

## CHAPTER ONE

### RECOVERING FORGOTTEN LIVES THROUGH FACT AND FICTION

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Over the course of the twentieth century, biographical writing evolved into a rich academic field of research, with major studies published from mid-century onwards. More recently, the field has further developed into a diverse and inclusive area of scholarly endeavour. This has shown how, as both a description of genre and a form of practice, biographical writing has the potential to bring together a range of varied perspectives, including scholarship from creative writing and other cognate areas, such as history and literary studies. Starting from the premise that biographical (as autobiographical) writing is a significant component of both contemporary artistic practice and scholarship, it is timely to offer contemporary re-evaluations of the components of the mode itself, its contemporary sub-generic incarnations, the range of subjects available to biographical investigation, and emerging or innovative methodological approaches. This is the purpose of *Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives*, a new edited collection with an Australian focus on biography: traditional, speculative and hybrid.

The aim of this edited collection is to encourage further research, innovation and collaboration in biographical writing by gathering together research that focuses on figures who have been largely neglected by history, or forgotten over time. The question of how to recover, reclaim or retell the histories and stories of those obscured by the passage of time, or neglected in historic and academic discourse, is one of growing public and scholarly interest. It certainly intrigues the contributors to this collection. Chapters on a diverse array of topics are included, such as: biography as a form of life writing (both historical and speculative); semi-biographical fiction; digital and visual biographies; autobiography; and semi-autobiographical fiction and memoir (both factual and speculative). Together, the chapters included in this collection offer a snapshot of new research on biography and its many variations and hybrids. *Forgotten Lives* also showcases the creative interventions that some scholars have used to produce speculative biographies of subjects whose lives and works have been obscured by time or dominant discourses, or reframe the ways a public figure is most commonly understood, either through their life story or their published works.

The desire to showcase contemporary academic scholarship in this field has been inspired by our current research, which examines shared interests in writing and publication, critical theory, and the multiple manifestations of biographical and autobiographical writing in various disciplinary and generic contexts. It is also strongly informed and inspired by our work with colleagues from the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) and leading contemporary journals in the field, including *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Programs*, which has thrown into sharp focus a real and sustained interest in contemporary biographical and autobiographical writing. The AAWP and *TEXT* concentration on writing of all genres and approaches, bringing together scholars and researchers, writers, students, teachers and other professionals from across Australasia. These institutions' focus on Australasian writing research and practice, but also foster interest and scholarship in specialist contemporary genres and sub-genres of writing. The interest in a collection on contemporary critical interrogations of biography and autobiography stems from the nature of numerous papers presented at AAWP conferences over time, and multiple conversations carried out between researchers, which identified biographical practice and research as an area of intense and enduring contemporary interest and a gap in current publication. As a result, a symposium was held at University of Southern Queensland in April 2016, bringing together scholars from around Australia, and from which the chapters of this collection are drawn.

*Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives* aims to provide a focus on contemporary biographical scholarship, bringing together a range of perspectives from different approaches and areas of study, including creative interventions into biographical discourse. The book offers a unique focus on research as well as speculative or imaginative biographical works focussing on persons whose lives have been obscured or forgotten. In particular, *Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives*:

- offers varied and multi-faceted readings of biographical and autobiographical writing, highlighting the importance and impact of sub-generic differences and experimentation within the genre;
- includes innovative and fresh perspectives on biographical writing within established areas such as history, memoir and auto/biography;

- draws attention to the under-represented body of work that uses fiction and other creative processes to construct a life story, or intervene in a life story already widely disseminated;
- places a particular emphasis on contemporary issues within biographical scholarship, such as speculative biography and the ways that the lives of forgotten or obscured figures can be recovered or recuperated;
- has a unique Australian focus, which although a locus of sustained and prolific biographical writing and scholarship, research and practice, is under-represented in book-length works; and,
- signals a shift in biographical research to an interdisciplinary approach that embraces imagination and creativity, and focuses on figures obscured by time or marginalised by dominant discourse.

