

National

This was published 15 years ago

Manning Clark's fraud

David Marr

March 5, 2007 – 11.00am

AS AN old man looking back on his life, Manning Clark claimed to have seen with his own eyes the horrors of Kristallnacht. Witnessing this notorious Nazi pogrom changed his life, said Clark, and made him the historian he was. It became the most famous story of a great storyteller.

"I happened to arrive at the railway station at Bonn am Rhein on the morning of Kristallnacht," he told the poet John Tranter in 1987. "That was the morning after the storm-troopers had destroyed Jewish shops, Jewish businesses and the synagogues. Burned them and so on ... I saw the fruits of evil, of human evil, before me there on the streets of Bonn."

But Clark was not there that day. The historian's biographer, Mark McKenna, reveals this week in *The Monthly* that Clark did not reach Nazi Germany for another fortnight. The person who saw the broken glass and smoking synagogues on that morning in November 1938 was the woman Clark was to marry. "It was Dymphna Lodewyckx, not Manning Clark, who witnessed the immediate aftermath of Kristallnacht."

It's not a small point. In the last dozen years of his life, Clark told the story on radio, on television and in newspapers. He wrote a most moving version in his memoirs: "Dymphna was there on the platform at the Bonn railway station when I stepped off the train early in the morning of 8 November, 1938. We walked in ecstasy up the stairs of the Bonn railway station, out of the darkness below into the light. We were in for a rude shock. It was the morning after Kristallnacht."

McKenna was shaken by the discovery that Clark could not have been there that morning to see the wreckage that foretold the Holocaust. But there was no doubt about it. Working on the Clark family papers last year, McKenna found a letter Dymphna Lodewyckx had written from Bonn to Manning

Clark in Oxford a couple of days after these events describing the smashed shops, the ruined synagogue and a rabbi's house in flames: "The violence was over when I came - but the crowds were everywhere - following the smiling SS men, children shouting in excitement, grown-ups silent ..."

At first McKenna thought he had made a mistake. "Like many others, I had taken Clark at his word. I had even quoted the Kristallnacht story in my published work. I reread Dymphna's letter carefully, checked Clark's diary entries, and saw that it was impossible for Clark to have been in Bonn on the morning of 10 November. As his own diary confirms, he did not arrive in Bonn until 26 November."

This revelation is bound to reignite the controversies that have blazed around Australia's most famous historian since Clark emerged in the late 1970s as a public defender of the Whitlam government. These attacks culminated in 1999 in an eight-page "investigation" in Brisbane's *The Courier-Mail* condemning the historian as a communist, an agent of influence and perhaps a Soviet spy.

That attack collapsed in derision, but the 16 years since Clark's death have seen continuing questioning - both academic and political - of his sweeping six-volume narrative of Australian history, and of the quirky persona he created for himself of the Old Testament prophet in a battered Akubra.

Even so, Clark remains the nation's most influential historian. McKenna's biography, due for publication next year by Melbourne University Press, is one of at least two under way.

Presenting his Kristallnacht discovery for the first time to an academic conference last year, McKenna had no doubt the historian set out to deceive.

"I am convinced that Clark chose deliberately to place himself on the streets of Bonn, knowing full well that he was not there. This was Clark's inner lie. But he had also told the story in public, and traded on his audience's trust in him as a historian."

McKenna asked: "Does this make Clark a fraud?"

His answer then was yes and no: while inventing the details of that morning said a great deal about Clark's self-dramatising character, McKenna didn't doubt for a moment that what Clark learnt of the pogrom and what he saw of its aftermath a few weeks later had the profound impact he always claimed. McKenna writes: "In this sense, there is no fabrication."

But in a chunk of the biography published this week in *The Monthly*, McKenna has taken a big step back from his original allegation of deliberate deceit.

"I believe that the older Manning Clark did possess some awareness of the fact that he was not present on the morning after Kristallnacht," he writes. "But to claim to know the extent to which he was conscious of it is to claim to know the inner depths of his mind."

The fallible memory of an old man must not be ruled out, argues McKenna. "I know I can never recover what he truly remembered, the memory of his inner voice, the voice only he heard."

But McKenna, a fellow in history at Sydney University, acknowledges the big problem for Clark is the retelling of the Kristallnacht story in the 1990 autobiography *A Quest for Grace*. Here Clark quotes other letters of his and other diary entries from those months in 1938. "It seems highly unlikely," McKenna told the *Herald*, "that Manning did not see the letter that showed quite clearly that Dymphna was there the morning after Kristallnacht and not him."

The historian's son, *The Australian Financial Review* journalist Andrew Clark, has told the *Herald*, "Mr McKenna has discovered what he believes is a discrepancy in the dates of my father's visit to Bonn ... He is not contesting that my father visited my mother in Bonn after Kristallnacht, just the precise date of his arrival." He argued that the fact his father was recalling events 40 or 50 years in the past "goes some way in explaining any alleged discrepancy in dates".

Clark faults McKenna for not providing readers with a full context of those events. "If he had done so, readers would have known that at the alleged time of my father's arrival in Bonn, the Nazis' murderous acts against Jews was still in evidence."

He regrets McKenna did not speak to him: "Not because I am my father's son, but because I had extensive conversations with my late mother about this period, conversations which vividly confirmed the enormous impact this evil act ... had on my father."

If another round of the so-called Culture Wars is to be fought over Manning Clark's reputation, this piece of operatic scene setting - "both romantic and tragic", writes McKenna, "like Verdi doing Shakespeare" - will be the focus of renewed and perhaps savage controversy. Had Clark forgotten he was not there? Had his wife's memories become his own in a 50-year marriage? Was he mischievously pulling our legs? Or was he setting out to deceive?

McKenna is hoping for a nuanced discussion of his discoveries, not one that simply slams Clark's credibility.

"He created himself as a myth, cultivating a theatrical persona of the people's priest and sage, telling history as parable. And as the Kristallnacht epiphany reveals, the moral of the parable always mattered more than the facts."

Kristallnacht

AFTER a Polish Jew shot a Nazi diplomat in Paris in late 1938, a savage assault was unleashed on the Jews of Germany.

About 100 people were killed on the nights of November 9 and 10, nearly every synagogue in the nation was damaged or destroyed and about 30,000 Jewish men were taken to concentration camps.

The slang name Kristallnacht - roughly, the night of broken glass - came from the shattered shop windows that littered the streets of every German town and city.