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# Preface

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A few years ago, in the final throes of completing my doctoral thesis on the former Western Australia Chief Protector of Aborigines and colonial artist Henry Prinsep (1844–1922), I attended the annual Christmas party of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society.<sup>1</sup> Each year Marie Louise Wordsworth, a long-time member, threw open her lush garden overlooking the Swan River at Peppermint Grove and generously allowed her visitors to examine her fine collection of Western Australian art and furniture. Among her possessions were paintings, objects and ephemera from the Prinsep estate that she had purchased on the death of Prinsep's youngest daughter Emily.<sup>2</sup> She invited me to inspect them and, opening a beautifully made jarrah bureau, there lay my subject's quills, pens, pencils and paper—and a pair of his wire-framed spectacles. Brazenly perhaps, I could not resist the chance to try them on and just for a moment I was able to see the world through his lens; gazing at his oil painting of karri forest next to the bureau, I realised that he was short-sighted and had what I took to be severe astigmatism. I already knew about the persistent stomach ulcers and respiratory problems that plagued his last years, and from the numerous images of him with cigar in hand, I assumed he would have been accompanied by the stench of tobacco. But I had not realised that he was also beset by poor vision, a burden for one who saw himself primarily as an artist, a calling that far outweighed his dedication to being a colonial civil servant. Such insights, even if seemingly inconsequential to the historical record, can add much to the quality of a biographer's understanding, as the English historian Kathryn Hughes observed in her 2017 book *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum*. She reminds her readers of Thomas Carlyle's exhortation to remember that the past was populated by living people with a corporeal presence: 'Not abstractions were they, not diagrams and theorems, but men, in buff or other coats and breeches, with colour in their cheeks, with passion in their stomach, and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men.'<sup>3</sup>

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1 My PhD thesis was later published under the title *Henry Prinsep's Empire: Framing a distant colony* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014).

2 Many of the paintings and furniture were later purchased by the National Library of Australia. In 2011 they formed a part of the NLA exhibition *Out of the West: Western Australian Art 1830s–1930s*.

3 Thomas Carlyle quoted by Kathryn Hughes. *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), x.

Biographers spend a lot of time with their subjects. As a writing project develops, they come to fill the waking hours and haunt the dreams and, after a while, something akin to an obsession with a long-dead figure might play tricks on the mind. Many biographers have written about the sense of intimacy that accompanies their quest, the interplay between historical evidence and imagination, the sometimes blurred boundaries between the two spheres, and the temptations to allow the latter to compensate for the gaps in the record. My research on Prinsep had the advantage of an extraordinary archive, which the subject himself had accumulated, maintained and organised. At the time of his death the archive—papers, family records, paintings and drawings, photographs, and the ephemera of daily life—was housed under one roof, but by the time I arrived, it had fragmented into innumerable smaller collections, portions of it in the state and national libraries, in art galleries, in private collections or in the homes of descendants. At times I wondered whether the book would become more a record of the archive than a biography, even toying with the idea that a biography of the archive might be more achievable than one of the man. My confusion though was resolved when I recognised biography to be infinitely more than an alpha to omega account, but rather an examination of a life in all its complexities, shades and forms. Furthermore, the author is also an actor, perhaps not the protagonist, but by being the creator of the biographical work, the one who sifts the information and decides what should be highlighted, excluded and ordered, and how it should be interpreted.

My initial interest in Prinsep related to his role as Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines, a position he held for nearly a decade in the government of Sir John Forrest and, after his departure to the federal sphere, during the first unsettled years of the state government after Federation. Prinsep was the architect of a law that, in the hands of his successors, became notorious for its impact on Aboriginal family life and the freedoms of individuals. His Aborigines Act of 1905 laid the foundation for an ever-more oppressive regime that, by the time it was finally repealed in 1972, had intruded upon the life of almost every Aboriginal person in the state, bringing untold misery as families were split and successive generations institutionalised. The judgement of history has not been favourable to those such as Prinsep who designed and implemented these laws. In the words of the former prime minister Kevin Rudd, they brought ‘indignity and degradation’ on to a ‘proud people and a proud culture’, resulting in a system that was a ‘deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity’.<sup>4</sup> Yet a century before Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generations, Prinsep had approached his task with an almost blasé lack of concern for its consequences. Forrest had refused to allow the laws to proceed on the grounds that they would ‘make prisoners of these poor people in their own country’,<sup>5</sup> but Prinsep conceived his laws as engineering a ‘complete separation’ from a way of

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4 Kevin Rudd, ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’, 13 February 2008, viewed online at [info.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples](http://info.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples).

