Creating authentic lives: fictional biography and the writing of real lives in fiction

An exegesis to accompany the creative project, *The fortunes of Millicent Bryant, aviator*

Abstract

Fiction was adopted as a useful tool to begin the writing of *The fortunes of Millicent Bryant, aviator,* a work that seeks to tell the 'larger' life and explore the development of the personality of the woman who became Australia's first woman pilot. However, with the source material rich only in the last period of her life, the work came to be written fully in the form of fictional biography. In doing so, it raised the main question that this exegesis addresses: *what writing approaches and methods can create a biographical portrayal in fiction?*

This required establishing the capacity of fiction to be biography (or biography to be fiction). After setting a working definition of what could be expected of fiction, its intersections with history and biography when writing about the past and historic individuals were examined before comparing it, in the form of fictional biography, to the alternatives of nonfiction biography, creative/narrative nonfiction, and historiographic metafiction. It was concluded that fiction's exploratory capacity, its potential to envision Millicent's 'larger' life while respecting the evidence, suited it to the project's biographical aims.

With one seminal scholarly work providing the main basis for theorising fictional biography, this was an opportunity to describe and conceptualise some of the imaginative 'means' by which this form can function, and to test its efficacy, using the insights of creative practice. Methods and approaches included developing a consistent persona, establishing the human relationship between subject and 'self', utilising 'knowing' in subjective as well as objective terms, and recognising the role of narration. A significant constraint was overcome by extending the conceptual basis of the writing through the processes of 'storying' and worldmaking, and employing a hermeneutic perspective that conceived the writer metaphorically as an 'inter-mediary', a guide to the reader, in a journey of meaning relating to the subject person. This assisted the refiguration and completion of the current work, with both research and writing practice leading to a view of fictional biography that supports arguments for its recognition as a mode of biography.

Contents – Exegesis

Creating authentic lives: fictional biography and the writing of real lives in fiction

1. Introduction

In my beginning is my end

— *T S Eliot, 'Four Quartets'*

1.1   In the beginning was the story: Millicent Maude Bryant (1878–1927)

The German-American theorist, Hannah Arendt, argues in *The Human Condition* that 'the essence of who somebody is – can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story'.[1] Her point is that the significance of a life, its meaning in relation to others, requires the act of remembrance and then narration; even the hero, she says, 'remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet or historian'.[2] Thus the contribution of a person to the life of the *polis,* their community and political world, must be made real by being remembered and then narrated.

Arendt's thinking is prescient of the path taken to tell the story of the life of my own great-grandmother, Millicent Bryant, who was Australia's first woman pilot. It began, indeed, with remembrance, but the essence of the story had little substance until my mother, Millicent Jones (née Bryant), rose to speak to a gathering of the Royal Aeronautical Society's Australian Division during International Women's Year in 1975. She presented her talk as part of a theme of 'Women in Aviation' in the Australian Academy of Science Building in Canberra, a structure that, with its flying saucer shape, seems to look as confidently forward to exploring the cosmic realm as the early aviators were of conquering the skies. My mother, however, opened her talk with a disclaimer:

> I feel I am in a rather strange position because I have been asked to talk about a person of whom, even though she was my grandmother, I have no first hand knowledge. What I do know has been gained mostly from newspaper clippings plus the vague questions of a child to her father. These were polite rather than interested, as unfortunately she died in a Sydney Harbour ferry accident long before I was born. So I hope I can build for you some kind of a portrait of this obviously remarkable women from the information I do have.[3]

This 'remarkable' woman, after whom my mother was named, is the person to whom subsequent references to 'Millicent' will refer unless otherwise indicated. But my mother's short composition for the talk, even if it was largely collected from remembered fragments and anecdotes, was a first step in Arendt's terms: it was perhaps the first time since 1927 that her grandmother's life had been sketched out as a whole, not just the particular achievement that made her famous in her time. Moreover, it provided the foundation for the present project and made possible the following, more recent, outline that introduces her as the subject of the project to which this exegesis relates.

Millicent Bryant's childhood took place in the colonial era and her adult life in the newly federated Australia. Thus, while her life began with nineteenth century understandings of the world, some distinctly modern views came to supplant the older ones to which many of her contemporaries still held, and which gave her a greater degree of freedom to act and to be whom she chose. The eldest of ten children, she was born Millicent Maude Harvey near Oberon in 1878, and experienced the struggles and pleasures of growing up on a sheep grazing property in outback New South Wales. It was a life that had its share of heartache, with the deaths of two siblings by snakebite and drowning respectively; another two were struck by polio. However, it also seems to have been an active, free-spirited life by my mother's account, and Millicent became an expert horsewoman. Her mind was likewise active, and she was not only a voracious reader but evidently attracted to her father's shrewd approach to building family wealth through property acquisition: she took a land appeal to the NSW Supreme Court when she was only 18.[4]

Not long after, however, she found even broader horizons in the city, and, in the first year of the new century, 'escaped' the country by marrying a Sydney man, Edward Bryant. They built a life in Manly, where Millicent undertook charity work, raised three boys (who became successful businessmen) and, on her own initiative, organised a trip to England for the family in 1911 in time for King George V's coronation. On returning she bought land and built a house in Manly and nurtured regular contact with her two youngest brothers prior to their

enlistment in World War I. Tragically, they both died, one of pneumonia in a notorious Sydney military camp, the other in action in France.

