10. Assessing the *ADB*: A Review of the Reviews

Mark McGinness

A too kindly reception?

The greeting in March 1966 from W. G. Buick in the *Australian Book Review*, 'Let us celebrate the birth of a giant', must have been music to the ears of Douglas Pike and his team on the publication that month of Volume 1 of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.¹ In the *Age*, Noel McLachlan concluded, '[a]s a work of reference the series will certainly be invaluable', and Professor Pike's modest hope that 'it will inform and interest the lonely shepherd in his hut as readily as the don in his study' ought to be richly fulfilled. Not just shepherds and dons, though: 'Anyone with an ounce of interest in the myriad origins of his nation is bound to find it fascinating'.² In a thoughtful review of the first two volumes, Geoffrey Blainey, surely its most eloquent critic, predicted the *ADB* would 'probably be the most valuable reference work in Australian history; it is already one of the most readable works on Australian history. This twin achievement would have been unattainable without outstanding editors'. Blainey neatly concluded:

The last article in these volumes records briefly the life of Yuranigh, an aboriginal guide and traveller who died west of the Blue Mountains in 1850. The anonymous author quotes a tribute by Sir Thomas Mitchell to this obscure aboriginal: 'his intelligence and his judgment rendered him so necessary to me that he was ever at my elbow'. The same will be said of these volumes for years to come.³

Most other reviews since the late 1960s, although perhaps not as euphoric as Buick, have generally welcomed successive volumes of the *ADB* kindly. The *ADB*, like all biographical dictionary projects, understandably cites such laudatory reviews and praise whenever it can.⁴ Rod Moran believed that the *ADB* was 'one

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1 W. G. Buick, 'Whom Was Whom and Why', *Australian Book Review* (April 1966), p. 112.

2 Noel McLachlan, 'The Names in Our Past', *Age* [Melbourne] (5 March 1966).

3 Geoffrey Blainey, *Papers and Proceedings* [Tasmanian Historical Research Association], 15, no. 2 (1967), p. 63; and Book review, *Historical Studies*, 14, no. 53 (1969), pp. 102–4.

4 A selection of such reviews includes: *Walkabout* (July 1966); George Johnston, *Sydney Morning Herald* (18 March 1967); Neville Hicks, *Australian* (26 April 1969), p. 17; John Lack, *Monash Reporter* (11 October 1972); Austin Cooper, *Advocate* [Melbourne] (18 January 1973); Humphrey McQueen, *Nation Review* (13–19 January 1977); N. D. McLachlan, *Historical Studies*, 18 (1978), p. 344; Les Blake, *Victorian Historical Journal*

of the most important longitudinal research projects in the intellectual life of the Humanities in Australia';⁵ Stephen Murray Smith praised it as 'a remarkable gift to the nation';⁶ while Eric Richards went even further to declare it as a 'gift of scholarship to the nation and the world'.⁷ Allan Martin predicted: 'The *Dictionary* seems destined to fulfil its promise as the most valuable working tool in the hands of Australian scholars'.⁸ Rob Inglis pronounced on radio that the

writing is good. There is in it that grist and fibre which characterised English correspondence at the end of the eighteenth century. This quality is something to do with describing an involvement in affairs—committees, business, expeditions, and with distance travelled arduously, on horseback or under sail; it arrestingly reflects the reaction of men with strong views on coming into contact with new lands and fresh experiences.⁹

Most of its reviewers have been, or became, contributors, which may explain the positive coverage; but it also reflects the extraordinary commitment and reach of the dictionary among Australia's academics and writers and the consensus that the *ADB* is something worth contributing to, as well as drawing upon.

In this chapter, I dwell not on the admiration for the *ADB* but on the criticism of it. I am on record myself as describing the *ADB* in a review as 'one of our least known national literary treasures'.¹⁰ I come 'not to bury' the *ADB*, in this broader consideration, however, but to tease out its attributes so that we can better understand it.

Amongst all the acclaim, there has also been criticism of the *ADB*. Malcolm Ellis's two reviews in the *Bulletin* in 1966 and 1967 have always been discounted because he was regarded as a discontent. Ellis came armed with strong views, having been in contact with the *ADB* from its birth. In fact, he even suggested it was his idea.¹¹ In any event, in the beginning of 1962 he had resigned as joint editor and the appearance of the dictionary's first volume was an opportunity to share his views on the project he had abandoned. In his review, entitled 'Disaster in Australian Research', Ellis claimed that 'the mountain of the

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(May 1980), p. 115; Lloyd Robson, 'The A.D.B.: International Precedent and the Australian Experience', *Meanjin*, 3 (1980), p. 397; Edward Dukyer, *Quarterly Bulletin* [Sutherland Shire Historical Society], 75 (1991), p. 633; James Walter, *Australian Historical Studies*, 104 (1995), p. 489; Wayne Crawford, *Mercury* [Hobart] (4 November 1996), p. 29; Holly Kerr Forsyth, *Australian* (21–22 March 1998); Carl Bridge, 'Good Blokes and Others', *Times Literary Supplement* (16 October 1998), p. 10.

5 Rod Moran, *West Australian* (3 June 2000).

6 Stephen Murray-Smith, *Australian Historical Studies*, 23 (1988), pp. 206–7.

7 Eric Richards, *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 34 (2006), p. 120.

8 A. W. Martin, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 2 (1967)', *Historical Studies*, 12 (1967), p. 133.

9 Rob Inglis, Review, 'Books for Comment No. 70', Transcript of Broadcast, *ABC Radio* (27 May 1966).

10 Mark McGinness, *Courier-Mail* [Brisbane] (27 April 2000).

11 Ellis to Prof. Huxley, ANU Vice-Chancellor (9 June 1963), box 68, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.

Australian Universities gave birth to a mouse, or half a mouse'.¹² Too many of the entries were written by people without expertise. Contributions from Russel Ward (on Grey and Fitzroy), James Auchmuty (Hunter), Charles Currey (on some legal personalities), Ken Cable (Bishop Broughton), Frank Crowley, B. H. Fletcher, Jim Davidson and J. M. Bennett were commended but many of the biographies were 'shockingly poor' and 'lamentably sparse and exhibit the writer's lack of original research'. He condemned the absence of recording writers' qualifications and was suspicious of the fact that many were unsigned. He also branded as utterly unsatisfactory and disastrous the decision to entrust some lives to direct descendants of subjects. Finally, what concerned Ellis was the lack of balance: 'One only has to attach the word "radical" to somebody, apparently, and he becomes of first importance', while 'Captain Cook gets only twenty anonymous inches, only five inches or 250 words of which deal with his experiences on and exploration of the Australian coast'.¹³

The launch of Volume 6 of the *ADB*, in 1976. Left to right: Nan Phillips, ANU vice-chancellor, Anthony Low, Olive Pike, John La Nauze, Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle

Photographer: Bob Cooper, ANUA226-689

¹² M. H. Ellis, 'Disaster in Australian Research', *Bulletin* (26 March 1966), pp. 48–9.

¹³ Ellis, 'Disaster in Australian Research', pp. 48–9.

C. Hartley Grattan joined Ellis in his complaint about unsigned entries in Volume 1. He expressed 'a strong doubt of the utility of [an] unsigned entry, even though it is clear enough they were compiled in the editorial office in Canberra'. Grattan felt that total or even relative anonymity detracts from authority. 'I say sign every piece and identify the signers'.¹⁴

Ellis remained unimpressed by Volume 2 when it appeared a year later, commenting that it was 'no credit to the editors and the teeming committees of supervision advertised in the introductory lists'.¹⁵ Again, his strongest charge was one of imbalance: 'when some of the most prominent men of the time are totally ignored one can only wonder about the standards of the University Historical Department'. For example, he condemned the fact that no less than three Macarthurs, sons of John, were ignored while his 'unimportant nephew, Hannibal' receives 'a whole two and a half pages'.

Prime minister, Bob Hawke, launched Volume 12 of the *ADB* at Parliament House, Canberra, in 1990

Photographer: Neal McCracken, ANUA225-526-2

¹⁴ C. Hartley Grattan, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 52, part 3 (September 1966), pp. 250–3.

¹⁵ M. H. Ellis, 'Biography Soup', *Bulletin* (10 June 1967), p. 82.

One can, of course, write a rejoinder to Ellis. He appears not to realise that many of the unsigned articles were often the consequence of dispute with authors over the extent of the editing of their original drafts. A number of authors decided that an article was no longer their own work after going through the 'editing mill' and they preferred not to sign their name to the final entry. Some other authors promised but did not deliver an article and so the job fell to *ADB* staff. The reason for staff's modesty in leaving their pieces unsigned is unaccountable until one recalls that the still prevailing practice of the almighty *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) was to acknowledge authors with nothing more than their initials.

There is no reason Ellis would know why so many early entries were unsigned because the preface was silent about this. Despite his early involvement in the project, Ellis must have misunderstood, too, the *ADB's* *floruit* philosophy because two of those sons of John Macarthur, Sir Edward and Sir William, both subsequently appeared in Volume 5. The *floruit* principle was applied to the first 12 volumes of the *ADB* with the period of a person's career, the period of his/her major flowering and contribution, rather than their death, determining what volume they appeared in.

Three of Ellis's criticisms are not so easy to address: the dictionary was unbalanced in the selection of subjects, especially the over-inclusion of radicals, people who achieved nothing and 'unimportant scallawags'; it was poor in 'the covering of facts and in accuracy of statement and judgement', probably as a result of the failure to mine manuscript collections and as indicated by bibliographies that were sparse; and it fell short of greatness. Interestingly, even the reviewers who gushed over the *ADB* raised similar concerns. Indeed, rather than a mass of favourable reviews, with a few exceptions that prove the rule, reviewers fall into two other categories: those who forgive the *ADB* its blemishes as slight and unimportant and those who see those same flaws as disfiguring.

