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Biography Today: A Commentary

JILL ROE

Are we living in a 'golden age' of biography? This extended commentary on biography today concludes that we probably are. Based on a selection of recent significant biographies, mostly Australian, a long association with the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and personal experience, it offers a perspective on the enhanced status of biography, highlights the widening scope and inclusiveness of the genre, and notes its increasingly porous boundaries. Problems of innovation are considered as well as achievements. Some current issues and expectations are also addressed. An awareness that the collapse of 'grand narratives' in the 1970s has created new opportunities for biography underpins the argument.

THE APPEAL of biography has fluctuated over time. Today, in Australia as elsewhere, biography is flourishing. Notable recent works have included Alisdair McGregor's splendidly produced *Grand Obsessions. The life and work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin*, which won the National Biography Award in 2011, and Mark McKenna's eagerly awaited biography of Manning Clark, *An Eye for Eternity*, winner of the 2011 Queensland Premier's non-fiction prize. As well, women's biography is booming, with the biennially-awarded Magarey Medal for biography by a woman now into its fifth round. Biographies sometimes win general history prizes, for instance Robert Kenny's tragedy of colonial Indigeneity, *The Lamb enters the Dreaming*: *Nathanael Pepper & the ruptured world*, which won the Prime Minister's Australian History Prize in 2008. Happily, biography is also popular with the book industry, which offers a Biography of the Year award, shared in 2011 by *How to Make Gravy* by Paul Kelly and *The Happiest Refugee* by Anh Do, both largely autobiographical works. In this article, I provide a perspective on recent trends in biography, discuss differences between its various genres and related fields, such as autobiography, memoir, and 'life writing', and canvass some present-day issues and expectations. It will be argued that while biography is often, and necessarily, conservative in approach, it is a challenging, fast changing and thriving genre of current historical writing.

* * *

Biography is an ancient art, and if you take the long view it is obvious how much it has changed over time. In earlier times biography was limited to an interest in the great and the good. Works were meant to be uplifting, as with the lives of saints and other holy figures written by nuns in the medieval era.[1] It was not until the late nineteenth century when the reading public and the book

[1] Jane Chance,'Medieval Women', in *Companion to Women's Historical* Writing, ed. Mary Spongberg, Ann Curthoys and Barbara Caine (Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 341–2.

world expanded that more democratic and secular aspects came into play. By then, as Donald Sassoon pointed out in his mammoth study *The Culture of the Europeans* (2006), biography had become even more significant. It was a sign of status to have a three or even seven-volume biography on one's bookshelves, such as John Morley's phenomenally successful three-volume *Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (1903) or a seven-volume *Life of Sir Walter Scott* by John Gibson Lockhart (1837–38). Improving oneself could even go as far as purchasing a ten-volume life of Abraham Lincoln. At the same time, autobiography, once a vehicle for contrition, increasingly included scope for self-promotion, and self-help treatises abounded, most famously Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859). It is also well to recall that the best-selling French book of the nineteenth century was a life of Bernadette of Lourdes.[2] It was not until Lytton Strachey's iconoclastic *Eminent Victorians* (1918) that the fashion for bigness began to fade. By now biographies that extend to even two volumes are usually thought excessive, although Michael Holroyd's authorized biography of George Bernard Shaw (1988–91) that ran to four, was warmly welcomed, and the more usual one-volume biographies of today are often considerably longer than other books.[3]

It took the shock of modernity and the rise of psychology in the twentieth century, to change biography. The first translations of Freud became available in the English-speaking world in the 1920s, leading to a more general self-consciousness about sexuality and introducing the possibility of discussing the sex lives of biographical subjects. Although the excitement attached to the rise of psycho-biography has long since abated, Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958) was a landmark. Likewise, the ground shifted when Simone de Beauvoir's great demystifying work, *The Second Sex* (1949) brought issues of gender to the fore. Nowadays no biography of substance can afford to neglect the vagaries of sexual experience (or lack thereof), as used to happen, for example with the life of Charles Dickens; nor should it fail to address the inner life (or lack thereof).

