

# Charmian Clift, Brenda Chamberlain, and the Dichotomous Freedom of Hydra

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The most prominent accounts of life on the Greek island of Hydra during the formative years of the island's expatriate artist community are found in Charmian Clift's memoir *Peel Me a Lotus*, and Elizabeth Jane Howard's novel *The Sea Change*, both published in 1959; and George Johnston's novels *Closer to the Sun* (1960) and *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969). Of these, Clift's *Peel Me a Lotus* has a particular status, given that as a memoir it has, superficially at least, more claim to representing an objective and 'truthful' account of expatriate life on this remote island as it emerged from the political and economic turmoil that gripped Greece following the Second World War and a protracted civil war. As Clift and her husband Johnston were pivotal in establishing that expatriate group of writers and artists and remained at its centre for almost a decade after arriving on the island in 1955, her account also carries authority as an insider's view of the couple's life amongst the island's growing international 'colony.'

There is also, however, another, often overlooked Hydra memoir from this period by a female writer and artist—Brenda Chamberlain's *A Rope of Vines* (1965). Exactly why Chamberlain's memoir has been comparatively neglected is not difficult to discern. The other four books engage emphatically with Hydra as most people know it, whether they have been to the island or not. That is, they each relate to the island as it was experienced from within the expatriate community, and focus on the harbor, the dockside, the taverns, and the rocky swimming beaches adjoining Hydra Port, the island's only substantial town. In these books, Hydra is depicted as primarily a social experience, rather than a place. Or in so far as the island is encountered as a place, it is one that exists within the confined range of the public spaces that are the domain of the expatriates.

Chamberlain's *A Rope of Vines*, on the other hand, deserves consideration *because* of the starkly different account it provides of life on Hydra, particularly of the town and island away from the social and commercial hub of the dockside. Chamberlain emphatically and continually reminds readers of the island's barren and forbidding demeanour, and of the harshness of both the island and town experienced by many Hydriots outside the boisterous, sociable waterfront. Hydra is, according to Chamberlain, an 'iron-bound savage island' (137) with an ardent, demanding spirit that is distinct from, and often in conflict with, the alluring conviviality of the waterfront where the expatriates are found huddled defensively with their backs turned to both the outer reaches of the town and the island's interior. As a testament to the expatriates' experience of living on Hydra, *A Rope of Vines* provides a distinct counterpoint to *Peel Me a Lotus*, that is important both to understanding Chamberlain's experience of the island and also affording new insight into Clift, her memoir, and the daily lives of the island's expatriated writers and artists.

Who was Brenda Chamberlain and what was she doing on Hydra? Chamberlain was an important mid-century Welsh artist, poet and novelist. She was born in 1912 and schooled in Bangor in north-west Wales, and from an early age demonstrated a strong interest in drawing and writing. Her developing imaginative life was fuelled by a love of walking amongst the wild and rugged landscapes surrounding her home town. After completing school she moved to London to study at the Royal Academy for five years, where she met fellow artist John Petts.

The couple married in 1935, although they would separate and divorce during the 1940s (Piercy).

Chamberlain's artwork is held in major collections throughout the United Kingdom. She also wrote two volumes of memoir; in addition she has been the subject of an academic monograph, and a biography by Jill Piercy published in 2013. In generational terms, Chamberlain was born some eleven years before Charmian Clift, and would die in July 1971, almost exactly two years after her.

Chamberlain first came to Hydra in 1963 at the age of 51. She was no stranger to island life, having spent the previous fifteen years living on the Welsh island of Bardsey, the subject of her first memoir, *Tide Race* (1962). Bardsey is a smaller and remoter island than Hydra, but one with a similar stern appearance and which also has a reputation as a refuge for artists, writers and musicians. Chamberlain would be a regular visitor to Hydra until the Greek military coup in 1967, after which living in Greece became increasingly difficult for non-citizens. Hydra was clearly a place she loved, although according to *A Rope of Vines* she also found the island demanding and daunting.

