

MARCUS CLARKE

(1846-1881) After immigrating to Australia from England in 1863, Marcus Clarke found employment as a journalist with the *Argus* and later the *Age*, *Australasian* and the *Australian Journal*. He began writing for the stage in 1868 while still working as a journalist. His early works were pantomimes and dramas. He married actress Marion Dunn in 1869 and had major success in the early 1870s with his serialised story *His Natural Life* (later published as a novel under the title *For the Term of His Natural Life*). Among his theatre works in the early 1870s were a number of sketches written especially for Harry Rickards. Clarke underwent the first of two bankruptcies in 1874 (the second in 1881). He collaborated with dramatist R.P. Whitworth and actor John L. Hall in the late 1870s before writing his most controversial work, *A Happy Land* (1880). Clarke died on 2 August 1881 leaving behind an unfinished opera libretto titled *Queen Venus*. It was later completed by Henri Kowalski as *Moustique* and given its Australian premiere in 1889.

Regarded as perhaps the best known of Australia's early writers, Marcus Andrew Hislop Clarke was born in the London suburb of Kensington on 24 April 1846. The only son of a Chancery lawyer, William Hislop Clarke and Amelia Elizabeth (nee Matthews), his mother died when he was four years old. Marcus was subsequently raised by his father and introduced to a style of living that in later years he could not afford. Educated at Cholmeley Grammar School, Highgate, Clarke made friends with the young Gerald Manley Hopkins and developed a passion for the novels of Balzac. Expecting a job in the Foreign Office he spent some time in France perfecting his French, but while undertaking his final year of studies in 1862, Clarke's father suffered a breakdown that either led to, or was the result of, financial ruin. Following the death of his father in 1863 Clarke made the decision to immigrate to Australia. He was initially taken under the wing of his uncle, James Langton Clarke, a County Court Judge who lived in Ararat, Victoria. Marcus spent his first few years in Australia engaged in a variety of occupations, including that of a clerk in the Bank of Australasia and as a station hand on the Wimmera River, Victoria. An introduction by Dr Robert Lewis saw him eventually employed with the Melbourne *Argus*, where as a staff writer he contributed a column of topicalities under the heading "The Peripatetic Philosopher." This column saw Clarke's mischievous sense of humour first emerge in print but also brought him into direct conflict with his publishers and influential personalities on a number of occasions.



Aged 20
Source: State Library of Victoria.

Clarke stayed with the *Argus* for a number of years before moving on to other papers, including the *Age* and *Australasian*. It was during this period, too, that he became friends with several other influential young writers of the time - notably playwrights Robert Percy Whitworth, [Garnet Walch](#) and James Neild. In 1869, too, he married actress Marion Dunn. These associations led Clarke to try his hand at writing for the stage and over a four year period beginning in 1868 he produced five staged works - *Foul Play; Or, The Wreck of the Proserpine* (melodrama, 1868), *Goody Two Shoes and Little Boy Blue* (pantomime, 1870); *Peacock Feathers* (a comedy adapted from Moliere and staged in 1871); the semi-tragic drama *Fernande* (1871) which Clarke adapted from Sardou's play of the same name; and the *Plot* (drama, 1872).