However, subjects are not always willing collaborators with these new interests. With Miles Franklin, it was the apparent 'lack thereof' of sources about her sexuality and inner life that was one of the biggest challenges I faced when writing her biography. [How strange, incidentally, it is to me that no-one seems to notice these aspects, maybe out of politeness; or maybe they just do not get to chapter 14.[4]] And like Miles Franklin, Sir Keith Hancock was a child of the late Victorian era who was not forthcoming in his papers. The biographer would never know from the record to date that he, like Miles, lived through what has been dubbed 'the long sexual revolution'. No doubt he did not have to pay much attention to such things, even as general editor of the great United Kingdom History of World War II (Civil Series); and his claim to our attention lies

[2] Donald Sassoon, *The Culture of the Europeans, From 1800 to the Present* (London: Harper Press, 2006), 491–6.

[3] A. M. Gibbs, *Bernard Shaw*, a one-volume biography published by UNSW Press, Sydney, in 2005, has the great merit from a local point of view of uncovering Shaw's Tasmanian connections.

[4] For some of many prior comments on Franklin's attitudes to sex and on religion, see *Stella Miles Franklin. A Life* (Pymble, NSW: Fourth Estate, 2008), 173 and Index, Christian Science.

primarily with his work as a historian, which happily, and unlike Brian Matthews' more personalised treatment in his *Manning Clark. A Life* (2008), Jim Davidson has thoroughly examined. The examination includes Hancock's South African work, in what are to my mind among the most interesting chapters of *A Three-Cornered Life* (2010). Even so, Hancock's reticence about the inner and sexual/romantic life is on a par with that of Miles Franklin. Apparently Miles burned 'scores' of love letters in the 1940s. Hancock likewise burned the letters that might have illuminated his first marriage to Theaden Brocklebank, which is said to have been 'difficult'. To interpret that generation's reticence is to enter another psychic world, with structures of feeling and ways of making sense of experiences that effectively predate Freud; and sometimes we simply cannot know what the experiences really were, or only that they were important enough for subjects to destroy the evidence. Sometimes there is not even that much to go on, as biographer Brenda Niall found when considering Martin Boyd's possible homosexuality.[5]

Another transformative influence on modern biography has been life-cycle studies. There is not room here to do more than sketch some relevant work, most but not all of which has been done beyond this country. Interest in childhood grew in the 1950s, and really took off with the publication of Philippe Aries' classic *Centuries of Childhood* (1965). The 1950s also saw the rise of geriatric medicine and what was originally a policy-driven concern with old age and death. Here the leading light in this country has been Patricia Jalland. In Britain, studies of old-age are by now so well established as to warrant a lavish Thames and Hudson publication edited by Patricia Thane entitled *The Long History of Old Age* (2005). And while there seem to be fewer works about the middle years—the years of maturity—Boston scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette has been working the terrain for some time now with titles such as *Declining to Decline* (1997). There is no shortage of studies, though few of them historical, on such turning points as parenthood and the menopause.[6]

The life-cycle approach to modern biography is probably most apparent in the concurrent boom in women's biography. I certainly found it valuable in studying the life of Miles Franklin. For example, even though it seems she never directly mentioned the menopause in her diaries, the menopause is an inescapable fact and turning point in women's lives, and it probably happened for her when she was in London in the 1920s, during what English writer Rose Macaulay called the *Dangerous Ages* (1921). At an earlier turning point in Miles'

[5] Geoffrey Blainey, 'The Hancock Express', *Australian Literary Review* (1 September 2010): 6–7, which rightly deems '*A Three-Cornered Life* . . . one of the very best Australian biographies of a mind at work', regrets the years spent on South African biography. Brenda Niall, *Life Class*: *The Education of a Biographer* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2007), 169 ff. The findings of Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*: *English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800–1975* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), have considerable bearing on the Australian experience.

