Introduction

In the mid-1950s I had been puzzled that no comprehensive biographical dictionary was available in paperback and I determined to fill the gap. I wrote to Penguin Books in London/Harmondsworth and received a thoughtful and encouraging letter from A. S. B. Glover, a classical scholar and editor. The two generally available major biographical dictionaries, Chambers’s and Webster’s, both had significant weaknesses. One was too British, with a poor representation of names outside of Europe (a deficiency corrected somewhat in later editions) and the second, while far more comprehensive, offered short entries, little more than concise lists of dates, offices held or works produced, with no interpretation or context provided. Both were heavy and expensive, while I planned a book that students could carry around.

As an undergraduate, I worked part-time as a draftsman in the Victorian Titles Office, and my fellow workers included John Landy, John Button and other future public figures. I began to work systematically on collating material for a dictionary of biography. In practice, the TO clerks operated on a daily quota. There was no point in breaking records for processing files because it would simply jam the system, because ‘engrossing’ Certificates of Title was a slow, pre-Gutenberg process. So draftsmen (and they were all male at that time) devoted surplus time to their special interests, such as working out sophisticated betting systems for racing. My speciality was developing lists of names that should be included in a reasonably portable paperback intended to be broader in range than existing hardcover biographical dictionaries.

I worked on this project on and off for many years. While largely relying on instinct, I would have backed my own judgment on the choice of names, and their relative length, against all comers. My selections were influenced by my constant reading of biographies, noting how often a particular name would have multiple references in indexes in a random sample of books about, say, 20th-century politics. However, I could check my judgment objectively by referring to The Biography Index, a cumulative list of biographical material in books and magazines, published quarterly by the H. W. Wilson Company, New York. (This was long before the Internet made the task of ranking name frequency so much easier.)

By the end of 1960 I had completed my first draft and had three bound volumes of typescript. I was then teaching at Dandenong High School and my long period on the television quiz ‘Pick-a-Box’ had just begun. It was the time when 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.

In January 1961 I took masses of material to London and arranged a meeting with Penguin Books. Charles Clarke began by asking to see 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 Charles left Penguin for the Tavistock Institute and years of uncertainty and confusion followed.
Sir Allen Lane, Penguin’s founder, recruited Sir John Summerscale, formerly Minister (Commercial) to Rio, to be editor-in-chief of reference books. He was an amiable, hospitable man, but not one of Lane’s shrewdest appointments. He had a passion for the Edwardian theatre, lawn tennis and South America.

Penguin’s headquarters was in Middlesex, but the reference books section was housed in an oubliette in John Street, Holborn. I thought the people working there had a distinctly P. G. Wodehouse flavour. I was already irritated by proposed lists of additions and omissions, with a disproportionate emphasis on English subjects. I asked Penguin’s reference people if they were familiar with the H. W. Wilson *Biography Index*. They had never heard of it. ‘How do you choose which names to include or exclude?’ ‘We ask chaps.’

To provide an example, a man working in the office was called over to proffer advice. I have always thought of his name as Wotherspoon, but this may be an embellishment. Sir John said, ‘Wothers, old fruit, in a biographical dictionary of about 6000 entries, with some bias towards the 20th-century and the English-speaking world, what would you do with the South African novelist Stuart Cloete? In or out?’ Wotherspoon closed his eyes for a few seconds, sucked his lips and blew out his cheeks. ‘I rather think … In.’ ‘There you are’, said Sir John. ‘We ask chaps.’