Chamberlain's initial visit to Hydra, which forms the subject of *A Rope of Vines*, came about somewhat serendipitously. She had previously visited Greece and was keen to return, and the opportunity to do so came after her mother had a social encounter in the UK with Mrs Didi Cameron (Piercy 278). It transpired that Cameron and her husband Peter owned a house on Hydra that they were prepared to make available to visitors. The house was in the area of Kala Pigadia, on the high part of the town and immediately opposite the twin wells that were the town's main source of drinking water. It was also at the point where the town gave way to the barren upper reaches of Mount Ere, the island's highest point.

The Camerons had purchased their house several years earlier, after they spent several months living in Clift and Johnston's Hydra house between November 1960 and April 1961 while the Johnston family lived in the Camerons' Cotswold farmhouse. This house exchange eventuated partly because of the Johnstons' increasingly dire financial situation and gave the desperate George a failed opportunity to rekindle the Fleet Street career he had abandoned in 1954 in order to live in the Aegean.

The seven months Chamberlain spent on Hydra in 1963 spanned from late May until nearly the end of the year. During this period, she returned to the UK for several weeks for the opening of a new exhibition (Piercy), although there is no mention made of this in *A Rope of Vines*, which is presented as a single uninterrupted stretch of time.

*A Rope of Vines* has superficial similarities with *Peel Me a Lotus*. Both are memoirs by women who take liberties with the objective truth; both women arrive on the island with ambitions to write, or in Chamberlain's case to write and paint; and both memoirs gravitate around a summer season. There are also important differences that are immediately apparent, in particular Clift's inclusion of her domestic life, with a family household consisting of her husband, the increasingly fretful George; a newborn, whose birth in the family's newly purchased home is described in the book's opening chapters, and two older children. Chamberlain on the other hand is essentially alone, her main relationships being with Vavara, the woman who tends her house, but speaks no English; Sophia, a quarrelsome neighbour; and absent local man Leonidas, who may or may not be Chamberlain's lover.

Another stark difference between the two books is the integration of the Hydriot community into their narrative. *Peel Me a Lotus* has been criticised for neglecting the Hydriots, something that is used as evidence that the Johnstons and other expatriates never really integrated into the island community (Sotirios). Indeed Hydriots *are* quite present, and while it is only the characters of Creon and Socrates, and to a lesser extent the Katsikas family, who have agency in the narrative, a cast of others are named, have their place in the town's social hierarchy established, and are given small but meaningful parts in the unfolding narrative. What is true, however, is that *Peel Me a Lotus* is decidedly a book about the decision to expatriate and what this experience entails when it involves becoming enmeshed with a growing number of expatriates and tourists who develop their own complex social rituals that are 'foreign' to most of the local community. Other than the house in which Clift lives with her family, the book's scope is confined to the dockside spaces that were the hub of Hydra's social and commercial activity. The result is a detailed portrayal of a claustrophobic conviviality that increasingly troubles even the famously sociable Clift:

We are endlessly meeting . . . the same people over and over again, endlessly meeting . . . Within the group there is fluctuation, but the plastic tablecloth is eternal, the cold stuffed tomatoes or the cold fish congealing on the plate, the scarred, evil, scrofulous cats scavenging around one's feet, the carafe of pale yellow wine replenished again and again, the eternal conversation. Always the same conversation, yesterday, today, tomorrow, the same smart verbal catch-ball with obscure poets and philosophers, the same Freudian terms, the same 'frank' piggery, the same shafts of malice and spite, the same derisive laughter. (128)

Chamberlain, however, goes consciously in the other direction, by conspicuously rejecting the daily dockside gatherings with their constant chatter, gossip and flirting that sustained the 'colony.' When Hydra's international visitors enter *A Rope of Vines* it is almost always in order to portray them as an irritant where they are the centre of tension and disputation with the Hydriots. In *A Rope of Vines* it is only Hydriots who are named and given a direct role in the narrative, with expatriates occupying a place at the fringe of the narrative, and remaining nameless. Chamberlain's neighbours at Kala Pigadia, for example, are simply referred to as 'the Englishman and his wife,' and although she describes exploring parts of the island with the couple's children, they too remain unnamed.