The preface: An opportunity lost

In his review of the first volumes, Geoffrey Blainey wrote of 'the merit of writing a much longer expository preface to the next series of volumes'.¹⁶ A succession of editors thought the first preface so good they barely changed a word—for almost 30 years. There was a slight concession to political correctness in the preface to Volume 7 in an explanation of the *ADB's* selection criteria. Volume 6 had, like its predecessors, stated: 'Many of the names were obviously significant and worthy of inclusion. Others, less notable, were chosen simply as samples of

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16 Blainey, *Papers and Proceedings* (1967) and Book review (1969).

the Australian experience'.¹⁷ Volume 7, after mentioning the worthies, followed with: 'Many others have been included as representatives of ethnic and social minorities and of a wide range of occupations, or as innovators, notorieties or eccentrics'. This single sentence may suggest a seismic shift on the part of the editors and working parties but it is probably more a case of moving with the times. As Peter Ryan put it in his *Quadrant* review, '[w]ithout yielding to the crasser excesses of political correctness, the *Dictionary* has not ignored modern trends'.¹⁸

Otherwise, the prefaces remained formulaic and frozen until Volume 13, John Ritchie's third volume, which came to life with the opening: 'In January 1940 cheering crowds farewelled soldiers of the 6th Division as they sailed to do battle in the deserts of the Middle East. In December 1980 an inquest into the death of Azaria Chamberlain began at Alice Springs'.¹⁹ If nothing else, this underlined the abiding commitment to continuity and the original vision for the *ADB*. But it remains to be said that had the early editors shared a less clipped and unyielding preface with their reviewers, if not their readers, they may have been saved much questioning from critics as to their policies and approach.

Senator Jim McClelland launched Volume 13 of the *ADB* at the State Library of New South Wales in 1993

ADB archives

17 'Preface', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1979), p. v.

18 Ryan, 'The ADB', p. 88.

19 'Preface', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 13 (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1993), p. v.

Balance in selection

George Shaw greeted Volume 11 (1891–1939: Nes to Smi) with an almost joyous response. He delighted in the Australian tendency towards irreverence in the face of the ponderous and serious. He seized upon the entries of Bridget Partridge—‘lapsed nun’; John Pomeroy—‘inventor and pieman’; and Joseph Perry—‘salvationist and showman’. He suggests, with what many a contributor might see as a touch of envy, the indulgence of the editor on allowing Peter Howell to ‘get away with’ the comment on Frederick Poole, who ‘when he found himself growing deaf in Ballarat, he returned to Adelaide to take over a choir school and later in life was chaplain to Adelaide’s hospital, its destitute asylum, its prison and two of its bishops, Harmer and Thomas’.²⁰

Geoffrey Dutton also wrote of thoroughly enjoying himself in reviewing the same volume. He saw ‘the brief entries’ not as ‘gravestones but life-windows’, and delighted in finding among its subjects Helena Rubinstein (whose autobiography J. R. Poynter described as ‘a romance undermined by flashes of candour’), and the sheepdog expert John Quinn (1864–1937), whose kelpie Coll was, said the *Bulletin*, ‘to the dog world what Victor Trumper was to cricket’. He also praised the ‘wonderful women here: the artists Thea Procter (“I am not the sort of person who could sit at home and knit socks”), Kate O’Connor, Margaret Preston, Ellis Rowan’.²¹

The issue of inclusiveness is a fraught one for any compiler of a dictionary and most critics are unable to resist seeking and exposing those he or she thinks are missing. In 2005, a supplementary volume of the *ADB* was published, its own ‘missing persons’, with another 500 lives—from Dirk Hartog, born in 1580, to John McKeddie, who died in 1980.²² The *DNB* volume of missing biographies was published in 1994.²³ The *ADB*’s version included 161 women, the greatest number in any volume. It might be suggested that the attempt to rectify the imbalance is undone by a preponderance of community and charity workers who, despite their worthiness, may not have warranted inclusion. It is true to say that these activities reflect the restricted scope of any sort of public life for many Australian women until the 1960s; but is that sufficient reason to include them all?

As Paul Brunton noted of the supplement volume: ‘There are, for example, a lot of nurses. If one is ill this may be a good thing, but it may be overkill in a

20 George P. Shaw, ‘Book Review’, *Australian Historical Studies*, p. 119.

21 Geoffrey Dutton, ‘Wonderful Windows to a Variety of Lives’, *Sydney Morning Herald* (26 November 1988), p. 89.

22 *ADB, Supplement 1580–1980*.

23 C. S. Nicholls (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography. Missing Persons* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

biographical dictionary. While they were all clearly worthy, conscientious, and necessary, perhaps this is not sufficient for inclusion in a national work'. He also questioned the inclusion of Mary Griffith, sister of Sir Samuel, and Paquita Mawson, wife of Sir Douglas, who 'when all is said and done are there because of those connections'.²⁴ In its inclusiveness, the supplement has remained true to the representative aim of the *ADB*, especially when one sees that Aborigines, Pacific Islanders, working people, criminals and non-white immigrants have been rescued from oblivion. There are 49 entries on Indigenous lives—as the preface states, 'a far higher proportion than in earlier volumes'. Also embraced are the exceptional who were inexplicably missed, like Granny Smith and Arthur Yates, who do real credit to this exercise.²⁵

The question of balance and inclusiveness remains a live one. Ellis, it will be remembered, was critical of the inclusion of 'ordinary lives'. To

include biographies of a sometimes flogged convict who did nothing in a rather misspent life save go on board the wreck of the *Sirius* at Norfolk Island in 1790 and allegedly "save" her, or a sergeant-major of the South Devons who did nothing whatever of note except leave behind a rather scrappy account book [was wrong].²⁶

Ironically, in his review of Volume 17 of the *ADB*, Paul Pickering, while acknowledging the work as 'a national treasure' and praising it for its scholarship and quality, accused the *ADB* of elitism and of falling 'a long way short of examining a cross-section of Australian society that would be necessary to justify the word "Australian" in the title. Labour historians', he added, 'looking for "biography from below" will not find it here'.²⁷ This is a surprising charge, given the background and expertise of three former editors, Bede Nairn (a labour historian), Geoffrey Serle (who contributed to labour history) and John Ritchie (one-time editor of *Labour History*), and, on closer inspection, is probably unwarranted.

It is indisputable that the country has, or has had, proportionately more Australian labourers and workers than any other occupation. There have, historically, also been even more Australians who would have described their occupations as 'homemakers' or 'housewives'; but this does not justify their inclusion in the *ADB*. Although he does not concede the point, Pickering proffers a solution to this 'inequity' by proposing that Australia follows Britain's example with a *Dictionary of Labour Biography*. Indeed, Britain has produced 12

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24 Paul Brunton, 'Mysterious Quotas', *Australian Book Review* (February 2006), pp. 19–20.

25 Eric Richards, 'The Grand Parade: A Review Essay on Volume 16 and the Supplement to the Australian Dictionary of Biography', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 34 (2006), pp. 116–20.

26 Ellis, 'Biography Soup'.

27 Paul Pickering, 'Review: Di Langmore (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 17', *Labour History*, no. 95 (November 2008), pp. 271–3.

volumes of such a dictionary so far. A 'Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement, 1788–1975' was launched at the Labour History conference in 2011 and is being incorporated in the ADB's companion web site Labour Australia.

Despite Pickering's concern, the depth and range of chosen subjects in the ADB remain impressive. In browsing through the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), the distinguished man of letters Alan Bell wrote of searching for Reverend Mr Cox of 'Cox's Orange Pippin' fame and coming across three dozen other Coxes, few of them of high rank but most of them of some specific interest, with their biographies 'well done'.²⁸ This prompted a similar search in the ADB, with similar results. There are some 15 Coxes: a grazier, a pastoralist, a landowner, two clergymen, two doctors, a politician, a writer and a businessman. But, underlining the ADB's consistently eclectic mix, there is also a pharmacist, an auctioneer, a real-estate agent, a military officer–road-maker–builder—and a 'wild white man' (Samuel Emanuel Cox, 1773–1891) (Volume 1).

In reviewing Volume 14, Davis McCaughey argued that 'the large number of entries and of authors, together with the exhaustive selection process, protects the volume from the charge of being arbitrary. The volume may be assumed to provide a fair cross-section of Australians who came to prominence in the mid-twentieth century'.²⁹

The same volume was greeted with an enthusiastic review by Carl Bridge in the illustrious *Times Literary Supplement*.³⁰ In an article entitled 'Good Blokes and Others', an almost exhilarated Bridge saw the volume as constituting 'a sort of post-modern journey through Australia's immediate past, peopled by a diverse cast of worthies, good blokes, crooks, eccentrics, rogues and grotesques'. Yet for all these—the actress Dorothy Dunckley, who would return Christmas cards unopened, endorsing them with 'and the same to you'; the skywriter Fred Hoinville; the loop-the-loop motorcyclist Jim Gerald; and the rainmaker Jack Johnson—Volume 14 was not just an amusement park rollcall (although Sir Leslie Stephen, the DNB's first editor, used to emphasise the importance of 'amusement' as well as factual accuracy). Bridge also acknowledged the presence of Cardinal Norman Gilroy, Harold Holt, Howard Florey, Herbert Evatt, the Duke of Gloucester and Peter Finch. Even the estranged and disapproving Malcolm Ellis, who reviewed Volumes 1 and 2 so trenchantly, is accorded a sympathetic and measured entry in Volume 14. As for all of those who came before, there was a job to be done and the usual rollcall of less exciting eminences was captured and contained, including 59 politicians, 14 general practitioners and 13 judges.

