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Marcus Clarke: Confronting Spectacle with Spectacle in *For the Term of His Natural Life*

While Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* is unquestionably a classic text of the Australian literary canonⁱ, oftentimes the importance of Clarke's journalism as influential antecedents to his novel is underappreciated. In "Marcus Clarke: The Romance of Reality," John Conley outlines how Clarke's journalism career affected his literature, such as sensitivity to historical accuracy, a sense of audience and reader interest, and even funding for his research visit to the Tasmanian prisons.

In addition to skills and access, Clarke's journalism experience also put him in a unique position to observe nineteenth century Melbourne. Clarke's articles have been recognized as an important source of commentary on Australia's colonial culture, and several scholars have used these opinions as a framework of analysis for Clarke's seminal novel. In "Marcus Clarke: 'Christianity Is Dead,'" Joan E. Poole demonstrates how the religious opinions found in Clarke's "Civilization without Delusion" pamphlet manifest in his novel through the juxtaposition of the two reverends, Meekin and North.

According to L.T. Hergenhan in *A Colonial City: high and low life, selected journalism of Marcus Clarke*, Clarke's documentary sketches of the societal underbelly—"Lower Bohemia"—indicated he felt a kinship towards the outcasts. With the early death of

Clarke's parents, the loss of his inheritance, and his subsequent displacement to Australia, Hergenhan suggests:

“It is not hard to believe that at least something of Clarke's own wounding experience is expressed in these stories when we remember that what seems most crushing in the suffering in *For the Term of His Natural Life* and 'Lower Bohemia' is the aloneness of the abandoned outcasts, their condition as rejected 'things' rather than human beings, adrift not only amongst indifferent people but in an indifferent universe” (xvii).

As previous scholars have used Clarke's journalistic opinions as an analytical lens to study *For the Term of His Natural Life*, I will use Andrew McCann's analysis of Clarke's social critique on “the society of the spectacle” as a framework to examine Clarke's novel. This analysis will tie together several other scholarly conversations on Clarke and his novel, while also setting up my own contribution, particularly within the character of Maurice Frere.

Journalistic Roots of Social Commentary

At only age 21, Clarke began writing some of his most noteworthy contributions to Australian journalism through his “Peripatetic Philosopher” column for the *Australasian*. This column was not only an outlet for his youthful zest and confidenceⁱⁱ, but also it “served as a major springboard for his explorations of the evolving *metropolitan* and social character of colonial Melbourne” (Niski 4). Immediately successful, these “literary cocktails” (qtd. in Hergenhan xv) identified Clarke “as a born

journalist, essayist and commentator,” according to Brian Elliot, recognized biographer of Marcus Clarke (qtd. in Conley 55).

From this journalistic perch, Marcus Clarke oscillated between “lightweight chitchat” and “social expose” (Hergenhan xxvi, Niski 5). Andrew McCann explores the nature of some of this commentary in his “Marcus Clarke and the Society of the Spectacle: Reflections on Writing and Commodity Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Melbourne.” McCann argues that Clarke criticizes the societal fascination with spectacle as a result of the “monotony of quotidian existence in the capitalist metropolis.” People enjoyed the sensational, such as “the sight of the condemned criminal at the gallows,” and Clarke suggests that this indicates “ignorant or ill-balanced minds,” according to McCann.

“The economy of boredom and pleasure that informs culture-consumption thus emerges as a kind of atavism that violently subverts the assumptions of the enlightenment progress. Society’s apparent advancement into the era of commodity capitalism was also a repetition of the barbarism apparently left in its wake” (McCann).

The public’s “lust for blood” created a textual formula—“dioramic literature”—that used familiar European models to represent “the spectacle of the ‘unnameable thing’” often unique to the colonial experience. To negotiate this formula, McCann argues that Clarke advertises himself as a self-reflexive vagabond, or the “Peripatetic Philosopher.” From this perspective, Clarke’s work both confronts and assimilates this loss of moral perspective within this commodity capitalism.

Selling the Spectacle and the Fine Print

March 1870 marked the first appearance of Clarke's novel as a serial in the *Australian Journal*. It ran for a sprawling 370,000 words over 28ⁱⁱⁱ months, and "the *Journal's* readers seem to have lacked either the credulity or the stamina to pursue Clarke's text through such an 'outrage [of] the probabilities,' for circulation declined by two-thirds during the novel's run," according to Sean Christopher Grass in "The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner." The "sheer length and seemingly endless accumulation of everyday detail" combined with the excess of sensationalism reflects McCann's emphasis on the relationship between boredom and the pursuit of pleasure.