The life within an expatriate 'bubble' portrayed in *Peel Me a Lotus* appears to be broadly true to Clift's experience of Hydra. Throughout the memoir she acknowledges the distracting frivolity of expatriate life amidst an enclave of writers and artists, many of whom would also claim that their reason for being on the island was to get away from it all and work, while Clift finds many of them too young, too frivolous, or too dislocated for her own sense of creative expatriation.

The framework for Clift's mounting angst is provided by her awareness that the 'freedom' that has brought her to Hydra is increasingly vexing. She and Johnston have gone to the island to escape the mindless daily routines, inconsequential work, and the social and moral conformity experienced in modern cities, in favour of having the time, space, beauty and cheap living that would allow them to fulfil their creative dreams. What eventuates, however, is a way of life that proves how daunting freedom can be when it delivers social liberties that are both irresistible and debilitating. Clift expresses her growing doubts as her fellow expatriates spin a web of attraction and revulsion, and when, unable to tear herself away from the thing that troubles her most, she and Johnston find that at day's end they, 'go home a little drunker than

we ought to be, feeling vaguely worsted, jangling with some unspecified resentment, indefinably tainted' (129). But whatever ambivalence Clift might have expressed about the dockside and the people she meets there, the daily gatherings at this 'tainted arena of the waterfront with its traps of tables and wine' (163) remained the focus of her island life, even as she acknowledged their potential to sap the time and energy required by her work. As a result she is left disturbed and diminished.

In contrast, in *A Rope of Vines* Chamberlain makes her distaste for the dockside expatriate life apparent from the outset. She writes that 'I feel little reason to visit the waterfront . . .' (23), and from the moment of her arrival her eye is drawn upward, above the town, to the hillside monasteries. From the outset, Chamberlain frets that a 'powerful dual reality exists on this island of 3,000 souls and 300 churches' (13). It is a dichotomy she finds everywhere—between Hydra, the sociable dockside town, and Hydra, the forbidding island; between the vibrant flatness of the agora, and the austere uplands of the island peaks; between the glamour and volatility of the taverns and cafes, and the stoical discipline of the monasteries; between the wealth displayed on the dockside and harbour, and the confronting poverty in backstreets behind the port. As Chamberlain announces on her opening page: 'International travellers throw an unreal glamor over the port, but step out of the harbour, and you will come across club-footed boys, women withering within the sun's luminosity, mal-fed children grossly fat, dwarfs with sun-smitten faces' (13).

Despite her dislike for the dockside and its expatriates, it is inevitable that Chamberlain couldn't totally avoid the port, and even though the town's social venues fill her with dread she does mention a number that are well known from that period; Katsikas, Douskos, Loulous, and Grafos. They are represented, however, as being symptomatic of all that is wrong with the dockside—they are places of drunkenness and argumentation, where the tensions between the locals and visitors become apparent. A key incident of *A Rope of Vines* is indicative of Chamberlain's attitude to the dockside's foreign contingent. Her friend Leonidas lives under the threat of imprisonment as he awaits trial in Athens for manslaughter. In Chamberlain's narrative his predicament is described as the result of a fight with an English tourist on the dockside that erupts after Leonidas inadvertently trips over the man's dog on the overcrowded waterfront (70). The truth of this situation was that the man on whom the character of Leonidas was based *was* facing criminal charges, but these resulted not from a Hydra brawl with a tourist but rather when a car he was driving on the Peloponnese ran down and killed an elderly woman (Piercy 295).

With Leonidas's liberty threatened as a result of this supposed incident, Chamberlain embraces life away the troublesome harbour front. Her house at Kala Pigadia places her on the town's fringes, where she is exposed to the heat and harshness of sun-struck rock adorned only by the most tenacious vegetation. Chamberlain sees this as a liminal space separating the domestic, commercial and social spaces of Hydra, the town, from the barren hills that reach above and express the essence of Hydra, the island.

