By their words and their deeds, you shall know them: Writing live biographical subjects—A memoir

NICHOLA GARVEY

In 1791 James Boswell published *The Life of Samuel Johnson LLD*, a biography unlike anything that had come before it; indeed, few have matched it since.¹ Written some 230 years ago, it was published to wide acclaim for its unconventional style in detailing the private life of its subject. Boswell's subject, Samuel Johnson, was both his muse and his mentor. At the time, Johnson was the most celebrated biographer of his day. His approach was innovative and a stark departure from the usual style of the time, which focused on successes in public life and on pedigree and steered away from anything to do with the private life. Johnson, however, believed readers could learn as much from a person's mistakes and foibles as from their successes, and that there was no better 'instructive' medium than biography:

No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.²

In Johnson, Boswell had the perfect biographical subject. Johnson not only aided the career of his young protégé with both access and freedom from censorship, but also was able to counsel the younger man in the ways of his own groundbreaking approach to biography. All told, Boswell spent 270 days with Johnson over the course of 21 years, capturing the subject's 'authentic talk' and nuances, habits and patterns of behaviour. Boswell would, at the end of a long day with Johnson, write by candlelight throughout the night to capture the experience so that 'none of the freshness and glow might fade'.³ Ultimately, Boswell went far deeper into character, nuance and private life than his mentor ever did so that, in time, Boswell became a more celebrated biographer than his subject.

The biographical theorist Park Honan has described *The Life of Johnson* as the first biography to utilise 'expressivist anthropology'—a methodology that focuses not on the grand public gestures but on the smaller deeds and actions that often are more

1 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson. Abridged and Edited with an Introduction by Charles Grosvenor Osgood* (Project Gutenberg, 2006 [1791]), www.gutenberg.org/files/1564/1564-h/1564-h.htm.

2 Samuel Johnson, 'The Rambler 60 (13 October 1750)', in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, eds Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 9–12, doi.org/10.1515/9783110516678-002.

3 Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 9.

revealing about a person's true character and intent.⁴ In asserting this, he was agreeing with Plutarch's contention that 'the most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues and vices of the men who performed them'.⁵

This article explores the theme of expressivist anthropology in biography through my personal experience of writing the authorised biography of the Australian businessman and mining mogul Andrew Forrest. While it did not quite match Boswell's two decades and 270 days with Johnson, my interaction with the subject spanned approximately 10 years and 100 days. This close and lengthy chronicling gave me insights into Forrest's persona that no amount of research from afar could have achieved. Anthropologists call this close chronicling of life 'field research' and, according to anthropologist Joseph Casagrande, it is a challenging scientific undertaking because of the tricky balance between being a 'participant' and an 'observer'. To observe properly means to participate, but to participate the biographer must be careful not to identify too closely with the subject: 'If he is an objective scientist, he cannot go native, neither can he hold himself aloof and observe human behaviour as a naturalist might watch a colony of ants'.⁶

While there can be no better place to understand the interior motive than by being with subjects as they go about their day, biographical portraiture undertaken in this way is inherently risky. The challenge for biographers pursuing an expressivist anthropological approach is maintaining the distance required for objective analysis. Although elements of Boswell's biography of Johnson might be seen as panegyrical or overly fawning, this is offset by what the reader gains in the detail of Johnson's day-to-day life.

Who is Andrew Forrest?

Andrew Forrest is one of Australia's most successful businessmen, a self-made billionaire who bulldozed his way into the global iron ore industry by founding in 2003 a new mining company called Fortescue Metals Group (FMG). Iron is of course the key ingredient that goes into making steel—one of the most ubiquitous and important products of the modern world. What is remarkable about his story is that Forrest was able to achieve what some of the largest mining companies in the world have never been able to. Numerous global mining conglomerates have tried to break into the iron ore industry without success. The sheer size of investment

4 According to Honan, the philosopher Charles Taylor first coined the term 'expressivist anthropology'. Park Honan, 'Theory of Biography', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 13, No. 1 (Autumn 1979): 109–20, doi.org/10.2307/1344955.

5 Plutarch, cited in Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 252, doi.org/10.4159/9780674038226.

6 Joseph, B. Casagrande, *In the Company of Man: Twenty Portraits by Anthropologists*, reprint (London: Forgotten Books, 2018 [1960]), xii.

required to build an iron ore company presents an almost insurmountable barrier to entry, perhaps more than any other industry. Yet Forrest did it, and he did it without the backing of big business and without any personal capital. He was practically bankrupt, having even sold his family home, when he decided to break into iron ore, after a previous nickel-mining venture called Anaconda Nickel left him in a precarious financial position and his business reputation in tatters.

Iron ore is a lucrative industry. Fifty years before the birth of FMG, in 1952, Lang Hancock made his fortune after he discovered the largest iron ore deposit in the world while flying his light plane back to his station in the Pilbara. Hancock then sold the rights to mine the deposit to the mining company Rio Tinto. From the royalties alone, Hancock became the richest man in Australia without having to build any of the infrastructure required to mine the iron ore. By the time Forrest decided to enter the industry, it was thought all the large deposits had been found. He not only had to discover deposits that no-one believed were there, but also had to then build an entire mining operation, including 260 kilometres of railway line, road infrastructure, a deep-water port to handle bulk carriers carrying loads of up to 400,000 tonnes, not to mention facilities to accommodate up to 10,000 workers. Big mining is largely about big finance and Forrest raised more than A\$2.9 billion in first-round finance despite his venture being a stand-alone start-up.