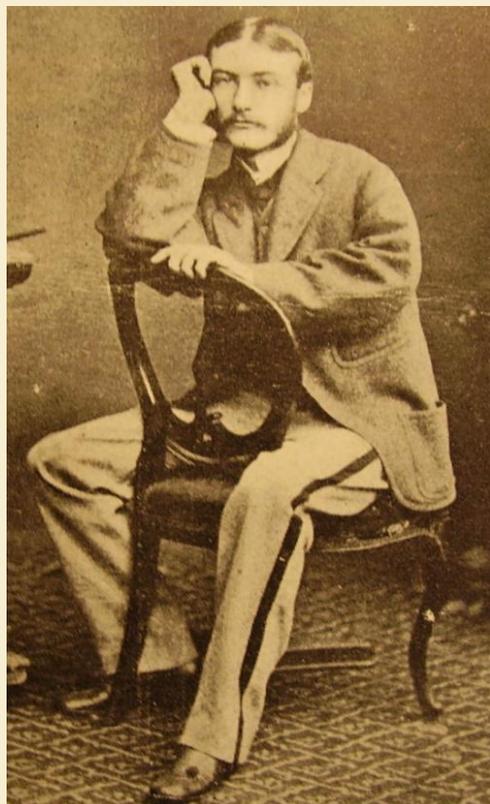
During this period Clarke continued to work as a journalist and in 1870 he was given the editorship of the *Australian Journal*, a position that did not last long. He nevertheless remained with the journal for some two and a half years. His stay was primarily due to the enormous success of his serialised story, and one of the great Australian novels, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (the story was originally published as *His Natural Life*, and given its more well-known title by publishers when reprinted in 1882). The success he garnered from his first attempts at writing for the stage gave Clarke the opportunity to write several sketches for [Harry Rickards](#) during 1872 including "Strolling on the Sands" and "Perfection" in addition to another pantomime, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* (1873).

For the next five years Clarke's theatrical output lapsed. This was to a large extent the result of his employment with the Melbourne Public Library, which had rigid rules of behaviour for its servants, including the earning of outside income. Clarke began at the Library in 1870 as Secretary to the Board of Trustees and in 1873 was appointed Sub-Librarian. He did continue to write, however, but was unable to contribute regular columns such as the "Peripatetic Philosopher," and was also required to steer clear of overt political commentary - at least under his own name. It would appear, too, that his hectic lifestyle, not the least being sheer overwork, led to bouts of anxiety and other related health problems in the mid-1870s. The additional burden of debt also contributed to his poor well-being. Matters reached a head in 1874 when he was forced into insolvency.

It was not until 1878 that Clarke's next work would be staged, this being the musical burlesque extravaganza *Alfred the Great* (Academy of Music, Melbourne). A collaboration with R.P. Whitworth led to an adaptation of the French comedy, *Reverses* had been written in 1876 but was not staged until 1879. It is believed, however, that during this hiatus Clarke wrote a number of songs for various local performers, and may possibly have begun work on the text for a cantata, titled *Proi*. Scored by the Italian composer Paolo Giorza, it was not performed, however, until 1881. From 1878 until his death, Clarke's theatrical output increased steadily. His non-music theatre works from this period onwards include: *The Moonstone: Chandrakanta*, a romantic drama adapted from the Wilkie Collins novel; and the comedy *Baby's Luck*, co-written with actor John L. Hall (1879). It has been speculated that Clarke's return to writing during the late 1870s may well have been the result of financial need. This situation did not improve for him, however, as he was again forced into bankruptcy in 1881. The motivation to write was still there, nevertheless, as the works he wrote in the two years remaining before his premature death (including several music theatre productions), may be regarded as among his best.

Perhaps most significant of these productions was his libretto for a satirical operetta called *The Happy Land* (1880), co-written with Robert Percy Whitworth and actor H.E. Walton. Banned in Victoria due to its controversial subject matter (much of it was aimed at the government of the day), the work stirred up much debate and returned Clarke one again to a position of public agitator. Interestingly, among the cast was a young would-be actor called Thomas Bent. He later gave up acting for politics and eventually becoming Minister for Railways and later the Victorian Premier.¹ Despite the ban being enforced, evidence has been found which indicates that a revival was undertaken at least once in Victoria, at the beachside township of Frankston. This clandestine performance in 1880 was sponsored by fellow-writer Garnet Walch who chartered at his own expense a steamboat to carry the company to its destination. The excursion was a financial disaster for Walch and he soon afterwards filed for bankruptcy.