[6] Patricia Jalland, *Australian Ways of Death*: *A Social and Cultural History, 1840–1918* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, c. 2002), and *Changing Ways of Death in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney, UNSW Press, 2005); Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline*: *Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

life, the rebellious years 'near Goulburn', I was able to draw on a classic Australian study, Beverley Kingston's 1986 article on the Australian girl, and had recourse to a two-volume encyclopedia entitled *Girlhood in American* (2001), which contains entries on such central topics as 'Courtship'.[7]

At a more pragmatic level, the life-cycle approach to biography is popular with publishers. Not only does focusing on a phase in the cycle offer a possible solution to the problem of publishing long and complex lives, which they often feel are too costly, but it also encourages the commissioning of some pleasing anthologies. The most popular phase is probably youth, and numerous anthologies of childhood have appeared in recent decades, such as the 1997 anthology *The Oxford Book of Australian Schooldays*. However, the experience of old age is surely ripe for in-depth anthologizing in Australia; and if publishers seem to be ahead in fostering the life-cycle approach, it is also true that much good work, on marriage as well as old age, is now available in thesis form.[8]

Earlier biographers would surely be astonished to see how much wider the scope of biography is today. Coverage in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (*ADB*) is a case in point. It is unlikely for example that Azaria Chamberlain would have been included in earlier volumes. Treatments have also subtly changed over time, in accordance with changing mores, and the available data. Thus the first mention of homosexuality came in 1979, at the end of an entry on William, Earl Beauchamp (1872–1938), 20th governor of New South Wales; and these days it is possible to be more open about divorce. The subterfuges necessary before the introduction of no-fault divorce in 1975 meant it was sometimes difficult for biographers to know what really happened. Moreover, it is a long time since cause of death has had to be specified for those over seventy at their death; and mention of a religious affiliation is hardly *de rigueur* by now.[9]

Persons included in the *ADB* must be deemed to be of national significance, or in some way representative of the Australian experience. But as with everything else, patterns of esteem may change over time. When it first appeared in the 1960s dealing with the earliest period of colonization, the first volume contained very few women (10 of 575) and fewer still Indigenous persons, *viz*. Arabanoo, Bennelong, Biraban, and Bungaree. Although the overall number of entries increased in the second volume, it contained only one more entry on women (11 of 607), and the number of Indigenous persons

[7] *Stella Miles Franklin*, 232–3, 42; Beverley Kingston,' The Lady and the Australian Girl: Some thoughts on nationalism and class', in *Australian Women*: *New Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), 27–41.

[8] *The Oxford Book of Australian Schooldays*, eds. Brenda Niall and Ian Britain with Pamela Williams (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997). Recent theses of which I am personally aware include Robyn Arrowsmith, 'Australian WWII war brides in America: Their memories and experiences' (Macquarie University, 2010) and Jennifer A. Jones, 'Old Age in a Young Colony: Image and Experience in South Australia in the Nineteenth Century' (University of Adelaide, 2010).

[9] On Lord Beauchamp, see *ADB*, vol. 6/www.adbonline.anu.edu.au, also *The Governors of New South Wales*, eds. David Clune and Ken Turner (Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, 2009), chapter 20, by Graham Freudenberg; Chris Cunneen, 'Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle', ts. 18–19, in *The ADB's Story* (Canberra: ANU E-Press, Biography Series, 2011, in press, titles provisional), and pers. comm., 20 December 2010.

remained at four. However, thanks to figures made available by the current general editor of the *ADB* Professor Melanie Nolan and detailed in the following paragraph, I can report that big changes have since occurred. Fifteen volumes later, as the *Dictionary* draws closer to recording late twentieth century lives, the numbers of both women and Indigenous Australians have increased exponentially. Partly it is simply because there have to be more women and Indigenous people included as more have become prominent in what are deemed lives of national significance. But it was also because neither the impetus nor the research to uncover their lives was there early on.

