

Biography Footnotes:

the newsletter of the National Centre of Biography

No 6, 2010

From the Director's Desk

Congratulations to all the ADB authors who were recognised in the Queen's Birthday Honours List

- Emeritus Prof Derek Anderson AM
- Ian Carnell AM
- Victor Crittenden OAM
- Walter Eastman OAM
- Emeritus Prof John Elkins OAM
- Sally Anne Hasluck OAM
- Emeritus Prof Roderick Home AM
- Emeritus Prof Lesley Johnson AM
- Alexander Moncrieff OAM
- Andrew Sayers AM
- Jessie Serle OAM
- Emeritus Prof Ross Williams AM

Congratulations also to Jill Roe whose book, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography* continues to win prizes. This time it is the biennial Magarey Medal for Biography. You'll find Janet Doust's review of the five short-listed books inside the newsletter.

Those of you who missed Jill's recent discussion, with Ramona Koval and Gideon Haigh, on the status of scholarly biography in Australia on ABC Radio National's Book Show, can listen to the tape, or download the transcript, from the ABC's website at

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2010/2952842.htm>

Congratulations to NCB staff members, Sam Furphy and Rani Kerin, and their partners, on the recent arrival of their babies. Sam had a boy, Alexander Samuel, and Rani a girl, Saffron Jane.



The ADB's Working Parties have finalised their draft lists of people, who died in the 1990s, to be included in the ADB. The lists will be aggregated and further reviewed before being placed online for public comment. It is anticipated that we will begin inviting authors to write the entries early next year.

People considering undertaking a PhD with the NCB are reminded that they must submit their application forms by 31 October if seeking an Australian Postgraduate Award (worth \$22,500 per annum, tax free, in 2010). Successful applicants will need to start work on their thesis by 31 March next year. 31 October is also the closing date for the prestigious Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship, worth \$30,000 per annum, tax free, with a further \$10,000 research support grant annually. For those not quite ready to start their studies, the College of Arts and Sciences offers a small number of scholarships which may be taken up mid-year. Contact me at melanie.nolan@anu.edu.au for more information.

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Our announcement, in the last newsletter, of the impending launch of Obituaries Australia has proven to be premature. Unforeseen difficulties have meant that we've had to delay the launch until early next year.

Over 100 people from all over Australia attended the NCB's recent symposium on 'The Life of Information'. In November we will be holding a conference on the powerful men who ruled the federal public service in the 1940s to 1960s. See inside the newsletter for further information.

Two new Biography Fellows will shortly be joining us at the NCB. Professor Don MacRaid, Research Professor in History at Northumbria University, England, will be with us in October-November, and will give a paper on 'St George and Maid Marian: In search of the English diaspora, 1815-1939' at the ANU on 3 November. Philip Carter, publication editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* will join us in December and will give a paper on 'What Happened Next? The Oxford DNB, 2005-10'. For further information about the centre's fellows see

<http://ncb.anu.edu.au/people/biography-fellows>

Senator John Hogg, President of the Senate, will launch volume 3 of the *Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate* on 25 October. Containing articles on the 104 senators and four Clerks of the Senate whose parliamentary service ended between 1962 and 1983, the volume covers the final Menzies years, the conflicts over the Vietnam War, Labor's triumph of 1972 and the drama of the dismissal of the Whitlam government. To celebrate the launch, the book is on sale at the special price of \$63.96 (normal price is \$79.95). For further information and an order form see

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/bio_unit/bio_volumes/index.htm

The Centre for Media History at Macquarie University is holding a symposium 'Headliners: Early Australasian Press Biographies' on 23 November at the State Library of New South Wales, from 9 am to 6 pm. Speakers include Elizabeth Morrison, Rod Kirkpatrick, Denis Cryle, Craig Munro, Peter Putnis, Pat Clarke, Philip Cass, Allison Oosterman and Richard Trembath. The cost of \$60 covers catering. For further information contact Professor Denis Cryle at dcryle@cqu.edu.au or Dr Elizabeth Morrison at liz.morrison@bigpond.com

You may recall that in the last issue of *Biography Footnotes* we announced that we had received funding to purchase a state-of-the-art Guardian AO scanner, which produces high quality images and can easily scan oversize, bound and fragile materials. As well as using the scanner for our own projects, we have decided to make it available, on a cost recovery basis, for other research projects. See inside the newsletter for further details.

Those working on a biography are invited to add their details to the NCB's 'Who's Writing What' website at <http://ncb.anu.edu.au/whos-writing-what> The site aims to act as a conduit for those working on similar projects and, also, to ensure that researchers don't unknowingly embark on the same projects.

Gail Clements retires from the ADB

It is with sadness that the Australian Dictionary of Biography farewells Gail Clements, who officially retired on 10 September.

Gail joined the ADB in 2000 after moving to Canberra from Brisbane. She had gained a PhD from Griffith University in 1999 on 'Science and Colonial Culture: Scientific Interests and Institutions in Brisbane, 1859-1900'.



It is often said that it takes 10 years to properly train an ADB editor. Gail, however, picked up all of the ADB's nuances and idiosyncrasies very quickly. Nor was she daunted by being given the task of editing the entries for the 'smaller' states – South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania. As those of us who have had charge of that desk know, it is not easy to master the diverse research materials of so many states.

Gail was appointed acting managing editor of the ADB in 2008, following the retirement of Darryl Bennet, and in her usual manner, took on the challenge with great aplomb.

In her retirement she plans to spend many hours reading, gardening and travelling with her husband, Bob.

Professor John Ritchie, the first of the three ADB General Editors for whom Gail worked — the others being Dr Di Langmore and Professor Melanie Nolan — accurately summed up her achievements when he wrote that Gail was 'a first-rate colleague, affable, warm-natured and considerate to others. She has a real sense of responsibility, to her own work and to her associates. I value her as an academic, and as a friend' — and so do all her colleagues.

