

Introduction

For more than 60 years I have worked in short bursts on my *magnum opus*, the *Dictionary of World Biography (DWB)*.

It demonstrates my preoccupation, even obsession, about making sense of the world to myself and sharing those insights with others. The work, inevitably, is highly personal, even semi-autobiographical, projecting my involvement in politics, teaching history, extensive travel, and absorption in music, literature, the arts, religion, philosophy, ethics, and decades of work with a disaster relief organisation and campaigns to reduce blindness.

As a student in 1950, I was profoundly influenced by the great philosopher Bertrand Russell, and observed him in Melbourne at close quarters. He said: ‘Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind’.

I set out the convoluted history of the *Dictionary of World Biography* in my autobiography *A Thinking Reed* (Allen and Unwin, 2006). A variant of the text appeared as the Introduction in six editions of the *DWB* published by ANU Press 2014–19. ‘*True Biographies of Nations?*’ (edited by Karen Fox, ANU Press, 2019), a collection of papers presented at a seminar in Canberra in July 2016 about dictionaries of biography generally, includes my own contribution, ‘Writing a Dictionary of World Biography’. This Introduction draws from all three sources.

In the mid-1950s I had been puzzled that no comprehensive biographical dictionary was available in paperback at a modest price. I determined to fill the gap. As a university law student I had been concerned that so many contemporaries had either a sketchy, or nonexistent, grasp of recent political history, let alone familiarity with great composers, philosophers or discoverers in other disciplines, such as medicine. References to my heroes Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer or Albert Einstein drew a blank. Important and controversial Australians, such as Billy Hughes, John Thomas Lang or Percy Grainger, were forgotten, or had never been known. I was trying to pursue the concept of ‘the abundant life’ and I felt pained that so many had no access to the unfamiliar. If they knew nothing of Bach or Michelangelo, they were missing something significant. I always planned that my *DWB* would be more than a collected list of names, dates and places. I intended to provide a hook, something to encourage readers to pursue the subject – in effect, sharing my enthusiasms.

In comparison to national dictionaries of biography, my attempt has been an overview, analogous to what H. G. Wells had attempted, if that does not sound too pretentious, admittedly limited by my lack of expertise in some areas and remoteness from primary sources, but fortified by the (small c) creator’s knowledge and experience.

While I was teaching history and literature at Dandenong High School, I typed away furiously on my old Olivetti. I retain three bound volumes of my first draft bearing the final date of 5 May 1959, when I was only 26.

The text runs to 837 foolscap pages, with about 430,000 words and 6,000 entries. Amendments and new entries over the next 20 years were pasted in. Some of the original text survives in later, much expanded, editions, now about double in length.

I always intended to include entries on the living in my *DWB*. When I finished my first draft in 1959, while Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, Franklin Roosevelt and Josef Stalin were dead, Churchill, de Gaulle, Chiang, Eisenhower, MacArthur, Tito and Zhukov were still alive. It would have given a very lopsided account of World War II and the post-war world to have eliminated the quick in favour of the dead.

I was confident, perhaps overconfident, about the quality of my research. I had sent drafts to many subjects, inviting comments, and received valuable information from E. M. Forster, P. G. Wodehouse, Ezra Pound, Oskar Kokoschka, Vladimir Nabokov, Graham Greene, Iris Murdoch, Noam Chomsky and John Updike. Igor Stravinsky wrote: 'Glad you corrected all those absurd inventions of my so called "biographers" and, not critical, but critical [sic] reviews in musical periodicals you mention ... Thanking you very much for all these corrections.'

Obsessed about correcting error, I did not necessarily accept everything that my subjects told me. My approach was opinionated and subjective. I set my entries in the broad sweep of history, pointed to relationships between major characters and their times, and challenged errors in other reference books. I was making judgements all the time. I included cross references (*) and a bibliography to encourage discursive reading.

Apart from teaching, my long period on the television quiz show *Pick-a-Box* had just begun. Eisenhower, Khrushchev, Mao, de Gaulle, Macmillan and Menzies held office and (other than me) only Queen Elizabeth II is a link with that bygone era.

I wrote to Penguin Books in Harmondsworth, London, and received a thoughtful and encouraging letter from the then general editor A. S. B. Glover, a tattooed Buddhist with a photographic memory. In January 1961, I took my first draft to London and arranged a meeting with Penguin Books. Charles Clarke, a senior editor, began by reviewing my entry on the psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, and this impressed him enough to offer me a contract and a generous advance. Unfortunately, soon after the contract was signed, Clarke left Penguin for the Tavistock Institute, and years of uncertainty and confusion followed. There were deep divisions within Penguin Books, and very strong differences of opinion about whether they should be publishing general reference books at all. Glover left too.

After the departure of Glover and Clarke, the project drifted for years. There was obvious concern about the credibility of a young antipodean author, of whom they knew nothing. I was then advised that M. Vibart Dixon, a former editor-in-chief of *Chambers's Encyclopedia*, had been brought in to edit my material. Oddly, I never met, spoke to or corresponded with him. He died in 1967.

