Introduction

Our volume of reflections on Indigenous biography and autobiography is drawn from selected and refereed papers first presented at an international conference held at the National Museum of Australia in 2007. The principal sponsor was the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University (ANU).

Forty-three people presented papers at this four-day conference. Speakers were drawn from Australia, Spain, Austria, New Zealand, South Africa, Botswana, the Ainu Islands and Taiwan. More than half were Indigenous scholars from around the world, and almost a quarter of the speakers were Indigenous presenters from mainland Australia and the Torres Strait islands. The very generous participation of our sponsor organisations enabled us to cover most of the travel and accommodation expenses of all the Indigenous participants.

The conference poster used the work of Roy Kennedy, a Wiradjuri (southern New South Wales) print-maker depicting the Aboriginal settlement of Warangesda, on the Murrumbidgee. He added the caption 'Days of Harmony on Our Mission: I’m going back to the late thirties and forties when Aboriginals had great times among the elders of those days when you were told to do something you did it without question'. Here were raised many of the issues discussed at the conference: On whose memories do biographers rely? Can autobiographers rely on their own memories? For whom are stories told? How does one resolve disagreements? Who has the right to tell stories about the Indigenous past? Our discussion covered theoretical issues as well as the ethics and practicalities of negotiating these issues with communities – and sometimes one’s own family. The conference themes were ‘Who Owns the Story?’, ‘Controversial Lives’, ‘Who is My Audience?’ ‘Elusive Relationships’, ‘Art and Politics’, ‘Alternative Narratives’ and ‘Mixed Identities’.

Each of the papers here is drawn from one of these sections. The Maori scholar Aroha Harris, for example, reflects on her writing the life of Joe Hawke and her biographical role as a biographer balancing the demands of the academy against the demands of Joe and his family, the delicacies and indelicacies of Joe’s story, and the privileges of the biographer in ‘knowing’ Joe against the ‘rules’ of historical method. Discussion of the life of the Sydney entertainer and ‘stolen generations’ victim Pauline McLeod draws on the author Simon Luckhurst’s decision to prioritise Pauline’s enormous private writings. By letting the documents speak for themselves, he wishes to portray a character in which he, as biographer, plays a minimal role.

The conference was very generously sponsored by the Humanities Research Centre, ANU; the National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU; the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Western Australia; the Australian Centre for
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Indigenous History, ANU; and the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, Griffith University. The convenors of the conference acted as the editors of the volume Professor Anna Haebich, Ms Frances Peters-Little and Professor Peter Read.

We strongly recommend the contents of this volume both as examples of state of the art Indigenous life writing, and also as an earnest discussion of the complexities and difficulties involved. These no longer are the concern of only non-Indigenous writers. They are of vital concern also, and perhaps more so, to Indigenous scholars.

Professor Peter Read
Sydney, October 2008