

The *ADB*—My Best Friend

P. A. Selth

Earlier this year I casually remarked to an *ADB* staff member that the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* was 'my best friend', and in various ways had been part of my life for longer than I cared to remember. I was promptly asked to put this in writing.

My father, Don, had a history degree from the University of Adelaide. There were four students in his honours year; one of them was Douglas Pike. In 1959 our family moved from Adelaide to Launceston when Dad became headmaster of the Launceston Church of England Grammar School. Dad wanted to increase the amount of attention given in the school curriculum to Australian history, in particular the history of Tasmania. The main problem was the curriculum set by external examination bodies. He set about having it changed. He had an ally: Doug Pike was appointed to the chair of history at the University of Tasmania in 1960, and became foundation general editor of the *ADB* on 31 January 1962.¹⁴

There were then few books about Tasmania's history. Dad had a copy of John West's *The History of Tasmania* (1852), and he arranged for a copy of the Libraries Board of South Australia's 1966 facsimile edition to be placed in the school library.¹⁵ (Multiple copies of A. G. L. Shaw's wonderful 1971 edition were also to be added to the library's growing collection of books on Australian history.) Dad taught a Tasmanian history class. Our textbook was J. R. Skemp's dark-green, limp-cloth-covered *Tasmania Yesterday and Today*, published in 1958.¹⁶ It was all fairly rudimentary; there was not much readily available for the teaching of secondary school students (or anyone else), despite our teacher's passion for the subject.

Things changed in 1966. Volume 1 (1788–1850, A–H) of the *ADB* appeared in the shops. Dad soon brought home the beautifully produced red-cover, cream-dust jacket volume—and we discussed who got to read it first. I lost, but we jointly looked for entries of men and women who had a connection with Tasmania (and South Australia). I remember our finding the entry for Joseph Archer, the Tasmanian landowner, some of whose descendants were at the school.¹⁷ And there was the bushranger Matthew Brady, whose alleged hide-out near Launceston we had been shown on a school excursion.¹⁸

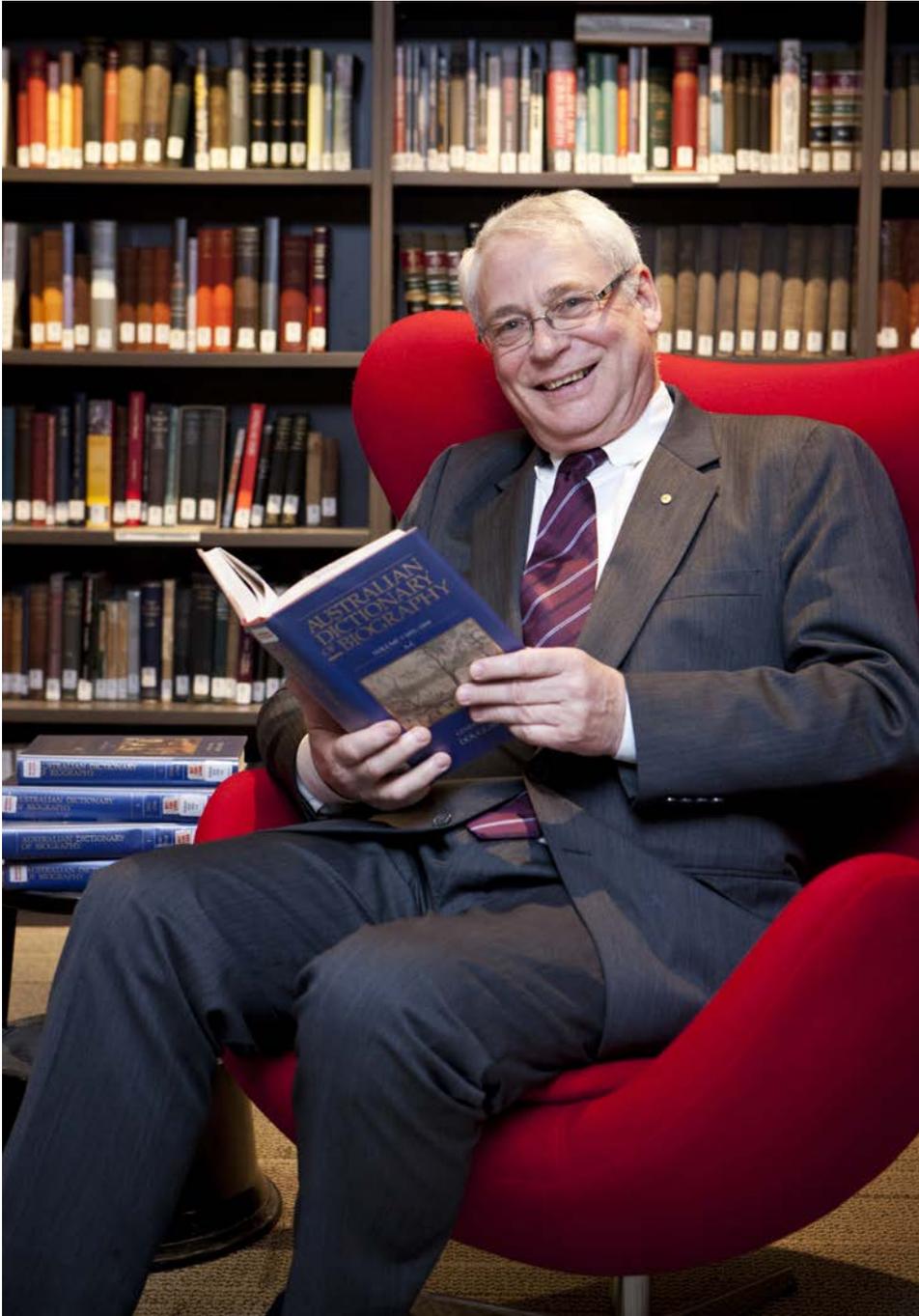
14 Bede Nairn, 'Pike, Douglas Henry (Doug) (1908–1974)', *ADB*, vol. 16, pp. 1–2.