A number of things had to occur simultaneously for Forrest to pull off this seemingly impossible business feat, but perhaps the most important was the rise of China, which doubled the global demand for iron ore from 500 million tonnes to 1 billion tonnes in five years. For the previous two decades there had been barely any movement in demand, upwards or downwards. Forrest predicted the rise of China, raised billions of dollars on the back of that prediction and built the infrastructure required within 18 months. Pulling it off will go down as one of the most impressive business feats in Australian, and perhaps global, corporate history.

In the midst of building FMG, Forrest devoted whatever spare capacity he had to philanthropic endeavours. His initiatives in this area have been equally ambitious and include pledges to end Indigenous poverty, find a cure for cancer and eliminate global slavery. Yet, despite Forrest's business success and his commitment to philanthropy, there remained a distinct whiff of scepticism in people's opinions about him. While it was true he had an army of followers—people who loved, respected and admired him—there were many who despised him. A large part of this negative commentary was due to the fiasco of Anaconda Nickel. Many of the company's backers, including ordinary 'mum and dad' investors, lost their money, and Forrest was the public face of Anaconda Nickel. There was an overarching cynicism, primarily in business circles, and a view that Forrest was a man not to be trusted. The issue of his trustworthiness was something I knew I needed to interrogate if I were to unlock his biography.

Things stick out when I am interviewing people. Sometimes I don't know why I am struck by a particular statement, quote or opinion, but I find myself returning to it time and again, going over it in my mind, bothered by it because I feel it is important somehow but I don't quite yet know where it fits. It usually resolves itself—in time. When I started on the Andrew Forrest biography, I was at the tail end of writing FMG's 10-year anniversary book.⁷ During the course of my research, I was in a helicopter with geologist Eamon Hannon, Fortescue's head of exploration. We were in the Pilbara—a remote part of Australia—desert-like, sparsely vegetated, hot and virtually uninhabited. He had taken me out to see what an iron ore outcrop might look like, how they explored for it and how they drilled for it. In the course of that excursion, I told Hannon about my newly appointed position as Forrest's biographer and joked that I was not the first person on Forrest's list to write his biography, or the second—in fact, I was nowhere on the list.

'It's doesn't matter,' Hannon said. 'You got the job.'

As it would turn out, getting a job with Forrest was something of an adventure and Hannon was one who would know. Early in the FMG story, he was sent to the Pilbara exploration camp as the new head of exploration. Forrest had not let the incumbent, Barry Knight, know about his new hire or that he had been replaced. Things had not been going well and no reserves of iron ore had yet been found. Knight, who, compared with the others in the camp, had first-class accommodation—a second-hand caravan—flung open the door to find Hannon.

'G'day, mate,' said Hannon. 'I'm the new head of exploration.'

'Well that's news to me, junior,' said Knight and slammed the door.

Hannon knocked again, a little louder.

'How about you and me walk over to that hill out yonder? The first one back gets to keep the job,' Hannon said.

Knight studied him for a moment. He would not be surprised if Forrest had given the job to someone else, the way things were going. He was not interested in 'walking out yonder' for a bare-knuckle fight with 'some long-haired yahoo'; the company probably would not survive the next few months in any case.

'You can have the job,' he told Hannon, 'but you're not getting the caravan.'

That was fine for Hannon; he preferred sleeping under the stars anyway and, according to Hannon, it did not matter whether I was first pick as biographer—I had the job and that was what mattered.⁸

7 Nichola Garvey, *Sense of Purpose: Fortescue's 10-Year Journey 2003–2013* (Perth: Fortescue Metals Group, 2013).

8 Interview with Eamon Hannon, Pilbara, Western Australia, 26 July 2012.

Figure 1 The author with Eamon Hannon

Source: Author collection, 26 July 2012.

I tell this story for two reasons: first, to introduce the ruggedness of the Pilbara, where the Andrew Forrest story is based, where there is no mobile phone reception, no running water, where the best accommodation is a used caravan, where things need to be settled there and then and where a large part of Australia's economic prosperity lies; and second, because this habit of hiring someone for a job without informing the incumbent happened all too often with Forrest. It happened to his head of finance, it happened to his head of human resources and it happened to me. People were rarely sacked; when they were replaced, they just had to move over, find themselves another job in the company or go elsewhere. But, for now, at least, *I* had the job as biographer.

But what struck me about that conversation with Hannon was that it appeared that, despite my inexperience in biography (having published only one book), there seemed to be an acceptance that I might be the right person for the job. I had done various bits of writing for Forrest on and off over the past five years and was now writing the company book.

'You know him. You've worked with him. You've *seen* what he can be like,' Hannon remarked with a slight sense of foreboding. 'Well, good luck. You're going to bloody need it.'

Those closest to Forrest understood that he was a far more complex character than his public persona conveyed. That comment from Hannon stuck with me: yes indeed, *I have seen what he can be like*. More than that, over the years of working with him, I have experienced what he can be like. I was both participant and observer. It was an invaluable window into the art of biography, but it was also challenging and taxing, and I am unlikely to ever work with someone as closely on their biography again.