The great leap forward came in the 1970s, and a determined effort has been made since to ensure inclusiveness. With the publication in 2005 of the *ADB Supplement* volume edited by Christopher Cunneen—what we call the 'Missing Persons' volume—came a great catch up. In that volume, almost ten per cent of entries were on Indigenous Australians, and even more striking, almost thirty per cent were female. Thus over all the volumes, more historically and demographically realistic proportions have been achieved. The proportion of women of national significance now approaches twelve per cent overall. Some think that is still too low, but it should be remembered that numbers on the early volumes were so very low. The proportion of women in coming volumes is expected to reach twenty per cent. A similar situation pertains regarding Indigenous entries. Whereas these amounted to less than 0.7 per cent of all entries in the two pre–1850 volumes, in volume 17, which covers the early 1980s, they amounted to 2.2 per cent; and overall, the proportion has reached 1.5 per cent. This figure too is expected to improve in coming volumes. Of course there is more to be done, but the struggle continues, as it does in real life.

Likewise, many more individuals are deemed suitable subjects for biography. Again this is apparent from more recent ADB entries, for instance there is one on cooking writer Harriet Wicken, who appeared in the *Supplement*. Another instance comes from the work of G. P. (Gerry) Walsh, the *ADB*'s most prolific contributor. Walsh, who has contributed an astonishing 192 entries to date, has made something of a speciality of rural lives, such as that of rabbiters Joseph Copeley and his younger brother Ken.

My own far fewer contributions cover a variety of lives. These have included not just strange religious leaders and women writers such as 1920s theosophist George Sydney Arundale and Miles Franklin and Marjorie Barnard, but also, among others, an opera coach with the pleasing name of Lute Drummond (her students included Margaret Whitlam); a diminutive free-thought lecturer called Wallace Nelson who became founding editor of the *Australasian Manufacturer*; 'the incomparable Ina Wildman', a *Bulletin* columnist who died young; and Chave Collisson, an expatriate feminist leader. My favourite effort is probably Michael Sawtell, South Australian-born Emersonian, bushman, and activist in the Aboriginal cause (though you would not want to be in the same room as him for long, he talked so much). Mostly these people have had more than one claim to fame, as did Lute Drummond, a founding anthroposophist and early advocate

of an opera house for Sydney. It has often been remarked of the *ADB* that by comparison with other national dictionaries it is democratic in both scope and style—as befits a plain people, I might add. [10]

In recent times some biographers have introduced innovations such as collective biography, or what I would call 'relational biography', a phrasing which applies especially well to studies of parents and children. John Ritchie's *The Wentworths. Father and Son* (1997), was volume 1 of a projected two-volume 'relational biography' that sadly Ritchie did not live to complete. A more recent example is Evelyn Juers' *House of Exile* (2008), a winner of the Prime Minister's non-fiction award in 2009, on the life and times of Thomas Mann's brother Heinrich and Heinrich's partner Nelly Kroeger-Mann, radical intellectuals of the Weimar era, who fled Nazi Germany to France and died in the United States a decade or so later. Not all biographers succeed in comprehending both parties in a marriage; and it is easy to see why judges were impressed by Juers' work in other respects as well. It does not quite conform to the normal procedures of historical biography, but for some readers this has been an advantage, a means of resolving tensions between the requirements of fiction and non-fiction. Writing in the *Australian Literary Review*, Felicity Plunkett concluded that *House of Exile* would be 'a breakthrough'.[11]

However, if you are looking for a quick escape from the problems of writing historical biography, by which I mean from problems of evidence and interpretation, it is instructive to take a good look at Juers' extensive bibliography. Regrettably it is non-specific—Juers lists what books she consulted on certain subjects, such as the life of Thomas Mann or the rise of Nazism—but it shows how the authority of the text, which is highly mannered and often purely speculative, actually rests on the study of a vast historiography. Evidently there is no escape from sustained reading and research. Biography is not for the faint hearted. Nor is it a genre admired by everyone. Many readers prefer memoir: which is entirely understandable, especially given such recent offerings as Anna Goldsworthy's *Piano Lessons*, with its unforgettable portrayal of Goldsworthy's Russian-born music teacher Mrs Sivan ('We are not teaching piano playing—We are teaching philosophy and life and music digested'). Meanwhile the opportunities for group biography along the lines highlighted by Barbara Caine's *Biography and History* (2010), based on British and European materials since the late eighteenth century, for the most part lie before us, with Brenda Niall's *The Boyds* (2002) an outstanding exception, and pastoral sagas such as Mary Durack's classic *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959) the more familiar approach.[12]

