



COUNTRY AND LIVES AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY AND ITS HISTORY

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There have been attempts to relate national characteristics “by reference to climate, habitat and soil and investing the collective subject with psychological attributes” for over two millennia.¹ More recently historians of modern nationalism developed elaborate typologies often citing Martin Heidegger’s arguments that “the being of the human finds its essence in the being of place — the belonging together of being and topos” [MALPAS 2012 : 5-6]. And yet the challenge to the ontological connection between self and place, what Jeff Malpas describes as the “topological analysis of self and identity”, has a long philosophical tradition, too. This debate over experience, biography and nation has implications for historians who have raised empirical questions about the development of collective sensibilities over time among recent emigrant peoples, their physical peculiarities, behavioural quirks and emergent national character. In this paper I consider the role that biography writing played in the construction of an Australian national identity geared to what Pierre Nora famously termed as the “*roman national*”, or the collective discourse on the history of the nation and its place in the world.² I argue that Australian historians played a significant role in the history of biography writing and, related to it, the debate over collective Australian identity.

Nora also considered the relationship between the historian and the writing of history, something he termed as “*ego histoire*”. The fraught development of Australian historians writing “their own history” is clear in the biography of Keith Hancock (1898-1988). Generally regarded as Australia’s “most distinguished historian”, he was born in Melbourne in 1898, three years before the Commonwealth of Australia was established in 1901, attended the University of Melbourne and graduated from Balliol College in 1922 as a Rhodes Scholar to become the first Australian to gain a Fellowship at All Souls, Oxford [O’BRIEN]. He was Professor of History at the University of

¹ Raphael Samuel, in *Island Stories* [8-9] traces such “epical history” on the idea of nation to Hippocrates c. 460 BC.

² For a broader discussion of Pierre Nora’s ideas, and “Nation” in Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf’s *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution Française* [801-804], see ENGLUND.

Adelaide (1924-1933), Birmingham (1934-1944), University of London (1949-1956) and the Australian National University (ANU) (1957-1966). He was also Chichele Professor of Economic History, Oxford, (1944-49), Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, and Research School of Sciences (ANU). Both British and Australian governments knighted him for his services to “their” history. Others have argued that Hancock’s own idea of identity “transcended nationality”, spanning the “relation between metropolis and periphery”, and looking toward “a transnational polity”, the British Commonwealth which was developing out of empire.³ After all, Hancock’s corpus of work included a history of Australia, the editing of 28 volumes of the British *Civil Histories of the War, Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, and a two-volume biography of the prominent South African and British Commonwealth statesman Jan Smuts. Sandra Holton, for instance, argues that he spent most of his life trying to resolve the issue of being an “Antipodean” in the early twentieth century from being “both European and not European” [271]. The title of the first volume of his autobiography, *Country and Calling*, (1954) signalled the tensions he felt about nation, citizenship, national identity, nationalism, biography and profession. His own biographer, Jim Davidson, describes not only an Australian–British duality but a “three-cornered life” including at times Italy and then South Africa. His impact on Australian biography writing was significant. Hancock called the first conference of Australian historians in 1957 and subsequently became the foundation chairman (1958-67) of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* Editorial Board, which the ANU hosted, thus mentoring Australian biography more generally.

***“Licking the cold outside of a champagne bottle on a thirsty day”:
Kick-starting Australian biography writing***

Presciently in October 1947 Professor R.M. (Max) Crawford at the University of Melbourne suggested to Hancock that the newly-formed ANU would provide a service to Australian historiography by producing an “Australian Dictionary of National Biography”. The ANU was founded in 1946 with a specific nation-building charter to encourage, and provide facilities for, research and postgraduate study, both generally and in relation to subjects of national importance to Australia [DEDMAN]. The ANU Council had

³ Sandra Stanley Holton, “The Autobiographies: Country and Calling and Professing History” presented at a “Sir Keith Hancock Symposium” held in the Australian National University in Canberra in 1998, for the centenary of Hancock’s birth and ten years after his death. It was published as “‘History is about Chaps’: Professional, National and Gender Identities in Hancock’s Autobiographies”.

