Introduction: Should the biography of a person 'whose business is thinking' simply 'be the story of their thought?'[1]

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This special issue of the *Australian Journal of Biography and History* (*AJBH*), the journal of the National Centre of Biography (NCB), arises from a workshop on intellectual biography I organised at the NCB, School of History, The Australian National University, Canberra, in December 2024. NCB symposia have generally led to publications.[2] This special issue of the *AJBH* follows other special issues on Oceania Lives and Tasmanian Lives.[3]

The NCB's symposia are usually related to our core business, especially that of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (*ADB*), which the centre hosts. Intellectual biography is not extraneous but is fundamental to the *ADB*'s work. Concise biographies consider what makes someone 'tick' and, concomitant to this, what ideas animate a life. All too often, concise biographies concern themselves only with what someone achieved in their lives. Stefan Collini has considered the misconceptions about intellectual history (and biography) in Britain, namely, that it is idealist and a history of things that never mattered, that it is about the political elite (scientific and economic thinkers) and not the poor and inarticulate, and that Britain is a society with no worthwhile or significant ideas. Collini has resisted the long history 'of denial that intellectuals exist in Britain', and his works have considered intellectual history from below and how ideas circulated in culture rather than texts.[4]

1 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford University Press, 1939), preface.

2 In 2015, for instance, the NCB hosted a symposium on 'Biographies and Autobiographies of Historians: Their Historiographic Significance', and a publication subsequently emerged from that event: Doug Munro and John G. Reid, eds. *Clio's Lives: Biographies and Autobiographies of Historians* (ANU Press, 2017), doi.org/10.22459/CL.10.2017.

3 Talei Luscia Mangioni, Nicholas Hoare and Katerina Teaiwa eds., 'Oceania Lives', Special Issue, *Australian Journal of Biography and History*, no. 9 (2025), doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.09.2025; Annaliese Claydon, Kristyn Harman and Naomi Milthorpe, eds., 'Writing Tasmanian Lives', Special Issue, *Australian Journal of Biography and History*, no. 11 (2026), doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.11.2026.

4 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930* (Clarendon Press, 1991), doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198201731.001.0001; Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198800170.001.0001.

Similarly, Annaliste biographers like Jacques Le Goff and the Italian microhistorians question the elitism of much intellectual biography.[5] Australasia has suffered even more than modern Britain from the view 'that it is a society with no worthwhile or significant ideas' emanating from either a rich range of intellectuals above or below.[6] There is a historiography concentrating on an antipodean anti-intellectualism. It might surprise, then, that there are over 650 ADB entries out of 14,000, that is 5 per cent, that explicitly discuss intellectuals, their ideas, intellectual movements and/or intellectual networks. Moreover, the NCB is interested in biographical methodology, the reach of individual agency and, with that, the reach of people's ideas as well as their limits. So, this special issue on intellectual biography is relevant to the ADB.

Over the course of the two-day workshop on intellectual biography, participants considered whether the biography of a person whose business is thinking should be, as Robin Collingwood suggested in 1939, 'simply' the story of their thought.[7] Should ideas be embodied or remain disembodied? To what extent should individual lives and subjective ideas be balanced with larger, impersonal historical forces? Malachi Hacohen, who has himself written a well-received intellectual biography of Karl Popper, suggests that there are limits to intellectual biography.[8] Many of the debates over the ideas-structure-agency dynamic derive from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*.[9] Kuhn argued that science alternates between periods of 'normal science'—characterised as routine, puzzle-solving work within an established paradigm—and 'revolutionary science', or dramatic shifts in which that paradigm is replaced. Hacohen regards biography as a second order methodology in intellectual history: it can get you to the brink of discursive shifts by showing how problem solving/generating activity reaches 'exhaustion', precipitating a shift, but it cannot describe the shift itself. He argues that intellectual biography is essential for understanding intellectual change and the context of ideas, but it cannot fully replace broader history. So, the workshop was attentive to intellectual biography balancing individual agency with larger, impersonal historical forces.

5 Jacques Le Goff, 'After Annales: The Life as History', *Times Literary Supplement,* no. 4489 (1984): 304, 405.

6 Barry Jones, author of the *Dictionary of World Biography*, could only list 17 living Australian intellectuals in 1993. The *Sydney Morning Herald* (12 March 2005) managed 100 in a survey in 2005. Australian anti-intellectualism is seen as coming both from below and above: Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer, 'Labour Intellectuals in Australia: Modes, Traditions, Generations, Transformations', *International Review of Social History* 50, no. 1 (April 2005), 1–26, doi.org/10.1017/S002085900400183X; Greg Melleuish, *Australian Intellectuals. Their Strange History & Pathological Tendencies* (Connor Court Publishing, 2013).

7 Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, preface.

8 M. H. Hacohen, 'Rediscovering Intellectual Biography – and Its Limits', *History of Political Economy* 34 (2007): 9–29, doi.org/10.1215/00182702-2006-036.

9 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).



Figure 1: Some of the participants of the intellectual biography workshop, 5–6 December 2024.
Source: Photograph by Michelle Staff.

