Three Questions for Biographers: Public or Private? Individual or Society? Truth or Beauty?

Susan Magarey

They are usually such fat books, biographies, that the mind—to say nothing of the wrist—quails before them. Hermione Lee’s Edith Wharton has no fewer than 756 pages, and that is without the notes, bibliography and index. Such a major undertaking they present to a reader. Such a huge commitment of time and energy, emotion and imagination, they require of the researcher and writer. The very undertaking is complicated, too, by uncertainty about the nature of the task, the slipperiness of the category of “this ever protean genre.”

Nevertheless, biographies are both important and popular. As historians, we know how crucial it is to have at least basic information about the actors in the settings with which we are concerned, even settings as vast as Paul Gilroy’s Atlantic or Fernand Braudel’s Mediterranean. Hence the centrality of, for instance, the Dictionary of National Biography and the Australian Dictionary of Biography to scholars in Britain and Australia. Such works are important to literary critics, too, as Robert Dixon has noted: biographical studies of Australian authors were, he wrote, part of the formation of his discipline, the study of Australian literature. Biography is also immensely popular: “everyone from pop princesses to pissed-off politicians,”


In mid-2007, when Kerrie Round and I had completed a biography, I thought it appropriate to reflect on three general questions that had arisen during our five years of work. Our subject was Roma Flinders Mitchell (1913-2000), Australia’s first female Queen’s Counsel, the first woman in Australia appointed to a superior court, the first woman invited to present the Boyer Lectures (Australia’s equivalent to the Reith Lectures in England), the first woman elected chancellor of an Australian university, Foundation Chair of the Australian Human Rights Commission, and the first woman to be appointed governor of an Australian state. She was a distinguished and popular public person. She was also a woman who did not marry, and, as a result, attracted widespread and intense gossip about her well-shielded private life. The questions that our work provoked were principally about ethics. One question—public or private?—arose because the people who were appointed as Justice Mitchell’s associates over the years when she sat on the Bench of the Supreme Court of South Australia between 1965-1983 would not talk to us about her. They seemed to assume that the task of a biographer was to ferret out secrets about a subject’s private—read sex—life, and then publish them for intrusive and possibly damaging judgment. The second question—individual or society?—was prompted by encountering the current view that the relationship between biography and social history is a “new” area of inquiry. Our assumption from the outset of our project, and indeed for some decades before that, was that a narrative of the singular life could become intelligible only when embedded in a detailed social history, a process that could also be described as focusing on social history through the lens of an individual life. Versions of each of these questions would be likely to occur to all biographers, as would our third—truth or beauty?—a question about ways in which biographers may shape their material.

Here, I do not want to consider these questions specifically in relation to our book, Roma the First. Rather, I want to discuss them more generally. I will attend only to biographies written during the
last century or so, mostly in English. For the most part, I will not attend to autobiographies. So no Plutarch, no Lives of the Saints, no Aubrey’s Brief Lives, only a moment of Boswell, and none of the growing body of memoirs and autobiographies currently appearing under titles that all seem to be variations of Myself When Young. I should note at the outset that my three questions set up dichotomous oppositions, but I do not regard such oppositions as fixed, necessary, or unresolvable. That is, if asked to make the choices that they present, my answer would most often be not “either/or,” but rather “both/and.” I am not, in any case, attempting to produce answers or even to reach conclusions, but merely to raise some ideas and offer some stories connected to these questions.

Public or Private?

There is a wonderful moment when James Boswell, biographer of Dr. Samuel Johnson, makes clear how he would have answered this question. It is in the autumn of 1790, a time when brilliant correspondent and novelist Frances—Fanny—Burney was serving as second keeper of the robes to Queen Charlotte. At a gathering at Windsor Castle, in the midst of a multitude, Boswell caused her great embarrassment and discomfort. “Yes, madam;” he declared, 

> you must give me some of your choice little notes of the Doctor’s; we have seen him long enough upon stilts; I want to show him in a new light.... I want to show him as gay Sam, agreeable Sam, pleasant Sam: so you must help me with some of his beautiful billets to yourself.

When she refused, he intensified his pleas, “directly in front of the Queen’s Lodge, ‘with crowds passing and repassing.’” Only the approach of the royal family rescued her from his importunity. Reporting this moment to her sister, Burney affirmed that nothing would convince her “to print private letters, even of a man so justly celebrated, when addressed to myself.” But what, for her, would have been a violation was, for Boswell, “a vindication—a vindication of
his protagonist and a vindication of his biographical method.” Such letters would allow him to show us Johnson’s heart as well as his mind, the private as well as the public man.

