Australians have always been great travellers, not only internationally but between Australian states and territories. Writing about Australian lives is thus a biographical challenge when they transcend national and internal boundaries. It means that, when dealing with mobile subjects, biographers need to be nimble diachronically, because of changing locales over time, and synchronically because many Australians have not always seen themselves as bound to a particular place. Nonetheless, despite the problems of writing about mobile lives, the deft use of biography appeals as a means of examining individual life paths in their immediate contexts within the larger scales suggested by transnational historical practice. An abundance of books, edited volumes, and articles have followed individuals, families, and other collectives as they ‘career’ (to use the term adopted by Lambert and Lester in their influential 2006 volume, Colonial Lives Across the British Empire) around the globe.

Over its 60-year history, the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB), like its British equivalent the (Oxford) Dictionary of National Biography, has been characterised by many as a ‘classic instance of national self-regard’.¹ Yet in a similar way to its predecessor, the ADB has been fluid in its conception of the ‘national’, and thus has endeavoured to recognise Australians who have been active overseas, as well as foreign nationals who have contributed, even fleetingly, to Australian life. Nonetheless, various factors have meant that such an aspiration has tended more toward the ideal than the reality, and that ‘the shadow of the nation’ has continued to affix itself to biography.² Not least of these is the nature of the personal archive, which generally reflects a cultural, social or political contribution to a particular nation state, rather than a life of movement and transnationality. Added to what will often emerge as practical and methodological problems in biographical writing, the most popular biographical subjects, and those generally favoured by publishers, are often the ‘towering national figures’ whose significance is defined by their contribution to the particular nation. In over 13,000 published biographies since its first volume in 1966, the ADB corpus reflects this tendency towards the national in biographical writing, at least at a prima facie level. The vast majority of subjects (87.5 per cent) are male,

and 63 per cent are public servants, federal, state or local government politicians, army officers, soldiers or academics, whose lives are likely to be documented, often in detail. Nearly half (48 per cent) were born overseas, although in later volumes this proportion has fallen significantly, while only 11 per cent of those born in Australia died overseas, many of them military personnel. For those who were born and died in Australia, the ‘faceted browse’ function on the ADB website yields some interesting results, demonstrating a significant level of mobility within Australia and between Australian jurisdictions. Thus there is the possibility that those who are prominent in the ADB might also be anomalous, reflective of their social status and occupation but not of the majority population. Furthermore, they also tend to have been significant in a single jurisdiction, their personal archives held in the single sphere, and thus presenting a coherent record of career, contribution and significance. Biography in general, and the ADB in particular, has had greater problems dealing with those who have lived across borders and jurisdictions, and particularly those whose records are scattered and austere.

The articles in this issue of the Australian Journal of Biography and History consider subjects who have lived across and between national and internal Australian boundaries, and the authors have thus been compelled to address the methodological and theoretical problems of mobility. Kate Bagnall addresses the seemingly insurmountable problem of writing about Chinese women who settled in Australia in the second half of the twentieth century. In seeking to ‘give a name to some of the earliest Chinese women who made New South Wales their home, and to understand something of their lives’, she confronts the absence of evidence about a population which was vastly outnumbered by Chinese men in colonial Australia, a population which is itself difficult to trace in the historical record. In seeking to pursue a methodology of ‘global microhistory’ to uncover the lives of those in effect erased from history, Bagnall’s article is a rejoinder to histories that fail to consider the women who migrated as well as those who stayed at home.

