



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
LAUNCH OF VOLUME 12 OF
THE AUSTRALIAN DICTIONARY OF BIOGRAPHY
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The first volume of the Australian Dictionary of Biography was launched in 1966 by Sir Robert Menzies. A quarter of a century and seven Prime Ministers later, it is my very great pleasure to finish off the job.

To put it quite simply, today's launch celebrates the appearance of a new landmark in the intellectual landscape of this country.

Today brings to completion the original ADB project: twelve volumes of biographies covering Australia's history from the First Fleet to the outbreak of the Second World War.

I am not prone to biblical quotation. But there is a compelling relevance in those stirring words from the Apocrypha: "Let us now praise famous men."

The relevance is two-fold.

First, the Australian Dictionary of Biography has become the foremost reference for anyone seeking information about the "famous men" - and famous women - of Australian history.

And second, in creating these volumes, the editors and authors of the Australian Dictionary of Biography have themselves earned the praise and the gratitude of all Australians.

It was that formidable pioneer of Australian historical studies, the late Sir Keith Hancock, who thirty three years ago convened the conference at the Australian National University that launched the ADB project.

It must have seemed a breathtakingly ambitious proposal. It called for an unprecedented commitment to cooperative scholarship involving thousands of people around Australia. It demanded work that was at once scholarly and eminently readable.

And today, with the twelfth volume safely off the press, we can look back on 7211 biographies in the ADB - and on nearly seven million words; and we can only conclude that the plans and expectations of the ADB's founders have been met and surpassed.

It is thoroughly right that I should name those leading figures who have so expertly praised our famous men and women.

As chairman of the editorial board, Sir Keith Hancock was succeeded by Professor John La Nauze and the current incumbent Professor Ken Inglis; Professor Douglas Pike, the first general editor, was succeeded by Bede Nairn, Geoffrey Serle and, currently, John Ritchie.

Let me add how good it is that Bede Nairn is with us today. His generous and productive involvement with the ADB continues, with his authorship of seven of the biographies in this volume.

The Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University has borne most of the expenses of the project; the Melbourne University Press has been a stylish and accurate publisher.

Finally, there is the veritable army of authors, nearly 3000 strong, and contingents of advisers in libraries, archives, registries and historical societies around Australia and overseas who have generously contributed their time and efforts to do the leg-work, the patient digging, the painstaking research, that ultimately gives these volumes their strength and stature.

The triumph of the ADB is that it has been truly a national project, in its planning and execution.

It has not taken some elitist view of Australian history, glorifying the deeds of the leading public figures of Melbourne and Sydney.

It has taken a truly national vantage point, that has encompassed women as well as men; shearers and bushrangers and murderers and artists as well as Premiers and Governors and Bishops; those born overseas as well as those born in Australia; the west coast and the smaller states as well as the populated south-east corner of the continent.

So it is as diverse as the Australian community that it describes.

In these last six volumes, covering 1891-1939, that community becomes an independent federation; undergoes the cycle of booms and busts including the Great Depression; endures the First World War and the lead-up to the Second.

Reading this book about the people caught up in those events is like watching a parade going past - an extraordinarily diverse national parade.

In this the twelfth volume alone, we have

- Labor's first Prime Minister, J C Watson;
- the tragedy of Ted Theodore;
- the soldier whom C E W Bean considered the greatest man he ever knew, Sir Brudenell White;
- Streeton and Strehlow and a brace of Symes;
- the pioneer feminist Adela Pankhurst and Ethel Turner, author of Seven Little Australians;
- Joseph Leslie Theodore Taylor, better known as Squizzy Taylor, whose occupation is crisply given as 'criminal';
- James Whelan, just as crisply: wrecker;
- Fred Walker, the Vegemite man; and
- John Whittle, Victoria Cross winner, who by 1932 was forced to beg to feed and clothe his family.

Dr Johnson said that "to make dictionaries is dull work" - but reading this one is far from dull.

It is imbued with a fantastic sense of evocative detail.

We are told, for example, that John Wren died after suffering a heart attack when Collingwood won the 1953 Grand Final; we glimpse Sydney University's Professor of Greek, William Woodhouse, spending his time on the train every morning teaching himself Albanian, Bulgarian and Hebrew.

I was particularly pleased to see Sir Donald Bradman's tribute to Bill Woodfull, Test skipper during the 'Bodyline' series, and Bede Nairn's superb biography of Victor Trumper.

And the ADB is imbued too with a fundamental honesty. This dictionary is not an exercise in hagiography, of either the individual or the nation. Our shortcomings are on display, too - biographies of individuals who had to struggle, sometimes unsuccessfully, against community neglect or hostility.

The unhappy story of the Aboriginal warrior Tjangamarra and Bill Gamage's life of the New Guinean patriot, Sumsuma, show two men whose different careers taught them depressingly similar lessons about the Australia of the Europeans.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For all these reasons, this volume is in every respect the equal of its eleven predecessors.

It's very appropriate that it should be launched in this building - a building whose history lies ahead of it.

Inevitably, many of the words that will be spoken in this new Parliament House, and many of the deeds to be performed here, will one day be recorded in volumes of the Australian Dictionary of Biography that are as yet unplanned.

But for all its newness, this is also a building that rests firmly on the foundations of Australian history.

It embodies our parliamentary democracy and it encompasses the essence of our federal nationhood - those vast enduring achievements won, at great cost, by our predecessors, many of whom of course are memorialised in the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

In this building are guaranteed the values they held dear: freedom and the supremacy of the individual in this great Australian nation.

So the Australian Dictionary of Biography reminds us of what it truly means to be an Australian, and will teach future generations the basic truths of the Australian identity and the Australian achievement.

In launching this volume and in commending this project I can give it no higher praise than to say that it performs those vital tasks accurately, comprehensively and with style.

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