He is by no means the last—or even the first—biographer to have confronted this matter. But not all biographers would have agreed with him. If we leap across more than two centuries and half the globe, we could compare Brenda Niall’s decision, when composing a biography of the early twentieth-century Australian writer Martin Boyd, to refrain from mentioning his sexuality, on the grounds that, despite clear evidence of inner turmoil, there is no clear evidence of homosexuality. Reviewing Niall’s own autobiography, Diana Simmonds comments that

while the warts ’n all approach that’s favoured today is clearly anathema to Niall, she seems to believe that... mentioning the elephant in the corner was not the answer either. It also led to the mildly wicked soubriquet “Brendenial” which, from this reading, was neither kind nor far from the truth.10

As Virginia Woolf commented, the biographer might be “bound by the facts,” but those facts “are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change,” hence the mutual implication of fact and value. Concerns about sex and sexual morality have certainly changed since Brenda Niall opted for such delicacy in her treatment of Boyd. Michael Ackland’s recent and unfortunately weak and carping biography of the famous Australian writer, Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson—best known by her pen-name, Henry Handel Richardson or H.H.R.—declares it necessary to supersede Dorothy Green’s splendid Ulysses Bound, and Axel Clark’s more recent but incomplete biographical study, on the grounds that Richardson’s embargoed papers have now been released and there are questions about her needing answers, particularly questions bearing on her private life.
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Was she, as some have suggested, drawn to lesbianism, or at least to bisexuality? Did she fear to contract congenital syphilis? What did she think of her radical reformist sister Lil? What was her attitude to the woman’s [sic] movement? The Munich accord? The questions are almost as endless as the later surmises.14

These days, biographical subjects give explicit approval to biographers wishing to discuss their sex lives. David Marr’s *Patrick White: A Life*, for instance, makes no bones—so to speak—about the Nobel-Prize-winning novelist’s homosexuality, and Marr was, he tells us, writing with White’s help and assent.15

But answers to questions about the balance between what can be considered private and what is public are not always so easy for a biographer, or for his or her subject. I have two examples. The first concerns Australian Allan Martin’s biography of the best known of Australia’s nineteenth-century politicians, Henry Parkes. The second comes from Australian Hazel Rowley’s excellent new book on one of the legendary couples of twentieth-century Western history, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.16

I do not want to discuss *Henry Parkes: A Biography*,17 except to observe that distinguished Australian historian Geoffrey Bolton described it as “the essential modern study,” “a subtle, thorough and illuminating account.”18 What I do want to pause over is the view of it presented by brilliant historian of both Australia and Mexico, Inga Clendinnen, in the first A.W. Martin Memorial Lecture, in 2005.19 Surprisingly, perhaps, in such a context, her view was one of great and continuing disappointment.

She had expected great things of this work, Clendinnen tells us. For in the early years of La Trobe University’s History Department, when Allan Martin was working on his biography of Parkes, and faculty members could attend each other’s honours classes, she went to his honours classes on biography for two years. It appeared sedate, she commented, but it was “in reality daring”:
Allan taught us to read between the lines, under the lines, inside the lines, with the exact mix of rigour and imagination historians need.... And then, when we were ready, he gave us some of his toughest Parkes material, and we struggled to map that labyrinthine self lined with self-mirroring walls.20

Yet, when Martin’s Parkes appeared, its preface apologised to his biography class. He had planned, he wrote, “to explore Parkes’s life history under other categories,” to expose “those intersecting patterns of experience, personality and circumstance which mould a man’s response to the contingent and hence lie under the existential surface.”21 But he had not done this. Instead, and he acknowledged that this was “an intellectual and artistic defeat,” he resorted to a rigid chronology, “because it was the political Parkes he was determined to pursue.” Why does a focus on the exclusively political require a rigid chronology? Where, exclaimed Clendinnen, were Parkes’s outrageously exploitative yet profoundly dependent relationships with women—first with his doting sisters, then with his doting wife Clarinda and the two young wives who followed her (the last one 23 to his 80), and throughout his life with a sequence of daughters and daughter-substitutes?… Did they weary of their Sacred Monster, devouring maidens at the rate of about one every six months? Why did Parkes need a diet of docile, sustaining women so much?22

And why, asks Clendinnen, did Martin step back from his earlier and so much more adventurous intellectual endeavour?

One answer might be, as another Australian biographer and historian, Mark McKenna, has suggested, that teaching and writing can be very different endeavours.23 Another explanation could be equally prosaic, as English historian Ged Martin, briefly a colleague of A.W. Martin, has proposed. Ged Martin points out that before his work on Parkes, much of Allan Martin’s research had been carried out with political scientist Peter Loveday into factionalism in the politics of New South Wales. It would therefore be unsurprising that
Allan Martin eventually returned to the kind of analysis and writing with which he was most familiar: the political.\textsuperscript{24} This would have to be, I would add, “the political” with the pre-feminist assumption that “the political” eschews attention to the personal, to precisely “those intersecting patterns of experience, personality and circumstance which… lie under the existential surface” that Martin lamented leaving out of his portrait of Parkes.

