

Mark Graham, *Mark My Words. The Mark Graham Story* (Sydney: Bantam Sports, 1989). Illus., pp. 123. \$15.95

Reading Manning Clark's *The Puzzles of Childhood and Mark My Words : the Mark Graham Story* at the same time proved to be a disconcerting experience. Despite the intellectual distance between these two books, Clark's constructs of the tragic flaw and the problem of desert are relevant to assessing the life story of the tall second rower who spent a substantial portion of his adult life engaged in an exercise of some futility : attempting to win a premiership as captain of the North Sydney Rugby League Football Club.

Would Professor Clark look with the eye of pity at the working-class boy from Otahuhu who fell in among so many thieves? Why did God not reward more generously this muscular Christian who, before each game of football, read a prayer from his mother 'to dream the impossible dream'? (p.123) Was Graham's tragic flaw the outcome of a hard and unforgiving game which, at its top level, demands unreasonable amounts of strength and speed? For, in order to survive, the tall string bean of 1981 whose great asset was his phenomenal acceleration around the edge of the rucks had to turn himself into a 105kg man mountain. And yet, together with advancing age, his bulk robbed him of his speed. He became just another big man playing in a red and black jersey with the mockers in the Bob Stand shouting: 'Come on Graham! Do something! You big log!' or, even more woundingly, 'Go back to New Zealand, you bludger!' The pharisees of the Sportsman's Bar are quick to condemn the weakness in a man.

Of course it may be inappropriate to interpret *Mark My Words* as a philosophical statement. It is certainly not an especially good book. Pre-publication publicity suggested that it was going to 'lift the lid' on the troubles at the heart of the North Sydney malaise. This it

fails to do though there are insinuations that the club's administration has always been lax and that the referees are often biased. In suggesting that the inhospitable terrain of North Sydney Oval was actually used to intimidate opponents (pp.13-14), Graham provides an interesting twist to the now famous 'Curse of the Kalahari' theory¹ yet the analysis is superficial. Nor is *Mark My Words* strong on describing the inner man. The raw spots which the pharisees of the Sportman's Bar alluded to as 'women troubles' rush by with indecent haste. It is interesting to ponder what it must be like to have a bleeding heart and then run into a Warren Ryan-induced Canterbury Bankstown gang tackle. Perhaps this explains those occasional flashes of courage and brilliance? He did not care what the Belmore bruisers did with his body. He had given up hope for everywhere he looked there was pain and disorder. As the age of Cronos returned what did it matter that 'Killer' Kelly had an elbow in his face or that 'Cement' Gillespie was trying to separate cranium from torso?

At the end of the day was Mark Graham justified? Who can tell? For many years he was one of the highest paid rugby league players in Sydney. Perhaps the North Sydney club would have been better advised to have split its resources into smaller bundles. Who can tell? At his best Graham was inspirational and there are many who will derive much pleasure in the years to come from the memories of his blind side dashes, particularly when close to the line. The present writer is one of them. The mockers of the Bob Stand will continue to ponder the mystery of why he played so much better in the black and white of his native country, but then the south of Auckland was always his 'Swanee River', that place where his heart is 'turning ever'. My own puzzle is the extent to which Graham's football career mirrored the parable of Samson at Gaza. With his hair floating below his collar, at the start of the season he was unstoppable. Yet, after the ritual hair cut, the same boulder-size biceps, the same

two pick handles of shoulders, the same long, pumping legs and loping, high-stepping running style were somehow inadequate. Stripped of his locks and perhaps grieving for his Delilah, he was human after all.

It is a pity that *Mark My Words* is far from a crowning achievement. A good deal of the book would have benefited from more judicious editing. (The whole of chapter 6, for instance, should have been deleted.) Alternating awkwardly between the first and third persons, the ghostwriting is deplorable and big Mark Graham's formidable fist which once broke Wally Lewis's jaw ought to be shaking firmly in these persons' directions. In a lamentably poor conclusion and epilogue they have even succeeded in generating an impression of a man who is consumed by a sense of his own importance. (In the one, admittedly indirect, conversation I have ever had with Mark Graham I was struck by his fatalism rather than his conceit.) At least the photographs are well chosen and clearly reproduced. How long will it be, however, before Australian rugby league will be the subject of a monograph that does not automatically assume that all of its readers are morons. Even Adrian McGregor seems incapable of jumping from the sports to the features pages without assuming that his readers have had a frontal lobotomy as they passed the crossword.

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NOTES

1. See my article in *Sporting Traditions*, 5.2, (May 1989). After a distinguished career in the mainstream media between July and September 1989 the 'Curse of the Kalahari' theory then took centre stage in ABC Chairman, David Hill's, campaign for the presidency of the North Sydney RLFC. In the Sydney Morning Herald on

21 October 1989 Hill proclaimed: 'I read a treatise from an academic where he went through every conceivable reason why we have not been successful.... I ran his report on Radio National but I disagreed with most of his conclusions'. This does not, it must be said, augur well for the prospects of a commissioned club history. On 12 December 1989 Mr. Hill was elected president.