The NCB welcomes its newest member of staff



The National Centre of Biography has been fortunate in securing the services of computer programmer, Scott Yeadon, who joined us on 12 July.

Scott brings with him a wealth of experience having started as a computer programmer seventeen years ago. For the last seven years he has been part of the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) and Australian Partnership for

Sustainable Repositories (APSR) team at the ANU so is well placed to take on his new work at the NCB.

Scott's primary responsibility will be to re-engineer the software used by ADB Online so that we can integrate new features such as thematic essays, events, timelines, lists (of all prime ministers, all VC winners etc....) and digitised reference material. We are also planning to undertake more intensive indexing of entries to enable us to better map the associations between individuals.

Canberra-based web developers, Project Computing — principally John Evershed, who helped design the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*, and Kent Fitch, the main developer behind AustLit and the National Library's new Trove search engine — are assisting Scott in redeveloping the ADB's software. At Project Computing's suggestion, Scott is investigating using MediaWiki as the basis of the ADB's new service. The platform for Wikipedia, and many other websites, MediaWiki is a collaborative authoring environment which uses popular open-source technologies. It also has various extensions that should enable us to add the particular features we are seeking while its large user community will ensure that there is continuing support for the software into the future.

Scott is also completing the initial development of Obituaries Australia. Eventually we plan that the OA and ADB websites will be closely integrated and will have the same software platform.

The Seven Dwarfs and the Age of the Mandarins: Australian Government Administration, 1940s to 1960s



Date: 4-5 November 2010, 9 am - 5 pm

Venue: Old Parliament House, Canberra

Cost: \$110 full fee; \$75 (students and pensioners)

*includes lunch and morning and afternoon teas provided by Ginger Catering

Organised by the National Centre of Biography, this two-day conference explores a critical and formative period in Australian history, with a focus on the contributions of several leading individuals. In the postwar period, many university graduates rose to the highest levels of the Australian public service and exerted a profound influence on public policy. Some of the most famous names are Sir Frederick Shedden, Sir Roland Wilson, Dr H. C. Coombs, Sir Kenneth Bailey, Sir Allen Brown, Sir John Crawford and Sir Stan Carver. Physically diminutive, they were dubbed the 'Seven Dwarfs'. Others with comparable intellectual depth and analytical skill were Dr John Burton, Sir Paul Hasluck, Sir Arthur Tange, Sir James Plimsoll, Sir Leslie Melville, Sir Richard Randall and Alf Conlon.

The 'Seven Dwarfs' epitomise major changes in Australian government administration during the period of postwar reconstruction and the subsequent decades of prosperity and affluence. The era was marked by an expanding role for the Commonwealth government in the life of the federation; it saw the adoption of economic policies inspired by John Maynard Keynes and welfare reforms influenced by the Beveridge Report from the United Kingdom. By exploring the careers of these public service 'Mandarins', the conference will cast light on significant debates about public policy and the role of government in postwar Australia.

Visit the conference website for more details and to register:

<http://ncb.anu.edu.au/seven-dwarfs>

or phone (02) 6125 4146

The NCB is grateful for the support of the following in organising the conference:

Research School of Social Sciences, ANU

College of Arts and Social Sciences, ANU

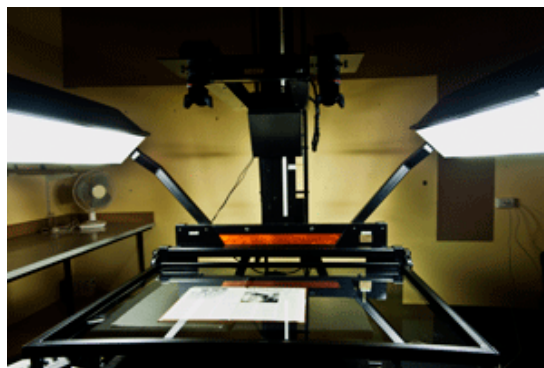
Australian and New Zealand School of Government

Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House

Public Policy Institute, Australian Catholic University, Canberra

NCB's Digitisation Facility

The National Centre of Biography has started on its mammoth endeavour of digitising the reference material stored in the 11,500 folders created while editing entries for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. As well as birth, death and marriage certificates, the files contain published obituaries and profiles, oral histories, academic records, personnel files, unpublished eulogies and reminiscences, and correspondence with authors and family members of ADB subjects. The more sensitive material, and material protected by copyright, will remain accessible only to ADB staff. The remainder will eventually be made freely available online, via links from ADB entries.



As mentioned in our last newsletter, the NCB received \$100,000 from the ANU Major Equipment Grant to purchase a state-of-the-art Guardian AO scanner. We have also been fortunate in being able to employ Maxim Korolev and Phil Robinson to operate the scanner. Both have considerable experience using the machine, having worked on the National Library's newspaper digitisation project, which used the same model scanner to digitise some issues of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Women's Weekly* (NB: The other newspapers were digitised from microfilm rather than hardcopies).

As well as digitising material for our own projects, the NCB has decided to make the scanner available, on a cost recovery basis, to other areas within the ANU as well as to cultural institutions, government agencies and individual researchers.

One of only two such scanners in Australia, the Guardian's special features are the high quality images produced by its two Canon EOS 5D cameras, its ability to easily scan material ranging from passport size images to large maps, and its careful treatment of bound and fragile documents.

Anyone interested in using the scanner for their project should contact the NCB on (02) 6125 4146 or ncb@anu.edu.au.

