

Burton R. Clark, 1921–2009. The man, his saga and his times

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Everyone of us has his or her ‘invisible college’: that gathering of fellow scholars who have inspired us, with whom we have worked, corresponded and exchanged ideas across the years of our efforts in the different fields and domains of higher education. By its very nature, we can never be sure of the exact size and dimension of this fraternity. For the ‘invisible college’ remains largely that. It is invisible. It is ‘virtual’ in both senses of the term. We meet fractions of it with gladness and pleasure at those events and conferences that are our professional lot. In effect, the ‘invisible college’ takes on – to use a theological term – a corporeal presence only on two very specific occasions: first, when one of its masters retires; second, when we come together to pay our tribute to them, to rejoice in their life’s work – to give thanks for the contribution their labour brought to the shaping of our domain. This we do as we take our final leave of our friend and colleague, Bob Clark.

No scholar of higher education will question the shaping and the influence, fundamental and formative, that Bob Clark has wielded over the study of higher education at all levels, micro and macro, institutional, system and comparative. No student worth their salt, from the first year graduate stripling, embarking on the study of higher education, can remain unfamiliar with the concepts and models that Clark coined and claim to be serious. Today, more than a quarter century after his seminal work *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective* appeared, Clark’s oeuvre still provides the basic tools and vocabulary with which our understanding of the higher education system advances.

Bob Clark’s ‘invisible college’, if we define it as those he inspired and whom he continues to inspire, is immense. It is, to use a much overworked adjective, but precise in his case, global. Our commemoration of his oeuvre represents only a regional sub-section of the Clarkian invisible college, primarily British and, secondly, European. And yet, it is singularly appropriate that this first initiative to summon part of Bob’s ‘invisible college’ into physical being should come from the UK, from the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London, and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University.

The times shaping the man

When I look back on Bob Clark’s career, I am reminded of a famous speech made in 1826 to the House of Commons by George Canning, one of Britain’s greatest Foreign Ministers. British foreign policy vis a vis Portugal, then under attack by a motley band of mercenaries bent on restoring the benefits of absolutism, involved in Canning’s words ‘calling the new world into

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existence to adjust the balance of the old' (Bryant 1906). So, I would argue, did Clark's research in the area of higher education. It called upon the experience of the new world to adjust the balance or our perception of higher education in the old. Why did the Clark oeuvre have such impact in the old world, rather than the new? This question in no way belittles the intrinsic significance of Bob's oeuvre. In posing it, I am simply seeking a supplementary explanation why the Clarkian perspective should have acquired such weight, over and above that which naturally results from rigorous scholarship, from the clarity and elegance in which it was couched and the sheer relevance and explanative power his insights generated. For if the man has shaped his times, so also have the times shaped both the man and the significance of what he wrote.

A midway course

I will steer a course midway between the man and his times, whilst taking one particular reference point, which in sheer physical terms, was very certainly the weightiest undertaking Bob engaged upon. It weighed 7.2 kilograms. I am, of course, alluding to the *Encyclopedia of Higher Education* on which I served as editorial cabin boy to Bob's role as master mariner.

The common linkage between the worlds new and old was of course those very forces that gave birth to Clark's field of scholarship: namely, the drive to mass higher education. Mass higher education was first attained in the United States. And the 1944 GI Bill of Rights acted as the Archimedes lever to its development.

Mass higher education and Bob Clark are intimately and indissolubly associated. This association has many different levels. First, Bob was one of what Americans are now calling 'The Great Generation', those called up to fight the Second World War. Bob was one of the hundreds of thousands for whom the GI Bill of Rights threw higher education open – to those who, in earlier times, could never have afforded to go to college (Clark 2000). Second, when he returned from Europe to take up his studies in 1949, he moved to the West Coast, to Los Angeles and to the University of California, later to become the epicentre of mass higher education as well as its most evident pioneer. As the University of California moved steadily towards mass higher education in the 1950s, Clark was already amongst a small research team at Berkeley (Rothblatt 1994; Kerr 2004).

The drive to the west

I have often wondered why Bob, who was a New Jersey man, decided to follow the well-known advice of Horace Greely 'Go West, young man'. After all, neither New Jersey nor New York was lacking in outstanding universities. The answer lies in Vienna, and the delights of Viennese opera. So great were the latter that Bob chose to 'demob' in Vienna rather than returning home immediately to take up study.