28 Alan Bell, 'Lt. Col. Finch and Other Worthies in the New ODB', *Sewanee Review*, 115, no. 2 (2007), p. 281.

29 Davis McCaughey, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 14', *Australian Historical Studies*, no. 111 (1998), pp. 390–1.

30 Bridge, 'Good Blokes and Others'.

Above all, the *ADB* has changed over time, quite obviously in gender and race, but also in occupation, State of origin and sexuality. Allan Martin made it clear in 1966 that the bias he saw in the subjects for the first period (up to 1850) was itself a reflection of what he believed to be the characteristic of Australian society:

[C]andidates for such preservation are largely self-selecting: to then become more than a name on a registry file or shipping list one had to be literary enough to leave records, or noticeable enough to be written about contemporaneously by the literate. One result is that, despite the editor's laudable admission of a few obscure individuals 'simply as examples of the Australian experience', this collection cannot represent a full cross-section of colonial society. We sense, for example, the shadowy presence of such types as town labourers, ordinary seamen, shopkeepers and bullockies, but none takes on substance unless he managed somehow to climb above his station or fall into terrible error. As is proper, there is a large contingent of convicts (fifty of them) but all are men who rate notice as examples of the exceptional—in culture, acumen, respectability or sheer devilry. Inevitably, the 'cavalcade' has its invisible men.³¹

Martin further notes, as has everyone else, that there were only 15 entries on locally born Australians and only five on Aborigines. Women hovered in the background with only half a dozen entries. As already noted, the old *DNB* recorded only 5 per cent of women among its entries while the *ODNB* has doubled this figure. The *ADB* has 14.3 per cent of women; the supplement volume had 29 per cent, similar to the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Volume 5, which boasts 28 per cent women.³² It is unanimously accepted that the percentage of women will increase in all national dictionaries as they progress, reflecting both the increasing number of prominent women and the ideological drive to include more. Jim Davidson noted that in the six volumes 1890–1939, the proportion of women had risen to 20 per cent. He quoted Patricia Grimshaw as observing that '[t]he only higher proportion of women will be found ... in the index category "eccentrics", where they stand at fifty per cent (of four)'.³³

Most reviews, however, concentrated on the inclusions rather than the omissions. Martin noted that the two well-represented groups in the early volumes were 'mediocre' administrators—'counting the twenty-two governors, they make up

31 A. W. Martin, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, 12, no. 48 (April 1967), pp. 584–6.

32 Melanie Nolan, 'The Place of the Few Among the Many? A Review Article on *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume Five, 1941–1960*', *Making History* [Ministry of Culture and Heritage E-journal], (2002) <<http://www.mch.govt.nz/History/making-history/dnzb.html>> E. Baigent, C. Brewer and V. Larmine, 'Gender in the Archive: Women in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the Oxford English Dictionary', *Archives*, no. 113 (2005), pp. 13–35.

33 Jim Davidson, 'It Takes All Sorts', *Eureka Street*, 3, no. 2 (1995), p. 21.

more than a fifteenth of the whole’—and the respectable classes in the small communities, pursuing trade, landed or professional occupations. In assessing the first seven volumes, Lloyd Robson noted, too, but more sympathetically, the number of administrators from war and peace who were included:

It is difficult to discuss the Great War without a knowledge of the men who made the crucial decisions, and it is equally impossible to discuss the first two generations of Australians without being aware that the archetypal convict was not a Great Man, and does not appear in the *ADB*, although his superiors do.³⁴

Lyndall Ryan, while impressed by the entries in Volume 15—an incisive James McAuley, a commanding Robert Menzies, an outstanding Archbishop Howard Morrell, a superb Sir Rex Nan Kivell—found it had captured a fascinating but frustrating period in Australian history that shaped Australians who were dominated by World War II and the Cold War. She was, however, encouraged by a brilliant entry on Johnny O’Keefe, which, while marking his demise, heralded the arrival of rock’n’roll, signalling ‘the end of what must now be seen as a sad and dreary era’.³⁵

Table 10.1 Breakdown of *ADB* Entries in Period 6 (those who died 1991–2000)

Broad occupation	Number	Percentage
Academics	96	6.7
Arts	229	16.2
Benefactors	7	0.5
Business	115	8.1
Community	67	4.7
Education	27	1.9
Journalism	62	4.4
Legal	44	3.1
Medical	81	5.7
Military	140	9.9
Miscellaneous	29	2.0
Politics	121	8.6
Professions	64	4.5
Public service	80	5.7
Religious	55	3.9
Rural	39	2.8
Science	78	5.5
Sport	75	5.3

³⁴ Robson, ‘The A.D.B.’, p. 397.

³⁵ Lyndall Ryan, ‘Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 15’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 32, no. 2 (2001), pp. 153–4.

Table 10.1 shows that the percentage of military entries has shrunk to less than one-tenth (9.9 per cent). Academics (6.7 per cent) and people involved in the arts (16.2 per cent) account for one-quarter of the entries.

Increasingly, commentary has noted that more recently published *ADB* articles are discussing the private lives of subjects. Volume 17, the last volume to appear before the *ADB*'s golden anniversary, retained the pace, standard and style of its predecessors but as it was the first to cover lives lost in the 1980s, it reflects the features and fortunes of that decade. Bobby Goldsmith succumbed, at the age of thirty-eight, to AIDS, that decade's epidemic, while Dame May Couchman died at the age of one hundred and six (inexplicably, the editor, in her preface, overlooked the oldest dame in the history of the Commonwealth). Another sign of the times was the simple statement in Christopher Sexton's entry on Sir Robert Helpmann: 'Despite his showmanship, Helpmann was a private man. The great love of his life, with whom he shared a flat in London, was Michael Benthall (d. 1974)'.³⁶

Change over time? Private lives: Sticking to the straight and narrow?

A text search of the online *ADB* uncovered an extraordinary statistic. It revealed that the term 'homosexual' appears no more than 19 times. (Just to be sure, 'gay' was also searched: of the 54 occurrences, no more than four referred to a subject's sexuality; the rest reflecting a proper name or the prevailing meaning of the word until the 1970s.) There is only one Australian identified in the 17 volumes as 'bisexual'—the writer Colin Campbell McInnes (1914–76). And the term 'lesbian' appears but once—and even then to describe 'Edwards, Marion (Bill) (1874–1956) transsexual barman, pony trainer and bookmaker'. Given that the first volume did not appear until 1966, and even allowing for editorial strictures on relevance and space, to identify some 20 men out of 10 500 as homosexual does seem rum. While this might smack of excessive circumspection, it should be noted that Michael Holroyd's seminal life of Lytton Strachey that so boldly opened the bedroom doors of Bloomsbury did not appear until 1967 and it was another two decades, and *The Times* obituary of Sir Robert Helpmann, before obituarists turned their gaze upon the sexuality of their subjects.

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36 Christopher Sexton, 'Helpmann, Sir Robert Murray (1909–1986)', *ADB*, vol. 17, pp. 512–15.

Colin Matthew, editor of the *ODNB*, touched on this issue in his address to a conference on national biographies in 1995:

[T]he public/private antithesis is one still followed by most DNBs, partly because the reaction against it is comparatively recent and partly because it is a serviceable way of incorporating such information in what is probably a brief article. To integrate fully the home and sexual life of a person who is, as most are, in a DNB for 'public' reasons, requires space, and space is money and time. But this incorporation is perhaps *the* central challenge for DNBs of our time.³⁷

Mere statistics cannot be conclusive, but Matthew's position may have influenced the *ODNB*, in which the term 'homosexual' appears 500 times. That said, it may not be quite fair to compare unfavourably the tight-lipped approach taken by the *ADB* in the mid 1960s with that of the *ODNB* three decades later. More recent *ADB* lives have indicated a shift. Elizabeth Webby's comprehensive and elegant entry on Patrick White (Volume 18) has moved with the times and accorded Manoly Lascaris, his long-suffering companion, the status of 'life partner'.

While traditionally the *ADB* has taken the public road where the issue of sexuality is rarely crossed, with some lives it could simply not be avoided. The entry for Tasmanian-born actor and legendary swordsman Errol Flynn (Volume 8), by William Bryden, is remarkably bland and, at a mere three paragraphs, almost dismissive (his zoologist father, Theodore, with whom he shares the entry, has the lion's share with four paragraphs). The great Grace Bussell suffered similar treatment in Volume 3: given a scant column inch while her obscure father garnered a full page.³⁸ Having listed, with names and dates, but without more, Flynn's three marriages, it follows with astonishing understatement: 'Apparently a playboy all his life'. (Perhaps the fact-checkers, in the absence of an audit of assignations, would not permit anything firmer?) Two well-publicised trials for statutory rape that ended in Flynn's acquittal may justify their omission, but do not his string of liaisons (including the last with a fifteen-year-old) bear upon the man, if not the actor, and warrant acknowledgment? Strangely, the author then cites, although without giving it credence, the allegation that 'according to his most recent biographer, Charles Higham, [Flynn] was a friend to the Nazis during World War II'. Flynn, despite his shortcomings, deserves better.

37 Colin Matthew, 'Dictionary of National Biography', in Iain McCalman, with Jodi Parvey and Misty Cork (eds), *National Biographies and National Identity* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 1996), p. 11.

38 James Waldersee, *Journal of Royal Australian Historical Studies*, 57 (1971), p. 183.

This disappointing entry prompted a look at the entry of the *American National Biography* (ANB) on the 'Tasmanian Devil'. At more than 2000 words (although it must be stressed that size does not matter), James Ross Moore's exposition of Flynn's life and legacy is excellent—rich in quotes and brimming with detail and insight: 'Before he arrived in Hollywood in 1934, the man later called a "prince of liars" by his biographers essayed many adventures whose only common threads were twin lifelong loves: danger and the sea'. He also vividly marks the swashbuckler's decline from 'the true flower of chivalry' and 'a symbol for men of everything they longed to be and could not be' to 'a symbol of voracious sexuality', 'deferred from military service because a physical examination revealed malaria, a heart murmur, gonorrhoea, emphysema, and tuberculosis'.