invited Hancock to advise it about the establishment of a school of social sciences, hoping that he would become its inaugural director. Hancock in turn invited leading economist Sydney Butlin, political scientist Percy Partridge, legal academic, G.W. Paton, psychologist M.M. O'Neill, social studies researcher, James A. Cardno and historian Crawford to prepare overview papers on their respective disciplines and their prospects at the ANU. He asked them, *inter alia*, to consider "What facilities are necessary for the encouragement of research in your field in Australia?" [4] Crawford's survey of biography in 1947 provided a bibliography of just three dozen biographies. He argued that

There is I believe more work being done now on Australian biography, a field in which we have in the past done relatively little. I do not need to labour the point that biographical studies will teach us about much more than the persons studied. This is work for individual scholars. The role of the National University might be the eventual production of an Australian Dictionary of National Biography. [CRAWFORD: 3]

Hancock had been involved in the Dictionary of National Biography in wartime Britain and he regarded an ANU-led national history project as an important realisation of the ANU's charter. When Hancock finally took up his position as inaugural professor of history and director of the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) in 1957, he also took up the national dictionary project as an important flagship of his professional leadership.

Hancock called a national conference in August 1957 in Canberra to gauge the state of Australian history and to begin a conversation among Australian historians [see ALEXANDER *et al.*]. It was the first conference of, by and for Australian historians. It is noteworthy because it gave its general support to his national dictionary of biography project: representatives from every Australian university agreed that a "Concise Dictionary of Australian Biography" was the single most important priority to stimulate the development of Australian history. Participants agreed that they did not simply set their graduate students to writing Australian biographies because those biographies would lack context and setting: "if the more general history of the period had not been written a student attempt at biography might fail as it would lack the necessary background". The student "might be tempted to ignore" complex historical problems, "glossing over difficulties with biographical information" [MACINTYRE 1998 : 72]. According to R.G. Collingwood, English philosopher and historian, after all, what was important was not how a man might appear to the eye, but what he is was thinking, and that required sources and maturity to interpret them. His book, *The Idea of History* argued that history was "recollection" of the

“thinking of “historical personages”. There was a consensus among the conference participants that important Australian biography was increasingly possible by the late 1950s.

This four-day conference included university historians and others involved in researching Australian history, from across the nation. “The others” included journalists and historians Malcolm Ellis and Brian Fitzpatrick, Catholic archbishop and historian, Dr Eris O’Brien, and military historian Gavin Long, to discuss how to “advance the study of Australian history” [GOLLAN 1957 : 81].⁴ Ellis was one of the few Australian historians of any hue who had published multiple well-received biographies: on pastoralist John Macarthur, Governor Lachlan Macquarie and architect Francis Greenway. Not only had he specialised in biography but he had also reflected upon biography. Most Australian biographies, Ellis wrote in 1955, were like “licking the cold outside of a champagne bottle on a thirsty day” [432]. Biographical practice was poor. In turn, Hancock was attracted to someone who stressed the facts of a life but also insisted on “familiarity with the age in which your victim lived; with its conventions, with its mode of thinking, with the limitations of its thought, with the stage of its civilisation, with its sumptuary conditions, and with its social climate” [439].⁵

In what became a landmark conference, Australian historians took stock of their profession, assessing its state and plumbing the depths (or shallows) of the “soul of Australian history”. They concentrated on four fields: biography, church history, labour history and economic history; there were also sessions on the teaching of Australian history and the state of archives. The inclusion of this latter session was characteristic of Hancock, who had been engaged closely with archives at the time of writing Smuts’ biography. The conference unanimously agreed that “one of the badly needed aids to historical research [...] [was] a Concise Dictionary of Australian Biography”, and acknowledged the start that had been made towards this goal with Fitzhardinge’s Biographical Register, a card index begun in 1954.⁶ It was also agreed that any dictionary project would be a long-term project needing the co-operation of the ANU, state universities, and the general public. Robin Gollan, ANU labour historian who wrote an account of the conference,

⁴ See Andrew MOORE, WATSON 1979, Sheila FITZPATRICK, JOHNSTON and WIGMORE.