The 2024 workshop (Figure 1) on intellectual biography brought together speakers from Australia and overseas, many of whom have chapters in this volume. The workshop was framed as a consideration of both the methods used by authors of intellectual biographies and the various kinds of intellectual biographies. Historians are increasingly considering the meta-history of our biographical practices. As a historian who has written on *Biography: An Historiography*, and who has supervised doctoral students writing intellectual biographies, I was interested in this issue of how historians have approached intellectual biography over time.[10]

This special issue of *AJBH* comprises an introductory essay and eight papers across three themed sections: I. Intellectual Biography and Historical Writing—The Case of J. G. A. Pocock, II. Kinds of Historians' Intellectual Biographies, and III. Historians' Autobiography as Intellectual Biography. In the introductory essay, I attempt an overview of historians' intellectual biographies in the postwar period. Historians' intellectual biographical approaches have shifted from documenting the intellectual life of a 'great thinker', what is known as an internalist approach focusing on a thinkers' thoughts, to externalist approaches, focusing on the more general context. Approaches range from intellectual biography 'from below', considering micro-history, to group mentalities. In the postwar period, historians debated whether intellectual biography should entail methodological individualism or collectivism, internalist or externalist approaches, and whether to lump or split lives and intellectual developments.

10 Melanie Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography* (Routledge, 2023), doi.org/10.4324/9780429426391.

Historians such as Herbert Butterfield, Janet Browne and Richard Whatmore engaged in these debates over kinds of intellectual biographies and, in the process, their contests encouraged methodological development in intellectual biography.

The first section in this special issue is dedicated to J. G. A. Pocock. Appropriately, as an antipodean volume on historians' intellectual biographies, special attention has been given to Pocock, the renowned New Zealand–born historian and political thinker. Richard Whatmore puts the spotlight on Pocock, author of the influential *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), and the ways that being a New Zealander was relevant to the British world history he wrote.[11] Pocock, born in London but raised in New Zealand, described himself as a 'fourth-generation colonist' and 'antipodean'. He was never at home in England or the United States, where he lived most of his long life. Understanding both Pocock's 'antipodean perception' and his essential outsidedness is important to understanding his perspective on history. He was all too aware of historical context, change, adaptation and variability, and the need to understand these in their own terms and contexts. As a consequence, Whatmore argues, Pocock was sensitive to the plurality of political languages.

In a short commentary on Whatmore's article, Kate Fullagar, considers the pluralist implications of Pocock's godwit history, which was critical of 'kiwi-centric' history, both Māori-centred (or, more broadly, Indigenous histories) and Pākehā-centred. Her own work has adopted aspects of Pocockian histories of the contests within groups in the eighteenth century.[12] In the final article of this section, Thomas Ashby puts the spotlight on Pocock's youthful development.[13] Taking up the theme of Pocock thriving in his rootlessness, he argues that the question of being a kiwi (flightless) or a godwit (taking extraordinary migratory journeys) is a conundrum facing many a historian, especially those of past empires. Most significantly, he argues that Pocock's ideas were not static: he presents a case for the close reading of intellectuals' lives over time and how their ideas were shaped and reshaped.

The second section considers the ways in which intellectual biography has enabled or facilitated a more inclusive approach to ideas and thinking. The definition of what is valid intellectual work is increasingly being interrogated. This has been especially useful for making a wider range of intellectual occupations visible. For instance, as Sophie Scott-Brown has shown in her biographies of Raphael Samuel and Colin Ward, organisers and activists need to be considered. She stakes space for them

11 Richard Whatmore, *What Is Intellectual History?* (Polity, 2015), doi.org/10.1002/9781118508091.

12 Kate Fullagar, *The Atlantic World in the Antipodes: Transformations and Effects since the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); Kate Fullagar, *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist* (Yale University Press, 2020), doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300243062.001.0001; Kate Fullagar, *Bennelong and Phillip: A History Unravelled* (Simon & Schuster/Scribner Australia, 2023).

13 Thomas Ashby, 'De republica saeculari: The Architectonic of Freedom and the Temporal Republic of Algernon Sidney' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2024).

as valid intellectual knowledge workers.[14] In this way, the variety of intellectuals, intellectual workers and, thus, intellectual biographies is burgeoning as widely as broader social history.[15]

Ian Kumekawa has written an intellectual biography of A. C. Pigou as a 'typical economic biographer'.[16] Here he argues for a more 'capacious' approach to the category of economic intellectuals. He rallies against intellectual history only being about 'prominent men working at prestigious institutions', and resists an internalist lens that focuses on a relatively small and rarefied group of actors. He is ambitious to know more generally about how others impacted on their thinking. In the process, he considers economic systems of ideas, Pigou's classical construction and Keynes's macroeconomic visions. Pigou's intellectual biography was entangled with that of Ernest Simon, a British industrialist, politician and public servant, and Marion Fitzgerald, a social science researcher.