Forrest called me in 2011, three years after we met, to ask me whether I could recommend a biographer to write his story. I had recently completed my first biography on a little-known and intensely private gambling magnate, Alan Tripp, which had just been published by HarperCollins. So, when Forrest's call came, of course I thought he was asking me whether I was interested.

‘No, no, no. My advisers are telling me I need a well-known writer, someone *famous*,’ he told me.

Fame and his penchant to be associated with it were among the first quirky things I observed about Forrest. Over the years, I have seen him associate himself time and again with whoever was trending at the time, including Malala Yousafzai, Donald Trump and even Pope Francis. As a young stockbroker fresh out of university, he cold-called some of the biggest names in Australian business, and the benefits he gained far outweighed the multitude of rejections. In 1990, as a young man, he was in the Democratic Republic of Congo travelling around with a friend when they heard of Nelson Mandela’s historic release from prison. The two of them flew to South Africa, joined in with the street celebrations and decided to knock on Mandela’s front door. It was heavily guarded and they were rebuffed, so they instead went to Desmond Tutu’s house, where they were admitted and had tea. Instinctively, Forrest has, from a young age, sought out famous people, whether it be in politics, world athletics, religion or Hollywood.

So, when it came to writing his biography, my lack of fame told against me and I was quickly set straight that he was not calling to establish my interest in the project, but merely for advice on who *would* be a good biographer. We spoke about some obvious Australian biographers and some less obvious choices and he made some unusual suggestions, such as the US writer/demographer Malcolm Gladwell, the British historian Niall Ferguson and the Australian novelist Tim Winton, but ultimately he settled on no-one. I continued working on Fortescue’s corporate history, while over the next year Forrest occasionally floated the possibility of one biographer or another. But in the end, I was given the job. One could argue that I had reasonable credentials: I knew him, I could write, I wrote biography, but above all (and with the benefit of hindsight), I think I ended up with the job because I was a person Forrest thought he could control.

When I first started working on Forrest’s biography, the issue of control quickly became a central theme. His driving need to control, and his ability to orchestrate events and manipulate people to get what he wanted, was a dominant character trait. Like all dominant character traits, it was both an asset and a liability. It was also the starting point for the polarising effect he has on people. Forrest is a likeable character. Quick to smile, easy to banter, he is a larrikin with impeccable manners. It is as though, growing up on a 100,000-hectare station in the heart of the Pilbara, he had read about the mores and graces of the landed gentry in a century-old book. He kisses the hands of women and calls men ‘sir’, always opens the door for others and walks on the road-side of the footpath. I have no doubt that, if there was a puddle over which a woman must walk, he would throw down his cape. He is unusually tactile. He kisses both cheeks of women and hugs men often. He loves everybody and liberally says so. In fact, familiarity goes hand in hand with his charm.

Within the space of our first meeting—a three-day trip to Fitzroy Crossing in north-west Western Australia—we had become firm friends and, apparently, I was now part of the Forrest family. We were there at the invitation of June Oscar and other Indigenous women elders to help push through an alcohol moratorium. He seemed just as familiar with Aboriginal people as he was with others and invoked long family and country connections to gain trust and legitimacy. He knew how to connect with Aboriginal people and would speak personably and intimately with those he met: ‘I knew your grandmother when I was a little fella’ or ‘I skipped rocks with your dad’ were typical phrases he might use. He was exceptionally acute at finding common bonds with people from all walks of life. He has the ability to make anyone feel they are the most important person in the room. He builds people up, zeroes in on them and makes a person feel they are part of his inner circle. The effect it has on people is both varied and extraordinary. For some, it might be described as intoxicating. On a business trip to Japan in the 1980s, he convinced his business partner Albert Wong that Wong could speak Japanese even though he knew only a few phrases. ‘One thing about Andrew is that he can make people do things they wouldn’t otherwise think possible,’ said Wong:

He has this ability to boost one’s confidence, you felt you were invincible. I remember we were in Japan, and I couldn’t really speak Japanese and Andrew said, ‘Yes, you can’, and for some reason I thought I could speak Japanese for a while, but in fact all I was doing was speaking English with a Japanese accent.⁹

After the trip to Fitzroy Crossing, I, too, drank the ‘Forrest Kool-Aid’, but did I really believe I was part of the Forrest family? No; at least, not yet. At the time, he struck me as someone who lived fully in the moment and who bored easily. His overenthusiasm and abundant compliments came across as a touch disingenuous, but I still liked him, and his showmanship was highly entertaining. He was good fun to be with and seemed not to take himself too seriously; even his mobile ring tone was amusing: the whistled theme tune from the Clint Eastwood film *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*.

Other people, however, could not abide him. For some, his swagger and overeffusiveness made him seem too ‘salesy’ and, by extension, untrustworthy. Despite the detractors, Forrest’s charm was without doubt one of his most effective methods of getting what he wanted.