In spite of the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transnational impact of biographical writing, most scholarly publications in the area have given a distinct priority to certain themes and areas of enquiry, including questions of truth, privacy and ethical production, and to prominent locations of production such as the USA and UK. While these are areas of important consideration, opening up the field to a broader range of critical themes and geographical or national literatures provides a more nuanced and diverse picture of the field, and of areas of investigation that are animating contemporary study and practice. There is a need, therefore, for this collection focused on contemporary biographical writing and its role in recovering important, but forgotten, lives, and focusing on scholarship arising out of Australasia. Likewise, this collection fills a need for examples of creative or speculative approaches to rendering those forgotten (or distorted) lives.

*Forgotten Lives* is divided into three sections, organised both thematically and conceptually. Each of the three sections features essays developing the themes and content of that section in different and innovative, and sometimes even unusual, ways.

### **Forgotten Lives: The historical, the speculative and the biographical**

The essays in the first section focus on forgotten or obscured lives, and on the historical and speculative methods used to discuss these lives. The first chapter in this section, ‘Australian Speculative Biography: A Means of Recovering Forgotten Lives’, by Donna Lee Brien, profiles the most contentious of biographical sub-genres – the ‘speculative biography’ – which proclaims the central role of authorial interpretation in biographical writing. Brien uses a case study approach to focus on a number of rarely discussed works, which illustrate varied aspects of the productive role of speculation in biographical writing. The chapter demonstrates the potential of using speculative writing strategies to produce biographies that are rich, appealing, thought-provoking, and historically-informed, narratives of real lives and experience.

‘Understanding Deadman’s Pocket: Peter Glynn and the Making of a Colonial Frontiersman’, by Libby Connors, explores an incident on the early Queensland frontier that was soon added to the pantheon of Australian colonial frontier stories. It investigates a racial attack through the biography of its survivor, Peter Glynn. Connors originally intended to peel away the racist context in order to understand its underlying causes but, in the process of her research, Glynn’s life revealed insights into acts of working class masculinity on the mid-nineteenth century Australian colonial frontier that add to existing gender critiques of and pioneering.

In his chapter, Patrick Mullins argues that politicians are rarely forgotten. Thanks to the intersection of the Carlylean ‘Great Man of History’ theory, and the Rankean emphasis on nation states, studies of the past are commonly framed through the actions and words of those who are most conspicuous. Yet in Australia, those politicians who serve in the Senate are more easily overlooked than their Lower House colleagues; with the exception of notable crossbenchers, senators are generally unknown to the broader public. As Senator Bob Collins once said, “The Senate, of course, is the B-Grade” (Peacock 1996). *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate (BDAS)* – commenced in part to rectify this – is nearing completion. Mullins’ chapter explores both the rationale for the *BDAS* and its preliminary outcomes. Comparing it with similar examples worldwide, Mullins critically analyses the limitations and opportunities of the *BDAS* as an example of biographical research and argues that – by its recovery of these overlooked lives – the *Dictionary* illuminates a dimension both inherent within, and outside, the mission of biography: institutions, places, events and contexts.

Unlike politicians, children are seldom the subjects of biography. When they are, Nike Sulway suggests in her chapter, the relative lack of sources, the unresolved nature of their life stories, and the tendency of adults to overwrite children’s experiences with their own result in unusual, and often troubling, texts. In child biographies, objectivity is even more elusive than it is when dealing with adult subjects, particularly as these biographies are often written by grieving relatives. Sulway argues that the contemporary expectation that “biographers accept the impossibility of objectivity, deny their omnipotence and make their political, social, cultural and other motivations discernible in their texts” (Brien 2014) is further complicated by the particular nature of these biographies, and the unusual relationship of biographer and subject; parent/adult and child.