Emile Chabal has just completed an intellectual biography of Erik Hobsbawm.[17] In his contribution to this volume, he takes issue with the 'Cambridge School of Political Thought, which has provided much of the impetus for Anglo-American intellectual history's emphasis on "texts in context"'. Rather than accepting the basic assumption that ideas are forged in dialogue with other ideas, Chabal suggests that space and place need to be considered.

Matthew Birchall's 2021 doctoral thesis was on 'Company Colonisation and the Settler Revolution, 1820–1840'.[18] In his paper in this special issue, Birchall considers the colonisation theorist Edward Gibbon Wakefield's 'trajectory from Newgate to New Zealand'. He argues that intellectual biography 'needs to track not just ideas but the people who held them—and where they took them'.[19] His argument is that the need to consider how ideas are used or applied matters as much as the theories themselves.

14 Sophie Scott-Brown, *The Histories of Raphael Samuel: A Portrait of a People's Historian* (ANU Press, 2017), doi.org/10.22459/HRS.05.2017; Sophie Scott-Brown, *Colin Ward and the Art of Everyday Anarchy* (Routledge, 2023), doi.org/10.4324/9781003100409. See also, Sophie Scott-Brown, 'Raphael Samuel and the Politics of the People's Historian', *Journal of the Socialist History Society* 61 (April 2022): 76–95.

15 For a discussion of some recent kinds of intellectual biography, see Melanie Nolan, 'Thinkers, Writers and Kinds of Intellectual Biographies: Contribution to a Symposium on Sophie Scott-Brown's *Colin Ward and the Art of Everyday Anarchy*', *History of European Ideas* 50, no. 5 (2024): 864–7, doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2024.2307761.

16 Ian Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist: A. C. Pigou and the Birth of Welfare Economics* (Princeton University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691163482.001.0001.

17 Emile Chabal, *The Age of Hobsbawm: The Life of a Revolutionary Historian* (Harvard University Press, 2026).

18 Matthew Birchall, 'Company Colonisation and the Settler Revolution, 1820–1840' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2022).

19 There were other kinds of intellectual biography discussed at the workshop that do not appear here. Sophie Scott-Brown reconsidered the 1950s in terms of the way of thinking at a political moment. Nicholas Brown pondered whether J. G. Crawford (who would never have claimed to be an intellectual) was an 'applied economist' or an intellectual?

The third section of this special issue considers historians as intellectuals and how we study them. Stefan Collini, in his consideration of historians as intellectuals, was mindful that many historians, including A. L. Rowse, Arthur Bryant, E. H. Carr and E. P. Thompson, wrote for a non-specialist readership.[20] He argued that they were public intellectuals nonetheless. Increasingly, intellectual biographies of historians are being published. Historians are writing autobiographies and memoirs in increasing numbers too.[21] Rowse wrote of his 'Cornish Childhood' as well as his life at Oxford.[22] While Bryant did not publish an autobiography, Pamela Street was able to use personal diaries and letters to write a biography.[23] Tamara Deutscher, who knew E. H. Carr, published a memoir in 1983 detailing some of his personal reflections.[24] E. P. Thompson wrote a memoir of his brother, Frank Thompson, but his own biography probably awaits the opening of his papers at Oxford's Bodleian Library in 2043.

In this special issue, Jaume Aurell considers 400 memoirs or autobiographies that he regards as 'historiographical enquiry' and 'intellectual biography'.[25] He sets out to show the kinds of intellectual accounts historians are producing of their own thinking. Having written three intellectual biographies, the most recent of which was *An Intimate History of Evolution: The Story of the Huxley Family* (2022), Alison Bashford, in her article, reflects on how she approaches the genre.[26] The line between public 'objectivity' and private 'subjectivity' blurs in science biography generally, just as the line between lived experience and the shaping of scientific ideas blurred in the case of the Huxleys. Bashford argues that the Huxleys' evolutionary inheritance involved not only a disembodied theory but also an intimate engagement best considered intergenerationally, diachronically and biographically.

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20 Stefan Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

21 Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jeremy D. Popkin, 'Invitation to Historians: History, the Historian, and an Autobiography', *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 14, no. 2 (2010): 287–300, doi.org/10.1080/13642521003710862.

22 A. L. Rowse, *A Cornish Childhood: Autobiography of a Cornishman* (Jonathon Cape, 1944); A. L. Rowse, *Coming up the Hard Way: A Cornishman at Oxford. The Education of a Cornishman* (Jonathon Cape, 1965).

23 Pamela Street, *Arthur Bryant: Portrait of a Historian* (Collins, 1979).

24 Tamara Deutscher, 'E.H. Carr—A Personal Memoir', *New Left Review* 137 (January–February, 1983): 78–86, doi.org/10.64590/ylt.

25 Jaume Aurell, *Theoretical Perspectives on Historians' Autobiographies: From Documentation to Intervention* (Routledge 2015), doi.org/10.4324/9781315678030; Jaume Aurell, *Historians' Autobiographies as Historiographical Inquiry* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), doi.org/10.1017/9781009396912.

26 Alison Bashford, *An Intimate History of Evolution: The Story of the Huxley Family* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

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