The Life of Information

The Life of Information – a one-day symposium on the design and use of online dictionaries, encyclopedias and collections – was hosted by the National Centre of Biography at the Australian National University on 24 September. More than 120 people representing over 30 institutions registered for the event. Funding for this nationally significant



meeting of the biography and digital humanities community was provided by the NCB, the School of History, the Humanities Research Centre, and the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The symposium posed the question: ‘Which online formats for knowledge are likely to survive the digital revolution to become lasting records of place, culture and identity?’

The audience included university researchers, website/data managers and staff from collecting institutions and government agencies. The 20 graduate students who attended came from disciplines as diverse as biography, history and art, through to medicine, chemistry and earth sciences, showing the relevance of the symposium theme from multiple viewpoints.

The event was opened by ANU Pro Vice-Chancellor (E-Strategies) Robin Stanton, who reflected on the importance of digital scholarship across the disciplines and argued that one of the greatest challenges continues to be the obsolescence of digital data formats – which has resulted in what is often referred to as the ‘digital dark ages’, with many works of digital scholarship no longer readable even using modern computers.

Symposium convenor Paul Arthur outlined the National Centre of Biography’s plans for the continued enhancement of the online version of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* to include new features such as more intuitive search functions and a revised look and feel. Going digital after nearly 50 years in print, the ADB demonstrates the complexity of translating print information to digital form, and also the very great advantages in making this landmark national resource freely accessible online. The soon-to-be-launched *Obituaries Australia* digital project was also announced.

In the first session of the day ‘Lives Online’, Stephen Due gave an overview of the *Australian Medical Pioneers Database* (<http://www.medicalpioneers.com>), a national biographical database of colonial doctors from settlement to 1875. Janet McCalman, Sandra Silcot and Len Smith reported on *Founders and Survivors* (<http://www.foundersandsurvivors.org>), a large collaborative project that seeks to record and study the founding population of 73,000 men, women and children who were transported to Tasmania, and from that base build a longitudinal study of their descendants (it will result in the world’s first cradle-to-grave datasets that can be linked intergenerationally). In the next session, ‘Stories in the Archive’, Zoë D’Arcy explained the opportunities and the challenges of making digitally available material from the National Archives of Australia’s collections, including the recent *Mapping our Anzacs* (<http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au>), which has encouraged public input. Cassandra Pybus showed her *Black Loyalist* (<http://www.blackloyalist.info>) project, a repository of data that provides as much biographical information as can be found for the individual

slaves who ran away to join the British during the American Revolution – presented using advanced visualisation techniques to show family interrelationships. Katherine Bode (visiting from the University of Tasmania but soon to begin work at ANU, in 2011), summarised findings from her analysis of the history of Australian publishing trends via the datasets of *Austlit – The Australian Literature Resource* (<http://www.austlit.edu.au>).

The afternoon sessions began with a digital forum involving CSIRO scientist Kerry Taylor, *Atlas of Living Australia* (<http://www.ala.org.au>) director Donald Hobern, and leading developer of digital resources for the National Library of Australia, Basil Dewhurst. The forum had three short presentations followed by a panel discussion including the audience. One of the main themes was the way that the often divergent concerns of the arts and the sciences are brought together when dealing with the complexities of managing digital collections.

The last session of the day, on the topic of ‘Knowledge Networks’, featured a discussion of the Heurist research data management tool (<http://heuristscholar.org/heurist>) and the *Dictionary of Sydney* (<http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org>) project, from technical, editorial and management perspectives (with presenters Ian Johnson, Ross Coleman, Emma Grahame, Steven Hayes and Stewart Wallace). The symposium concluded with an in-progress report by Tim Sherratt on *Invisible Australians* (<http://www.invisibleaustralians.org>), which seeks to present a new historical assemblage of lives negatively influenced by the White Australia Policy.

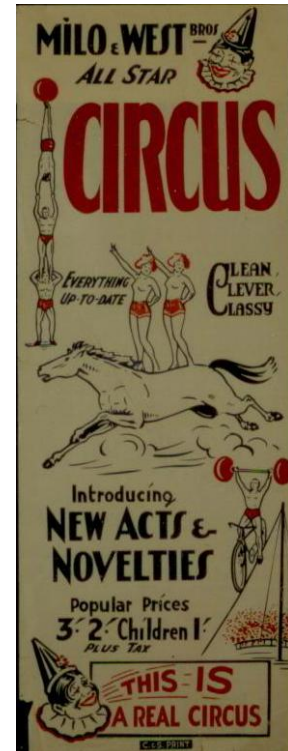
The symposium program, which includes detailed information about the presenters and topics in each session, is available by following the link at http://ncb.anu.edu.au/Life_of_Information.

The Perils of Circus Biography

Mark St Leon, a descendant of the St Leon circus family, has written eight biographies of circus people for the ADB, as well as a PhD and a forthcoming book on the history of Australian circuses. In this article he discusses the difficulties he has encountered researching the lives of circus performers.

Whoever is foolish enough to attempt to write a history of the circus and of circus families will perish in a madhouse. A world of bohemianism, nomadism and genius offers enticement to the explorer, but if he looks for records he will be disappointed. They are few, and these are often scrappy, and more frequently contradictory. Out of such fragments we may not be able to weave a complete counterpane but we can, at least, fashion a patchwork quilt and enjoy the fashioning.

Thus wrote English journalist and former circus artist, John S. Clarke, in his 1936 work, *Circus Parade*. After some four decades of inquiry into my own family's past in Australian circus, as well as Australia's wider panorama of circus history, I will not disagree with Clarke's sentiments. While I am yet to 'perish in a madhouse', I have at times been close to checking in to one. The pursuit of Australian circus family histories and genealogies has required both patience and perseverance, if not outright tenacity. From these labours, I have distilled, *inter alia*, eight biographies of early Australian circus identities for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as well as a book provisionally titled *Circus & Nation: The Saga of Circus in Australia*, to be published in 2011.



