

# Recovering History through Fact and Fiction



# Recovering History through Fact and Fiction:

*Forgotten Lives*

Edited by

Dallas John Baker, Donna Lee Brien  
and Nike Sulway

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0325-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0325-0

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors conceived this project in conjunction with the *Forgotten Lives / Biographies* symposium hosted by the School of Arts & Communication, University of Southern Queensland, in April 2016, convened by Dr. Dallas John Baker. The editors sincerely thank ReDTrain at the University of Southern Queensland for supporting that event, as well as funding an Eminent Visiting Scholar residency for one of the editors of this collection, Professor Donna Lee Brien, which enabled her to travel to Toowoomba to deliver her keynote address, and engage in the productive discussions that have resulted in this volume. A warm thank you also to Professor Barbara de la Harpe, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts, who launched the symposium, and to Professor Rhod McNeill, Head of School of Arts & Communication, who supported the idea of the symposium from the beginning.

This collection is the sum total of the work of the contributors, and we thank them for their commitment to this project. Sincere thanks, too, to the peer reviewers of the collection, whose astute and generous comments improved this volume.

We would also like to gratefully acknowledge our schools and universities – the School of Arts & Communication at the University of Southern Queensland, and the School of Education and the Arts at Central Queensland University – for supporting both the research that has resulted in this book, and this collaboration. Special thanks go to the Centre for Regional Advancement in Learning, Equity, Access and Participation, a cross-disciplinary research centre at Central Queensland University, for their ongoing support of this research.



**FORGOTTEN LIVES:  
THE HISTORICAL, THE SPECULATIVE  
AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL**

## CHAPTER ONE

### RECOVERING FORGOTTEN LIVES THROUGH FACT AND FICTION

DONNA LEE BRIEN, DALLAS JOHN BAKER  
AND NIKE SULWAY

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 one 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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## CHAPTER TWO

# AUSTRALIAN SPECULATIVE BIOGRAPHY: RECOVERING FORGOTTEN LIVES

DONNA LEE BRIEN

### **Introduction**

Profiling the most contentious of biographical sub-genres – the ‘speculative biography’, which proclaims the central role of authorial interpretation in biographical writing – this essay will use a case study approach (Merriam 2009) to focus on a number of rarely discussed Australian works that illustrate varied aspects of the productive role of speculation in biographical writing. This will suggest the potential of using speculative writing strategies to produce biographies that are rich, appealing and thought-provoking, historically-informed narratives of real lives and experience. By referring to the reviews of this volume, it also provides both some contextualisation of how these biographies have been received by critics and reviewers, as well as a working example of the value of such reviews in creative writing research.

### **Biography (and autobiography)**

Biography is popularly understood as a factual story of a life, which is not written by the subject (Hamilton 2009, 81). Technically, a biography covers the whole of a person’s life, whereas a biographical memoir focuses in on a certain aspect or period of that life. Although this ‘rule’ is often broken, biographies are also usually defined as being based on documentary evidence, while memoirs are based on memories of the person being written about (Brien 2004). The documentary evidence used in writing biographies traditionally includes such materials as: birth, death and marriage certificates; shipping, flight and other manifests; census records; diaries, letters and photographs; government, legal, business, financial and medical records; newspaper articles, books and other

material written about or by the subject; interviews with the subject and people who knew that person; military service and war records; and other such materials (see, for example, Leckie 2004). Often other materials are also consulted to sketch in, or check facts about, the ‘times’ in which a biographical subject lived, and the ‘life and times biography’ is often referred to. This biographical evidence can be stored in the public domain, buried in archives or libraries, or held in private collections. Part of the biographer’s art is not only the ability to locate and then sift through relevant evidence, but also finally to order and describe it in a way that tells a compelling story about a person’s life. The biographer and scholar of biography Leon Edel has, for instance, stated that:

The moment you start shaping a biography, it becomes more than a mere assemblage of facts ... you are creating a work of art ... This kind of writing requires patience, assiduity, also enthusiasm, feeling, and certainly a sense of the biographer’s participation. The biographer is a presence in life-writing, in charge of handling the material, establishing order, explaining and analyzing the ambiguities and anomalies (qtd. in McCullough 1985).

Libraries and bookshops hold shelves of such biographies, from ponderous tomes on political figures that may have taken decades to research and write to more quickly produced and frivolous – although albeit often enjoyable – volumes on figures from popular culture.