While he was compelled to revise his novel to "a sleek 200,000 word text" (Grass 228)^{iv}, Clarke continued to both critique and take advantage of popular culture-consumption, as McCann suggests: "Clarke could critically foreground the degradation of public taste while simultaneously pandering to it." Not one to shy away from candor, Clarke blatantly states his equal devotion to monetary gains in one of his sketches of Lower Bohemia, titled "Le Roi S'Amuse":

"My object in writing these papers is twofold—First to make money; second to give you a faithful impression of the true life of Melbourne bohemia; and I think the latter object will be best achieved by painting for you the picture, and leaving you to draw the moral for yourself" (qtd. in Niski 5).

Clarke's use of spectacle to sell is also reflected in his particular choices of sources, as discussed in L. L. Robson's "The Historical Basis of *For The Term of His*

Natural Life.” Robson demonstrates how the majority of the novel’s violence is based on genuine historical details. Clarke draws on accounts of cruel Commander John Price for Commander Maurice Frere, two different ship seizures—the *Cyprus* at Recherche Bay and the *Frederick* at Macquarie Harbour—for the seizure of the *Osprey* brig, and the cannibal convict Pierce for Gabbett’s cannibalism. However, Robson suggests that Clarke uses these accounts in a sensational manner. While Australia’s history of transportation takes course over eight decades, Clarke strings together its most grotesque episodes to create a novel of spectacle the public won’t be able to resist.

From the scandalous prologue to the tragic epilogue, the novel brims with “implausible turns and sadistic spectacles” (McCann) of which Rufus Dawes spends the majority of the story fighting against its demoralizing effects. The connection between Clarke’s challenge to popular sensationalism’s atavistic effects^v and Dawes’s struggle to maintain his identity can be observed clearly in the fatal flogging of Kirkland as Michael Wilding outlines in “Marcus Clarke: *His Natural Life.*” Initially catering to the societal “lust for blood,” Dawes describes Kirkland’s punishment in graphic detail:

“The lad’s back, swollen into a hump now presented the appearance of a ripe peach which a willful child had scored with a pin. Dawes, turning away from his bloody handiwork, drew the cats through his fingers twice. They were beginning to get clogged a little” (qtd. in Wilding).

However, Wilding points out that Clarke quickly “diverts attention to Dawes who has been doing the flogging”^{vi} and the subsequent mental torture when Dawes refuses to flog Kirkland anymore. Instead, Dawes is flogged until “the agony forced from his labouring breast a hideous cry” (Clarke, Book 3 Chapter 15) after being mute for well

past one hundred lashes. He “seem[s] to have abandoned his humanity” as North observes in “[Dawes’s] frightful outpouring of obscenity and blasphemy.” Dawes’s identity being stripped away through spectacle reiterates Clarke’s emphasis on the degrading effects of the sensationalist “logic [that permeated] the political and moral choices of society” and how it was “antithetical to rational discernment,” according to McCann.

If flogging is the spectacle that causes Dawes’s mad outburst, it’s particularly interesting to note which convict took over the whip—Gabbett. This convict becomes a paradigm of atavistic spectacle with his later cannibalism at the end of Book Three. The horrors in this chapter particularly resonate with Clarke’s commentary in context of Wilding’s suggestion that the depravity is the result of societal forces. According to Wilding, Clarke’s language in these scenes implies a childish naivety. He specifically describes the escaped convicts as “boys”^{vii}, and he noticeably portrays the “ignorance” of one of the convicts before he’s murdered:

“Clarke insists on Sanders’ being a ‘bewildered wretch’, praying by folding his hands ‘like a child’, [with] his ‘big, stupid face’ ... [and] in pitiful confusion of his brutalized senses’: brutalized, not brutal—his depravity is not innate but imposed upon him, by society, by the penal system.”

In other words, Wilding argues that Clarke’s emphasis is “not on their culpability, but on their ignorance, on their simplicity, on their suffering, and on what they have suffered in society.” Clarke’s commentary continues to translate into his literature through this connection between society and atavistic spectacle.

Imperialist Qualities of Culture Consumption

This cannibalism scene also highlights the capitalism angle of Clarke's commentary. According to McCann, Clarke implies a "general economy of pleasure and spectatorship" in Melbourne society that can also be seen in Gabbett. Just as the colonial public features consumers of the spectacle, Gabbett is a consumer, both as a literal cannibal and a metaphor for imperialism, according to Creighton Nicholas Brown's "The Hunger: The Power and Politics of a (Post)Colonial Cannibal."^{viii} This concept introduces the idea that Clarke chose the transportation system not only for historical reasons^{ix} or sensational value, but also for the qualities of imperialism that mirror Melbourne's commodity capitalism.^x

While a unique form of colonialism, the transportation system is, at its heart, a Britain venture of imperialism. Therefore, approaching *For the Term of His Natural Life* from this perspective reveals unique qualities of imperialism. The novel's authority figures can be interpreted as the colonizers, while the convicts represent the colonized. The treatment of the convicts directly echoes the imperialist attitudes of viewing the colonized as savages. The convicts are consistently described as animalistic throughout the novel as Grass points out:

"At the moment [Dawes] is erroneously apprehended for [Lord Bellasis's] murder, he realizes that his captors look at him 'as though he was a wild beast,' ... Elsewhere in the text, convicts are 'fed like dogs,' treated like 'wild beasts,' and retreated—when finally subdued by Maurice Frere—like 'whipped hounds' to their kennel" (236-237).