The strategy adopted by Penguin, they told me, was to break up the work into categories and send my entries out to specialists so that they could add a cachet of legitimacy to the work of an unknown antipodean. Unhappily, because of the years wasted over the project, some experts had died, dropped out or possibly gone mad. Then I was advised that an experienced editor had been brought in, to ‘coordinate’ the book. He was M. (for Meredith) Vibart Dixon, former editor-in-chief of *Chamber’s Encyclopedia*. I looked up *Who’s Who* and found that he had been born in 1898, was educated at Eton and King’s College, Cambridge and had written *The True Facts about the Disputed Frontiers of Europe* (1940). We never met or talked on the telephone. Sir John sent me a list of Dixon’s suggested additions and omissions. Overwhelmingly, the additions were British, the proposed omissions non-British. I protested vigorously. Then, in 1967, I was told that Vibart Dixon had died.

I was confident 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 critinitical 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 judgments all the time. I included cross references (*) and a bibliography to encourage discursive reading. Detail in entries often reflected what I was teaching at the time, for example the artists of the Italian Renaissance, or the leaders of the French and Russian revolutions.
When galley proofs started to arrive, unexpectedly, late in 1969, I could hardly believe how much had dropped out. Great bleeding chunks of my material had been eliminated, especially in the letters B and H, and in particular subject areas. Among composers who had gone missing were Bach, Bartók, Beethoven, Berio, Berlioz, Bernstein, Bizet, Bliss, Bloch, Boulez, Brahms, Britten, Bruckner, Busoni, Buxtehude, Byrd, Händel, Haydn, Hindemith, Holst, Hummel and Humperdinck. The writers Heinrich Heine, Ernest Hemingway, Hermann Hesse, Homer, Horace and Victor Hugo were absent, as well as violinist Jascha Heifetz and pianist Vladimir Horowitz, Herodotus, Jan Hus and Holbein. Confucius and Goya had dropped out too.

My text’s precision had been transformed to vagueness. Stanley Baldwin, three times Prime Minister of Britain, was described as ‘exercising power’ or ‘taking the helm’ without his office being specified. Somebody had carefully changed the dates of United States presidential terms, so that Eisenhower was described as being President 1952-60, that is, from election to election, instead of 1953-61, from inauguration to inauguration. Only a political illiterate could have done that, I fumed. Many entries, for example Robert Menzies and Nuri es-Said, had rather an empire loyalist flavour. The entry on the tennis star Suzanne Lenglen was almost as long as the one following, on V. I. Lenin.

Then Penguin advised a change in plan. It would publish a three-volume *Penguin Encyclopedia*, and my biographical entries would appear as part of a work which covered places and things as well as people, not in a separate volume. I would be credited as co-author.

I rewrote hundreds of new entries, pasting them up on the galleys. Then, after a long pause, an exasperated letter from Penguin to say that the three-volume project had been abandoned, breaking the contract but offering compensation. ‘After a long series of exchanges, it has become clear that your concept of the work’s scope and ours has become irreconcilable.’

This was a stupid assertion. I wrote back at once.

Can you provide some specific examples of these irreconcilable differences? If your problem is that I insist Bach, Beethoven, Confucius, Händel, Haydn, Heine, Hemingway, Herodotus, Homer and Hugo should be in, while you insist that they must be excluded, then this is an irreconcilable difference. But if that is the case, then say so. At least that would clarify the matter. But is that what you are saying?

Penguin did not reply. In 1970 Allen Lane died and Penguin Books was bought by the Pearson group, which owned Longmans. Years dragged by. In 1977, my friend Rohan Rivett, a courageous journalist, suggested that I write to Jim Rose, the new chair of Penguin, proposing that the project be revived. He had read my correspondence file and thought that Penguin had treated me badly. He knew Rose well and wrote him a covering letter. Jim Rose replied promptly and sympathetically, agreed that the *Dictionary of Biography* project had been appallingly handled, but concluded that Penguin lacked personnel with expertise in reference works. He sent a generous cheque in lieu of damages and said I was free to place the book elsewhere. Rohan died unexpectedly a few months later.