A third answer emerges from the additional experience that I can bring to shed light on the questions that Clendinnen advances. When A.W. Martin moved from the adventurous and thoroughly heterosocial classrooms of the new La Trobe University where she had worked with him, it was to the slightly older and distinctly patriarchal offices of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, an exclusively research-focused body, also an institution modelling itself on the single-sex halls of learning at Oxbridge or Harvard. There, being one of so exclusive a boys’ club required of him a freshly affirmed loyalty, as Clendinnen says, a loyalty “to his tribe, his fellow researchers in Australian political history”: “sophisticated ventures into individual psychology or the exploration of feminist themes were not, shall we say, prominent in Australian history at the time.”\textsuperscript{25} No, they were not. I know: I was there too, as only the second female PhD student admitted into that History Department (a very different place today, I hasten to acknowledge). At its head, then, was John La Nauze, himself a biographer of eminent politician Alfred Deakin, one of the makers of the federation of Australia. With Deakin, La Nauze had very considerable material about his subject’s subjectivity, his anguished self-disgust, his spiritual doubt. But—and here Clendinnen waxes botanical—La Nauze thought individuals were like onions, with layers that might be unwrapped. And this biographer—whom she deems a gentleman scholar—held “that biographical duty and gentle values alike demanded that only the outermost layers be unwrapped.”\textsuperscript{26} There was nothing as clear as a departmental “line,” to be sure, merely a set of unquestioned assumptions. La Nauze and his colleagues, considering political biography to be the only worthy kind of biography, might
marvel among themselves over the research evidence of Parkes’s sex drive, as did Ged Martin when Allan Martin showed it to him,27 but they did not, apparently, urge him to include it in his published work. Ultimately, Clendinnen’s disappointment with Martin’s biography was a result of his delicacy, the same kind of delicacy shown by Brenda Niall and John La Nauze—their decisions that there are limits to what of the private can be made public.

Hazel Rowley’s work shows no such inhibitions. Nor, indeed, did her subjects. These two French intellectuals were as famous for the irregularity of their union with each other, and their love affairs with other people, as for Existentialism, the mid-twentieth-century philosophy that they developed. They wanted everyone to know all about them and their lives. “Never for a second,” writes Rowley, “did Sartre and Beauvoir, in their relationship with each other, stop living as writers…. Turning life into narrative was perhaps their most voluptuous pleasure.” Both, she continues, “were heavily imbued with what Sartre called ‘the biographical illusion’—the idea that ‘a lived life can resemble a recounted life.’” They also believed “passionately” in telling the truth: “the notion of privacy was a relic of bourgeois hypocrisy.” So they would keep all of their writings, deliberately and consciously making themselves into myths, intending that the future would pore over narratives of their lives and find them “‘touching and strange.’”28

Yet it was not only future readers but also their contemporaries who would read these narratives, of course, since Beauvoir embarked both on works of fiction that included disguised autobiography, and on explicitly autobiographical writing. Her passionate relationship with Chicago writer Nelson Algren appears in disguise in America Day By Day (1948, trans. 1953) and in The Mandarins (1954, trans. 1956). Algren was far from considering this “touching and strange.”

“To publicize a relationship existing between two people is to destroy it,” he told an interviewer. “See, the big thing about sexual love is it lets you become her and lets her become you, but when you share the relationship with
everyone who can afford a book, you reduce it. It no longer has meaning. It’s good for the book trade, I guess, but you certainly lose interest in the other party.”

Then Beauvoir’s *Force of Circumstance* was published, its English translation heralded in the United States with appetiser extracts in *Harper’s* magazine in November and December 1964. Here Algren appears with his own name. In the first extract, Beauvoir announces that she became attached to Algren towards the end of her stay in the United States, and goes on to meditate on where such a connection fitted in her pact with Sartre. Other couples have made such pacts, she notes, “to maintain throughout all deviations from the main path a ‘certain fidelity.’” If these are only “passing sexual liaisons,” she considers, “then there is no difficulty.” But passing liaisons were no real test of the pact. What she and Sartre wanted, by contrast, was to experience “contingent loves,” something no doubt more difficult and demanding. It also raises, as she finally acknowledges, the “one question we have deliberately avoided: how would the third person feel about the arrangement?” Her description of meeting Algren relates things he had never himself been told: “People would often talk about him to me; they said he was unstable, moody, even neurotic. I like being the only one who understood him.” As Rowley notes, graphically, Algren was “out in the open, swinging in the breeze.”