From what his wife, Adèle, told me recently, both she and Bob had decided that studying at the local university was neither appealing nor adventuresome. Nor was staying on the home patch. Both Adèle and Bob became part of that final drive to the West. It was no small challenge: cross-country travelling – by car rather than by rail – was relatively cheap, if exhausting. But, with a fellow traveller, expenses can be shared. Bob's advert in a New York newspaper for a fellow passenger to ride with him to California was fateful indeed. The only answer to his ad came from a young New Yorker, Adèle Halitsky, then studying medical biology, also at UCLA. What started out as a coast-to-coast drive matured into a romantic saga that was to last 50 years and involve many books. Adèle Halitsky became his wife, his muse, his strictest critic and eagle-eyed editor.

Italy and the preparations for the second Clarkian landing in Europe

There is, however, a third link between Bob and mass higher education. It is very clearly the 'greatest of these three'. It laid the groundwork for Bob's 'intellectual saga'. Bob was amongst the earliest students to base his fieldwork on higher education. Though awarded in the field of organisational sociology, our colleague's doctorate analysed leadership in the Los Angeles school district. His subsequent career as it unfolded at Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley and Yale saw him concentrating wholly and single-mindedly on issues that were key and strategic as America proceeded resolutely into the unknown territory of mass higher education. It was during the years from 1956 to around 1980 that he laid the groundwork, methodology – principally the large-scale case study approach – together with the fundamental concepts, later set down in his masterly synthesis, *The Higher Education System*. They formed the intellectual logistics and back-up for what we may now call the second Clarkian landing in Europe. The first took place a decade and a half earlier in December 1944, when he disembarked with the 42nd Infantry Division on a freezing Christmas Eve at Marseille.

When did Bob turn his attention to the world beyond the United States? His publication record shows clearly that the fruits of the first foray into foreign parts – and systems – came out in 1977. In fact, the groundwork for *Academic Power in Italy* was laid down over the course of the decade. As anyone who studied higher education in Italy knows to their cost, it is politically, administratively and from the sheer anthropology of its academic cultures, one of Europe's most complex systems of higher education – not to say, downright opaque in the nuances and subtleties which govern its ways and the behaviour of its actors, great and small.

Bob's involvement with Italy marks, as I have said, the second Clarkian landing in Europe. The second landing, in 1969, was, as he himself recounted later, to examine a system at the polar opposite to the United States. One where an apparently powerful central Ministry held sway, where academia formed part of public service and where, to use an anachronism for he never used these exact terms, legal homogeneity and formal state control (Neave and van Vught 1991) all flourished like the Green Bay Tree.

Lover of Italian opera

Thus, Bob justified his choice of Italy. But the demands of scholarship were not the whole story. To my mind, and based on many conversations over the years with Bob and Adèle, there is a second level explanation. And this is just as important to our understanding the man as it is the scholar. Why, I once asked both him and Adèle, did he foreswear France? After all, France was a system volatile in the extreme. It too, could be seen – and indeed, saw itself – as the counterpoint to higher education *à l'américaine*? Italy was simply more 'sympatico', Adèle told me.

But Italy has many other virtues. One of its greatest joys is – its opera! Despite being put to a series of *'interrogations serrées'*, Bob never admitted this. Nor, for that matter did he deny it, hotly or passionately. That was not his style. But I remain unpersuaded that a man who succumbed so willingly to the temptations of Viennese opera could remain insensitive to the glories of its Italian equivalent. So, I incline to the view that opera was indeed the tipping factor that bore heavily on Bob's choice between Italy and France.

The Italian adventure ran in parallel with Bob's establishing a permanent base for the study of higher education at Yale, arrayed, as he himself noted, around the three key disciplines of history, politics and sociology. As he ruefully pointed out, 'We never did find an appropriate economist with particular foreign expertise who could also interact with the rest of us' (Clark 2000, 19). The importance of the Yale years in shaping the Clarkian school in the study of higher education was crucial. He gathered around him a small but choice group of PhD students, many from within the United States, but also a handful who were sent to train specifically with him as

the future cadres of policy analysis for Sweden. Thus the second Clarkian landing in Europe went hand in hand with consolidating what the military would see as the logistical base. The structures, methodology and the hypotheses for testing and verification were firmly in place when Bob returned to his alma mater as the Allan M. Carter Professor of Higher Education in 1980. The way lay open for a sustained and systematic exploration of higher education in its cross-national setting.