⁵ For Hancock’s early views on Ellis as a distinguished biographer and “our devoted comrade”, see “Memorandum on volume 1” and “Personal Notes for Concluding Speech by W.K.H. (8 December 1961)” box 69, Q31, *Australian Dictionary of Biography Archives* (ADBA), ANUA. See also AUCHMUTY 1955 & 1960.

⁶ “Excerpt from Statement prepared by Professor Hancock. Formation of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*”, box 69, Q31 ADBA, ANUA. The card index grew to 300,000 subjects by 1987.

regarded the meeting “as an index of the growing maturity of Australian history studies” [ELLIS 1955 : 432]. Articles started to be drafted in 1959 and the first two volumes of the *ADB* were published in 1966 and 1967.

Of course there was some biography before Ellis, Hancock and the *ADB*. Surveys, notably by H. M. Green, of biography as part of a more general survey of Australian literature in 1951, 1962 — and revised by his widow, Dorothy Green, in 1985 — indicate that the first Australian biographies were akin to “extended, more considered, and permanent version of the obituary” [MACINTYRE 1998 : 70].⁷ A raft of biographical dictionaries between 1879 and 1892 showed a growing interest in Australian’s biographies. Early Australian dictionaries of biography were neither comprehensive — many required subjects to pay a fee to be included — nor did they involve systematic research: fee-paying subjects tended to write their own biographies. J. Henniker Heaton's *Australian Dictionary of Dates and Men of the Time* (1879) set the tone, recording the lives of 550 men and eight women. David Blair's *Cyclopaedia of Australasia* (1881), Everard Digby's *Australian Men of Mark* (1889), and Philip Mennell's *The Dictionary of Australasian Biography from the Inauguration of Responsible Government* (1892) followed. The latter, while largely reliable, did not include Arthur Phillip, Lachlan Macquarie or John Macarthur. Fred Johns began his series of volumes — *Johns's Notable Australians* — from 1906, and in 1934 published *An Australian Biographical Dictionary* containing about 3000 biographies. The average length of each entry was about ninety words. Academic historians had little to do with these early collective biographies.⁸

A second wave of collective biography included *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, published in 1925-26 and focused on prominent achievers, and Percival Serle's *Dictionary of Australian Biography*. Serle accepted the challenge to systematically compile Australian biographies, publishing 1030 life stories in his two-volume dictionary in 1949. It was a mammoth task. An accountant by profession, Serle began collecting biographical information about Australians in 1929. Ten years later, and by then in his mid-70s, he decided to compile a dictionary and during the next five years set himself the task of writing four lives a week; the average article length was 640 words. His 1949 dictionary was a marvellous accomplishment, though it also showed, as ANU historian Laurie Fitzhardinge later commented, that “[t]his is the best that can be done by one man. It's better than anything that went before.

⁷ See also GREEN 1962, McDONALD and T. Inglis MOORE.

⁸ D.H. Borchardt, with the assistance of Sandra Burr, compiled *Checklist of collective biographies*.

[But] It makes it clear that this is no longer a one-man job. It's got to be a team job on the model of the DNB".⁹

Green pointed to just three outstanding Australian biographies before the 1950s: Nettie Palmer's biography of her uncle and High Court Judge, *Henry Bournes Higgins*; M. Barnard Eldershaw's *Phillip of Australia* — "the" author was a professional collaboration between Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, and the subject was Arthur Phillips, governor of New South Wales (NSW) 1788-1892; and H.V. Evatt's *Australian Labour Leader*, a memoir of William Holman, NSW Premier 1913-1920. Green commended but criticised the style of literary biographies: Alec Chisholm's biography of C.J. Dennis; James Devaney's *Shaw Neilson : A Life in Letters*; Colin Roderick's *In mortal Bondage : The strange Life of Rosa Praed* and Palmer's *Henry Handel Richardson*. None of these biographers held an academic position, although Roderick was appointed Professor of English at James Cook University, Townsville, in 1965. Devaney was an ex-Marist brother who worked as journalist and teacher while several others were Marxist activists. At that point academic historians — such as Alexander Melbourne, George Mackaness, Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Margaret Kiddle — began to publish with university presses as the number of biographies grew slowly.