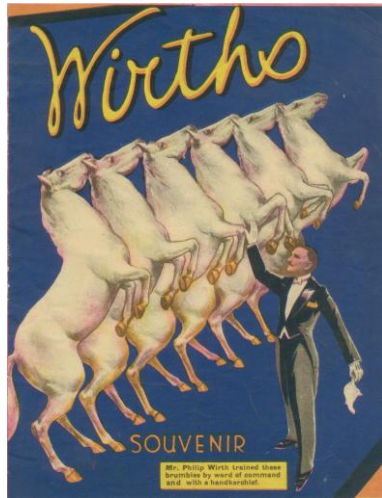
Poster for Milo & West's Circus used in WA in the late 1930s. Bob West was an Aboriginal circus proprietor who took his family circus across the Nullarbor Plain in the summer of 1934-35, the last epic journey to be made across the Nullarbor by horses and wagons. In WA, West combined with another showman, Milo, to present Milo & West's Circus. *Courtesy: Mark St Leon Collection.*

Why specifically write biographies of circus people? Does anyone actually read them?

The circus was one facet of an industry of travelling showpeople which kept Australians, especially those in rural and regional areas, entertained in the century between the goldrushes of the 1850s and the advent of television. As well as amusing, our travelling showpeople captured, communicated, cultivated and defined all manner of human values, from the great and good to the feeble and mediocre, just as the electronic media does today. In ways which we are still to measure and understand, these values are reflected in the most pervasive features of modern Australian life: informality, irreverence, fairness, tolerance and so on. In negotiating a new land and a new people, the travelling showpeople were sowing the seeds of the Australian identity. On this score alone, their contributions and achievements deserve to be better understood.

Some of Australia's circus people graduated to the international circus arena. As any credible history of circus in America, England or Continental Europe will demonstrate, the Lismore-born 'wizard of the wire' Con Colleano and 'the world's greatest lady bareback rider', Bundaberg-born May Wirth, are considered among the finest circus artists of all time. Yet, their achievements were largely forgotten in the land that

nurtured and first applauded their talents. Their passings, in 1973 and 1978 respectively, failed to draw the attention of the Australian media, let alone produce any obituaries [NB: you will find their biographies in the ADB].



A cover for Wirth's Circus program about 1932 showing Philip Wirth and his trained horses. Wirth's Circus was Australia's major circus for nearly 80 years until its closure in 1963.
Courtesy: Mark St Leon Collection

As early as 1875 a comprehensive history of circus in England appeared with the publication of Thomas Frost's *Circus Life and Celebrities*. In 1932, Earl Chapin May did the same thing for American circus with his *The Circus from Rome to Ringling*. And in France in 1946 appeared Henry Thetard's monumental *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque*. My personal library is replete with works of circus history from these and other countries. In Australia the famous Wirth brothers, George and Philip, each left his autobiography, published in 1925 and 1933 respectively. However, it was 1980 before even a thumbnail history of circus in Australia appeared with the publication of Geoff Greaves's slim volume, *When the Circus Came to Town*. The published record pertaining to Australia's circus and other travelling showpeople, as well as the wider history of entertainment, has expanded significantly since then.

So much for the rationale for writing biographies of Australia's circus people and justifying the place of circus and circus people in Australia's wider history. What practical challenges are involved in this pursuit?

Obstacle No. 1: Transience

By their very occupation, circus people were and remain a transient lot. The movement of small armies of people, animals and equipment over all kinds of terrain and through all kinds of weather in order to reach cities and towns by scheduled day and date took precedence over the care of papers, diaries or photographs. Inevitably, whether valued or not, those records were often lost, damaged or destroyed in the course of relentless travelling.

Because of their transience, significant life events - birth, marriage, death, census and so on - might be documented, if they were documented at all, in different, widely-separated civil jurisdictions. Although Australia's circus people largely confined their travels to Australasia, many travelled throughout the Pacific and Asian regions and some travelled as far as South Africa, England, South America and the United States.

Obstacle No. 2: Education

As Helen Stoddart has written in *Rings of Desire*, Britain's circus people typically started life with neither money nor respectability. They therefore had nothing to lose and everything to gain by pursuing their chosen craft in circus. The same could be said, by and large, of Australia's first generations of circus people, whose early ranks were drawn from not only Britain's circus people but also convicts, tinkers, hawkers and the labouring classes, or their progeny. Where money or respectability is lacking, so also is

education and the commensurate ability and inclination to document one's life and labours for posterity.

It may be no coincidence that the first Australian circus family, and one of the few, to leave comprehensive historical records, the famous Wirth family, was also the first that was demonstrably educated. As highly-trained operatic and concert musicians, the Wirth family's first generation obviously had a claim to literacy and several of their number left written autobiographies, published and unpublished. A large quantity of the Wirths' business and family records, accumulated over a century of show business activity, was recently acquired by Sydney's Powerhouse Museum and awaits thorough cataloguing.



A poster used by Woodyear's Australian Circus during its visit to Japan in 1889. The poster gives us some idea of the types of acts presented in a circus of this era. *Courtesy: Mark St Leon Collection.*

For most of Australia's circus people, however, education was, at best, a haphazard 'hit or miss' affair until state education departments increasingly enforced educational obligations on parents and guardians, especially in the post-World War II period. The consequence for biographical research is apparent: a general paucity of letters, diaries and personal accounts - and even, an educated person's appreciation of the importance of the historical record - that could facilitate the compilation of a circus biography.