Knights of the Clarkian ‘round table’

Clark’s international outreach was not the only initiative. Other attempts had been made in the US to create an international forum: notably in the 1970s by James A. Perkins, one-time President of Cornell University, and founder of the Princeton-based International Council for Educational Development. Whilst Bob figured prominently in the Perkins Round, its purpose was very different. Certainly, the Perkins Round had higher education as its focal point. But it aimed at a slightly different constituency – primarily at national leadership, those who jiggled and danced across the interface between the university and the world of national policy-making, between the Administrative Estate and national civil service: in short, university leadership at national and often Ministry, level. The Clarkian nexus, by contrast, brought together two groups: senior scholars actively involved in researching current issues in the major European – and later, Japanese – systems of higher education together with a goodly injection of a then younger cohort of scholars, still engaged in winning their spurs. Retrospectively, the Clarkian ‘round table’, with occasional rotations amongst knights and squires, remained in place for the next 13 years, up to and beyond Bob’s official retirement in 1992.

Hindsight: a blessing and a curse

For historians, hindsight is both a blessing and a curse. Because we now know what the outcome was, it is all too easy to see the known outcome as part of the original intention. Bob’s initiative in 1980 to bring European and American scholars together was, to quote Victor Hugo, an idea whose time had come. Within individual countries in Europe, the scholarly community in higher education had begun to coalesce and take on a sustainable research capacity. In Britain, for instance, there were the Lancaster conferences of the mid 1970s, in Germany, the creation by Ulrich Teichler of the *Kassel Wissenschaftliches Zentrum fuer Hochschul- und Arbeitsmarkt-Forschung* (Research Centre for the Study of Higher Education and Work), and in Sweden, the setting up by the Office of the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities (UHA) of a higher education research programme to assess the policy initiatives of the 1970s and early 1980s, master-minded by Eskil Bjorklund (Neave and Jenkinson 1983).

Coalescence of the higher education research community accelerated during the 1980s with the founding of CHEPS (the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies) at Twente, in the Netherlands, in 1984, and the shift in attention towards higher education by the predecessor to the present-day Norwegian Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education. Coalescence, however, was largely confined within the systems that generated it. True, this was to change with the establishment in 1988 of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), principally to develop a Western European and cross-national perspective. That two of CHER’s three founders also sat at the Clarkian round table, was no coincidence. In short, to summon up once again the ghost of George Canning, Bob’s initiative in the early 1980s to create the round table, concentrated on sustained cross-national research into higher education, did indeed bring about a ‘new balance’ in the old world. At the very least, it showed that the coalescence at national level should be pursued beyond the boundaries of single systems.

Two stages in the coalescence of the higher education research community

Still, important differences remained between European initiatives and those that accompanied the early growth of that section of the higher education research community which Clark's initiative put in train. The differences lay in two fundamental characteristics that set the Clarkian initiative apart from the usual run-of-the-mill gatherings of inter-governmental organisations which, up to that point, had exercised a virtual monopoly over the cross-system study of higher education – UNESCO, OECD (Amaral and Neave 2009), the Council of Europe and the then relatively marginal European Community institutions (Neave 1987). First, the research agenda of the round table was determined, shaped and driven from within that section of the scholarly community, which Bob called into being. Just how it was driven, I shall deal with in a moment. Whether it is either accurate or fair to see this initiative as a final brilliant blaze of independent scholarship before the triumph of commissioned research and tendering to government priorities, the reader will have to judge. The second feature that sets aside the 13-year saga our colleague launched was no less noteworthy. Not only was it characterised by its uncompromising scholarly independence. It also had a text. That text came in the shape of the *Higher Education System*. From this latter standpoint, it may be argued that one of the most significant latent functions of the Clarkian round table was at one and the same time to test, verify and ascertain how far concepts forged in the setting of higher education in the United States had application, power and explicative validity elsewhere.

Scholarly humility

For those of us who can look back across three decades, the central feature of the Clarkian round table must surely be as an outstanding example of both scholarly rigour and at the same time, scholarly humility. At the very moment when the first drum beats of what has in the meantime become the thunderous orthodoxy of neo-liberalism and the adjustments it required – and continues to require – of higher education, our colleague, unlike many, did not publicly subscribe to the equivalent in higher education of that devastating claim that what was good for America was, for that self-same reason, good for the rest of the world. This is not to say, and his oeuvre does not deny it, that he did not believe there were features that could profitably be emulated by others. But from there to thumping the drum of an undiluted proselytism was, for him, simply not on. As a scholar whose meticulousness and scruple were second to none, one of his prime virtues lay precisely in his willingness to suspend belief until evidence was to hand to bear it out. Or to reject it.