Control was the entire impetus behind his search for a biographer in the first place. There was an *unauthorised* biography being written about him by journalist Andrew Burrell, commissioned by Melbourne publisher Black Inc. For someone like Forrest, so preoccupied with being in control, it got under his skin that someone was attempting to tell *his* life story. Burrell worked as a financial journalist for

9 Interview with Albert Wong, 17 March 2014.

The Australian and had covered the mining boom since 2006 so, on the face of it, he at least had industry understanding. Forrest would constantly grumble about Burrell being a mediocre journalist *at best*, citing this or that example of him 'getting it wrong'. He had even tried to pay Burrell to drop the project. He told Burrell he would match whatever Black Inc. was paying him if he would just ... go away. But Burrell persisted and so Forrest instructed everyone he knew not to talk to him, and mostly he was successful.

If charm did not work, Forrest had other methods to exert control. He could be highly combative and had no compunction about crossing swords with anyone. I discovered that people were wary about speaking candidly of Forrest. Even after he had phoned or written to someone notifying them that they had free rein to tell me anything, I always detected a slight reticence, as though people were carefully choosing their words. Little by little, however, there were patterns of behaviour that kept resurfacing. His combativeness was one such trait, and not just in business circles. He could be equally bellicose in philanthropy as towards journalists attempting to write his unauthorised biography.¹⁰ For Forrest, charm and pugnacity were as complementary as salt was to pepper in his pursuit of control.

While most people were cautious about speaking out against Forrest, Simon Lill, an old school friend, seemed to have a longstanding grudge against him, a seething contempt that at first I found hard to comprehend.¹¹ They had attended the same private school, lived together as young adults and had worked together in stockbroking. It was at a time when stockbroking in Western Australia resembled the Wild West—anything went. In the 1980s, the government began cracking down on insider trading, which was rife, and Lill fell foul of the new regulations and ended up spending a year in prison. By the time he got out, Forrest had already set up his first mining company, Anaconda Nickel, and offered Lill a job. One day, Forrest, Lill and a few others were sitting around the board table when Lill said something disagreeable to Forrest—perhaps he was rude or interrupted someone, which was a huge Forrest bugbear stemming from his chronic stutter as a kid. Perhaps Lill said something a bit too familiar. Lill could not perfectly recollect what it was, but three decades later, he remembered the sting of the rebuke. Forrest put him squarely in his place. Until that moment, Lill considered himself a peer, but after that meeting, he was in no doubt about his position in the hierarchy. Forrest was the boss, and Lill had better not forget it.

10 Throughout 2014 and 2015, Forrest worked closely with the Vatican on his 'ending global slavery' agenda. However, he ended up falling out with the highest echelons of the Papal administration essentially due to the issue of control and Forrest not wanting to cede it to the Vatican. He has fallen out with Indigenous groups, too, when they have challenged his authority or decisions.

11 Interview with Simon Lill, November 2012.

This was not the only example of Forrest coldly putting employees in their place. His butler of 10 years, John—who drives the family around Perth and is valet in various other aspects of life—is with the family day in and day out. He is a genial man, eager to please, unassuming and compliant, and about the same age as Forrest. One year, he was invited to spend Christmas with the family at their farm. He told of the joking playfulness and then suddenly, out of nowhere, Forrest rounded on him. Seemingly, John had become a bit *too* familiar and he was put swiftly in his place in such a way that he was brought to tears. Christmas was ruined, for John at least. If Forrest used familiarity as part of his charm, it was a one-way street. He alone set the tenor of the ‘friendship’ and he was liable to change it at will.

In the workplace, too, I began noticing a similar pattern in the stories people were telling—the way in which Forrest would court people, flatter them, literally hug them, throw an arm around their shoulders, call them his family, joke and laugh ... and then, whammo! I developed a label for this behaviour: the ‘kiss-kiss, kick’! It was extremely effective. This excerpt from my draft biography illustrates this trait:

[In the early days of Fortescue,] Company Secretary, Malcolm James, was standing in the middle of the office and joked about being an iron ore company with no iron ore. Forrest leapt out of his chair and pulled him into a meeting room.

‘Mate,’ Forrest seethed. ‘If you’ve got serious doubts that we’re going to get there, then express them to me in private—don’t burden other people with your fears.’

Campbell was shocked. The coldness in his [Forrest’s] eyes, the tone of his voice ... He and Forrest had been friends for a while now, even their wives were friends, but this was something new. There was a side to Forrest’s personality that made people wary of him. He had an ability to make people feel like they were his best mate, that they were part of the inner circle but every now and again he would take a 180 degree turn and cut you down. He did it to almost everybody. Beyond the friendly, chatty persona was a character that could use words to slice a person in two. Yet this, at times, acid tongue, was amazingly effective at keeping people in check. If the Army employed a tactic of kick, kick, *kiss* to fortify the troops and engender loyalty, Forrest’s way was more kiss, kiss, *kick*. And when he returned to the smiling, friendly Forrest, as he always did, there was left a small kernel of wariness that kept people forever slightly on the back foot.¹²

I knew it was only a matter of time before my ‘kick’ came, and when it did I, too, was shocked and brought to tears. I was in the midst of writing the company book and had just spent a whirlwind five days in Western Australia, interviewing dozens of people, traipsing around the Pilbara. I landed back in Sydney on a Friday night after a five-hour flight. My husband and two-year-old son had just pulled up at the airport but before I could open the car door the phone rang. It was Forrest.

12 Nichola Garvey, ‘Land of the Giants: How Andrew Forrest Bulldozed his Way into Big Business’, Draft ms, 28 October 2016, 135.

