

The Old Rebel - A Life in Nuneaton 1885-1960 By George Leonard Clarke

By David Sidwell

Editors note: this article was written before the book was published and launched in November 2011

Part 1

Have you ever looked at a faded black and white photograph and wished it could speak, like the paintings at Hogwart's in the Harry Potter films?



This picture is of my grandparents George and Gertrude Clarke with their son Tommy and my mother as a baby in 1916. Mum told me many times what a wonderful big brother Tom was, his terrific sense of fun, and the shattering effect on the family when he died aged 21. So how would you feel if you found a book that said this?

"Tommy was always full of life and fun... Sometimes at supper time, I got going on one of my favourite subjects, Tom would take the opposite view on purpose to get my hair off. Once, when he had tormented me a bit too much, there was half a loaf of bread on the table and I picked it up and threw it at him. Whenever we got debating after that, if I got a bit hot under the collar, he would laugh and say, "Wait a minute Dad, I'll go and fetch the loaf"."

These are George's own words, written in fountain pen, in his beautiful copperplate handwriting, between July 1956 and January 1957. Nine volumes, 72,262 words: the story of his life in Nuneaton. Mum kept the nine school exercise books (red, ruled feint) in a red cardboard box under the shoes and handbags in the bottom of her wardrobe until she died in 2000. I decided to self-publish the book, rather than pay thousands to a publisher. Launch date is expected to be November this year, and I thought Society members might be interested in how I'm going about it.

First of all though, some details in case we share ancestors. George Leonard Clarke was born in 1885 in Walsgrave, and died in Nuneaton in 1960. His father was Thomas Clarke, born in Nuneaton in 1851, died 1931. Gertrude Brooks was born in 1888 in Nuneaton and died there in 1955. They ran the King William on Coton Road in the 1920's and in the 40's and 50's lived at 183 College Street. If anyone would like to know more about them and their family, (or has some stories or pictures that may make future editions of the book), please get in touch: theoldrebel@davidssidwell.co.uk.

First, the good news. Getting the manuscript uploaded to an internet publishing site, designing the cover, and ordering copies is amazingly easy and ridiculously cheap. From creating an account at www.completelynovel.co.uk to hitting the save button on the book took about 3 hours, and the proof copies arrived within 5 days. And what took my breath away isn't just that the ink was dry, or the fact it was beautifully printed and bound. It staggered me that here was a completely professional book, printed on demand just for me....and that single proof copy cost just £6.

Now, the not so good news. I've learned exactly why publishers exist, and how painstaking their work is: digitising the text, proof reading, editing, publicising, launching, selling, distributing, etc. have taken me far longer than I ever dreamed. I now know a lot more about the process than I expected (or ever wanted to!). You will also need some specialist software, and a reasonably beefy PC.

Digitising the text. The first problem was getting the book into digital form. I had two false starts. I'm not a bad typist, but lost all feeling in my fingers after a few thousand words, and lost the will to live just thinking about typing all 72,262 of them. So next I tried scanning in a page and trying to use optical character recognition software to convert it to text, but George's handwriting defeated it. Eventually I bought Dragon Naturally Speaking voice recognition software, which converts your words into text in a Microsoft Word document as you read it out loud. Not cheap at £80, and it was hopeless with period words like wagonettes, and good old Midlands phrases like well-britchd, but basically it worked, especially when I got used to describing punctuation as I read, rather than editing it in later.

Let's take this sentence, as an example. You would read it as:

"New paragraph Cap L let's apostrophe ess take this sentence comma as an example full stop".

Not hard once you get used to it, but any relatives within earshot soon start taking the mickey: "Cap D David comma your tea's apostrophe ess ready." And it might still spell tea's as tee's, and you'd need to correct it later. This way it still took a while, but at around 2-3 hours per volume, I was making much faster progress.

Beware, however: as mentioned in the previous article with image processing software, clever software needs lots of computer power. On my desktop PC, with a fast CPU and 4GB memory, it works in real time, with the sentences appearing just about as fast as I can read them. On my laptop, despite its 1GB memory, you have to speak much more slowly, and wait for the software to catch you up, which is amazingly boring. You have been warned.

Proof Reading: I had no idea how hard is the job of proof reading. I read the book over and over, correcting punctuation, spacing, misunderstood words and phrases. After weeks of this, my wife picked it up, and said "Have you read this at all? There are three mistakes on this page alone." Grrr.

A friend told us how professional proof readers work. To avoid getting wrapped up in the flow of the story and missing mistakes, they read the book from back page to front, and each sentence backwards. .difficult ridiculously was it but ,this tried We

Editing: My intention was to leave George's words unedited, but realised that a tweak here and there would make the book much more readable. That meant reading it all over again, moving chunks of text around, and increasing clarity, but without losing the flow, George's voice, or the period feel. He hasn't come back to haunt me (yet), so I reckon I've done ok.

Footnotes: George refers to many contemporary events, or the old Imperial weights and measures, or even pounds shillings and pence. Younger readers wouldn't know what 2/- is, or 4 oz., and Word's standard footnote capability was excellent. It proved very useful too, for telling some lovely old family stories, without losing the integrity of George's manuscript.

