12. From Book to Digital Culture: Redesigning the *ADB*

Melanie Nolan

We suspect that the usefulness of the ADB could be extended significantly if means could be found to make it well known beyond a basic range of people such as academics, teachers, students, journalists and genealogists … we discussed a number of alternative methods for organising the entries in the next series of volumes (including the ingenious suggestions of one witness for using the new technology to achieve progressive and provisional publication).


The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (*ADB*) was designed for publication as a series of books.¹ Three main activities lay at the heart of the project: the books, intended as repositories of concise, scholarly biographies of famous and representative Australians; the Biographical Register (BR); and the index. Preparation of the volumes involved working parties and staff in selecting, commissioning and research editing the entries. The BR (originally called the National Register) was a tool for establishing a pool of names, from which to make the selections for inclusion; it eventually developed into a publication in its own right. The index was compiled so that people could more easily navigate their way around the articles. From 1986 the *ADB* began to consider the application of new technology to these three traditional tasks. Technological ‘retooling’ involves more than changing the medium and attendant culture. A fundamental transformation of the project is concomitant with a digital redesign of the *ADB* 50 years after its beginning.

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¹ The original *ADB* project involved 12 volumes (Period 1, Volumes 1–2; Period 2, 1851–90; Period 3, 1891–1939). The review of the *ADB* in 1986 considered whether the *ADB* should continue, following the completion of the original project in 1990–91 and, if so, on what scale and with what speed and staffing. The committee held it should ‘continue without pausing’, with the Editorial Board suggesting six volumes, 1940–80, for Period 4. ‘Report of the Committee of Review of the Australian Dictionary of Biography’ (May 1986), box 125, Q31, ADBA, ANUA, p. 9. Editorial Board meetings in 1994, 1996 and 1998 committed the *ADB* to Period 5, 1981–90, with the last meeting agreeing to two volumes, while meetings in 2000 and 2002 committed the *ADB* to two volumes, Period 6, 1991–2000, and a ‘missing persons’ volume.
Dictates of the book culture

The demands of book publishing determined a number of features about the *ADB*, including the number of entries to be included, their length, the manner of dealing with corrigenda and the extent of indexing. For example, in 1976, having commissioned and begun work on the submitted articles, as Chris Cunneen discusses in Chapter 4, Peter Ryan, the director of Melbourne University Press, demanded that the length of Volume 6 be reduced by 10 per cent. In 2009, MUP said that we could add 10 per cent to period six. These are perhaps extreme examples but they do indicate how the constraints of the book flowed into all aspects of the *ADB*.

The essence of the *ADB* has been editing for economy, in keeping with its own house style and according to the publishers’ requirements. Editing, the 1986 Committee of Review of the *ADB* decided, was a ‘modest term for procedures’ that involved ‘considerable new research and in all cases … careful checking back to source materials’. The work of *ADB* research editors became a defining...

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aspect of the ADB process. When the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) was published in 2004, several reviews pointed to errors, to which Philip Carter makes reference in his chapter. The editors of the ODNB argued ‘that the mistakes are rare … only 2 per cent of the entries’. They reminded critics that ‘when Sir Leslie Stephen’s first edition (1885–1900) came out, its mistakes were later corrected in a 300-page erratum’.1 Malcolm Ellis was highly critical of the first volumes of the ADB for this reason. Geoffrey Partington has subsequently pointed out that ‘[s]ince the corrigenda of Volume one soon stretched to three pages and contained over one-third of the corrigenda for the first twelve ADB volumes, Ellis may not have been all that wrong’.4 In contrast, Mark McGinness in Chapter 10 also indicates that careful observers like Allan Martin reckon, however, that ‘most errors were trivial’, and praised instead the high level of accuracy achieved by both editors and staff and the obvious attention given to revision and correction.5

*ADB staff, 2009. From left: Gail Clements, Janet Doust, Pam Crichton, Barbara Dawson, Brian Wimborne, Melanie Nolan (seated), Christine Fernon, Karen Ciuffetelli, Anthea Bundock*

Photographer: Darren Boyd, *ADB archives*

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1 See, for example, Vanessa Thorpe, ‘At £7,500 for the Set, You’d Think They’d Get Their Facts Right: Throwing the Book at the DNB’, *Observer* (6 March 2005).


