

BIOGRAPHY FOOTNOTES

the newsletter of the National Centre of Biography

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

The National Centre of Biography continues to value its close ties with the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB).

In December last year Dr Philip Carter, Publication Editor of the *ODNB*, joined us at the NCB as a Visiting Fellow and presented a well-received paper, 'What happened next? The Oxford DNB, 2005-2010'. Since the 60-volume *ODNB* was published in 2005, staff have added about 2500 biographies to its website, revised many other entries, added hundreds of thematic essays, formed links with a number of national institutions and have sought to develop a popular public profile. A version of his paper will be included in the history of the ADB, to be published later this year.

Philip and I met again in April this year, this time at Oxford, where I also met Dr. Lawrence Goldman, Editor of the *ODNB*, to discuss future collaboration between our two evolving online works of reference. We are hoping that Lawrence, who is writing a biography of the economic historian, Richard Tawney, might be able to join us at the NCB as a Visiting Fellow in the near future.

Closer to home we are planning to hold talks with staff of the National Library of Australia and National Portrait Gallery about future collaborations.

Melanie Nolan

Director, National Centre of Biography
General Editor, Australian Dictionary of Biography



Dr Lawrence Goldman, General Editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* with Professor Melanie Nolan, General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 5 May 2011

Front cover:

The *Obituaries Australia* 'team' Scott Yeadon, Christine Fernon, and Max Korolev (back row from left) with (from left) obituary writer, John Farquharson, NCB director, Prof Melanie Nolan, obituary authority, Dr Nigel Starck, and ANU Vice-Chancellor, Prof Ian Young at the launch of *Obituaries Australia*, 14 April 2011

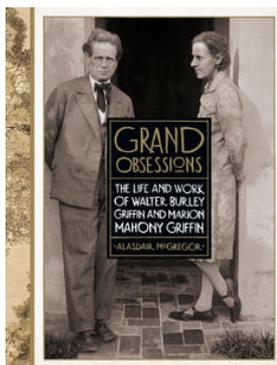
AUSTRALIA DAY AWARDS

Congratulations to all the ADB authors who were recognised in Australia Day Honours:

- Mr Roger Butler (AM)
- Dr David Clune (OAM)
- Air Commodore Mark Lax (Ret'd) (OAM)
- Mr Aladin Rahemtula (OAM)
- Dr Spencer Routh (OAM)
- Mr Ronald Store (OA)

NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY AWARD

Alasdair McGregor won this year's \$20,000 National Biography award for his book, *Grand Obsessions: The Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (Penguin). The book was the unanimous choice of the judges, Professor Carmen Lawrence (University of Western Australia), Peter Rose (editor, *Australian Book Review*) and Professor Peter Skrzynecki OAM (University of Western Sydney).



58 books were nominated for this year's award, from which six were shortlisted.

The other shortlisted books are:

- Ross Fitzgerald and Stephen Holt, *Alan 'The Red Fox' Reid: Pressman Par Excellence* (University of New South Wales Press)
- Harry Dillon and Peter Butler, *Macquarie* (Random House Australia)
- Sheila Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter* (Melbourne University Press)
- Anna Goldsworthy, *Piano Lessons* (Black Inc)
- Roderick Buchanan, *Playing With Fire: The Controversial Career of Hans J Eysenck* (Oxford University Press)

The judges described *Grand Obsessions* as a 'grand' winner in every sense of the word and 'the most elegantly published book in a large field not always notable for high production values'.

The prize comes 99 years after the Commonwealth Government announced its international competition to design Australia's new federal capital city – a competition which the Griffins won and was to become one of their 'grand obsessions'.

JACQUI DONEGAN HEADING OVERSEAS



NCB PhD student, Jacqui Donegan, is heading overseas later in the year to take up a prestigious fellowship to Harvard University.

Ms Donegan, who holds a Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship for Doctoral Study at the ANU, will take up the Alfred D. Chandler Jnr Travel Fellowship at Harvard Business School.

Her research explores the active associations between Australian and American food manufacturers in the early 20th century, especially those seeking alternatives to sugar.

Jacqui said she was thrilled at the opportunity.

"The Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship has enabled me to undertake extensive research throughout Australia and America, and this fellowship will complement that with a sustained period of primary research in the Harvard Libraries," she said.

"Harvard pioneered the case-study method of business analysis and as a consequence the Harvard libraries hold most of the original legal transcripts from the dissolution of business trusts from 1916.

"I'm also looking forward to working with a range of American historians who, like Chandler, study business organisation."

Jacqui's PhD thesis, "The Confectionery Kings: Robertson, Allen and Hoadley, 1890-1930", is supervised by Prof Melanie Nolan and is due for completion next year.

KIBBLE LITERARY AWARD

The three shortlisted books for the \$30,000 Kibble Literary Award for a work by established female writers in the area of life-writing have been announced:

- Delia Falconer, *Sydney* (University of New South Wales Press)
- Annette Stewart, *Barbara Hanrahan: A Biography* (Wakefield Press)
- Brenda Walker, *Reading by Moonlight* (Penguin)

The award was established in 1994 by Nita Dobbie in memory of her aunt Nita Kibble.

WENDY SUTHERLAND

Wendy Sutherland has come out of retirement to copy edit volume 18 of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, which will be published next year.

Wendy has been proofreading *ADB* entries for Melbourne University Press since the late 1970s and is one of the 'living legends' associated with the *ADB*. Her skills at finding inconsistencies in style and grammar are formidable. It comes as no surprise to learn that she has won the Barbara Ramsden Award for editing three times, as well as a University of Melbourne Gold Medal.

'NEW LOOK' AUSTRALIAN DICTIONARY OF BIOGRAPHY

The *ADB*'s new website will be launched next month. The changes are mostly cosmetic at this stage, the content will remain the same.

The NCB's computer programmer, Scott Yeadon, has been working hard over the last few months to update the website's architecture so that, in future, we will be able to add thematic essays and digitised resources to the site, and include links to the NCB's *Obituaries Australia* website.

DIGITISING COMPENDIUMS OF BIOGRAPHY

The NCB is digitising out-of-copyright Australian compendiums of biography. So far we have digitised *Australian Men of Mark* (1888) and have almost completed Phillip Mennel's *Dictionary of Australasian Biography* (1892).

We also plan to scan John Henniker Heaton's *The Australian Dictionary of Dates and Men of the Time* (1879) and Geoffrey Serle's *Dictionary of Australian Biography* (1949).

All books will be available both as pdfs and E-books from the NCB's website later this year.

INTERNATIONAL AUTO/BIOGRAPHY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

The International Auto/Biography Association is holding its 8th biennial conference at the Australian National University on 17-20 July 2012.

A call for papers will be posted on the IABA's website http://www.theiaba.org/?page_id=187 on 1 August.

OBITUARIES AUSTRALIA LAUNCHED

The launch of the NCB's new website, *Obituaries Australia*, by the ANU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian Young, on 14 April attracted widespread media coverage. Professor Melanie Nolan and obituary authority, Dr Nigel Starck, who spoke at the launch about the evolution of obituaries (see inside for his paper), spent almost the entire day being interviewed by radio stations throughout the country. One producer even wanted them to duck out during the actual launch for a quick interview.

Canberra's ABC TV news also covered the launch as did the *Canberra Times* – who included it as a feature article on their front page.

Melanie Nolan's interview with Radio National's 'Life Matters' can be downloaded from <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters/stories/2011/3190528.htm>

TWELFTH BIENNIAL LABOUR HISTORY CONFERENCE

The Association for the Study of Labour History is marking its fiftieth anniversary by holding its biennial conference in the city in which the society was formed – Canberra.



The conference is being held in association with the NCB and has as its theme 'Labour History and Its People'.

The conference runs from 15-17 September.
Cost: \$300 full, \$200 students and concession.
Early bird rate for registrations prior to 1 July:
\$250 full, \$150 students concession.

For further details and to register visit <http://ncb.anu.edu.au/labour-history-conference>

WORKING LIVES

'Working Lives', a new, online Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement will be launched at the 'Labour History and Its People' conference in September.

The project is being managed by John Shields and Andrew Moore, and has been financed by the University of Western Sydney and an ARC grant.

STAFF NEWS

KAREN FOX knocked back an overseas offer of employment to take up a two-year Postdoctoral Fellowship with the National Centre of Biography in January this year.



After completing her MA thesis on the history of knightships and damehoods in New Zealand since 1917 at the University of Canterbury, Karen moved to Canberra in 2006 to undertake a PhD on 'Media Representation of Famous Indigenous Women in Australia and New Zealand' at the ANU's Australian Centre for Indigenous Studies.