These events, as for many others at the time, seemed to bring fundamental changes for Millicent. The old mores no longer held, and she sought a new sense of life. She began studying Japanese at Sydney University, became a keen early motorist, golfer and, finally, aviator, being an early member of the Australian Aero Club (NSW Section). Unusually for the time, she left Edward (Ned) and established her own life with her sons, going on to become a businesswoman and small-scale land developer. She became the first woman to fly solo, to pass the tests and gain her 'A' licence not only in Australia but in any Commonwealth country outside Great Britain. Then, less than a year later, on November 3, 1927, she was killed in the *Greycliffe* disaster on Sydney Harbour, and her interment, attended by hundreds, saw a striking tribute when biplanes from the Aero Club dropped a wreath from the air onto her gravesite.

If this final scene is anything to go by, Millicent and her achievement evidently mattered strongly to the public and to people other than her family and sons. Yet, without knowing her life fully it is difficult to see its significance in its own context. I myself somehow 'absorbed' the story of Millicent Bryant, aviator, as I grew up but it was not until I heard about it again and then read my mother's talk, short and sparse as it was and long after it had been presented to the Royal Aeronautical Society, that my own interest began to flicker. I began seriously to turn my attention to Millicent and become interested in the story of her life after the 'discovery' by my mother of a neglected collection of letters, a correspondence her father had exchanged with her grandmother while he was overseas on his early business trips in the mid-1920s – the period in which Millicent became a pilot. Also including a much smaller but widely spaced selection of earlier correspondence, as well as notebooks, diaries, writing fragments, ephemera and other items, this is known as the Millicent Maude Bryant Letters Collection (MMBLC); for brevity, I subsequently refer to this or its contents simply as 'the letters' or 'the Letters Collection'.[5]

Millicent gained a great deal more shape for me, as a real person, after my mother convinced me to read these letters, although this was after she herself

had re-read them and started to retell various incidents, adding to the basic story and making me more curious to know this person who had been my great-grandmother.

A sense of her reality, as a person and in an actual 'past', became stronger after the establishment of a physical site of memory and remembrance, the result of my uncle John Bryant's driving wish to see some memorial erected to commemorate Millicent's life. After the location of her grave was verified by Robert Jones, one of her other great-grandsons, a memorial stone and plaques were created and installed. They were dedicated in an informal ceremony by Nancy Bird Walton in the presence of family members, world solo flyer Gaby Kennard, Australia's first woman helicopter pilot, Rosemary Arnold, members of the Australian Women Pilots' Association, members of Manly Council and the community on Sunday, May 6, 2007.

1.2   Writing and research aims

1.2.1   Aims and research question

These events not only mark the origin of the present work as a writing project but also as a research project, with two dimensions. In the first case, the main task was to explore Millicent's life as fully as possible through the letters and all other avenues so that the broader life and persona glimpsed in the family story could, along with her flying achievements, be written and shared. Arising from the first is research into the form, shaping and process of the writing, a separate but closely related project that addresses questions in the broader scholarly domain about how fiction can be used to write a real person's life.

In the beginning, and during the early phase of factual research and focus on primary sources, I expected to write in some form of nonfiction biography; however, I came to write the life of the real person, Millicent Bryant, in fiction, adopting the form of fictional biography. The reasons for doing so originated in the fact that, with Millicent's life almost unknown and even her flying achievement little remembered, it seemed most important to tell her life in a

way that would address the obscurity into which she had fallen. While it was essential to be true to her real life, it seemed my responsibility to the family, the community and Millicent herself, to present this life in its colour and fullness and to make it accessible to as wide a contemporary readership as possible. Such a portrayal might then open up a sense of 'who' Millicent was, as a woman, in the late nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, enabling readers to gain insight into the formation of the personality that produced the person who became Australia's first woman pilot.

But with the sources providing strong detail only towards the end of her life, it began to seem that biography as a nonfiction form might not suit these needs. After writing in fiction to kickstart my account of her early life, and exploring the intersections of history, biography and fiction, I perceived that my aims might be better satisfied through what Ina Schabert, in particular, has distinguished as 'fictional biography' in her seminal work of scholarship on this subject.[6] In this mode, fiction aims to serve the purposes of biography; it is not, therefore, any arbitrary fiction but one that, while constrained by and aligned with the known facts of the life, still has as its goal a fuller, more vivid and intimate sense of the person in question.