An attempt to break up the text and send it off to specialist editors ended in high farce. In 1969 I received the first page proofs only to find that many entries in the letters B (Bach, Beethoven, Berlioz, Boulez, Brahms, Britten, Bruckner, Byrd) and H (Händel, Haydn,

Heine, Hemingway, Herodotus, Holbein, Homer, Horace, Victor Hugo, Jan Hus) had gone missing. Confucius and Goya had dropped out too. After a blazing row, Penguin pulled the plug and after more years of delay offered a handsome cash settlement in 1977.

After another hiatus there came an unexpected invitation for the work to be published by Macmillan in London. The offer had been arranged by M. Vibart Dixon's son. Dixon, a committed Anglophile and empire loyalist, had weeded out many of my non-British entries and presumably was responsible for the dropped out entries. Despite my reservations, I weakly agreed to the offer, anxious to see my work in print, even if it meant sharing royalties (and credit) with Dixon's family.

Then another fiasco. Despite promises that I would see the final proofs to ensure that missing entries were inserted, the work went to printers and binders without material on hundreds of subjects, including George Bush Sr, then US Vice President, Hua Guofeng, China's head of state, François Mitterrand, France's President and two Australian stars, Patrick White and Gough Whitlam.

The volume was published in London in October 1981 as *Macmillan Dictionary of Biography* by Barry Jones and M. V. Dixon. A biographical note on the authors read 'Dixon's work on the *Macmillan Dictionary of Biography* was completed before he died in 1967'. This seemed to be self-evident.

I protested vigorously. The work received a generous review in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Sir William Haley, former editor of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, to which I responded angrily. I wrote a sharp attack on the bungled project, which appeared in *Private Eye*.

The Rutledge Dictionary of People by Barry Jones and M. V. Dixon, published in New York in 1981, was news to me, as was the *St Martin's Press Dictionary of Biography* (New York, 1986). Through Brian Stonier, Macmillan Publishers Australia took over the rights from London and published three editions to my satisfaction.

In 1994, Michael Wilkinson of Information Australia, Melbourne, published a much expanded edition, renamed *Dictionary of World Biography*, dropping M. V. Dixon as co-author, launched jointly by former prime ministers Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser. Further editions followed in 1996 and 1998, the last copublished with *The Age*.

I revised interminably, especially after discussions with people such as Isaiah Berlin, Francis Crick, James Watson, Peter Medawar, Max Perutz, Peter Doherty, Michael Tippett, Karl Popper, Henry Moore, Sidney Nolan, David Hockney, Patrick White, John Coetzee, Ernst Gombrich and Benoît Mandelbrot.

Then, after 1998 came a long hiatus, when multi-volume or single-volume reference books such as *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or the *Columbia Encyclopedia* were going out of print because of the availability of millions of entries on Wikipedia.

In 2011, Garry Sturgess conducted a long series of interviews with me for the National Library of Australia's oral history project. He was an enthusiast for the *DWB* and helped to persuade the National Centre of Biography at The Australian National University (ANU),

which does the editorial work for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, to exhume, update and revise my obsession. He worked for years on a documentary film, *Barry Jones: In Search of Lost Time* (2018), which won him a PhD from ANU.

At ANU, Melanie Nolan and Tom Griffiths were enthusiasts and encouragers and proposed that the *DWB* appear both as an ebook and in traditional printed form. Gareth Evans, ANU Chancellor at the time, was a benign influence. After decades of frustration, working on the project with Michael Wilkinson and then the ANU team proved to be stimulating, enjoyable and productive.

In 2014 ANU E Press produced the work, revised and rewritten again, in paperback and online. Michael Wilkinson published a handsome hard-cover version in 2016 in conjunction with ANU Press.

Inevitably, my work is semi-autobiographical, reflecting my own experience, understanding, attempts to grasp a world view, dealing with diversity and trying to neutralise prejudice. I was always a very rapid and – more important – efficient reader, and over the decades I have consumed thousands of books, including novels, biographies, plays and poetry, as well as being an assiduous visitor to art galleries and museums, a modest collector of artworks and archaeology, and a concert hall habitué. Travel was also a very important factor.

In Paris in May 1958, I had witnessed the collapse of the Fourth French Republic, and this, followed by years commuting to France as Australia's representative to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO: 1991–95) and the World Heritage Committee (1995–96), fuelled my interest in French history, especially the French Revolution, art, music, politics, science and architecture. I have visited France more than 40 times. My obsessions included revolutionary and political history, Montaigne and Pascal, Debussy and Ravel, Proust, films, churches and cathedrals, Cavallé-Coll organs, menhirs and dolmens in Brittany, and prehistoric cave art in the Dordogne. Entries on de Gaulle, Mitterrand, Chirac and Macron, Simone Veil and Viollet-le-Duc have been enlarged as I better understand complexities.

