
Introduction

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The *Australian Journal of Biography and History (AJBH)* was established in 2018 with the principal aim of promoting the study of historical biography. In her 2023 book *Biography: An Historiography*, Melanie Nolan, currently director of the National Centre of Biography, situates biography as integral to the practice of history, a discipline that stresses the role of the individual rather than focusing solely on the structures constraining human agency.¹ Consistent with this objective, the *AJBH* publishes lively, appealing and provocative articles that ‘engage critically with issues and problems in historiography and life writing’ as well as illuminating themes in Australian history.² Since 2018, the journal has fulfilled its charter with three general numbers emanating from a call for papers and four special themed issues: Number 2, 2019, *Canberra Lives* (edited by Malcolm Allbrook); Number 5, 2021, *Political Biography* (edited by Stephen Wilks and Joshua Black); Number 6, 2022, *Writing Slavery into Biography* (edited by Georgina Arnott, Zoë Laidlaw and Jane Lydon), and Number 7, 2023, *Convict Lives* (edited by Matthew Cunneen and Malcolm Allbrook).

The articles in this general number apply biographical methodologies to illustrate and enliven a range of themes and episodes in Australian history. Utilising the example of the head of the federal Department of External Affairs between 1947 and 1950, John Wear Burton, Adam Hughes Henry explores some of the ways in which anti-communism in 1950s Australia served to limit critical thinking on the country’s foreign policy. The article focuses on Burton’s controversial but often-overlooked visit to the People’s Republic of China in 1952, an episode that enraged both major Australian political parties and brought about his professional and personal isolation. Burton is the subject of a family memoir by his daughters, Pamela Burton and Meredith Edwards, which reminds us that, although he is remembered chiefly as a talented if controversial diplomat who ascended to great professional heights but fell from grace at a relatively young age, he went on to achieve much as a landowner and farmer, a bookseller and a writer who gained an international reputation for his work in conflict analysis and resolution.³ Hughes, though, argues that Burton himself—‘confident, brash and intellectual’ with a tendency to be uncompromising—

1 Melanie Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2023), doi.org/10.4324/9780429426391.

2 ‘Aims and Scope’, Australian Journal of Biography and History, accessed 8 July 2023, press.anu.edu.au/publications/journals/australian-journal-biography-and-history.

3 Pamela Burton and Meredith Edwards, *Persons of Interest: An Intimate Account of Cecily and John Burton* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), doi.org/10.22459/PI.2022.

contributed to his own demise as a diplomat. Further, that Burton, perhaps, did not appreciate ‘the consequences for individuals who openly challenged Australian anti-communist attitudes in the 1950s’. Those who ignored or failed to recognise the emerging political realities of the period could find themselves cast as ‘figures of suspicion and scorn’, or, more seriously, as ‘a secret communist, dupe or sympathiser’.

In their article on the black sports promoter and entrepreneur Jack Dowridge, who lived and largely thrived in Brisbane between the mid-1870s and his death in 1922, Gary Osmond and Jan Richardson argue that the biography of such a figure must not only ‘situate a life in its broader context’ but also recognise the ‘ultimate unknowability of past lives’. Dowridge is a particularly alluring subject to illustrate such themes. Much can be known about some aspects of his life. He was born in Barbados; he sought opportunities to become a successful fighter and business figure first in England and then in Queensland; and, despite evidence of ‘racial hierarchy, stereotyping and racist language’ in Australia, became much admired in his adopted hometown, and indeed was instrumental in establishing a Caribbean community there. Yet the details of his earlier life—his descent from African slaves and connections to slavery and his early experiences as a boxer—are elusive. The task of illuminating relatively obscure lives such as that of Dowridge is, the authors argue, dependent on a ‘patchwork of archival fragments’ and the rapid expansion of digital resources and tools to access them, the latter adding new dimensions to the potential of biography. Such resources promise not only to add detail to individual lives but also to complicate them by illuminating their context, and, as the authors describe it, by incorporating individual lives into the ‘bigger stories of empire’: ‘slavery, transportation, the plantation economy, racism and the creation of an African-Caribbean diaspora’.

By contrast, Phillip Deery and Julie Kimber, in their study of the often-overlooked figure of Evdokia Petrov (1914–2002), consider the ‘disjuncture between historical imagination and the archival record’. In historical records of the time, Evdokia is generally portrayed as subservient to her husband Vladimir, although both were operatives at the Soviet Embassy in Canberra. The authors started their project with the intention of giving Evdokia just historical and biographical recognition—they expected to produce ‘a conventional biographical portrait, extending but consistent with previous studies’. But what they encountered was a ‘world of deception and dissembling’ that meant they became ever less certain the further their research proceeded. Biography in such a context became an exercise of frustration: what the authors anticipated would be an exercise in marshalling the sources in all their variety—‘through her own words, through Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, government and newspaper reports, through oral history and through secondary studies’—to find the ‘real’ Evdokia, instead became a ‘biography plagued by ambiguity’.