He wanted to know why the company book was not finished. I explained that I was still interviewing people. I told him *your* people have set these interviews up; I can't write what I don't know.

These are the words I remember him saying:

Is it acceptable to you that a key part of my marketing and engagement strategy is late?
Is it acceptable to you that *you* are the reason which will hold this great company back?

Then he put me on hold. I got in the car in shock. I had barely had enough time to scratch myself the entire week and I had never spent so long away from my son. Emotionally and physically, I felt I had put in as much as I was able.

'How was your trip?' my husband asked.

'Great,' I smiled.

Inside I felt deflated, hurt and, yes, that I needed to perform *better*. I resolved that I *would* do better. That was my first Forrest kick and it (and my response to it) was a sign that I was going 'native'. Or was it?

Biography is essentially about uncovering the truth. The truth of character reveals itself in the behavioural patterns of the subject. Honan alluded to these patterns by what he calls 'feelings' in biography. According to him, modern biography has two complementing structures: the facts of lives (the chronology) and the feeling of a life. 'Modern biography,' he wrote, 'succeeds or fails through its structure of feelings ... This always involves a tactic, a scheme of selection, and a method of handling the relationship between biographer and biographee.'¹³ What he is referring to is the process of portrayal; what to include or exclude to paint a picture. While anomalies in behaviour can be illuminating in their own way, the patterns in behaviour are what reveal the truth about character.

In the end, Burrell's biography did suffer from the lack of access imposed by Forrest. Burrell covered Forrest's public life more fully and analytically than could be achieved in short format. Yet, although he achieved a chronology, his treatment of Forrest lacked the complexity of character, motivations and reasoning to lift the work to insightful heights. In Park Honan's parlance, it lacked *feeling*. After its publication, Forrest's feverish pursuit of a commissioned biography dissipated. Whatever he feared about Burrell's book did not eventuate. He still wanted to continue with the authorised biography—in part, I think because he enjoyed having a biographer around as part of his retinue, but also because he is especially diligent about documenting history.¹⁴

¹³ Honan, 'Theory of Biography', 112.

¹⁴ I have written one of two Fortescue books, as well as two articles to do with Forrest's Indigenous philanthropy. He has also commissioned a historian to write the history of the family pastoral lease, Minderoo.

The sales of the Burrell biography were modest and, in response, my publisher was wary of producing another biography that might till similar ground. Having read my first draft, he advised me to go back and dig deeper as it, too, lacked ‘feeling’ and it needed to come at the story from a different vantage point. I had the unenviable task of telling Forrest that the ‘cradle to present-day’ story I had drafted was unlikely to attract interest from publishers. I pitched to him starting anew, but this time it would be all about the business story, an Australian version of *Barbarians at the Gate*, with all of the snakes-and-ladders intrigue that big business entailed.¹⁵ Until that point, which was about a year into the project, Forrest had been an awkward subject. He was almost impossible to book time with. For our first proper sit-down interview, I had flown to Perth from Sydney to conduct a three-hour intensive question-and-answer session, to broadly outline the details of his life. It was to be the first block interview of many, or so I thought. But things did not quite work out that way. Instead of the quiet sit-down, I was ushered into a chauffeur-driven car to attend the opening of a Linfox trucking logistics facility. *No problems*, I was reassured, *we can do the interview as we’re driving there*.

The three-hour slot I had been allocated was taken up with opening speeches, an Aboriginal welcome to country, a meet and greet with the Western Australian premier and a tour of the facility with Lindsay Fox, his two sons, a film crew and a handful of journalists. So, my interview was reduced to just 30 minutes en route to Forrest’s next engagement—a lunchtime speech at the Perth Convention Centre. As we cruised through an avenue of shops, Forrest instructed his chauffeur to pull over and he asked me whether I wanted a coffee.

‘Sure. I’ll have a flat white, thanks.’

‘John, mate. Can you run over and grab two *skinny* flat whites?’

Interesting, I thought. I am not a fan of skinny milk nor am I particularly body conscious. I was not offended but I did find it curious that Forrest chose to ignore what I had asked for. Over the subsequent four years, I was to discover that this was not a mere slip, an accident or a localised incident; it was a consistent theme. He was domineering. He took charge. He honestly believed he knew best, about *everything*. It was a trait that governed his personal, business and philanthropic endeavours. As I was to witness, time and time again, this attitude pervaded even the most minor interactions with Forrest, such as ordering a cup of coffee, and was painful to witness and, perhaps more so, to experience.