This reliance on the published or archived public record brings with it, of course, certain problems. While some individuals attract considerable documentation of their lives, others attract little. There are many biographies, for instance, of powerful people, but far fewer of the people who work for them. Many more biographies have been written about the wealthy than the poor; many more biographies of men than women. Biographer Amia Leiblich has written, for instance, about how she, in the late 1980s “became aware of the scarcity or near-absence ... of biographies about women, by women writers” (2004, 206). There are also many more biographies about those from rich Western countries than the developing world (Spivak 1999), and many more about heterosexual than queer subjects (Hughes-Hassell, Overberg and Harris 2013, 12). There are some vivid exceptions to this assertion, but these prove how many biographies of rich, powerful Western men there are. An unusual volume worth considering in these terms is the edited group biography *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780-1938* (Gestrich, Hurren and King 2012). The editors of this volume note the paucity of “detailed biographies of the poor” (8), responding to Waller’s

earlier observation that “not only are biographies of the poor seldom written and even less often read, those which do reach the bookstands are invariably the memoirs of individuals who have risen from the lower ranks to achieve fame or notoriety” (2006, 13). But this task is not easy – in wanting to write about the inhabitants of slums in Victorian England, Shülting asks how such biographies can be researched or narrated (2016, 10). Feminist, queer, postcolonial and other scholarship cites the lack of biographical texts on subjects of interest in these areas, making similar cases for why such lives should be documented, remembered and re/inserted into the historical record (see, for instance, McIntosh 1988; Magarey, Guerin and Hamilton 1992; Moffat 2015).

Some careers also seem to attract biographies – there are many more biographies of actors, pop stars and other celebrities than surgeons, farmers or academics, for instance. I have, to date, found only one published book-length biography of a homeless person, Alexander Masters’ award winning *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005), which won the Whitbread Award for Biography in 2005. Despite utilising a highly successful experimental narrative form, it was the author’s choice of subject that was most praised in reviews (Brien 2015). Morse, for instance, noted as the book’s “greatest triumph” that it presents “an intimate, poignant, if often disturbing view of one homeless man in England ... in all of his complexities and contradictions, his strengths and weaknesses” (2007).

Leading biographer Victoria Glendinning has recently complained about what Thorpe characterises as a “shrinking market for serious biography” (qtd. in Thorpe 2010), claiming that publishers are only interested in ‘safe’ subjects like the Brontë sisters and celebrity biographies (Thorpe 2010). Sometimes, however, this preponderance is due to the source materials available. In the case of the arts, there are many more biographies of writers, for instance, than painters, so many that the literary biography is a long-lived recognised sub-genre of biographical narrative. This concentration makes sense, as writers often leave a rich trail of documents that can be used in biography, including, most notably, their published and unpublished writing, which can be dissected for information about life events and their meaning. That all sounds rather straightforward, and reading posted reviews on bookselling sites such as Amazon.com reveals that that is how most readers understand biography.

Since the 1990s, when all kinds of autobiographical narrative has made the bestselling lists, autobiography as a genre of writing has prompted much theoretical, methodological, ethical and other musing in the academy (see, for example, Bell and Yalom 1993; Anderson 1997;

Backscheider 1999; Egan 1999; Douglas 2001; Smith and Watson 2001; Eakin 2004; O'Rourke 2006; Whitlock 2010). Although much serious work has also been completed on biography, it – as a genre of writing – has been less studied and theorised than the first person form of autobiography which, it can be posited, may be due at least in part to biography's notional status as a straightforward, factual genre. Some writers and scholars have, however, long recognised that biography is of interest as a form of creative writing (see, for instance, Woolf 1927; Edel 1957; Nadel 1984; Novarr 1986). Biographers themselves have, indeed, reflected on the work involved in constructing coherent and interesting biographical narratives from the often seemingly dry and unpromising data which makes up the majority of biographical sources. In the Preface to his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Lytton Strachey, for instance, reflects on how, “it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as it is to live one” (2012, 6). Edel notes that biographers require the qualities of “patience, assiduity, also enthusiasm, [and] feeling” (qtd. in McCullough 1985). In elaborating on this, he also posits that there is more to the journeyman craft of putting together a series of facts in writing biography, a focus on the interior life of the subject is essential:

The moment you start shaping a biography, it becomes more than a mere assemblage of facts ... you are creating a work of art ... establishing order, explaining and analyzing the ambiguities and anomalies. Biography is dull if it's just dates and facts ... there must be a sense of the inwardness of human beings as well as outwardness: the ways in which we make dreams into realities (qtd. in McCullough 1985).

