Foreword

Tom Griffiths

When an organisation begins to imagine the next phase of its future, it generally composes a strategic plan. The Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB), however, writes a history—and one spiced with biographical portraits. Of course, the ADB has done the strategic plans too—more than should have been demanded of such an unimpeachable and impressive national enterprise. But the reality of daily life in the ADB is that, even after 50 years, it continually has to fight for its future, especially against those within its own university who are driven by corporate competition rather than national collaboration. The ADB’s Story reminds us of the foundation vision of cooperative scholarship that brought the ADB to life, a vision that the dictionary has realised so superbly and that continues to inspire all who work for it. This book is about a half-century of dedicated work across the nation by good and generous people who are also brilliant scholars. It is about the organic, federal design of the ADB and how those structures have coped with and invented change. Knowing this history—in all its biographical and contextual richness—is the best strategic plan an institution could possibly generate.

We learn from this history that when Keith Hancock was establishing the Australian Dictionary of Biography in 1959, he assured the ANU vice-chancellor that he thought it ‘unlikely’ that he would ‘need to look for a millionaire’. As Hancock’s current successor as chair of the Editorial Board of the ADB, I recently sought help from the ANU vice-chancellor in finding that millionaire. The ADB Endowment Fund, wisely established by Professor John Ritchie, has become more important with the years and has been vital to maintaining core functions in straitened times. The Australian National University remains firmly committed to the ADB, but its ability to fund this prestigious collaboration is being steadily eroded.

Yet, as Keith Hancock foresaw, the ADB—more than any other single enterprise—realises the national mission that is literally at the heart of The Australian National University. In the recent words of the Chancellor of the ANU, Professor the Hon. Gareth Evans AC QC, ‘The Australian Dictionary of Biography captures the life and times and culture of this country in an absolutely distinctive and irreplaceable way … I could not be prouder of the ANU’s continuing role as custodian of this crucial part of our national legacy’. The ADB—as the largest and most successful cooperative research enterprise in the humanities and social sciences in Australia—is indeed inscribed into the very fabric, identity and rationale of our national university.
Yet to work with the *ADB* is immediately to become keenly aware of how much it draws on a truly devolved, federal synergy. One is quickly humbled by the range and generosity of its expert volunteer labour, the brilliance and originality of its thousands of unpaid and willing contributors, the enthusiastic support of universities, libraries and museums right around the country, the dedication of its vital working parties and members of the Editorial Board, the skill and devotion of its staff, and the daily dependence on *ADB* entries by scholars and readers, businesspeople and politicians, lawyers, teachers, journalists, nurses, farmers, cooks, possibly shearers and hopefully millionaires. We now know more than ever before the extraordinary extent of that readership because of the launch of *ADB* online in 2006 and the 70 million hits the site receives each year.

I am proud not only of the *ADB* and its vast, dispersed team but also of the fact that *The ADB’s Story* is a product of the intelligent historical insight that detailed knowledge of the past does indeed enable us to plan wisely for the future. I congratulate the General Editor, Professor Melanie Nolan, and Online Manager, Christine Fernon, for recognising the need for this book and for all their work in bringing it into being, and I thank all the authors for combining scholarship and experience in a perceptive and inspiring portrait of a truly great national institution.

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