Bryden's ADB entry on Flynn misses three available sources relied upon by Moore. Bryden does cite the *North Shore Times* but misses (as does Moore) the fascinating morsel that the young Errol, while at Shore School in Sydney, had shared the boarding house with John Grey Gorton. Perhaps this coincidence might find its way into Sir John's entry in a future volume of the ADB?

In reviewing the ANB for *The New York Times Book Review* in 2000, Richard Brookhiser pronounced what he saw as the three elements that make a good biography: a clear exposition of the essential facts, vivid detail, and judgment.³⁹ Mary Eagle's essay on Sir William Dobell (Volume 14) is the model of what an entry should be and meets all three of Brookhiser's criteria. The progress of his life is chronological and clear while vivid descriptions and wonderful anecdotes bring him to life. He 'saved drastically on clothes'. His friend and fellow lodger Eric Wilson described him going out in the evening, 'holding a newspaper under his right arm to cover the tear in his overcoat. Whenever his socks have holes ... he simply paints his leg to match'. Eagle also matter-of-factly addresses his sexuality ('From mid-1936 until September 1938 Donald Friend was based in London; he and Dobell were both homosexual and otherwise had similar tastes'). More importantly, she meets Brookhiser's third criterion in assessing his importance: 'Comparisons outside Australia may be made with the British painter Francis Bacon and the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson whose art was to choose "the decisive moment"'.

Other lives that have found their way into both the ADB and the ANB deserve comparison—not to claim the superiority of one dictionary over the other, but to suggest the difference wrought by the winning combination of a lively author and a well-lived life. Peter Harrison's ADB essay on Walter Burley Griffin is a model of eloquence and learning, although his judgment of Griffin's legacy is perhaps too muted: 'Although at the time of his death Griffin might have been

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39 Richard Brookhiser, 'Who Counted?' (Review of *American National Biography*), *New York Times* (23 January 2000).

judged a failure, later generations regard his designs and ideas with a respect which would have astounded his contemporaries, and his surviving buildings are valued as part of Australia's architectural history'. Paul Kruty's considerably briefer entry for the *ANB* complements Harrison's, taking a more global view of Griffin's legacy: 'Griffin stands as the third great member, after Sullivan and Wright, of the Chicago movement to create a decorated modern architecture for the twentieth century. His buildings, landscapes, and town plans on three continents record a lifetime's dedication to this goal'.⁴⁰

Another Olympian American figure is Douglas MacArthur, who straddles the pages of both the *ADB* and the *ANB*. In the former, D. M. Horner does touch on the personal: 'Conservative, moralistic and apparently religious, when he was chief of staff he had kept a young Eurasian mistress Isabel Rosario Cooper in a Washington hotel while his mother lived at his official residence'—which the *ANB* does not—but Horner quite properly focuses on the general's time in Australia. Michael Schaller, in the *ANB*, takes an equally appropriate view of MacArthur, from an American perspective.

Both entries refer to MacArthur's address to Congress on his return home, and in doing so they highlight the different use to which quotes can be put. The *ADB* puts it thus: 'he promised to "fade away—an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty"'. Survived by his wife and son, he died on 5 April 1964'. The *ANB* concludes: 'he closed his address by citing the words from an old army song: "Old soldiers never die. They just fade away"'. But it adds: 'Clearly, the old general did not expect to fade away. He testified for several days during spring 1951 before congressional panels, trying to persuade the legislators of the wisdom of his strategy'. Schaller devotes a further three paragraphs to support his contention that the general was not for fading (as Horner suggests), and refers to MacArthur's address at the 1952 Republican nominating convention in a bid for the White House. Suitably reflecting the national aspect of the *ADB*, however, Horner concludes: 'Between 1942 and 1945 he had been the dominant figure in Australia's conduct of World War II. Few figures who have spent less than three years in this country have had such an impact on Australian life'.⁴¹

Another lively double Australian–American entry is the tortured figure of Percy Grainger, who emigrated to the United States in 1914 and took US citizenship in 1918. Kay Dreyfus, in the *ADB*, is strong on Grainger the musician but she also provides a striking image of the man:

40 Peter Harrison, 'Griffin, Walter Burley (1876–1937)', *ADB*, vol. 9, pp. 107–10. Paul Kruty, 'Griffin, Walter Burley', *American National Biography Online* <<http://www.anb.org/articles/17/17-01053.html?a=1&n=walter%20burley%20griffin&d=10&ss=0&q=1>> accessed 2 July 2013.

41 David Horner, 'MacArthur, Douglas (1880–1964)', *ADB*, vol. 15, pp. 150–2.

The fact that Grainger's appearance matched his talent was a not insignificant component of his success. As a young man, his Byronic good looks and his golden hair were almost as much admired and as often remarked as was the strength and vigour of his playing. In later years he affected a markedly eccentric presentation, a personal style which, if nothing else, made for good 'copy'. Grainger's pianistic feats were complemented by a vigorous athleticism; long-distance walking was a favourite if intermittent pastime. Throughout his life he abstained from alcohol and tobacco and in his middle years he became a vegetarian.⁴²

In the *ANB*, J. Marshal Bevil presents a striking psychological portrait:

His father's philandering and alcohol abuse and his mother's harshly domineering manner probably contributed to the emergence of a number of unusual traits in their son as he grew into manhood. These included immature emotional ties to his mother that lasted until her suicide in 1922, masochism, rigid self-discipline that included strenuous exercise, pervasive freneticism, comically bizarre behavior, and virtually uninhibited flights of creative fantasy.⁴³

The *ODNB* also captures Grainger in an unflinchingly frank account: 'He was one of the century's more practised flagellants, equally at home in giving or receiving the lash'. The *ADB* is less forthcoming about Grainger's relationship with Rose:

His mother's suicide in April 1922, from despair at rumours of incest and gathering effects of syphilis, was a crushing blow. She had been his constant companion, 'managed' his business, social and emotional affairs, guided his career with single-minded purpose. Her influence was definitive; her death left Grainger with a lifetime legacy of guilt and remorse.

But, again, any account of Percy Grainger must be about his music and the *ADB* more than does justice to this: 'His compositions for military band are regarded as classics of the genre; his settings of British and Danish folksongs are acclaimed for their sensitivity and appropriateness'.⁴⁴

Sometimes the brilliance of the author makes any comparison, even with the same subject in another dictionary, absurd. A life in point is Manning Clark's *ADB* entry on Joseph Furphy. Clark's elegance, insight and wit shine from

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42 Kay Dreyfus, 'Grainger, George Percy (1882–1961)', *ADB*, vol. 9, pp. 69–72.

43 'Grainger, George Percy (Percy Aldridge)', *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

44 Michael Piggott, 'Brief Biography and the "all-round-man"', *Grainger Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, no. 1 (2011), pp. 5–20.

every paragraph: 'he established a reputation as a Sterne in moleskins or a Munchhausen among the bullock-drivers. Nature had planted in him a vast fund of cheery optimism. All his life he was a stranger to the pessimism and the melancholy which weighed down Henry Lawson and other bush writers'. And later: 'he began to have the "vision splendid". It was to be a more serious-minded, non-Dionysian view of the fate of being a man in Australia'.⁴⁵ This splendid essay makes one regret that Clark, although a section editor, has no more than four entries attributed to him.

What conclusions can one reach from this perhaps indulgent and unnecessarily lengthy list of comparable lives between dictionaries? The most obvious is that the difference lies in the qualities of the author. The life and character of the subject are decisive but, despite the strictures and instructions of the editorial teams, or perhaps with their indulgence, a well-informed, well-written entry will shine through and make the obligatory, less dazzling entries more bearable. As Geoffrey Blainey noted of the first two volumes, and this has remained largely true of those that have followed, 'individuality has not been suppressed'.⁴⁶ Allan Martin echoed this: 'No half-dozen pages lack an example of life bursting through as author answers to subject'.⁴⁷ As he observed in reviewing Volume 2:

As before, in entries great and small, the swift vignette is a source of life: Lang in full cry against Stuart's 'malice prepense of the foulest character imaginable'; Polding with a convict 'kneeling by his side in the sanctuary, and by word and action, instructing all through one how to make their confessions'; Macquarie, the devoted husband and father, agreeing to have the family's favourite old cow shipped all the way from Sydney to Mull.⁴⁸

Surely, this is the stuff of biography.

The tyranny of space, the cramping form and the editor's whip: Lean, mean and, most importantly, authoritative?

Lawrence Goldman (editor of the *ODNB* since 2004) observed in his 2006 Seymour Lecture that '[t]he tone and style [of the *DNB*] was not grandiloquent, rhetorical and imperial, but business-like, factual and understated, and was praised as such in many quarters'. Significantly, he highlighted the distinct

⁴⁵ Manning Clark, 'Furphy, Joseph (1843–1912)', *ADB*, vol. 8, pp. 600–2.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Blainey, *Papers and Proceedings* [Tasmanian Historical Research Association], 15, no. 2 (1967), p. 59.

⁴⁷ Martin, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1', p. 586.

⁴⁸ Martin, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 2', p. 133.

