Trinity College, Melbourne, has produced a number of notable historical scholars. Three in particular came of age between the First and Second World Wars, when they were resident students of the College, and together form something of a period piece: Sir Keith Hancock, Manning Clark, and Chester Wilmot. They were products of an era - in the College, the University and the world. They came to work in essentially different historical fields: in British imperial, Australian, and military history respectively, and they were all distinctly individual. But they were also remarkable for similarities of personality and values, and because all of them made seminal contributions in their respective areas of endeavour. The better part of a century has passed since they were students in Trinity, and they were products of a vanished world. All three are now dead. But their approach to the study of history, particularly their intellectual breadth and humanity, is salutary today in an age of academic specialisation and the cult of technology.

War cast a long shadow over the youths of these men. Keith Hancock came up to university in 1917 after his parents had forbidden him to enlist: a legal right they had over their youngest son. His brother had been reported missing on the Somme (where he was killed by shellfire) soon after Hancock's eighteenth birthday. The sober company of ex-servicemen and the communal memory of many lives lost influenced Hancock's student days. Wilmot and Clark came up a decade later (in 1931 and 1934). Both travelled to Germany in the late 1930s, and became aware of the evils of Nazism and the prospect of another great war. Like the same generation of British historians, these three young Australians were shaped by a political climate of great seriousness. This helped to imbue their historical thinking with the power of great events, with issues of social change (particularly in the wake of the Russian Revolution), and with deep moral purpose. They were also influenced by their teachers. Hancock came into the orbit of Professor Ernest Scott, whose teaching of history, while empirical and hostile to theory, had what Hancock considered the merit of ‘span’. Wilmot, too, was influenced by Scott, who was a role model of an historian engaged in international affairs, and by W MacMahon Ball in political science. Clark was inspired by the teaching of Professor Max Crawford, whose breadth of historical vision is frequently remembered.

Trinity, too, seems to have had its influence on these three students. Naturally, in the manner of an Australian residential college, this was more atmospheric and indirect. The educational ideals of the College were rooted in the Victorian principles of Christian humanist discipline. Alexander Leeper, the first Warden and guiding spirit, was of course noted not only for his championship of liberal learning, but also for his controversial engagement with public issues. His successor, JCV Behan, was a scholar distinguished by intellectual austerity and power, but also by wide learning. Leeper knew Hancock's family well, and Hancock, like his father before him, came under Leeper's general supervision. Hancock recalled the intimate living arrangements in College, and the intellectual excitement of some of the friendships he formed. Clark later wrote that life in Trinity taught him many things, and had vivid memories of
Behan. The warden invited the poet laureate John Masefield to speak, which was for Clark an intellectual milestone. Wilmot was also under Behan, who was apparently very pleased with him as a member of the College. In appropriately personal and intangible ways, Hancock, Clark and Wilmot all seem to have imbibed the liberal intellectual atmosphere of Trinity College.

**Two Professors of History**

Sir Keith Hancock was arguably Australia’s most distinguished professional historian. The first Australian to be elected a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, he occupied five chairs in Australia and in Britain. Professor William Roger Louis, editor-in-chief of the new *Oxford History of the British Empire*, has called Hancock the greatest historian of the Empire, remarkable for his breadth, scope and rigour, comparing his one volume study *Australia* to Frederick Jackson Turner’s writing on American history. In the opinion of the imperial historian DK Fieldhouse, imperial history was never the same again after the first two volumes of Hancock’s survey of Commonwealth affairs. Stuart Macintyre has remarked on the pervasive influence of Hancock’s *Australia* amongst Australian historians.

Hancock believed in broad historical learning and context. He moved across economic, social, cultural, military and political history. It was the combination of such themes which took him initially, against his will, into African history. Hancock’s writings contributed to the historiography of Italy, Australia, Britain, Africa and the Commonwealth. His overriding passion, as Donald Markwell has observed, was the study of war and peace. This constituted a link between his academic and public involvements. He was a thoughtful critic of appeasement in discussions of foreign policy in the 1930s, and played a key role in the production of the civil series of the United Kingdom official war histories between 1941 and 1949. More than a professional historian, Hancock was significantly engaged with the political and imperial affairs of his time, as well as contributing greatly to the development of the Australian National University. His professional activities, it has been said, were deeply influenced by the tradition of English Christianity, and his underlying purpose was moral. For Hancock, the Bible, Shakespeare and other such texts were fundamental to the thinking of the historian.

