Obligations and Debts in Writing the ADB’s Story

Melanie Nolan and Christine Fernon

At the beginning of 2009 we decided to write an account of the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB). Melanie Nolan took up her position as general editor of the ADB in June 2008. While she had been involved in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography as a working party member and author, she was the first general editor of the ADB not to have had experience with the institution. She was, moreover, heading a unit in a state of change: many staff were retiring and there was a pressing need to develop the online version of the ADB further. Nolan believed that an account of the ADB’s past was overdue, not only to preserve institutional memory and to understand why decisions had been made, but also to help locate a path into the future.

Meanwhile Christine Fernon, the ADB’s bibliographer and, from 2009, online manager, was busily arranging, cataloguing and boxing up more than 11 000 of the ADB’s working files for transfer to the ANU Archives. Previous general editors John Ritchie and Di Langmore had sent some ADB administrative records to the archives. All of the working files on subjects in the dictionary, and the unit’s more recent organisational files, however, were held in 44 metal filing cabinets spread throughout the ADB’s offices. Working through the files, Fernon realised that they were rich in information about the ADB’s administrative and editorial processes. She began to use some of the material she was finding for items in our Biography Footnotes newsletter, which she edits. As Michael Piggott has noted elsewhere, the ‘distributed “ADB family” (the thousands of authors that have written for the ADB, and the distinguished members of the Editorial and Working Parties) probably did not realise they were doubly making history as they researched, wrote, argued over inclusions, edited, checked the facts, and conducted correspondence’.¹ While the files were important to preserve for posterity, Fernon also believed that a ‘full’ history, based on the files, should be compiled as the broadest and best kind of guide to the records that was possible.

¹ Michael Piggott, ‘ADB Files as a Historical Source’, Biography Footnotes, no. 2 (March–May 2009), p. 5.
Our common ambition to write a history of the *ADB* was timely. In 2009 the dictionary celebrated its first half-century. Fiftieth birthdays are a cause also for reflection. Thus, in December 2009 we held a one-day conference on the *ADB*’s history. Many of those who have been involved with the *ADB* over the years, including Ann Moyal and Geoffrey Bolton, who were present at its birth, attended the conference. The following day we held a closed workshop on the dictionary’s future directions.

Conferences often lead to edited collections. In the absence of any other contenders, the *ADB* took it upon itself to coordinate the writing of its own history. It proved more difficult than we expected. Many of the leading figures in the *ADB*’s history—Keith Hancock, Laurie Fitzhardinge, Douglas Pike, John La Nauze and Geoffrey Serle—are now, themselves, subjects of *ADB* entries, and full biographies of Hancock, Pike and Serle have been written. These studies, however, have included little on their contributions to the *ADB* and its development. Indeed those involved in the *ADB* have shown a marked reluctance to write memoirs.
Historians have traditionally rejected first-person accounts, especially their own memoirs, as subjective and, therefore, unreliable. This is changing. There is increasing interest in historians’ own pasts, their life stories and the institutions with which they were associated as things that help us understand the stories they have written. Accounts of Australian historical enterprises are, as a consequence, appearing. This collection, then, is a companion to understanding the content, character and form of the 18 volumes (plus the supplement volume) of the ADB, so far published.

This collection has taken time to assemble and finalise. Presentations to the 2009 conference, which provided the foundation, needed augmentation. New work was commissioned. In the end we had too much and had to omit some material in the interest of space and the demands of the narrative. There are, for instance, 47 short profiles of significant ‘ADB personalities’ in this book. What appear here are summaries of longer accounts that will be published on the National Centre of Biography’s web site.

Like the ADB itself, this project has been a national collaboration and we have incurred many debts. We wish to thank, above all, the contributors: Darryl Bennet, Geoffrey Bolton, John Calvert, Philip Carter, Chris Cunneen, Russell Doust, Beverley Kingston, Mark McGinness, Ann Moyal, Philip Selth, Jill Roe and Gerry Walsh. Retired ADB senior staff—Bennet, Gail Clements and Cunneen; past staff—Paul Arthur, Pam Crichton, Barbara Dawson and Janet Doust; and present staff—Niki Francis, Sam Furphy and Rani Kerin, read and checked particular sections of the text. Of these, Clements’ and Francis’s contributions were substantial. We thank The Australian National University, especially former vice-chancellor, Ian Chubb, and the present one, Ian Young, for their support of the ADB. The ANU Archives’ staff—in particular, Maggie Shapley, University Archivist, and Sarah Leithbridge, Senior Archivist—were especially helpful. David Carment, Tom Griffiths, John Nethercote and Philip Selth read the entire manuscript and saved us from making some simple errors. Selth epitomises the nature of the ADB family: he was a member of the ANU’s executive, he is an author and he is a second-generation ADB supporter. Geoff Page and Suzanne (Sue) Edgar wrote poems about the ADB, which are reproduced with their kind permission. Sue Edgar, a long-serving ADB staff member, also contributed photographs.


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