15 John Reynolds, 'West, John (1809–1873)', *ADB*, vol. 2, pp. 590–92.

16 Gwenda M. Webb and Peter G. Webb, 'Skemp, John Rowland (1900–1966)', *ADB*, vol. 16, pp. 253–4.

17 G. T. Stilwell, 'Archer, Joseph (1795–1853)', *ADB*, vol. 1, pp. 24–5.

18 L. L. Robson, 'Brady (Bready), Matthew (1799–1826)', *ADB*, vol. 1, pp. 147–8.



Philip Selth with his beloved editions of the *ADB*, 2012

By courtesy of Philip Selth

The advent of the *ADB* did not help me in my study of history at school, for by now I was required to learn about the kings and queens of England, but I had the *ADB* at home and read it avidly. In the end Dad gave up, and bought me my own copy of Volume 1 (and Volume 2 in 1967).

I went to the ANU in 1968 to study Australian history and political science. A few years earlier Dad had given me a copy of Fin Crisp's *Ben Chifley: A Biography* (1961)¹⁹ and Manning Clark's *A History of Australia. Volume 1: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie* (1962). Now I had access to wonderful libraries on the campus and across the lake where the National Library of Australia was opened later that year. Like many students then, I had a Commonwealth Scholarship—and little money. But I was at the Co-Op Bookshop on the day Volume 3 of the *ADB* was available—and I bought Dad a copy. I was to give Dad a copy of each volume as it came out. He was reading the *Supplement 1580–1980*, published in 2005, when he became too ill to continue to read. His set of the *ADB* went to a grateful grandson.

The ANU's history and political science departments at that time were filled with lecturers such as Manning Clark, Don Baker, Eric Fry, Barbara Penny, Dorothy Shineberg and Fin Crisp, who inspired their students and made frequent references to the *ADB*. Not surprisingly, most had written entries for the dictionary. John Ritchie, whom I still remember giving a wonderful oration in the Tank lecture theatre on Governor Macquarie, his black academic gown astray, was to become general editor of the *ADB* in 1988. We lived near each other, and on occasion met at the Belconnen Trash and Treasure Market where, among other matters, we would talk about the forthcoming volume of the *ADB* or the book on which he was working, *The Wentworths: Father and Son* (1997). John would invariably have to counsel me to wait patiently for the next volume—it would not be published until he was satisfied it was in the best possible form.

While at the ANU I joined the Canberra and District Historical Society and met three of the *ADB*'s greatest supporters: Nan Phillips,²⁰ Pat Wardle²¹ and Don McDonald.²² Nan was the society's long-serving secretary, Pat the editor of its *Newsletter*, while Don edited its *Journal*. Nan was personal assistant to the *ADB*'s general editor; Pat had assisted in the early work of the Biographical Register, the forerunner to the *ADB*; all three were contributors. All three deserve entries

19 Scott Bennett, 'Crisp, Leslie Finlay (1917–1984)', *ADB*, vol. 17, pp. 269–70.

20 Suzanne Edgar and Martha Campbell, 'Phillips, Nan (1911–1984)', Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, Canberra, <<http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/phillips-nan-814/text815>> (accessed 26 June 2012) (f.p. *ANU Reporter* [May 1984], p. 6).

21 George Temperly, 'Patience (Pat) Australie Wardle, nee Tillyard (20 June 1910 – 22 April 1992): 'A Lover of Nature, a Ministering Angel and a Friend to All'', *Canberra Historical Journal*, [NS] no. 30 (1992), pp. 5–7.

22 P. A. Selth, 'Donald Ian McDonald 1923–1990: "A scholar and a gentleman": A Memoir', *Canberra Historical Journal*, [NS] no. 27 (1991), pp. 12–20.

in the *ADB*; both of Pat's parents, and her husband, are already there.²³ I also remember, with fondness, Jim Gibbney, both in his room in the *ADB* offices, squinting over his collection of file cards of biographical references, which so many of us regarded as an Aladdin's cave of delights, and at his kitchen table with a glass of whisky, arguing over my suggestions for his PhD thesis that was to be published as one of a three-volume history of the Australian Capital Territory.²⁴ Jim also deserves an entry in the *ADB* or, as he used to call it, 'the Dic'.

