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Bonn mots: so whose memory is picture perfect? The Monthly has a problem getting Manning Clark in frame

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It is only several pages into Mark McKenna's article in the March issue of The Monthly that the reader learns about the focus of this finely-crafted essay about the historian Manning Clark. "Of all Clark's epiphanies ... there is one that stands out for its allegorical power," he writes, and recounts several instances between 1978 and 1991 in which Clark spoke or wrote about visiting Bonn on the morning after the Reichskristallnacht pogrom. McKenna demonstrates that Clark arrived in Bonn only on November 26, 1938, more than two weeks after the morning following the pogrom in which synagogues throughout Germany had been torched, Jewish businesses looted, and Jewish men carried off to concentration camps such as Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. He came to Bonn to visit Dymphna Lodewyckx, who later became his wife.

When describing how he witnessed the immediate aftermath of the pogrom, he borrowed images provided by Dymphna who was in Bonn on November 9 and 10, 1938, and who had seen the smashed shops and the smoking ruins of one of Bonn's synagogues. McKenna's argument is nuanced. He stops short of calling Clark a fraud and of accusing him of having consciously deceived his audience. He nevertheless argues that: "The details of Clark's life, like Australia's past, are adapted to suit his dreams and mystical visions. Manning Clark, Australia's greatest self-mythologiser, was a daddy-long-legs spinning his thread". Others have been less kind. Following the publication of McKenna's article, Andrew Bolt and Gerard Henderson, for example, have embraced the opportunity to have a cheap shot at Clark. Opposite McKenna's first mention of Clark's Reichskristallnacht story is a full-page image of a burning building. It underscores the centrality of that story in the context of McKenna's essay. The picture is captioned "A Berlin synagogue burning on Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938". McKenna's exploration of Clark's self-mythologising makes much of the fact that he was not exactly where and when he said he was. Does it matter then that the image illustrating the article is not of a burning Bonn synagogue? Or could this lack of specific relevance be excused by the fact that the image chosen to illustrate the article is particularly powerful? The building in the picture is the Neue Synagogue.
(New Synagogue) in Oranienburger Strasse in the centre of Berlin. It was consecrated in 1866. With its capacity to accommodate more than 3200 worshippers, it embodied the comparative affluence and self-confidence of Berlin's Jewish community. Its restoration was initiated by the government of the German Democratic Republic in 1988 and completed seven years later long after the toppling of East Germany's communist regime. Today its golden dome, crowned by a Magen David, is again a landmark in the centre of Germany's capital. Is it perhaps fitting that McKenna's article is illustrated not with an image of a little-known synagogue in Bonn but with an image of what once was one of the most magnificent houses of Jewish worship in Germany? On the night of November 9, 1938, Nazi storm troopers set fire to the Neue Synagogue. As elsewhere in Germany, their actions were part of a concerted attack on Jewish lives, institutions and property. Unlike elsewhere in Germany, their attempts to burn down the synagogue failed. The officer in charge of the local police station chased the arsonists away and ensured that the fire brigade put out the flames. The synagogue was only lightly damaged. It was renovated and used in its original capacity again briefly from early 1939. The last service was held on March 30, 1940. On November 22, 1943, the building was gutted in a British air raid. The photo of the Neue Synagogue engulfed in flames is not from 1938. The building burnt out on the night of November 22, 1943, and not during the 1938 pogrom. It may have been that the image used to illustrate McKenna's article is a fake that it was not taken in 1943 but that it is, as the German writer Heinz Knobloch has suggested, based on a 1948 photo, to which flames and smoke were added. Does it matter that the image of the burning synagogue has, strictly speaking, nothing to do with Manning Clark's reference to his 1938 visit to Bonn? It is, after all, a powerful image which conjures the magnitude and significance of the events of November 9 and 10, 1938. Part of its power is due to the fact that it has been used on many previous occasions it is effective because it is a well-known image of a (supposedly) well-known event. Much like Manning Clark's story about stepping off the train at Bonn railway station on the morning after the Reichskristallnacht pogrom, it has been taken to be true because it has been presented repeatedly. The editor who chose the image of the burning Berlin synagogue (say, over an image of a burning Bonn synagogue) would have done so because we, the readers, expect no less. Manning Clark, too, may have fashioned a story of his life in line with what he thought was expected of him at that point in his
life. He did not set out to dupe his readers and was perhaps no more a fraud than a
daddy-long-legs is a spider spinning its thread.