Later, he describes how the biographer is an artist who must both “explain and examine the evidence. The story is told brushstroke by brushstroke like a painter”. In this important interview, Edel also touches on speculation in biography, writing that, “What we hope for from most biographers is informed speculation”. In terms of his own practice as a biographer, he states that he “usually set[s] the facts in front of a reader and if necessary say[s] ‘we may speculate’ or ‘we may conjecture,’ if I think the facts add up to this or that conclusion. There are gratifying moments when you speculate and then find proof of accuracy; there are less gratifying moments when you find your conclusion was far-fetched” (qtd. in McCullough 1985). Many other biographers acknowledge that due to the interpretation involved in their creations, all biography is speculative to some degree and, in recognition of this, describe their narratives as one possible version of the life story they are telling, rather

than the single definitive story of a subject's life. This is clearly demonstrated in the now long established practice of biographers adding the subtitle "a life" to their titles as, for instance, in Joe Klein's *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (1980), Claire Tomalin's *Jane Austen: A Life* (1997), Meryle Secrest's *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (1998), Jonathan Steinberg's *Bismarck: A Life* (2011), Peter Slevin's *Michelle Obama: A Life* (2015), and myriad other examples.

### Speculative biography

As Edel maintains above, all biographical narratives include a measure of speculation on the part of their authors. Speculative biographers, however, openly include a level of conjecture and speculation that goes beyond this core authorial technique, yet are still able to maintain their works as non-fiction biographies, rather than biographically-based fiction (Brien 2014, 2015). Before investigating this in more detail, it is also worth clarifying upfront what the speculative biographer is not, as this has confused some commentators. Speculation in biography does not include biographers who exaggerate or lie about the data they collect, who claim they have conducted research they have not, or who have fraudulently invented their own background or qualifications. Such cases of exaggeration, lying, fraud and/or hoaxes are not examples of speculative biography. Speculative biography is also different again from what I refer to above as biographically-based fiction and which James Vicars elegantly describes as work which is "recognisably biographical ... but is imaginatively written or entirely (or in part) presented *as fiction*" (2015, 17, italics in original). Instead, speculative biographers diligently work from the available evidence, but feel free to make what might be termed as "educated guesses" to fill biographical gaps. Speculative biographers, moreover, also make it patently clear when they are thus interpreting the available evidence and including their own conjecture in the text.

Despite being somewhat controversial, such biographical speculation is not a recent innovation, nor is its recognition new. In 1927, Virginia Woolf discussed what she called "the biographer's imagination", which she believed particularly useful in investigating the subject beyond their public persona. Biographers, she stated, used "the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, [and] dramatic effect to expound the private life" (1927, 155). Woolf, however, was also careful to stress that biographers must balance fact and speculation in their narratives or else risk their works not being classified as biography. Many biographers since have agreed. In 1973, for instance, Richard Ellmann, author of major literary

biographies on Irish writers W. B. Yeats (1948), James Joyce (1959) and Oscar Wilde (1987) among many other volumes, confidently proclaimed that biographies would “continue to be archival, but the best ones will offer speculations, conjectures, hypotheses” (1973, 15). In 1996, acclaimed biographer Peter Ackroyd went further, proposing that, in his experience, the entire act of biographical composition is based on speculation, arguing “everything is available for recreation or manipulation” (qtd. in Omega, 214). While certainly not seeking to falsify the historical evidence (or record), the speculative biographer extends and supports the account generated from this evidence by using speculation as a means of inserting into the narrative those biographical elements without which the biographical subject’s life story is incomplete. These elements can include the emotional responses, thoughts and motivations that so interested Woolf, as well as other information which assists in creating a richer and more complete life story for the subject under investigation. To illustrate this, the rest of this essay will profile some Australian works that demonstrate varied aspects of the productive role of speculation in biographical writing.