Don McDonald was succeeded as the *Journal's* editor in December 1971 by John Iremonger; I became editor in March 1976. From 1990 to 1993, John was the *ADB's* publisher at Melbourne University Press. I remember discussing with him what I thought to be a dreadful decision—the replacing of the lovely cream dust jacket with the current glary blue jacket. 'Comrade', he said, 'it gets the customer's eye'. He wanted to introduce the *ADB* to a wider readership; I just wanted to read it. He gave me a full set of the blue jackets and instructed me to put them on my volumes of the *ADB*; I did—over the cream jacket.

I have three entries in the *ADB*, and am trying to draft three more.²⁵ I cannot remember who asked me to draft the first two (probably John Ritchie). Chris Cunneen asked me to write the next two. I volunteered myself for the two that will follow. The entry on the barrister Eric Miller inspired me to begin work on two full-length biographies, of Eric Miller QC and of his cousin John Joseph Murphy (1914–97), New Guinea patrol officer, Coastwatcher, POW and PNG district officer. The *ADB* has been the genesis of literally hundreds of articles and books, and is cited in any scholarly work on Australian history.²⁶ It has also been the 'cause' of many of its readers, not least me, spending more than we perhaps should to purchase books cited in entries or written by contributors.

23 K. R. Norris and D. F. Waterhouse, 'Tillyard, Robin John (1881–1937)', *ADB*, vol. 12, pp. 232–3. Patricia Clark, 'Tillyard, Pattie (1880–1971)', *ADB*, vol. 12, p. 232. Barbara Dawson, 'Wardle, Robert Norman (1895–1979)', *ADB*, vol. 16, p. 491. An entry for 'Wardle, Patience Australie (Pat), née Tillyard (1910–1992), Community Member/Worker', is scheduled for publication in the 1991–95 volume.

24 Jim's cards formed the basis of H. J. Gibbney and Ann G. Smith (eds), *A Biographical Register 1788–1939: Notes from the Name Index of the Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1987). H. J. Gibbney, *Canberra 1913–1953* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1988). Obituaries for Jim include Chris Cunneen, 'Obituary Jim Gibbney', *The Canberra Times* (26 August 1989), p. 6; 'Obituary, Dr H. J. Gibbney, 1922–1989', *Historical Records of the Australian Capital Territory* (Canberra: Canberra District Historical Society, 1990), pp. 4–5. See also, posthumously, 'Launching of Jim Gibbney's Historical Records of the Australian Capital Territory. A Guide', *Canberra Historical Journal*, [NS] no. 27 (1991), pp. 48–9.

25 P. A. Selth, 'Pottinger, Sir Frederick William (1831–1865)', *ADB*, vol. 5, pp. 451–2; 'Piper, Harold Bayard (1894–1953)', *ADB*, vol. 16, p. 6; 'Miller, Eric Stanislaus Joseph (1903–1986)', *ADB*, vol. 18, p. 161. 'Kevin Ross Murray (1931–1991), barrister and army officer', 'Daniel Leahy (1912–1991), explorer and pioneer' and 'W. J. Read (1904–1992), Coastwatcher and government officer' are scheduled for publication in the volume covering the period 1991–95.

26 As happened with so many other contributors, I was encouraged by Don McDonald and Nan Phillips to expand my entry on Sir Frederick William Pottinger into an article: "'A splendid type of the genuine English gentleman": Sir Frederick William Pottinger, Bart. (1831–1865)', *Canberra Historical Journal* (March 1974), pp. 20–53.

I returned to the ANU in January 1992 as pro vice-chancellor (planning and administration). It was not long before I was wandering lost about the Coombs Building looking for the *ADB* offices. (I had been there dozens of times, but the catacombs-like Coombs Building is not exactly visitor-friendly.) I was greeted like a long-lost friend (as I would like to be regarded) of the *ADB*—and promptly asked if I could help solve a problem. It was thought I may have some influence. The request was reasonable and the *ADB* did indeed have a friend in the Chancellery Building. More importantly, it had many across the campus, throughout Australia, and abroad.

As I try to write the two biographies for which I 'blame' (thank) the *ADB*, I refer daily to the *ADB* online; but only to find the references—I then prefer to sit in a chair in a quiet place reading the bound volume. My son, however, probably has not picked up a bound volume. Like many of his generation, he reads the *ADB* on a hand-held device. But that does not matter. What matters is the existence of the *ADB* and the scholarship, and pleasure, it has brought so many people.

I am glad that the *ADB* is my best friend.

Philip Selth OAM is executive director of the New South Wales Bar Association. His ADB entry on the Sydney silk Eric Miller QC (1903-86) has led him to work on two full length biographies, one on Miller and the other on his cousin, John Joseph Murphy (1914-97), a coastwatcher charged with treachery after being released from a Japanese prison camp. Philip is also writing the ADB entry on Murphy.