¹⁵ Bryan Burrough and John Helyar, *Barbarians at the Gate: The Fall of RJR Nabisco* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

Money and power

When the acclaimed biographer Robert Caro set out to write his biography of Robert Moses, which became the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Power Broker*, he understood from the outset that the book was really about power.¹⁶ Caro's deep curiosity was with how power operated in reality, not how it was enshrined in legislation and legal codes. Moses had refused to cooperate with Caro, but after years of dedicated research, doggedly inching closer to Moses's inner circle, Caro's subject relented and granted him a series of interviews. At first, the biographer trod gently, teasing out his subject's perspective on the many events in which he had been involved, but as soon as Caro broached a sensitive topic, such as the corruption that underlay city planning decisions, Moses shut the door and refused any further communication.¹⁷ Caro's book was unauthorised but it allowed him to honestly consider his subject's pursuit of power. After the initial publisher's advance had evaporated, Caro and his wife, Ina, experienced many difficult years financially in pursuit of the truth about Moses's life and career, and in particular the way he had learned to exert power and influence. It took Caro seven years to write the book and the result was an uncompromising portrait, which was widely praised, won awards and established the author as one of the United States' leading biographers. My book about Forrest, by contrast, was not only authorised, it was also commissioned and, while that approach supposedly would remove obstacles pertaining to access, it also threw up many more issues. According to Hamilton and Renders in *The ABC of Modern Biography*, no biographer should enter into an authorised agreement lightly. Such an agreement will *always* involve giving up one's independence.¹⁸

After I told Forrest that I had to start anew, that I wanted to write a *Barbarians at the Gate*-style exposé about big mining, something occurred that I had not expected: he softened. He let his guard down, he gave me more time and allowed me to interview him and properly investigate his business story. Looking back, I think it was perhaps because I told him that I did not need more *money* to complete the task, I just needed more time. While much of Forrest's story is about power, a lot of it is also to do with *money*—how it has motivated Forrest, his acuity in the employment of capital, how he uses it to manipulate people by withholding and promising it and his absolute obsession with it, despite all of his declarations to the contrary.

16 Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

17 Robert Caro, *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing* (New York: Knopf, 2019).

18 Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 14.

Figure 2 From left: Nichola Garvey, Robert Caro, Ina Caro, Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders at the Biographers International Organisation, New York, 2019

Source: Author collection.

Figure 3 In China in 2014, from left: Nichola Garvey, former prime minister John Howard and Andrew Forrest

Source: Author collection.

That decision to start again was both a good and a bad one. It turned out to be a bad decision for my personal finances as I thought it would take perhaps another year to complete a second version of the manuscript, but it ended up taking three. But it turned out to be a good move from the perspective of shifting the balance of power. Until that point, Forrest expected me to jump when he said jump. He would often give me no notice of his demands but expect me to respond without question. He once called unexpectedly and asked me to be at his Sydney office in 15 minutes. It was a Saturday afternoon and I got there in 30 minutes. When I arrived, he asked me why I was late, and then spent

just 15 minutes with me before going to see a movie with his daughters. On another occasion, I received an email from his secretary with a request to join Forrest for lunch. It was about 11 am. I was looking after my young son that day and, with no hope of getting a babysitter at short notice, I declined. Five minutes later, the phone rang, and it was Forrest. He rebuked me for not calling him personally to decline, rather than responding to his secretary's email, with words to the effect: 'Do you really want this gig at all if you're not prepared to go the extra mile?' I remember standing in the middle of a playground at a loss about what to say to him. Should I have responded to him directly instead of responding via the medium from which it was sent? I don't think so. And that was what it was like working with Forrest—a constant kiss-kick. Forrest seemed to think people should be grateful for the mere opportunity of working with him, with no corresponding appreciation for their efforts. David Mendelawitz, a plucky young geologist who had started with Fortescue before they had even discovered iron ore, was called a 'traitor' by Forrest because he declined the role of mine manager. Mendelawitz had a one-week-old baby at home and did not want to be away from his family for weeks at a stretch. After all the hard work and effort Mendelawitz had devoted to the project, it was a statement he found hard to take. 'I know where my loyalties lie,' Mendelawitz said.¹⁹ However, when Forrest stopped paying me, he also stopped expecting me to jump when he said jump. 'We're now business partners,' he said.

A curious thing about Forrest is that he is notoriously parsimonious when it comes to money. In the early days of Fortescue, this was necessary. Like all start-ups, for Fortescue, money was tight. Forrest would instruct his staff to wash their socks and jocks in the hotel sink rather than send it to a laundry. When negotiating with suppliers for the construction of a section of railway or road, his staff drove hard on pricing and Forrest would then ring and ask for a further 5 or 10 per cent off the agreed price, and he would *always* achieve it. It was a classic one-two approach to negotiation (as I was later to personally experience). He would send his staff in to negotiate hard and then when the supplier thought the deal was done Forrest would come in and negotiate harder still.

Staff were often paid well below market rates. The chief financial officer, Chris Catlow, took a pay cut, earning one-sixth of his market rate to work at Fortescue, and invested his personal money in the business, too. Again, this is not uncommon and is often necessary in start-ups. Yet even after Fortescue's success and Forrest's ascension to the spot as Australia's richest person, his parsimoniousness never went away. He is even proud of it and calls it frugality. But is it frugality when other people are wearing the cost? On a trip in 2014 via the Vatican and then London, eight of us went out to dinner. When the bill arrived, Forrest made no move to pay and, in the end, it was paid by Raza Jafar, a Pakistani philanthropist and billionaire.

19 Garvey, 'Land of the Giants', 182.

I thought it was strange that Forrest did not move to pay the bill given that we were all, including Jafar, his guests. I spoke to Jafar about it afterwards, having noticed this trait a few times.

‘Why does he do that?’

‘He’s not used to being a billionaire,’ Jafar surmised.

But it was more than that. If Forrest paid for something, he made sure to point it out.