Contrasting with the dearth of information on Chinese women immigrants to colonial New South Wales, Jackie Dickenson’s chapter on the Hong Kong–based merchant and trader, Melbourne-born Elma Kelly (1895–1974), benefits from an abundance of documentation, both in the realm of the personal and official. After having been a prisoner of war in Hong Kong during World War II, Kelly returned to the island to pursue ‘splendid opportunities, particularly for Australians’, who she believed would flourish in the commercial world because of their ‘poise’ and their ‘liking for the life’. In an attempt to exploit the prospects, she formed a partnership with Sydney-based woman Belle Robilliard, and launched an import-export business which, although it thrived for a time, eventually failed. The correspondence on which the article is based vividly recounts the way Kelly and Robilliard looked
back on their pre-war lives, their expectations that they might recover the security and privileges they had once enjoyed, while looking towards a postwar order that promised them, and privileged white women like them, more autonomy than they had ever before experienced.

In her article on the Corney family in the aftermath of World War I, Alexandra McKinnon considers the record of loss and sorrow preserved in the archives of the Australian War Memorial. Four of Rebecca Corney’s children served in the war, and a son, Hume, was killed on the Western Front. The newly established memorial, seeking to preserve the experiences of war both on the European and home fronts, wrote to many Australian families asking them to help establish their collections. McKinnon charts the long and tumultuous correspondence between Corney and the memorial, reflecting the dynamics of a family profoundly affected by war, experiencing grief and trauma that extended well beyond the years of the conflict. By examining the experiences of one family, the article explores the impact of grief on the development of archival records of World War I.

In her reflections on writing a biography of the Australian composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912–1990), Suzanne Robinson explores very different methodological questions. Born in Melbourne, Glanville-Hicks left Australia at the age of 20 and lived in England, the United States of America, and Greece until she returned in 1975. A much admired figure, three biographers had tackled her life before Robinson decided to take a different path, and consider as many archives and personal recollections as she could find. In the process she discovered not only ‘wit, humour, passion and stoicism’, but artifice, a life Glanville-Hicks conjured to create ‘her concept of the life of a significant creative artist’. Some of what Robinson found horrified and dismayed her, and she found herself having to consider how (or whether) to represent the ‘unedifying details’, including the ethics of intervening in the narrative by offering authorial interpretations, responses, even apologies. As a feminist biographer, the most ‘troublesome question’ was whether her subject’s considerable imperfections, which became evident during research, risked undermining her status as a composer, particularly one whose reputation was yet to be fully established.

A different form of methodological question is posed by Pat Buckridge in his article on three generations of Macdougall men, each of whom became journalists—Dugald (1833–1879), who also excelled in business and politics, Dugald the younger (1872–1947), and James (1903–1995). The question Buckridge considers is whether his subjects can ‘usefully be considered as a grouped biographical entity signifying more than the sum of its parts, which is to say more than the three separate lives’. By examining the sequence of three careers in successive generations of a family, he discerns that they are ‘progressively enabling’, in that each career was
partly performed on the legacy of the previous generation(s), and ‘thus modified by its relation to the others’, constituting what the author calls a ‘Macdougall mini-dynasty … across three generations and 120 years of Australia’s history’.

By contrast, Peter Crabb’s article on the colonial goldfields reporter John Augustus Hux (1826–1864) relates the story of a single figure who, having made connections in his English homeland that would serve him well in Australia, worked as a digger, and provided eye-witness accounts of a number of significant goldfields in New South Wales, including the Snowy Mountains field at Kiandra, and Lambing Flat (Young). As well as recording his observations of the anti-Chinese riots at these centres, Hux provided a current, vibrant, and acute account of a formative period in Australian social and economic history which is not only important historically, but helped to form popular images and understandings of an important colonial industry.

Finally, in a departure from the theme of mobility characterising the other contributions, Nichola Garvey documents her experiences of working with the Western Australian iron ore magnate Andrew Forrest to research and write his biography. In an interesting combination of autobiography, biography, commentary and reflection, this is an unusual account in that it considers, and in the process gives the inside story of, a biographical project that never saw the light of day. In what was conceived by both the author and the subject as an ‘authorised biography’, Garvey’s article raises some fundamental questions about biographical writing of living persons, including the utility and pitfalls of what she calls ‘expressivist anthropology’, as well as the scope of authorisation in biographical writing.