Obstacle No. 3: Marginalism

Ever since they were classified with 'rogues and vagabonds' in the English social hierarchy under Elizabeth I, travelling entertainers have customarily been perceived, not always incorrectly, as emanating from society's margins, underclasses or low life. Possibly as a result and whether intentional or not, their lives and labours have been largely overlooked in works of Australia's regional and social history. The wider social, economic and cultural significance of their eternal wanderings are yet to be explored by historians.

In the absence of independent investigations into these wider social, economic and cultural meanings, the circus biographer is left the task of reconstructing such meanings as best he/she can. They need to determine how the activities of circus people contributed to shaping urban and regional histories and identities. Conversely, the circus biographer needs to identify wider social, economic and cultural forces that shaped the lives and identities of circus people.

Obstacle No. 4: Oral documentation

Since the 1970s I and other researchers have gradually assembled a large bank of oral recordings with circus identities whose recollections have extended as far back, in some cases, as the 1890s. This valuable resource allows us insights into the lives of circus people that would otherwise be lost forever. Nevertheless, the recollections of the first

generations of Australia's circus people largely escaped oral documentation due, if not to the absence of portable recording equipment, then certainly to the lack of any inclination of contemporary historians to document the lives of circus people in this way. The recollections of some of the earlier generations were partially captured in a handful of interviews and passing quotations published in contemporary newspapers and magazines. Handed-down, inter-generational oral accounts are scant, their reliability often impaired by embellishment or distortion.

Obstacle No. 5: Noms d'arena

As the careers of countless film stars, singers and other artists easily demonstrate, an attractive name, real or contrived, stands for much in the fickle world of show business. If backed up by a genuine talent and reputation, a professional pseudonym could ensure instant recognition and legitimacy. As Kellow Chesney has written in *Victorian Underworld*, since some 'circus-menageries' in Victorian England were considerable businesses, the gaffer's [showman's] name on a bill could well be good for a very substantial sum. Pioneering circus historian Thomas Frost coined the term *noms d'arena* to describe the pseudonyms adopted by British circus people.



Australia's circus people were no less enthusiastic in their use of *noms d'arena*. The steps involved in adopting *noms d'arena* in Australian circus varied widely but we now know of numerous examples and have a better idea of their derivation and use. The original surname of the Colleano family, for example, was Sullivan. The Bumpuss family became the Cousins.

There was little formality involved in adopting a *nom d'arena* which, in many cases, quietly replaced the inherited family name, thus complicating the tracing of circus genealogies and therefore the preparation of circus biographies. In fact, my own surname 'St Leon' has a long and twisted (yet honourable) history as a showman's pseudonym. My great-great-grandfather started life in London about 1826 as John Conley, altered his name to John Jones by 1842 and was conferred with the professional name of 'St Leon' when he appeared with his sons in a gymnastic troupe at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne in 1865. Re-organising his own circus in 1875, he became known by the full professional name of 'Matthew St Leon'.

Conclusion

Drafting a biography provides challenges in assembling and discerning facts and reducing them into a succinct and balanced summary of a human life. In drafting a biography of a *circus* identity, the obstacles identified above often conspire to produce a trail of immense complexity. While many obstacles today can be ameliorated by the convenience of the internet and the combined efforts of an increasing number of researchers, many brick walls remain in writing a circus biography that defy complete demolition.

The Great Encourager: The ANU's W.K. Hancock

*The Chancellor of The Australian National University, Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AO QC launched Jim Davidson's biography **A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian WK Hancock** (UNSW Press) in front of 80 guests of the National Centre for Biography on 17 July 2010. Sir Keith Hancock was one of the ADB's founders. We present the text of Gareth Evans speech.*

GARETH EVANS: Being neither a history student nor, until now, an ANU person, the first time I really became aware of the subject of Jim Davidson's admirable biography was in the mid-1970s, when the great man was in full cantankerous-fox-terrier mode crusading against the Black Mountain Tower. This was much to the rage of the then Whitlam Government, as I recall hovering around Lionel Murphy's office as a rather junior adviser at the time, although rather more to the wonderment of subsequent generations of Canberrans, who seem to have rather taken to the tower as a graceful punctuation mark on the skyline rather than the monstrous environmental carbuncle that Sir Keith portrayed it as.



Gareth Evans (left) with Jim Davidson at the launch

The rather quirky and decidedly radical Hancock of the later years, who springs so colourfully from the last chapter or so of Jim's book, and from the pages of his own last works, particularly *Discovering Monaro* and *Professing History*, is a hugely committed environmentalist, passionate opponent of nuclear weapons, scourge of neo-Nazism and sensitive portrayer of Aboriginal culture. And to any but the most reactionary modern eyes and ears, and I have to confess my own, this Hancock is a rather more accessible, engaging and sympathetic character than the one who occupies the first 400 or so pages of this colossal study.

For all his obviously instinctive decency, and for all the freshness of vision that he brought to so much of his historical writing, Hancock was very much a product of his time – in being for example, as the author clearly shows us, less than condemnatory about Hitler when he first came to power in the early 1930s, deeply understanding of the White Australia policy, treating indigenous Australians as irrelevant to our own



history and blacks as irrelevant to South Africa's, and buying the idea the old Commonwealth as a force for global peace and security well past its use-by date. Not to mention being more English than the English, and Oxonian than the Oxonians, in his formality of style, delight in titles, distaste for first names, and generally deep personal reserve: so buttoned up that, as Davidson delightfully quotes the *New Statesman* review of his autobiography, *Country and Calling*, "It appears from the story that he marries, but it is never quite clear whom".

But of course it's the worst kind of hindsight to judge someone against standards which were at the time no part of anyone's worldview, and there is a huge amount to admire –

as this biography makes abundantly clear – about Hancock’s life, both personally and professionally.

