

## **TALK given to the Independent Scholars' of Australia Association**

**18 April 2006, by Rosemary Jennings**

Thank you, Kris – I'm delighted to be here today...

Over six years ago I was invited to join the Australian Dictionary of Biography team as one of three part-time researchers. At that time, Professor John Ritchie, who had been a lecturer and tutor of mine at the ANU, was General Editor and Dr Di Langmore was his deputy. In August 2001, Professor Ritchie suffered a debilitating stroke and Dr Langmore then acted as General Editor and was confirmed in that position in May 2004. We are fortunate, indeed, to bask in her exceptional leadership and that of her deputy, Darryl Bennet.

Now, in case you are not familiar with the Dictionary, or the ADB as we know it, I shall just give you a brief background to this important publication, paraphrasing from material found in Research School of Social Sciences annual reports, the ADB brochure and our website. The Dictionary had its beginnings in 1957 when a Canberra conference of representatives of university history departments from across Australia

supported the concept of a large-scale biographical project. This followed precedents set by the British Dictionary of National Biography and the Dictionary of American Biography and now, at least a dozen countries are engaged in producing such memorials to their 'mighty dead'.

Incidentally, Sir Keith Hancock, launching Volume 10 of the ADB in 1986, judged that the ADB had surpassed its British counterpart in its more adventurous inclusion of people 'widely representative of endeavour and achievement on every front of our experience as an emergent nation'.

From the first meeting, a national committee, an editorial board, specialist working parties and a small central staff were developed. State working parties, who are allotted a quota based on demographics, select their lists and give advice on appropriate contributors. Since work began on the 1891-1939 period, an Armed Services and a Commonwealth working party have carried out similar functions. Recommendations for inclusion and for authors are checked, on a national level, by advice from experts in specialised areas, such as science, religion, warfare, art, economics and sport. Men and women who have made a significant contribution to Australian history and others chosen as representative samples of the Australian story are included. In 2005, too, a decision by

the editorial board resulted in the formation of an Indigenous Working Party operating in Canberra and meeting as required. Word lengths for entries vary from 500 up to 6000 for the most significant people in Australian history. No living person is included, the authors are all voluntary and they comprise professional and amateur historians as well as many with specific knowledge.

The ADB is a standard work of reference and a research tool consulted by thousands of scholars, students and the general public. It has to be as accurate as possible, given the complexity of biographical research and it also has to be readable. Referring to the pressure of the first point, a colleague giving a talk last year, said, and I quote, 'Moving from one great book to another, I will liberally paraphrase 1 Corinthians 13 for the ADB:

*And now abideth style, conciseness and accuracy, these three, but the greatest of these is accuracy.*

In this context, I recall an entry for Noel Counihan, an artist and revolutionary, where the author claimed that, as a boy chorister, at St Paul's Cathedral School in Melbourne, he had been required, on special occasions, to sing 'Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that

begat us...'. Nowhere could I find information to verify this until I contacted my brother, a pillar of the Anglican Church in Adelaide and he, in turn, gave me the name and phone number of John Payne, a local theologian and expert on church music. From him, I learnt that the anthem was written by Ralph Vaughan Williams, the words were taken from Ecclesiasticus 44 which is one of the readings for All Saints Day, the first of November. It followed that this would indeed be a hymn sung at that time and we were, therefore, able to confirm the author's claim.

It is my job to verify statements by authors of the ADB entries and, to this end, I work to Dr Nicholas Brown, Senior Fellow and Research Editor. Nicholas gives me a copy of the entry with a list of queries relating to it. I investigate these, check their accuracy or otherwise and add any other relevant information. Always, we want authors to 'bring the subject alive' so anything we might find to enhance the personality or character is valuable. I was reassured recently by Nicholas's observation that what we three researchers do is 'crucial' because I'm always expecting someone in authority to tap me on the shoulder and say 'You're fired – you're having **way** too much fun...'. I suppose I'm a stickybeak at heart because I'm always interested in people's lives, how they think and why

they do what they do. In particular, I'm fascinated to learn of the forces that influence some individuals to, perhaps, contribute much to the community, to push themselves to the limit for a cause, to conceive of remarkable inventions, to engage in criminal activity etc. Why is it so? I ask myself...I recall, for example, an entry for a Dr Edward Woodall Gault, doctor and medical missionary who, despite suffering from serious depressive illnesses all his life, still contributed an amazing amount to communities in both Australia and India. His mother died when he was three years old, he was raised as a devout Methodist and he married another doctor who proved to be a great support throughout his adult life – one wonders which of these influences, or perhaps all three, made him such a skilled, compassionate and highly principled leader in his field **despite** debilitating health problems. In this context, I'm reminded of the words of the poet W H Auden:

*'...What were the struggles of his youth, what acts*

*Made him the greatest figure of his day:*

*Of how he fought, fished, hunted, worked all night,*

*Though giddy, climbed new mountains; named a sea:*

*Some of the last researchers even write*

*Love made him weep his pints like you and me*

As well as checking and examining entries by other authors, we are invited to contribute some ourselves. The first entry I wrote was about Frances Provan, naval officer and businesswoman, who enlisted as a telegraphist in the WRANS in 1941 – trained women were needed for such work to free men for active service. She was given the official number WR/1 so she was the very **first** Wran and many others followed. She never married and was childless so it was hard to find a source of personal information. In time, however, I managed to locate her younger sister who sent a photograph and I was thus able to know what she looked like and describe her ‘large brown eyes and classical features’. Her sister, Mrs Parker, told me more about her personality, her schooling (further verified through school records) and, in particular, Glennie Memorial School where the headmistress stressed moral behaviour and told her pupils ‘Remember you are a Glennie Girl and there is nothing a Glennie Girl cannot do’. This was advanced thinking for the 1920s and I like to believe that those words helped Frances to realise her later very successful career in the navy – in 1945, for example, she was posted as officer-in-charge of Wrans in Darwin, an operational zone – and, post-

war, her appointment as London manager of Jackson's United Meat Company was an unusually responsible position for a woman in those male-dominated days. As with many others who might otherwise be forgotten, Frances Provan is honoured through the ADB as someone who played an important part in the Australian experience.

I can now find my way around the National Library, National Archives and War Memorial computer catalogues with ease and these lead me to parliamentary records, newspapers, business directories, university calendars, organisation, school and club annual reports, year books, electoral rolls, biographies and much more. I've been surprised often to realise that I actually know exactly where to go for certain information. Practice makes perfect, I suppose....

As you may know, the ADB has its headquarters in the Coombs Building, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, but I spend most of my time in Canberra's collecting institutions. In particular, I'm privileged to have a desk in the Petherick Room of the National Library where scholars, authors, researchers etc are lucky enough to enjoy excellent facilities and outstanding reference assistance in that splendid resource. Within

those walls, 'my spiritual home' as I call it, I have met and befriended many interesting and delightful people, all fired with the same enthusiasm, so this is an added ADB bonus... Of course, I work, too, in the National Archives, the War Memorial, the ANU libraries and any place where records are kept. I am constantly surprised by the range of material found and, sometimes, frustrated when items I expect to locate are not available. I might add that my two research colleagues and I get in quite a frenzy when examining books without indexes and have been known to threaten dire consequences, such as a ritual burning of the offending items. So far, we've managed to restrain ourselves... All in all, though, I think the worthy citizens of Canberra are very well-served in the field of historical research.

Seventeen volumes of the ADB have been published so far, covering the years 1788 – 1980, sixteen of the regular series and a Supplementary Volume. Usually, they are launched, in different capital cities, every few years; the supplementary Volume was introduced in 2005 and Volume 17 covering A-K, 1981-1990 will appear in 2007. The ADB is going on-line this July (2006) which, as you might imagine, has resulted, and continues to result, in an extraordinary amount of work for all staff

members but particularly Darryl Bennet who is the driving force behind the whole operation. The website containing all 17 volumes, some 10,000 published articles, (and, of course, future volumes will be added in time) is presently being tested for accessibility, usability and system functioning, and checked for errors in the data fields. The ADB on-line will be launched by the Governor-General on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2006 at the Great Hall of the ANU. The website, we believe, will be used by many people in years to come. Unlike our British and American counterparts, it will be free and open to Internet search engines. No subscription...Some people have expressed the view that this facility might result in a reduced need for hard-copy editions of the ADB. The reverse is more likely as many more people needing concise, scholarly accounts of the lives of past Australians are made aware of its usefulness and want to add it to their libraries whether private or public. I don't know about you, but I still think that nothing beats holding books or manuscripts in your hands.

In December 2005, the ADB Supplement was launched by the Honourable Dr Meredith Burgmann MLC, at the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Publication of this was funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council and the volume was edited by Chris Cunneen, with Jill

Roe, Beverley Kingston and Stephen Garton. An adjunct to the first 16 volumes of the ADB, it contains 504 articles on people ranging in time from the Dutch navigator Dirk Hartog, born in 1580, to the soldier John McKeddie, who died in 1980. You may be interested to know that about one tenth of the entries are on indigenous Australians and 32% are on female subjects as diverse as a garage proprietor, a taxidermist and a temperance activist.

Some of my friends like to read the ADB as volumes of short stories and, indeed, where else would you find such a collection of eccentrics, like Rosaleen Norton, the self-styled 'witch', politicians from Edmund Barton to Harold Holt, the newspaper proprietor Sir Frank Packer, Harry Lea who produced Darrell Lea chocolates, Johnny O'Keefe of rock 'n roll fame – the list is endless. I feel privileged indeed to be a part of a team which produces such a significant publication, something which chronicles, albeit briefly, lives of people, some of whom achieved greatness and others who might have been forgotten if it weren't for the ADB. They **all**, however, contributed in some way to the Australian story.

Thank you...