Over the years the *ADB* developed an elaborate system of corrigenda, but has rarely accepted addenda. Given the constraints of a book project, however, the corrigenda had to be published separately. In 1991 a consolidated corrigenda, compiled by Darryl Bennet with assistance from Suzanne Edgar, was published. In 1992 *ADB* research assistant Hilary Kent suggested to John Ritchie after preparing an index for the first 12 volumes that a ‘systematic approach’ to the corrections in the *ADB*, especially in regard to births, deaths and marriages in the first volumes, be adopted, but it was regarded as subsidiary to the central work of publishing new volumes.

Ritchie, the *ADB*’s longest-serving general editor (1987–2002), was as deeply committed to producing volumes of the *ADB* as his predecessors. When the director of the Research School of Social Sciences, Geoff Brennan, suggested that he write a strategic plan in 1994, he responded that ‘the ADB’s single research goal is straightforward: to produce a volume of half a million words, containing the lives of about 670 Australians, written by 500 authors and to do so in roughly thirty months’.

Occasionally the Editorial Board has considered enhancing *ADB* entries. For example, in 1964 the board decided to include an article in Volume 1 on the Colonial Office, ‘together with a chronological table setting out dates and names of all these officials … [and] the governors of each colony’. The decision was revisited the next year but it was decided to abandon that proposal (even though the essay had been written) because of space constraints. The *ODNB* began including ‘thematic essays’ as well as companion reference material, reference lists and collective biographies in its online version in 2004; the *ADB* followed in 2012.

### The Biographical Register

The collection of biographical data predated the *ADB* project by a number of years. Interviewed by Robin Gollan in 1982, Laurie Fitzhardinge, who started the BR, said that it was

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8 John Ritchie to H. G. Brennan, ‘Strategic Plan’ (15 September 1994), NCB/ADB files.

9 The first thematic and collective biography essays appeared on the National Centre of Biography web site in 2012.

10 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (10 April 1964), box 64, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.

11 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (12 February 1965), box 64, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
conceived partly as a way of building up material until the time seemed to be right to launch the Dictionary, partly as it still is—as a separate research tool for people who would never get into the Dictionary but whom the searchers in Australian history were going to want to know about at some point, not necessarily know all about them, but be able to place them.

He said that the register began ‘very modestly’, and was a means of putting on record, and making accessible for their reference, material found either by myself or by my students about these obscure people that I, or they, had to spend a week finding out about and save the next man doing it. And it probably started out of Allan Martin’s work, I think. Allan had an immense repertoire of knowledge about minor characters … on which the Parkes’ correspondence sheds some light. And this, I think, was probably the beginning of the register. But it grew quite informally and rather haphazardly in that way.12

To begin with, it was a box of cards on Fitzhardinge’s desk and an annotated copy of *Who’s Who in Australia* with deaths noted and ‘that sort of thing’.

Fitzhardinge noted that from the beginning Hancock had recognised the importance of the BR for the *ADB* project.13 Many State and university libraries had similar indexes or registers of biographical material, but they tended to focus on the libraries’ collections, or special interests. The BR had a national focus. In 1960 Hancock wrote to State librarians, seeking access to their biographical indexes and files. After meeting with John Feely, chief librarian of the State Library of Victoria, in 1961, Geoff Serle, who was then chair of the Victorian Working Party, wrote to Hancock to inform him that he and his research assistant had gained access to the State library’s registers but found they were a ‘rather haphazard set of cards of references to obituaries, etc., with no collated information’.14 Rather than ask the ‘short-staffed and poverty-stricken’ library staff to build up their biographical registers, Serle preferred having someone ‘directly under my control doing the work’. They agreed that the best strategy was for the *ADB* to coordinate State material and build up a central, consistent, biographically dedicated national register at the ANU.15