Algren reviewed the book for *Ramparts*, mimicking Beauvoir’s story about meeting him, but in reverse: “People claimed she was surprisingly sententious, humorless and tyrannical for a good writer. I like being the only one to know she wasn’t a good writer.” In *Harper’s* he quotes her passage about contingent loves and then he really goes to town: “Anybody who can experience love contingently has a mind that has recently snapped. How can love be contingent? Contingent upon what?” Fifteen years later, he elaborated to an interviewer (we might note his racism, too, in passing):

“I’ve been in whorehouses all over the world and the woman there always closes the door, whether it’s in Korea
or India.”…”But this woman flung the door open and called in the public and the press… I don’t have any malice against her, but I think it was an appalling thing to do.”31

No doubt John La Nauze, Allan Martin and Brenda Niall would have agreed with him. But Hazel Rowley did not. She had no need to censor herself as, by this time, it was all in print and public circulation anyway. Is this simply a matter of opinions changing as times change? Michael Holroyd considered, in Whiggish fashion, that the twentieth century had seen

the boundaries of biography… enlarged, until its subject matter is pretty well now the whole range of human experience, insofar as it can be recovered. It is a matter not only of the legitimacy of subject matter, a new balance sheet containing the investment of income as well as sexual expenditure, but also of the variety of narrative modes…. We are beginning to grow up.52

More recently, prize-winning Australian historian Peter Cochrane has argued for the mutual implication of private and public in an individual life, and, at the same time, contended that biographical narrative is crucial to historical and political understanding. “A dialogue between the public and the private spheres,” he wrote,

is an important part of good biographical narrative, and great biographers have set the standard in searching for a deep reading of the ‘humanity of the lived life’, and a vivid sense of the life once lived. What drives us?… That was the story within the story…. It was the reason I thought biographical narrative was the way to explore the vast and irreconcilable ambitions that shaped the political foundations of the Australian colonies.33

Individual or Society?

I was prompted to ask this question by what I regard as a quite extraordinary remark that literary scholar Ian Donaldson made in a
lecture he gave in 2006 when he was head of the Humanities Research Centre’s Biography Institute at Australian National University, consultant editor to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and at work on a biography of Ben Jonson. His lecture, the annual La Trobe University Lecture for that year, was entitled “Matters of Life and Death: The Return of Biography.”

When I was an undergraduate studying English literature in the 1960s, I knew that resorting to biography to analyse a literary text was considered entirely inadequate. But that was the rule fifty years ago, and in only one field of intellectual endeavour. I am aware, too, of the claims of some historians in the United States that they are producing “the new biography.” But “new” in their view turns out to embrace the whole gradual turn to cultural studies among historians seeking to explain the formation of group or individual identity, an intellectual shift under way for the past fifty years or so. So from where, in Donaldson’s view, was biography supposed to be returning?

Towards the end of his talk, he observed that social historians themselves are beginning increasingly to discover how much can be learnt about an entire society, a wider historical moment, through following with close attention the trajectory of a single life, a single family, a small group of individuals whose lives, though seemingly unusual, are also in some sense exemplary.

What is extraordinary here is the chronology conveyed by his words “are beginning.” When—I would ask in amazement—did social historians ever stop depicting “the wider historical moment” through their narratives of individual lives?

Two great English biographical studies of the twentieth century illustrate my point: E.P. Thompson’s William Morris and Yvonne Kapp’s Eleanor Marx. They are both very fat works—necessarily, because each devotes immense scholarship to the culture and society which formed their subjects, and the culture and society which their subjects helped to form. Even in its revised 1976 version, Thompson’s work is 825 pages long, and Kapp’s two volumes total
over a thousand pages. In each, there is no question but that the wider historical moment is integral to the individual, just as the individual shapes those moments of social history. I will focus on the beginning of William Morris and the end of Eleanor Marx.

Edward Thompson, radical dissenting activist, is justly famous, and not only among historians, primarily for his path-breaking work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and subsequently for *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) and *The Poverty of Theory* (1978). The last of these is his intervention in the debates about theory that swept the social sciences and helped shape the new intellectual field of cultural studies. His wonderful biography *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* deserves to be better known than it is, especially among those who associate the name William Morris principally with distinctively beautiful furnishings. Listen to how Thompson introduces his subject, a moment in which he makes Morris—literally—embody the intellectual temper of his society, his times.

William Morris was born in March, 1834—ten years after the death of Byron, twelve years after Shelley’s death, thirteen years after the death of Keats. As he grew to adolescence, the reputation of the last two poets was growing up beside him. He was caught up in the last great eddies of the disturbance of the human spirit which these poets had voiced—the Romantic Revolt. Romanticism was bred into his bones, and formed his early consciousness. And some of the last clear notes of this passionate revolt were sounded when, in 1858, the young William Morris published *The Defence of Guenevere.*

In his second paragraph, Thompson sketches the narrative trajectory of his whole book, the story of Morris’s life.

