

## Remembering Dennis J. Clark: Historian and Activist

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*Dennis J. Clark (1927-1993), photo by Patricia Negron.*

Historian and social activist Dennis J. Clark (1927-1993) died in his home last September 17. Since then, the tributes to his mind and character have rolled in. So, too, have the memories of his many stories, his gusto for life, and his passions for history, his people, and his city. In thinking about Dennis Clark the historian, it is not possible to separate him from Dennis Clark the man. So it is with this brief essay remembering Dennis Clark.

Dennis Clark was a full-blooded native Philadelphian, and proud of it. In spirit and association he never left the city he loved, even when he was away organizing migrant workers in the Southwest in the 1940s or working for interracial justice in New York City in the 1960s. Philadelphia as social experience and as metaphor for urban America always stood at the center of Clark's life and work. But Clark's Philadelphia was not the one of laced curtains and tearooms found on the Main Line or Rittenhouse Square. Nor was it locked in time to a colonial past of staid Quakers and powdered-wigged Founding Fathers. Clark found the real Philadelphia, and his heart, among the folk. In his histories, he sought to recover the lives of those thick-wristed men and women whose daily toil and struggles built the city and defined its basic character. The city he knew and loved was, as he described it in a walking tour he conducted in 1993, a place of "labor riots and ethnic combat . . . gangster hangouts, the haunts of dockwallopers, mill 'dollies,' street singers, bootleggers and weekend chippies who made the nation's most historic city a theater of democratic striving and underclass aspirations and foibles." Those were the stories Clark wanted to tell.<sup>1</sup>

Clark's interest in social history grew from his own experience. Calloused hands showed character, he believed. As a youth growing up in the Depression among the Irish working class, he lived and observed the life he later would write about. Clark worked on the docks, on beer trucks, and on construction sites—jobs like his father held—and felt the camaraderie of the workers while he also saw the injustices endured by men underpaid, knocked about and, worst of all, forgotten by those "above them" who owned the docks and buildings and wrote the histories. Clark went off to St. Joseph's College, a Jesuit school in Philadelphia then known for drawing heavily on the sons of urban Irish working-class families for its students, and upon graduation with a degree in history and political science proceeded to Fordham University, the University of Pennsylvania, and finally Temple University, where he earned a doctorate in history. His formal education did not distance Clark from his roots. If anything, training in political science, sociology, and history provided the means to reconnect with his past and his people.

Clark viewed his education as an instrument for social change. Like C. Vann Woodward, who in the 1950s argued that the historian must be an activist, Clark acted on his training. After working as a labor organizer trying to improve living conditions for migrant workers during the 1940s, he returned to Philadelphia.

There he worked for the Philadelphia Housing Authority, where he played a major role in desegregating the Authority's projects, and the Philadelphia Council for Community Advancement, where he pushed for neighborhood redevelopment. His first book, *The Cities in Crisis—The Christian Response* (1960), reflected both his observations on ethnic and racial tensions in the urban setting and his belief that Christians had obligations to right social wrongs. Although Clark later would become disenchanted with the Catholic church's positions on a host of social issues, he never abandoned his conviction that Christian people could foster community by their actions. Clark worshipped at St. Malachy's Roman Catholic Church in North Philadelphia, long after the parish had been transformed from a one-time Irish and immigrant stronghold to an African-American and Hispanic one. Such convictions in the 1960s led Clark to be among the founding board members of the National Catholic Conference of Interracial Justice and to travel to New York to serve with the Catholic Interracial Council, duties that included editing the *Interracial Review*. Among the works that came from such experience was *The Ghetto Game: Racial Conflicts in the City* (1962).

Clark's activism extended to matters of work environment. In *Work and the Human Spirit* (1967), he recalled how central work was to human dignity and self-worth, and in *Future Bread: How Retail Workers Ransomed Their Jobs and Lives: With A Guide to Cooperative Ownership* (1983), with Merry Guben, he lamented the loss of personal contact and concern in the modern business world. Such concerns about the changing face and nature of work in the post-industrial age led Clark backward to explore the history of work and the workplace, especially in Philadelphia and among the Irish mill hands, domestics, and manual laborers. Indeed, Clark fixed increasingly on the Irish working class in his writing after he became head of the Samuel S. Fels Fund in Philadelphia (a foundation supporting science, education, the arts, and community service), where he worked from 1971 until his retirement in 1988.

During the 1970s Clark turned to history as his principal vehicle of expression. He continued to write commentary, especially for Irish and Irish-American publications, and to stay abreast of contemporary social issues. He even ventured into predictions on the future of the city in a book for the American bicentennial essaying Philadelphia's past and prospects (*Philadelphia 1776-2076*, 1975), and angrily into the politics of Northern Ireland, which spurred him to write *Irish*

*Blood: Northern Ireland and the American Conscience* (1977), about American involvement in and responsibility for the tragedy across the ocean. He nursed an abiding dislike of the English for crimes against the Irish over the centuries—a perspective that colored his thinking about the Irish experience on both sides of the Atlantic. But the working classes and work had come to dominate Clark's thoughts. As the “workshop of the world,” Philadelphia fascinated him most of all in looking at work and the effects of industrialization on people. The varieties of work drew many different people to Philadelphia, which he once described as “one big factory around a thriving port,” and forced Philadelphia and the many peoples there to redefine themselves, even as they struggled to retain their older cultures and identities. That was the story of America that begged to be told. In thinking and writing about the peoples of Philadelphia, Clark had come home.