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12 Laurie Fitzhardinge, interviewed by Robin Gollan (30 September 1982), box 70, Q31, ADBA, ANUA, typescript p. 2.
13 Keith Hancock, ‘Formation of the Australian Dictionary of Biography’ (n.d.), box 69, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
14 Dianne Reilly, Paul de Serville and John Arnold, ‘Remembering the La Trobe Library’, *La Trobe Journal*, no. 80 (Spring 2007), pp. 22–37.
Examples of entries in the Biographical Register. The earliest citations were written in pencil. From the early 1980s citations were loaded into an in-house database. In 2011 the Biographical Register was replaced with Obituaries Australia, a freely accessible, full-text and comprehensively indexed companion web site to the ADB archives.
Ann Moyal tells the story of her first day at the ADB and being asked to fill in a BR card. Coordinating the collection of data for the register and publishing regular updates to it became two of her main tasks. A series of research assistants was employed to work on the project, including Pat Tillyard, Judith Robinson and Nan Phillips. References were collected from dictionaries such as H. Morin Humphrey’s *Men of the Time in Australia* (1882), George Loyau’s *Notable South Australians* (1885), Phillip Mennell’s *Dictionary of Australasian Biography* (1892) and Fred Johns’ *Notable Australians* (1906), as well as State encyclopedias and biographical information in periodicals and newspapers. ADB working parties also began to populate the register; a ‘block of biographical material from the Tasmanian State Archives’ filled a gap for that State.

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16 Jim Gibney, ‘Biographical Register’ (6 May 1976), box 132, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
18 A. Mozley, ‘The Project of a National Register and a Dictionary of Australian Biography’, a work in progress seminar to the Department of History, RSSS, ANU (23 April 1959), box 67, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
In 1961 Hancock sent a letter to Australian newspapers, historical societies, pioneers’ clubs and genealogical societies informing them that the ADB was compiling a Register of Australian biographical material on lesser known figures, so that we should be most grateful for information not only on prominent personalities such as will be found in the Dictionary, but also others who have played a significant, but less conspicuous, part in any aspect of Australian history, so that details may be recorded for future research workers.20

The usefulness of the BR was as an auxiliary to the dictionary, performing ‘a twofold service, both as a check against the omission of names from the lists of inclusions, and as a guide to possible contributors. In turn, names dropped from the Dictionary lists, are incorporated in the Register’.21 In 1959 and 1963, roneoed compilations of names and references, called ‘short lists’, were made available to libraries, university history departments and many historical societies in Australia.22 Pike indicated in the prefaces to the first three volumes of the ADB that copies of the BR would be ‘circulated at intervals to Australian libraries’, but there were never sufficient resources to do so. From Volume 4 onwards, readers were advised, in prefaces, that thousands of names and biographical information were ‘accumulating at the Dictionary headquarters at the ANU, which they were welcome to visit’.23

The BR flourished under Jim Gibbney’s supervision from 1965 to 1983. A trained librarian and archivist, Gibbney joined the ADB in 1965 as a research fellow ‘to act as general adviser on source material to the Dictionary and to change the direction of register work in certain directions desired by Professor Pike’.24 Pike was concerned, for instance, that the ‘current obituary collection was fairly haphazard’, and that the general name index cards should be accompanied by biographical files housing documents. Gibbney began systematically indexing the Australasian, the British Australasian and the Australian Town and Country Journal, as well as government gazettes, parliamentary papers and Colonial Office records for biographical material.25 Collecting biographical references was also added to the list of tasks set for State research assistants. By 1973 the BR had more than 50 000 index cards covering 20 000 people. In 1976 it was decided that the publication of entries from the register should coincide with the publication of the last of the initial 12 volumes and would cover the same period (1788–1939), so that researchers would have access both to the 8100 scholarly

20 W. K. Hancock, ‘Letter to Australian Newspapers, also Historical Societies, Pioneers’ Club, genealogical societies and a second letter was sent to newspapers in Great Britain and Ireland’, box 69, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
21 ‘The Biographical Register’ (July 1961).
22 Ann Mozley to Professor Hancock, Memo (13 March 1962), and related material, box 73, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
24 Jim Gibbney, ‘Biographical Register’ (6 May 1976), box 132, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
entries in the *ADB* and to brief epitaphs, and references of another 8000 ‘people from every State, from all walks of life, women as well as men, young and old, making a collection of lesser-known who are none the less relevant to the study of Australian regional, institutional and family history’.  