Thereafter the impulse of revolt in English poetry was almost spent, and the current set... away from the main channels of life, and towards ever-more-secluded creeks and backwaters. What had been a passionate protest against an intolerable social reality was to become little more than a
yearning nostalgia or a sweet complaint. But throughout all the years of his despair, between 1858 and 1878, the fire of Morris’s first revolt still burnt within him. The life of Victorian England was an intolerable life, and ought not to be borne by human beings. The values of industrial capitalism were vicious and beneath contempt, and made a mockery of the past history of mankind. It was this youthful protest, still burning within him, which brought him into contact, in 1882, with the first pioneers of Socialism in England. And when he found that these pioneers not only shared his hatred of modern civilization, but had an historical theory to explain its growth, and the will to change it to a new society, the old flame flared up afresh. Morris, the Romantic in revolt, became a realist and a revolutionary.39

Culture, society and individual are, here, woven together into a single, if many-stranded, narrative.

Yvonne Kapp had been a novelist and literary editor of Paris Vogue. But she felt that her work “lacked dignity and moral justification.”40 Her Damascus experience came in a meeting with Harry Pollitt, chairman of the British Communist Party. She turned her attention to campaigning for the rights of refugees from Nazi persecution, and, among other things, to the ten years of research and writing that gave us her biography of Eleanor Marx. Eleanor Marx was the sixth child and fourth daughter of Karl and Jenny Marx, born in 28 Dean Street, Soho, in 1855, the only one of their offspring “to be born, to grow up, to live, to work, to cast her lot with an Englishman and to die in England.”41 When she was only eighteen, a correspondent described her as “a politician from top to bottom.”42 The narrative of her life is a story of international socialist politics and activism in Britain and Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century.

It is also a personal tragedy. During the summer of 1884, Eleanor Marx began to live openly with Edward Aveling, a bourgeois scientist who taught botany and zoology at the Polytechnic College in Regent Street, but one who had undergone a conversion from his Nonconformist upbringing to freethinking and thence to socialism.
Throughout this journey, Aveling gave numerous public lectures and produced an array of publications in which, as Engels pointed out, he claimed to know far more about Marx’s political economy than was justified. His journey also led him into Eleanor Marx’s bed. Kapp notes that from the time of her union with Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx’s life “became purposeful.” No longer does she doubt where she is going, “she goes”: “she is a woman complete: responsible, fearless and supremely capable of using her gifts to the full in the service of her fellowmen.” But Kapp acknowledges, as well, that Edward Aveling’s character was “deplorable” and that their union was “disastrous in the long run”: she does not baulk at putting together the tragic story of Eleanor Marx’s end.

On 7 June 1897, Eleanor Marx began a week of work, acting as official interpreter for the Eighth Miners’ International Congress held in St. Martin’s Town Hall. She also had two guests staying: a friend who needed nursing after her confinement and a twenty-one-year-old whom she was trying to persuade to get a job. On the next day, Edward Aveling, under an alias, reducing his age by three years, falsifying his father’s name, and giving a spurious address, was married by special licence at the Chelsea Register Office to the daughter of a music teacher, a young woman of twenty-two. It was not until the end of August, however, that Aveling, possibly following a quarrel, walked out of the household that he and Eleanor Marx had established, refusing to say where he was going and indicating, if not actually announcing, that he was leaving her for good. She was distraught: “alone” and facing “utter ruin”—the loss of “everything, to the last penny, or utter open disgrace.” Driven to speculation about the nature of such anguish, Kapp wonders if the “utter ruin,” the “utter disgrace” that Eleanor Marx faced would not have been more likely a consequence of Aveling having “dipped his fingers into political or trade union funds” than of his desertion of her, his common law wife.

The two reached some kind of modus vivendi which carried them through the ensuing six and a half months, with Eleanor Marx maintaining her attendance at meetings of various socialist organiza-
tions, and carrying on her correspondence about socialist organization with Karl Kautsky, with Wilhelm Liebknecht, with Pyotr Lavrov, and with her sister and brother-in-law, Laura and Paul Lafargue, telling none of them of Aveling’s desertion. But then something snapped. On 31 March 1898, she sent the maid to the chemist with a note saying “Please give the bearer chloroform and a small quantity of prussic acid for dog,” enclosed with Aveling’s card to give the request scientific legitimacy. The maid brought them and also the poison book, which Marx had to sign. By the time that the maid was back from returning the poison book, Eleanor Marx was in bed, undressed and dead.46

After canvassing all the explanations offered both at the time and since, Kapp concludes that the greatest trouble for Eleanor Marx at this moment was not so much that Edward Aveling deserted her, but that she felt politically ineffectual. “Aveling alone,” she writes,

could not have destroyed Eleanor, though his cold heart, incapable of love, undoubtedly froze her eager hold on life. He was simply the last straw. The dire resolve to kill herself must surely have been taken because she believed she was no longer needed by anyone or anything.47

It is the wider historical moment, the social history, that, in Kapp’s view, gives us an explanation for this moment of desperation in the individual life. Whether we agree with her or not—and I have to confess that I do not—we are still compelled to acknowledge that this wonderful biography offers precisely the balance of individual with society and culture that Donaldson thought he discerned as “new” only two years ago. Kapp’s work was published, to great acclaim,48 thirty years ago.