Hydra, as represented by Chamberlain, is made from the bones, the skeleton of the jagged uplands. It is a place of rocks and ruins; of rampant prickly pear and treacherous bougainvillea; of suffering donkeys and diseased kittens; of scorpions, wasps and vipers; poverty stricken and drunken neighbours; violent storms and earthquake. She writes frequently of unspecified ghosts that spring from the ground beneath her feet and wander through all her imaginings. So while in *Peel Me a Lotus* the well in front of Clift's house serves as a communal gathering place for

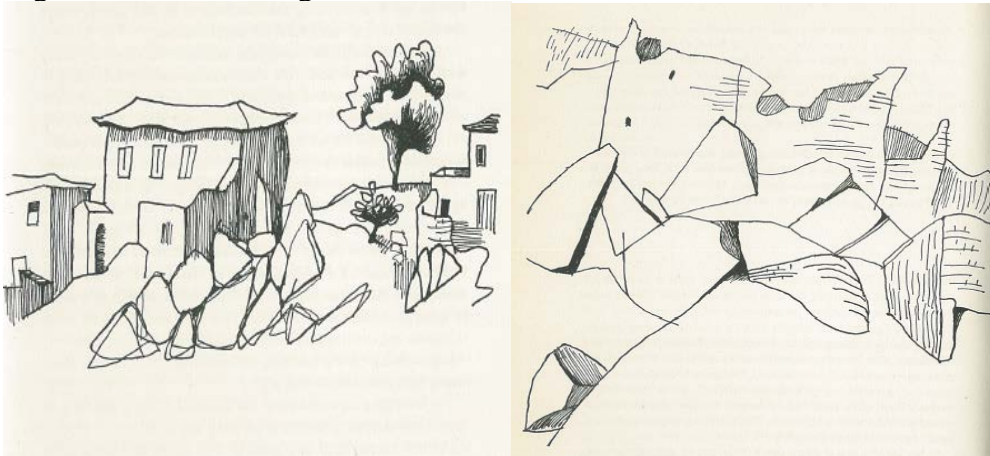
gossip and a playground for the town's children, Chamberlain senses something far more sinister lurking beneath the wells of Kala Pigadia:

This is an uneasy island, ghost-ridden, and with black danger in the air. It is advisable to keep the well-covers closed at night, for it is possible to have the spirit of a dead person down there, and in the dark hours it is likely to walk abroad if the iron lid is left off. (24)

Chamberlain depicts the island as an intense, unsettling, sun-damaged, and bestial place that barely sustains some rough scabble animals, the hard as flint peasants, and the priests and nuns of the monasteries who have consciously embraced a life devoid of conventional comforts. Like Clift, Chamberlain also realises that Hydra is a difficult place in which to practise her art and writing—but for very different reasons. As Chamberlain declares, 'This island burns me' (140), and it is a fire that is driven by a conflicted natural beauty that is superficially alluring to writers and artists, but which nonetheless debilitates the creative temperament. Leonidas warns her of the challenge of producing art in a place that is a threat to the 'tender elite' (142). And as Chamberlain comes to understand of Leonidas:

He had often felt imprisoned by [the island], and he longed for somewhere less powerful in which to live, for example, the next island, the elegiac Poros. . . . He used to say, it is because we are cooped up here between the sea and the mountains, trying to be artists, or pretending to be artists, exiles in a strong context, in an island too strong for most of us to fight against. (142)

The drawings Chamberlain produced to accompany her text complement her written sentiments. Whereas her painting is often marked by a heightened palette and a romantically tinged naivety, in *A Rope of Vines* she finds a very different medium in 70 line drawings that are bleached of all traces of colour and romanticism, but ideal for reducing the stark geometry of rock, vegetation, and buildings to their most severe form.