Manning Clark’s contribution to Australian history and culture has been widely discussed, which is itself evidence of his standing. The intellectual strengths and limitations of his six volume *A History of Australia* are now well known. While it has been found to be weak on detail, social background and engagement with other historical writings, there can be no denying the drama, erudition, rhetorical passion and stamina of Clark’s story-telling. His accounts of William Charles Wentworth and of the tragic end of the Burke and Wills expedition, for example, demonstrate his gifts for character portraiture and narrative in the humanist tradition. Clark’s vision has validated Australian history as a subject underpinned by great themes.
Although he occupied university posts, Clark stood outside the work of the historical profession as such, while achieving a national profile as a cultural icon. Arguably what Manning Clark did, although writing during the twentieth century, was to give Australian history its nineteenth century literary-historical epic. Towards the end of his life he told how his inspiration had been Carlyle and his history of the French Revolution. Clark’s moral preoccupations were always evident: he even called part of his autobiography *The Quest for Grace*. His political engagements are also well known, especially his defence of the Whitlam government of the 1970s. But his political awareness and energy can be traced back to his student days at Melbourne and in Trinity. The records of the Dialectical Society, of which he was secretary, recite the political issues in which he was schooled. There were debates on socialism, capitalism, the future of democracy, the Spanish civil war, conscription, and the prospects for the British Empire. 

**Chester Wilmot at War**

Chester Wilmot was - and remains - the most well known of these three Trinity men. Never a professional historian, and never sufficiently appreciated in his own country, he still lacks a biography. But by the end of the Second World War he was a celebrated war correspondent. His broadcasts for the BBC from the Western European battlefront in 1944-45 were highly regarded and heard by millions of people. His book *The Struggle for Europe*, published in London in 1952, was an instant best-seller and received eight printings within two years. Like Churchill's *The Second World War*, it still stands on bookshelves throughout the English-speaking world, in homes, libraries and shops, respected and familiar and forming part of the mental furniture of a generation’s understanding of the momentous events through which they lived. There is a well known photograph of Montgomery taking the German surrender at Lüneberg, in which Wilmot stands behind the German officers seated in the foreground. Montgomery reproduced it in his memoirs and saw fit to identify Wilmot in the caption. By the time he died prematurely in an air crash in 1954, Wilmot was an internationally famous man. He is still perhaps the most famous member of Trinity.

As a war correspondent for Australian and British radio, Wilmot had both physical and moral courage. Always scrupulous about accurate reporting, he was insistent on seeing the fighting for himself. In the Western Desert he was wounded by ‘friendly fire’, and he dropped into Normandy with the British 6th Airborne Division on D-Day. He had a ready rapport with soldiers of all ranks, and an intuitive, analytical grasp of war. He also knew the kind of officers he liked. He supported Rowell against Blamey in New Guinea in 1942, which led to his own loss of accreditation but also to his eventual secondment to the BBC. He was a fighter against unreasonable censorship, and his reports were known for their fair-mindedness, detachment and depth of analysis. As a correspondent he was unusual in placing events within a wider political context.
As a military historian, Wilmot based his study of the war in Europe upon an enormous amount of research in Western Allied and German sources, both documentary and personal. One of the first writers to exploit the captured German records, he also appears to have had privileged access to British military records such as war diaries.\textsuperscript{23} Montgomery also opened his papers to him.\textsuperscript{24} Wilmot’s tactical battle narratives, some based upon his own experience, are highly engaging and have drawn many readers, young and old, to his book. \textit{The Struggle for Europe} was consciously written as an epic, and is infused with its author’s enthusiasm for the democratic crusade against fascism. Wilmot’s epigraph was taken from Milton’s \textit{Samson Agonistes}:

\begin{quote}
Oh, how comely it is and how reviving
To the Spirits of just men long opprest,
When God into the hands of their deliverer
Puts invincible might.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The book was both a work of history and a colossal journalistic scoop. Wilmot was the first to elucidate the Anglo-American disagreements over strategy and operations, the dissent amongst the German generals leading to the July Plot of 1944, and the origins of the Cold War in Europe. The book has its deficiencies, notably a lack of access to Soviet sources and a consequent underestimation of the great Russian contribution to victory.\textsuperscript{26} There is also a general bias towards the British point of view. But it remains a monumental synthesis which retains its readability. Leading military historians have heaped praise upon \textit{The Struggle for Europe}. Sir Michael Howard has compared it to Napier’s history of the Peninsula War. Sir John Keegan has seen it as revolutionising the writing of military history by bringing together higher strategic, economic and operational, human and tactical themes. Wilmot, according to Keegan, created a model for the history of war, written ‘with emotional passion but intellectual dispassion, from the widest possible perspective and variety of sources and never, never without remembrance that the drama of war is a tragedy for those touched by its fatal consequences’.\textsuperscript{27}

Wilmot indeed approached his work (in the words of one of his colleagues) with profound seriousness and a passion for the truth.\textsuperscript{28} He spoke to students at Trinity in 1951 about his forthcoming book and what he saw as the betrayal of the British Empire by Roosevelt in conjunction with Stalin. One member of the audience still recalls, after fifty years, Wilmot’s utter involvement with his subject.\textsuperscript{29} Three years later, at his memorial service in London, the printed order of service began appropriately with the words of John Bunyan: ‘Mr Valiant-For-Truth passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side’.\textsuperscript{30} Wilmot, as Manning Clark observed, was steeped in the classics and the virtues of British democracy, as well as in ‘the moral earnestness, the concern for social justice of Protestant Christianity’.\textsuperscript{31} Leeper and Behan, one suspects, would have approved.
The Trinity Factor?