There were two obstacles to a wider flourishing of biography before the 1950s. First, writing of biography was out of favour among academic historians, certainly Australian academic historians for the first part of the twentieth century. Australian historians were doubly disadvantaged because there was little Australian history [MACINTYRE 1998 : 72].

In 1973 in the annual lecture delivered to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Francis West credited the "Past President, Sir Keith Hancock, and his official ancestor as Chairman of the Australian Humanities Research Council, Professor James Auchmuty" for regarding biography as "the proper concern" of an historian over the objections of some distinguished historians and for helping turn around attitudes [WEST 1973 : 1]. The distinguished historians West was referring to were Sir Lewis Namier, noted historian of the British Parliament, and Professor Geoffrey Elton, a Tudor history specialist. Namier thought that biography was lightweight while Elton regarded biography as a "branch of literature or literary criticism, rather than as history" [5]. Both historians used all the evidence available which included lives, but collectively. Namier used prosopography or

⁹ Laurie Fitzhardinge, interview by Barbara Ross, 4-26 March 1987, TRC 2159, transcript, National Library of Australia, Canberra (NLA). See also LA NAUZE. It should be noted that, while the DNB was a team effort, just one hundred individuals wrote three-quarters with Stephen Lee writing 820 articles and Leslie Stephen 378.

collective biography of every 18th century Member of Parliament and peer who sat in the British Parliament to reveal their local interests and voting patterns. In 1952 he argued that biographers preferred the narrow study of a single human life because they lacked the creative imagination and skills to do otherwise. Similarly Elton distinguished between history and biography arguing in 1967:

if a man's death marked the end of an epoch — and how rarely that happened — his birth did not, for the formative years which are the proper concern of a biographer are of no significance for the historian of an age which is unaware of them. No man so completely dominates an age that its history can be written in terms of him [ELTON : 134-135].

The proper subject matter of history was explaining change. As West pointed out in 1973, despite their views in print, both Namier and Elton dealt with the major biographical difficulty of “the relation of a man or woman to his or her times” [6], with Namier writing the biography of Charles Townsend and Elton when he wrote so much about Thomas Cromwell. West argued that the problem was that historians had shunned biography; in the twentieth century biography had been the work of “non-historians” who came “to the men and women of the past as strangers from another world” [8]. There were no insurmountable obstacles for a historian to write good biography in principle if there were sources and historiography. The “major biographical difficulty of the relationship of man or woman to their times” that Namier and Elton raised “would obviously vanish if there were a sufficient body of good historical scholarship into which a single life could be fitted and against which a single life can be set in perspective” [6].

While Australian historians came to write and teach their “national” history and write Australian biography relatively late, by the second half of the twentieth century Australian history was flourishing. In the late 1930s academics like Gerry Portus had proclaimed that “Australian history was not deserving of being a university subject” [MCKENNA : 250]. They were followed by several generations of academic historians Keith Hancock, Max Crawford, Manning Clark and Francis West, who disagreed and published Australian history, and increasingly Australian biography.¹⁰ The scholarly journal, *Historical Studies : Australia and New Zealand*, had been founded in 1940, Clark was the first historian to teach a full-length course in Australian

¹⁰ For instance, English-born Francis West had been a Research Senior and Professorial Fellow respectively in Pacific History at the ANU for most of the period 1952 to 1976 and had written biographies of brothers Hubert and Gilbert Murray. Hubert was a judge and Lieutenant-Governor of Papua from 1908 until 1940. Gilbert was then Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford.

history in 1946, and the first conference, as we now know, was held in 1957. Writing in 1962, Green noted that Australian history “stretches out behind its present like a long wake” and was being populated; the developing universities were providing “biographers with opportunities” but, above all, a large element in Australia had “in the best sense” become “literate” [GREEN 1962 : 1355-1356]. The *ADB* began to stimulate research; Hancock, Crawford, Clark and West were all contributing authors.¹¹ Specialist Australian biographical bibliographies appeared.¹²

Fashions were changing. Hancock himself also pointed to the issue of popularity: historians had been “unduly subservient to the then fashionable doctrine that history is always made by ‘impersonal forces, never persons’”. He lamented the popularity of Marxist ideas of history from below, and sociological ideas of statistical averages that had undermined biography [HANCOCK 1976 : 54-55].