Last year she taught two courses for the School of History and was among the top 10 ANU teachers nominated for the UniJobs 2010 Lecturer of the Year.

As well as editing entries for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Karen is undertaking two research projects of her own – a history of the honours system in Australia, and a history of fame in Australia.



MAX KOROLEV joined the NCB in December as our digitisation officer.

Max previously worked on the National Library's newspaper digitisation project, scanning issues of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Women's Weekly*, as well as some rare books and Treasury papers.

A College of Arts and Social Sciences grant at the end of last year has enabled us to take on Max as a full-time employee for two years. As well as continuing to digitise obituaries from magazines and newspapers, he is digitising out of copyright biography compendiums

Max's work is very specialised. Rather than simply scanning the items, the two cameras mounted on the NCB's Guardian AO scanner photograph the material so a sound knowledge of manual photography, as well as of processing and manipulating images, is essential to obtain the highest quality reproductions.



Back (L-R): Professor Melanie Nolan, Michael Mironov
Front: Sharon Hoffman, Scott Stephenson, Lexie Harper
Absent: Gemma Nourse

ADB INTERNS

The National Centre of Biography is offering ANU History Honours students a unique chance of working with ADB staff.

Five of this year's seven honours students are taking the internship as part of their elective course requirements. In March they spent a week at the NCB being briefed on the processes involved in producing ADB entries, starting with the selection of entries through to the various stages of editing. They also visited the NCB's digitisation facility to learn about the processes involved in scanning and OCRing material.

The interns are also required to spend a week 'shadowing' an ADB editor and to submit a 1000-word obituary and a 5000-word thematic essay for assessment. If the work is of sufficient standard it will be added to the *Obituaries Australia* website, giving the students their first published work.

MASTER OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH & WRITING



Biography allows us to explore some of the most fascinating questions of human existence.

How do we come to be who we are?

What is the essence of a life and character, and can we as biographers really know that essence?

How are narratives of lives shaped by differences of culture, class or gender?

About the degree

Biographical work helps us understand our history in new ways, and can cast fresh light on whole realms of political and social change. Not surprisingly, biographical approaches are growing ever more popular in a wide range of fields, from history to heritage, politics to art.

The Master of Biographical Research and Writing (MBRW) is an initiative of the National Centre of Biography at the ANU. The Centre includes the Australian Dictionary of Biography and other biographical projects, and acts as a focus for the study of Biography in Australia.

The MBRW is a postgraduate coursework program that equips students with a thorough theoretical and critical grounding in biography, and with the skills and opportunity to undertake their own biographical projects.

The program is relevant for graduates wishing to undertake a specialist postgraduate program in biography, professionals working in a variety of cultural institutions who are finding biography to be of increasing relevance to their professional practice, independent scholars wishing to pursue biographical projects, intending PhD students interested in undertaking postgraduate research in biography, and anyone wishing to broaden their knowledge and understanding of past lives.

Graduates of the MBRW program may go on to careers in writing and publishing biography, in the editorial and publishing worlds, in cultural

and visual arts, in the public history and heritage sector, in film, radio and television, in education, or in the library and archives sector.

Typical courses

- Writing Biography
- Reading and Writing History
- History and Theory
- Oral History, Memory and Life Stories
- Biography and Society
- Digital Histories and Biographies
- Biographical Practices
- Australian Dictionary of Biography Internship
- Biographical Research Project

Admission

Students can complete this program in 1 year full-time (2 semesters) or equivalent part-time. Applications from distance education students are welcome. Courses in the program involve a combination of online learning and short intensive sessions held in Canberra. All intensive sessions will take place over a two-week period in June/July.

Applicants should have a four year Bachelors degree either as Honours or a combined degree in a cognate area from an Australian tertiary institution or its international equivalent. Equivalence can be met with completion of either the Graduate Certificate in Liberal Arts (Writing, World Histories and Lives) or the Graduate Diploma in Arts (History).

Further information & contact

T (02) 6125 2898

E students.cass@anu.edu.au

W ncb.anu.edu.au/studyncb/masters

A GLIMPSE AT VOLS 19-20 OF THE ADB

1411 people have been selected by the State, Commonwealth and Armed Services Working Parties for entries in volumes 19 and 20 of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which cover those who died in 1991-2000.

The proportion of women (17%) remains much as it was for volumes 17-18 while the percentage of Indigenous Australians (11%) has increased slightly. The real differences are the declining percentage of entries for the Armed Services and the rural sector. Prominent military figures include 'Weary' Dunlop who, as both camp commander and surgeon, attended to the needs of fellow POWs in Burma's death camps, and nurse Vivian Bullwinkel, the sole survivor of the Banka Island massacre at Singapore. Major Susan Felsche, the first woman to die on active service since World War II, is also included.

The arts are well represented by writers and poets Nancy Cato, Mary Durack, Geoffrey Dutton, Kevin Gilbert, Dorothy Green, Frank Hardy, Maxwell Harris, Alec Hope, Nancy Keesing, Sumner Locke Elliott, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Di Riddell, Morris West and Judith Wright. Included among the artists are Arthur Boyd, John Brack, Elizabeth Durack, Emily Kngwarreye, Rosalie Gascoigne, Ivor Hele, Sidney Nolan, John Perceval, Brett Whiteley and the great photographer Max Dupain.

The Australian Labor Party lost many of its comrades in the 1990s: the irrepressible Fred Daly, Don Dunstan, Jim McClelland, Gordon Scholes, Lance Barnard and Olive Zakharov. It also lost some of its greatest foes: Bob Santamaria, whose Catholic Social Studies Movement led to the Split of the ALP in the mid 1950s; High Court judge, Garfield Barwick, and Governor-General, John Kerr, who played prominent roles in the sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975; and the mysterious Tirath Khemlani, a key player in the damaging loans affair. Bob Hawke's personal secretary, Jean Sinclair, and Bob Menzies's wife, Dame Pattie, are also included. Among the Liberal politicians to be included are Neville Bonner, the first Aborigine to be elected a Senator, and Paul Hasluck, who also served as Australia's 17th governor-general.

The 1990s saw off the last of the powerful federal public service mandarins: Fred Wheeler, Allen Brown, Geoff Yeend, H. C. Coombs, Roland Wilson, John Bunting, and Henry Bland. One of the new breed of senior public servants, Peter Wilenski, also died, at the age of 55. Prominent feminists, both from an earlier era and the 1960s, who are to have entries include Irene Greenwood,

Daphne Gollan, Eva Bacon, Edna Ryan and Clare Burton. Roma Mitchell, who in a remarkable legal and civil career was Australia's first female Queen's Counsel, first Commonwealth female Supreme Court judge, first female Chancellor of a University and first female governor of an Australian state, is also included.

Many of Australia's great entertainers died in the 1990s: Frank Thring, Noel Ferrier, Peter Allen, Bobby Limb and Dawn Lake, as did scriptwriter and producer, Joan Long, and actors John Hargreaves, Queenie Ashton, Burnum Burnum and Gordon Chater. Also included are the first man to speak on Australian TV, Bruce Gyngell, television producer, Hector Crawford, and the general manager of the ABC, Talbot Duckmanton. Many older mothers will remember the helpful household advice of Martha Gardner, while those born in the 1950s will fondly recall children's TV entertainer, Happy Hammond.

Controversial trade union leaders, Ted Roach of the Waterside Workers' Federation and Norm Gallagher of the Builders Labourers' Federation, have been selected for entries as have historians Alexandra Hasluck, Paul Bourke, Russel Ward and Manning Clark. Other academics include economic historian, Noel Butlin, demographer, Mick Borrie, physicist Marcus Oliphant and English professor, Colin Roderick.

Keen gardeners will be pleased that Cornelius Tesselaar, of Tesselaar Roses fame, has an entry, as do Valerie Swane and conservationist Milo Dunphy. Also included are eye specialist, Fred Hollows, land rights campaigner, Eddie Mabo, Ted Noffs from Sydney's Wayside Chapel, and Derek Llewellyn Jones, the author of many books on women's reproductive health.

The 1990s also saw the deaths of respected journalists David McNicoll, Robert Haupt, Paul Lyneham and Andrew Olle. In the business world we lost Kenneth Myer and Peter Abeles and, in sport, horserace caller, Bill Collins, sports commentators, Ron Casey and Alan McGilvray, champion cyclist Hubert Opperman, and footballer Ted Whitten.