'biographical memoir that has always characterised the *DNB*—the rounded, literary and rather more impressionistic portrait of the life and its context, inevitably longer and more discursive'. In contrast, Goldman admired 'very much' the 'sharpness and focus of the entries in the *ADB*, even more so now that I appreciate the rigorous checking of each and every fact in a submitted article'.⁴⁹ He realised it certainly in the wake of the fracas that broke through the general acclaim greeting the launch of the *ODNB* in 2004. It was said the *ODNB* was 'riddled by error'.⁵⁰ Its editors acknowledged error as 'inevitable' in such a large undertaking and pointed to the utility of online publication for it permitted 'continual revision'.⁵¹

Allan Martin was typical in his review of Volume 2 of the *ADB*, noting two facts: 'the high level of accuracy originally achieved by the editors and their staffs (the errors are, for the most part, trivial), and the continuing care devoted to revision and correction'.⁵² Yet he also observed: 'Space tyrannises and a regular format cramps the multiple authorship, which sometimes cringes visibly under the editor's whip. Plain, clear narrative is required, especially in the minor entries, and the pages fold quietly over corpses being decently docketed and laid back to rest'.⁵³

Dedication to the truth is an abiding principle for the *ADB* and tends to explain its characteristic tautness and prudence. When interviewed in 1999, John Garraty, editor of the 24-volume *American National Biography*, published by Oxford University Press (OUP) that year, admitted that the OUP office in Cary, North Carolina, generated 'well over a hundred thousand queries' seeking confirmation of factual claims during the editorial process.⁵⁴ In its five decades, the *ADB* will have well exceeded that number. Contributors could cite a plethora of examples. I will cite one from my own experience. My draft entry on Sir Edgar Tanner, sports administrator and politician (Volume 16), contained the assertion that 12 boys in his primary school class eventually became knights. Some months later, in correspondence, the editor advised me that the team had only been able to confirm that seven boys in that class became knights.⁵⁵ Ultimately, no mention was made at all of the subject's early education. The

49 Lawrence Goldman, 'Virtual Lives: History and Biography in an Electronic Age', *Australian Book Review* (June 2007), p. 43.

50 Elizabeth Day, *Sunday Telegraph* (24 October 2004). Vanessa Thorpe, *Observer* (6 March 2005). Nikolai Tolstoy, *Times Literary Supplement* (3 December 2004). Lawrence Goldman, *Times Literary Supplement* (10 December 2004).

51 Giles Foden, *Guardian* [UK] (25 September 2004). Robin Fox, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*.

52 Martin, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 2', p. 133.

53 Martin, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1', p. 586.

54 William R. Ferris, 'A Nation of Individuals', *Humanities*, 20, no. 1 (1999).

55 Mark McGinness, 'Tanner, Sir Edgar Stephen (1904–1979)', *ADB*, vol. 16, pp. 361–2.

classic example of the *ADB*'s respect for truth appears in one of its corrigenda: 'For "died in infancy" read "lived to a ripe old age in Orange"'.⁵⁶ As Peter Ryan observed, 'the Corrigenda show the conscience of the *Dictionary* at work'.⁵⁷

For many years the *ADB* had a full-time staff member who compiled lists of corrigenda, which were consolidated and published with each new volume. Most of the corrigenda understandably relate to the earlier volumes, when authoritative material proved elusive, and much of it is prosaic, such as wrongly spelt names. A number of entrants have been found to have imagined themselves younger. Others, such as Daisy Bates, have been found guilty of inventing their early lives, only to be uncovered by full-scale biographies.

Interestingly, since the *ADB* has gone online, protective descendants have plagued *ADB* staff with corrections. An assertion that one subject had a mistress was met with the (unfruitful) protest, a century on, that the woman was his 'friend'.

The *ADB*'s reputation for 'sharpness and focus' is a legacy of its founding editor. Bede Nairn's essay on Douglas Pike (Volume 16) remarks on his passion for 'conciseness, without the sacrifice of humanity and style'.⁵⁸ Many a contributor has seen favourite anecdotes or observations scrapped. Again, I speak from experience. I thought it interesting and mildly amusing to say that when, in 1941, Sir Byrne Hart (Volume 17) was posted to Northern Command Headquarters as deputy assistant quartermaster general and required to arrange for the reception of the first American troops to arrive in Brisbane, 'he proved most unpopular for feeding them mutton'. The editor thought otherwise. She may, however, have had good cause to jettison the observation that the only way the headmaster of the Southport School could tell Byrne and his twin brother apart was that one had webbed toes.

Though mine did not, many an anecdote has survived to publication and they add greatly to an appreciation of the subject and the readability of the text: John Aitken (Volume 1) carrying his sick lambs ashore one by one to found his flock; the Aborigine Arabanoo (Volume 1), who 'was at first pleased by a handcuff on his wrist, believing it to be an ornament, but became enraged when he discovered its purpose'. Queensland silk Sir Arnold Bennett's brilliance as an advocate is painted in one episode (Volume 17). Successfully defending, at a retrial, a man charged with poisoning a testatrix, Bennett suggested that the strychnine was self-administered. He stirred 40 Alophen pills into a glass of water and sipped it, 'demonstrating to the jury that the extreme bitterness of the poison could not have been concealed', and invited them to try it.

56 T. M. Perry, 'Atkinson, James (1795–1834)', *ADB*, vol. 1, pp. 42–3.

57 Peter Ryan, 'The ADB', *Quadrant* (June 2000), p. 88.

58 Bede Nairn's essay on Douglas Pike: *ADB*, vol. 16.

Rigorous pruning and paring of the entries by the *ADB*'s editors are justified on the bases of consistency, cost and proportion but one often longs for more. It might be said that many entries are simply too brief. The luxury of space accorded to the contributors (and readers) of the *ODNB* and the *ANB* is a cause for envy. And yet, in his review of Volume 17, Stephen Wilks observes that 'almost all entries manage to be succinct without sounding disrespectfully terse'.⁵⁹ With expansiveness comes a greater need for checking. In abiding by its doctrine of exactitude through concision, the *ADB* has been generally (except by Ellis) accepted as authoritative and untainted by error.

Where the primacy of such a doctrine appears vulnerable for the dictionary is when according traits and values to its subjects. Of Volume 1, C. Hartley Grattan wondered whether 'gently moralistic evaluations, usually to be found in final paragraphs, are to be too warmly encouraged from writers and, really, are of much use to readers. Maybe it is best to stick to "the facts"'.⁶⁰ But surely some evaluation, some assessment of character or achievement is essential? Otherwise the result is merely a *Who's Who*. Geoffrey Blainey raised the fundamental matter of sources, specifically the reliance on obituaries. He noted an assertion in the entry on Sir Robert Officer (Volume 2)—Officer's obituaries 'made much of his unostentatious benevolence to the poor, his earnestness and personal piety'—and suggested it would be valuable if a historian could study the changing conventions underlying the portrayal of character, especially in newspaper obituaries. He proceeded to ask, 'were such valuable judgments as "honesty", "integrity", "courageous", "public-spirited", "philanthropic", "honourable", used as we used them today? Were they used with some consistency throughout the nineteenth century?' The same question could still be asked. The select bibliography throughout the *ADB* consistently contains references to subjects' obituaries, which, until quite recently, have resembled eulogies in their tendency to gloss and extol, but again, they are cautiously employed in the manner of 'obituaries praised his selfless...', 'obituaries portrayed...'; so perhaps Blainey's advice has been heeded. In this regard, the development of *Obituaries Australia*, the digital repository of obituaries the NCB is publishing from newspapers, journals, magazines and bulletins, is welcomed. Comparing an *ADB* article with an obituary will expose the *ADB* craft.

Conclusion

How has the *ADB* been assessed? Most reviewers of the *ADB* considered it against some benchmark of good dictionary practice. Reviewers have been

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⁵⁹ Stephen Wilks, 'Dictionary Speaks Volumes of Our History', *Canberra Times* (8 December 2007), p. 14.

⁶⁰ Grattan, 'Australian Dictionary of Biography', p. 252.

largely indulgent of the *ADB*'s shortcomings in the face of its contribution to Australian history. Considering the *ADB* as a whole is difficult because one has to contextualise articles and take into account changing historical mores. Measuring comparable, or the same, lives between different dictionaries also requires indulgence because a dictionary based on submissions is necessarily patchy and individual examples are not necessarily indicative of the dictionary as a whole. Moreover some dictionaries, like the *DNB*, have been revised, while the *ADB* has not.

What, then, makes the *ADB* distinctive from other dictionaries of biography? As early as Volume 3, the incisive Blainey ventured to identify three distinctive characteristics: 'It is unusually sympathetic to confidence men, round pegs, and what the preface calls "samples of the Australian experience"'.⁶¹ What makes it different is its Australian-ness. The key remains the phrase repeated in the preface to successive volumes: the *ADB*'s inclusion of lives 'as samples of the Australian experience'. As Lloyd Robson put it:

[T]his would have shocked Stephen and Lee at the *DNB*, and the managers of the *DAB* [*Dictionary of American Biography*, precursor of *American National Biography*]: no one, however beneficent or favourable his conduct may have been towards his family and son, was to be a subject because he was 'representative', thundered Sir Sidney Lee, and both Britain and the United States set their faces against including such persons.⁶²

The *ADB*'s sampling must be vulnerable to charges of imbalance, but its boldness in attempting to capture not just the exceptional but also the emblematic Australian is unique.

Another abiding strength is devotion to truth. The dogged fact-checking begun in the 1960s continues unabated and, while it may annoy the more lyrical and speculative contributor, it does the *ADB* great credit. The other *ADB* trait that has also maddened two generations of contributors is dedication to concision. The loss of precious anecdotes and axing of prized adjectives have made many look longingly at more indulgent editors of other dictionaries. Some subjects may have been given such short shrift that one wishes they had been left undiscovered until the 'missing persons' volume in which they may have been given more attention and space. But this discipline has also given space to more lives and lent each volume a consistency it would otherwise have lacked. As John Ritchie, the longest serving of all the *ADB*'s editors once observed,

61 Blainey, Book review (1969), p. 103.

62 Robson, 'The A.D.B.', pp. 3 and 95.

'it is possible to craft an object of beauty in 500 words'.⁶³ And, as the *ADB's* reviewers have frequently found, there are many splendid examples of this in the 19 volumes that have so far appeared.