Then, surprisingly, I received a letter from Richard Dixon, son of the late Vibart. He wanted to revive the project because he was looking for a source of income for his ageing mother. Richard worked as a producer for the BBC, his wife was in children’s publishing and he had very close connections with Macmillan publishers. His proposition was that if he could get
Macmillan to publish the dictionary, then we should agree on a 50/50 split of royalties for his mother’s lifetime, after which all royalties would revert to me. I met Richard and his wife at their elegant house in Hammersmith, liked them both, and assumed all would go well. I concluded that 50 per cent of something was better than 100 per cent of nothing. He explained that he had a complete set of his father’s galley proofs, from which Macmillan could reset the text. For once, the project advanced quickly; but when the first proofs for the Macmillan edition arrived, I saw that, once again, many major figures were missing. Vibart Dixon had been dead for a decade, but clearly these major entries, and hundreds of others, had dropped out while he was running the project for Penguins. I felt deeply betrayed.

For the second time, hundreds of entries had to be retyped. Richard said that Macmillan had agreed that the book would not go to the printers before I had seen a final set of proofs. Then a late night telephone call from Richard in London: ‘I’m sorry, but there has been a misunderstanding. The material has been printed without your additional entries and is about to go to the binders.’

‘In that case’, I said, ‘I will ask Macmillan Australia not to distribute the volume here’. ‘You can’t do that’, Richard shrieked, ‘Macmillan in the UK is counting on large Australian sales’.

He suggested a compromise – that before the book was bound, a one-page addendum would be printed in the back, containing a few entries that I considered essential. I proposed George Bush senior, Vice President of the United States; Hua Guofeng, China’s head of state; François Mitterrand, the French President; Patrick White and Gough Whitlam.

I said to Richard, ‘You can’t begin to grasp the embarrassment of publishing a dictionary of biography in Australia bearing my name which excludes White and Whitlam. It will make me a laughing stock and neither of them will ever speak to me again.’

The book was published 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.

When the first bound copies arrived in Australia in October 1981, I could not contain my fury. I flew to London immediately and made vigorous protests at Macmillan’s head office. I had an angry exchange with the sales manager, Adrian Same, when I complained about errors and omissions. He said, ‘Frankly, our main interest is in sales. We don’t give a f*** about its level of accuracy. Who cares, other than you?’

I saw an advertisement in a New York trade journal for The Rutledge Dictionary of People by Barry Jones and M. V. Dixon, published by Rutledge Books. In New York I sought legal advice from a specialist in publishing law, Harriet Pilpel. She counselled against initiating action for an injunction to prevent publication: ‘You would have to post a performance bond in multiples of tens of thousands of dollars’. I blanched at that and settled for writing a letter of protest to Rutledge Books, which they failed to acknowledge.

Oddly, the Dictionary received a generous review in the Times Literary Supplement written by Sir William Haley, former Director General of the BBC and editor of Encyclopaedia Britannica. The TLS printed my letter of protest about favourable treatment of a book which I regarded as a travesty. My response to Haley became a news item in Australia.
I wrote a sharp attack on the bungled project, which appeared in *Private Eye*.


Brian Stonier, Chairman of Macmillan Publishers Australia, was sympathetic, and told Macmillan UK that he would only distribute the book in Australia if the volume included a disclaimer by me. Controversy about the publication probably helped its sales. Brian believed in my concept of the dictionary, so he acquired publication rights from Macmillan UK, produced a new edition which restored the deletions, and further editions in 1986 and 1989. However, M. V. Dixon's name, although printed in a smaller font than mine, remained on the title page, although his contributions had been virtually eliminated.

I was careful about the relative balance of entries. Certain categories were automatically included: most popes, all British sovereigns and prime ministers, French and German kings and presidents, American presidents, prime ministers of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa. I wanted to avoid either including too many Australian entries, or overreacting and having too few. I had to be selective and tried to balance Australian and Canadian politicians, painters, novelists and poets. Inevitably, Israel and Ireland had, and have, a disproportionate international political and cultural significance, with more representation, say, than New South Wales and Victoria, which between them had the same population.

