Clem Christesen and his Legacy

This is a task I have been dodging for a long time, I realise as I sit down to write. Clem Christesen was a complex and contradictory individual, and his life-work even more so. The two are hard to separate: for more than three decades, from 1940 until 1974, Clem’s name was synonymous with that of Meanjin, but his contribution to Australian cultural life extends far beyond the magazine’s pages. In many ways he was a larger-than-life figure who defies any neat summation.

As an individual, Clem was the most quixotic person I have ever known. He was irascible and charming by turns, a great hater who remained intensely loyal to those who were willing to weather his storms. To give a small example from my own experience, at one point we fell out over my editing of Judith Armstrong’s The Christesen Romance, and he sent me to Coventry for two years. Then, late one afternoon, I picked up the phone to hear a familiar gravelly voice saying ‘Jenny? It’s your old mate from Eltham.’ (I’m sure he’d rehearsed that line.) And our friendship resumed more or less where it had left off, with some new silences.

Clem was quixotic in another sense: in the political arena, he was constitutionally incapable of not tilting at windmills. (St Clement, the patron saint of lost causes?) He was a committed democrat, sympathetic to socialism – the archetypal fellow-traveller in Cold War terms. But what made his political stance distinctive was his visceral rebellion against Australian insularity. He often recalled the shock he had experienced in 1939, when he left the intellectual and political ferment of Europe on the brink of war and returned to Brisbane, only to find the town mired in inward-looking complacency. This sense of being out of place at home had much to do with his determination to set up a literary magazine. His editorial endeavours were driven by a fierce desire to connect Australians with the wider world and prod them out of the ‘stomach-and-pocket view of life’, as he called it in the first issue of Meanjin Papers.
If Clem was egalitarian and internationalist in his political views, his cultural stance was unabashedly elitist, with strong overtones of cultural nationalism. Like many others of his generation, he watched with growing alarm as the wartime ‘call to America’ translated into an unprecedented national love affair with American commodity culture. Culture for Clem meant high culture – pre-eminently literature and the visual arts, along with their attendant critical traditions – and it was in danger of being swamped by the influx of trash from across the Pacific. Meanjin in the 1950s and early 1960s devoted a remarkable amount of space to articles decrying the rise of comic books, speculating about the effects of television and waging a futile war against the tide of what Clem called ‘Koka-Kola culture’.

Around himself and Meanjin, Clem gathered a band of loyal supporters, none more so than his Russian-born companion, Nina Mikhailovna Maximov, whom he married early in 1942. Nina was a woman of extraordinary generosity and imperturbable calm. Her faith in Clem and his magazine sustained the embattled editor through his frequent lapses into self-doubt, and her soothing presence helped to extinguish the spot-fires that constantly broke out around him.

From the outset, Meanjin and its editor attracted national attention. Among the first to respond to the inaugural issue was Nettie Palmer, who threw her influence behind Clem’s project. Her letters to him were peppered with the names and addresses of potential subscribers and contributors; she also gave him stern tuition in the art of writing letters, at one stage returning a particularly incoherent missive festooned with marginal notes. Thanks partly to her influence, Clem’s network of correspondents grew spectacularly. In retrospect, they form a Who’s Who of postwar Australian literary and intellectual life, although at the time many were just beginning their careers: Alec Hope, Manning Clark, Judith Wright, Dorothy Green (then Dorothy Auchterlonie), Arthur Phillips, James McAuley . . . the list could be extended endlessly.
Clem was a keen talent scout and an indefatigable correspondent. Although he often lamented the paucity of his achievements as a writer, I would argue that the *Meanjin* archive was his magnum opus. At a time of strict censorship, his correspondence became an outlet for forms of expression that were forbidden in print. It is impossible to read Clem’s letters without being struck by the contrast between their explosive vernacular energy and the far more restrained prose that appeared in *Meanjin* itself. The disjunction between the two is a tribute to the lingering power of repressive notions of propriety in mid-twentieth-century Australian literary culture. At the same time, the letters disclose the workings of that repressive regime in many guises, enforced less by official regulation than through informal pressures and the self-censoring practices of the printing and bookselling trades. (Clem’s printer once phoned, almost incoherent with rage, refusing to typeset the coming issue because it was ‘full of fucking filth’; the ‘filth’ in question was Patrick White’s story ‘Down at the Dump’.)

The archives also reveal another kind of doubleness: *Meanjin*’s apparent poise and its increasingly illustrious stable of contributors belied its fragile financial condition. Editing a small magazine is always something of a three-card trick: the magazine depends on subscriptions, which in turn depend on subscribers’ confidence, so a certain amount of self-censorship is mandatory when it comes to discussing the magazine’s financial state. By 1944, however, Clem could dissemble no longer; he wrote an editorial calling for donations and announcing that the magazine would have to close if they were not forthcoming.

Closure was averted when the University of Melbourne offered the magazine a home at the university press and agreed to pay Clem a salary. Within a year, however, the arrangement had broken down. Gwyn James, the manager of the press, was a crusty professional publisher who was impatient of Clem’s enthusiastic amateurism. And, as if to highlight *Meanjin*’s marginal status, it soon transpired that the magazine had no paper ration. Clem often used to say that he first understood Kafka’s novels when he found himself...
tramping the corridors of Paper Control in Brisbane, being fobbed off from one official to the next until he feared he would never see daylight again. In the end, he had been refused a ration, and was forced to beg an under-the-counter supply of newsprint from the printer of the local shipping news. Technically, *Meanjin* was an illegal publication. The consequences for James were potentially disastrous; he could only publish the magazine at the expense of the press’s own list. This predicament exacerbated the tension between the two men.

After the breach with James, Clem carried on alone, arranging his own printing and distributing the magazine through various independent publishers. So *Meanjin* continued to appear, its dignified typography and polished prose giving no hint of its editor’s private desperation. In fact, Clem was often barely able to finance producing the magazine, and his relations with the University of Melbourne remained fraught. Although the magazine was housed at the university, the promised salary was discontinued, leaving him financially dependent on Nina.

Clem’s political views had also made him many enemies in the conservative academic community. He was repeatedly branded a Communist for his outspoken support for civil liberties, and he and Nina were hauled up before the Petrov Commission. There were moves to restrict his editorial freedom, and he had to contend with constant carping at the magazine’s left-leaning stance. All this conflict left a terrible legacy of bitterness. To the end of his days, Clem harboured an almost paranoid resentment at the university’s lack of recognition of his efforts.

Yet his legacy is an extraordinarily rich one – not just in terms of what he published or in the continuing survival of the magazine he founded, but also in the countless small encouragements he gave to generations of literary hopefuls. While *Meanjin’s* selection of polemical and critical articles was strongly driven by Clem’s own preoccupations, in his choice of fiction and poetry he maintained a remarkably open editorial policy. He took heed of the unsolicited manuscripts that arrived daily in his mailbox, and freely dispensed
advice to anyone who showed promise. He was a close textual editor with a keen ear, and was not afraid to take a punt on publishing unknowns.

To my mind, this is what marks Clem out as a truly great editor. Over the years I have met many writers who can still recite by heart phrases from letters they received decades ago, when they first dared to send their work to Meanjin. It is in the works of such writers, and in the pleasure they continue to give their readers, that Clem Christesen has his living legacy.

Jenny Lee

Bio: Jenny Lee was editor of Meanjin from 1987 to 1994. She is currently co-ordinator of the Publishing and Communications program in the English Department at the University of Melbourne.