Following *The Happy Land* Clarke had better box office success with the comedies, *A Daughter of Eve* and *Forbidden Fruit* both of which were staged in Melbourne in 1880, and included songs and musical accompaniment. These last two works also starred his wife, Marion, who had returned to the stage for the first time since 1868. Upon his death on 2 August 1881, Clarke left an unfinished comic opera libretto, too. Titled *Queen Venus*, a completed version, with music composed by semi-resident French composer, Henri Kowalski, was given its Australian debut as *Moustique* in 1889 (Kowalski had staged the work in Brussels in 1883). In 1885, three years after Clarke's death, *His Natural Life* was adapted for the stage. More than a dozen different productions are known to have been staged up until 1913.²



Marcus Clarke's liveliest dramatic writings were pantomimes and comedies, but and as with the fate of other popular culture writers it is clear that his originality and humour were only appreciated by the contemporary public of his day. In this respect, apart from the iconic *His Natural Life*, Clarke's creative output, including his colourful journalism, has never left a lasting impression on future generations. Brian Elliott, in his entry on Clarke for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, notes, however, that the author's journalism in particular "still seems extraordinarily alive and vivid, providing a brilliant index to a very vigorous period of colonial literary life."³ Nevertheless, it his great novel that has outlasted not only his other works, but also every other nineteenth-century Australian writer. Indeed, *For the Term of His Natural Life* is arguably the only work of the whole first century of Australian literature to be considered monumental.

A memorial was erected over Clarke's grave in 1898 on the seventeenth anniversary of his death. Wybert Reeve, who unveiled the monument, said the tribute "was the recognition of the fact that a reproach would rest upon the people of these colonies, as lacking intellect and intelligence, if the grave... were left to remain without some memorial."⁴

Theatre Magazine (Sydney) Jan. 1915, 3.

¹ "Music and Drama." *Brisbane Courier* 3 June 1905, 16.

² *For the Term of His Natural Life* was first filmed in 1908, followed by another in 1911. In 1927 Norman Dawes released his famous version.

³ Elliott, 418.

⁴ "Late Marcus Clarke," 6.

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1870:** *Goody Two Shoes and Little Boy Blue* [pantomime] Lib. Marcus Clarke; Mus. incl. Marcus Clarke
- 1872:** "Perfection" [musical sketch] Txt. Marcus Clarke; Mus. [n/e].
"Strolling on the Sands" [musical sketch] Txt. Marcus Clarke; Mus. [n/e].
- 1873:** *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star; Or, Harlequin Jack Frost* [pantomime] Lib Adapt. Marcus Clarke (from John Strachan); Mus. [n/e].
- 1878:** *Alfred the Great* [burlesque] Txt. Marcus Clarke; Mus. Alfred Plumpton, Thomas Zeplin and Henry Keiley.
- 1880:** *The Happy Land* [operetta] Txt Adapt. Marcus Clarke (from W.S Gilbert and Gilbert A' Beckett)/Mus. [n/e].
- 1880:** *A Daughter of Eve* [play with music] Txt. Marcus Clarke; Mus. [n/e].
Forbidden Fruit [musical entertainment] Txt Adapt. Marcus Clarke (from P.F.A. Carmouche); Mus. [n/e].
- 1889:** *Moustique* (aka *Queen Venus*) [comic opera] Txt. Marcus Clarke; Mus. Henri Kowalski.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. "Strolling on the Sands" (1872). *AusStage*, the Australian live performance database incorrectly identifies this work as have been first staged in 1870. The earliest mention of the work identified to date can be found in the 24 February 1872 editions of the *Australasian* and *Age* newspapers. No precise premiere date is identified, however.⁵
2. Clarke died at St Kilda, Melbourne, on 2 August 1881. The official cause of death was from erysipelas, also known as St Anthony's fire, which is a bacterial infection that affects the skin.

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Source: National Library of Australia.

⁵ "Entertainments: the Theatres Etc." *Australasian* 24 Feb. 1872, 18. For further details see the AVTA entry in Works: 1870s (1872).

Last updated: 18/08/2020

Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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