However, relating biography and fiction is not as straightforward as applying the label 'fictional biography'; this is perhaps because the term introduces a qualification that sets the two apart rather than bringing them together. My aims are biographical, but not to create nonfiction biography; yet, I am not writing a novel for its own sake. Thus, from a writing perspective, the research question seeks to understand and utilise the combination by asking:

>   ***What writing approaches and methods can create a biographical portrayal in fiction?***

1.2.2   *Approach and argument of the exegesis*

Impetus for writing in fiction came from the desire to tell Millicent's life more fully as a 'true story' rather than using a nonfiction biographical form in which this fuller life might, perhaps, only have been represented by its fragments. I

therefore look to a view of biographical writing that is broad enough to recognise fiction as one of its modes, a perspective that has been explored and tempered in debates about biography since the time of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf but more recently by Robert Skidelsky, Richard Holmes, Ray Monk, Susan Tridgell and others.[7]

At the same time, fictional biography is not taken to be ungrounded, or fantasy, but an imaginative exploration and a construction that draws on all the historical evidence available. To decide its potential for my own project and to address the research question, I frame fiction in its discourse before proceeding to examine questions of how it can represent the past, including relevant debates and intersections with history and biography. I then evaluate its strengths, compared to alternatives, as an exploratory mode, in order to determine its suitability for a project such as my own. Chapter 3 seeks to demonstrate and explore how my practice developed as fictional biography, including the innovations of method and approach that created my portrayal of Millicent. These are related to the work of other writers, and further problems and solutions that emerged from the project are discussed. I conclude that fictional biography can be supported as a biographical mode, advancing a view of its potential based on my research and writing practice.

1.3   Ethical and personal considerations

The project brought with it a sensitivity to what other family members might think about my use of a family story, at the same time as the sense of opportunity that I was well placed to tell that story. I have, therefore, done my best to explain to family members and relations that I have been in touch with what I am trying to do with the biographical account. Without exception, they have encouraged my project and generously given whatever help they could.

While the question of biographical intrusiveness does not apply in the case of a deceased subject, there was the possibility I might make discoveries during the research that may not be comfortable for myself or other family members. While

the primary ethical responsibility to them was to respect any confidentially shared information and personal sensitivities, there might still be concerns if the story was told in an unbalanced or inappropriate way. I sought to keep my awareness open to such possibilities.

But a concern that remained with me was not raised by anyone else in the family that I spoke to. This was how to understand myself as a man writing a woman's life, particularly in my revealing of Millicent through her letters and intimate jottings, and in trying to imaginatively place myself within her embodied 'reality'. On one hand, I did so with awareness that I could never have the same understanding that a woman might have, and that my viewpoint would be carrying embedded gender and cultural assumptions. On the other hand, I had the advantage of connecting to my subject through a number of female family members, especially my own mother, who strongly influenced my writing of the project. As well as being a source in her own right she (also as Millicent) was a lens through which I came to see the grandmother and great-grandmother we never met. Moreover, in my own mind, the question is addressed, at least partly, by my own aim to get as close as I could to Millicent, the person, whose life was connected in myriad ways to my own, to know her through all the means I could employ, and to create through these the fullest possible story of her life.

1.4   History, truth and writing a woman's story

An additional motivation for the project, at varying levels, has been a desire to do justice to Millicent's story for the sake of having her small part in Australia's national history recognised and perhaps memorialised. But as the writing proceeded and I made the choice to adopt a fictional approach, the motivation to memorialise her in this sense became less important.

This raised the question of whether I was abandoning the aspiration to add to the historical record. However, the record, for me, presented part of the problem. On one level, while my research might make additions to it, the record would still be fragmented and unbalanced and not, it seemed, particularly

coherent in terms of presenting Millicent as a whole person. For example, little of Millicent's persona is directly revealed until, almost at the end of her life, snippets of her voice are heard in newspaper quotes or when, much more fully, she speaks to John (mostly called 'Jack' by the family at this time) through her letters to him in this period; however, without inserting the letters far more fully (regardless of whether or not it made for an engaging read) this would not be accessible to a reader. On another level, the writing of Millicent's life in fiction is also a response to the kind of historiography that, until more recently, did not find in women's lives an appropriate subject matter; this is perhaps evidenced by how quickly she was forgotten and that it was only because of her achievements in a male-dominated world that she attracted attention and came to any kind of fame. But, because she becomes partially visible through the letters, the question 'who was Millicent Bryant?' can be addressed imaginatively and the focus reconfigured, moving away from the rhetoric of heroism that, as Susanna Scarparo puts it, divides human beings not only into winners and losers but leaders and masses: 'the winners, like the leaders to be remembered and celebrated, the losers, like the masses, to be forgotten'.[8]

This is a situation which has been recognised and addressed by writers, historians and feminists since Virginia Woolf and, while it was not my intention that this should be a focus, it is a reality that my project is contributing to the wider project they have initiated; without their work I might not have considered it possible or worth my own while to write Millicent's life. Therefore, considerations of gender and the depiction of women's lives influence both my writing and discussion and provide important insights.