In a similar vein but with a very different subject, Richard Fotheringham's article on the variety entertainer and singer Jenny Howard, aka Daisy Blowes (1902–1996), had the benefit of a wealth of source material, not only for the first third of her life in Britain, but also for the many years she lived and worked in Australia. A Trove search alone throws up many 'hits': often advertisements for her performances, but also 'many reviews, promotional interviews and other glimpses of her life, most consciously manufactured for newspapers and other publications of record as publicity'. Implicit in the record is what the author calls the 'failings' of those 'whose private and public lives become of more than family interest and who are asked to recount their experiences and memories':

Moving themselves to centre stage as the hero of their own story and/or hoping that a spotlight might be shone on their previously undervalued contribution ... Then there are the less histrionic, universal problems of forgetfulness; misremembering; concealing, airbrushing or rewriting embarrassing or even criminal failings; accentuating the positive and *telling a story*—putting real, faulty and false memories into a plausible teleological narrative, a sequence that both comments on the times in which they lived and their role in it as agents of their own destiny rather than as recipients of chance and serendipity.

Thus, rather than the 'exercise of frustration' experienced by biographers of subjects like Evdokia Petrov, a figure such as Howard emerges as a character in her own play, a self-idealised figure, the details of her life so complex and manufactured as to bamboozle even the experienced biographer. And, as with Petrov, the biographical quest of finding the 'real' person behind the curated one not infrequently leaves a biographer less certain than ever that they have succeeded in their aims.

David Marr, though, in his biography of the novelist Patrick White, was left in no doubt as to whether he had succeeded in his biographical quest, at least from the perspective of his subject. Martin Thomas relates in his article 'Patrick White and the Path to Sarsaparilla' that the novelist demanded a 'final pound of flesh from his biographer' by making Marr 'sit with him at the dining table while he read it in front of him from beginning to end'. The process went on for days, White sometimes laughing 'uproariously, often at his own witticisms', sometimes challenging a point of syntax or a fact, but nevertheless placing the biographer in an extraordinary position, which, although 'excruciating' at the time, was an 'amazing gift' from subject to biographer. The result, as Thomas puts it, was a biography of 'complete artistic freedom', 'unauthorised' certainly, but 'aided and abetted by its subject'.

Patricia Clarke, in her article 'Divorce Divide' describes the experience of the journalist Iris Dexter, née Norton (1907–1974), in seeking, but until 1950 failing to obtain, a divorce from an abusive husband, and the devastating impact the drawn-out episode had on her life. Norton had married Dexter, a racing reporter, in 1928, but within a few months he had started to drink heavily and beat her until, after two years, she sought a divorce on the ground of 'constructive desertion', the legal term denoting a forced departure from a marriage because of the violence of a spouse.

As Clarke describes, Norton had commenced her career with the ambition, and seemingly the talent, to pursue a career as a journalist and writer, but the disaster of her violent marriage and the barriers against arguing the case for constructive desertion essentially ruined her career and her aspirations.

Finally, two articles in this number utilise collective biographical methodologies to illuminate historical episodes that, although very different from one another, have become emblematic in Australian history. Nichola Garvey, in 'Women's Lives in a Fragmented Archive', relates the story of the 'death ship' *Neptune*, which arrived in New South Wales in 1790 as part of the infamous Second Fleet. On board was a cargo of women convicts, numbering just over five hundred on departure, but only 340 on arrival, the remainder, thirty-one per cent of the original number, having died en route. Garvey sets out to find these lost women, utilising a hitherto little-used archive of depositions taken in 1791 as part of a criminal investigation of the captain of the *Neptune*, Donald Trail, and the first mate, William Elrington. As the author contends, the archive provides rich material not only on context—the social systems and power structures on the ship—but also on the 'cargo of women', including detailed biographical information on individual women. Peter Woodley also uses a well-known historical episode that has become iconic in Australian history, the 1891 Queensland bush workers' strike. The episode has generally been portrayed as a 'war' between capital and labour, the result being a crushing defeat for the labourers. But, as Woodley argues, as well as signifying a 'clash between abstract class interests', the strike also showed the 'often intense and fraught intersections of individuals' lives', many of which would never have come to light were it not for the strike and its judicial consequences. The article convincingly exemplifies the potential of collective biographical methodologies 'as a window into the *experience* of class—examining the convergence of disparate lives in a moment, how they influenced and, in turn, were affected by it, and how ... that experience shaped their subsequent trajectories'.

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