Many will remember the tragic deaths of heart surgeon, Victor Chang, and ALP politician, John Newman, both victims of gunmen. Royal Commissioners, Robert Hope and Philip Woodward have entries, as does disgraced chief magistrate Murray Farquhar.

Finally, we note the inclusion of three ADB stalwarts – Laurie Fitzhardinge, who began the ADB's *Biographical Register* in 1954, Patricia Wardle, who worked on the *Register* with him, and the Dictionary's second general editor, Geoff Serle.

BIOGRAPHY READING GROUP

The National Centre of Biography is continuing with its monthly Biography Reading Group in 2011. The group meets in an informal setting during lunchtime on the last Thursday of each month to discuss, with a guest speaker, the difficulties faced in writing biography.

Two meetings have so far been held this year. In March Professor Stephen Foster discussed his recent biography *A Private Empire* (2010), about several generations of the Macpherson family, at our first meeting.

In May Dr Martin Thomas, ARC Future Fellow in the ANU's School of History, discussed his recently published speculative biography, *The Many Worlds of R. H. Mathews* (2011). Mathews, a surveyor and self-taught anthropologist, left little in the way of diaries or papers upon which to construct a life story.

If you would like to attend any of the remaining sessions for the year please contact us at ncb@anu.edu.au. For further details see <http://ncb.anu.edu.au/biography-reading-group-2011>

30 June: Associate Professor Philip Dwyer

Philip teaches European History at the University of Newcastle and is head of the Violence and Social Order research program at the university's Humanities Research Institute. His biography *Napoleon, 1769-1799: The Path to Power*, won the National Biography Award in 2008. He is currently working on a sequel to this, as well as a number of related projects that include the war memoir, and the massacre in history. As a biographer of Napoleon, Philip grappled with the issue of character development over time.

28 July: Professor Jenny Hocking

Jenny is the Head of the School of Journalism and Australian Studies at Monash University and is one of Australia's best-known political biographers. Her work includes *Lionel Murphy: A Political Biography* (1997); and *Frank Hardy: Politics Literature Life* (2005). *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (2008) was the first of a two-volume biography of the former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam.

25 August: Peter Rose

Peter is a poet, critic, novelist and editor. To date he has published four collections of poetry, one novel and edited several anthologies. During the 1990s he was a publisher at Oxford University Press, and since 2001 has edited the *Australian Book Review*. He was also on the

judging panel for the Prime Minister's Literary Award and this year's National Biography Award. His own family memoir, *Rose Boys* (2001), won the National Biography Award in 2003. Peter will discuss biography on the basis of his experience in a wide range of roles.

29 September: Gideon Haigh

Gideon is a prolific sports and business journalist, historian and biographer. During the 1980s and 1990s he worked as a journalist for the *Age* and the *Australian*. He has written and edited over two dozen books. His histories include *The Cricket War* (1993) and *The Summer Game: Australian Test Cricket 1949-71* (1997). His biographies include *The Big Ship: Warwick Armstrong* and *The Making of Modern Cricket* (2001) and his award-winning *Mystery Spinner: A Life of Jack Iverson* (1999).

27 October: Dr Sheridan Palmer

Sheridan, a curator and art historian, is the author of *Centre of the Periphery: Three European Art Historians in Melbourne* (2008) and *Argy-Bargy: Dean Bowen* (2009). She will be discussing her current biography-in-progress of art historian, Bernard Smith, who is recognised as the 'father of Australian art history', though his role and importance reaches well beyond that title. He was, for instance, one of the first doctoral students at the ANU, completing his thesis on European Vision and the South Pacific in the School of Pacific Studies in 1956.

24 November: Dr Elizabeth Morrison

Elizabeth has been a librarianship lecturer and Australian studies research fellow at Monash University and a project officer in Canberra for the Academy Editions of Australian Literature. Now an independent historian, she researches and writes about nineteenth-century Australian literary, publishing and newspaper press history. She has researched fiction serialisation in the colonial press and edited two Ada Cambridge 'newspaper novels' – *A Woman's Friendship* and *A Black Sheep*. Her history of Victoria's country press, *Engines of Influence*, appeared in 2005. She will speak about her current project, a biography of the Melbourne *Age* newspaper proprietor David Syme.

OBITUARIES AUSTRALIA

The National Centre of Biography's new website, Obituaries Australia (OA), launched by the Australian National University's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian Young, on 14 April, has been well received by the public. So well received, indeed, that the sheer number of people trying to find OA via the NCB's website, the day after the launch, caused the NCB site to crash for a few hours.

'Word' has spread quickly through genealogical societies, and numerous individuals and groups have contacted us offering obituaries, many of which would have been difficult to obtain otherwise. Historian, Barry McGowan, has given us the obituaries of 50 Chinese people he found during his research on the experience of the Chinese in the Riverina. The archivist of the Marist Brothers in Sydney has offered 300 obituaries of members of his order, while the archivist of U3A in Canberra is searching back copies of its newsletter for obituaries. We were also delighted to receive obituaries from a librarian, who told us that 'Sending you obits has just replaced making corrections to Trove Newspapers as my favourite task for quiet times on the information desk!'

People have also been more than happy to send us both scanned and transcribed copies of obituaries and to help index them. At first we just asked for birth and death dates and places. The response was so good that we have added fields for cause of death (which, strangely, generally is not given in obituaries) and places of education. We are now thinking of asking



ANU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian Young launches the Obituaries Australia website,

for the full range of indexed fields – membership of organisations which they were involved, rural properties owned, and places of employment. Some of our regular correspondents are already adding these details on their own initiative when sending us obituaries. One person has gone a step further and sends the names of people in the OA with whom the person had an association.

This assistance by the public is invaluable in helping us to reach our goal of capturing every published obituary of an Australian. At the moment OA has 1,800 obituaries. We are hoping to have 5,000 by the end of the year and 10,000 a year later. Once we reach the latter figure the value of the database as a research tool will become apparent. You can already see signs of its potential.

Using the faceted browse option you can, for example, find five people who were at the Eureka Stockade, as miners, spectator, soldier, and a woman who was born there. This not only gives faces to events but helps to answer the questions – *What happened to the people then? Where did they go after the Stockade.* Again, using the 'faceted browse' option, you can find all people who had an association with a particular school, as students, teachers, benefactors etc. The search can also be narrowed to find all those who had an association with the school at the time a particular individual was there, or you might be interested to know which universities students from that school went to, what jobs they took etc....

We are also looking at tools to visualize complex relationships. So far we have included family trees.



launch of Obituaries Australia, 14 April 2011

OBITUARIES AUSTRALIA (cont'd)

The tree showing the 35 members (for which we have obituaries) and five generations of Sir Alfred Stephen's large family (he had 18 children) is our most complex to date. We hope to use other visual tools to show work relationships, and the ownership - and changing boundaries - of rural properties over time.

Apart from their use as research tools, the obituaries are, very often, great reads in themselves. Some are heartbreaking, such as the 18-year-old boy, an only son, who went off to war and died of influenza soon after landing at his first destination, or the pastoralist on a remote station who suffered horribly with severe burns for three days (and then died) while waiting for a doctor.

The obituaries can also be very revealing of the attitudes of the day. Many obituaries of early pastoralists, particularly in Queensland, speak matter-of-factly, and sometimes in great detail, of skirmishes with local 'blackfellows'. We have created an index term 'settler/indigenous contact' so that those researching contact history can easily find these obituaries.

It is also interesting to note the changing tone and language of obituaries over time. The earliest obituaries are quite solemn and tend to sermonise about whether the person was 'ready' to meet their maker. In contrast, a recent obituary for a stage designer had, as its leader, 'It's curtains for ...!'

As a special project we have been scanning obituaries from the *Pastoral Review*, which was published from 1890 to the 1950s. We have also been noting all the properties the pastoralists owned and hope eventually to include maps which locate those properties and show their changing boundaries over time. Read as a whole these obituaries tell a marvellous story of rural Australia and of the indomitable spirit of those people.

Men, of course, figure most prominently in the obituaries. But there are some remarkable tales of the experiences of women, such as Eleanor Coppin who managed to live to 83, despite rearing eight children 230 miles away from the nearest doctor in outback Western Australia in the 1870s-80s. Her obituary tells of how, on one occasion, she had to wade knee-deep in water through driving rain, with a five-day old baby, in search of shelter after the family's wooden homestead was blown away by a great willy-willy. Sent to Roebourne for the birth of another child, she endured days of being jolted about in a bullock

wagon only to find that there were no sleeping quarters on the coastal lugger taking her to her destination, so had to sleep in any space she could find on deck.