'Memoir from the Margins: Narrating Buried History', by Ira McGuire, reflects the idea that "all histories are a kind of fiction" (Nelson 2007, n.pag.). McGuire discusses her grandmother, Martta Vilenius, who had two novels published: her first in 1936 and the second in 1960. By the time Martta Vilenius moved from Finland to Australia in 1987, to join her family, she was a forgotten literary footnote. She lived out her final years in a Finnish nursing home in Brisbane, surrounded by the treasured objects collected in her youthful travels. McGuire reflects on the fact that her grandmother died before anyone thought to record her memories, to look at her as a subject, to give her context. From the fragments of recollections that McGuire holds, this chapter discusses and uses memory and photographs to narrate a buried history.

The subject of Jayne Persian's chapter is Vladimir Ležák Borin, a post-war enigma. Borin, a Czech migrant to Australia, was much more than he seemed. Arriving at the tail end of the post-war Displaced Persons (DP) Scheme, through which more than 170,000 Central and Eastern Europeans arrived in Australia as International Refugee Organisation-sponsored refugees, Borin was described by contemporaries as a 'fraud' and of the 'political underworld' (Richards 1978, 11). Borin's somewhat convoluted journeys, both political and geographical, tell us something of the life of the politically elite, and active, displaced person. Exploring the life story of an outlier of the DP Scheme in Australia, this chapter focuses on Borin's life story as a type of micro-history, or even a foray into speculative biography.

### **Writing and Performing Lives: Creative interventions on stage, page and screen**

Building on the methods of construction of biographical writing in section one, the second section focuses on how to represent or discuss lives using creative means such as film-making, fiction and performance. A number of these chapters focus on the famous or once famous, whose biographies have been forgotten or distorted by their celebrity status. Elaborating on concepts of the speculative nature of all biography evidenced in section one, and expressly discussed in Donna Lee Brien's chapter, the works in this section demonstrate how researchers can creatively intervene in biographical discourse and/or resurrect interest in a forgotten figure through biographical narrative and imagining.

Debra Beattie's 'Gender Disruption in the Life and Times of Daphne Mayo' describes how the author, during extensive archival research for a bio-pic on this once well-known Australian sculptor, located previously unexplored information regarding a woman with a lifelong commitment to art and her career as a sculptor, and a determination to live her chosen life as a financially independent modern woman. Although quite introverted, Mayo is a feisty example of the emerging 'new woman'. Beattie describes how she carved out a unique life devoted to art, her own arts practice, and her work for the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In this, Beattie entwines her conclusions regarding Mayo's personal life with these interventions into the public sphere.

In 'Fiction as a Biographic Space for Exploring "Lost" Lives', James Vicars explores how the once closely-guarded, and argued, divide between fact and fiction is now being crossed by many kinds of writing, including the biographical. Reflecting upon his own writing of the biography of aviatrix Millicent Bryant, Vicars discusses how fictional forms are being used by writers in many parts of the world to recover forgotten or neglected lives, as well as those of better known historical figures. Ranging from the full biographical novel to hybrid true stories and fictional fragments, Vicars argues that these works create or inhabit a biographic space in which 'lost' lives can be rediscovered.

Bernadette Meenach's 'Remembering Garland: Performing a Forgotten Biography' begins with a discussion of how the evolution of biography has seen a transformation in the role of the biographer from the objective and invisible reporter of facts to a subjective perceiver situated firmly within a social context. In this chapter, Meenach discusses how, in her work in a practice-led doctorate, she aimed to recover the actress Judy Garland's life story from the common descriptions of her life as a tragedy. By using two of her own original works of biographical theatre, Meenach reveals how she sought to reframe Garland's life story. Meenach also highlights a series of principles that practitioners of biographical theatre, and other biographical writers, may find useful.

In 'Writing Back to Tolkien: Gender, Sexuality and Race in High Fantasy', Dallas J. Baker argues that there is more than one version of the much-loved fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien in public and scholarly discourse. He argues that it is important that the version that survives in public memory is not one that silences discussion about gender, sexuality and race. One potent way to work against this forgetting, Baker innovatively suggests, is to produce creative works that contribute to readers' knowledge about race, gender and sexuality in Tolkienesque literature. Baker uses his own work, a series of Young Adult fantasy novels, as an example of how this can be accomplished.