But at that moment when biography was becoming a respectable and desirable occupation for Australian historians, and Australian biography was flourishing, there was another development too: the radical school in history.

Great “Radical” Ship of “Australian National Biography”?

Biography was politicised in postwar Australia. A generation of radical nationalist historians emerged in Brian Fitzpatrick’s wake: Robin Gollan, Bede Nairn, Ian Turner, Russel Ward, Eric Fry, Miriam Dixson, Daphne Gollan and Edgar Waters. Stuart Macintyre has linked these radical nationalists to radical internationalism:

Just as the German Romantic philosopher Johann Fredich Herder (1744-1803) thought of the nation as arising from an organic relationship between a particular people and a particular place, revealing its unique character or *Volksgeist* through language and culture, so the Communist International held that all nations had their own popular traditions expressive of an impulse for freedom and equality [MACINTYRE 2013 : 48].

While the Old Left did not write much biography, the New Left had fewer qualms; even a duty to do so. The radical view concentrated on the distinctively Australian and emphasised egalitarianism. There was a wave of

¹¹ See NOLAN & FERNON.

¹² See Ulrich ELLIS.

work on Ned Kelly, Peter Lalor, Henry Lawson, William Lane.¹³ The New Left also wrote on the coalminers, metal workers, the Australian Workers Union, rural workers. And in this they approximated to the Australian stereotypes.

The peak of pursuit of the “typical Australian” was Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*.¹⁴ Indeed he laid out in his opening pages a catalogue of the attributes of a “typical Australian”. Ward’s “Australian” was egalitarian, without affectation and loyal to his (working) class. Australians believed in solidarity. They were convicts, bushmen and unionists, Celts who had suffered at the hands of the “poms”,¹⁵ hard workers who had served Australia’s great pastoral industry against both the environment and the pastoralists. The typical Australian was “a practical man, rough and ready in his manners”. He was pragmatic, stoic, “taciturn rather than talkative”. There was definitely a democratic tenor in Australian biographies and a search for identity in Australian biography in the postwar years. Australians were collectivist, egalitarian and democratic.

In 1970 Coral Lansbury suggested that the egalitarian, working-class, rural and largely benign view of Australian identity was born in the 1850s in England and translated into the literature. She argued that the Australian bush myth, then, was imposed on Australia from English literature:

The egalitarian, Arcadian expression of Australia was composed not in the nineties in the bush of Australia, but in England during the fifties by [Samuel] Sidney, [Charles] Dickens and [Edward Bulwer] Lytton. The sardonic mockery of Australian writers like Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy was the reaction of experience in Australia itself to English literary imagination [2].

The Australian national ethos was, then, a literary creation. Radical historians belatedly enshrined it as history in postwar Australia, and Lansbury, and others, were critical of Russel Ward for concentrating upon bush virtues and male “mateship”.¹⁶

In turn, the radicals themselves have attracted biographies as subjects, and Ward wrote his autobiography, *A Radical Life*. Some historians have traditionally regarded first-person accounts, especially their own memoirs, as subjective and, therefore, unreliable. They probably would not think of

¹³ See ROSS, MOLONY 1980, GOLLAN 1985 and NAIRN.

¹⁴ See also Vance PALMER.

¹⁵ “Pom”, or “pommy”: designates the English in Australia and New Zealand; probably a contracted form of “pomegranate”, rhyming slang for “immigrant” (Jimmy Grant). For a discussion see MACLEAN.