Volume 18 of the *ADB* was launched at Government House, Queensland, in December 2012. From left: Pat Buckridge, chair of the Queensland Working Party, Melanie Nolan, General Editor, Penelope Wensley, Governor of Queensland, Tom Griffiths, chair of the Editorial Board

By courtesy of Cathy Jenkins

Finally, the rarest quality of all to which the *ADB* can lay claim is democratic accessibility. Apart from New Zealand's, no other dictionary of biography is freely available online to its readers. As John Ritchie's successor, Diane Langmore, put it as the *ADB* went online, 'I always felt it was eight million words of treasure locked up and ... the online version will ... unlock the treasures'.⁶⁴ What Stephen Murray Smith had lauded in 1988 as 'a remarkable gift to the nation' had been given all over again.

Many more people now access the *ADB* online than buy the book. The *ADB* site records some 70 million hits a year. And even if they are in a hurry, they could

⁶³ Robert Hefner, 'Volumes of Work in a Long Reign of Editing', *Canberra Times* (27 February 2000), p. 36.

⁶⁴ Diana Streak, 'Who, What, Where, When of Australia Online', *Canberra Times* (7 July 2006), p. 2.

not but be impressed by its scholarship and scope. Douglas Pike's hope that the *ADB* 'will inform and interest the lonely shepherd in his hut as readily as the don in his study' must now be stretched to the homesick expatriate in his office offshore and the student on her laptop on campus.

There has been a huge commentary on the *ADB* in the form of reviews over the years and this chapter has tried to summarise and analyse these critical assessments. Finally, as the essence of this chapter has been a review of the reviews, the words of Professor Blainey must again be called upon: a 'review of a book which itself compresses the knowledge of several hundred contributors on a wide variety of these is bound to be subjective. Inadequacies of the book are far outweighed by the inadequacy of the reviewer'. As he wrote of Volume 3, and it remains apt, a reviewer cannot 'really know how much this masterly book depended on the skills and efforts of the ... editors ... At the very least our debt to them is enormous'.⁶⁵

Mark McGinness was a prosecutor in the Queensland Solicitor-General's Office and, after a brief period in private practice, he joined the newly established Australian Securities Commission in 1991. He became coordinator of international enforcement in 1993, then director of international relations at the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, and has been director of international relations at the Dubai Financial Services Authority since 2005.

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65 Blainey, Book review (1969), p. 104.

Book Reviews

Hundreds of reviews of *ADB* volumes have been published in newspapers, magazines, and journals. These three, reprinted here, assess the *ADB* at its beginning, its midpoint (so far) and its most recent volume. It is fitting that the final review should be by Mark McGinness, the author of this chapter's 'Review of Reviews'.

Geoffrey Blainey, Review of *ADB*, vols 1 and 2 (1967)

Douglas Pike, ed., *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volumes 1 and 2, 1788–1850, Melbourne University Press, 1966, 1967.

On first reading the inaugural volumes of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* I realized how an early Australian settler must have felt when he received a packet of news from his home country. Indeed it would be more appropriate to liken the feeling to that of a settler answering an 'anyone knowing the whereabouts' advertisement and duly receiving his first home news for forty years.

The dictionary brings news of hundreds of people whose name is more or less familiar to those interested in Australian history. It transforms our knowledge of many lives, adds much to our knowledge of others. If we had wondered why someone decided to migrate to Australia in 1813 or why he decided to go home in 1833, wondered what became of this New South Wales colonel or that judge, or had been forced to guess the social background of this squatter or that convict, the answer often is in these volumes. Even if this were the only service provided by the new dictionary, its publication would have been justified. But the dictionary provides many other services and clues for the practising historian and a remarkably sustained interest for general readers.

In understanding the past there are, for most people, successive layers or levels of awareness. Sometimes the biographies in these volumes made me more aware of simple facets of early Australian society. By their pithiness, by the interest which a life story can arouse, they indirectly emphasise some themes with a force and clarity which no generalization can quite convey. For instance the life of Samuel Terry, told skillfully by Gwyneth Dow, makes one realize the social and economic mobility which was *possible* in early Australia at that time. Terry was a Manchester labourer, sentenced in 1800 to transportation for theft; if he had been born a century and a half later he might have risen to become a successful, and perhaps slightly shady, seller of secondhand cars without ever accumulating the capital to start his own car yard. In New South Wales, however, he landed on his feet, on ground fertile for those with commercial

acumen. When he died he had a personal estate of a quarter of a million and sufficient personal prestige to attract a regimental band to his funeral. Of course he was not typical, but neither was his experience rare, as many other biographies show. The dictionary indirectly conveys many other observations with a success which cannot be equalled by most general histories with their understandable emphasis on simplifying and generalising. It also suggests themes which I for one have not seen in other books and articles. One simple example: the number of rich Australians, who in the first sixty years retired to England points to a relevant factor in Australia's balance of payments, a factor which probably so far has not been noticed.

The volumes are well written, and this must be a tribute to the editors as well as the contributors. Some articles which might not add much to existing knowledge are still essays of distinction with the additional virtue that they marshal fragments of evidence hitherto widely dispersed. In reading I jotted down the articles which seemed so meritorious in presentation or so illuminating that they deserved reference in a review; the list became too long. L. R. Marchant's articles on French navigators were, at least to me, a revelation. Michael Roe's essays on men as different as a Tasmanian governor and a Victorian 'beardy' are eloquent and fascinating. Kenneth Cable on churchmen and teachers, Niel Gunson on missionaries, K. M. Dallas on Enderby the ship-owner, the late John O'Brien on Charles Laing the architect, Bede Nairn on Archbishop Polding, O. K. H. Spate on the Malay-Portuguese author, Eredia, and Peter Eldershaw on Lieutenant-Governor Davey are some of the articles which displayed differing techniques and facing different problems, seemed highly successful. Other reviewers, justifiably, could list a different set of articles; one virtue of these volumes is that individuality has not been suppressed.

Occasionally an individual's character appears too much in black and white. A New South Wales public servant is described as 'both incompetent and dishonest'. Of an Adelaide candle-maker we are told: 'His whole life was affected by a deep religious fervor'. A settler on the Hunter River is marked by 'honesty of purpose' and also by 'sound common sense'—a phrase which, by the presence of a redundant adjective, incidentally hints that there is a trait known as 'unsound common sense'. In most articles the prose is tight, and so a shortage of space perhaps justifies the use of emphatic phrases rather than conditional phrases such as 'he was said by some to be honest'. But when some of the black and white judgments appear close together, the effect can be unsettling. Furthermore, the source material on some of these people being meagre, it may be dangerous to describe someone as honest or corrupt merely on the surviving evidence of one or two contemporary witnesses or on the strength of a court case which, judging by the recorded biographies of some magistrates, did not take place in the Court of Solomon.

Side by side with the sweeping depictions of personal character are far more which are careful without being over-timid. Thus Governor Macquarie, according to N. D. McLachlan, 'probably had more integrity than most' men of his day; this is the kind of realistic judgment which John Reynolds also displays in his articles. Much can be said for the practice—visible in some unsigned articles—of revealing the source of certain descriptions of character: 'Officer's obituaries', notes the article on Sir Robert Officer, 'made much of his unostentatious benevolence to the poor, his earnestness and personal piety'. Certainly, if a historian has studied a nineteenth-century life for a long period and if he has the aid of adequate sources, he is justified in making a more confident appraisal of character; but most contributors, understandably, did not possess these advantages.

Many historians will be influenced, subtly or strongly, by these opinions of character when weighing evidence and assessing the worth of witnesses in their own fields of research. The accuracy of these character sketches could therefore be of vital importance in view of the astronomical number of times the dictionary will be consulted. Indeed, before editorial work on the volumes covering the years 1851 to 1890 is completed, it would be valuable if a historian could study the changing conventions underlying the portrayal of character, especially in newspaper obituaries. Most writers in the next series of volumes will rely on the assessments of character and personality published in newspapers and magazines of the time; and yet we know very little about the conventions surrounding such obituary notices. For examples, was funereal courtesy more common in 1890 than in 1850? Were such valuable judgments as 'honesty', 'integrity', 'courageous', 'public-spirited', 'philanthropic', 'honourable', used as we use them today? Were they used with some consistency throughout the nineteenth century, or did they rise or decline in the hierarchy of virtues? Similarly, does a slightly different set of assumptions underlie obituary notices in say the *Hobart Mercury* or the *Launceston Examiner* of the same year? I am not sure whether these questions are answerable; I suspect some are. This is a subject which probably justifies a doctoral thesis, and the *Dictionary* would be only one of many works which could gain from the findings. Without such analyses, contributors may be forced to accept at face value the judgments of obituary writers, when in fact such judgments can no more be translated uncritically into modern usage than say the pound-note of a century ago.

It is difficult to assess character; it is perhaps even more difficult to assess the influence of an individual who has long been dead and whose life is sparsely documented. Most of us, in our historical research, more or less skirt the problem of weighing one man's influence. In books which pursue a broad theme—the history of a colony or city or region—individuals tend to be drowned in the stream of events, and their actions come to seem inevitable, pre-ordained by

weightier trends and events. The unusual individual serves as a mere symbol, a bobbing piece of straw which indicates the force or direction of the current. Alternatively, in a biography, the author's sympathy for and absorption in the one individual often magnifies that individual's influence. In a general history, lack of space also assists in crowding out the individual, just as in the book-length biography an abundance of space elevates him. In a general history a writer usually takes full advantage of the valuable yet untrustworthy ally named Hindsight, which often makes events seem inevitable, an inevitability that the same historian would not assign so eagerly to the events and influence of his own life or the life of anyone else. Biographers make less use of hindsight, I suspect, partly because their narrative is absorbed with only one subject and can therefore go forward more evenly from year to year, whereas general historians have to push one phase of the story forward with a long leap and then return to pick up another thread which is similarly shuttled forward.