A central theme of imperial Gothic^{xi} is “atavism”—psychological and social regression like Kurtz’s ‘going native’ in [Joseph Conrad’s] *Heart of Darkness*” (245), according to Patrick Brantlinger in “Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914.” Of particular relevance, Brantlinger describes how the “fictional atavisms can be matched by innumerable expressions of anxiety about backsliding by politicians and colonists doing the actual work of the empire” (247). This atavistic theme aligns with Clarke’s social commentary and its translation into *For the Term of His Natural Life*, as attested by the previous examples of Dawes’s flogging and Gabbett’s cannibalism. However, within this particular imperialist context, Frere also presents a unique case for analysis using a linguistics methodology:

"If I thort she was agoin' to throw us over, I'd cut her throat as soon as look at her!" snorts Gabbett savagely.

"Jack ud have a word in that," snuffles the Moocher; "and he's a curious cove to quarrel with."

"Well, stow yer gaff," grumbled Mr. Gabbett, "and let's have no more chaff. If we're for bizness, let's come to bizness."

"What are we to do now?" asked the Moocher. "Jack's on the sick list, and the gal won't stir a'thout him." (Clarke, Book 1 Chapter 7)

This conversation reveals that convict speech patterns reflects the 19th century English class system. The convicts’ rough language indicates a lack of education, a common characteristic among the lower class and the poor. This notion is fortified by the knowledge that these particular convicts later start a mutiny. In other words, they are the worst of the convicts, or the “lowest” class of convicts according to Book 2, Chapter 3:

“Seven classes of criminals were established in 1826, when the new barracks for prisoners at Hobart Town were finished. The first class were allowed to sleep out of barracks, and to work for themselves on Saturday; the second had only the last-named indulgence; the third were only allowed Saturday afternoon; the fourth and fifth were ‘refractory and disorderly characters—to work in irons;’ the sixth were ‘men of the most degraded and incorrigible character—to be worked in irons, and kept entirely separate from the other prisoners;’ while the seventh were the refuse of this refuse—the murderers, bandits, and villains, whom neither chain nor lash could tame. They were regarded as socially dead, and shipped to Hell's Gates, or Maria Island.”

The social context of the convicts’ language is also evidenced when compared to the upper-middle class dialogue, such as Rev. Meekin’s poetic description of his duties in the following passage:

“Meekin smiled, as a gentlemanly martyr might have smiled. ‘The Lord's work, dear leddies—the Lord's work. I am but a poor labourer in the vineyard, toiling through the heat and burden of the day.’ The aspect of him, with his faultless tie, his airy coat, his natty boots, and his self-satisfied Christian smile, was so unlike a poor labourer toiling through the heat and burden of the day, that good Mrs. Jellicoe, the wife of an orthodox Comptroller of Convicts' Stores, felt a horrible thrill of momentary heresy. ‘I would rather have remained in England,’ continued Mr. Meekin, smoothing one lavender finger with the tip of another, and arching his elegant eyebrows in mild deprecation of any praise of his self-denial, ‘but I felt it my duty not to refuse the offer made me through the kindness of his lordship. Here is a field, leddies—a field for the Christian pastor. They appeal to me, leddies, these lambs of our Church—these lost and outcast lambs of our Church.’” (Book 3, Chapter 1)

His extravagant description seems to retain the tell-tale “plummy” accent that is often associated with the 19th century upper-middle class and their desire to establish respectability comparable to the aristocrats.

Establishing these boundaries can give readers unique insight into Frere's dialogue and thus his character. Frere is an established upper-middle class character—indeed, he was nearly an aristocrat if Sir Richard's will had been altered before his untimely death—yet his speech more than once features convict slang, as seen in Book 3, Chapter 9: “If you mean, fake up that paper,” returned Frere, unconsciously dropping into prison slang, “I’ll tell you. He had a Bible, I suppose, while he was writing?” If the language of other characters is defined by class, Frere's status becomes questionable. Earlier in the novel, the narrator suggests that Frere picked up on the slang to better understand his prisoners and use it to his advantage. Frere's strategy distinctly echoes the “backsliding” nature of imperialism that Brantlinger suggests.