At the personal level, he inherited from his father a Christianity of the kind made manifest in basic human kindness and decency, not ecclesiastical pomp. He was evidently wonderful with kids of all kinds, including – as he has confirmed to me – the BBC’s Nik Gowing (second-named Keith by his mother Margaret, with whom Hancock worked closely on the war histories): although it remains unclear whether the cat which our knight apparently used to swing by the tail to amuse the young Nik thought quite the



Thea Hancock Fountain, ANU
donated by Sir Keith Hancock

same way. And as Davidson’s deeply touching chapter on Hancock’s marriage to Theaden puts beyond doubt, for all the problems created over many years by his work habits and preoccupations – not unusual with obsessive husbands – there were really deep reservoirs of affection and respect between the two. (I do rather wish this chapter, for which the reader has to wait 420 pages, had been placed much earlier in the book, because I was until then having the *New Statesman* reviewer’s problem. But about a *Meanjin* editor’s judgment in these matters I suppose there can be no dispute).

To be admired about the public Hancock was first, and above all, the sheer volume, quality of analysis, lucidity and professionalism of his writing over six decades, in his successive roles as a fellow of All Souls, holder of history chairs at Adelaide, Birmingham, Oxford and the ANU, and director of other of research projects, institutes and schools in London and Canberra. The “span” of it, for a start, to use one of his favourite words, remains simply breathtaking: more than twenty highly original books and monographs, including full-scale works on the Italian *risorgimento*, Australia, the British Commonwealth, key volumes of the multivolume official history of Britain on the WWII homefront he edited, the two-volume Jan Smuts biography, two volumes of his own autobiography, and a mountain of shorter pieces.

Then there was the role he played as the great *encourager* of others – not least his biographer here, as Jim makes clear – nurturing and drawing out new or latent talents; creating a collegial rather than hermit-like environment in all the institutional settings in which he worked; by goading, praising and sheer force of example getting people to produce their best work – and leaving a lasting legacy of respect and affection in the history profession. Sometimes the support and encouragement ended in tears – most spectacularly in the case of the appalling Malcolm Ellis and the Australian Dictionary of Biography project – but it’s hard to be censorious of someone led into error by believing in the hidden best, rather than recognizing the obvious worst, in his putative colleagues.



(L-R) Jim Davidson, Phillipa McGuinness, Libby Robbins and John Mulvaney

Of course what Hancock will always be most remembered for here in Canberra is his role in the birth and growth of the ANU. The story is a long and complex one, well told in Stephen Foster and Margaret Varghese's excellent history of the University, and now told again in even more fascinating detail in this biography. It starts with the identification, by Coombs and others right at the outset, of Hancock – along with Oliphant and Florey – as one of the international stars on whose commitment the whole project will stand or fall; it continues with Hancock's vacillation over whether to return to head the Research School of Social Sciences, and the conditions on which he would do so; comes to an apparent shuddering halt with his St James Park bench conversation with Douglas Copland in 1949 which led him to walk away from the whole project; then ends happily, after all, with the return of the native to accept the RSSS Directorship after all in 1957, his highly successful performance in that role for four years, followed by another five years as Professor of History and yet another twenty very productive years after that as a University Fellow until he died at the age of 90 in 1988.

There are times reading this tale – with all the incredible early-year frustrations, false starts, dead-ends, meanderings and misunderstandings it relates – when I don't think I would be alone as a reader in wanting to reach back into the pages of this history, grab our central character by the neck and say “for God's sake, just make a bloody *decision*”.

It's in this context I think, more than anywhere else, that Jim Davidson brings out the central tension in Hancock's life, between – as Hancock put it himself in his own biography – *country* on the one hand, with his intense and enduring passion, nurtured above all in his Bairnsdale childhood, for his own native soil; and *calling* on the other, his sense that he could only fully realize his professional destiny in the UK, and particularly Oxford. As Jim puts it so well (p.254), “Hancock wanted country and calling to merge; he dreamed of an All Souls in the Bush. Until he was satisfied that something like it could be achieved in ‘a high quality enterprise on Australian soil’, he was not prepared to commit himself.” And he didn't – at least not until seven years later, when the new University was well and truly established, with its own very special identity.

I have to say that, despite the urge to which I have confessed to retrospectively strangle the great man for all his Hamlet-like agonizing – his reluctance to leave the stones and



Dr Margaret Stevens (L), former ANU vice-chancellor, Prof Anthony Low, and Dr Ann Moyal all worked for Sir Keith Hancock at the ANU

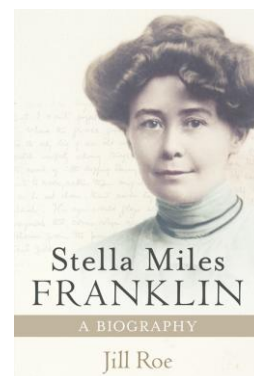
spires of Oxford for the bricks of Canberra, the green grass for the brown – I do have a sneaking personal empathy for the dilemma he felt. Some of you, I fear, may have seen the tape from an ABC *Four Corners* program many years ago about Australian expatriates abroad – which tends to resurface every few years when someone gets the urge to embarrass me – which

has me, the Melbourne tramdriver's son, languidly sprawled on a Christ Church meadow bench circa 1969, being asked the question as to when I am planning to come home, and replying in an impossibly Bridesheadian drawl "Well, one feels about all *that* rather like St Augustine: God give me chastity and continence, but not yet". With that in my own past, twenty years of Australian cultural growth and maturity later, I can hardly blame Hancock for his own Augustinianism: what seems now an incredibly remote and not easily understandable cultural deference to the mother country's brand of civilization was very real then.