All this has some relevance to the *dictionary*, because most people who contributed articles had had experience in writing about a general theme but not in writing biography. Furthermore in Australia, biography has had few skilled practitioners, and a biographical dictionary therefore poses problems; indeed this is one of its virtues.

In most articles in these two volumes the problems of defining the individuals' influence on their times did not arise; it was probably small, and the authors were wisely prepared to accept that assumption. The problem of assessing influence was usually tackled, however, by contributors writing articles on those pioneers who were regarded as significant and were therefore allotted a high quota of words by the editors. Thus Don Baker's excellent article on John Dunmore Lang asked in the final paragraph: 'Was Lang influential in this long process which culminated in a liberal, democratic and secular society? Or, was he like a man in a boat, shooting over the political Niagara, and furiously whipping the water to make it go faster?' Baker concluded that Lang's writings were of such a kind and volume that they 'must have had a large, though unmeasurable, influence inculcating the colonial values which were dominant in Australia by the end of the nineteenth century'. Anyone reading the article will see how carefully he reaches this conclusion. On the other hand, Michael Persse in an absorbing essay summed up the influence of W. C. Wentworth: 'More than any other man he secured our fundamental liberties and nationhood'. This is a bold conclusion: true, it could have been even stronger, for it only compares Wentworth's influence to that of other men and not to that of wider and impersonal causes; but even within that context his judgment assumes a wide knowledge of a maze of events and many men. While some writers seem

rather too sweeping in asserting the influence of their favourite, most writers seem conscious of the difficulty of making judgment, especially at this stage of our knowledge of Australian history.

These volumes are not easy to review, particularly because they represent both recent research and the specialized and long-accumulative knowledge of several hundred people. The number of times I was surprised by information is a reflection of my own previous ignorance and therefore my inability to write a comprehensive review. It is also risky for a reviewer to assess the merit of the editorial policy which shaped these volumes. One can only hope that in a future volume the national committee, general editor, or section editors will outline more fully the assumptions on which they are working. Any co-operative venture will gain if the aims and principles of the venture are disclosed as fully as possible to the co-operators. Moreover, this is a long-term project; and there seems to be some virtue in exposing the underlying principles to public discussion in the early stages, when these principles can, if necessary, be revised, rather than at a late hour when change is impossible. Finally, it is not unlikely that in the year 2017 historians may hold some different methodological assumptions and, if so, they may at times be wary of a work which is rather secretive about its own underlying principles.

In the uniform preface to the first two volumes of the *Dictionary of Australian Biography*, the principles of selection receive two and a half sentences:

Many of the names were obviously significant and worthy of inclusion. Others, less notable, were chosen simply as samples of the Australian experience. Some had to be omitted through lack of material...

The phrases 'obviously significant' and 'less notable' are not (very) revealing. They are not really illuminating for the scoreboard school of history which learns a lot by adding up and categorizing: someday some of its adherents will probably use the dictionary to compute the importance of such types as London men, ex-servicemen, young men, in shaping early Australia. Fortunately, three roneoed sheets entitled 'Analysis of Contributors' and apparently compiled by the publishers, Melbourne University Press, were sent to potential reviewers with the aim of supplying more information of volume one. According to the analysis twelve biographies in volume one each received more than three thousand words; and of those twelve people eight were colonial governors. Similarly one in five of the biographies in the volume received more than 1250 words, and most of these longer biographies were administrators and professional men. The statistics point to some of the principles of selection and emphasis, but presumably only a minority of readers have access to them; one hopes that the statistics will be brought up to date and published in later volumes or in a learned journal.

An advertising leaflet which came with the review copy of volume one (but which does not accompany copies sold in shops) is more informative than the official preface. The general editor, Douglas Pike, remarks in the leaflet that the dictionary is primarily a reference work and so the 'familiar' names—the names which readers are most likely to look up—dominate the volumes. To these names, he writes, 'have been added a few entries of almost forgotten characters, for no worse reason than they are samples of the Australian experience'. This note does not tie in with the official preface which allows one to assume that a considerable portion of the biographies were chosen as samples of the Australian experience. It would be interesting to know how many names were chosen because they were samples, and why such samples were thought necessary and indeed how they were selected. This is not a request for a mathematical formula or necessarily a criticism of the idea of selecting samples of the Australian experience; merely curiosity about the assumptions embodied in a work of importance.

The preface in the first two volumes could mislead an intelligent reader into thinking that the dictionary embodies the experiences of a wide cross-section of Australian society whereas my impression, confirmed by the advertising leaflet, is that it concentrates largely on those people who had power, influence, success or notoriety. Of course the preface may be more accurate than the advertising leaflet. But even if the preface is correct, and the sample of the Australian experience is wide, it could be advisable to add a warning in the preface that the Australian dictionary is more democratic in content than biographical dictionaries of other countries, but is still much more a record of personal success than of failure and far more a record of the exceptional than the normal individual. Such a warning is necessary because the work aims to attract, and deservedly will attract, a wide audience. Some members of that audience will be tempted by the existing preface to jump to the conclusion that they are entitled to generalize about the Australian experience on the collective strength of these entries.

Several other decisions of the national committee or the editors merit discussion; but any comment can only be speculative, because the volumes do not explain these decisions. The decision that many entries would be unsigned is puzzling, especially as some are of the highest standard. The decision to divide the project into self-contained series of volumes, one series ending at 1850 and the next at 1890, is not explained. I am not sure of the advantages of this policy; they may well outweigh the disadvantages. It is already clear, however, that this method has disadvantages. Many of the selected lives flourished both before and after 1850; thus a Tasmanian flour-miller, who was aged nineteen and a nonentity in 1850, and who lived on until the First World War, appears in the pre 1850 volumes. The speed with which many entries can be consulted will be

reduced by the gamble of deciding which volume to consult. This is not to argue positively that wrong decisions have been made, but to suggest instead the merit of writing a much longer expository preface to the next series of volumes.

Judging by the initial volumes, the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* will probably be the most valuable reference work in Australian history; it is already one of the most readable works on Australian history. This twin achievement would have been unobtainable without outstanding editors. The general editor, Douglas Pike, and the section editors, A. G. L. Shaw and Manning Clark, claim no credit whatever for the success of these volumes. All their work has been inconspicuous, and we can only surmise how much energy, care, and scholarship they must have dedicated to the task. One imagines that in a team of several hundred players they were called on to bat on sticky wickets, catch in first slip, declare innings closed, protest against gloomy light, detect bodyline, check the scores, and makes centuries in even time on the last day—all this in addition to the obvious editorial functions of picking teams, deciding the order of batting and bringing on drinks. Unlike many captains they have not imitated W. G. Grace in refusing to be given out; a revised scoresheet labelled 'corrigenda' comes with each copy of the second volume.

The last article in these volumes records briefly the life of Yuranigh, an aboriginal guide and traveller who died west of the Blue Mountains in 1850. The anonymous author quotes a tribute by Sir Thomas Mitchell to this obscure aboriginal: 'his intelligence and his judgment rendered him so necessary to me that he was ever at my elbow'. The same will be said of these volumes for years to come.

Geoffrey Blainey, 'The Australian Dictionary of Biography', *Papers and Proceedings* [Tasmanian Historical Research Association], 15, no. 2 (November 1967), pp. 58–64.

Book Reviews

Stuart Macintyre, Review of *ADB*, vol. 9 (1983)

Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle, Gen. Eds., *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 9: 1891–1939, Gil-Lat, Melbourne University Press, 1983

The best way to appraise a reference series such as this is to live with it, consult it and browse it, thereby savouring its riches. To read a volume through is to dull the appetite; too many stories of achievement can pall, the structures of exposition grow formulaistic, the overworked phrases turn into clichés. Yet the appearance of this, the ninth volume of a monumental series, demands a considered evaluation.

The project, now moving towards completion barely a quarter-century after its inception, is a major feat of Australian scholarship. When finished we shall have 7000 lives recorded accurately, readably and accessibly. Praise is due to the editors, the Australian National University which has provided a home for the project, and the Melbourne University Press which has produced and keeps in print such handsome volumes. Beyond these principal partners, we owe thanks to the working parties in each of the States, which prepared the lists of biographical subjects, and to the many hundreds of authors who have provided the entries.

For the ‘*ADB*’ is a co-operative project and as such it rests on compromise—or rather a series of compromises. The claims of one candidate for inclusion have to be measured against another. (Do you give the nod to this businessman or that bishop?) The weight of contemporary importance has to be balanced against retrospective criteria of representatives. (Yet another State politician or a pioneer female doctor?)

Since they depend on voluntary labor, the editors rely to a degree on who they can find to execute their plans. (Hence there seems no shortage of military historians but, on the evidence of this volume, biographies of Australian Rules footballers are thin on the ground.) And as a commercial project, the needs of the scholar have to be set against the interests of the general reader. (Thus some entries suffer ‘who’s who’ constipation while others strive perhaps too hard for the colourful anecdote.

What is the outcome? As we would expect, there is a heavy emphasis upon conventional achievement. Almost a fifth of the entries and a quarter of the space are taken up by State and Federal politicians, an eighth by businessmen and another eighth by war heroes and leaders. Other categories of eminence in descending order of emphasis, are: writers, artists, musicians and actors; scientists, inventors, architects and the like; religious figures; educationalists; doctors and nurses; lawyers; sportsmen; administrators. There are five subjects of Aboriginal descent, three Japanese, one Chinese. Women make up less than a tenth of the whole.