¹⁶ See ROE and LANSBURY 1966.

themselves as postmodern, but when French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes sought "The Death of the Author", it was an objective they shared. Most recently, however, there has been a huge swag of biographies of historians and historical enterprises. There is a huge current interest in the author, her or his intentions and biographical context. There is an appetite to identify their role in the shaping of our understanding of history writing, and locating its schools and waves of interest.¹⁷

The radical nationalists had several influences. For over a decade (1966-1978) professor of history at Monash University, Ian Turner, delivered an annual Ron Barassi memorial lecture on Australian Rules Football wearing a Richmond club beanie and accompanied by a can of beer and a pie and sauce. Football player Barassi had enlisted in World War Two and died of wounds. Turner validated the male sportsman and soldiers, best-selling Australian biography. As Stuart Macintyre noted, the radical nationalists also "informed the labour movement and challenged the history profession" [MACINTYRE 2013 : 54]. More generally locating a "*roman national*", Nora's national history meant considering a flawed chronicle as a chain of misdeeds of the ruling classes. This was certainly the radical Australian nationalist school's intention. Indeed, Australia is conspicuous in the extent to which its founders are considered flawed. Australia has not valorised its national "fore parents". As Green noted, "where bias exists it is very seldom due to hero-worship, which indeed is not, outside sport of course, an Australian characteristic" [GREEN 1962 : 1338]. For instance, O'Brien, writing of Joseph Banks and Governors Arthur Phillip, John Hunter, Philip King and John Macathur, regards them as extraordinary but mostly unscrupulous; men who "strove for the welfare of the colony" [1340] but allowed private gain, including their own. H.V. Evatt defended Governor William Bligh against the officers of the New South Wales Corps over the Rum Rebellion but Bligh has had few supporters since.

Unsettling the Radical Ship? Kinds of Australian Biography

Nora's "*roman national*" has also been criticised for its presumption of a conception of universal history told in a national story.¹⁸ The "democratic revolution" in Western historiography after World War II meant that many historians disaggregated what were regarded as the ruling-class national myths, particularly their sexist and racist omissions. More recent work challenges any master variable about Australian character. Richard White, in

¹⁷ See for example WATSON 1979 and INGLIS.

¹⁸ See e.g. CURTHOYS and BONGIORNO.

his 1981 *Inventing Australia*, critically deconstructs the attempts to capture Australia's "essence" or national identity. He looks at all the attempts, beginning before settlement (when Europeans "dreamed" of *terra incognita*), and argues that it, and all subsequent images, are inventions. White points to Russel Ward's 1958 *The Australian Legend*, in which he argued that the bush-made Australian is the "last great re-statement of the character of Australian type" [154] or identity.

Part of the unsettling was that radical historical biography has been followed by other kinds of biographies: for instance, women's and aboriginal biographies also claiming to be quintessentially Australian. Crawford's survey of "Australian" biographical works between 1933 and 1947 lists just 35 monographs in 15 years. A search of the National Library of Australia catalogue in 2013 lists over 13,000 "Australian biographical" works.¹⁹ However, Ann Curthoys noted in her Russel Ward Annual Lecture in 1992: "While we might undertake a feminist analysis of the gendered character of the debate about conceptions of the nation, we have not yet been able to redefine what national identity might mean" [13]. John Docker wondered why feminist historians did not concentrate upon social range rather than trying to establish hegemonic kind.

The question of how to address plurality has been entangled with the question of national identity. The "system of cultural signification" that makes up the nation is ambivalent precisely because it is in constant flux. All the same, while biography has diversified, there are still patterns in biography; as Hermione Lee has observed, "we can identify the popularity of certain kinds of biographies in different countries, periods and cultures [...] provides an insight into that society. What does that society value, what does it care about, who are its visible — and invisible — men and women?" [14].