Once we take such a quality into account, we obtain a very different perspective on the purpose underlying the 13 years he devoted to higher education beyond the shores of the North Atlantic and the North Pacific. That purpose was, in effect, one of negotiation – to find out how similarity in academic values and belief systems functioned when inserted in different organisational models and procedures themselves born out of very different legal, political and historic circumstances and reference points. Nor was negotiation a one-way process. As a keen and subtle observer of his own higher education system, Bob was very far from sharing the Panglossian view that in United States higher education, 'all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. On the contrary, his even-handedness – itself a form of scholarly humility – meant he had not the slightest hesitation in pointing out to his fellow scholars in the US the lessons they might derive from 'foreign practice'. Amongst the most significant, to Bob's way of thinking, was Europe's preservation of elite forms of secondary schooling in the midst of its drive to mass higher education.

In effect, if one looks carefully at the latter two projects the round table addressed – *The Academic Profession* (1987) and *Research Foundations* (1993) – each carried a second, very specific

volume of synthesis and conclusions. This Bob drew up entirely by himself in which the findings of the first – the ‘case study’ volumes – were ‘integrated’ within the world according to Clark and at the same time reinterpreted explicitly back into the American context.

Ways of getting things done

So far, I have concentrated on the place and the services Bob Clark rendered the scholarly community. But knowing what he has done for us is not the same thing as knowing how he did it.

No one who has worked with Bob Clark could fail to be struck by his boundless optimism, or by his sparkling cheerfulness. In the literal meaning of the words, Bob was a gentle man, a considerate interlocutor and a patient one, though none of these gentle qualities ever overrode a sharpness of mind and a conciseness that were ever ready, present and waiting. And yet. A gentle manner does not mean – and in Bob’s case, it most certainly did not – a flaccid lack of determination. On the contrary, it went hand-in-glove with an iron will. Even so, the way his seminars were arranged and conducted ensured that the iron claw never appeared, only the velvet glove.

The working dynamic of the round table was revealing indeed. Those writing papers received beforehand a very general remit intended to encourage them in the particularities of their home system. After presentation and very detailed comments by a discussant, the floor was thrown open, with Bob summing up at the end of each day. On the final day, Bob then set out the points of agreement, points that deserved further development, others that discussion had revealed to be more important than at first suspected and what the implications might be for different systems. After which, the conference closed and each, like Achilles, retired to their tent to tweak, remove or add. The final result was then despatched with no more than two months delay, to the Father of the Feast. And, after due comment, if needed, the Father of the Feast penned his overall introduction and synthesis.

Now this, you will say, is not greatly unusual. What was unusual was the level of agreement amongst participants on what were the general dimensions that emerged from the cut and thrust, the skeleton of synthesis, if you will, and the individual elements of exceptionalism. In effect, discussion generated a second, more detailed framework to which each adjusted his account, as he deemed appropriate. Only later, when I had had some experience of it, did it occur to me that Bob’s chairmanship had a curious kinship to the Japanese model of leadership.

For those who have not come across the Japanese ‘leadership style’, it is unusual because it is remarkably unruffled. The leader is entwined in an aura of great tranquillity. He or she is the essence – incarnation is perhaps better – of visible, transcendental and impenetrable calm. Around them, ideas, refutations, rebuttals, suggestions and personalities fight, clash and contend. This uproar lasts until the moment the Great Man or Woman decides they have heard enough. At which point, the GM/W raises their hands. Silence instantly descends. The Leader then announces their decision and all those who were frantically arguing to, fro, backwards and sideways, buckle down to work out the details. Now I am not saying that our colleague deliberately and knowingly employed a Samurai style, though I cannot wholly dismiss it, either. What I am saying is that Bob had a very clear vision about the way the project ought to unfold, whilst remaining deeply sensitive of, and accommodating to, the unexpected interim results his colleagues often came up with.

The *Encyclopedia*: a division of labour

A second example of Bob’s steely determination and unrivalled incisiveness was, for me at least, the *Encyclopedia of Higher Education*. Having appended our signatures to the bottom of each page

in a horrendously complicated legal document that seemed unending, which the lawyers smartly whipped away, we sank back and stared at each other – aghast as the implications sank in.

