

Life sentences

Time to revise entries

Professor Melanie Nolan writes about murder, sexual abuse, domestic violence and mental disorder in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, a collection of biographies of

In the decade 1994 to 2004, the British *Dictionary of National Biography* was granted over £25 million to revise articles written a century or so earlier and to add new ones on 'missing persons'. The first volume of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* was published in 1966, over 50 years ago. A number of our entries also need updating.

In the absence of a similar donation and, given our limited resources, we are correcting articles as much as we can, as well as systematically publishing new entries online each year. (We are 'up' to significant and representative Australians who died in the 1990s.) We also have started a number of 'missing persons' projects, including an ARC-funded *Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

While individual articles need updating for various reasons, there are issues that pertain to groups of articles such as frontier violence, sexual violence and mental health. Certain kinds of articles need to be revised as the historiography changes and new material comes to light. Let me give a few examples.

The ADB article on explorer and pastoralist Angus McMillan (1810–1865), published in 1967, recorded that he 'took a sympathetic interest in the welfare of Aborigines'. New research has shown he was involved in frontier violence so we have commissioned a new entry that will cover this. How many other entries of pastoralists will need to be revised?

The National Archives of Australia recently released the

Repatriation Department's World War One personnel files. This may have a profound effect on many of our diggers' entries.

The article on army nurse Rachel Pratt (1874–1954) has had to be revised, for example, to include that she suffered the effects of 'war neurosis' in 1939. Although she recovered and was discharged, she was treated for 'depression and melancholia' for the rest of her life.

Some readers assumed that we could simply and systematically add an addendum to ADB articles of sexual abusers in light of the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse whose final report was presented to the governor-general on 15 December 2017. (There has also been a number of related state royal commissions.) However, much of the evidence to the 2017 Royal Commission was in camera. Moreover, the problem with naming and accusing is that it is untested in the courts.

Sometimes, however, there are other records. Artist and writer Donald Friend's (1915–1989) original article did not mention his sexual relations with young houseboys in Bali and Sri Lanka in the 1960s and 70s. However, Friend's diaries, which the National Library of Australia published from 2001 to 2006, document his self-acknowledged paedophilia, allowing us to record this in his ADB article.

Evidence is the issue. We would not have known that Olive Zakharov (1929–1995), a Victorian Labor member of the senate from 1983 until 1995, had been the victim of domestic violence had she not publicly declared this in 1993. After disclosing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that she was a survivor of domestic violence in her second marriage, she initiated the government's Campaign to Stop Violence Against Women.

Zakharov's ADB entry article will be published online next year. Hopefully, it will be one of those that will not need to be revised for many years.

Read more at the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* at adb.anu.edu.au

