1 A Personal View

What is civilisation? I don't know. I can't define it in abstract terms – yet. But I think I can recognise it when I see it; and I am looking at it now.

Standing on the left bank of the Seine, renowned art historian Kenneth Clark turns and looks approvingly over the Seine at the cathedral of Notre Dame. Gothic figures revel in fine tracery, confined but not

He knows it when he sees it

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 2

Uncivilised art

constrained by mighty walls and buttresses. A civilised achievement. Yet, Clark continues, somebody standing on the same spot in the 9th century would have been struck by another product of man's art, floating down the river towards him; a symbol of destruction, rather than creativity. To the atonal notes of an organ, we cut to the prow of a Viking ship. 'Looked at today,' Clark notes, 'it's a powerful work of art. But to the mother of a family trying to settle down in her little hut it would have seemed less agreeable – as menacing to her civilisation as the periscope of a nuclear submarine.'

So opened a thirteen-part television series documenting western Europe's creative achievements, from the end of the Dark Ages to Concorde's first flight. Although Michelangelo's David, St Peter's in Rome and other great landmarks appear in the pre-title sequence, once in vision Clark makes it very clear that *Civilisation* is not going to be Clark's Tour of Masterpieces of Western Art. Viewing such great works could, Clark concedes, lead us to believe western European civilisation

to be unstoppable. But that would be wrong. 'All the life-giving activities that we lump together under "civilisation" have been obliterated once, when the barbarians ran over the Roman Empire.' Though we just about made it that time, 'in the last few years we've developed an uneasy feeling that it could happen again'. 'Advanced thinkers' have, Clark says, begun to wonder if civilisation is worth preserving. 'Well, this is why it seems to me a good moment to look at some of the ways in which man has shown himself to be an intelligent, creative, orderly and compassionate animal.'

As a presenter Clark's aristocratic authority was leavened by diffidence. He is presenting a thirteen-episode series, but is candid enough to confess an inability to define his subject. Already in the submarine analogy we have an example of those asides whose tangential or throwaway air belies their weight. There would be many more such remarks, equally intent on highlighting parallels between our age, which Clark identified as one of 'Heroic Materialism', and past manifestations of the human spirit in western Europe. *Civilisation* was not going to be a stately progress from darkness to sweetness and light. The enemies of civilisation were ever present, and had a beauty of their own.

Civilisation: A Personal View by Kenneth Clark was commissioned in 1966 by Controller of BBC2 David Attenborough and Head of Programmes Huw Wheldon. Attenborough chose forty-three-year-old Michael Gill as director, who in turn approached Peter Montagnon, a fellow veteran of BBC Schools Television. A third director credit went to Ann Turner, who directed one complete episode as well as the extensive stills sequences that featured in all the others. In 1966 Clark was sixty-three. A privileged background and precocious talents had brought him a series of high-profile jobs in the arts, starting with his appointment as director of the National Gallery. He had gone on to serve as Surveyor of the King's Pictures and chairman of the Arts Council. Experience at the Ministry of Information during World War II introduced Clark to the world of moving pictures. A new career as communicator had begun.

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 4

Michael Gill and Clark

By 1966 he could have been excused for thinking that he was due for retirement. Although he was sceptical of 'art history' as an academic subject Clark had made a name for himself as the author of books such as *The Nude* (1956) and *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (1966), which deftly combined intellectual history, philosophy and something we would now recognise as art history. He believed that he only had a certain number of productive years left to him, and wished to focus on his writing. When the BBC first approached him Clark was hesitant. Attenborough and his colleagues worked him over during a lunch at the BBC's flashy new Television Centre. The BBC was eager to show off the possibilities of the high-definition 625-line colour signal that it had introduced in 1967, a marked improvement on the old 405-line standard.