Anthea Bundock, the last of the *ADB*’s Biographical Register officers, consults the Biographical Register, 2009

Photographer: Peter Fitzpatrick, *ADB* archives

Assembling and publishing the entries was a large undertaking. Seeking extra assistance for the project, general editor Nairn told the director of RSSS in 1980 that, while the main administrative activity of the *ADB* had to be directed towards publication, the gathering of diverse biographical material, its ‘organising, copying and filing’ were major activities, too.  

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26 ‘Biographical Register, Discussion Paper’ (n.d.), box 57, Q31, ADBA, ANUA; see also papers and report for ‘Australian Dictionary of Biography: Present State and Future Prospects’, seminar (22 October 1975), box 66, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.

27 B. Nairn to F. L. Jones (11 June 1980), box 124, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
several biographical registers of parliamentarians. Ann Smith saw the project to conclusion following Gibbney’s departure that year from the ADB. The two volumes of the Biographical Register were finally published in 1987.

The ADB continued to have a dedicated, full-time BR officer until 2005, and until 2009 on a part-time basis. The change was partly a response to the growing amount of biographical material now available online. By then it was estimated that the register contained citations on more than 300,000 index cards; an in-house database, created in 1981, held citations for a further 32,000 people. The BR had been a central part of the ADB’s work: it had been an important source for working parties when choosing subjects for inclusion in the ADB; and it had been of vital use to large numbers of other researchers who contacted the ADB with queries for sources on people, or came to the ADB’s offices to search the cards themselves. By 2009, however, an average of only 270 people were consulting the register each year.

Indexing and ‘rapid referencing’

In 1903 Sidney Lee published an index and epitome of the 66 volumes of the British Dictionary of National Biography to permit ‘as ... rapid reference as possible’. All entries were summarised and references to leading facts and dates recorded in them were indexed, a massive task of cross-referencing. Lee admitted that it had taken him and ‘his assistants’ a ‘vast amount of time and trouble’. The ADB’s general editors were keen to achieve this final editorial task for the ADB, too.

The ADB had always included simple indexing. At its most basic was the use of ‘quod vide’ (q.v.) in articles, to indicate that a person mentioned by name was also an ADB subject, in the same or another volume. In a book project this type of indexing can only be retrospective (you cannot index to a volume that is yet to be published) and quite limited. Reviewers of the ADB have often urged that a comprehensive index was urgently needed. General editors Serle and Nairn were keen to publish an index, saying that ‘a full-scale subject-index, as distinct from a simple name, place and occupation index’, would be a research

28 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (23 May 1983), box 125, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
aid of great importance. ‘Consider, for example, of what potential benefit it would be’, they suggested, ‘what a flying start it would give, to anyone making a study of pastoralism, manufacturing, a profession, or dozens of other topics’.32

In 1975 the Editorial Board discussed suggestions by ‘reviewers and others’ about the need for an index for the first six volumes, a concise ADB and similar initiatives.33 This was thought to be especially necessary for casual readers who often found it difficult to locate a subject in a volume on the floruit principle (used up to Volume 12), which placed subjects in volumes according to when they made their most important contribution to Australian history and not their date of death. It was noted, though, that indexing work of this kind ‘would hold up production of regular volumes’, and the decision was made to wait. In 1979 Melbourne University Press raised concern about ‘the large size of an index (perhaps 500 pages alone)’, fearing it would be a daunting project for all concerned.34

ADB staff consult Volume 18 in 2012. From left: Sam Furphy, Karen Fox, Melanie Nolan (General Editor) and Rani Kerin

Photographer: Christine Fernon, ADB archives

33 ‘The Australian Dictionary of Biography. Present State and Future Prospects’ (5 October 1975), box 132, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
34 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (21 May 1981), box 125, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
The issue of an index became a perennial issue. In 1979 the Editorial Board again considered the possibility of an index to the first six volumes, ‘including the commercial proposal for computer production, but … it was decided that the project is not suitable for action at present and the board could do no more than hope that eventually a scholarly index will be produced’.35 Resources were limited and Nairn and Serle decided ‘to wait until completing the original project to volume 12 and then to produce an index’.