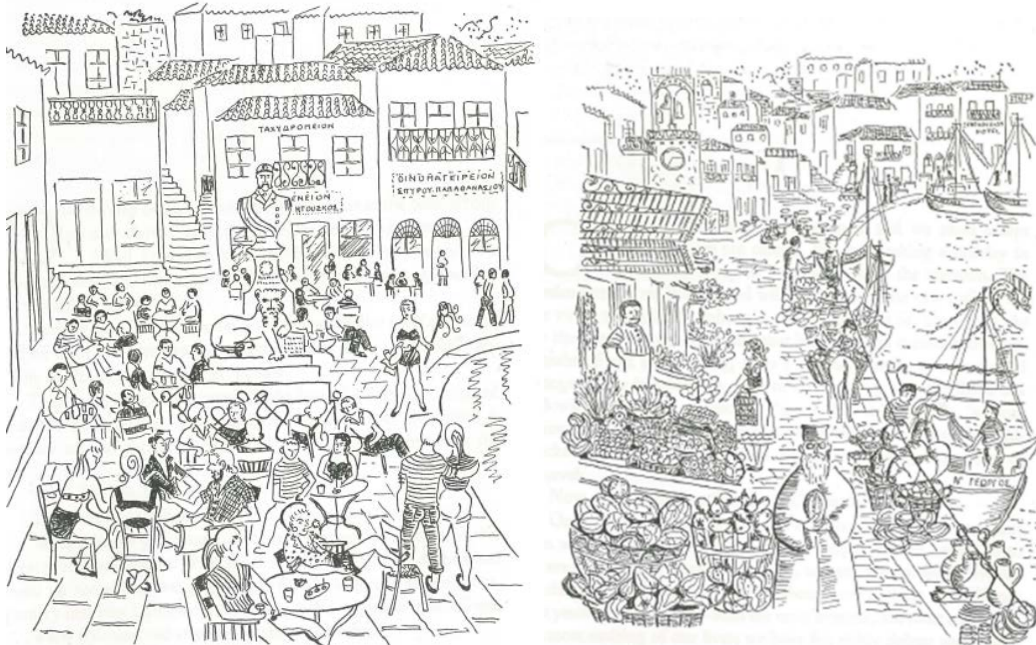


**Figures 1 and 2.** Drawings of Hydra by Brenda Chamberlain (*A Rope of Vines* 91, 50)

Chamberlain's drawings are a striking contrast to those by Nancy Dignan that accompanied Clift's memoir. (Dignan was an Australian married to Irish writer Patrick Greer. The couple were amongst the earliest to join Clift and Johnston on Hydra, and feature in *Peel Me a Lotus* as Sean Donovan and his 'artist wife Lola' (19)). Her lively illustrations for the book are her only recorded work. Whereas Chamberlain's drawings are devoid of people, except for some dark priests on horseback, and a deeply veiled nun or two, Dignan responded to Clift's portrayal of Hydra's boisterous social life with images that are overflowing with the vibrant human