Truth or Beauty?

This opposition is ancient, deriving from Aristotle’s distinction between poesie—what we might today think of as making things up, in which the writer creates fictions, but fictions which convey universal
truths—and history or biography, in which, as Virginia Woolf noted, the writer “is tied,” tied to telling particular “truths,” to what are still sometimes referred to only as “facts.” A biography, Woolf went on, “is made with the help of friends, of facts,” whereas a novel “is created without any restrictions save those that the artist... chooses to obey.” It is an opposition that presents biographers with particular problems.

Lives are chaotic, messy, and crowded with inessentials, while art requires order, themes and a pleasing variety so as to transform the detritus of experience into an object of beauty. The temptation to sharpen or improve an anecdote can be irresistible. At what point does the merely artful pass into the fictional?

I am not considering here works that are clearly works of fiction, like novelist Anthony Burgess’s beautiful story about Shakespeare’s life, Nothing Like the Sun, or, to make that leap through time and space again, Drusilla Modjeska’s Poppy. Nor do I want to return to the discussions that took place around Brian Matthews’s biography of Australian writer and pioneering feminist Louisa Lawson, in which both the voice of the biographer and the voice of his alter ego, Owen Stevens, occupy nearly as much of the text as the story of Lawson’s life and writing. Such worries over the distinction between truth and beauty sound very last century today. We now live in a decade when we read with equanimity Bruce Redford discussing “the fictive methods of biography” in a book about Boswell’s Johnson, or Richard Holmes’s conference paper entitled “Biography: Inventing the Truth,” or Hermione Lee reporting that both John Halperin and Peter Ackroyd, biographers of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens respectively, “fictionalise their deathbed scenes, in attempts to be ‘true’, not to the realities of death, but to the spirit of the writer’s life.”

I am not suggesting that these biographers tell lies. But I am recognising that the very act of selecting what to include and what to leave out from the vast mass of data that a biographer or historian ac-
cumulates, that all those tiny choices—of what to put together and what to keep separate, of emphasis, of image or metaphor—that the multitude of small analytical decisions that go into the composition of a narrative, do amount to “making it up.” And that brings the biographer or historian much closer to the creative art of a novelist than Aristotle’s distinction would have allowed. There are also complementary questions to be considered about fiction writers who carry out historical research, and their responsibility—or lack of it—to that research.

Instead of revisiting those old discussions now, I will discuss briefly a question raised about two biographical studies currently in process. Both are biographies of Charles Manning Hope Clark (1915-1991), author of *A History of Australia*, published in six volumes between 1962 and 1987, a historian who, in the lead up to the bicentenary of the 1788 settlement of newcomers in Australia, became one of our most prominent public intellectuals, a celebrity. One is by biographer Mark McKenna, Senior Research Fellow in History at the University of Sydney, and will be published by Melbourne University Publishing. The other, by well-known Australian writer, literary critic, and prize-winning biographer Brian Matthews, will be published by Allen & Unwin. We know about these works ahead of their publication because their authors erupted into print in the middle of 2007. Both were concerned with questions of truth—not about telling the truth themselves, but about their subject, Manning Clark, not telling the truth. For, as they both depict vividly, Clark—perhaps like Henry Parkes—was as concerned with constructing himself as a mythological figure as he was with analysing the figures he made prominent in his story of Australia. And that produced some creative moments.

A crucial one was the story that Manning Clark told about a personal epiphany that explains the vision that drove him to write *A History of Australia*, his life’s major work. This story, in McKenna’s view, “stands out for its allegorical power.” The story is about the occasion on 9 November 1938, since called Kristallnacht, when Nazi persecution of Jews began to herald the Holocaust. Joseph Goebbels
explained in the daily press that the occasion was revenge for an attempt by a Jew named Herschel Grünspan to assassinate a member of the German Embassy in Paris. Clark was at Balio reading History. Here is his story:

What really got me going was that when I was 22 or 23 I went to Germany to meet the woman I was going to marry, and I happened to arrive at the railway station at Bonn am Rhein on the morning of Kristallnacht. That was the morning after the storm-troopers had destroyed Jewish shops, Jewish businesses and the synagogues. Burned them and so on. And there I was confronted with these storm-troopers. Of course they didn’t menace me, or threaten me. But I saw the fruits of evil, of human evil, before me there on the streets of Bonn.56

There was glass on the footpaths, and big uniformed men standing in the trays of trucks with guns. In a later version he said:

I found myself chewing over the question of human evil. There were at least two people inside me—the optimist and meliorist, and, dare one say it, the part-time messianic; and the other pessimistic, gloomy, the person who saw no answers to the problem of evil, or, as I liked to put it in those five volumes, “the madness in men’s hearts.”57

On yet another occasion, re-telling the story on ABC television, he wept. Manning Clark told this story often. “It is his Creation story,” observes McKenna.