The two other tasks—producing volumes of the ADB and maintaining the BR—had priority. They believed that it was

more important to push on, than to delay to produce an index to volumes 1–6, and we are sure that public opinion is with us on this question. Fairly soon now, however, if it could be funded and the right person turned up, we would be happy to make a start, provided our energies were not distracted to any great extent.36

In the meantime, others began to compile indexes. In 1979 sociologists Julie Marshall and Richard Trahair compiled an occupational index to the first six volumes of the ADB.37 Robert Buchanan, a visiting fellow at the ANU and a historian of technology at the University of Bath, compiled an index of engineers in 1983.38 About the same time, Serle announced in the ADB newsletter that he would be ‘grateful to be informed of any specialist indexes to the ADB, which readers are compiling’.39 In 1991 Malcolm Sainty and Michael Flynn compiled an index to the first two volumes but could not find a publisher to distribute it.40 An ADB seminar in 1988 suggested that the index for the first 12 volumes was a priority project for the dictionary and a proposal was put to the Editorial Board. Hilary Kent commenced work in July 1989. She consulted Barry Howarth, who had indexed the 1988 project, *The Australian People: An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*. She was assisted in the work by others, including Helen Boxall, Sheila Tilse and Darryl Bennet. It was published by MUP in 1991.42 Ritchie described the task as ‘herculean’

35 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (8 November 1979), box 66, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
36 ADB Newsletter, no. 1 (December 1980), box 132, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
37 Julie G. Marshall and Richard C. S. Trahair, *Occupational Index to the Australian Dictionary of Biography (1788–1890), Volumes 1–6* (Bundoora, Vic.: Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, 1979).
39 ADB Newsletter, no. 3 (August 1983), box 132, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
42 Hilary Kent (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography Index to Volumes 1 to 12* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), Acknowledgements.
and a ‘monumental effort’, taking 18 months: ‘she had to read and analyse each volume, to differentiate between every name (there are no fewer than eighty-seven Smiths, and eleven of them are William) and to re-check all birthplaces and to examine a host of occupations’, which were categorised into 379 kinds. The index focused on names, occupations and origins or places of birth and pointed to the rich connections that could be made between subjects.

Only a trickle of historians, however, used *ADB* articles for group biography. R. S. Neale’s analysis of the first three volumes in terms of the social origins and characteristics of executive and administrative leaders in Australia from 1788 to 1856 was mentioned in Chapter 1.\(^3\) A decade later, Angus Buchanan used the data then available in the first six volumes of the *ADB* to consider the role of British engineering in Australia’s development.\(^4\) In 1990 Barry Smith attempted to use the lives of academics in the *ADB* and the published *Biographical Register* to begin to write a history of universities in Australia, although he felt constrained by the teleological nature of all but the best articles, shaped as they were by the ending rather than discussing unfulfilled ambitions and constraints on opportunities.\(^5\) All three historians discussed the difficulties they had ‘manually’ mining the *ADB* for social history using collective biography or prosopographical methodologies. It was simply hard work; and change was still some way off.

### The transition: CD-ROM, *ADB* online, People Australia, advanced indexing, 1986–2012

The *ADB*’s first steps towards adopting new technology for publication, research and indexing were faltering ones. In 1986 Stephen Foster, the executive editor of *Australia 1788–1988, A Bicentennial History*, made a submission to the 1986 Committee of Review of the *ADB* noting that the dictionary was a vast storehouse of knowledge about Australia’s past but suggesting that much of the information was inaccessible to potential users.\(^6\) The committee took evidence

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\(^{6}\) S. G. Foster to the Director, RSSS (20 February 1988); see also, Stephen Foster to Geoff Serle (26 January 1988), box 144, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
about the possibility of using ‘machine readable data retrieval systems’ and noted sharply that ‘while we did not explore this issue in detail, we suspect that the ADB management may not have explored it at all’.47

A year later Foster came up with an innovative project that he put before the Australian Bicentennial Authority for a project called ‘Australians on Disc’, which would include a ‘Guide to Biographical Research in Australia’, as well as the ADB entries in Volumes 1–11, the entries published in the Biographical Register, the compilation of parliamentarian registers, together with some of the early dictionary compilations (when reliable), Who’s Who in Australia, and bibliographies.48 All of the projects were to be published on a CD-ROM, a new technology that had only been around for a year, and were to be fully searchable.

