

Malcolm Turnbull: speech given at the launch of *The ADB's Story*, University House, Australian National University Canberra, 4 December 2013.

Can I say at the outset how incredibly moved I was – I nearly burst into tears at the end of this room when I came here – because you were kind enough to mention my mother was a contributor, not a high-volume contributor, but a contributor to the *ADB (Australian Dictionary of Biography)*. I was extraordinarily moved talking to you three, and to others here, because I was, for the first time I can remember since my mother's death, in the company of historians. I had forgotten what that felt like. It is actually very different. I can't quite put my finger on it but I was nearly overwhelmed by a wave of emotion. So don't think I'm just a flinty-hearted politician!

Vice Chancellor, Professor Young, Professor Griffiths, Melanie Nolan — the editor of the *ADB* — thank you all for inviting me to launch *The ADB's Story*.

It is a story of 50 years of collaborative achievement — 4,000 authors and hundreds of academics and other professionals who have served on working parties and the Editorial Board. All working without fee for this great national work.

It has been an early example of what we would call today crowd sourcing — a precursor, in some respects, in the analogue era of Wikipedia (although with considerably more disciplined quality control!).

No other national biographical dictionary can boast of this great strength of continued goodwill, maintained over five decades. You should all be very, very proud.

Sir Robert Menzies established the ANU in 1946. He was a great supporter of the *ADB* and was invited to launch its first volume in 1966 here at University House. This is still the place where the *ADB* comes to celebrate its achievements; the picture on the cover of this book was taken just outside the front entrance of the building. It shows Sir Keith Hancock, the first Director of the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU, planting an English oak tree on the southern lawn in 1984. It was Sir Keith, as Ann Moyal explains in her chapter in *The ADB's Story*, who laid the foundations of the *ADB*.

Ann Moyal deserves special mention. Not only was she the first employee of the *ADB* but wrote *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications* which covers the span of Australia's telecommunications history from the first telegraph line erected between Melbourne and Williamstown in 1854, to the industrial and political upheavals involving Telecom in the 1980s until the election of the Hawke Government in 1983.

As Geoffrey Blainey wrote in the forward to Ann's history, it is an important work "for those who work in telecommunications and the politicians, businessmen and civil servants who have to make decisions as how to harness, effectively and economically, the next wave of innovations."

Right now I am grappling with how best to transform the NBN project into a more cost effective shape. The Strategic Review which we will release shortly will be an exercise in what historians should appreciate — clear-eyed truth telling, free of spin and politics. There hasn't been a lot of that in the broadband debate over the last six years. Perhaps in the next edition of *Clear Across Australia* — that would take many volumes for the NBN — perhaps that can be taken up there.

Now, right here at the ANU, University House was also where the *ADB* and its supporters met in 2006 when the Governor-General launched the online version of the *Dictionary*. The site now has a phenomenal 70 million hits a year making it, surely, the first port of call for researchers of Australian history. It is certainly the most authoritative port of call. It is copied everywhere. This is not much consolation — but plagiarism is the sincerest form of flattery. It was a revelation to me to read of the care that *ADB* editors take to verify all the facts in entries. It was a revelation but, perhaps, not the most surprising one.

Back in 1966 Menzies was delighted to see the ANU take a leadership role in producing the *ADB* in line with its foundational charter to provide leadership in areas of national importance. While we naturally acclaim our scientists, especially medical scientists, our national achievements in the humanities and social sciences also deserve acclaim. The *ADB* is one the country's most significant collective research projects. You are proud of it. All Australians should be proud of it.

I congratulate all of you who have worked on the *ADB* as authors or on its Editorial Board and committees. On behalf of the parliament I congratulate you for your generosity in giving your time and expertise to this great national endeavour. I congratulate the ANU for making the *ADB* freely available online, rather than making it a subscription service as some other national dictionaries have done.

It means that anyone, anywhere in the world, can now read about the endeavours of those who have made Australia what it is. I understand that the online *ADB* has a wide reach and is being consulted not only by scholars and university students but by school children and the general public who search the web for more information after watching documentaries and TV dramas. Squizzy Taylor was this year's most frequently searched term in the *ADB*.

I also congratulate all those who have assisted the *ADB* project by opening their libraries and archives, and helping researchers find those hidden histories. The *ADB* would not have been as successful or as authoritative as it is without the support of the national, state and territory libraries and archives; the national war memorial; the countless school, regional and business archives; and the Registrars-General who have given the project access to birth, death and marriage records.