Obituaries Australia is a companion to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and will eventually be linked to it as its resource. Individual obituaries are also being linked to the National Library's Trove search facility so that researchers can find items held in Australian Libraries and other cultural institutions about the people. We are also providing links to biographical items about the people found in the National's Library's digitised newspapers and in the National Archives' digitised collection.

Obituaries Australia can be found at oa.anu.edu.au

JOHN FARQUHARSON COLLECTION

John Farquharson, described by obituaries authority, Dr Nigel Starck, as one of Australia's greatest practitioners of the art, has generously allowed the National Centre of Biography to reproduce his 81 obituaries.

The obituaries are a delight to read, showing John's great empathy for his subjects, his love of a good story, and his formidable writing skills. His obituaries are also often informed by personal knowledge of his subjects, though this has not prevented him from critically appraising them.

Before becoming an obituarist in the early 1990s, John was a political journalist and deputy editor of the *Canberra Times* and also worked as a journalist in New Guinea. He is a past president of the Canberra Historical Society and edited its journal for many years. More recently, he has recorded hundreds of hours of oral history interviews for the National Library.

John is also a great friend of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, currently serving on its Commonwealth Working Party, and has written six ADB entries.

His obituaries can be easily found via a 'browse author' search.

JILL ROE PRIZE



The Australian Historical Association (AHA) has launched a campaign to raise funds for a new prize for postgraduate students in honour of Professor Emerita Jill Roe AO.

The 'Jill Roe prize' will be awarded for the best article published by a postgraduate student in *History Australia* each year.

It is fitting that the AHA should honour Jill with such a prize as she has dedicated her life to mentoring and inspiring generations of students since taking up her teaching position at Macquarie University in 1967.

She has also made a significant contribution to the writing and public communication of history in Australia and abroad.

A long-time member of the AHA, she served two terms as its president between 1998 and 2002, held the Chair in Australian Studies at Harvard University between 1994 and 1995 and was an Honorary Visiting Fellow at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College in 1999.

She also held leading positions on the NSW History Council between 2005 and 2008, was the Council's nominee on the Macquarie 2010 Bicentenary Commemorations Committee and was vice-president of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History between 1986 and 2000.

More recently she was Director of the Macquarie PEN Anthology of the Australian Literature Centre and in 2009 was appointed a member of the Editorial Board of *History Australia*. She has been a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia since 1991 and in 2007 was made an Officer of the Order of Australia.

Jill's many publications include *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, which was awarded the Queensland Premier's History Book Prize 2009, the South Australian Premier's Non-Fiction prize and the Magarey Medal for Biography in 2010.

Jill has had a long association with the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, writing her first entry, on Ada Cambridge, in 1968 at the beginning of her academic career. She has since written a further 19 entries, two of which led to published books. Her entry on theologian George Arundel culminated in the publication of *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879-1939* in 1986 while her Miles Franklin entry led to a number of edited books of Miles's work as well as her award-winning full-scale biography.

Jill was appointed a member of the ADB's Editorial Board in 1985 and was its chair from 1996-2006. During that time she pushed for the ADB to go online and campaigned tirelessly for both the writing of ADB entries, and membership of ADB working parties, to be counted as ERA points for academics, and has been a vigorous advocate for the ADB in many forums. She was also an Associate Editor of the ADB's *Supplementary Volume* (2005) of missing persons and is an ongoing member of the NSW Working Party.

Those wishing to contribute to the prize should contact the AHA secretariat at TheAHA@latrobe.edu.au



Jill Roe with former Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffery, at the launch of Australian Dictionary of Biography Online, July 2006



Geoff Bolton, Janet McCalman and Jill Roe at the launch of vol 17 of the ADB, November 2007

DICTIONARIES OF BIOGRAPHY

In keeping with its role of promoting the study of Australian biography, the NCB is digitising out-of-copyright dictionaries of Australian biography and will make them freely available as E-books. Today these dictionaries are largely forgotten. In their time, though, they were the subject of parliamentary debate, public agitation, and even a court case in which a jury, and later five Supreme Court judges, were tasked with deciding what constitutes a 'Man of Mark'.

Sir John Henniker Heaton's *Australian Dictionary of Dates and Men of the Time: Containing the History of Australasia from 1542 to Date*, published in 1879, was the first biographical dictionary to be published in Australia. The son of an English Lieutenant-Colonel, Heaton sailed to New South Wales in 1864 at the age of 16. He worked, first on pastoral stations gaining 'colonial experience', and then as a journalist during which time he worked on his 550-page dictionary.

The book is a veritable minefield of information (both useful and useless). As well as containing biographical sketches of prominent men (no women were included) and lists of governors, colonial officials, members of parliament and church ministers, and the dates of various exploration expeditions, you can find the vital statistics of the country's biggest bull which, aged eight in 1878, weighed 3948lbs, was 6ft 1in tall, 11ft 9in long, had a girth of 9ft 10in and hefty, 3ft wide arms.

Not surprisingly, the *Australian Dictionary of Dates* met with mixed reviews. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described it as containing 'a large amount of information, some of which is valuable' while the English *Saturday Review* said that 'those who take an interest – and what Englishman does not? – in the rapid and vast progress of our great settlements on the other side of the globe, will find much to interest them'.

The book also caused a minor stir before it was published. Believing that local printers weren't equipped to print it, Heaton asked the Government Printer to take on the job only to find that he also censored some of the text. A court case ensued, which Heaton lost, and the book was eventually published in London. Meanwhile parliamentarians, on behalf of aggrieved local printers, sought to censure the Government Printer in parliament for taking work that rightly belonged to the private sector.

Controversy also dogged the publication of the next biographical dictionary, the two-volume *Australian Men of Mark* published in 1888.



The front cover of *Australian Men of Mark*. It has red morocco leather binding with ornate gilt lettering and decorations on its cover.

A beautifully produced book – though some argued the morocco (goatskin) covers were really made from sheepskin – designed to commemorate the centenary of white settlement in Australia, *Australian Men of Mark* contains over 750 main biographies and 100 full-page lithographic portraits printed on high quality paper. A further 3000 mini-

biographies were included in the appendices of the six editions of volume two.

The publisher, C. F. Maxwell, a member of the law-book publishing firm Sweet & Maxwell, described the book as an 'historico-biographical' record of the growth and progress of the Australasian colonies and of the lives of those of their representative men (again, no women) who have achieved prominence or distinction during the first hundred years'.

It was a laudable aim. The trouble was that most of the people in the volumes earned their place in it by taking out a subscription to buy the book. If they paid a bit extra they were also entitled to a signed photograph. When the book was finally published many men who thought of themselves as 'Men of Mark' were horrified to find their entries alongside those of – in the words of their lawyer Mr Pring – 'small ironmongers, drapers and other tradesmen in the city of Sydney of whom nobody had ever heard [as well as] hotelkeepers, gold-diggers, farmers, and people in humble positions of life'.

When it came time to pay for their subscription for the book, many of the more eminent subscribers refused and were subsequently taken to court. For their part, aggrieved subscribers in Sydney formed A Metropolitan *Men of Mark* Defence Association and hired a lawyer. Even the men of faraway Yarra (near Goulburn, New

DICTIONARIES OF BIOGRAPHY (cont'd)

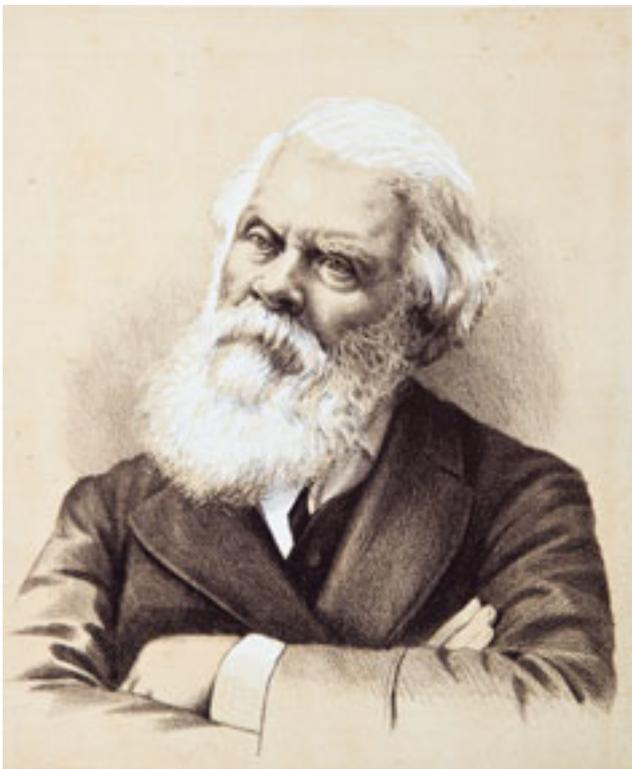
South Wales) held a public meeting and voted to not pay their subscription.