Colour television had enjoyed a head start in the United States, where it had become synonymous with tacky sponsor-driven game shows and Westerns. Attenborough was allocated a budget of a size

unprecedented in the BBC's history and told to produce television that would redeem colour's reputation, promote the new service and create a landmark in programming. The BBC had produced two three-part black-and-white series on antiquity entitled *The Glory That Was Greece* (1959) and *The Grandeur That Was Rome* (1960), in which the novelist Sir Compton Mackenzie visited historic sites and shared his 'reflections'. Now it proposed to get Clark to front a similar series on art history, one that would show the new medium's ability to render familiar masterpieces in colour. It would showcase 'all the loveliest things that western civilisation had created since the last two thousand years . . . a ravishing cavalcade of beautiful things'.[1]

But did Clark have any interest in working for the BBC? In 1955 Clark had taken the highly controversial step of accepting the chairmanship of the Independent Television Authority (ITA), the body charged with supervising the UK's first steps in independent television. Leading figures in the Conservative party had been among those who had questioned the BBC's broadcast monopoly, starting with a key white paper in 1952. That Clark, a figure who seemed to epitomise the patrician values of BBC founder John Reith, should prove a class traitor shocked many. Clark had followed up his ITA chairmanship with a career as presenter of more than fifty ITV arts programmes, doing his bit to address concerns that independent television would lead to a race to the bottom in programme quality.

In 1966 his contract with ITV expired. In inviting Clark to lunch, Attenborough wasn't just sounding him out about a new series: he was welcoming him back to the fold. This lunch at Television Centre soon became something of a legend. At some point Attenborough used the word 'civilisation', at which point Clark's imagination took fire, and he mentally began jotting down a tentative episode list:

> David Attenborough invited me to lunch, saying that he would like to discuss a project with me. He wanted to do a series of fifteen films: 'What shall I call it? Say Civilisation.' I don't think he really intended to use the word, but it slipped out. I was munching my smoked salmon rather

apathetically when I heard it, and suddenly there flashed across my mind a way in which the history of European civilisation from the dark ages to 1914 could be made dramatic and visually interesting. I said 'Let me think about it for half an hour.' I seemed to remember someone saying that I need only be chairman of a committee, and someone else that I need not write the programmes, only narrate them; but my mind was occupied and I did not answer. When we came to the coffee I said 'I will do the programmes. I will write and narrate them. I do not need any outside help.' At this moment Huw Wheldon had joined us and gave me full support. His colleagues felt a little uneasy, but there was nothing they could do about it.[2]

Much remained up in the air. Clark's preferred title for the series was 'What Is Civilisation? A Personal View by Kenneth Clark'. But the BBC decided it did not like the word 'civilisation'. Only after extensive discussion of alternatives was Clark able to retain it (albeit not as part of a question) and the subtitle 'a personal view'. Those three words after the colon seem dispensable today, but they played a vital role in softening a title that might otherwise have had the worst of both worlds: long, polysyllabic – yet monolithic and monumental at the same time. They also protected Clark against those who might accuse him of suffering delusions of comprehensiveness.

A lot was riding on the series. The budget of £15,000 per episode (c. £170,000 today) was an unprecedentedly expensive gamble for the time. In so far as the BBC never included salaries or equipment in such budgets, the real cost was even higher. When first broadcast in February 1969 the series met with considerable critical acclaim. There are stories of village church services being rescheduled and of '*Civilisation* parties' that met in the homes of those wealthy enough to possess a colour television. Yet in his autobiography Clark wrote of receiving letters from

people of every shade of thought or education . . . from very simple, almost illiterate people, who could not have understood a quarter of my allusions,

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 7

> to . . . cabinet ministers (including Jim Callaghan) and three Cardinals. The most affecting were letters from people who said that they had been on the point of committing suicide, and that my programmes had saved them.[3]

Only 1 in 200 sets or approximately 100,000 households could receive the colour signal, and large areas of the country were in any case out of reach of the new transmitters that had to be built to carry it. Though it was compared at the time by Barry Norman and others to BBC1's costume drama *The Forsyte Saga* (1967–9), the colour bar prevented *Civilisation* having anything like the same viewing figures.[4] According to the BBC's own estimates only around 1 per cent of the UK adult population watched, rising to around 8 per cent when the series was rebroadcast on BBC1 two years later. The tie-in book of the series was published in 1969, however, and extended the series' impact. It sold over a million copies in the United States, and remains in print.