The second question, sitting alongside the above, is one of truthfulness and trust. Could the family and readers alike trust the portrayal if I went beyond the supposed anchorage of 'facts'? How could they expect to know what was fact and what not? Although much of the evidence that underlies the substance of the narrative is apparent within it, I indicate the connections between the two in several ways. This production of the creative project contains endnotes, and an author's note explains my approach. Descriptive details of the research activities I undertook, some other notes on sources and how I worked with them, plus an

inventory of the Letters Collection, have also been placed in appendices at the end of the exegesis.

But I also assume that readers understand the 'notation' that the form of fiction provides: it is a familiar one to them, and they are made aware from the authorial note that it is an imaginative exploration that results from the central challenge of how to make limited knowledge into an accessible, personal story that not only retains a connection to the reality of the life in question but closes on the person herself. This understanding, though, does not mean that all is laid out to be grasped by the intellect, or can be simply passed from one mind to another. The efficacy and affect of fiction is not merely to be described but must be experienced by the reader, and it is created by deliberately different means than historical works. In this respect its goals appear to conflict with the desire for biographical accuracy; however, being 'inaccurate' may turn out to be truer, in the same sense that Antonia Pont prefers 'the broken and always already contaminated notion of not-being-able-to-get-it-right' in 'inaccurate autobiography', than if it attempts and limits itself 'to so-called "accuracy" '.[9] A more creative portrayal may also be a more open one, providing increased room for interpretation and, perhaps, a more personal connection with the life of another.

NOTES

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 193.
[2] *Ibid*.,194.
[3] Millicent Jones, 'Millicent Bryant, Australia's first woman aviator', in *Women in Aviation* (Canberra, ACT: Royal Aeronautical Society [Australian Division - Canberra Branch], 1975), 1.
[4] 'Harvey v. Minister for Lands', *The New South Wales Law Reports* XVII (Sydney: Hayes Brothers, 1896), 264-70.
[5] The Millicent Maude Bryant Letters Collection (MMBLC). Private collection of Millicent Jones.

[6] Ina Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1990). Brien favours the term 'fictional<u>ised</u> biography' as one that refers to 'a heightened, self-conscious and freely-revealed degree of invention within the non-fiction narrative' (Donna Lee Brien, 'The Case of Mary Dean: Sex, Poisoning and Gender Relations in Australia'. Creative work and reflective component [Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2004], 10). However, I have preferred Schabert's term, 'fictional biography', because it seems to signify the work to be more entirely offered as a fictional composition rather than fiction applied to an extant work of biography. Other alternatives, such as 'ficto-biography' or 'bio-fiction', have the whiff of jargon without seeming to be any more exact.

[7] See, among others, Robert Skidelsky, 'Only connect: Biography and Truth', in *The Troubled face of Biography*, ed. Eric Homberger and John Charmley (London: MacMillan Press, 1988); Richard Holmes, 'The Proper Study?', in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France & William St Clair (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press for The British Academy, 2002).

[8] Susanna Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester: Troubadour Publishing, 2005), 20.

[9] Antonia Pont, 'Inaccurate Autobiography – the 'true-invention' of a life', *TEXT Journal* 15, no. 1 (2011), 9.

2.   Exploring lives: fiction as a mode of biography

> In biography the opposite of fact is not always fiction
> and the opposite of historical truth is not necessarily a lie.
> — *William Siebenschuh*[1]

2.1   Introduction

The research question, '*what writing approaches and methods can create a biographical portrayal in fiction?*', is situated in the context of my decision to write in fiction and my subsequent choice of fictional biography as a genre. The use of fiction was initially adopted as a way of overcoming perceived limitations in the source material and getting the writing of Millicent Bryant's life started; yet, as the project progressed, it also came to seem the best way to undertake the richer and more vivid exploration of Millicent, the person, that my mother's talk to the Aeronautical Society had inspired.

This, however, exposed tensions between these motivations and my understanding of biography, raising the fundamental question: can fiction really be biography or biography be fiction? I thus seek to establish the potential of fiction for the task at hand, and, after situating its discourse and adopting a working definition for what it might address, consider its intersections with history and biography. What can make fiction useful in biographical writing, and in terms of the project's aims, then becomes clearer. Discussion of the capacity and appropriateness of fictional biography, including consideration of why it should be preferable to alternatives, completes this chapter prior to focussing on the methods and approaches that are employed in its practice in the next.