### **The biographer’s role in the biography**

A common feature of many speculative biographies involves the biographer openly acknowledging their research and writing processes, including any limitations or problems, as well as the various narrative strategies employed in order to construct their texts. This is exemplified in A. J. A. Symons’ innovative and influential *The Quest for Corvo: An Experimental Biography* (1934), a biography of the English author and eccentric Frederick Rolfe who called himself Baron Corvo, which has been cited as starting off “a whole new genre of biography” (Weintraub 2016, 244) due to its vivid inclusion of the biographer’s role. So much so, indeed, that Symons’ text was described as being a biographer’s autobiography (Cockshut 1989, 86). Australian Brian Matthews’ critically acclaimed *Louisa* (1987) similarly highlighted the biographer’s struggles, disappointments and methods while attempting to narrate the life of Louisa Lawson (author, publisher, feminist and mother of poet Henry Lawson). After describing a number of discarded ideas for inventing an “alternative [or parallel] text” (8) – by an invented editor or diarist – Matthews suggests that this alternative figure already existed by declaring: “It is the biographer” (12). He continues to write of himself, as biographer, in the third person throughout, and also creates an alter-ego for himself-as-biographer: Owen Stevens. Using these mechanisms, Matthews can

ponder aspects of the biographical enterprise, including the frustrations involved in biographical speculation when writing can seem an “Impossible, maddening task! Never knowing, never being sure ... longing to understand what might – what *must* – have happened” (131, italics in original). He also writes of wishing to be able to visit the past in order to check on these speculations: “If only one could go back, live their days with them, breathe that air, hear the sounds and see the scenes that surrounded *them*” (132, italics in original). Matthews, as biographer, also unpacks, criticises and debates Stevens’ judgments and conclusions – revealing for the reader the kinds of interior deliberations the biographer often has with his or herself while researching, writing and redrafting a biographical text. Such passages provide the reader with a revealing insider’s account of writing biography, although some were critical of the amount of the text that was given over to the Matthews’ (and the invented Owens’) musings. This work was, however, truly ground-breaking, especially in the way the two key stories were wound together – that of Louisa Lawson, and of a biographer struggling to tell the story of her life due to the lack of sources and the unreliability of what could be located.

This narrative device of author-as-character has continued to attract Australian speculative biographers, including Alan Close who drew on this device in *The Australian Love Letters of Raymond Chandler* (1995), which tracks the correspondence between a young Australian university student and the famous American crime writer in his later years. What Close can be said to have added to Australian speculative biography could be described in terms of his vivid sense of the biographer existing as an actual body in space, rather than a disembodied consciousness shaping the work in his or her mind’s eye. In this case, Close’s location in Australia – in his flat in Bondi and as he travels, tracing the letters and their Australian writer – plays a central and formative role in the biographical narrative.

As the criticism of this kind of biography suggests, this acknowledgement of the biographer in the text can be seen by readers as a conceited and unnecessary distraction from the core purpose of the narrative – which is to tell the story of the subject’s life – and, therefore, is a narrative strategy that needs to be utilised with discretion (see, Brien 2002). If readers judge this approach as successful, it is usually when biographers employ two strategies. Firstly, they interrupt the biographical account only to clarify the nature of their research and/or how they are constructing those narratives. Secondly, these interruptions are usually kept to a minimum. This is certainly the case in Peter Ackroyd’s much-acclaimed *Dickens* (1990).