The increase in viewing figures for the 1971 repeat undoubtedly reflects wider access to colour by 1971. But it may also reflect the feedback from *Civilisation* in America, where the series' reception was even warmer than in the UK. *Civilisation* was first screened in the National Gallery of Art, Washington in November 1969. Word of mouth spread its fame such that the gallery was forced to show each episode continuously. Even then, thousands were turned away. The gallery began a film loan scheme under which the series was shown for free at universities, high schools and public libraries across the country. Only then did the fledgeling non-commercial Public Broadcasting Service bow to pressure and take steps to air the series. Sponsorship from the Xerox Corporation enabled PBS to incorporate *Civilisation* into the core programming stream transmitted to all 200-odd public television stations in the United States, from HETV Honolulu to WNET New York.

Starting on 7 October 1970, episodes of *Civilisation* were shown on Sundays, and repeated on Wednesdays. Although other networks claimed a PBS viewership of just 0.1 per cent, *Civilisation*

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 8

received widespread newspaper coverage and was a critical success. PBS's own figures put the average audience at 950,000. Its profile at a time when federal funding of public television was under attack by the Nixon administration made *Civilisation* a poster child for 'quality' television. It was 'an Adult *Sesame Street*', and Clark was its Big Bird. With a distinctive beak, curious gait and imposing stature, he too was under threat from the barbarians. Out in the affiliates the series, tie-in courses and the *Civilisation* book provided opportunities to raise profile as well as funds from viewer donations, emphasising the message that public television was paid for, and produced by, 'viewers like you'. In Washington, *Civilisation* was the tank the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which channelled federal funds into the system) needed to park on the White House lawn.

Actually, they did better: the series was shown inside the White House. Mrs Nixon and various cabinet members came – the President stayed away. PBS won the battle with Nixon, thanks in no small part to Clark. With the exception of the Shakespeare series *An Age of Kings* (1961) BBC exports to American non-commercial television had been one-offs before 1970. What with the follow-on successes of *America* (1972, aired in the US in 1973), *The Ascent of Man* (1973, aired in the US in 1975) as well as the countless costume dramas shown on *Masterpiece Theatre*, PBS began to look like a fully owned-and-operated subsidiary of the BBC. As the 1979 Carnegie Commission on public broadcasting noted, 'the effect on American viewers is the impression that public television prefers actors and commentators with British accents'.[5]

Civilisation is a landmark series, and as such has threatened to become something of a cliché to its critics as well as its fans. To understand it fully we need to understand rather than condemn these stereotypes, to recognise the role they played in viewers' self-fashioning as members of a specific generation, class or profession. In my own interviews and informal conversations with an unrepresentative sample of people who remember the series, I have found views to be split between contempt and admiration. Broadly speaking, anyone who can

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 9

remember the series does so fondly, unless they work for the BBC or an art museum, in which case they find the subject embarrassing. To this 'professional' audience directly involved in bringing history and art to the public, *Civilisation* is the show they loved to make fun of at university, taking turns to laugh at their friends' impressions of Clark. The idea that there might be something to learn from the series is dismissed out of hand; the series is patronising, orientalist, relentlessly Whiggish, overly didactic and very, very slow.

In an otherwise highly sensitive reading of PBS history, Laurie Ouellette manages a pitch-perfect rendition of this caricature:

> [Clark is] an embodiment of gentility and expertise with his English title, sophisticated vocabulary, classic tweeds, and bowler hat. Stylistically, its slow-moving and staid camera movements, fetishized close-ups, loving pans of great works of art, and dulcet tones of chamber music conveyed an aura of serious contemplation. Clark's summation of extraordinary achievements presents each instant of artistic and intellectual genius as another step in the steady march of progress. His tour of the greatest music, literature, art, architecture, poetry, science, politics, and philosophy places the Western European high society at the undisputed center of 'man's common heritage' . . . [it] moves at the pace of molasses, relies on static shots of Clark pontificating, and requires a dictionary to follow.[6]

Another commentator has written that the series 'almost never admits to uncertainty or doubt, to ambivalence or to the existence of competing theories . . . admitting no gaps or problems, no alternatives and no sense of difference'.[7]

Though interpretations are of course bound to differ, at times I will confess to wondering if these critics and I had watched the same series. Clark didn't pontificate, he hedged. A belief in the steady march of progress was ridiculous. Whiggish and Marxist 'competing theories' *were* mentioned. Clark may occasionally present them in a simplistic fashion, but at least he treats them both the same. Clark *never* wore a bowler hat in *Civilisation*. If he affects any headgear, it is the distinctly