2.2   From research to writing

2.2.1   Key sources

Perhaps as a reaction to the shock and grief of her loss, the response of Millicent's three sons, George, John and Bowen, was to try to forget the trauma of their mother's death by moving forward with their lives and not looking back. Although the closeness of their relationship is evident in letters, it may be for

this reason that Millicent's grave, and that of her husband and my great-grandfather, Edward Bryant, who had been buried in the same plot in Manly (now Balgowlah) Cemetery some three years earlier, went unmarked for eighty years. My mother's disclaimer in her talk indicates the vagueness of the knowledge about her grandmother with which she was brought up, and she does not remember how she came to realise Millicent was Australia's first woman pilot: 'I just always knew' she says, and it was not until quite late in life that her father, John, spoke about his own mother. There are few primary sources, and it appeared early on that perhaps the definitive problem of the project was going to be the lack of varied source material due to the chain of circumstances, including Millicent's premature death, the house fire a few years later that destroyed many of her remaining belongings (papers, photographs, furniture and other personal effects) and, critically, the passing of George, John and Bowen.

The Letters Collection therefore became the focus of the project, and the resources drawn on include notes, fragments, ephemera, diaries and smaller groupings of letters from roughly 1900 to 1920 as well as its core series of letters from Millicent to John ('the later letters') in the years 1925 to 1927. These provide day to day details of how Millicent lived, felt and thought about her world in this period; as well as a personal chronology, they offer essential insights into her character and voice.

The almost exclusive reliance on the contents of the Letters Collection, did, however, make the gaps in the evidential fabric of Millicent's forty-nine years seem a formidable obstacle to relating her life fully. Where was other information to be found? One vital source came through contact with a Harvey cousin, Norma Meadley from Narromine, who provided me with her family history of the Harveys. It turned out to be an extremely valuable resource as it provided details of the structure of the Harvey family, birth dates, photographs, anecdotes, and brief histories. This provided the framework from which an account of Millicent's early life could be created.

The other vital secondary source was Steve Brew's 2003 book on the maritime disaster that claimed Millicent's life: *Greycliffe: Stolen lives*. This book provided a

detailed and readable account of the disaster, together with appendices giving the names of victims and survivors, details of the coronial enquiry and even lawsuits that eventuated in the wake of the tragedy. Its list of sources also pointed to the records I could follow up in the NSW State Records. However, its significance for the current project was greater than this because it enabled me to write the first section of the story expressively and confidently, that of Millicent's death, the aftermath of the *Greycliffe* disaster and the search for her body by Bowen, her youngest son. This was the very first part written, and it became a springboard for following sections and influenced the structure of the draft. Brew's book was supplemented by a scrapbook of newspaper clippings that appeared to have been assembled in the 1920s, probably by Bowen, and is now held by John R. H. Bryant. It contains reports and features written about Millicent's flying exploits but, poignantly, also includes photos and reports of her funeral on which I was able to base my writing of the final chapter.

These sources were fundamental in conceiving the project as one which could expand on my mother's account, and with which it seemed possible that I could write something of greater length and substance. The question then became one of how they could enable me to approach Millicent's life in the biographically faithful but exploratory way I wanted.

2.2.2   *Starting with story: the initiating role of fiction*

At this point, I return to Hannah Arendt's assertion that the act of remembrance 'remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet or historian'.[2] This is not only because it suggests there can be choices of form but that this form is adapted to the individual act of remembrance. This choice is the subject of much of this chapter and, while its scholarly domain is more broadly discussed in 2.3 and subsequent sections, it is first important to frame the circumstances and needs of this particular act of remembrance.

In the early stages of the research for this project I was excited by the impression of Millicent that was developing from the letters and other sources, as well as from the picture of the historic world that was becoming more real for me following visits to places where she had grown up in western New South

Wales. The creation of a biography by accumulation of 'factual' material was therefore making practical sense: without it there would be no fabric. The questions I was asking harked back in some ways to my training in journalism: 'What happened?' 'Where?' 'When?' 'To whom?' 'How do we know?' and 'What were the relationships?' There was a sense that answers to such questions would establish the available knowledge and the shape of the biography would then become visible.

This assumption, as I earlier noted, was premature: with Millicent having died nearly eighty years earlier and her sons thereafter, the opportunity of gaining first hand knowledge was gone. Moreover, although more substantial overall than I had supposed on my first reading, the depth and breadth of the primary sources in relation to the whole of Millicent's life is very varied, leaving large gaps in knowledge about the recorded events of her life let alone its more personal dimensions. An understanding of her life based on the presence or absence of such material thus appeared likely to be unbalanced or fragmented, a concern that became more pressing as my reading of the letters increased my knowledge of specific details of Millicent's later life and contrasted with that of her earlier life, which was almost entirely contextual. I had not expected that the sketch of her life that had originally inspired me would remain painfully brief and almost, in places, apocryphal: for example, that she drove to the summit of Mt Kosciuszko is supported by only the most passing of references in the letters (it is not even certain from this one reference exactly what she *did* do). The potential of my account of Millicent's life therefore began to look far different from my mother's shapely summary for the Royal Aeronautical Society which seemed to have something that my collected information lacked so far: a sense of story.