Shipowner and politician, Bruce Nicoll, was one of the people who refused to pay his subscription for *Australian Men of Mark*

Over forty cases were heard in Sydney before the case finally reached the Supreme Court of NSW, in 1891, to be heard by a jury of four. The judge had some fun at the expense of the subscribers by suggesting that they should have known what kind of book it was to be by the mere fact of their inclusion in it. More seriously, the judge

directed the jury that they had to decide whether the people included in the book could be considered 'Men of Mark'. If they were then the publishers were entitled to their fee.



Sir Henry Parkes has an entry in *Australian Men of Mark*
The quality of the lithographs is exceptional

But just what is a Man of Mark? Who 'deserves' a place in biographical dictionaries? This is something which continues to plague compilers of biographical dictionaries. It is therefore interesting to note what the learned judges had to say.

Obviously, 'Men of Mark' didn't include criminals, the judges directed the jurors. The difficulty was in deciding not the most eminent who should be included but in deciding those of less eminence. A Man of Mark was something beyond a man merely being intelligent and of good character. He should be someone who was more or less known. Someone of whom, if he died, people would not say, 'who is he? We never heard of him.'

It wasn't enough to be a very worthy gentleman and highly respected and looked up to in the locality where they lived. Man of Mark meant a man who had attained mark, which meant a man who had attained celebrity not only in New South Wales but throughout the Australian colonies generally.

Taking the judges' direction under advisement, the jury found that *Australian Men of Mark* contained people who could not be considered 'Men of Mark', therefore subscribers were entitled to withhold their payment for the book. The publisher's appeal for a retrial was subsequently refused by the Full Court.

In 1892 *Australian Men of Mark* was 'remaindered' in bookshops. Its sale price did not even cover the cost of its binding.

Subsequent dictionaries of biography have had less troublesome histories. Philip Menzell's *Dictionary of Australasian Biography* was published in 1892 to great acclaim. In 1906 Fred Johns published the first of his *Johns's Notable Australians*. His dictionary is also notable in that it was the first to include entries on women. In 1949 Geoffrey Serle published the two-volume *Dictionary of Australian Biography*.

In 1966, the Australian National University entered the field, publishing the first of its (so far) 18-volume *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT

A Licence to Resurrect: The Newspaper Obituary as an Agent of Biography

BY NIGEL STARCK

Obituary: The Instrument of Historical Record

The newspaper obituary has had a long, if occasionally interrupted, publication chronology. Episodic though its presence has been over the centuries, it has achieved some persuasive legitimacy as an instrument of historical record. The *New York Times* has described it as 'a first draft of history',¹ the obituaries editor of the *Guardian* sees it as 'the first verdict of history',² *The Penguin Book of Journalism* defines it as 'the first stab at biography',³ and the British *Dictionary of National Biography* has acknowledged a 'great debt of gratitude ... to the editor of obituaries in the *Times*, the most important material on which to base our selection'.⁴ For more than 300 years, the obituary has supplied a window to society's mores and machinations. It has engaged, variously, with: Restoration moralising, Victorian prurience, imperial omnipotence, racism and class distinction, the trauma of war, questions of emancipation and eccentricity, and the emergence in the press – and therefore within the public forum – of explicit character assessment.

Given Australia's colonial past, and its consequent inheritance of an established model in newspaper production, my research on this subject has concentrated on British press origins in obituary publishing. I have resisted obituaries crafted in a more exotic and ancient fashion – those, for example, that were uncovered in a 1996 expedition to the Sacred Animal Necropolis baboon catacomb at North Saqqara, Egypt. They record the lives and virtues of primates that had been captured for cult worship.⁵ My research has nevertheless demanded the reading of several miles of microfilm. At the first of the milestones, one encounters the origins of the obituary in the newsbooks – in essence, the magazines of the day – circulating in the seventeenth century. The earliest such example detected, written in English, records the life and death of Captain Andrew Shilling, of the East India Company. It was published on the 2nd of July 1622 by Nathaniel Newbery and William Sheppard to record the outcome of a sea battle between the British East India Company's fleet and four Portuguese warships. Their pamphlet has an overcooked title: *The True Relation of That Worthy Sea Fight Which two of the East India Shippes had with 4 Portingals of great force, and burthen, in the Persian Gulph*. But in relating the character and the deeds of Captain Shilling, master of the *London*, it contains an obituary of force and authority.



Dr Nigel Starck

After recounting some episodes of Shilling's early career, the unknown author writes that the master had been 'so liked and looked upon with the judicious eyes of the East India Company' that he was appointed Admiral of the Fleet. On the voyage to the Persian Gulf, he had led that fleet through 'boysterous Seas, and mounting billowes, [and] fearefull stormes'. Through his 'vallour and directions, his Company were victors, and brought their ships to take in their lading ... into England'. Then came the engagement with the Portuguese:

In the midst of the conflict, while we were wrapped in smoake and sweating in blood, a crosse shot crost us all and slue our Captaine; yea he perished in the midst of our triumphs.⁶

In offering that career history and an assessment of Captain Shilling's seamanship, the *True Relation* account satisfies the tenets of obituary classification. It has greater substance, through those biographical properties, than a simple chronicling of the fact of death. A death report in the news columns has its focus on the cessation of life; the obituary, by contrast, brings its subject back to life on the page – by delivering a posthumous character study. It can be seen as licensed to resurrect and, therefore, as a critical agent in the cause of biography. Yet the word itself, 'obituary', is derived from the Latin *obituarium* ('of, or pertaining to, death').

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

This summary of competing, yet complementary, roles is enshrined in this definition:

The obituary offers an appraisal of a life in the form of a brief biography – published in a newspaper, magazine or journal. It is important to note the appraisal factor, for it is this element which distinguishes an obituary from a standard news story about death. While the intent of the latter is to supply an account of a deceased person's life, often with information also on the circumstances of death, the obituary provides an assessment of its subject's character, achievements, and effect on society. This is frequently demonstrated through the use of anecdote.

- *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* 2005⁷

The business of printing, and therefore the practice of obituary composition in

the English-language press, was subjected to censorship and state monopoly during the commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell and the early years of monarchical restoration. A notably unpleasant measure of control was employed by Roger L'Estrange, journalist and censor at the court of Charles II. He carried the king's warrant to publish two weekly newspapers: the *Intelligencer* (on Mondays) and the *Newes* (on Thursdays). There was no serious competition. As censor, L'Estrange had been empowered to eliminate any printers suspected of seditious activity; after he had hanged and disembowelled one such miscreant (accused of inciting civil unrest), the press of the day found caution attractive. L'Estrange's obituaries became the exclusive valedictories for those who had remained loyal to the exiled king throughout the years of Oliver Cromwell's republic. The front page of a 1664 edition of the *Newes*, for example, was dedicated to appraising the life of an eminent royalist:

This week affords but little but the sad news of the death of that great Minister of State, William, Earle of Glencairn, Lord High Chancellour of Scotland, a Person

most Eminent, and well known in all his Majestyes Dominions, both for the Gallantry of his Spirit in the Noble Attempts against the Usurpers, as also for his sufferings during those times of Usurpation, and the many signal Services he hath performed in that high Station, wherein his Majesty most deservedly placed him since his happy Restauration. He dyed the 30th of the Instant of a Feavour in the 49th year of his Age, Beloved of his Prince, and Bewayled of all Ranks of his Majestyes Subjects.⁸



Dr Nigel Starck at the launch of *Obituaries Australia*, 14 April 2011

It offers precisely nothing in the cause of objective biography. A marked change in style, along with an abandonment of monarchist moralising, can be found sixty years later in the columns of a London newspaper entitled the *Daily Journal*, following the lapse in 1695 of the Licensing Act.

The emphasis had shifted by then to an authoritative recitation of biographical detail rather than indulgence in circumstantial dogma. The *Daily Journal* (1721 – 1737) became a leader in this new realism, adopting a much more sophisticated, less proselytising brand of journalism. It was consumed by a burgeoning coffee-house readership. From 1731, that clientele was served too with the *Gentleman's Magazine*, an elegant and inventive miscellany with a strong interest in necrology.