I understand Margy Burn, assistant director-general of the NLA, is here tonight. She is another example of a person from the cultural institutions who has given valuable service to the *ADB*, first as a member of the NSW Working Party and now in her role at the National Library. She was instrumental in winning NLA support for the ARC grant to place the *ADB* online. The NLA has been a particular and longstanding ally of the *ADB*.

I particularly enjoyed reading in *The ADB's Story* about the tireless assistance given to the project by Brigadier Maurice (Bunny) Austin, Captain Alec Hill and Lieutenant Colonel Frank Brown. After serving Australia in the defence forces these men gave long service, as civilians, to the *ADB* by transcribing, by hand, hundreds of pages of central office army records for military subjects in the *Dictionary*. All this in the days before photocopying. These men, and others, such as Barry Jones, Gough Whitlam and Richard Tolhurst, who used to send the *ADB* lists of errors after the publication of each volume, have achieved legendary status in the *ADB*.

I am proud to count my family as one of those who have 'served' the *Dictionary*. My mother, Coral Lansbury, wrote four *ADB* entries. They reflected both professional and personal interests.

Coral was the daughter of two actors and while she didn't persevere with acting herself, she was a very successful writer of radio serials. One of the entries she wrote was for George

Edwards, a prodigious producer of theatrical productions and radio dramas. George was a great mimic — he was known as the man of a thousand voices — and no doubt to save money would play many roles — as many as six in a single radio drama scene— ranging from young children to old ladies.

Of course radio drama in those days was produced live. Coral's father, Oscar Lansbury, was in charge of the sound effects — banging drums, firing pistols, rattling chains, clashing swords and clip clopping coconut shells along a gravel bed as the story unfolded.

But her interest in George Edwards was more than professional — Coral was his last wife, marrying him in February 1953 — at about 22 is the most sure bet — a short marriage terminated six months later when George died, his widow/biographer tells us, of liver disease.

A footnote to the entry would be that the young widow was left living in George's apartment in Longworth Avenue, in Point Piper, on Lady Martins Beach. It wasn't long before his creditors and heirs booted her out despite the help of her very good friend and smart young solicitor, Neville Wran. While grieving she met my father Bruce who was living, she told me, in a cold-water basement flat in the same street. They met on the beach and I was conceived thereabouts in, I suppose, January 1954. I think it says a lot about my father's compassionate nature that he went to such great lengths to console a grieving widow.

As it happens Lucy and I live on Lady Martins beach about fifty metres from where my parents met.

I asked my mother what drew her to my father (their subsequent marriage was neither long nor happy and I wondered why they had hooked up in the first place). She said that my father had swum up and down outside her apartment, diving up and down, pretending to be a porpoise. Such are the accidents that tilt the hinge of fate.

Carol also co-wrote, with Bede Nairn, the *ADB* entry on William Guthrie Spence, the founder of the Amalgamated Shearers Union in 1886 and the Australian Workers Union in 1894. Spence was one of the founders, too, of the Australian Labor Party and, I am delighted to say, was one of my Cabinet predecessors having been the Commonwealth Postmaster-General in 1914-15. If I may just digress here for a moment — one of the very sound things that the new Government has done is change the titles of all the Ministers — so instead of me being the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy — we rationalised all this pompous nomenclature. But I was half hoping that Tony Abbott, who is a lover of tradition, might rename my portfolio that of the Postmaster-General! But it didn't come to pass. That was a bridge too far.

Coral's initial interest as a historian was in labour history in general and the AWU in particular, hence her close association and friendship with Bede Nairn who was one of our most distinguished Labour historians.

Coral moved on from labour history to Victorian literature and wrote extensively, including in her book, *Arcady in Australia*, about how Australia was extolled, but misrepresented, by Victorian writers often under the influence of Samuel Sidney, Caroline Chisholm and others who saw Australia as a suitable and improving destination for the English working class.

Dickens never came to Australia, although many of his characters did perhaps, most memorably, Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. And two of his children took their father's emigration boosterism to heart and settled in Australia, one of whom, Edward Bullwer Lytton Dickens was successively a pastoralist in western NSW, a civil servant, and a member of the Legislative Assembly.

Coral's collaborator on Spence, Bede Nairn was a most prodigious contributor to the *ADB*, writing 80 entries. His role as author and General Editor has been charmingly evoked in *The ADB's Story* by former Deputy General Editor, Chris Cunneen. These connections between authors and *ADB* staff are a common thread of *The ADB's Story*.

I congratulate all past and present staff and contributors of the *ADB* who are here today for the wonderful gift you have given to the nation.

Long may your work continue.