### ***The Two Frank Thrings (2012)***

Peter Fitzpatrick's *The Two Frank Thrings* (2012) illuminates how far Australian biographers have come in the decades since *Louisa* (1987) and *The Australian Love Letters of Raymond Chandler* (1995). *The Two Frank Thrings* is an elegantly structured text that presents paired biographies of two prominent figures in Australian media who Fitzpatrick refers to as "Frank Thring the father" (1882–1936) and "Frank Thring the son" (1926–1994). This compelling, beautifully written biography also provides considerable reflection on biography as a form of writing, in a wholly enjoyable form which is both humorous and deeply moving. This work was well-received by reviewers and critics (see, for instance, Britain 2012; Stephens 2012; Kelly 2013; Steger 2013). McFarlane, for instance, described the work as "a superbly constructed biography" and commended Fitzpatrick's "impeccable research" (2012). *The Two Frank Thrings* was awarded the 2013 National Biography Award, not only a major Australian literary award but an interesting one, as it is for published works "aiming to promote public interest in these genres" (State Library of NSW 2016). The judges described two components of biographical endeavour – its content and how Fitzpatrick dealt with the lack of sources – as "a well-paced and clearly written biography in which the author brings to life two very different and determined self-mythologisers, and gracefully deals with what can be known about them and what cannot" (qtd. in Steger 2013). This latter remark relates to a significant feature of this text: Fitzpatrick's musings on his biographical sources. While the acknowledgements pages list a large number of interviews conducted over the seven years Fitzpatrick was writing this biography (vii–viii), his main text notes when these interviewees contradicted each other. His brief author's note also acknowledges that not only did his two biographical subjects keep no diaries, they also "managed to ensure that no self-revealing correspondence survived them at all" (ix). Throughout the biography, Fitzpatrick fascinatingly deconstructs a number of the kinds of historical documents that are usually understood to provide impeccable documentary evidence – birth, death and marriage certificates, and letters – to show how these were filled with untruths, as well as speculation on why they were. Fitzpatrick also clearly signposts his speculation on what might have happened with such words and phrases as "if", "perhaps", "presumably", "might", "maybe", "may have had", "might have looked rather like", "suggests at least" and so forth, clearly signposting what are his own hypothetical or other musings on the evidence and events in the public record. McFarlane comments that it is "admirable ... the ways in

which this research is used without clogging the narrative, and the honesty that casts doubt on tempting but dubious sources, especially the words of the two protagonists” (2012).

Fitzpatrick, however, goes further in terms of speculation, by including in this biography a series of openly fictional interludes between chapters, wherein he imagines a first person voice for each of his biographical subjects and creates a series of monologues – what he calls “exercises in impersonation” (ix). These, Fitzpatrick writes, “seek to create a distinctive voice for each of the Thnings, and a sense of how they might have talked to themselves” (ix). These passages are clearly set apart from the rest of the biographical narrative in terms of being set into discrete chapters and by the use of italics for these sections of the text. What is more, these chapters are always placed in the text at a time when the subject is travelling – on the move within Australia, or to and around England, Europe and America. These ‘impersonations’ are intriguing for, despite being so different from the rest of the biographical text, they do not disrupt it and, although being clearly invented, they do not hold the readers interest less than the historically-based narrative. This is likely due to a number of factors: their close reliance on the evidence (a footnote could be added to almost every sentence), how openly these are revealed as speculations, how elegantly they fit into the book’s structure and how well they support the meaning of the text overall.

### ***The Convict’s Daughter (2016)***

In *The Convict’s Daughter* – a major release by Allen & Unwin in 2016 – history lecturer at the University of South Australia, Kiera Lindsey, pens an openly speculative biography of Mary Ann Gill who, in 1848, aged 15, secretly left her father’s Sydney hotel and took a coach to a local racecourse – there to meet and elope with the wayward son of the former Attorney-General. Her father, a convict made good, pursued them and, enraged, shot at the man, but did not kill him. The biography then details the most scandalous abduction trial of this era and the fate suffered by convicts ‘who got above themselves’. This is biography pushing the boundaries of speculation, but always pulling back before the volume becomes an historical novel. Lindsey does this through all the mechanisms suggested above. She is a voice in the biography and uses Fitzpatrick’s carefully chosen language of speculation – “perhaps”, “we might then see” and so forth – but, interestingly, only very lightly through her text.

Instead, Lindsey supports a comparatively high level of speculation by using the accepted apparatus of history writing to clearly signal her

speculations. Her brief Prologue, for example, during which we meet Mary Ann as she shimmies down the drainpipe to her clandestine meeting with her husband-to-be, includes much thought, feeling and observation that a reader might suspect falls outside the historical record. This is then followed with a more formally written Introduction in which Lindsey sketches in her framing historical argument – that 1848 was the year of revolutions and this case marks an example of the tensions brewing in colonial Australia in this decade: between British and Australian-born residents, and Regency and Victorian values, and women wanting agency over their own lives. In this, Lindsey directly tells readers that she is going to use Mary Ann’s story to attempt to show that “colonial Australia was much more diverse and dimensioned than the well-known narratives of discovery, convicts, gold, and bushrangers sometimes suggests” (xiv) and, hence, the necessity for what could be characterised as a ‘less familiar’ narrative. At the end of the book are an Afterword, Acknowledgements section, Chapter notes, Bibliography and Index. Each of these sections both make clear, and build a case for, the historical validity of the speculation that Lindsey employs to tell Mary Ann Gill’s story.