‘I paid for the banana bread,’ he once said at a café inside Parliament House in Canberra. *So what?*

His secretary once described Forrest as *generous*. ‘Okay,’ I said to her: ‘Describe that to me.’ The example she gave was of Forrest donating Christmas lunch to a nursing home at a cost of about \$350. I asked her to give me some more examples but that seemed to be the largest of them. It was odd because Forrest makes such grand announcements when donating large sums to charity, but then seems almost hypervigilant about the most minor donations. On another occasion, he was asked to fund 20 wheelchairs for disabled former rugby players. Given Forrest had recently started his own rugby competition, it was thought he might be open to the initiative. He demurred, saying he would donate just one chair.

My replacement as biographer

In 2015, I sent my completed manuscript to Forrest and agreed to meet him in Perth the next day. Dispensing with greetings, his first words to me were: ‘I’ve read the first hundred pages and I’m beginning to think you don’t like me!’

He was half-joking. He was also half-right.

I was starting to feel resentful at how long the project was taking (four years by now) and how he kept encouraging me to do more and give it ‘10 per cent more effort’. I think the words were: ‘You’ve given it your perspiration, now give it another 10 per cent of inspiration’, or some such platitude. The truth was, I was burnt out and flat broke, and relying on my husband to keep the family finances afloat.

The whole ‘we’ll be friends for life’ shtick was beginning to wear thin, too. He would call me ‘family’ but had no idea about my family. We had known each other for a decade and in the previous four years spoke at least weekly, yet he would never ask about my family. Every so often he might offhandedly ask, ‘What does your husband do again?’ I would tell him, knowing it would instantly be forgotten.

Over the next two days, we were meant to read through the entire manuscript but at the end of the second day we had barely reached page 40. It was excruciatingly slow, and I told him so.

‘This is important stuff. If you have to come back 10 times then that’s what we’ll have to do,’ he said.

‘I can’t keep going over the same ground with you. I have to finish so that I can move on to other assignments and earn money,’ I told him. He knew that I had not been paid a cent in three years. That made absolutely no impact on him. He would keep going over the same things, no matter how long it took. The issue was that he did not entirely like my take on certain events. He would keep repeating his version, as if on loop, I guess on the assumption that if he repeated his story often enough, I would change my view. But the more I got to know him, the more the patterns became clear and, as a biographer, it became impossible for me to ignore them.

Part of the problem was Forrest’s understanding of what an authorised biography entailed. Certainly, he should be able to correct his own statements or versions of events, but his influence on the text should not extend to other people’s versions of events.²⁰ A good biography seeks to find the truest version of events based on all of the assembled versions. Following only the subject’s version of events is an *autobiography*. I tried, in vain, many times to explain how important it was to allow others’ views to be aired. Early in the project I had given Forrest a copy of Walter Isaacson’s biography of Steve Jobs. The point I was trying to make was that Jobs, a well-known control freak, had allowed Isaacson free rein. Isaacson was a well-known journalist, who had covered Apple Inc. stories over the years and knew Jobs. He had also published a number of biographies including of Henry Kissinger, Albert Einstein and Benjamin Franklin. Jobs chose Isaacson to write his biography because, he told him, ‘I think you’re good at getting people to talk.’²¹ Isaacson later discovered that Jobs was dying of cancer and wanted the public to know about his life in its entirety.

The biography of Jobs, I tried to explain, was not only highly regarded because of the light and shade it revealed of Jobs’s character, but because, by laying bare his failings, Jobs’s brilliance shone through more brightly. I might have saved myself \$50. Forrest never read the book. His response to me was: ‘If you think a control freak like Jobs had no say on the book, then you’re kidding yourself.’ *Was* I kidding myself about Jobs’s non-censorship? I don’t believe so. *Was* I kidding myself thinking I could convince Forrest to lay bare the light and shade in his character? Apparently, yes. Forrest was just 55 years old and was more interested in manufacturing an image of

20 For a fuller account of authorised biography and the pitfalls of this approach, see Hamilton and Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography*, Ch. 1.

21 Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), xvii.

himself than the truth of the story for truth's sake. As biographers and historians, we strive for truth because we know just how invaluable an objective snapshot in time is. Forrest had not yet arrived at that destination. I think he was too young.

Hans Renders, of the University of Groningen, believes the ideal time to write a person's biography is 10 years after their death, when the subject's peers are still alive and have gained a measure of objectivity through time. While there are certain benefits to this approach, much can be gained from firsthand evidence—expressivist anthropology. I knew I needed to do things differently if I was to have any hope of moving Forrest forward with the biography. I convinced him to allow the writer and biographer Peter FitzSimons to read and edit the manuscript, as both an independent third party and someone with enough gravitas to help break the impasse. FitzSimons was my writing mentor; he was also Australia's most successful non-fiction writer, the author of 10 biographies and a further 20 history books. He liked the manuscript and told Forrest so.

'Great!' said Forrest. 'And you should be co-author.'

Rendered redundant

FitzSimons and I went out to lunch to talk about it. He wanted to know whether I would consent to him becoming a co-author and whether I was comfortable with him charging Forrest a sizeable fee for doing so. I was. My reasoning was simple: I knew all along that Forrest wanted a famous author for his biography; he had that in FitzSimons. I also feared that Forrest could keep dragging out the project for years. If anyone could corral Forrest and bring the book to fruition, it was FitzSimons.