Serle responded favourably to the project, conceding that in the long run ‘this [CD-ROM] will be how the ADB is primarily distributed and used, or [will] be an alternative form of production’.49 The proposal was strongly opposed, however, by the director of MUP, Peter Ryan,50 who was generally unenthusiastic about anything—paperback, illustrated, concise or abridged versions, as well as any indexes—that could potentially be a major threat to sales of the existing volumes of the ADB.51 Emphasising the ADB’s contractual obligations, he pointed out that MUP had invested heavily in the dictionary, set artificially low retail prices per volume and maintained all volumes in print, at great cost in terms of the capital thus tied up. He estimated MUP’s total investment in the ADB up to that point was in the order of $3 million; the total value of the stock in the warehouse in the mid 1980s alone was $420 000. Volumes 3 and 6 were being reprinted, which would add some $30–40 000 to this stock investment. He also stressed that it was crucial to preserve the integrity of the present 12-volume scheme.52

Unable to obtain MUP’s support—and concerned that the CD-ROM would not include the full set of ADB volumes since Volume 12 had not yet been published—Serle withdrew his support for the ‘Australians on Disc’ project; but the venture had highlighted the fact that the new technology ‘won’t go away’.53 According to Serle, most of those involved on and around the ADB had come to

48 Draft paper by S. Foster, ‘The Australian Biographical database’ (8 January 1988), and paper on ‘Australians on Disc: A Report for the Australian Bicentennial Authority on the Feasibility of Developing an Australian Biographical Computer Database’ (February 1988), box 144, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
49 Geoffrey Serle to Director, RSSS (2 September 1987), and Geoff Serle, ‘Proposal for Biographical Database’, box 144, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
51 Memo by ‘Ann’? [Ann Smith].
52 Peter Ryan to Geoff Serle (29 May 1987), box 142, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
53 Geoffrey Serle to Peter Ryan (6 February 1988), box 142, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
recognise (‘many of us unwillingly’) that it ought to be done, if not immediately. He argued that the ADB needed to adopt the new technology in order to control the process.

Ryan responded in 1988 that MUP was ‘neither canutes nor dogs-in-the-manger, and have for some years acknowledged the probable need for presenting the ADB in electronic form’. But Ryan claimed that MUP had ‘serious misgivings about the wisdom of proceeding on the basis of present technology. In both programming and in the “access” end we see difficulties, which will probably be overcome; but we should not paint ourselves into a corner by undue haste’. He claimed that

though we don’t publicise it, MUP has always been at the forefront of Australian publishing in the use of the most advanced electronic techniques for typesetting and allied devices. One of our senior people is at present preparing for an overseas visit in which a specific study is to be made of disk presentation of volumes.

Ryan suggested that MUP would develop a scheme that involved neither the ADB nor the ANU in any significant work or expense and that MUP would provide the capital, technique, promotion, marketing and selling of the electronic ADB as it did for the volumes.

In 1988 the Editorial Board authorised Ritchie to negotiate with the new director of MUP for a CD-ROM version of the ADB. In 1992, when the ADB’s contract with MUP was renegotiated, Ritchie ceded all rights to produce the ADB in any form to MUP. In 1996 MUP produced a CD-ROM version of Volumes 1–12. Eight years later, it was suggested that the ADB should go online but MUP reminded the dictionary of its contractual obligation to work with it on any proposal. Following protracted negotiations, a new contract was drawn up allowing the ADB to proceed with an Australian Research Council proposal for funding to place the ADB online. It was agreed that the ANU would have all rights to online publications and MUP all hardcopy publishing rights. The ADB was then able to develop the dictionary as it saw fit.