In looking at work, Clark found his Irish folk. First, in *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience*, issued appropriately on St. Patrick's Day in 1974, and then in the subsequent volumes of what became his Philadelphia Irish trilogy—*The Irish Relations: Trials of an Immigrant Tradition* (1986) and *Erin's Heirs: Irish Bonds of Community* (1991)—Clark tracked the history of Famine and post-Famine Irish immigrants during and after work. For Clark, the Famine experience hung over all Irish action and identity, but the worlds the Irish made in America counted much, too. From the workplace, Clark followed the Irish to their homes, churches, union halls, saloons, and elsewhere. No neat Irish identity emerged from such investigations. The Irish Americans themselves sometimes perplexed and confused Clark—for example, in their big hearts sometimes mixing with bigotry (as in politics, where the Irish at times joined with and other times jostled with blacks at the polls and in the streets). He once said that “almost anything you say about them [Irish Americans] is both true and false.” He bored deep into the Irish-American culture and soul to find the truth about them. In doing so, Clark became more of a “micro-historian” than one with a panoramic vision. He appreciated the importance of comparative history in studying ethnic identities and American culture, and even contributed articles to the debates, but his “new social history” kept him focused on his people and Philadelphia for much of his scholarly life.

Over the several years before his death, Clark began to reach backward in time to consider the pre-Famine Irish experience in America (finding Irish indentured servants and others in greater number and of greater significance in colonial America

than theretofore thought) and forward in time to sift through the residues of Irish identity left by the Irish who as a people had completed a century of life in America. Clark began to examine more closely the institutions the Irish built, such as the Catholic church in America, stepping into the vanguard of the "new religious history" to shift the discussion from the pulpit to the pews, as in his booklet *Proud Past: Catholic Laypeople of Philadelphia* (1976), a look at parish life in the Philadelphia area, among several studies of Catholics rather than Catholicism.

What interested Clark most of all was the persistence of cultural identity. In evaluating his own writing, he recently observed that while most "history books are about how ethnic groups assimilated in this country," his "are opposite—they're about how people kept their identity, kept their act together and their bonds of community." Such interest directed Clark to places few historians had theretofore gone, such as inside the many local ethnic clubs and even to ethnic radio, where Irish (and other ethnic) identity prospered.

He also expanded his vision to comparisons of Irish adaptation in different places. His booklet for the Pennsylvania Historical Association, entitled *The Irish in Pennsylvania: A People Share a Commonwealth* (1991), echoed his continuing interest in the Pennsylvania, and more particularly the Philadelphia, story, but a book he was writing before he died emphasized more the Irish elsewhere. Clark acknowledged the need to move from a parochial, even self-indulgent older Irish-American historiography to one that would connect with the most dynamic areas of American social history—a move he already had made conceptually in his later works. In one of his last statements about the future of Irish and ethnic history, Clark insisted that scholars appreciate aspects of Irish experience too easily shunted aside, such as the Irish reform impulse, which Clark thought was "often secular, radical, and at polemical odds with Catholic conformism." He urged scholars to adopt new approaches to Irish-American and ethnic studies that would "more acutely align ethnic histories with major American movements and search out social and regional dimensions of group life that have been overshadowed by traditional categories." Such a strategy would bring scholars to "studies of women's history, work life as distinguished from labor organization, the social history of education and popular culture."<sup>2</sup>

In another important way Clark's life and work charted the direction of ethnic and Philadelphia history. Clark was among the few historians who early on

recognized the significance of “popular” and public history as the principal means of reaching the very people he wrote about. Among his many legacies is the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia, a major library, museum, and educational center on ethnic groups and inter-group relations that he, as much as anyone else, built up by his wise counsel as a longtime board member and by his work in shaping museum exhibits, public programming, and collecting policies. Along with his famous walking tours conducted for the Atwater Kent Museum in Philadelphia, Clark’s walking tours and public programs at the Balch brought history to the people. Museums without walls were the way to bring people to history, he believed. Rather than concede history to popularizers who cared only about the “great white men” of the past, Clark insisted that serious social history could seize the public imagination if scholars would but combine scholarship with activism, listen to the folk rather than just talk to them, and leave the dusty archives long enough also to discover history in buildings, back-alleys, and boardinghouses, and not just in boardrooms. Public history offered a means to that end.

Clark was, in sum, an outdoors historian, even as he thrived in the libraries and archives he frequented in America and Ireland. Famous for his wit and unfailing good humor, and respected for his commitment to social justice and to honest scholarship, Clark likely will be remembered most for his character. He never liked pretensions or pomposity, to which his own tweedy attire and hearty handshake attested, and he especially disliked dishonesty and injustice. As a historian, his calls for telling the stories of the folk, which he made real and vital by doing so himself, will remain his surest epitaph. They will echo hereafter as the new ethnic and social history he did so much to write moves to center page in American history textbooks and public consciousness. Clark embodied the true spirit of Clio. He made history matter.

## Notes

1. As quoted in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 18, 1993. The obituary by Andy Wallace in the *Inquirer* and the shorter one in the *New York Times*, September 19, 1993, offer the best and most accessible brief overviews of Clark’s life. I have drawn on them and also on clippings and personal items

in the Dennis Clark Papers, The Balch Institute, Philadelphia, for my assessment of Clark and quotations from him.

2. Clark review of Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America* in *American Historical Review*, 98 (June 1993): 936.