In its August 1780 edition, and through the influence of its co-editor, John Nichols, the magazine introduced a section entitled 'Obituary of Considerable Persons'; the following April, title and content were extended to 'Obituary of Considerable Persons with Biographical Anecdotes'. Those obituaries are as enjoyable today as they were in the magazine's own long and influential existence (1731–1907). What makes them markedly different from those which until then had appeared in the press was that they included, where Nichols found appropriate, hostile elements of character assessment.

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

Obituaries were no longer the exclusive preserve of lives that, in an editor's opinion, had adorned society; instead, column space was found for those who had undermined it. This conferred upon the art itself a richer, more complete, definition.

Among these discredited 'Considerable Persons' was Peter Defaile, described on the *Gentleman's Magazine* obituaries page of January 1783 as the 'most notorious villain as ever became the scourge of private life'. He was the second son 'of a good family' in the West of England, he qualified as an attorney, and then forged a will so that his elder brother was disinherited. After spending the spoils, of more than £40,000, in a prolonged chapter of dissipation, Defaile became a singularly effective, if sinister, eighteenth-century rake:

He insinuated himself, as soon as he found poverty approaching, into the good graces of a beautiful young lady of great fortune, whom he married, and spent all her money; and in succession, in the space of eleven or twelve years, married five more wives, all fortunes [sic], all which money he also spent, and these ladies died so very opportunely to make way for their successors, that when Defaile's character was better known nobody made any doubt of his having poisoned them.⁹

The obituary then recounts his gambling, arson and insurance fraud, swindling 'of an old lady out of a great deal of money', and killing of an opponent in a duel. Eventually overtaken by 'gout and stone', he died in a debtors' prison in Flanders. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, in pursuing a policy of obituary selection which was driven by the quality of the narrative as much as by the stature of the subject, serves as an enduring exemplar of the art. It has enriched our biographical annals. So, while it devoted nearly three pages of close-set type to the obituary of John Wesley, the theologian, it also found room in the March 1791 magazine for obituaries of James Heaton ('one of the most formidable poachers in the kingdom') and Winifred Griffith (a baronet's daughter who died 'in distressed circumstances' following 'an imprudent marriage' and 'the villainy of an attorney').¹⁰ This variety of life stories is precisely in tune with the approach adopted by enlightened editors of obituary pages today.

By the December edition of 1826, *The Gentleman's Magazine* was offering an extraordinarily rich assortment. Its obituary pages included instant, yet elegant, biographies of the astronomer Joseph Piazzi, 'discoverer of the planet Ceres'; Charles Connor, 'the

eminent comedian of Covent Garden', particularly remembered for his portrayal of Sir Lucius O'Trigger in Sheridan's *The Rivals*; Thomas Batley, the famous blind postman who 'without the guidance of either a fellow-creature or a dog' delivered parcels and letters in Suffolk; and Andrew Stewart, a Scot described as 'the heaviest man in Galloway', who was said to weigh '36 stones' (504lb, or 229kg).¹¹



Queen Charlotte, photo courtesy National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an9330385

As censorship relaxed, and as editors gained confidence, the press found the voice of opinion; this suited the practice of obituary, with its emphasis on appraisal of a life lived and, in some instances, of the influence of that life too. The causes of journalism and history

and biography are so acknowledged by an *Evening Mail* obituary, in 1818, of Queen Charlotte, consort of George III, whose German origins (and, so this obituary would suggest, mannerisms) militated against universal acceptance amongst her British subjects:

Her Majesty's figure was very pleasing, but her countenance, though not without attraction when she smiled, could not boast any claim to beauty. It was, however, a well-known fact that the King declared himself satisfied with his connubial fortune.¹²

The nuanced message there, for biographers, is that Queen Charlotte's natural sense of discipline brought some order to King George's household, which had notoriously failed to satisfy its creditors.

Obituary in the Colonies

When the colonies of the British Empire started publishing their own newspapers, the obituary discovered its own place as a wider-ranging instrument of record.

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

The *Boston News-Letter*, edited by the postmaster, John Campbell, illustrated his society's constrained mores with a tale of exemplary character and biblical drama for its first obituary in June 1704:

Medford, May 30. Sabbath day last about noon, after Forenoon's Exercise, Mrs Jane Treat, Grand Daughter to Deputy Gouverneur Treat of Connecticut, Sitting in her Chair ... with the Bible in her hand as she was Reading, which was her delight, was struck Dead by a terrible flash of lightning. ... She was a Person of real Piety, and a Pattern of Patience, Modesty, and Sobriety. This so awful a stroke on so righteous a Person and Family is a most amazing and mysterious Providence.¹³

In Australia, the father of obituary publishing was George Howe, a transported prisoner, convicted in England of 'robbing a mercer's shop' and sentenced to death. That sentence was then, for reasons now long lost, commuted to transportation to New South Wales.¹⁴ He was appointed official printer, and in 1803 produced the colony's first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 'under the censorship of the secretary to the governor, who examined all proofs'.¹⁵ For the second edition, in March that year, Howe reprinted an obituary that had originally appeared in a British newspaper. The life was that of Samuel McDonald, 'Big Sam', a sergeant of the 93rd Regiment, who was 'six feet ten inches in height, four feet round the chest ... and always disliked being stared at'. It is a charming character study, recounting Sam's repeated refusals to make celebrity appearances despite 'several considerable offers', breaking that resolve only once when, by royal command, he played 'the appropriate character of Hercules at London's Drury Lane. Sam died 'aged forty, of water in the chest' on the British island of Guernsey.¹⁶ The *Sydney Gazette*, unfortunately, takes advantage of the loose copyright controls of the time and does not identify the source of this obituary.

Though constantly reminded of Australia's tyranny of distance, which imposed on him a constant shortage of paper and the need to make his own ink, Howe continued to produce his four-page *Gazette*. His perseverance was to lead, in 1806, to his release into society as a free man. In the shorter term, on 25 March 1804, it led to the publication of Australia's first home-grown obituary. Its subject was James Bloodworth, the building superintendent in New South Wales:

He came to the Colony among its first Inhabitants in the year 1788 ... [and] the first house in this part of the

Southern hemisphere was by him erected, as most of the Public Buildings since have been under his direction. To lament his loss he has left a Widow and five children, the youngest an infant now only one week old ... the complaint which terminated in his dissolution was supposed to proceed from a severe cold contracted about two months since. The attention and concern which prevailed at the interment of the deceased were sufficient testimonies of the respect with which he filled, and the integrity with which he uninterruptedly discharged, the duties of a Public Trust during so long a period.¹⁷



Henry Buckle

The long obituary columns of 19th century newspapers demonstrate a mood of empire, masculinity, and omnipotence. Fine deaths, notably those of explorers and adventurers, were accorded fine tributes. The English historian Henry Thomas Buckle, who had the ambitious plan of writing a

history of civilization, died while travelling on horseback through Palestine. In Melbourne, the *Age* responded in an orotund fashion:

At the sudden view...on emerging from the rocky defile on the eastern ridge of Anti-lebanon, he exclaimed, 'It is worth more than all the pain and fatigue it has cost me.' Alas! How much more it was to cost him! The fatigue again brought on diarrhoea. The quantity of opium prescribed ... produced delirium for about a quarter of an hour, and it was touching to hear him exclaim in the midst of his innocuous utterances, 'Oh, my book, my book, I shall never finish my book!' ...he was seized with typhus fever, sunk into an unconscious stupor ... [and] died. ... And so, passing through the ruins of the Christian quarter, outside the walls, on the same day he died, as the sun set over that mountain ridge ... in the small Protestant cemetery, its trees torn up and its eight or ten tombstones broken by fanatical Mahomedans, he was interred.¹⁸

As that last sentence indicates, press interest in Islamist extremism was apparent as long ago as 1862.

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

The obituaries of the Victorian era demonstrate too a prurient interest in the cause of death. In Western Australia, *The Perth Gazette* pursued such a course in 1842 when it lifted, from an unacknowledged British newspaper, a singularly violent example of this practice. The subject was the Earl of Munster, described as the 'eldest son of his late majesty William the IV, by the accomplished actress Mrs Jordan'. (The word 'accomplished' is especially well-turned.) In a column-and-a-half of dense type, the newspaper recorded his military service, his marriage to a daughter of the Earl of Egremont, appointment to the Privy Council, and then – with those typically precise Victorian particulars – his suicide:

The melancholy event took place ... at No.13 Belgrave Street, Belgrave Square, his town residence, when Earl Munster put a period to his existence by shooting himself through the head with a pistol ... The face and head were severely and extensively wounded, and the right hand was wounded and covered with blood ... He had been particularly agitated when he heard of the recent disastrous news from Central Asia, and had been very much excited at the report that Lady M'Naughten and the other ladies had fallen into the hands of the Affghan [sic] insurgents.¹⁹

A suicide in Australia itself provoked a similarly vivid description of the method chosen. Thomas Wentworth ('Tommy') Wills was a prominent sportsman of the mid-nineteenth century, achieving distinction for coaching the Aboriginal cricketers who toured England in 1868 and helping frame the rules for Australia's own code of football.