Some biographies are innovative in that they seem more about the author than the subject. Sheila Fitzpatrick's *My Father's Daughter* (2010) explores the

[10] Full lists for all contributors and their contributions to the *ADB* are available on-line.
[11] Felicity Plunkett, 'Busybodies? Voyeurs? Time to get a life', *Australian Literary Review* (20 June 2010): 20–1.
[12] Anna Goldsworthy, *Piano Lessons* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2009), 3. I thank Mary Spongberg for making a copy of *Biography and History* available to me during the final stage of revision of this article.

author's early relationship with her father, radical Melbourne historian and civil libertarian Brian Fitzpatrick, who was also an alcoholic. Sheila too is a distinguished historian, of Soviet Russia. When asked if her book was really about her or her father or both, or even something else, such as 'love, death and betrayal', she replied firmly that it was about her. I think that is not quite right, but it is a well-written and thoroughly researched book, and readers can make up their own minds.[13] Related to this are biographers' intrusions into the text. Brian Matthews' 1987 biography of Louisa Lawson, which uses 'Owen Webster' as well as the 'I' word (later 'the biographer'), to worry about the evidence is notable here, and to dubious effect from a historical point of view. Personally I think putting one's self in is a waste of time and space—if readers cannot tell from the style or approach that it is me at work, they surely are not paying proper attention! If I recall correctly, the word 'I' appears only once in my biography on Miles Franklin, and that in the very last section, 'After Life'. But then I have been lucky—Miles is more fun than me and indeed most subjects—and she left plenty of evidence. For some biographers there are such big gaps in the record that they have to speculate; but we all need to be very clear about what is mere authorial conjecture.

Authorial interventions can lead to some surprising and possibly controversial innovations. A case in point is the biography of distinguished lawyer and first woman governor of South Australia Dame Roma Mitchell entitled *Roma the First* (2007) by Susan Magarey (donor of the Magarey medal) and Kerrie Round. Here the reader will encounter numerous passages in italics, most memorably to discuss Dame Roma's love life, about which informants were not willing to go on record. Faced with an impasse, the biographers write as follows: '*We have been told enough to ask the questions, indeed enough to furnish answers to them, but we have not found anyone willing to go on the record as providing those answers. So we have made up a story*'. This story is told in the following pages, in ordinary type. That is to say, the biographers decided to tell the story as part of the narrative itself, despite the lack of firm identifiable evidence.[14]

Biographical innovation may be an expression of authorial creativeness, but it is often encouraged by profit-oriented/cash strapped publishers. It is increasingly rare for example to find a fully referenced historical biography (except for contemporary political biography, where the accuracy stakes are high). Sometimes authors are encouraged to write in the present tense to liven things up. And then there is the dreariness, so it is said, of following the traditional structure of a life, with a beginning, middle, and end. Why not try starting in the middle? At least that would catch the jaded reader's attention. One instance where an arresting mid-life opening works is in the biography of Mitchell Librarian Ida Leeson. Biographer Sylvia Martin, who won the Magarey medal in 2008, begins with Ida mid-Pacific in the 1940s after she has left the Mitchell.

[13] Sheila Fitzpatrick and Jill Roe in conversation, Gleebooks, Sydney, 19 August 2010.
[14] Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round, *Roma the First*: *A Biography of Dame Roma Mitchell* (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2007), 262–6.