It was inevitable that there would be some bias in entry selection towards the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the lifetime of my readers, reflecting their desire for information to understand the context of how we live now, the impact on politics, revolutions, ideology, technology, science, World Wars I and II, the Cold War, literature, art, film, music and the media. Of my 30 longest entries, 11 subjects were active in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. I have made some attempts to write about The Beatles, who have had (I am told) a continuing influence. Despite my long, and increasingly unhappy, career in politics, I tried to be clinically detached in my entries on public figures, and would immodestly point to entries on Harold Macmillan, Margaret Thatcher and Richard Nixon. However, I have not disguised my loathing of totalitarian systems, whether Left or Right, and entries on Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and Mao are obvious examples. I felt that my explanation of ideologies was a strength and over many years I have tried to cover my areas of weakness, such as sport, popular music, ballet, ornithology, gardening and fourteenth-century Islamic tiles.

I was exhilarated by the challenge to rethink and rewrite my positions on great historical figures after many years of deep reading, travel and reflection. Time in Egypt, Spain, Turkey, Brazil, Peru and Cambodia led to fresh insights, major revisions and expansions of many entries – for example, Tutankhamun, Dilma Rousseff, Fujimori and Pol Pot. Visits to Rome in 2013 and 2014, followed by reading Mary Beard's *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (London: Profile, 2015), fed my obsessions about the Caesars, the papacy, early church architecture and Caravaggio, resulting in significant revision and expansion of many entries. Similarly, nine days in Iran in 2015 led to a reconsideration of Ferdowsi, Hāfez, Sa'di, Rumi, Omar Khayyam, al Ghazālī and the Shi'ite/Sunni schism. Time in Bourges, Chinon, Blois and Canterbury led to rethinking about Jacques Coeur and early capitalism, Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Dukes of Guise, Thomas Becket and Geoffrey Chaucer.

Access to Nobel Prize archives provided insight into the selection (and rejection) process. I drew attention to contemporary recognition, or lack of it. In the entry on James Joyce, I pointed to the long list of great writers who had failed to win the Nobel Prize for Literature: Ibsen, Tolstoy, Strindberg, James, Hardy, Conrad, Gorki, Proust, Rilke, Musil, Joyce, Woolf, Pound, Borges, Malraux, Greene and Auden.

Writing *The Shock of Recognition: The books and music that have inspired me* (Allen and Unwin, 2016) forced me to rethink the achievements of Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Montaigne, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Johnson, Gibbon, Sterne, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Proust, Joyce, Beckett, Kafka, White and Coetzee, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and Shostakovich. This, inevitably, led to extensive revision, or indeed recomposition, of many entries in the *DWB*.

The latest edition of the *DWB* (2021) has the equivalent of 985 full pages of text, more than 8,750 entries and 865,000 words. Four factors determined entry length: likelihood that the entries would be frequently consulted, availability of resource material, degree of influence that the subjects had on how we live (language, inventions, medicine, war, nutrition, religion, philosophy, information, exploration, entertainment, the arts and so on), and the extent of cross-referencing to other subjects in the *DWB*.

Of the 30 longest entries, 10 are of English-speaking subjects (Shakespeare, Franklin Roosevelt, Lincoln, Churchill, Joyce, Dickens, Ford, Oliver Cromwell, Washington, Margaret Thatcher), seven German (Wagner, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Hitler, Goethe, Marx), three Italian (Michelangelo, Dante, Columbus), two each are French (Napoléon, Proust), Russian (Tolstoy, Stalin) and Spanish (Picasso, Cervantes), and one each are Greek (Homer), Aramaic (Jesus), Chinese (Mao) and Hindi (Gandhi). Nine are writers, 12 political leaders, four composers, two artists and one each are religious (Jesus), political philosopher (Marx) and manufacturer (Ford).

It is a matter for regret that only Jesus, Mao, Gandhi and possibly Homer were not of European ancestry. That reflects the cultural biases that influence me and my potential readers. I try to compensate, but it is a formidable task.

My Shakespeare entry, by far the longest, has 2,386 words, with 56 cross-references (indicated by *), emphasising his life, his sources, the context of his work in the times of Elizabeth I and James I, and his influence on later writers, and including a bibliography. Thirty-seven plays are referred to, but in context, not set out in tabular form.

In recent editions I have made significant changes in the names for subjects, moving away from or adding to the familiar Anglophone versions (Philip > Felipe > Philippe) to the spelling in the original language, or the nearest equivalent, for example **Samuel** (Shmu'el), or **Jinnah, Muhammad Ali** (originally Mahomedali Jinnabhai) or **Yongle** ('perpetual happiness': personal name Zhu Di).

How tactful does an encyclopedist have to be in writing about living subjects? Publishing serious entries on the living may inhibit discussion of sensitive issues such as sexuality, mental and physical health, addictions and obsessions, or financial links, and much primary source material will be inaccessible or embargoed. Postponing treatment of subjects still living, and presumably not eager to be eligible, gives future biographers space and time to reflect instead of rushing to judgement. I had no such inhibition with my *DWB* and emphasised linkages between past and current subjects.

Since turning 89, my writing and revision for the *DWB* has been stimulated by a sense of urgency, with time running out.

Christine Fernon has been an exemplary editor and I am deeply grateful for her skills, resourcefulness, good humour, erudition (despite the odd lapse) and patience over eight years. When I refer to the *DWB* as 'our book', I mean it.

Barry O. Jones

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