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 10

unaristocratic cloth cap. 'Oh, that dreadful man with the pipe, always droning on . . .' commented the head of education at a national museum when asked how she recalled the series. Clark never smoked a pipe. Even those who remember the series fondly are guilty of making their own caricature, as an optimistic celebratory tour hailing the 'steady march of progress'. John Walker's account of the series in his survey *Arts TV* is typical in claiming that Clark's 'message was fundamentally positive and optimistic'.[8] The historian Richard Weight is a rare exception, noting the discrepancy between the ambivalent message Clark broadcast and the optimistic one so many viewers opted to receive.[9]

Clark himself was frustrated by the tendency of his viewers to miss the point, above all in America, where the gap between his personal convictions and his public persona yawned most. 'If you listen carefully,' he patiently told an audience in Washington, 'you will find there is a good deal more scepticism in those programmes than most people allow

Peter Montagnon and Clark

Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*: intimations of doom?

for.'[10] Those who knew Clark best knew he was a pessimist. One of the directors on *Civilisation* put it this way:

> Although he had intimations of doom, he thought he couldn't deal with them. Neither could [his wife] Jane. About both of them there was that feeling that they had seen it all and they didn't quite want to know what came next.[11]

Fifteen minutes into 'The Skin of Our Teeth' (episode 1) the barbarians defeat the classical world. Clark escapes to Ireland. If it wanted to survive 'civilisation would now have to face the Atlantic'. The camera pans over a blasted Irish moor. 'What a hope!'

For good or ill, *Civilisation* has become identified with a pompous, self-congratulatory 'presenter as hero' model. My own experience suggests that within the BBC the series is now seen as a cautionary catalogue of mistakes to be avoided. The 'c-word' itself is shunned by all save Neo-Cons eager to script recent events as yet another episode in 'The Clash of Civilisations'. As we celebrate its fortieth anniversary, it is time we had a fairer, less schematic assessment of the series: to go beyond the caricature of smug reassurance, scholarly hauteur and exclusive aestheticism to consider the series' portrayal of civilisation as fragile, yet open to discussion by everyone.

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 12

This book begins with a chapter providing background to Attenborough's commission. It places this series within the broader context of Clark's career as well as that of director Michael Gill, and includes close readings of Clark's ITV arts documentaries, Gill's early work and BBC's *Monitor* (1958–65). The second chapter attempts to pin down what Clark meant by 'civilisation', and just how he knew it when he saw it – or heard it, or touched it. I suggest that there is a way of piecing together all thirteen episodes other than as a crescendo, and show the ways in which direction, editing and even the handicaps imposed by technology were harnessed to get the 'shape of civilisation' right. The next two chapters consider the critical and popular reaction to the show, first in the UK and then in the United States. It should not be forgotten that *Civilisation* also met with popular acclaim when it was broadcast in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Yugoslavia, Holland, Belgium and Bulgaria. Despite the high profile it gave to 'their' history, it proved surprisingly difficult to get it redubbed for French and Italian television. Although *Civilisation* did eventually cross the channel, at the time Clark concluded that the French and Italians were 'too jolly grand' to accept a British series on culture.[12] For reasons of space, this book focuses exclusively on the British and American response. A final chapter considers John Berger's series, *Ways of Seeing* (1970) as well as *America* (1972) and *Ascent of Man* (1973), which followed the *Civilisation* model closely, even as they sought to tweak it. It also considers later series by Robert Hughes, Simon Schama and others.

Justifying *Civilisation*'s 'classic' status is on one level straightforward. The series was the BBC's first authored documentary series to be filmed in colour, and holds the same place in PBS history. It pushed the available 35mm film technology to its limits, including special effects. It spawned many imitators and would-be imitators, to the point that it threatened to become a cliché. But if we try to go any further we encounter only paradox. *Civilisation* is a loving look backwards, commissioned to show off the new wonders of

Conlin Chapter 1 8/1/09 11:52 am Page 13

high-definition colour broadcasting. It is a declaration of confidence in mankind's potential, presented by a pessimist. A celebration of continuity, at a time of dislocation. A show next to nobody watched, but which everybody remembers. If we can resolve these paradoxes, then perhaps we can learn something from *Civilisation*.