In theory starting with a death might also work, particularly with a subject whose manner of dying is the significant fact about her/him, but it would be difficult to carry off and is I suspect a technique more appropriate to oral history, where story tellers often begin by casting back in order to recapture lost lives. With some subjects, beginning immediately after the subject's death may be effective, as in the case of W. H. Wilde's biography of Dame Mary Gilmore, *Courage a Grace* (1988), which begins with Dame Mary's State funeral.[15]

Other trends are evident, such as the study of 'transnational lives'. However, since Miles Franklin had one such life, I wonder if this is much more than a matter of emphasis, readily accommodated provided the researchers and the publishers make it so. A recent example of what is at stake is a collection entitled *Transnational Ties*: *Australian lives in the world*, published in 2008, which contains studies of previously unknown or overlooked lives of comers and goers. These studies include Margaret Allen's biography of Otim Singh, 'a fine type of Hindoo' who became a respected shop-keeper at Kingscote on Kangaroo Island, and Alice Bagnall's account of poor Agnes Brewer who married William Lun Mow in Townsville in 1931 and went to China with him, where unbeknownst to her he already had a wife due to a prior arranged marriage. From a nuanced introductory discussion by co-editors Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott of the meaning of 'transnational' lives, which are also in some way Australian lives, it seems these transnationals were often individuals who were comfortable with Australia as a place, but not as society. This may be a new take on an old theme, but certainly the transnational approach is a sign of the times.[16]

Other challenges to traditional approaches to biography have to do with changes in modes of publication. If historians of reading are any guide, in the near future we will not only be reading e-books, but interactive e-books, which means that readers can change the text around if they chose. How this possibility might affect an evidence-based genre such as biography hardly bears thinking about. On a less alarmist note, the evidence does seem to suggest the difference between fiction and non-fiction, and between life-writing and biography, is becoming increasingly blurred, and a certain amount of overlap and loosening up of categories may be desirable or necessary. It is certainly going on. The question will be how to cope with it.[17]

Biographers often have to worry about privacy and censorship/self-censorship, an issue addressed by a symposium in 2002 held at the State Library of New South Wales, in association with the National Biography Award. Fortunately

[15] Sylvia Martin, *Ida Leeson*: *A Life* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006). The film 'Citizen Kane' opens with a death-bed scene/mystery; I thank Chris Cunneen for this example. See also Peter Read's approach to the life of Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams in *Tripping over Feathers*: *Scenes in the Life of Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams*: *A Narrative of the Stolen Generation* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2009).

[16] Particular difficulties may arise with transnational biography, e.g. access to research materials, sources of publication, and readership.

[17] These matters are canvassed in the concluding chapter of Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Reading* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003).

I never had to worry about this issue with Miles Franklin as she did a good job herself of destroying love letters and as it turned out the embargo placed by her trustees on a small amount of her correspondence at her death in 1954 contained nothing of significance by the time I got round to checking it. Moreover almost two generations had already elapsed. Indeed my experience in this regard has been quite the opposite of distressing. Because previous attempts at a biography of Miles Franklin had been so partial and negative, my efforts have been welcomed by the family.[18]

The question of ownership is also a contentious matter. Whereas there are no more than half a dozen people still alive today who knew Miles Franklin, often there are hordes who knew the subject. Who 'owns' the subject can thus be significant for a biographer, affecting among other things access to sources and information, and approval to publish material. When preparing a forthcoming entry for the *ADB* on Enid Lorimer, a British actress who came to Sydney in 1923 to establish a school of sacred drama at the Star Ampitheatre on Balmoral Beach and went on to have a long and successful career in film and television in Britain and Australia, I was faced with the problem of access. A British associate of Lorimer refused to help with information because she wanted to write the entry herself, or at least be cited as co-author. It was far too late for that, and we found the requisite information anyway, it just took longer. Ownership can be an especially difficult problem with Indigenous biography, where there are few printed sources and relatives are many. For an effective resolution of the problem of 'ownership' in Indigenous biography, see Heather Goodall and Isabel Flick, *Isabel Flick* (which won the first Magarey Medal in 2004). Also problems can arise in cultures where there is as yet no strong tradition of academic and impartial biography, as Hilary McPhee found after spending three years in Jordan working as co-author of a proposed biography. She discovered that members of the subject's inner circle wanted substantial changes to the final draft and she eventually had to abandon the project.[19]