5 John Forrest quoted in Allbrook, *Henry Prinsep’s Empire*, 2014, 273.

life he deemed ‘savage’. In a futile effort to persuade Forrest, he argued that future generations would praise his foresight and thank his government for preserving ‘the health & morality of the coming race’, and preventing ‘the ancient & interesting aboriginal race from sinking into a degraded grave & infamous memory’.<sup>6</sup>

The judgement of history has been much kinder to Prinsep the artist than to Prinsep the civil servant. Learning his craft under the tutelage of luminaries such as the British painter and sculptor George Frederick Watts and the portrait photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (who was also his aunt), by the time he left England he was a skilled artist and photographer. Using a variety of media—pen and ink, watercolour and oils, portrait and landscape painting, photography—he portrayed life in the still young colony from his arrival in 1866 until the 1920s. As an artist, he was at the forefront of those representing Western Australia at home and abroad, as the colony grew from a small outpost of empire to one that penetrated the entire land mass of Australia’s western third. Reading his diaries, which he maintained from the day he left England until a few days before his death (when his wife Josephine, née Bussell, took over the task), as well as his vast accumulation of letters, one is struck by his dedication to the artistic life, which was an almost daily pursuit and occupied a large portion of his time. It is clear that art, rather than civil service, defined his identity, and one can imagine that he would be dismayed to learn that he is remembered in Western Australian history chiefly for his dubious contribution to Aboriginal affairs administration.

Thus I was left with two conflicting images: one the visual artist who portrayed the people and places of his new home with sensitivity and compassion, the other the seemingly callous bureaucrat whose laws consigned generations of Aboriginal people to subjugation and control. I had little interest in attempting to reconcile or explain these contradictions, or even to delve into the personality that produced them. I was after all undertaking a PhD in history, and a multi-volume biography was clearly beyond the scope of the exercise. So too was an attempt to psychoanalyse my subject, even though there were aspects of his family history—his removal as an infant from the family home in Calcutta, India, to boarding school in England, the early death of his mother, and a distant and austere father—that might have made it a tempting exercise. What I needed instead was a historical narrative to provide an arena in which I could begin to understand and order Prinsep as a historical figure. It took me some time to realise that the resolution lay in Prinsep’s archive; while he did not, like Manning Clark, go to the extent of directing future biographers, his archive provided hints as to how he saw his life and his legacy.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> H.C. Prinsep to John Forrest, 17 November 1900, State Records Office of Western Australia, AN 3005 Cons 255 376/07.

<sup>7</sup> Mark McKenna, in his biography of Manning Clark, describes how his subject had left directions for future biographers: ‘As Clark worked his way through his papers towards the end of his life, he was conscious that historians and biographers would use them in the future—so conscious that he could not resist the temptation to direct the biographer.’ Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2011), 31.

A modest man, he probably never imagined that one day a biographer might go to the trouble of documenting his life. But he did have a strong sense of family history and legacy, and there is recurring evidence in his diaries and letters that it was for future generations that he arranged his archive, and that he wanted them to know and understand the history of his family. Thus I found my defining narrative in the generations of Prinsep's family whose lives spanned India, much of the British imperial world, and Australia. In the lives and work of his forebears, the artists, photographers, novelists and journalists, we find a family tradition of cultural and social capital, while in the preceding 3 generations of East India Company civil servants lay the tradition of governing colonised peoples. Thus rather than focusing on the biography of an individual, the study instead evolved to use biography to illuminate a complex history of mobility, exchange and the transmission of cultural capital. And through the family archive Prinsep so carefully compiled, the imperial world was reassembled as a network founded just as much on sentiment as on commercial links and connections.

Each of the articles in this edition of the *Australian Journal of Biography and History* uses biography to illustrate historical themes and to add texture to historical episodes. Patricia Clarke examines the role of 4 women journalists who were amongst a group of 8 recruited by the Australian Government to tour operational bases in eastern Australia during a critical phase in the Pacific War. The journalists—Constance Robertson, Patricia Knox, Iris Dexter and Lynka Isaacson—were required to report on women's services with the aim of encouraging more women to enlist and thereby release men for service overseas. They were amongst a very small proportion of women who were not only full-time paid journalists, but amongst the third of women over 14 who were employed full time. While Clarke writes of the group as a collective and in the process relates an important episode in the history of journalism, she is also alert to the gendered aspects of the story. Through the lives of these women, she considers wider questions of education and employment of Australian women in the immediate pre-World War II and war period. In the field of journalism, women faced systemic barriers to employment as well as individual discrimination; the women described in Clarke's article went to great efforts to attain equality in the workplace, yet they were often restricted to weekly publications while the dailies remained the province of men.