Wills, by the time he was forty-five, was experiencing delirium tremens and paranoid delusions. Some years earlier, he had eluded (by chance) an attack by Aborigines in Queensland which left his father and eighteen other pioneers dead; this incident served to increase an already unhealthy taste for alcohol.

His suicidal tendencies became so extreme that friends had engaged a man to watch him. One Sunday lunchtime in 1880, after waiting for his guard to go off duty, Wills stabbed himself in the heart with a pair of scissors. 'The scissors were taken from the demented man, but he had inflicted mortal injury', said the Melbourne *Age* obituary. 'There were three wounds in his left breast, and he died a few minutes later.'²⁰ Grim though some of this obituary

reportage was, there were occasions also when it assumed a certain risible character. The *Sydney Morning Herald* told its readers in 1882 that Canon Thomas Smith, a clergyman blessed with 'extraordinary powers of oratory ... expired on Saturday last' after suffering prolonged 'disease of the kidneys' and 'an unfortunate disagreement' with his bishop. In the United States, this tendency towards explicit recounting of the cause of death was accompanied by lamentation in verse. Tiring of the practice, the editor of the *Schenectady Reflector*, in New York, published a plea

in 1858 for a cessation of unsolicited poetry. His decision had been influenced, it would appear, by this attempt: 'The little hero whose name is here / Was conquered by the diarrhea.'²¹



Thomas Wentworth Wills

Obituary and Race

Early obituaries of both the American and Australian press disclose patronising attitudes towards indigenous elements of society. In 1882 the *New York Times* published an obituary of remarkable racial insensitivity; it was more a celebration of a death than an acknowledgment of a life. It began with news of a battle in the Chihuahua region between Mexican troops and 'renegade Apaches', in which the 'head of the entire [Apache] nation', Chief Loco, had been killed.²² Acknowledging in the text that the nickname 'Loco' was itself an insult (meaning 'crazy'), it then addressed his life story, saying that he had devoted himself to 'love-making and poker', and 'was quite fond of a joke'. The obituary

illustrated this characteristic by recalling:

Once, being given a burning-glass, he amused himself the entire day by drawing the sun's rays to a focus on the backs of his wives as they sat at work, and was immensely tickled at their sudden gymnastics and howls Scattered as they are, it is no longer possible now for the Apaches to elect a head, and as the royal succession has expired, they will probably go to pieces as a nation, which will be an excellent thing for the entire frontier.²³

In a graceless pun on the chief's poker habit, the obituary carried the headline 'Loco's chips passed in'. An Australian obituary of late nineteenth-century vintage displays a similarly dismissive societal attitude, consigning all Aborigines to imminent eclipse. An 1891 edition of a rural

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

newspaper in Victoria, the *Hamilton Spectator*, recorded the death of Johnny Mullagh, the Aboriginal sportsman who had achieved some measure of fame as a cricketer with the Melbourne club and on a tour of England in 1868. After attesting to his 'fine, free, wristy style', the *Spectator* branded him as the last of his kind:

never will Mullagh's reputation be surpassed by any of his race, for none, in a few years, will remain to show that once this great land of ours had a people of its own who, but a short half-century ago, were monarchs of all they surveyed.²⁴

Obituary and The Waste of War

Despatches from the front, even those filed by 'embedded' war correspondents of the twenty-first century, concentrate for the most part on the broader aspects of armed engagement: a city bombed, a convoy torpedoed, a garrison seized. For the minutiae of conflict and a sense of bereavement, turn to the obituary, for it possesses a constant pathos in recording the histories of individual loss.

The outbreak of World War One came at that time when the status of the obituary pages as instruments of history was now persuasively in place. Soon, the *Daily Telegraph* was publishing, all too frequently for the fireside in British homes, a 'Roll of Honour' feature. It listed the dead, the wounded and the missing, and attached an obituary column exclusively of military subjects. It told in 1917, for example, of the short life of Lieutenant Thomas Waller, twenty-one, shot by a sniper after 'leading his company of Gloucesters "over the top", gaining the objective and successfully holding it all day'. His companions on the page included Captain William Villiers, twenty, a late head of house at Winchester, and Captain Alfred Richardson, twenty-four, 'an ardent member of the choir' at Exeter College, Oxford.²⁵ Those three vignettes endow the cause of military history with a human countenance.

This manner of obituary serves too as a military museum in print. Private Joseph Hollingsworth, of Cardiff, was one of those volunteers who exaggerated his age (with the connivance, often, of the recruiting sergeants) to join up. At sixteen, he enlisted in a unit with a name redolent of warfare long past: the Welsh Cyclists. Less than two years later, he was 'killed in a night attack'. His commanding officer, in a letter to the young soldier's mother, spoke 'highly of his courage and earnestness'. And then there is the sad sniff of cordite and companionship encountered in the obituary of Private Roger Hillier, with its boys'



Johnny Mullagh

magazine style of expression: 'He was in the South Wales Borderers, and was struck whilst reading a newspaper to his chums.'²⁶

In giving a face to World War One's victims, as it had to those of seventeenth-century seafaring and nineteenth-century society's social stratification, the obituary art demonstrated its enduring quality to record and to enlighten. Yet, in

the years following the war, it went into pronounced and widespread decline. The conduct of biography was compromised accordingly.

Post-War Decline, Mid-Century Fall, 1980s Revival

The years after World War I saw a weakening in the obituary's function as the first verdict of history simply because newspapers changed their priorities. Instead of returning to the pre-war pattern of ponderous parliamentary reports and long editorials, they conducted competitions (with 'tea sets, washing machines, encyclopedias and silk stockings' as prizes),²⁷ increased their photographic content dramatically, published home improvement and fashion advice, and contributed generally to an age in which the leisurely journalism of the Victorian and Edwardian periods was 'replaced by sport, crime and foreign news'.²⁸ Only the *Times*, in London, and – to a lesser extent – the *New York Times* kept the practice alive. Recognition of the *Times* as an enduring force was found in the mid-1980s edition of Britain's *Dictionary of National Biography*. In the prefatory note, the editors acknowledged a 'great debt of gratitude...to the editor of obituaries in the *Times*, the most important material on which to base our selection'.²⁹ Elsewhere, certainly in the British and Australian press, the obituary fell for some decades into obscurity. This position could also be attributed, during World War II and its aftermath, to newsprint rationing.

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

Revival of the obituary art occurred when newspapers underwent another metamorphosis, in the late 1980s. Both Britain and Australia, embracing industrial reform and a consequent re-ordering of newspaper production, found the obituary ideal for their increased column space. In the United States, revival was apparent too. Proprietors and editors there, searching for new ways of maintaining sales in the face of competition from broadcast and online information sources, identified the obituary as an eminently readable alternative. It was more, though, than an exercise in broad acreage. Wit, candour, and egalitarianism were employed also.

Much of the humour, generally under-stated with impeccable temperance, was found in the London *Daily Telegraph*, which has aided researchers and biographers – and entertained its readers – with character sketches such as this:

Ian Board, who has died aged 64, was the proprietor of the Colony Room, a Soho drinking club favoured by ... assorted loafers. ... Perched on a stool by the bar, clad in tasteless leisure-wear, his eyes protected by sunglasses, 'Ida' (as he was known to his closest friends) would trade coarse badinage with his regulars. ... Board was an heroic smoker and drinker ... and if his drinking destroyed his youthful good looks, it also shaped and nourished his magnificent nose.³⁰



Hugh Massingberd, photo by Eleanor Bental

The editor who led that *Telegraph* transformation was Hugh Massingberd. He would always say that he was himself inspired by Roy Dotrice's one-man stage performance as the itinerant diarist and biographer John Aubrey:

Picking up a work of reference, he [Dotrice] read out an ineffably dull biographical entry about a barrister. Recorder of this, Bencher of that, and so on. He then snapped shut the volume with a 'Tchah', or it may have

been a 'Pshaw', and pronounced: 'He got more by his prick than his practice.' It was the blinding light for Massingberd. There and then in the Criterion Theatre, I determined to dedicate myself to the chronicling of what people were really like through anecdote, description and character sketch rather than merely trot out the bald curriculum vitae.³¹