Forrest agreed to pay FitzSimons a substantial sum to become co-author. For the deal to go ahead, I would have to sign over my rights to the manuscript to Forrest, which would include all future royalties. Until that point, I had been paid approximately \$120,000, which worked out at around \$30,000 per annum or approximately \$20,000 less than the annual minimum wage.

'Well, Andrew,' I said, 'I've invested just as much money into this book as you have, if not more. So, whatever you pay FitzSimons would surely also be offered to me?'

His exact words were: 'Don't be ridiculous.' Then he suggested that if I did not want to be involved I could just 'step away'.

And just like that, in Forrest's mind, I had served my purpose. I had been replaced. Except that, according to Australian law, he did not own the manuscript; I did. Irrespective of whether he commissioned the project, it remains my intellectual property and on that there was no grey area.

A week or two went past and one of Forrest's personal assistants called to strike a deal. The agreement was for half of what FitzSimons would be paid. I received a text from Forrest to meet him for breakfast the following morning in Sydney. He only had 15 minutes, so he got straight down to business. Half of FitzSimons's deal was too much and he negotiated \$15,000 less. (*Ah, the old one-two.*) It was the same tactic he used on all his business transactions; send someone in to negotiate a deal and then he would push for more. I remember sitting there thinking, *in the time it has taken me to drink this cup of coffee, you've just made \$15,000 in passive income.*²² *This is just a game for you.*

'Fine, Andrew. Let's just agree on it and move on.'

Forrest quickly finished his breakfast and excused himself from the table. He had meetings to get to. Moments later, the waiter arrived at the table with the bill.

By their words and deeds, you shall know them

In the end, the book never went ahead. After he negotiated with me, Forrest then tried to negotiate with the publisher, Hachette Livre. He offered them 10 per cent of sales to publish the book rather than the industry standard of around 40 per cent. It was a strange and disabling time to witness Forrest trying to take complete control over the book, including the authorship, the publication, publicity and everything else that goes into getting a book on the shelves. He did not seem able to let it run its course in the hands of people more experienced than him in the publishing industry. Samuel Johnson called it the 'tyranny of affluence'—those with great wealth also assume great wisdom over whatever they come across.

When Hachette Livre did not agree to Forrest's commercial terms, he simply walked away from the entire project, without so much as a backward glance. His deal with FitzSimons never went ahead and his updated deal with me never went ahead either. I tried a number of times, over the phone and via email, to talk to him about moving forward with the manuscript somehow. I suggested he release me to do an unauthorised account, but he did not want that. He kept promising the book would go ahead. But as the weeks and months drifted by, it became: *we will do the book provided you make certain changes*. Ironically, one of the major changes he wanted me to make was regarding his pattern of *not* fulfilling promises. The months became years. I was never offered an explanation nor any acknowledgement of what I had invested, financially, professionally and personally. I never saw him again. That was three years ago.

22 At the time, Forrest's dividend payments from Fortescue Metals Group were somewhere in the region of \$400 million per annum. At the time of writing this article, his dividend payments were closer to \$1 billion per annum, or \$20 million per week, or roughly \$125,000 per hour.

Johnson believed more knowledge may be gained of a person's real character from manners and behaviour than from a formal and studied narrative of their public life.²³ Boswell was given the permission to write Johnson's life, including those episodes when Johnson had not been 'entirely perfect'. It became an exceptional biography because Boswell was given full authorisation with no strings attached; nothing was out of bounds. That access paved the way for the first expressivist anthropological study, with Boswell as both participant and observer. Johnson believed biographical knowledge is at its fullest and most lively when it arises from direct acquaintance, but the closer the relationship between biographer and subject, the greater is the risk of partiality. Johnson's ideal biographer managed to transcend this tension, combining close personal knowledge with a commitment to knowledge, virtue and truth.²⁴

Modern expressivist anthropology is as enlightening as it is difficult. I did not just *see* what Forrest was like; I also *experienced* what he was like, and that was far more visceral. With Forrest one of the most successful entrepreneurs of our time, I lament that the forensic detail of his exploits might never be told. Yet, those same traits that make him such an effective entrepreneur—control, domination, power—do not translate well outside the ruthless environment of big business. They have served him well in the boardroom and enabled him to achieve business feats that are truly remarkable. Yet when translated to the social sphere, these very qualities risk becoming intensely unappealing, and perhaps help to explain Forrest's contested reputation. In the process of writing a biography that will never be published, I had learnt a great deal—perhaps too much—about Forrest and how he sought to project himself. But, more than anything, I have learnt about biography. As James Clifford remarked:

The biographer's perspective brings life together for us. And if the life does not take shape, if we do not in reading it encounter a distinct person whose voice, gestures, and moods grow familiar to us, then we judge the biography a failure.²⁵

23 Johnson, 'The Rambler 60', 9–12.

24 Caitriona Ni Dhuill, 'Samuel Johnson's Advice to Biographers', in Hemecker and Saunders, *Biography in Theory*, 15–19, doi.org/10.1515/9783110516678-004.

25 James Clifford, "'Hanging Up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners': Ethnographical Prospects (1978)", in Hemecker and Saunders, *Biography in Theory*, doi.org/10.1515/9783110516678-032.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:
No. 3, 2020, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.2020.07