Lyndon and Lyne Megarity, in their article on the 2 wives of the Queensland businessman and later premier Robert Philp (1899–1903, 1907–08), use the biographies of Jessie (née Bannister; 1856–90), and Mina (née Munro; 1867–1940) to illustrate the changes in the role of elite Queensland women over the relatively short period of a decade. Philp was a powerful man both in the world of business and politics, but Jessie had virtually no involvement in public life. Yet a decade later, Queensland society had changed to allow much greater level of participation in public life by women. The contrasting experiences of Jessie and Mina, the authors

show, ‘mirrored the transition of elite women from being mostly confined to the domestic world to having a more influential place in Queensland society in the early twentieth century’.

Two articles consider the problems of developing biographies of those who are essentially invisible in the historical record. The ‘first-fleeter’ Sarah Bellamy has drawn some attention from historians, and Melanie Nolan, Christine Fernon and Rebecca Kippen discuss her seemingly ‘insignificant life’ to illustrate various aspects of the initial British colonisation of the continent. As with many convicts, Bellamy’s historical record is sparse and she appears only periodically in official and newspaper reports, which, by their nature, document moments of crisis rather than the course of a life. Yet even these faint echoes suggest an eventful life, and have made her an attractive subject for historical fiction. Alternative methods though can add precision to these ‘unthinkable histories’. Collective biography and quantitative methodologies in particular help to build sharper images of the lives of women such as Bellamy before and after their transportation. In demographic terms we find that she was perhaps ‘typical’ of the small number of women convicts arriving at Botany Bay in 1778. Thus we can conclude that, rather than being exceptional, Bellamy’s biography reflects that of many of the first European women transported to Australia. She does not yet feature in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, but the ‘triangulated’ methodology of documents, collective biography and prosopography now makes her inclusion imperative. The biography of the Boonwurrung man Kurrburra (1797–1849) forms the subject of the contribution by Ian Clark, Rolf Schlagloth, Fred Cahir and Gabrielle McGinnis. Kurrburra has also been largely invisible to Australian history, yet a broadening of the search for sources, a re-reading of the records of official protectors of Aborigines such as George Augustus Robinson and William Thomas, and accounts by contemporaries such as William Barak, has allowed the authors to build a sharper image of their subject. By setting out to consider the whole of Kurrburra’s life rather than simply the moments of contact (or conflict) with colonial society, their subject can be re-presented as one who was respected and important in his Aboriginal community, and who managed, negotiated and sought to control his interactions with the colonising forces.

Sophie Scott-Brown, in her article on the British historian Rafael Samuel, considers the utility of biography in relation to intellectual history, and the relationship between what she terms ‘cultural persona’ and the empirical personality. She argues that conventional approaches to intellectual history have failed to account for performance as a medium of history making, and this, she suggests, was at the heart of Samuel’s commitment to democratising history; bringing history to the people, and recognising vernacular history as a potent medium of history making. Because intellectual history has tended to emphasise historians’ products rather than their ‘doings’ or performances, Samuel’s contribution to British historiography has often been minimised or even overlooked entirely. Biography, with its traditional concern

for the individual, can illuminate those ‘powerful personalities’ such as Samuel who leave unconventional records of themselves, who are in a sense ‘outsiders’ in their approaches, methods and associations.

By contrast, the biography of the anthropologist Leonhard Adam reveals a figure who some, such as the historian Greg Dening, viewed as something of an outsider, but whose works on Aboriginal art, particularly his *magnum opus* were highly successful, and indeed went to a number of editions. Michael Davis considers Adam as an outsider, concluding that his career after his arrival in Australia as a refugee was characterised by a willingness to work across disciplinary boundaries, an approach that perhaps made his practices unusual rather than alien. At the same time, Adam bore the scars of his Jewish ancestry in the context of Nazi rule of his homeland, and the loss of his career as a result. His arrival in the infamous prison ship *Dunera*, and initial internment in Australia, perhaps gave him a prevailing sense of being on the outside of Australian life and always looking in, but Davis suggests that such a perspective might have influenced his practice as an anthropologist.

In his study of the Australian delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, David Lee looks at the collective who between them forcefully asserted Australia’s position, and thus contributed to the country’s consolidation as an independent nation-state during the inter-war period. The men, who included the war-time prime minister Billy Hughes, a former prime minister Joseph Cook and 3 diplomats—John Latham, Robert Garran, and Frederic Eggleston—all had long and distinguished careers, and were much honoured for their contributions to the nation. Lee, however, focuses on the period leading up to the peace conference, its proceedings, side meeting and immediate aftermath, using biography to explain how the members of the delegation were so effective.

In the final article, Stephen Wilks considers political biography as a form and a genre, arguing that biographers of major political figures should endeavour to contribute to the closely related field of political history, and thus seek to establish their subject’s place in history. Arguing that biography is founded on human agency, and that political history is ‘rich in interpersonal interaction’, Wilks concludes that biography provides scholars with ‘a platform for exploring the tortuous chains of decision, chance and error that characterise the political past and the legacies it imparts’.

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