The biographer's art is not just to give us information and analysis, though Jim Davidson – after many years of research all over Hancock's world – has certainly given us that in spades. It is to draw us right into the subject's world, to understand it and feel it, and to understand not just how but why he or she acted as he did – and perhaps understand ourselves better as a result. Jim Davidson has done all of this superbly, and his publishers have done him proud with the finished product. This is a book which is going to have a very long shelf-life and library life indeed, and it thoroughly deserves to. Congratulations to UNSW Press, and above all to the author, for a job wonderfully well done.

2010 Magarey Medal for Biography

At a National Centre of Biography staff meeting I rashly undertook to review the five 2010 short-listed Magarey Medal biographies. I have had a feast over the last couple of months, fitting my reading of these absorbing biographies into lunchtimes, weekends and evenings. I don't envy the judges of book awards, as they have to read many more in order to arrive at a short-list before going on to make an award.



I was half way through my reading when the winner of the Magarey Medal was announced at the Australian Historical Association Biennial Conference in Perth in early July and I was pleased that I had already read it. The winner was Jill Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin*, which the judges summarised as a 'rich and comprehensive treatment of the cultural and social milieu of this signal literary figure.' Roe has already won a Queensland (2009) and South Australian (2010) Premier's literary award for *Stella Miles Franklin*. The Magarey Medal adds to the recognition by her peers that Jill's dedicated, meticulous scholarship over many years on Miles Franklin's life and times has alerted us to Franklin's importance far beyond the precocious young author of *My Brilliant Career* and the elderly benefactor of a prestigious literary prize.

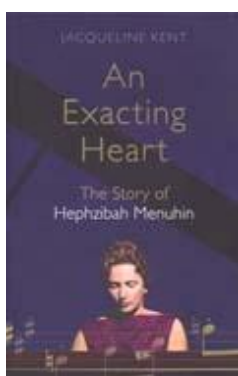
What of the other four shortlisted books:

Ann Galbally, *A Remarkable Friendship: Vincent van Gogh and John Peter Russell*. The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, 2008, 327pp, hb \$49.95.

Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History*. The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, 2008, 2009, 471pp, hb \$59.99, pb \$34.99.

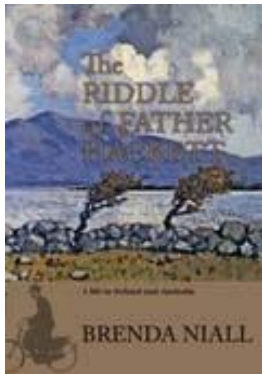
Jacqueline Kent, *An Exacting Heart: The Story of Hephzibah Menuhin*, Viking, 2008, Penguin, 2010, 440pp, hb \$49.95, pb \$27.95.

Brenda Niall, *The Riddle of Father Hackett: A Life in Ireland and Australia*, National Library of Australia, 2009, 320pp, pb\$39.95.



From the perspective of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* it is interesting to note that Jill Roe, Jacqueline Kent and Ann Galbally have each written entries for the *ADB* on the subject of their biographies, either because they were already working on the person and were the obvious choice of author or because the request to write an *ADB* entry triggered a passion to investigate further. For Roe, who has made a major contribution to the *ADB* over many years, the catalyst to research Miles Franklin's life and times was writing the entry on her for the *ADB*.

The subjects of these five short-listed biographies are John Peter Russell (1858-1930), and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) painters; Father William Hackett (1878-1954), Jesuit priest; Miles Franklin (1879-1954), writer, feminist and administrator; Gough Whitlam (1916-), politician and Prime Minister; and Hephzibah Menuhin (1920-1981), pianist, wife and social reformer.



Four out of the five lived for long periods outside Australia. Whitlam, the one who spent most of his time in Australia, travelled overseas on several occasions, most notably to China in 1971. Hackett and Menuhin were born outside Australia; Hackett in Ireland and Menuhin in the United States of America. These five lives illuminate Australian subjects, as the Magarey Medal requires, but indicate how in earlier times, despite its apparent isolation, Australia and many Australians interacted with other parts of the world, particularly Europe and the United States.

John Peter Russell, the son of Scottish immigrants spent many years in France, after first studying art at the Slade in London. Miles Franklin worked in Chicago and London and for some time during World War I in Macedonia, before settling in Sydney. Father William Hackett was an active supporter of the Irish revolutionaries before being sent by his Jesuit superiors out of harm's way to Melbourne. Hephzibah Menuhin rebelled against her situation in the hothouse of her brother's prodigal musical career and her own, and spent the middle years of her life as a grazier's wife in the western district of Victoria, before again rebelling and moving with a new husband to England. Yet these biographies illuminate interesting and non-stereotypical aspects of the Australian experience, both in Australia and outside it.

Each of the biographies is structured chronologically and is based on extensive research and a wide variety of sources. They are well-written, and professionally published and presented. Four of the five deal with the whole life and times of the subject. Jenny Hocking and her publishers, Melbourne University Publishing, decided in the course of her writing the life of Gough Whitlam to concentrate on his early career and development and finish at the launch of the 1972 election campaign. This allows Hocking to develop more in depth description and analysis of particularly important political manoeuvres and to hurry over less significant facts and details. Jim Davidson comments in his delightfully titled and perceptive article on the art of biography, 'Bouncing on the Trampoline of Fact', on Hocking's technique in *Gough Whitlam*, that she minimises and elongates time according to the importance of the episode in the whole life.¹ It is significant that her subtitle is *A Moment in History*. I was reading Hocking's biography of Whitlam's moves to update the Australian Labor Party after its long exile from power and to take over the leadership from Arthur Calwell just as the ALP was imploding in June 2010. I found her exposé of political power struggles in the 1960s fascinating, with significant resonance today.