54 Peter Ryan to Geoffrey Serle (9 February 1988), box 142, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
55 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (18 August 1988), box 125, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
56 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (21 May 1981), box 125, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
57 Minutes, Editorial Board meeting (10 July 1992), box 125, Q31, ADBA, ANUA.
58 ‘Publishing Agreement between MUP and ANU’ (3 August 2005), NCB/ADB files.
Obituary Australia was launched at the ANU in 2011. Back row, from left: Scott Yeadon, Christine Fernon, Max Korolev, Nigel Starck (author of Life After Death) and Ian Young, ANU vice-chancellor. Front: John Farquharson, obituary writer, and Melanie Nolan, ADB general editor.

Photographer: Peter Fitzpatrick, ADB archives
Obituaries Australia and People Australia

In 2009 the ADB moved the 11 000 files that had been created while editing dictionary entries from its offices in the Coombs Building to the ANU Archives, so that they could be stored in the proper atmospheric conditions and be more accessible to researchers. The question then arose, what should we do with the 300 000 cards of the BR and the 100 000 citations on the in-house database? How could that information be made more accessible—and useful?

Rather than simply digitise the cards and place them on the web, as some suggested, the decision was made to take a new approach, utilising the indexing and cross-referencing opportunities that the web afforded. As a first step an online obituaries database was started in 2011. Obituaries have always been the single most important source of information collected for the BR and are a major source of reference for ADB entries. The full text of obituaries is being published and is indexed using the same fields as those in the ADB, so that those searching the ADB can also be drawn to results in Obituaries Australia, and vice versa. The Obituaries Australia entries are also being indexed to show cause of death, place of education and work, awards won, association with pastoral properties and events, and any groups or organisations that the subjects were involved in. This level of indexing, which will be retrospectively applied to ADB entries, will enable all sorts of complex queries to be posited.

Other biographical web sites have also been created, including Women Australia, Labour Australia and the overarching site People Australia, which searches all of the web sites for entries and also include a register for those for whom there is little published information. In a sense, we are returning to our ‘roots’ and revisiting the publications from which we first took information when starting the BR in the 1950s. This time around, however, we are digitising and indexing the entries in Mennell’s Dictionary of Australasian Biography and Johns’s Notable Australians. And we plan to seek the cooperation of the national and State libraries to digitise their biographical files (the National Library of Australia, alone, has 200 000 of them) and add them to our databases.

More than the book online? The ADB and digital culture

The three main tasks of the ADB project have been radically changed by the application of new digital technology. Going online in 2006 has made the project widely accessible and facilitated advanced indexing and linking between
entries; but these developments, in many ways, are simply the book project online: electronic editions of print and paper resources or existing bodies of work brought together more efficiently than before.

Some think that the ADB project should not develop beyond its original book or ‘liber’ objectives. Others, such as Gavan McCarthy, are conceiving more possibilities for the ADB in the new digital age. In 2004 McCarthy gave a conference paper, ‘The Australian Dictionary of Biography Online; the Foundation of an Online Encyclopedia of Australia’. Others have imagined a universal dictionary. The ODNB’s project director, Robert Faber, thought a universal dictionary possible, through interoperability—thereby linking all biographical dictionary web sites.

ADB staff, past and present, at the launch of the online version of Volume 18, December 2012. Back row: Max Korolev, Scott Yeadon, Chris Clark, Nicole McLennan, Karen Fox (hidden), Chris Cunneen, Di Langmore, Nick Brown and Sam Furphy. Middle: Rani Kerin, Christine Fernon, Anthea Bundock (hidden), Janet Doust, Barry McGowan, Rosemary Jennings, Paul Arthur and Darryl Bennet. Front: Brian Wimborne, Edna Kauffman, Melanie Nolan, Niki Francis, Barbara Dawson, Gail Clements, Chris Wallace, Sue Edgar

Photographer: Natalie Azzopardi, ADB archives


In this regard, the *ADB* is already a party to the Humanities Networked Infrastructure (HuNI) project, which aims to provide researchers around the world with access to the combined resources of Australia's major cultural data sets and information assets. The HuNI project seems to be an advanced electronic version of the project that Foster imagined the *ADB* being involved in on disc in 1988.