Which are the most formative years for an individual? When do we take on board the critical baggage that gets under the skin and creates the patterns, obstacles and opportunities of future life? There are too many personal variables - intellectual and cultural, emotional, physical, and spiritual, and clearly no definitive answer. It would be foolish to suggest that three such complex personalities were fundamentally shaped by Trinity College. Trinity was surely, at most, a contributing influence and one hard to measure. The home lives of Hancock, Clark and Wilmot were obviously important, and not dissimilar: two were the sons of clergymen and the other (Wilmot) married a clergyman’s daughter. All three were, moreover, products of the same school in Melbourne Grammar. Hancock and Clark have acknowledged their debts to school teachers. Wilmot excelled at school in both ancient and economic history: subjects which foreshadowed themes in The Struggle for Europe. (The first paragraph of the book distinctly echoes the opening sentences of Gibbon’s Decline and Fall.) All three men, as students, engaged in wider university affairs beyond the College walls. Wilmot became president of the Students’ Representative Council and a leading national student politician, as well as serving in the Melbourne University Regiment (a fair soldier, although he ‘tended to analyse orders’). There was also the influence of political ideas. Clark’s left-wing leanings are well known. Hancock eventually moved politically to the left. Wilmot, according to Clark, aspired to be a Labour Prime Minister of Australia. And there were other institutions and places. Wilmot travelled the world as a young man, and Hancock and Clark both went on to Oxford. All Souls, it has been credibly suggested, was the formative intellectual influence upon Hancock.

It is difficult to disentangle such a fabric or to identify any one such influence as dominant, certainly not in all three cases. All three men, moreover, show professional and personal contrasts. Hancock’s intellectual style was cautiously brilliant, his approach that of a great historical detective and judge. Clark’s was that of a prophet, emotive and rhetorical. Wilmot strove for detachment in understanding events which he himself witnessed. Hancock and Clark have testified to being misfits at school, whereas Wilmot was a school captain. Hancock and Wilmot became establishment figures (although not uncritical ones) in Australia and in Britain, but Clark was a rebel. Hancock and Wilmot managed to negotiate between their dual Anglo-Australian loyalties; Clark did not. At a fundamental level, however, all three appear to have had more in common than not, and this is probably why they respected and befriended each other. Hancock, like Clark, paid a personal tribute to Wilmot ‘in respect and affection. He was a journalist of great integrity, a fine historian and a brave man’.

Hancock defended Clark’s scholarship, patriotism and integrity against the attacks of MH Ellis in the 1960s. Clark praised Hancock’s gifts and his Australia as a seminal work.
A Great Tradition

Hancock, Clark and Wilmot were all drawn to the study of history as an avenue towards understanding the world. In that cause, they were all fiercely driven workers, empiricists more than theoreticians, and believed in the need for the historian to inspect personally the scene of the action, to have ‘muddy boots’. All three, as we have seen, had deep moral purpose to the point of passion, a habit of political and social engagement, and an independence and breadth of mind leading to the production of seminal works. Two (Hancock and Clark) wrote meditative multi-volume autobiographies (Wilmot, while less introspective, might well have written an autobiography in time, but he died young). All three were ultimately internationalists with a deep sympathy for the human condition. All three were significantly influenced by a climate of war. Given all this, we are entitled to speculate about the deep cultural influences which worked upon the three of them: the forces of sixteenth and seventeenth century English humanism and Calvinism - mediated through the Victorian educational tradition, itself transplanted to colonial Australia.