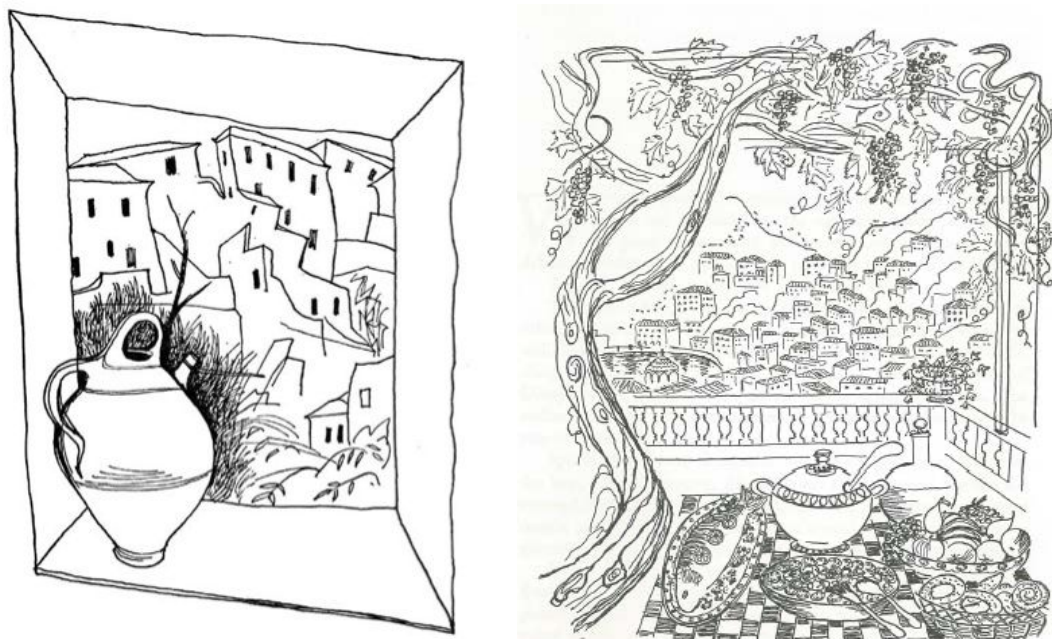


activity of the town, the dockside and the beach. Readers find in these drawings a pictorial representation of the vibrant sociability described by Clift in *Peel Me a Lotus*.



**Figures 3 and 4.** Drawings of Hydra by Nancy Dignan (*Peel Me a Lotus* 167, 123)

Even when Chamberlain and Dignan produced images that are formally similar in compositional terms they nonetheless retain stark differences. Whereas Chamberlain’s insistent rendering of the angular shapes of the island’s built forms make even the houses appear to be enclosed, impenetrable and imprisoning, Dignan produces far more familiar and inviting representations of a Mediterranean townscape where, in the absence of figures, the generous social life is nonetheless conveyed by gastronomical abundance framed beneath a sinuous and inviting archway.



**Figures 5 and 6.** Framing the Hydra Summer.

**Figure 5:** Drawing by Brenda Chamberlain (*A Rope of Vines* 160).

**Figure 6:** Drawing by Nancy Dignan (*Peel Me a Lotus* 187).

Chamberlain had signalled at the outset the presence, and the otherness, of the monasteries standing high on the shoulder of Mt Ere, symbols of a Hydra that is distinctly at odds with the town below. She notices, at the very beginning of *A Rope of Vines*, that ‘Where the houses end, the desert begins. Above the desert, on the mountain, is the *monasteri*’ (13). Several pages later she puts in place the framework of her narrative by declaring that ‘The port and the people in it do not interest me. I am drawn by the monasteries on the barren hilltops. The first thing I must do is to go up there. Is it possible to hire a mule and a guide?’ (20)

Fascinated by the monasteries Chamberlain soon finds her mule and guide, and makes trips up to the monastic communities of Agia Efpraxia and Profitis Ilias, where she comes across nuns and priests shut away in search of ‘the black God of incense and incessant prayer, the God of no mercy’ (27). And when Chamberlain can no longer cope with her haunting experience of the island, the threat to Leonidas, and the harrowing influence of the dockside, she seeks a retreat with the nuns of Agia Efpraxia, declaring that their convent is the only place where her mind is at rest.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed Chamberlain did move in with the nuns for several days, and although she concedes in *A Rope of Vines* that her stay was brief, in the telling it seems to be an extended period as she carefully describes the daily routine of early rising, the cycle of prayers, the afternoon siesta, and the regularised meals. And although she concludes ‘there is no escape from the island,’ the convent proves to be a sanctuary, providing at least a temporary freedom, or release, from her personal travails. But just as Clift found that her longed-for freedom was illusory at best, so too does Chamberlain find it far from simple to free herself from the spectre of the imprisonment that awaits Leonidas, or the terrors that hold her own mind captive.