Privacy and ownership relate to the matter of truth. Two participants of the 2002 symposium, David Day and Nadia Wheatley, both experienced biographers, stressed that whatever happened, they were bound to tell the truth, albeit a 'compassionate truth' where total revelation of a story would have been harmful in some way.[20] We do not talk much about truth these days, but in historical biography at least, and I would say in all biography, you have to be true to—that is evaluate carefully—the available evidence. It seems that the one expectation common to all biography is that it must illuminate a life in a truthful way.

I must stress the word 'available' for biographies—indeed all histories—depend on sources extant or known to be extant. When significant Patrick White material turned up in the National Library in 2006, the existence of which

[18] National Biography Award website: Day of Discussion, F(f)ame and Glory, 23 March 2002.
[19] Susan Wyndham, Spectrum, *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) (4 December 2010): 31.
[20] National Biography Award website: Day of Discussion, session 3.

was never revealed to him, biographer David Marr was astounded: 'The old bastard . . . told the world over and over again that none of this existed'. Likewise many were surprised to learn of the depth and longevity of the recently revealed relationship between poet and environmentalist Judith Wright and 'Nugget' Coombs, which biographer Veronica Brady had described simply as a friendship in *South of My Days*, published in 1998, two years before Wright's death. Maybe the time was not ripe to discuss such a delicate issue. In any event, it is a reminder that writing about a living person has its own problems. It is not just the subject's reputation that must be considered, but the effect the treatment might have on the lives of significant others.[21]

Biography is a particularly pedantic form of historical writing. This is partly a technical matter, as instanced by the procedures of the *ADB*, where contributions must pass through several stages of checking. It is also due to circumstances specific to Australia. In Australia, the historical culture is relatively youthful, and biographers often find that their chosen subject has never been previously researched, which in turn means that the fashion for relativism and new approaches, about which we read so much in biographical theory, is not a serious option. There may be a dozen biographies of Virginia Woolf in existence, so the reader has a choice of both content and style, but even with a well-known figure like Miles Franklin, mine is the first biography to be based on her papers. Nor do we have biographers galore. Given the amount of work involved, no-one is likely to challenge David Marr as the principal biographer of Patrick White for years to come, despite the new-found material.

The biographical frontier is still wide open in this country. Recently I was charmed to learn that someone is writing a biography or maybe has written a biography of the eccentric Melbourne bookseller E. W. Cole. How many of us remember the variegated pleasures of *Coles' Funny Picture Book*, I wonder. And will the writer acknowledge the *ADB* entry, first published so long ago? More to the point, I submit that it is unlikely that anything like Hilary Mantel's fictionalized biography of Thomas Cromwell *Wolf Hall* is going to come out of this country for a good while. In my view *Wolf Half* deserves all the prizes it has won. But it should be remembered that while it is innovative in style, it rests on four centuries of history, research, writing, and understanding.

Therein lies the challenge. While it is true enough that biography today is a house of many mansions, and we expect it to be, it is also true that we expect to learn from it, and think that it should be reliable, convey the available contextual knowledge, and be complete. This suggests that biography is in fact a quite conservative genre. No matter how you do it, it has to have somewhere a beginning, a middle, and some sort of an end, even biographies of the living. It also has to be based on evidence. Style is not enough. Moreover, a life cannot be divorced from its context. As biographer Hermione Lee says, following Virginia

[21] David Marr, 'Patrick White's return from the pit', *SMH*, 3 November 2006, 1; Veronica Brady, *South of My Days*: *A biography of Judith Wright* (Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1998), and Fiona Capp, 'In the Garden', The *Monthly* Essay, June 2009, and see *My Blood's Country* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010), 4–5, 164–5.