The way forward from this impasse crystallised when I wrote a shorter, summary story of Millicent's life from all I had learned to that point. Though this was conceived as an outline for the fuller portrait, it cleared the roadblock. It also linked to the section of prose in which I'd imagined Bowen going to the old Sydney morgue in search of Millicent's body. I realised that I could go forward and write about Millicent's early life in a similar way, although it would be based

much more on contextual knowledge such as information from the family history and my own research into the Harvey landholdings. The resources were, furthermore, spread much thinner over the years of Millicent's childhood and adolescent life in comparison to my initial piece, but it showed me that I could provide her life with a fuller 'shape' if I wrote it as fictional prose, creating and filling out incidents suggested by the known facts.

In writing her early life (now much compressed into the first chapter of Part II in the creative work), I took documented occurrences and dates and turned them into story vignettes connected more or less chronologically. In the original draft these included Millicent's birth, which was created from the recorded date and joined to later descriptions of her birthplace and of coach travel in the period. Other parts of her early life were drawn from newspaper reports of incidents such as the suspicious burning of the woolshed at 'Edithville', and related dates such as the death of her younger sister by snakebite. This seemed to work, enabling me to draw on my curiosity and sense of connection as Millicent's great-grandson and to begin writing down and forming my knowledge. It also worked in the sense that, as I began to tell her story from the beginning, I found that writing in the form of fiction overcame the factual 'gaps' I'd earlier been concerned about and that, almost to my surprise, the fuller account of her life I had been seeking began to appear.

But upon reaching her young adulthood and writing of her days in the better documented environs of Manly in the 1890s and early 1900s, which is where this version takes up her story in Part II, I began more strongly to feel the tensions of writing a real life in fiction; I wanted the exploration of her life to be biographically faithful at the same time as having confidence in the role my imagination was playing. Other forms for completing the writing of Millicent's life were therefore contemplated, but the momentum which was enabling the creative work to steadily proceed prompted me to first consider the mode of fiction and the question 'can fiction be biography?' or 'can biography be fiction?'.

2.3   Fiction, nonfiction and their discourses

One answer is that biography is always-already fiction in the sense of it being a construction rather than the life itself; indeed, it can be argued that we are all engaged in fiction-making. Maureen Ramsden succinctly articulates this view, arguing that 'we interpret the world in terms of fiction', and that this 'in its broadest sense, shapes our everyday world'.[3] Reality is constructed as a text because our representation of the world in any way is always different from our direct 'knowing' of it. Narrative is an essential means of making sense of the real world, and factual as well as fictional works 'have a basic element of fiction at the level of their imaginative conception and construction'.[4] American literary critic and theorist, Robert Scholes, puts it even more strongly: '[a]ll writing, all composition', he says, 'is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. No recording. Only constructing'.[5]

These assertions, encompassing a broadly postmodern perspective, are reminders that even the most stridently factual biography is a construction, cannot avoid selecting material on a subjective as well as objective basis and is the product of authorial attitudes and positions which may not be transparent. But while it is important, liberating even, to acknowledge that our representations of the world are constructions, it is not my view, on one hand, that biographical writing of the life of a real person can disengage from its sources. On the other, however, my practice reflected the experience that writing a life has more to do with how sources are interpreted and what is made of them through the particular forming processes that are employed. Using fiction to begin a narrative of Millicent's life allowed me not only to construct my understanding from limited and unbalanced factual resources but to explore the 'possible' in her life which lay beyond these. Hayden White, expanding on Michel de Certeau's notion that fiction is the repressed 'other' of historical discourse, argues that 'historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable'.[6] It was in something of this sense that I began writing Millicent's life as a story, in the context of historical facts and

their lack on one hand and in the absence of the non-historical, non-factual Millicent on the other. This seemed, in my own setting, to mirror the 'unassailable lacuna' or absent 'other' that de Certeau, writing about history and Foucauldian archaeology, exemplifies in the work of Martin Duberman and which he observes 'ceaselessly moves and misleads him ... or indeed *writes*'.[7] The lacuna becomes, prompts or even compels the writing; this indicates 'the relation of the *logos* to the *archè*, a "principle" or "beginning" which is its other ... [and] on which it is based, which makes it possible', according to de Certeau.[8] It was such a lacuna that prompted me to begin writing in fiction, from the 'other', the indefinable *archè* or originary source as it were, and from this a form that I could call 'Millicent' took shape.