My *Dictionary* had a higher proportion of female entries than *Chambers's* or *Webster's* but they accounted for less than 15 per cent. I felt that my explanation of ideologies was a strength and I tried to cover my areas of weakness, such as sport, popular music, ballet, ornithology, gardening and 14th-century Islamic tile making.

I included some tightly compressed anecdotes and the occasional telling quotation, such as Artur Schnabel’s comment on Mozart’s piano sonatas: ‘Too easy for amateurs: too hard for professionals.’ I reported strongly critical views: ‘Handsome, imaginative, but superficial and distrusted by his contemporaries (*Alanbrooke, *Montgomery, *Templer, *Ismay), Mountbatten's reputation has declined since his death.’ I wrote of Anton Chekhov, ‘His funeral was Chekhovian: the coffin was lost, confused with a general’s and returned to Moscow in an oyster cart.’ In the entry on the actor Donald Wolfit, I quoted Clement Freud: ‘John Gielgud was a *tour de force*, while Wolfit was forced to tour.’ 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.

In 1994, Michael Wilkinson of Information Australia, in Melbourne, published a much expanded edition, renamed *Dictionary of World Biography*, with no reference to M. V. Dixon. There were 8,500 entries. Further editions followed in 1996 and 1998, the last being co-published with *The Age*.

I revised interminably, especially after discussions with people such as Isaiah Berlin, Francis Crick, James Watson, Peter Medawar, Max Perutz, Michael Tippett, Karl Popper, Henry Moore, Ernst Gombrich and Benoit Mandelbrot.
Spending time in Egypt, France, Spain and Peru, for example, led to fresh insights and major revisions of many entries, and writing new ones. So, much personal experience was compressed into the *Dictionary of World Biography*.

What about pop culture? Jerome Kern? Cole Porter? Bing Crosby? Frank Sinatra? Elvis Presley? The Beatles? John Coltrane? Frank Zappa? They were included, partly because universality of recognition, their lasting influence and extensive literature about them conferred ‘classic’ status. Major figures in jazz were there because their virtuosity appealed to me. But I failed to include Perry Como, Tony Bennett, Frankie Laine, The Rolling Stones, The Seekers, Kylie Minogue, Demi Moore or Johnny O’Keefe. Is being well known the only criterion? I am open to persuasion.

Gough Whitlam was my most distinguished and assiduous proofreader and I appreciated his detailed critiques. I have been gratified by the number of people, unknown to me, who say that they read the *Dictionary* for pleasure. I agree with their judgment, but it is nice to hear it.

Then, after 1998 came a long hiatus, when single-volume reference books such as the *Columbia Encyclopedia* were going out of print because of the availability of millions of entries on *Wikipedia*. I set out the convoluted history of the *Dictionary of World Biography* in my autobiography *A Thinking Reed* (2006).

In 2011, Garry Sturgess conducted a long series of interviews with me for the National Library of Australia’s oral history project, and began work on a documentary film about my life. He was an enthusiast for my *Dictionary of World Biography* and persuaded the National Centre of Biography at The Australian National University, which does the editorial work for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, to exhume, update and revise my *magnum opus*.

Melanie Nolan, Tom Griffiths and Christine Fernon have been enthusiasts and encouragers and proposed that the *DWB* appear both as an ebook and in traditional printed form. After decades of frustration, working on the project with the ANU team has been stimulating, enjoyable and productive.

Despite – or perhaps because of – my advancing years 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. Among the best revised entries, I think, are Jesus, Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Sterne, Jane Austen, Dickens, Tolstoy, Joyce, Beckett, Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, J. S. Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Wagner, Verdi, Schoenberg, Ravel, Shostakovich, Britten, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, Pope Julius II, Margaret Thatcher, Harold Macmillan, Heidegger.

*Barry O. Jones*

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This is an extended version of experiences with the *Dictionary of World Biography*, which appeared in *A Thinking Reed*. 