In the Afterword, for example, Lindsey explains to readers why she has used this form “as exciting as fiction” (280) to describe why the people in this story “behaved as they did” and how they “thought and acted” (281), explaining that “I have striven to recreate the sounds and smells, textures and tastes of their time, believing that this exterior world would provide a pathway into the interior world of these ordinary colonial subjects” (281). In seeking to provide a foil to biography written “through historical documents and the eyes of the men who made them” (281), Lindsey provides a biographical text through which readers can see the world “from the perspective of a young woman who was preoccupied with the everyday” (281). Lindsey also explains that, despite the 40,000 words of newspaper stories published about the abduction, and ensuing legal trial, there is no surviving image of Mary Ann, no private diary or personal correspondence; and so she was faced with “the task of recreating a life that is only partially documented” (282). To do this, Lindsey, as biographer, has used all the existing evidence, but embellished this when there is none, although using historical research to do so. Alongside this, importantly, she also shares her rationale for doing so with the reader. She explains her rationale thus: “I don’t know, for example, the colour of the gloves and bonnet Mary Ann wore when she stepped into the witness box in 1848, but I do know the fashionable colours of that year and the importance of stagecraft in nineteenth-century courts, particularly when it came to romantic scandal” (284). This is not unlike the manner in which

Andrew Motion used notes in his openly speculative *Wainwright the Poisoner* (2000). In *Wainwright*, Motion utilises the available historical evidence, together with his considerable knowledge of the Romantic period, to concoct a first person ‘Confession’ for his subject – an artist, con-man and poisoner who was transported to Australia – and then follows each chapter with notes that explain the evidence which sometimes supports, but at other times questions, ‘Wainwright’s’ version of events. In her Notes section, Lindsey provides descriptive detail “for readers who seek information about which parts of *The Convict’s Daughter* are factual and which are imagined” (296). Even her Acknowledgements pages (293–5) add further information about the research behind Lindsey’s speculations.

Lindsey also creatively uses the plates in the centre of the book in this manner. In one particularly indicative example, on a double page of illustrations in the middle of the book, she includes an archival illustration of the family hotel and an advertisement for it from *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 16 October 1846. These two images are presented alongside two photographs of contemporaries of Mary Ann’s parents and Mary Ann. In this case, the text accompanying the imagery explains that there are no surviving images of these individuals, but here, at least, are images of the time that fit with descriptions Lindsey could locate and that readers can use to assist their imagining of these people.

## Conclusion

In 1901, Henry James noted the importance of speculation in attempting to imagine past lives for literary characters, suggesting that a writer “may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints as much as you like” but noting that “the real thing is almost impossible to do ... the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals” (qtd. in Edel 1957: 202–3). While James was writing about representing characters in fiction, these remarks are applicable to this discussion in terms of how to incorporate this sense of an individual’s consciousness and identity into the biographical text. Speculative biography, by suggesting possibility (an informed idea of what may well have happened) instead of asserting certainty (what must have happened) in some aspects of the biographical narrative not only does this, but also reveals the potential of investigating and revealing the subjectivity, creativity and fallibility of biographers in their task of narrative construction. Moreover, by basing their subjective conjecture, empathy and imaginings on the documented facts (and making clear when any conjecture is not thus grounded), biographers can speculate

but still ensure their texts are classified as non-fiction biographies. In this way, speculation allows biographers to utilise and amalgamate into the resulting narrative evidence that is fragmentary, ambiguous and contradictory, and to relay how uncertain, contradictory and confusing real lives are. It also allows biographers to write reflectively on the nature of the biographical enterprise itself as a holistic mixture of historical archival enquiry and creative endeavour. Moreover, it can be posited that a recognition of such speculation can contribute to making a case for biography to be considered as a valid form of creative writing rather than merely a mechanistic presentation of historical facts. Such a reconsideration may lead to a more general recognition that there is both creativity and art as well as research and knowledge involved in writing a biography. That this is clearly how biographers see themselves is evidenced in how, in both the form and content of their writing, the biographers discussed above openly acknowledge that while they present only one of the many possible interpretations and re-imaginings of the available evidence, the life stories they present are the version that these biographers subscribe to. They are, indeed, the biographical versions of a life that these writers have crafted using all their skill in order to most coherently and completely explain the existing evidence about those lives.

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