

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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## Historian turned heads through ideas; Inga Clendinnen 1934-2016

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Inga Clendinnen was one of Australia's most distinguished historians and she was also a writer with a virtuoso gift for dramatising ideas. After a notable career as an academic historian culminating in the publication in 1991 of her extraordinary study *Aztecs*, Clendinnen, who contracted life-threatening hepatitis and, as a consequence, had a successful liver transplant, wrote on subjects ranging from Nazi Germany, *Reading the Holocaust* (1998) to Australian Aboriginals and Settlers (*Dancing with Strangers* 2003) as well as her startling memoir *Tiger's Eye* (2000), which combines autobiography with flashes of fiction.

But then Inga Clendinnen was the rarest kind in Australian intellectual and literary life, a scholar of the first rank who was also, in temperament and achievement, a dazzling artist.

She was born in Geelong in 1934 after the Depression to a modest family, though her father ran a factory. Her mother was her blacking factory and *Tiger's Eye* is, among other things, a blazing portrait of the lack of affection between the two women which seems, complexly, to have shaped Clendinnen.

She studied history at the University of Melbourne under Max Crawford, and the girl born Inga Jewell married John Clendinnen when she was 20 because, as she confessed many years later, she got sick of doing it in the back seat of the Peugeot.

People tell ravishing stories of the young Inga - as a beauty, as a siren, as a lover of the good life. She and her husband raised their two boys in the bohemian bush in Eltham, where they were friends of Betty Burstall who started *La Mama* and her film director husband Tim Burstall.

In 1969 Inga transferred from Melbourne University where she had been senior tutor in history to a lecturer's position at La Trobe where she became one of the most prominent members of a school of history which included Rhys Isaac and that one-time Jesuit, Greg Denning among its members.

This group of historians was influenced by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and they believed what they called the "subject-position" - the I voice - was central to the interpretation of history.

In practice this meant an intense imaginative involvement in the frequently alien thought patterns of the historical figures and societies being scrutinised.

So Clendinnen in her great study *Aztecs*, tries to see the Aztecs in their terms, to apprehend what those savage and grand rituals of sacrifice meant to them while never diminishing the terror and human pain.

"So I hope to arrive", she wrote, "at something of what the Mexica were seeing on their small lit stages before the shrines at the crest of the pyramids: what those scenes of mannered violence said to them of the human condition and of the terms of their own social existence, the one casting its natural light upon the other".

Clendinnen was both a moralist with an intense psychological feeling for the inflections of cruelty and the reality of human suffering and someone who saw something like the artistic impulse as central to every human and social enigma. To read her is to encounter an intelligence, at once impassioned and fierce, which is a bit like a great critic who has somehow, as if in a dream, found that no book or painting, but the world itself, is her text.

Aztecs came out of Clendinnen's research at Princeton and was subtitled "an interpretation".

Then, after she contracted auto-immune hepatitis, all of her work became a matter of interpretation because she ceased to be a university historian and became something bigger.

She said she had found herself tossing down drinks early in the day because of the sheer horror of the Aztec material.

"I mean there was blood everywhere. There were hearts everywhere. When you have holocausts of people going weeping and trembling to their deaths."

Throughout her life-threatening illness, she held onto the image of the Aztec warrior. "When I thought through the labyrinth of possibilities and memory and so on, I found at the very heart of the labyrinth a little Aztec warrior as the vision of how one ought to be in conditions of challenge."

This identification with the warrior is crucial to an understanding of Inga Clendinnen. When her friend Helen Daniel, the literary editor, died after a period of tragic depression, Inga, standing in front of the altar at Burley Griffin's Newman College chapel, turned to her Aztecs and used their favourite saying, "I hope it was a good day for Helen to die".

Clendinnen became the recipient of a liver transplant, and she had great faith in the fact that in Australia "it's strictly democratic ... you can't buy your way into the queue." And it was Helen Daniel, as editor of Australian Book Review, who encouraged her to try her arm as an essayistic writer. It led to the celebrated essay about George Augustus Robinson, the do-gooder who rounded up the Tasmanian Aborigines. And it led to Tiger's Eye, that recollection of a life by the fierce light, as well as the valley of the shadow of death.

She didn't look back. Reading the Holocaust is an elegiac meditation on the darkness that enshrouds the Holocaust. Inga wanted to know how people, like us, did these things. "Humankind saw the face of the Gorgon in the concentration camps, petrifying the human by its denial of the human, both in itself and in its prey."

That's why David Malouf said of this book that Clendinnen "brings the Holocaust close up and stares the Medusa down. Inga Clendinnen claims for history the same power as poetry or fiction to enter the silences and make them speak."

And Dancing With Strangers is just as distinctively an attempt to see how those semi-Enlightenment Englishmen could be charmed by the Aborigines, and how they could turn away from the light.

She hated cruelty and loathed pomposity. In her book of essays, Agamemnon's Kiss - cited by her publisher, Text, the morning she died - she says, "now I know how I want death to come to me strolling in the slanting rain of light ... I will say to Death, 'A moment, friend.' And then: 'I'm ready now.'"

**Inga Clendinnen proudly described herself as an anarchist. She rode into battle every day of her life. Her husband John died in 2013. She is survived by her two sons.**