Perhaps the climax of his atavistic regression is emphasized by his “theft” of Dawes's accomplishment with making the coracle. During their time on the island, Dawes and Frere briefly switch roles as “Frere's authority of gentility soon succumbed to [Dawes's] authority of knowledge” (Clarke, Book 2 Chapter 12). By the time they get off the island, Frere has been reduced to stealing like a convict.

What makes this act even more significant is the symbolic nature of the coracle, as Nicholas Burns outlines in “Receptacle or Reversal? globalization Down Under in Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*.” Burns notes the peculiar conversation around Sylvia's source for the coracle idea:

“She has gotten this term from her *Child's History of England*, from which she reads this passage: ‘The Ancient Britons... were little more than barbarians. They painted their bodies with Woad—that's blue stuff, you know, Mr. Bates—and seated in their light coracles of skin stretched upon slender wooden frames, most have presented a wild and sage appearance.’ Clarke here makes the same reflective point about

Roman Britain with which Conrad begins *Heart of Darkness*—that Britain was once barbarian.”

This concept echoes McCann’s analysis of Clarke’s commentary suggesting “a repetition of the barbarism apparently left in its wake.” Once again, the atavistic nature is present, and this time, the connection to Frere seems to emphasize Clarke’s critique of his audience—most likely the upper classes, the specific spectacle consumers.

Conclusion

While Marcus Clarke is primarily known for his depiction of the brutal transportation system in his novel *For the Term of His Natural Life*, his journalism is worthy of equal attention, especially as a commentary lens for this classic text. Specifically, Andrew McCann’s analysis of Clarke’s successful “Peripatetic Philosopher” and other sources of social expose reveals journalistic opinions accusing the public of atavistic culture consumption—an opinion that echoes throughout the spectacle of this seminal novel, but most interestingly in its imperialist implications and the bloodthirsty character of Maurice Frere.

Notes

ⁱ In addition to being adapted for the screen and as an interactive iPad app, the book has scarcely been out of print since the 1870s and has been translated into German, Russian, Dutch, and Swedish, “testifying to the truly international nature of the book’s fame” and its “enduring popularity,” according to Niski (16).

ⁱⁱ According to Hergenhan, Clarke's "persona, capable as he knew from his schooldays of winning him easy popularity and acceptance when he cared for them, was to be carried over into his colonial life in Melbourne and into his journalism, lending both outward gaiety and impish provocativeness, a witty liveliness and a cynical blasé air" (xix).

ⁱⁱⁱ The original plan was to complete the run in twelve installments (Grass 228).

^{iv} Stephen Murray Smith writes in the introduction of the 1970 edition of [*For the Term of*] *His Natural Life* that the "revision is of no doubt an admirable piece of sub-editing, but . . . it is a mutilation of the original design. There is also a certain disingenuousness about it, a sense of Clarke's anxiety to lay off—he was perhaps influenced by the mixed reception the serial received [and] by this time he was anxious for patronage" (17).

^v McCann quotes Clarke's journalism as evidence of this conception: "The bricklayer who goes to see a hanging, or buys a 'dying speech' to take home as a relish to his pipe, is only displaying another phase of that feeling which got Mahomet worshipped, Caesar crowned, or Tom Thumb patronized."

^{vi} Wilding reminds readers "the system in the penal camps was to make one convict flog another—a refinement in tortures, a planned demoralization."

^{vii} Wilding argues that this word choice is important because it is the "only significant alteration" Clarke makes to his word-for-word transcription of the deposition from the original convict cannibal Pierce.

^{viii} Brown uses Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* to better understand this metaphor. In this novel, "the sale of the protagonist's family's Indian zoo animals to various zoos in the United States and Canada" demonstrates how "Western culture consumes Eastern cultures" (54). This sale is what leads the family to be on the ship that sinks and the later cannibalism resulting from Pi and several other characters being stranded in a boat on the ocean.

^{ix} Stephen Murray-Smith suggests that it was suitable timing "for the examination of Australia's convict 'stain'." He describes how the "indignation of a generation before at the very existence of the System had given ways" to the gold rush days, but "Clarke saw, or sensed that there was nevertheless a nerve there to be touched, and . . . he put in train what may be called the 'positive' interpretation or re-interpretation of the System, emphasizing its injustices, inconsistencies, its negations" (10).

^x Conley emphasizes that "societal change is more likely to emerge from a literature that holds up a mirror than one in pursuit of new faces drawn from the imagination rather than from the street" (69).

^{xi} McCann also explores the Gothic nature of *For the Term of His Natural Life* in "Colonial Nature-Inscription: On Haunted Landscape." He analyzes Clarke's "weird

melancholy” description of the Australian bush, in which the grotesque and the ghostly reveal, in their excessiveness, the pleasure of commodification.

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