Strange Truths

John Thompson


LIKE SPORT, the Australian Dictionary of Biography is a national institution. Since publication commenced in 1966, the appearance of each new volume is one of the perennial delights of Australian letters. Now, with Volume 16, General Editor John Ritchie and deputy Diane Langmore present the lives of 673 Australians who died in the period from 1940 to 1980. This new volume, the last of four in its series, represents Australians whose names fall alphabetically within the division Pik–Z. Appearing first is an essay honouring one of the Dictionary’s own: Bede Nairn’s debt and judicious tribute to the historian Douglas Pike, who edited the first five volumes. The final entry is the late Margaret Rilett’s profile of the Lutheran pastor Alfred Freund-Zinnbauer and his wife Helga, a reminder of Australia’s role in offering a refuge to the victims of Nazi persecution in Europe. Continuing the ADB’s fine tradition of cooperative scholarly endeavour, 569 authors offer a richly textured and layered portrait of Australia and of Australians over much of the twentieth century. Aboriginal Australians are well-represented in this latest volume; so too are those Europeans who worked in various ways as advocates for the Aboriginal cause.

While the ADB chronicles the lives of the famous, the titled and decorated, the rich and successful — judges, generals, politicians, boardroom czars, sportsmen and women, artists, writers and many more — its inclusions over the years have been deliberately democratic and representative. With time this practice, self-conscious at first, has been refined. High achievement in national life is an important and necessary criterion for selection, but it is not the only one. Some people are included as representatives of ethnic and social minorities, and of a wide range of occupations. Others are present as innovators, notorieties or eccentrics. The ADB has provided a model for other national dictionaries to become more inclusive in their representation of biographical subjects. Where England’s Dictionary of National Biography was once seen as ‘Westminster Abbey in print’, it has in recent years looked to Australian practice for guidance in the ways of admitting democracy into the British pantheon.

Alongside the great and the good — the wartime army officers Sydney Rowell, Stanley Savige, Victor Sturdee and George Vasey, the viceroy and hero of the Allied wartime campaigns in Burma, Sir William (later Viscount) Slim, the feminist (Lady) Jessie Street and the Red Cross worker Vera Deakin White — Volume 16 gives us the cameos of a diverse assortment of minor lives that enrich the story of twentieth-century Australian experience. Gathered here are brief portraits of publicans and priests, chess champions and snooker players, wood carvers and furniture makers, gaol escapes and private detectives. While the focus is always on the lives of individuals, the editors are conscious that in the accumulation of detail a larger dimension is present — a sense of the complexity of the human situation, and of the greatness and littleness of moral response and behaviour.

Some examples are eloquent. Wendy Birman sketches the empty introspective life of Maria Caroline Verona Prevost, who flowered briefly as a ‘flapper’ in the dance halls of Perth in the 1920s. Malcolm Brown provides the shocking details of the career of Murray Beresford Roberts, impostor and swindler in several Australian states; he choked on his vomit and died in a hotel in New Zealand in 1974. Mike Richards draws an intriguing picture of the criminal Ronald Ryan, ‘a stylish — if “spivvy” dresser’ who liked expensive, well-cut suits, silk ties and fedoras. He wanted to be known as the ‘leading criminal’ in the country. Notoriety delivered a different fate: he was the last person to be judicially executed in Australia.

Within the constraints of tight word limits and the ADB’s famously terse editorial style, some fine writers work miracles of creativity with their allocation. Even so, it is a pity that Sitarani Kerin was not allowed to do more with Anna Vroland, whose important work as a human rights advocate and in campaigns for the Aboriginal cause is subsumed in an entry shared with her husband. The matching of some notable subjects with authorial skills of a high order brings distinction to Volume 16. The communist leader Lawrence Sharkey is well-served by Stuart Macintyre, whose reading of a contentious subject is nicely set within his larger reading of the history of Australian communism. Deep subject expertise works also for Ken Inglis in his account of Rohan Deakin Rivett, crusading journalist, newspaper editor and author, and for Dennis Haskell, who achieves a superb portrait of the poet and journalist Kenneth Slessor. Ross McMullin is brilliant and perceptive in his reading of the life of Labor Party maverick Eddie Ward, remembered by one of his contemporaries as ‘an East Sydney Robespierre’. With Jessie Street as her subject, Heather Radi is imposing. So, too, is John Rickard in his twin portraits of Sir Thomas White, airman, businessman and politician, and of his wife, Vera Deakin White, who was, within her gift of family charm, always her own distinctive and formidable personality. David Horner’s reading of the life of the public servant Sir Frederick Shedden is magisterial.

While Volume 16 will have a guaranteed life in private and public reference libraries, it deserves to be read in its own right as a key to understanding the human condition shaped and defined by the peculiar exigencies of Australian life and experience. If we need to be reminded, it will tell us that Mark Twain’s ‘land of the most beautiful lies’ is also the repository of many strange truths.