Two trends relevant to any "*roman national*" have been the sophistication and complexity of biographies. An expanding body of historiography on Australian biography asks unsettling questions about "the search for identity in Australian biography". As Ray Monk and others have pointed out, there is an expanding body of academic literature on biography which asks some of the same methodological questions that Samuel Johnson addressed in his two famous essays on biography, *Rambler* (1750) and *Idler* (1759). Is biography fiction? Who deserves to have a biography written of them? What details are appropriate to be included in a biography? Is it

¹⁹ National Library of Australia on-line catalogue, accessed 15 December 2013. <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Search>.

possible to know with certainty the inner life of another? What are the moral or ethical responsibilities of biographers towards subjects, social sensitivities and the truth? [MONK]. Australian biographers have asked these questions too.²⁰ Bill Wilde notes that Brian Matthews, in his biography of Louisa Lawson, female newspaper proprietor and mother of poet Henry Lawson, asks the same questions that Virginia Woolf, author and an experimenter in biographical methodology, asked: the central problem of biography was how to weld together the “granite-like solidity” of truth or fact and the “rainbow-like intangibility of personality or character” [WOOLF : 149]. Wilde writes:

The face that turns towards you at last need not be the face of the subject; or *only* the face of the subject... It *can* be — indeed is more likely to be — a composite, a new entity that has grown slowly and almost unnoticed out of your experience of being immersed in the life of the subject [4].

While Australian commentators have interrogated the nature of biography, other questions about representation have been more directly disconcerting down under. Is there a quintessential Australian biography? The National Biography Award was instituted in 1996, and from 2000 has been an annual award which the State Library of New South Wales administers, and as part of that process it has had to define Australian biography:

The subject of the work is to be an Australian or have made a significant contribution to Australia. Other subjects may be considered if the author is an Australian citizen or permanent resident and the work provides a particularly Australian perspective of the subject.²¹

About half the winners have been unambiguously Australians writing about Australian subjects. In 2012 Martin Thomas won for a biography of an anthropologist, *The Many Worlds of R.H. Mathews*; and similarly Barry Hill in 2004 for *Broken Song : T. G. H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, about anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow and his translation of the spiritual songs of the aboriginal people of central Australia. Brian Matthews’s biography of historian Manning Clark won in 2010 and Graham Seal for *These Few Lines : A Convict Story : The Lost Lives of Myra & William Sykes* in 2008. While John Hughes was born in Australia, in *The Idea of Home : Autobiographical Essays* (2006), his memories are of a household ruled by mother and grandparents who fled the Ukraine during the Second World War. Joint winner in 2003

²⁰ See WEST 1973, WILDE and COLEBORNE *et al.*

²¹ “National Biograph Awards”. State Library of New South Wales. www.sl.nsw.gov.au/about/awards/national_biography, accessed 16 December 2013.

was Peter Rose's family memoir, *The Rose Boys*, a portrait of the impact of his football playing brother's 1974 accident which left him a quadriplegic. Co-winner in 2003, Don Watson's *Recollections of a bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM* was a cutting-edge political biography by a staffer. Jacqueline Kent's *A certain Style: Beatrice Davis, a literary Life*, which won in 2002, was about Davis's fifty years in the publishing industry which culminated in her being general editor of Australia's premier publishing house, Angus & Robertson. Roberta Sykes's 1998 winner, *Snake Cradle*, was part of a trilogy; this included aboriginal challenges to her aboriginality and controversy over the extent of her contribution to the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service.

Without any debate, the prize has also gone to biographies about Australians living for substantial periods outside Australia, including to Peter Fitzpatrick for his biography of a film maker and his flamboyant gay acting son, *The Two Frank Thrings* (2012); and Ann Blainey for her biography of famous opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba: *I am Melba* (2009). Robert Hillman won in 2005 for *The Boy in the Green Suit*, which is about his younger 16-year-old self, abandoned and disliked by his family, escaping from selling shoes in Myers Emporium in Melbourne for Ceylon, Athens, Istanbul, Tehran, and Kuwait. His search for a fabled paradise in the Indian Ocean was inspired by his father's stories. Peter Robb's 2000 winning entry *M: A Biography of European Painter Caravaggio* (2000), on the Renaissance artist, was controversial not because of its eligibility but because of its content, with some critics describing it as "ludicrous" and "drivel". Mandy Sayer's *Dreamtime Alice: A Memoir*, the winner in 2000, was about her family's rejection of her father's "bohemian performing life". She became a character in his stories by learning to tapdance and performed with father, Gerry Sayer, a jazz drummer, on the streets of New York and New Orleans.