Images of incarceration run deeply throughout *A Rope of Vines*, playing on that duality common to islands where on one hand they are places of freedom and liberation to which one ‘escapes,’ while at the same time they are enclosing, restricting and imprisoning. Chamberlain finds evidence of entrapment and imprisonment all around her on Hydra—cruelly tethered goats; insects snared by children; caged birds; shackled donkeys. She also revels in reminding readers that her room at the convent is rightly called a ‘cell,’ but that it is only one layer of the incarceration to which she is subjected. As she declares, ‘I make my care and prayer an offering to God, from the cell of my flesh, within the cell of plaster and wood, within the cell of the island, within the cell of the sea’ (13). And if Chamberlain finds temporary relief from the island by escaping to Agia Efpraxia, then there also arises a reminder of a deeper form of imprisonment that even monastic life is incapable of alleviating. She cannot escape the most existential form of incarceration, the cell of her own humanity—the knowledge that in being alive, and in the cognisance of being human, lies the pathway to self-imprisonment:

If there is any sense of being imprisoned, then it comes out of something born in all of us. To be alive is to be trapped within the flesh, within the mind, within the patterns of days and nights.

It is not only that I am enclosed in this cell, whitewashed, with a hard bed, a small window, but since I first saw light, even before that time, I was cell-enclosed, for no one of us can burst into a real freedom from our case of flesh. I, you, each in a separate cell, a cocoon of self, which we cannot disown or creep from, or break, or exchange for another, must submit to this confinement with whatever grace lies within us. We are enveloped in flesh, and in that flesh the soul, the mind, and the heart are imprisoned until death. (97–98)

So while Chamberlain's time with the nuns gives some relief from Hydra's iron-bound grasp, she also recognises that it marks the limit to her quest to find a permanent solution to her agitated state, or to be released from her entrapment. As she writes, 'I relax and I am happy in the atmosphere of order and peace created by the good mothers, but for how long could I be content to stay with them? I should soon become rebellious, this haven a prison' (103).

An obvious question to ask is, did Brenda Chamberlain and Charmian Clift ever meet? The question is tantalising because although there are clear differences between their two memoirs, it is arguable that Clift and *Peel Me a Lotus* influenced Chamberlain's own view of Hydra and the memoir she would write. Despite a lack of direct evidence, it is highly likely the two women did meet. Given the personal connection through their mutual acquaintances, the Camerons, it is almost certain that Chamberlain would have arrived on Hydra with an introduction to the Johnstons, and certainly Clift and Johnston were always keen to have within their orbit the writers and artists who made it to the island.

Whether or not they met, it is however likely that Chamberlain would have read *Peel Me a Lotus*. As a woman travelling to Hydra and seemingly doing so with a view to writing a memoir, there was only one substantial book in English available at the time that purported to be a factual account of the island, and that was *Peel Me a Lotus*. And although Clift has chosen in her memoir to focus on the dockside, and the irresistible pull of its summer season peopled by earnest artists, transient beats and day-tripping tourists, she is too acute an observer and too interested in the experience of Greek island life (her previous memoir, *Mermaid Singing* (1956), written about the island Kalymnos, is almost forensically anthropological in its description of local life and customs) not to see the threatening otherness of Hydra—the Hydra that Chamberlain saw.

In a lengthy, harrowing, and unexpected reverie late in *Peel Me a Lotus*, Clift suddenly looks away from the entrancing social spaces, and turns her gaze squarely to the backstreets, lanes and crumbled ruins away from the Port, where another human face of the island, marked by poverty, disease and lechery, is revealed. She is startled to find that:

Everything is changed as though I am looking at the island in a distorting mirror  
 . . . .