In this sense, surely, Trinity had a role in reinforcing certain values when these three men were at a formative age. It would be too much to claim that their works exhibited specifically ‘Trinity’ ways of writing history, but it would also be to claim too little. The College’s influence on them was part of a deeper cultural tradition in which Trinity constituted one part, an important part, of a wider environment. We could dismiss this environment as neo-liberalism, the cultural handmaiden of a patrician social order soon to disappear, in which the moral worth of individuals must be measured more strictly in the retrospective historical balance. This would be a learned view. But we might also, even simultaneously, see the intellectual liberalism of that period in the longer span of the Western classical and Renaissance legacy. We might see it as an ongoing and precious possession in terms of the freedom of the mind. Its echoes can, moreover, be heard in the writings of the following generation of Trinity historians, who have carried it with distinction down to the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first. It can be heard in the human insight and elegance of John Poynter’s biographies of Leeper, Felton and Grimwade, in Jamie Mackie’s inter-disciplinary approach to the study of Indonesia, in John Ritchie’s editing of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, in James Grant’s centenary history of the College itself, and perhaps also in the theology, historically based, of Barry Marshall. One could also write in different ways of the work of AGL Shaw, of Frank Crowley, and of the independent radical Brian Fitzpatrick: one of those who founded the University Labour Club at a meeting in Trinity in 1925.
A Legacy

Hancock and Clark were long lived. When this writer heard them speak in the late 1970s and early 1980s they had the charm of wise old men, whose gentility and range of cultural reference was reminiscent of the old world halls of learning from which they had come. They seemed almost to be products of the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth. Wilmot’s voice by contrast, frozen in time on BBC recordings, remains that of a young Australian, mature beyond his years but enthusiastically caught up in a great historical adventure. The recording he made aboard a glider, crossing to France in the darkness of D-Day, still has the power to thrill: what awaited them there on French soil, he says, they could not know.

Wilmot saw out Hitler and Hancock the British Empire. By the time Clark died in the early 1990s the Soviet Union and the Cold War had been consigned to history. The old Australia in which they had all grown up - Anglophile and solidly provincial, and ill at ease with Asia - had also gone the way of the Empire. Their university world had become virtually unrecognisable. The role of the inspirational god-professor had given way to the political cut and thrust of educational bureaucracy and to management and financial dealing on a whole new scale. An explosion of academic people, jobs and books in the decades after the Second World War had professionalised the gentlemanly academic life of earlier times. The student population were no longer the educated elite but the products of a democratised mass system. A pedagogical culture in which history had an eminent if not pre-eminent place, and in which liberal education in the humanities was widely regarded as a treasure, had given way to a culture of specialisation, of commercial pragmatism, of technophilia and of the American cult of the new. Women had claimed their rightful place in the socio-political scheme.

What could the memories of Hancock, Clark and Wilmot offer such a world? All three of them were, in their different ways, great historians and great Australians of whom Trinity can be duly proud. But their continuing significance may well be more than this. It would seem to lie in their natural intellectual range (they were ‘inter-disciplinary’ before the word was required), in their ambition of mind and in their sense of high calling. It might also lie in their human demonstration of the value of the collegiate ideal. We cannot recreate their world, and would not wish to do so. Internationally and socially it was, in crucial ways, terrible and they fought and hoped for a better one. Neither should we put any of them on a pedestal. We could, however, do worse than to regard them still as great teachers.
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About the Author:

Dr John Reeve, a member of Trinity and Ormond Colleges and a graduate of Melbourne and Cambridge Universities, teaches history and strategic studies at the University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, and is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.
Endnotes

1 I am grateful to Mr Geoffrey Brown for his valuable assistance in researching this essay and to Professor Donald Markwell for encouraging me to think about Trinity historians.


6 Hancock, *Country and Calling*, pp.65-6.


8 *Farrago*, 22 Sept, 1932.


12 Hancock, *Country and Calling*, pp.166-70.


14 Hancock, *Country and Calling*, Chapter VII.

15 Thomas, ‘Keith Hancock: Professing the Profession’, p.147.

16 See in general Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark: Essays on His Place in History* (Melbourne: MUP, 1994).

17 These two set pieces, from Volumes II and IV respectively of *Clark’s A History of Australia*, are appended to his third volume of autobiography. Manning Clark, *A Historian’s Apprenticeship* (Melbourne: MUP, 1992).


20 One is apparently in preparation by Neil McDonald.


22 Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty. From the Crimea to the Falklands: The War

23 I owe this point to my colleague Professor Robin Prior. See also P. Dennis, J Grey, E Morris, R Prior (eds) with John Connor, The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History (Melbourne: OUP, 1995), pp.672-3.


29 Recollection of The Reverend Lawrence Reeve.

30 Hetherington, Australians: Nine Profiles, p.125.


34 Hetherington, Australians: Nine Profiles, p.114.

35 Macintyre, “Full of Hits and Misses”: A Reappraisal of Hancock’s Australia’, p.45.


37 Professor William Roger Louis, keynote address, Canberra, 2003.

38 Wilmot, for example, criticised Churchill’s second volume of war memoirs as self-aggrandising in understating the roles of key subordinates. Reynolds, In Command of History, p.213.

39 Hancock, Country and Calling, p.61n.


42 Don Watson, Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life (Sydney, 1979), p.17.