And it turns out not to be true. Manning Clark did not arrive in Bonn until 26 November, more than two weeks after Kristallnacht. It was Dymphna Lodewyckx, the woman he was to marry, who saw the glass on the pavements and the soldiers with their guns. She wrote to tell Manning Clark about it, enclosing the article by Goebbels. Indeed, Clark did not meet Dymphna Lodewyckx in Bonn at all on that visit; she met him, in Cologne.58

Matthews does not contest McKenna’s analysis. Instead, he offers another dimension to the discussion with an account of “What
Dymphna Knew.” Dymphna Lodewyckx was a German scholar of rare intellectual distinction and beauty, by the late 1930s studying German literature for her doctorate in Bonn. She had grown up in Australia, though, in the household of her Belgian father, Augustin Lodewyckx, who taught Germanic Languages at the University of Melbourne, and her mother, born Anna Sophia Hansen. The Lodewyckxs’ grandson Andrew Clark described this household as “a European oasis” in leafy Mont Albert, a suburb in Melbourne.

The orchard, vegetable and flower gardens were demarcated by carefully stacked Flemish-style woodpiles. Outside the back door was a row of clogs. It was also a haven for the study of languages. Dymphna Clark spoke Dutch at home, and was flawless in German.

The culture of the household was markedly anti-Australian, and the family’s views included a rejection of Australia’s unqualified support for Britain and her empire. In 1933, their approval of Hitler’s goals found expression in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, with two articles by Augustin and one by Anna Lodewyckx, expounding at length on the convictions with which Hitler had risen to power, his policies for the future, his determination to stamp out both Marxist socialism and the power of international Jewish finance, the cultural joys of being in Munich, and a strong sense that it would be desirable to “see what this younger man [Adolf Hitler], with his many excellent intentions, can accomplish.”

Dymphna Clark must have known of their views, Matthews maintains, even if she had reservations about them. They would have constituted far more complex baggage for her as she walked among the glass and wreckage of Kristallnacht than Manning Clark could ever have brought to his more distanced encounter with the destruction in Bonn. She would have told Manning about her parents’ politics, if only in preparation for his meeting with them, a meeting that, apparently, left him speechless. Equally, she would have told her parents about Kristallnacht, if only to assure them of her safety. But she was, in Matthews’s view, “unwilling to open a rift that would
be potentially so divisive within the family.” And so, it seems, was Manning Clark. His wife’s parents had died by the time that Manning Clark, telling his own life-story, converted Dymphna Clark’s experience into his own.

We are left with two questions. Why did Manning Clark appropriate the story of Kristallnacht from his wife? He could, just as well, have offered it as her story but still one that had profound implications for his view of humanity and its capacity for evil. Secondly, why did Dymphna Clark let him get away with it?

Both McKenna and Matthews reply to the first question by emphasising that Manning Clark was, first and foremost, a writer, and that writers make things up. McKenna argues that it was “significant” that the first time that Clark told the Kristallnacht story, it was “in the context of autobiography, a notoriously imperfect and fraught enterprise at the best of times,” one which writers of the calibre of Doris Lessing and John Coetzee have declared deceptive. One could object that Coetzee and Lessing are novelists, while Clark was a historian, but then we are back to the truth versus beauty dichotomy. McKenna does offer something that I find far more persuasive as an argument:

Kristallnacht, the portent of the Holocaust, is mankind’s fall from grace. In this sense, there is considerable truth in Clark’s account of it. The truth lies in the felt part—the emotional and moral truth—and the conclusions drawn. He did not see the glass on the street or the smoke rising from the burning synagogues on the morning of 10 November, but he certainly experienced its aftermath and the increasing terror of the Nazi dictatorship.

Matthews maintains that taking over someone else’s story—he is also thinking of Henry Lawson pinching “The Drover’s Wife” from his mother—is what writers do all the time. This, of course, could also leave us with questions about Clark’s historical writing. But perhaps they are best saved for another day. As for why Dymphna let Manning get away with it, McKenna thinks that the answer is that “she
was so loyal to him that she could never betray him.” Matthews points out, though, that in two interviews about her own life, Dymphna provided dates which made it clear that Manning was not there when he said he was, although she does not spell out the implications of this information.