I wish Roe and her publishers had exercised and engaged in a similar range of compression and expansion in her *Stella Miles Franklin*. I had bought the book when it was first released, but found its size daunting and had retired it to my bookshelves unread until I took on this exercise. It should have been more severely edited or come out in two volumes, or made more judicious use of differing emphases and length of treatment of facts in various parts of the story. I found the accounts of Franklin's time in Chicago and London tedious reading, although they should have been intrinsically

¹ Davidson, 'Bouncing on the Trampoline of Fact', *ABR*, Jul-Aug 2010, pp. 42-45.

interesting – girl born in the New South Wales bush makes a significant mark in feminist and welfare circles in two important northern hemisphere urban centres of influence. Obviously though, eminent judges of three prestigious prizes thought otherwise.



The title of Ann Galbally's *A Remarkable Friendship: Vincent van Gogh and John Peter Russell* is misleading. Russell and van Gogh were certainly friends for several years until van Gogh's suicide in 1890, but Russell had many other friendships and associations before and after meeting van Gogh. Russell's life is interesting in its own right without overemphasizing a relationship with a more well-known artist. Russell is deservedly the subject of a biography. The promotion of his life and art are significant in showing his development and importance as an artist beyond that of his other colleagues, particularly Tom Roberts, back in Australia as one of the mythmaking Heidelberg school of artists.

This school followed, with an Australian inflection, the British Victorian story-telling pictorial mode, rather than the extension of impressionism being developed by Russell and van Gogh in France.

William Hackett and Hephzibah Menuhin were both born outside Australia, but their biographers make a convincing case for the contribution they made to Australian life and times; Hackett in Melbourne from 1922 and Menuhin in the western district of Victoria from 1938 (aged 17) to 1957 (when she moved to England with her new husband). Brenda Niall has presented a wonderfully written account of Hackett, his upbringing in Ireland, his involvement with the Irish republican movement and his later activities in the Roman Catholic establishment, movements and life in Melbourne. At last I began to see clearly the importance of the close links between Ireland and Australia for so many Irish Australians in the first half of the twentieth century.

Similarly Jacqueline Kent deals with Hephzibah Menuhin's equally complex life and upbringing and her time in Australia in the years straddling the second world war. She was probably always an exile wherever she lived - and because she was not her brother - but she made an impact on her local area in Victoria and on the Australian classical music scene more generally at a time when it was still quite provincial. *An Exacting Heart* is a fitting title for the biography of a person of such talent and tortured inheritance.

A winner? I know why there are three judges on the panel for the Magarey Medal in Biography. It is important to have to persuade at least two others of the merits of 'one's favourite'. Arguing with the three judges within myself I find it almost impossible to decide between Brenda Niall's *The Riddle of Father Hackett* and Jacqueline Kent's *An Exacting Heart: the Story of Hephzibah Menuhin*. All five short-listed books are excellent biographies on Australian subjects showing the rich complexity of the lives of five notable Australians.

Janet Doust

Janet is a Research Editor with the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, an historian of Australian colonial history and an avid reader of autobiography, memoirs and biography.

Life Sentences

*The editor of the ANU **Reporter**, Simon Couper, invited the National Centre of Biography to contribute a series of columns on subjects in the Australian Dictionary of Biography which would be of interest to its readers. This is most recent of the columns appearing in the series 'Life Sentences'.*

This year the State Library of New South Wales is celebrating the centenary of the opening of the Mitchell Library, home of one of the world's great national collections. Reclusive, sensitive and with an independent income, David Scott Mitchell (1836-1907) devoted much of his life to book collecting. He aimed to gather a copy of every document that related to Australia, the Pacific, the East Indies and Antarctica. In poor health by 1898, Mitchell offered his collection – amounting to over 60,000 documents – to the state library on the condition that it be housed in its own wing.



E. A. Petherick
(an23480896, held NLA)

The State Library of New South Wales also holds the Dixon collection, bequeathed by Sir William Dixon (1870-1952). The businessman focused his collecting on early navigation and geography, exploration of the Pacific, early Australian settlement and, above all, pictures. He also paid for the library's spectacular bronze entrance doors, its Chaucer stained-glass windows and left it a substantial endowment to establish the William Dixon Foundation.

When bookseller Edward Augustus Petherick (1847-1917) offered his great collection of Australiana to the Commonwealth National Library (now National Library of Australia) in 1908 he included himself – as its custodian – as part of the deal. His other great work was to write a bibliography of Australia and Polynesia. Consisting of over 100,000 cards, the bibliography remains unfinished, in 92 boxes, in the national library.

Like Petherick, Sir John Ferguson (1881-1969) was both a passionate Australiana collector and bibliographer, who also found time to serve as a judge with the Industrial Commission. In 1918 he began work on his seven-volume *Bibliography of Australia* in which he aimed to include an accurate description of every book, pamphlet, broadsheet, periodical and newspaper relating in any way to Australia pre-1900. The first volume was published in 1941 and the last in 1969, shortly after his death. He began depositing his collection of 34,000 items of Australiana in the national library in 1939.

The National Library of Australia also holds the Rex Nan Kivell (1898 - 1977) collection. A New Zealand-born art dealer who adopted the style of a bon vivant, Nan Kivell amassed over 15,000 pictures, manuscripts and printed material relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. It was said that he donated his collection to the library in exchange for a knighthood.

Thomas Fisher (1820 - 1884) is, perhaps, the most unlikely of all the great library benefactors. The son of convicts, Fisher was orphaned at 12. He was apprenticed as a bootmaker and soon owned the building that housed his shop. Further property speculation saw him buying cottages, ships and hotels. In his retirement he liked to

stroll through the grounds of the University of Sydney and attend commemoration addresses. Stirred by the Chancellor's address in 1879, for a man of great wealth and public spirit to 'earn the gratitude of their country by erecting for the University a library worthy of comparison with like edifices', Fisher left the bulk of his estate to the university. The library building, opened in 1909, was named in his honour.

Christine Fernon

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