Christopher Skase, courtesy National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4173838

The candour emerged in the practice of publishing obituaries of those who had undermined, rather than adorned, society. The *Age*, in Melbourne, began its posthumous appraisal of a fugitive entrepreneur with this explicit statement:

To those closest to him, Christopher Skase was a man of vision, a creator of prosperity and a persecuted victim of witch-hunting governments. Alternatively, he is remembered as a scoundrel, a thief, a liar and a coward.³²

As that passage makes apparent, contemporary columns – as purveyors of instant biography – have abandoned the principle of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* (of the dead, say nothing but good). They subscribe with much more enthusiasm to *mors omnia solvit* (death dissolves all things), which exorcises restraint and – to a considerable, though not inexhaustible, extent – the risk of being sued for defamation. It is this maxim which allowed Jack Waterford, today editor-at-large of the *Canberra Times*, to compose a memorable posthumous appraisal of Professor Derek Freeman, the ANU anthropologist who had achieved both acclaim and notoriety for refuting Margaret Mead's views on Samoan society. Waterford pulled on the Latin prophylactic of *mors omnia solvit* when discussing Professor Freeman's death, in his July 2001 *Capital Times* column:

The late Professor Derek Freeman is obituarised elsewhere in the paper, and, while the obituary faithfully deals with his distinguished academic career...it rather tends to overlook the fact he was in many respects barking mad. This was a matter we always had difficulty with at the *Canberra Times*...to quote him on anything

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

outside his discipline, and even a few things inside it, was to invite the most fundamental questions about his sanity, particularly when the moon was in a particular place and Derek was wearing his deerstalker hat.³³

Candid rendition is at times softened by a touch of playfulness. A classic example of recent vintage is found in the London *Independent's* obituary of Sir Colin Cole, for fourteen years Garter Principal King of Arms. After referring to his 'exaggerated notion of camaraderie and (his) over-optimistic craving for unanimity in institutional decision-making', it had this to say about the late knight's forty-six-year marital relationship:

Something of a ladies' man, he nevertheless enjoyed a long and successful marriage, his wife Valerie being admirably tolerant of his many outside commitments.³⁴

Obituaries: Sex After Death

That reference to fleshly persuasions also underscores the point that for decades, when having to adjudicate on matters of a sexual character, the standard obituary response was one of obfuscation and euphemism. Two celebrated men of letters, William Somerset Maugham and Noël Coward, were given incomplete obituaries by the *Times* in this regard. Maugham's, in 1965, provided an authoritative dissertation on his literary achievements, a brief mention of his marriage, and eschewed any mention of the intimate liaisons with his two male private secretaries.³⁵ Coward's, eight years later, concentrated almost in its entirety on his professional accomplishments, diverting to private life only in discussion of his generosity to 'old theatrical connexions who had no claim on him'.³⁶ Again, there was no reference at all to his same-sex associations.

Come the late twentieth-century's transformation of obituary writing, however, an abundant opportunity arose for retrospective clarification. When Maugham's daughter, Lady Glendevon, died, the *Independent* immediately put right the omissions of times past. It described Maugham as 'perhaps the century's grumpiest writer', telling readers that he had entered into a doomed marriage and had later adopted as a son his 'secretary and lover'.³⁷ Between her father's death in 1965 and Lady Glendevon's in 1999, the obituary art had divested itself of some inhibitions.

Sir Noël Coward's life story was rendered less expurgated in the 2005 obituaries of his long-time partner Graham Payn, who had achieved fame of his own as an actor

and singer. In Britain, the *Guardian's* account described Payn as Coward's 'companion for the last 30 years of his [Coward's] life' after the theatrical knight 'had been let down by his former lover, Jack Wilson'.³⁸ The Australian press displayed similar episodes of initial camouflage and subsequent enlightenment following the death in 1990 of Patrick White (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature) and that of his life partner, Manoly Lascaris, in 2003. Biographers can gain some sense of reassurance from this growing mood of revelation.

Obituaries: Wit and Charm

The obituary, then, has the capacity to disclose with authority and record with assurance. In so doing, it can also charm and entertain. To conclude on a note of wit and warmth, let us turn to the writing of John Farquharson, a force in the creation of our National Centre of Biography Obituaries Database. His Melbourne *Age* obituary of Alexander Borthwick, a diplomat, included this classic vignette:

With his clipped speech, chivalry and great sense of humour, he was also good at the throwaway line. An instance of this was when the Duke of Edinburgh asked him whether his family of nine meant he was a good Catholic. "No," said Alex, "just a careless Anglican!"³⁹

Quite simply, the best obituaries of today are sublime to read. Russell Baker, in a foreword to a *New York Times* collection, has relished the 'blessed relief they provide after the front page', finding them to be:

Oases of calm in a world gone mad. Stimulants to sweet memories of better times, to philosophical reflection, to discovery of life's astonishing richness, variety, comedy, sadness, of the diverse infinitude of human imaginations it takes to make this world. What a lovely part of the paper to linger in.⁴⁰

The author: Dr Nigel Starck, a former newspaper reporter and television current affairs producer, teaches creative writing at the University of South Australia. His book *Life After Death* (Melbourne University Press, 2006) offers a definitive account of newspaper obituary history and practice. He has been described by the *Guardian* (London) as 'the acknowledged world expert on the obituarist's craft'. Dr Starck's biography of the Australian author, broadcaster and Burma Railway veteran, Russell Braddon, is to be released by Australian Scholarly Publishing later this year.

A LICENCE TO RESURRECT (cont'd)

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FROM BR TO OA

BY MELANIE NOLAN

When the Australian Dictionary of Biography project began at the Australian National University in 1959, one of the first tasks of its assistant editor, Ann Moyal, was the publication of the *Biographical Register*, which had been started by Dr Laurie Fitzhardinge in the early 1950s to assist in identifying historical subjects for the future dictionary.

The register itself consisted of thousands of biographical citations about people, gleaned from newspapers, parliamentary debates, magazines and newsletters and handwritten on index cards. The first and eagerly anticipated copy of the *Biographical Register*, a 48-page roneoed booklet, was published in 1961.

In 1987 a two-volume copy of the *Biographical Register* was published. By then the register had grown to include over 300,000 index cards housed in 180 catalogue-card drawers. A few years earlier, staff had started entering all new citations into an in-house database.

In April this year, the ANU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian Young, launched the latest incarnation of the *Register* – a freely accessible, full text, online database called *Obituaries Australia*. The obituaries are being extensively indexed and linked to relevant digitised material held in cultural institutions, and to items about the subjects in the National Library's digitised newspapers.

As well as continuing its former role of helping to identify future subjects for inclusion in the ADB, we anticipate that, over time, *Obituaries Australia* will lead to exciting research projects on the study of common characteristics of historical groups and the analysis of

the associational life of Australians over time.

Some of its potentials can already be seen. Click on the link to 'World War I' and you will find the names of all those, in the database, who played some part in the war – as soldiers, Red Cross administrators, contributors to the conscription debate, as well as those who gave up their stately homes for military hospitals. You will also find a list of those who were engaged in the major military battles and the roles they played, those who were killed in action (and in which battle if known) or who died later of war wounds. Go to an individual soldier's entry and you can read the soldier's war service record, digitised by the National Archives, as well as investigate the links to the obituaries of other family members, friends, and work and school mates.

We are interested in mapping all sorts of relationships. The obituary of bushranger, Ben Hall, contains links to people he robbed, as well as to gang members, police officers who pursued him, the man his gang fatally shot, and also to the son of that man, who witnessed the shooting and went on to join the police force.

Obituaries Australia seeks to capture every published obituary of an Australian, subject to copyright rules. It is a mammoth task and we are seeking the public's assistance in helping us to find obituaries and to index them.

Professor Melanie Nolan is the Director, of the National Centre of Biography and General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*

* taken from *ANU Reporter*, Winter, 2011, p 8



Former ADB Biographical Register Officer, Anthea Bundock, stands alongside the 180 drawers of BR cards created by ADB staff between the early 1950s and 1980s



TWELFTH BIENNIAL LABOUR HISTORY CONFERENCE

15-17 September 2011

Manning Clarke Centre
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CONFERENCE THEME

The twelfth biennial labour history conference is brought to you by:

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The theme of the conference is **Labour history and its people**, with particular emphasis on the role of biography in the study of Australian labour history.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in 1961 at the ANU.

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SPEAKERS INCLUDE

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- Labour archivists Sigrid McCausland and Maggie Shapley
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- overseas guests Professors Don MacRaild and Neville Kirk.

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