Such perspectives, in challenging the everyday assumption that our view of 'reality' is simply a reflection of 'how it is' (and that how it 'was' is equally straightforward), also prompt the question of how fiction, fact and nonfiction should relate to each other. Ramsden offers the conception that

> Fiction can refer to a process of shaping discourse (poiesis), to the practice of invention and feigning, and to a particular system of relations existing within a given text and how it relates to the real world, which mark it out as a work of fiction in a particular era. Facts are mental constructs, products of nineteenth century positivism, which depend both on the shaping, interpretive power of the human mind, and also on a context—social, discursive and epistemological—to give them meaning.[9]

These framings emphasise not only context but also the sharing of a common element of construction and shaping that aligns with the origin of the term, fiction, in *fingĕre*,'to fashion or form' as well as to 'feign'.[10] *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, in characterising fiction as 'the general term for invented stories, now usually applied to novels, short stories, novellas, romances, fables, and other narrative works in prose', also notes that fiction can carry positive as well as negative connotations: 'the adjective *fictitious* tends to carry the unfavourable sense of falsehood, whereas "fictional" is more neutral, and the archaic adjective "fictive", revived by the poet Wallace Stevens and others, has a more positive sense closer to "imaginative" or "inventive".'[11] In these terms,

nonfiction stories would be those *not* 'invented' or 'imagined'; they would be 'true' stories in everyday parlance. But how true? While nonfiction might nominally be the negative of fiction, it can hardly be the negative of 'fashioning' or 'forming'; not all nonfiction, moreover, avoids 'feigning'.[12]

This could be clarified somewhat by recognising the potential confusion of discourses that have competing claims on the notion of fiction; as Nelson Goodman notes, '[l]iteral falsity distinguishes fiction from true report; but falsity alone does not make fiction'.[13] Dorrit Cohn expresses the problem as one of the application of the term 'fiction' to narrative discourse in general at the same time as to imaginary discourse. She opts for a use of the term restricted to its sense of 'nonreferential narrative', whereby fiction's references to the world are not bound to accuracy and 'it does not refer *exclusively* to the real world outside the text'.[14]

Alvin Plantinga offers a useful summation of how fiction works that seems to fit these discourses. He says that the author of a work of fiction 'does not *assert* the propositions that form his stock in trade … he exhibits them, calls them to our attention, invites us to consider and explore them'.[15] In this way, fiction can be 'true' *as well as* being invented or imagined. An example is Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* which, both as a novel and portrayal of a real person, illustrates how we can think of stories of a life where one might be invented or imagined and another might not be – yet both could be 'true'. Thus, instead of confining the writing of Millicent's life to very limited and unevenly balanced factual evidence, the use of fiction could be understood as an exploration of propositions, *informed* by the evidence, about how her life might have been lived and experienced.

2.4   Engaging the past: history, fiction and biography

But as the 'propositions' in this case involve fictionally representing the past, they are exposed to criticism and debate such as that conducted in a vigorous public and sometimes polemical fashion following the publication of Kate

Grenville's novel, *The Secret River*, in 2005. This was also a work with strong resonances for how I was conceiving my own project, as Grenville seeks to explore the ways in which early interactions between Aboriginal people and white settlers in colonial Australia might have taken place through the fictional account of a freed convict whose character is rooted in Grenville's research on her own ancestor, Solomon Wiseman. However, in a noteworthy contribution to *Quarterly Essay* in 2006, historian Inga Clendinnen took issue with Grenville's explanation during a radio interview that while '[t]he historians are doing their thing … let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events'.[16] She famously castigated Grenville for a related comment in this interview that, while historians were wrestling with the facts, the novelist is able to 'stand on a step-ladder outside this and look down on the fray' (or, as the audio subsequently revealed, '*at* the fray'[17]). Clendinnen takes Grenville to be claiming to know, by her method, with 'equal certainty' what is intimated within the records and what is beyond them, exposing, Clendinnen says, the gulf between 'doing history' and 'doing fiction'. She adds that 'we can't post ourselves back in time', nor can we put ourselves in the place of even 'those people we guess to approximate our own kind because that would condemn us to play Blind Man's Bluff in a largely unintelligible world'.[18]

These arguments might as easily have been referring to 'doing biography' and 'doing fiction'; Clendinnen's view denies that the novelist or writer can imaginatively work with facts relating to the 'actual' past, access to which, she maintains, is 'slow, always problematic'.[19] This is contrasted with Grenville's empathy and imaginative understanding, which Clendinnen disparages as self-referential and representing a 'narrow cultural and temporal world'.[20] Yet, the ability to 'post ourselves back in time' is precisely what the imagination *is* free to do, and Grenville's novel is based on much careful research.

Mark McKenna, on the other hand, in his own response to Grenville's comments in which he expresses concerns about 'a rival history' competing with 'real' history in Australia, gives novelists their due. This is because, unlike Clendinnen,

he illustrates the potency of the 'rival' approach by quoting novelist, David Malouf, who puts it revealingly:

> The only way of grasping our history – [...] the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people's entering into it in their imaginations, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction ...[21]

McKenna also follows up Malouf's comments by identifying a crucial difference between history and fiction. History, he says, relies on distance 'while fiction constantly tries to break that distance down, to create the illusion that the reader is there, and therefore knows what the past was like'.[22]