My Procrustean bed would not be taken too seriously—how does one categorise an ‘artist, bimetalist and pioneer daylight surfer’, a ‘versifier and swindler’ or a ‘merchant and litigant’. But clearly if you had aspired for admission to this Hall of Fame, it was best to have been masculine, rich and to have made your mark in a field of conventional esteem. Hence the two Knox families of BHP and CSR fame earn five entries in this volume. If you were a sportsman, it was best to have played cricket or Rugby League, preferably in Sydney, and futile to have played any sport in Western Australia or Tasmania. Alternatively, if a scoundrel, you should have been a colourful or notorious one like Isabel Gray, the courtesan, or Handcock, the associate of Breaker Morant.

Certain features are common to each entry. First the formalities: name, dates and field of activities. Next, a brief account of ancestry and circumstances of birth; then the main section, a biographical narrative. Here the tone is equable, praising judiciously (‘Kind, courteous and unassuming’), criticising by decorous allusion (‘her bedroom was a scene of great activity’) and gentle irony (‘the results were often controversial’). The penultimate paragraph will offer a thumbnail characterisation and, perhaps, suggest the magnitude of the achievement. The standard entry concludes, as it began, on a formal note: death, descendants, estate.

It is an undemanding format, well suited to the uneven abilities of the contributors. The conventions assure that the enthusiastic will not wander too far off course, and they need not become monotonous unless you feel impelled to read from cover to cover. Nor is the formula necessarily restrictive. Like the fugue or the sonnet, it imposes rules of composition within which the writer can give free play to ingenuity, and it is possible to achieve a richly dramatic effect. Roger Joyce follows the form closely in his fine large-scale entry for Samuel Griffith; Patrick O’Farrell relaxes the narrative principle in his striking portrait of Archbishop Kelly.

These are longer entries and the shorter entry of 800–1000 words is perhaps more challenging. The danger here is that the record can crowd out the person—so

many entries fail to establish a sense of personality or even to provide a physical description. Yet consider the force of this brief passage from Geoffrey Blainey's entry for Paddy Hannan:

He was short and slight and his face was weather beaten. A photograph in old age shows a bald head, wispy beard, strong nose and searching eyes.

The account of the 'gun' shearer, Jacky Howe, achieves more with the description: '17-inch biceps and a hand the size of a small tennis racket' than a list of tallies ever could. Again James Griffin's masterly entry for William Hackett, priest and confidant of Mannix, tells us that he farewelled the boys leaving Xavier in 1939 with these instructions: 'Keep fit. Don't grumble. Shoot straight. Pray Hard'.

Revealing in a different sense are the bromides and euphemisms that punctuate the more pious entries. Too often we hear the subject was 'tough and determined', a 'firm disciplinarian', 'forthright in her speeches and opinions', or—I like the modifiers here—was 'remembered by his descendants as fairly remote and rather stern', 'strict when necessary' and 'took his responsibilities too seriously to be popular'. We have here an ideology of Australian leadership, challenging yet at the same time constrained by the egalitarian ethos. Cumulatively, these entries provide (mostly unwitting) commentary of the abilities of leadership, and the loneliness and strains it imposes.

The more successful entries recognise frailties of temperament. The marriage of Charles Kingston, we are told, 'was not a happy union and he soon returned to lechery'. Zelman Cowen acknowledges Issac Isaac's 'appalling certainty', and the acknowledgement in no way diminishes his stature. Others are alluded to be martinets; their families can disintegrate, they can hit the bottle and even take their own lives. Equally they can spend their declining years in uneventful happiness. In the end, one is left with a sense of the richness of individual experience.

And also mutuality. My last impression from reading this volume is what a clubbable lot our notables were not just in the Melbourne Club or Sydney's Union and Australia's clubs but as Wallabies, Savages and Boobooks in the national capital that was Melbourne in the early years of this century.

Stuart Macintyre, 'A Monumental Series Marches On', *Age* [Melbourne] (1 October 1983), p. 18.

Book Review

Mark McGinness, Review of *ADB*, vol. 18 (2012)

Review, Melanie Nolan, Gen. Ed., *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 18: 1981–1990, L–Z, Melbourne University Press, 2012

Last year the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* celebrated its 50th anniversary and to crown it, Melbourne University Press has published Volume 18, completing an account of Australian lives which ended between 1981 and 1990. It begins with Maurice Lachberg, trade unionist, communist and cabinet-maker; and finishes with Mervyn Zischke, apostle and leader of the Apostolic Church of Queensland. If this gives a hint of the eclectic mix, a flick through the pages and 669 lives confirms it—there's Bing Lee and Ben Lexcen, John Meillon and Hephzibah Menuhin, Lloyd Ross and Lloyd Rees, Sir John Pagan and Sir Sidney Pope, Patrick White and Cyril Pearl, Douglas Stewart and Kenneth Slessor, Robert Trimbole and Kylie Tennant, Margaret Woodhouse and Olwen Wooster.

One expects a solid representation of generals and judges, politicians and pastoralists, artists and academics and they duly appear. The convicts (50 of them) and pastoralists of the early volumes have given way to community workers and businessmen. There are no less than 100 knights in Volume 18. The two benighted Billies—McMahon and Snedden—are given fair and thorough assessments. Lionel Murphy's eventful life and its tragic end are judiciously dealt with by Brian Galligan, with a generous tribute from Michael Kirby and a neat quote from Barry Jones, 'a passionate participant in the human adventure. He was magnetic, fearless and even reckless'.

The *ADB* formula is long-established—how they looked and what they did to make it in; but also their parentage, education, partners and issues—even the precise medical cause of death, the funeral arrangements and, until recently, the extent of the deceased's estate.

And while the great and the good are well represented, there has been a great effort to honour the aim to reflect 'the Australian experience'. There is a solid representation of Indigenous Australians—Cinderella Simon and Valentine McGinness; councillors and activists, a cameleer, a clergyman, two campaigners and at last a governor, Sir Doug Nicholls.

There are about 160 women—more than in any of the previous 17 volumes. Apart from nurses, nuns and educationists, there are three booksellers, a beautician, and a botanist, a pianist and a puppeteer. Dames Enid Lyons and Merlyn Myer sit comfortably among the entries with Enid Lorimer and Olga Masters, Christina Stead and Grace Cossington-Smith. And Ethel (Monte) Punshon, described in the 1980s as the world's oldest lesbian. She died in 1989 aged 106, having taught English in Tokyo and was appointed to the Japanese Order of the Sacred Treasure.

The *ADB* is something of a sacred treasure itself. When Volume 1 appeared, Professor Geoffrey Blainey predicted the *ADB* would 'probably be the most valuable reference work in Australian history; it is already one of the most readable works on Australia history'. He concluded, 'The last article in these volumes records briefly the life of Yuranigh, an aboriginal guide and traveller who died west of the Blue Mountains in 1850. The anonymous author quotes a tribute by Sir Thomas Mitchell to this obscure aboriginal: "his intelligence and his judgment rendered him so necessary to me that he was ever at my elbow." The same will be said of these volumes for years to come'.

Has the *ADB* held up to that promise? It's true, most of its reviewers (including this one) have also been contributors, but a half-century of sustained scholarship and 12,000 Australian lives is an extraordinary achievement.

Biographer (and contributor) A. W. Martin wrote, 'Plain, clear narrative is required, especially in the minor entries, and the pages fold quietly over corpses being decently docketed and laid back to rest'. This reviewer's entry on Sir Douglas Wadley, 'solicitor and company director', was one of these—a sober account of a good man and a gifted, public-spirited professional. There are many like this—so matter-of-fact, as dry as the outback in drought. Part of this is a legacy of the first editor, Douglas Pike, who had a distaste for adjectives and adverbs, maintaining, half in jest, as there were no adjectives in the Psalms there would be none in the *ADB*. But more importantly, in its authoritativeness and its zeal for the truth, the *ADB* dares to be dull. It is, after all, a dictionary.

Yet many an adjective, anecdote and vivid vignette survive, adding immeasurably to an appreciation of the subject and the readability of the text. There is a sparkling entry by K. S. Inglis of Stephen Murray-Smith. As a commissioning editor, 'His imagined typical reader was a matron at a hospital somewhere near Port Hedland'. There is Lloyd Rees exhibition's after his visit to Chartres Cathedral: 'he envisaged Australia through European eyes, and Europe through Australian eyes'. And Sir Colin Syme, 'one of the leading businessmen of his generation ... although living in Toorak, he continued to drive an old Holden

car, used a battered plastic briefcase...' And heart surgeon, Harry Windsor, 'When he first started cardiac surgery he used to sleep next to the patient's bed and he did this for years'.

While traditionally the *ADB* has stuck to the straight and narrow, taking the public road where the issue of sexuality is rarely crossed, the last few volumes have opened the odd bedroom door. We learn of Sir Billy Snedden, 'Returning to his Rushcutters Bay motel room with a female companion in the early hours of 26 June, he died there soon after of coronary artery disease'. Hal Porter apparently had relations with a son of his biographer. After the war, journalist Sam White, '... returned to Europe and began an affair with the novelist Nancy Mitford, using his volatile friendship with her to gather stories on British expatriates in Paris'. In its impeccable devotion to the facts, the *ADB*, and the author, rely on an obituary by Robert Haupt in the *Age* as the source of the claim but the affair is a surprise to no less than four of Miss Mitford's biographers.

The *ADB* is full of surprises but the biggest surprise is how little known it remains. Since 2006 it has been available online—and free but, it must be said, that no Australian library, home or office, should be without those 18 royal blue-jacketed tomes, the ultimate source of the Australian experience.

Mark McGinness, 'The Aussie Experience', *Canberra Times* (13 July 2013), 'Panorama', p. 23