Index: Then somebody said "You'll need an Index, won't you, given all the names and places?" And yes Microsoft Word has an automated indexing capability, but you have to go through the text *yet again*, and highlight each phrase to be indexed.

Insert photos: Inserting photos is easy, but to put them where they best belong you have to read it *all over again*. Not forgetting the List of Illustrations, which Word can't do for you, so through the text you go for the umpteenth time to create that.

Microsoft Word vs. Adobe Acrobat: I now know why professional publishers use something like Adobe Acrobat at £500+ and not Microsoft Word. For a standard novel it would be fine, but for a 300 page book with 94 illustrations, it takes a lot of manual messing about to get the book looking right.

Publicising, selling, distributing. We're now at Publisher's Proof stage, where we have the book ready to hit the volume print button. Using www.completelynovel.com to publish it means we'll have to do our own publicity, buy the initial stock, deliver to the Library and Waterstones etc. No doubt this will take more time than we expect, but one thing at a time.

Overall ? As anyone interested in genealogy knows, working on your family history just eats time. What I expected to take a few evenings and Sunday mornings has turned into many months of graft. I had to replace my computer mouse as the scrolling mechanism was completely worn out. I certainly never expected to have read the book so many, many times. I feel I know George's life better than my own: I'd love the subject to come up on Mastermind. But it's also been a labour of love, and I'm sure George would be absolutely delighted with the result. And I hope you will like it too.

Part 2

There's a wonderful book by David Eagleman called "Sum – Tales From The Afterlives." In it there are these infinitely sad words:

"There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time."

In the last Newsletter, I described finding the book my Grandfather's wrote of his life, and the pleasures (and trials !) of getting the text digitised and edited. As part of this effort, I collected hundreds of photographs, news clippings, and family stories, and hopefully, delayed the final deaths of my ancestors for a little while longer.

This article focuses on the process processing old photos. Probably the most joyful part of all family history is meeting all your relatives, collecting the family photographs, hearing the old stories and lots of new ones. But quite rightly, some people won't let you take their old photos away, so I ended up taking my laptop and printer/scanner round the houses, scanning them in as I went. But that's not the end of it: in the final version of the book we wanted to include 94 photos and copies of newspaper clippings. Getting these in shape was a lot more work than expected.

Having images from 100 years ago is a privilege, but when you look at them critically some are in quite bad shape, needing work to bring out the best in them. Some are too dark, some too light, some are black and white and some are sepia, some have big scratches or blotches on them, and many have torn edges and creases. Here's a perfect example.

This is May Clarke, George's sister. May Clarke was on the stage for a while, then ran the Black Swan pub in Stockingford. In her final years she was housekeeper for Nuneaton Mayor Tut Moore in Manor Court Road.



The software for processing images used by professional photographers is Adobe Photoshop, but the full version costs over £1000. I use Corel Paint Shop Pro, which is a copycat product, not as sleek and capable, but does everything an amateur needs for £80. Just one caveat, though: you do need a reasonably powerful PC to run it - at least 2GHz processor with 1GB main memory. Less than this and it will run sloooooooooooooow. You have been warned.

I ended up with five standard tasks when tidying up the pictures.

Scanning: I set the scanner to capture only black and white images. Yes, it lost the lovely sepia tint of some of the shots, but these ranged from bright orange to nearly uniform grey, which wouldn't have looked that good. And I later learned that a mix of black and white and sepia is much more difficult to print on demand: not only do the printing machines have automated contrast settings, but also the images on a PC are stored in RGB (red-green-blue) colour format. Publishing on demand involves converting your manuscript into a pdf, and requires images in CMYK (cyan-magenta-yellow-black) format. Saving in pure black and white sidesteps the whole issue.

Cropping: Use the Crop tool to select the area of the image you want to keep, and make sure it's level.

Contrast: There is a joyful little widget called a Histogram tool. In one simple step, it compares the lightest and darkest areas of each individual photo, and automatically resets the contrast. This process often took our breath away, producing good images from pale ghosts, or what looked like black holes.

Sharpen: The Sharpen tool increases the sharpness of the image. Using this on a relatively soft setting brings the picture to life without making it look harsh or false.

Repairing damage and filling in background: The Clone tool is a magical piece of digital technology that changes the mouse cursor into a brush and allows you to copy and paste parts of the image. In this shot for example I used the dark area from the top left of the picture and 'painted' it into the background. If you have the time, you can focus right down into the image, and correct it pixel by pixel: very handy for areas like May's arm, where I had to 'create' a missing area by her wrist. Sometimes you're forced to lose detail: if you compare the very top of her wonderful hat, you can see I've had to fill in some areas that I just couldn't save.

Once you get into the rhythm of correcting the photos, it's good fun. We had a few very special moments when you scan in what looks like a hopeless case, you correct the contrast, and a suddenly recognisable and familiar face appears. Having done this for all the images in the book, they gained a consistency and clarity that doesn't detract from the text, and I'm very pleased with the outcome, despite the late nights and square eyes. It's amazing to think that results like this can be achieved by an amateur at home. When I enthused about how good software is these days, my wife asked me if I liked my computer more than her. I didn't answer immediately: a fatal mistake. You'd think after being married for 32 years, I'd know better, but computers really are clever, aren't they?