Other winning entries have been for biographies on subjects who were not Australian-born but who had made a contribution to Australia including to Alasdair McGregor for his biography of Canberra designers *Grand Obsessions: The Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (2011). And others still were written by Australians about non-Australians such as Philip Dwyer for *Napoleon* (2008); and Jacob Rosenberg's *East of Time* (2007) was set in Lodz, Poland, in the 1930s and early 1940s, in the years between the author's childhood and early maturity. The author was a Holocaust survivor who migrated to Australia in 1948 and similarly, the first winner in 1996, Abraham Biderman for *The World of my Past*, was a victim and survivor of the Holocaust who was critical of the allies' "disinterest and cruelty" to European Jewry.

Sometimes like Seal's *These Few Lines*, the biographies were based on a small archive which the author had to piece together like an historical detective. Fitzpatrick's is essential reading for biographies as it charts the defences both Frank Thrings built up against the biographer. On the one hand, there is a lack of information on Frank Thring (1882-1936), the pioneer theatre-owner and Australian filmmaker and founder of Melbourne's Efftee films and 3XY radio. Fitzpatrick's research uncovers "documents that lie and histories that are lost". That Frank Thring was first a sideshow conjuror who never filled out a birth, death or marriage certificate correctly, and promoted riddles about his background. On the other hand, there is almost too much information available on his son, Frank Thring (1926-1994), the flamboyant homosexual, actor, international film star and local television personality who nevertheless managed to conceal his "real" self as effectively as his father. Frank the son seemed to be forever talking about his life, all the while revealing little.

"Australian" biography is about Australians, who are essentially modern with a high proportion of immigrants. The indigenous people who inhabited Australia for 40,000 years were quickly outnumbered after white settlement began at the end of the 18th century. The "native born" did not dominate until the 1890s. John Molony argues that "the early native-born [that is before 1850], 90 per cent of whom sprang from convict parentage, were made to feel second-rate and outsiders to society because of their parentage" [MOLONY 2000 : 1]. The discovery of gold in 1851 brought a new wave of immigrants but in the 1890s, for the first time, the native-born became the majority of the population. A second wave of European immigrants came to Australia: two million migrants between 1945 and 1965. Most were assisted, that is the Commonwealth Government subsidised their travel, they were virtually "manpowered" with the government assigned jobs and they were bonded for two years. Australia, together with New Zealand, Canada and the United States, are often described as "settlement countries" for the immigrant waves that they have attracted. A quarter of Australians were "foreign born" in 2007.²² More than 43 per cent of Australians were either born overseas or have one parent who was born overseas. So there is increasing acknowledgement of the variety of Australian lives. There is now a growing literature on the relationship between self and nation.²³ As Ros Pesman notes:

²² "Population". Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS Migration, Australia, 2008-09 (cat. no. 3412.0)

²³ See FALKINER.

To place Australian experience in a wider framework is not to reject Australian nationality and culture, but to emphasize their connections with the rest of the world, their porous and permeable qualities. Identity and nationality are, like everything else, not fixed structures, but processes in the making. There is no Australian “identity”, only “identities”, and these have been forged abroad as well as at home, in contact and in collision with others, as well as in isolation. [17]

Conclusion: “The Hancock quandary”

It is overdone to connect culture and place, biography and nation directly and there are few environmental determinists among Australian historians and biographers. Clearly there is an environmental influence on people’s identity, experience and understandings of the past in varying degrees at different times. Indeed antipodean historians are increasingly examining variation itself and the patterns within variation rather than stereotypes or “roman national” in their biographical studies.²⁴ Historians have not bothered with postmodernism much either, concentrating instead on the careful accumulation and analysis of a range of Australian lives. In this, Keith Hancock was a significant figure both in the critical role he played in the development of the *ADB* — and the fillip it gave, in turn, to biography writing among Australian historians — and also in his own experience and practice as a biographer. Transnationalism is topical once again but, in the late 1950s, Hancock was seen as increasingly old-fashioned in validating multiple identities, something that he himself grappled with in his own varied life and which Australian biographers are now grappling with in writing about their country and its lives.

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²⁴ See NOLAN, drawing on GOULD.

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