Woolf, it is a case of the fish and the stream; or more prosaically, and I quote her again, 'Biography is never just the personal story of one life. It always has political and social implications'.[22]

A lot has been written about the appeal of biography. Some contributors to the 2002 biography symposium felt that it was all about entertainment, the secrets and the revelations and the exotica that emerge. Others suggested that its appeal lies primarily in the vicarious pleasure of sharing another's life; or the reassurance to be had from knowing about that life. Then there are those who say it is a quasi-religious experience, whereby entering into the travails of another human being is uplifting. And is not the exemplary or moral life still significant, given how much we may learn from the experiences of others and the way they have handled the various challenges they have met? I would think there is some truth in all of these suggestions: biographies can be thrilling, reassuring, uplifting, even exemplary. Also I certainly think biographies can be educative. I found Gerald Martin's biography of Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez instructive, as I read it with an atlas by my side.[23]

Above all, biography is about the perennial fascination with character. What Miles Franklin's friends liked best about her was her irrepressible spirit. As a study of character, biography offers a special kind of knowledge and understanding (with apologies to psychologists), hard come by any other way. I cannot begin to say how much I have learned about life from studying Miles Franklin, not least the importance of staying the course, despite difficulties and set-backs, some self-inflicted. I have also found studying other biographies instructive, indeed illuminating, as in the case of Barry Hill's majestic *Broken Song*, on the life of linguist T. G. H. Strehlow, son of the Lutheran mission born at Hermannsburg in Central Australia and author of that great work *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (1969). Ted Strehlow was a man of strong, but basically divided character, as to a differing and lesser extent many of us are.

Readers are the other part of the equation. Some readers of biography begin with the last chapter, perhaps hoping for a good death, or to see if the subject really matters. To show significance, the biography must be about context as much as character, with the place of the subject in his or her times made clear. It sounds easy, but it is not. In the case of Miles Franklin, the history of her native state New South Wales from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century is not well known. Her years in Chicago span one of the most vigorous periods in that great city's history, and the London years and war service in Macedonia have never before been studied. Maybe as a historian I got carried away by her times, but they add to her significance; and although length is the most common issue to be raised, I am on the whole unrepentant, except for the last chapter. I cried when I was writing the final pages, and the chapter would have been better broken in two.

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[22] Hermione Lee, *Biography A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.
[23] National Biography Award website, Day of Discussion, sessions 1–2, esp. Ashley Hay, Dorothy Rowe.

Readers' expectations are difficult to pinpoint. Three years have passed since *Stella Miles Franklin* was first published, and much longer since it was commissioned along with an edition of her correspondence way back in the 1980s. By 2011, with a second imprint of the paperback out and the title now available as an e-book, the readership is changing and there seem to be as many expectations as there are readers. While *Stella Miles* is still going strong, it seems I have yet to give enough thought to the expectations of younger readers, or to the well-disposed, but less committed, reader. Her early years interest them; but many are in no position to assess the context and significance of her later experiences (a recent commentator dismissed her American years as mere 'typing'), much less her literary output and political values, which are by now also quite remote. Maybe something more analytical and direct would suit. Whereas once I thought it might be fun to compile a collection of the wit and wisdom of Miles Franklin or the Miles Franklin cook-book, I now wonder how best to address these changing expectations more directly. Maybe I will have to put myself in!

A lot is expected of biography today. Standards are, as Brenda Niall has said, 'dauntingly high'. This applies to content as well as approach and accessibility. Although the historical culture that underpins much biography is relatively shallow in Australia, the situation is improving all the time, and resources for biography abound. Furthermore, publishers have generally welcomed innovation. And readers are alert and responsive. Those who say we are living in the golden age of biography are probably right. At a time when many other explanatory structures have failed, biography is riding high. At its best, it is a flexible genre that illuminates both the life and the times of its subjects, and, to put it more grandly, the human condition.[24]

[24] Niall, *Life Class*, xi.