There is another possibility, though. Perhaps I have rendered both questions and answers about Manning and Dymphna Clark, Kristallnacht, and Manning Clark’s epiphany far too crudely in my account of this debate. McKenna and Matthews do, both, raise these questions. But their answers are far less morally absolute than mine; mine have assumed an absolutely clear distinction to be drawn between memory and imagination, between truth and falsehood. Such a distinction may conform to schoolroom morality, but it is less easily sustained before at least a century of “intense historical debate about the contentious connection between the infinitely complex lived experience of history itself and the stories we tell about that experience.” As early as 1922, André Breton was asking what would follow “if memory were only a product of imagination,” for instance. In 1964 and 1965, André Leroi-Gourhan, comparing human and computer memories, pointed out that “human memory is particularly unstable and malleable (a criticism that has become traditional in modern psychology, with reference to judicial testimony, for instance).” In 1977, Jacques Le Goff, in whose work the previous two quotations appear, himself wrote that

> Psychologists and psychoanalysts have insisted, in the case of memory as well as that of forgetting... on the conscious or unconscious manipulations that interest, affectivity, desire, inhibition, and censorship exercise on individual memory.

With such pronouncements in mind, explaining the specific details of Manning Clark’s story of his epiphany—an amalgam of memory, fear, ambition, and desire—becomes far less difficult. As McKenna observes,
The unreliability of memory is the unreliability of autobiography, a necessarily apocryphal genre. Distanced by time, the self who is created by the narrator becomes a character, even a complete stranger to the person who writes … [T]he felt life is often a more abiding memory than the minutiae of the lived life.69

“Most likely,” McKenna concludes, “Clark, the great historian, needed to be there to make the parable of Kristallnacht more powerful, to draw from the events the great lessons he had undoubtedly drawn.”70

Conclusion

My own explanation as to how Kerrie Round and I dealt with these three questions in our biography of Dame Roma Mitchell is to say that we considered everything written or said to be legitimate for inclusion in our portrait: that is, we made no exclusions on the grounds of protecting privacy. We endeavoured to make Roma Mitchell’s life intelligible by embedding it in a social history of the twentieth century. And we opted for the truth, to the extent that we could determine it, but also tried to make it beautiful. That meant, ironically given my argument in this article, that when we endeavoured to tell the truth about Roma Mitchell’s sex life, we encountered opposition strong enough to compel us to compose an explicitly fictional short story to include in the pages of our distinctly non-fictional biography.
Notes

2 Peter Rose, “Goethe’s Two Left Feet: Reflections on the Hazards and Liberties of Biography” (paper presented on the occasion of receiving the National Biography Award, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, 3 April 2003).
6 I presented an earlier version of this article as a paper to the History Discipline, University of Adelaide, July 2007; by invitation of the Postgraduate Seminar, History Department, University of Sydney, on 21 April 2008; and at the invitation of the Staff Seminar, History Department, University of Newcastle on 31 October 2008.


20 Ibid., 25.


22 Inga Clendinnen, “In Search of the ‘Actual Man Underneath,’” 27.

23 Mark McKenna, email message to author, 20 April 2008.

24 Ged Martin, email message to Barbara Messamore, 7 July 2008. I am grateful to both of them for sharing this correspondence.


26 Ibid., 29.

27 Ged Martin, email to Messamore, 7 July 2008.

28 Hazel Rowley, Tête-à-Tête, xi.

29 Nelson Algren, as quoted in Hazel Rowley, Tête-à-Tête, 298, 299.

30 Hazel Rowley, Tête-à-Tête, 299-300.

31 Nelson Algren, as quoted in Hazel Rowley, Tête-à-Tête, 300, 301, 303.


38 E.P. Thompson, William Morris, 1.

39 Ibid., 1-2.


41 Yvonne Kapp, Eleanor Marx, 1: 21.

42 Ibid., 1: 144.

43 Ibid., 1: 286.

44 Yvonne Kapp, Eleanor Marx, 2: 677-680.

46 Ibid., 2: 696-7.
47 Ibid., 2: 707.
48 Charmian Brinson, in “Afterword / Yvonne Kapp – a reflection” Yvonne Kapp, Time Will Tell, 293, quotes among others Eric Hobsbawm: “Yvonne Kapp’s magnificent and definitive Eleanor Marx is one of the major biographies of our generation.”
49 Virginia Woolf, The Art of Biography, 162.
56 As quoted in Mark McKenna, “Being There,” 28.
57 As quoted in Mark McKenna, “Being There,” 29.
58 Mark McKenna, “Being There,” 35, 31-33.
62 Mark McKenna, “Being There,” 34.
63 Ibid., 32.
65 Mark McKenna, “Being There,” 31.

Mark McKenna, “Being There,” 34.

Ibid., 31.