## **Romantic and Renaissance Lives: Recovering the past in the digital and fictional present**

The third section of the collection looks further backwards in time to consider the biographical dilemma of how to write a life after the passage of centuries and the loss of much evidence. Each chapter in this section does this in its own unique way. The works in this section illuminate the lives of fascinating but largely unknown figures.

Laurie Johnson's chapter on John Lyly, playwright, poet, and 'rather less than successful courtier', discusses how, in the digital age, biographers invariably seek to furnish their scholarship with images of their subjects. Johnson notes that when dealing with subjects from eras preceding the photographic age, there is the blessing provided by portraiture, and poses the question: What is the fate of a biography where no portrait exists? Johnson's chapter argues that although Lyly's literary and dramatic influence on Shakespeare and others is without question, there has been no rush to produce Lyly biographies. Johnson suggests this may be partly due to the fact that no portrait was ever painted of Lyly. Johnson also discusses the pitfalls of using Google Images, or indeed any site of similar design and architecture, when seeking to compile visual support for a biography.

In her chapter 'The Tudor Paintrix in Recent Fiction', Catherine Padmore considers the archival traces of two little-known female Tudor painters: Susannah Horenbout (1503-1554) and Levina Teerlinc (1515-1576). Padmore examines what has been made of these women's lives by contemporary fiction writers, noting that little archival evidence of their lives remains and that, while the fragmented nature of the record has frustrated historians and art historians, it has been a boon for writers of historical fiction. Padmore argues that the absence of historical documents has allowed fiction writers to invent freely to 'fill in the blanks'. Padmore uses a number of recent novels that feature these artists, or characters based on them, to frame her discussion, and argues that within these works of historical fiction the Tudor paintrix undergoes multiple metamorphoses, becoming detective, adventuress or protector.

Jess Carniel's chapter on fifteenth-century scholar Laura Cereta, a humanist of some renown in Quattrocento Brescia, a town in northern Italy, describes how many women who participated in this tradition of learning have been lost in its history, or have been disregarded as serious humanist thinkers, and the literary merit of their texts neglected. Carniel demonstrates how Cereta developed an array of techniques to deal with social and cultural mores regarding women and learning in the fifteenth century, also analysing the aspects of Cereta's life experience that influenced the construction of her humanist literary persona.

'Biography and Beyond: The Reanimation of Mary Shelley', by Alison Bedford, acknowledges that the restorative power of biography in recognising 'forgotten lives' is well established. In the field of literary criticism, Bedford notes, this has led to the rediscovery of many writers and works now considered canonical. Bedford suggests that one of the most successful biographical recuperations is of that Mary Shelley, who was lifted from her husband's shadow by the feminist biographers of the 1980s. However, this chapter argues that once biographical recuperation has re-established critical interest, it is possible to go beyond biographical approaches, which identify figures worthy of study, in order to reanimate these historical figures and make new offerings to the existing body of criticism and its theoretical approaches. Bedford outlines these approaches and explores how contextual studies of how place, time and personality shape authors enriches our understanding of the emergence of new cultural forms, such as science fiction, and also gives insight into the formation of discourses that reach beyond genre.

Throughout the collection, these scholars, researchers and writers demonstrate various innovative and exciting approaches to the scholarship and practice of contemporary biography. Collectively, they argue for a practice that is inventive and creative, responding in diverse ways to the problem of the biographical subject whose life narrative has been obscured, distorted, hidden or erased. Each chapter demonstrates a unique approach to the practice of biography; together, they offer an exciting insight into the challenges and possibilities of biographical writing, while also urging us to recall and recreate the lives of those who have been forgotten. This collection will, we hope, not only provide a much-needed snapshot of biographical writing and enquiry in Australia today, but also encourage other such enquiries and collective responses.

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