The old woman sweeping the church doorstep looks up at me as I pass, and her eyes are white with trachoma. Two adolescent louts are teasing the dwarf girl and she is laughing—why did I never notice before that she has two sets of teeth? All the Bosch people have crawled out from their dark corners and are limping and hopping and gibbering in the sweltering sun: the face in the window has a beak like a parrot, the baby dead of malnutrition is a swollen toad, a woman shrieks among the windburnt geraniums with the howling mouth of a Greek mask—gone mad, they say, with waiting for her man to return from the sea—the hand that measures out a mound of glistening green grapes is not a hand at all, but a sort of double-hooked claw covered with scabs. Eyes are furtive, mouths are leering, bodies are swollen and misshapen. On the butcher's slab a skinned bull's head all covered with flies slides slowly towards me in a mess of slippery scarlet. Four boys with poles and hooks are fishing cruelly for birds ... The flyblown carcass of a dead cat is rotting in Kyria Spirithoula's hen run, and every lane and rooftop and alley is aswarm with live ones—huge, slinking, predatory and lust-haunted brutes all torn and mangy and scarred. In a dark archway a young sailor snickers



and his old companion, dressed expensively in yachting clothes, lurches back into the shadows.

I cannot seem to blink back into focus. The tiers of ruins seem more real than the gay and crowded waterfront. The island died long long ago; the antics of all the smart bright people who throng the café tables suddenly have the obscenity of necrophilia. (160–61)

For readers of Chamberlain's *A Rope of Vines* these observations, the shock that accompanies them, even the cadence of the sentences, will be familiar. Like Chamberlain, Clift realises that not only are the expatriates—including herself—usually ignorant of Hydra's harsh realities, but that they are somehow connected with them, as the neglectful beneficiaries who feed off the poverty that surrounds them. In Clift's references to the 'distorting mirror' and of needing to 'blink back into focus,' she questions her own vision and her own grasp of the reality of a place she thought she knew so well, and in doing so she questions the authenticity of her own expatriated island life. It is a confronting admission to the existence of that *other* island encountered and described by Chamberlain, and a frank recognition of the lived experience of the Hydriots that is hidden by the cosmopolitan gloss, bright lights, and bobbing *caiques* of the harbour. It is also a recognition that one of the 'freedoms' she has hitherto claimed, is that of turning her back on the harder truths of island life.

Similarly, *A Rope of Vines* concludes with Chamberlain also questioning *her* vision, as she walks along the harbourside that she has so often been the source of her narrative scorn, amid the rains that signal the end of summer's iron-bound grip. It is a rain that visually distorts everything that should be familiar, and suggests that there might an aspect of the island's dockside life that has hitherto eluded her capacity to see:

What are these shapes dancing along the length of the port? They are caiques, with painted poops and heroic tillers, surreal, unreal, vessels my imagination has dredged up; and why should not the squat wooden hulks with swaying masts that rise questing into the darkness speak for me, for mankind, for the sieved seas and the thymy mountains. They join the sky to the earth by stretching their yards heavenward, and by grinding their bows against the stubborn rocks of the quayside. ... The tall masts sprout green leaves. The god and the identifying vessels fuse. (159–60)

Whether or not they met in life, it seems that Chamberlain and Clift did at least meet—tentatively—on the page. Not only through the shared subject matter of a woman writer exposed to Hydra, but through the ways in which each writer eventually recognises and responds to the island's dualities. In their different way, each eventually reached a hesitant reconciliation of the disparate elements of this place they loved, and in doing so each of them confronts the complex limits of the freedom that Hydra both promises and denies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the novels by Johnston and Howard, the monastic communities, standing high on the shoulder of Mt Ere serve a symbolic function by representing another Hydra, the harsh, barren rock that was rarely visited, and little understood, by most tourists and travellers. Howard's *Sea Change*, for example, focusses on four adult characters who arrive on the island with various interpersonal issues to be thrashed out. The action takes place entirely in their rented house, at the town's swimming rocks, and in taverns and restaurants. As they finally depart from the

island the reader is told that ‘Suddenly she [Lilian] pointed to the top of the mountain. “We never went up to the monastery. The day we arrived here, I planned to do that, and we never did. That is something we could have done”’ (355).

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