More immediately, the *ADB* is looking to use its own resources to develop e-research projects. Three reviews of the *ADB* online in 2009–10 considered this question. The director of the ANU's Supercomputer Facility, Ben Evans, and project officer Stuart Hungerford wrote a ‘Redevelopment Project Plan of the *ADB*’ in November 2009. A few months later, Tim Sherratt, a freelance web site content developer, presented his review of the *ADB*; while John Evershed and Kent Fitch, principals of a private-sector IT company, Project Computing, submitted their review in March 2010. The reviews, together, put a strong case for the *ADB* to begin the task of redeveloping the project’s software to provide for new functionality and to appoint its own computer programmer. These ideas were also the subject of a seminar of the *ADB* Editorial Board in December 2009.61

Central to these developments has been the creation of new databases and new methods of indexing to support e-research. For example, instead of simply hyperlinking between subjects in entries, the relationship between subjects is now being described. This enables family trees to be drawn and the visualisation of the links between family groups.

Digital technology should be seen as an integral part of historical scholarship, providing tools and media to assist the historian in better research, better recording and better communication. As O. V. Burton acknowledges, ‘by incorporating the tremendous power of the computer with the practices and methodologies of the historian, the result should be better history’.62

Digitising resources and analysing a mega-database enable a range of research work to be focused on, for instance, kinship, associational life and place. The study of family history is not new in Australian history. In the 1980s there was considerable work on family-centred, community, social history.63 At the same

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time, demographers worked on the aggregate antipodean family experience.\textsuperscript{64} Self-consciously ‘collective’ or ‘group’ family history has been written intermittently, in memoirs such as Mary Durack’s \textit{Kings in Grass Castles}, studies like Bobbie Hardy’s \textit{From the Hawkesbury to the Monaro}, and Stephen Foster’s \textit{A Private Empire}.\textsuperscript{65} Collective and prosopographical biography methodologies have identified and drawn relationships between individuals, often using statistics and concentrating on prominent and powerful people, groups or families.\textsuperscript{66} Most recently, there has been interest in historiographical questions about networks of families using relational models.\textsuperscript{67}

All of these studies share the view that the family and familial networks are at the heart of society but they can make no claims about representativeness or typicality for their particular case studies; nor can they develop a typology beyond the case studies. Work on families in the past has provided, effectively, a huge, unweighted list of candidate factors and cases of individual families in isolation.

The NCB/\textit{ADB} is amassing a large body of comprehensively indexed biographical records of Australian families for our community and providing data for social network and visualisation analysis. There is also research potential in the new online capacity to study the associational patterns of Australians and their place in biographical history. The \textit{ADB} is fielding membership of associations for its biographies and obituaries, which, together with digitised associational membership lists, will be available for use for research projects. For example, obituaries from the \textit{Pastoral Review}, when considered in light of lists of stockowners in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Tasmania and other sources such as Darrell Lewis’s ‘The Victoria River District Doomsday Book’, a compendium of Victoria River District cattle station histories and biographies of station


employees, will be able to shed social-history light, by way of biography, on place. The ADB, then, will not be just ‘a national record and a suggestive piece of social history’.

The ADB was significant for Australian history at its outset, when Australian history was in its infancy. It is still important now that there is so much more information at hand and a plethora of sources available. New technology enables patterns to be established and hypotheses to be tested.

**Conclusion**

If the ADB had been designed, from the beginning, to be published online, many things would have been done differently. The evolution of technology has had a major impact on how history is recorded and communicated, since at least the time of the invention of the printing press. The advent of the Internet and the rapid development of digital technology have had a particular impact on the ADB. Digital media and computer tools are revolutionising biographical practice. They have allowed the ADB to present accumulated factual information simultaneously in print and in ways that traditional print methods simply could not achieve, and are allowing biography to be researched and analysed in new ways. The ADB has become more accessible and it has been linked in pathways with all kinds of other material online. Above all, the many subjects who ‘had to be omitted through pressure of space or lack of material’ from the book project are now being salvaged in the ADB online project.

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68 Darrell Lewis, ‘The Victoria River District Doomsday Book’, a compendium of Victoria River District cattle station histories and biographies of station employees, a copy of which he provided to the ADB.
73 A version of this phrase about relegating the many to the Biographical Register was in every preface, *ADB*, vols 1–17 (1966–2007).