Bob bent a mischievous eye in my direction: ‘An A to Z dictionary, that it’s not’, he said, firmly. And strangely, so it turned out to be. Over the next six months, we worked unremittingly to hammer into shape a workable and equitable division of labour. An equitable division of labour, we agreed with astonishing speed, required section editors. Section editors would ensure that, as editors-in-chief, we had the division and they had the labour. After delicate enquiry, blackmail, and the use of all the arts of suasion – some moral, others less so – we succeeded in luring 12 trusty colleagues aboard the venture. Four of the 12 had been members of the Clarkian round table. Others commanded so weighty a repute that had we failed to seduce them, the *Encyclopedia’s* claim to be a ‘weighty tome’ would, in truth, have been tattered indeed.

Designing the *Encyclopedia’s* structure was complex. But at least that we had under our complete control. Bob came up with the idea of constructing the work around a double matrix arrayed around four common elements:

- (1) Higher education and society.
- (2) The institutional fabric of the higher education system.
- (3) Governance, administration and finance.
- (4) Faculty and students: teaching, learning and research.

It was an elegant and original arrangement. It bore out to the full Bob’s determination to avoid the A to Z telephone directory approach. On the one hand, each of the four domains figured as elements in a standardised analysis of the individual systems of higher education. On the other, each domain was itself broken out and sub divided into individual topics and analytic papers, arranged around themes. Thus, Volume 1 was given over to national systems of higher education – some 135 in all; Volumes 2 and 3 covered some 120 themes and topics such as administration – national and institutional – finance, and particular models of higher education. Disciplines contributing to the study of higher education, masterminded by Tony Becher, formed a self-standing section in Volume 3. For Volume 4, we felt a special pride. It showed the general reader how the basic disciplines that formed the knowledge core of higher education had evolved over the past quarter century. In many ways, Volume 4 was a self-contained mini-encyclopedia within the *Encyclopedia*. It revolved around five generic fields; the humanities, the social sciences, biological sciences, medical sciences and physical sciences, each with its own editorial master-mind.

Since neither of us over the past four decades had even dipped his toes into three of the five fields, we had recourse to scholarly networks which served us royally. Names eventually filtered upward and both master mariner and cabin boy heaved sighs of relief. Such relief was not to last. The best laid plans of Clark and Neave did indeed go astray. Massively. We signed the contract in September 1988. Almost at that the very moment, Eastern Europe fell apart. The more conscientious of our authors suddenly found that their accounts, if not turned into dust and ashes, had taken on an unexpected degree of irrelevance. Others contributors sank without trace. And those who did not sink sought advice from distraught section editors who, naturally, passed the cries of woe onward and upward.

I must confess that I have never so admired Bob’s Olympian calm as at that moment. There was good reason: national systems of higher education was my pigeon. But an encyclopedia has many purposes. If we could not ensure all country analyses were up to the minute, it was still useful to have an account that primarily served an historic function. It was, we reckoned, just as important to know the state of play of higher education in the latter days of rapidly vanishing regimes. Besides, none could possibly know how it would all turn out. And lastly, it underlined

as nothing else that the study of higher education is itself provisional. The replies handed down to the distressed were resolute, virile and encouraging. Reassured, the *matelots* turned back to the business of making everything shipshape.

Despite these and other mildly vexatious episodes, the *Encyclopedia* was published on time and launched at a reception in San Francisco in March 1992. The date coincided with two major events: the riotous annual circus of the American Educational Research Association, with some 13,000 attendees – though not all turned up for the launching – and what was alluded to as ‘Bob’s retirement party’. But this was no retirement at all, for Bob’s retirement was to produce five more books, at least three major personal research projects and a flood of articles which showed, as nothing else, that Bob’s insight, meticulousness and sheer scholarly creativity remained as sharp as ever they had been.

Envoi

In closing this very personal view of my good friend and colleague, Burton R. Clark, there remains but one thing for me to add. The delight and very real pleasure of working with Bob – and, no less important, seeing how he worked to encourage and inspire others to surpass themselves, has been a privilege rare and extraordinary. If the truth were out, shaping the way we dissect and account for our times, demands that the man also shapes his times by shaping his colleagues. This Burton R. Clark did and did so in full measure. It is for this very same reason that his loss, though grievous indeed, cannot be marked otherwise than by our collective thanks for a life that so signally moulded our understanding of both our universities and our times.

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