Notwithstanding McKenna's desire to separate these approaches, his comments, as well as Malouf's own, suggest the possibility of a complementarity in seeing and understanding the past. Supporting this possibility from the novelist's side, Dorrit Cohn cites Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as demonstrating a conviction that fiction 'enables a writer, first and foremost, to render historical happenings by way of the personalized and momentary experience of individual human beings'.[23] From a historian's perspective, Simon Schama supported this notion memorably in his account of a nineteenth century murder in *Dead Certainties*.[24] This work plays with the whole concept of historical certainty, as well as showing Schama to be 'acutely aware of the distance between lived reality and the attempt to narrate it – between the literary narratives of history and the actualities of the past', according to Camilla Nelson.[25]

These observations recognise the ability of some imaginative writers to create a fictional 'prism of history', to borrow Barbara Tuchman's notion.[26] Grenville, for instance, brings historical research and creative imagination together to help create a 'different way' to understand the past, explaining that

> I was trying to be faithful to the shape of the historical record, and the meaning of all those events that historians had written about. What I was writing wasn't real, but it was as true as I could make it.[27]

This is an assertion that fiction can conduct an exploration of the past with integrity, which was perhaps Grenville's real claim; her subsequent novel, *The Lieutenant,* illustrates how this can also apply to the exploration of situations involving particular historical individuals. The debates that arose over *The Secret River*, however, seemed to keep circling concerns about whether it claimed to be history or not. Yet, because it was *not* history, *The Secret River* could create an historical event through the imagination and 'discover' a past not referentially real but possible and even historically plausible because of its faithfulness to the known context.

Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, published in 2000, had already anticipated the kind of assertions made by Grenville's work. However, the explicit claim of doing so was sidestepped by the author; while Inga Clendinnen's comments about fiction and history would equally have applied to Carey, he refused to take the bait and mostly allowed the book's provocative title to make the statement for him. Thus, Clendinnen's satisfaction at Carey's answer, when the latter was pressured about the historical authenticity of *True History* at the Brisbane Writers' Festival, seems pyrrhic: that Carey simply said 'I made it up' has very much the sound of a deflection in the face of interrogation.[28]

Yet, according to historian Tom Griffiths, the point is more what Carey *didn't* make up. Griffiths observes that the novel

> is not only a reworking of a real historical person, it is also a conscious extrapolation of a real historical document [Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie letter'] … The factual inventions in his novel are relatively trivial; what is more striking is his respect for the known past – he has imagined within and under the public record rather than in defiance of it.[29]

True History of the Kelly Gang thus shows the power of the fictional approach that Grenville's work later highlighted more controversially: it seems to serve both the factual truth of the past (assuming there is agreement with Griffiths' assessment that Carey's factual inventions are indeed 'relatively trivial') as well as the broader truth of a historical person imagined in fiction. But although Carey's work might, arguably, achieve the goals of fictional biography, these

were not its stated aspirations. A work such as my own, which aimed to be biographical and to tell a life not already known, needed to establish the facts of the life at the same time as going beyond them. It had to 'create' a biographical past based on a careful process of historical research and simultaneously use it as a springboard for exploring its subject's life. Although having to forego the claim to represent the past within the limitations of historical exactitude (rather than its representation *per se*), fiction's trump is that a broader exploration is then possible. Turning what was 'known' about Millicent Bryant into fiction also seemed to remove barriers to drawing in, as it were, the 'not-known', the kinds of non-factual 'knowledge' that could help create a story of her life that was as rich, plausible and 'true' as *I* could make it.

Although the debates have mostly arisen from the fear that fictional versions might somehow displace 'real' events and lives, works of fiction have themselves focused on the problematic processes involved in biographical writing: examples range from Henry James' *The Aspern Papers* to A S Byatt's *Possession*. Judie Newman also draws attention to two American works of fiction that use the writing of biography as a structuring metaphor; in particular, she points to the way the character writing biography (Polly, in Alison Lurie's *The Truth about Lorin Jones*), through the reciprocity of relating with the life of another and deciding to acknowledge its multiple threads, realises that 'to choose a story is to choose a life.' In this, Newman concludes, 'Fiction becomes biography—and biography fiction'.[30]

2.5   Fixing writing form and genre

These considerations made it clearer for me that fiction had the exploratory capacity the project required, and that it could develop the means to write the more vivid and complete story of Millicent I wanted without losing biographical veracity and perhaps even fidelity. It fitted, as well, the nascent genre of fictional biography introduced below and more fully discussed in the next chapter. This seemed to match my aims, resources and inclinations, and although my work is influenced by, for example, postmodern and hybrid fictional forms, it does not

announce itself as such a form. The other major modes I considered as alternatives, and which also influenced my work, were creative or narrative nonfiction and, of course, nonfiction biography. In discussing these in the following sub-sections, I seek to further focalise the logic and the inquiries conducted so far through the lens of my own project's goals. This results in an attempt to summarise both the potential of fiction and the limitations of these other modes. Though the discussion is itself somewhat limited in scope, it might be noted that, rather than being a simplistic falling back on generic boundaries (which, it should be apparent, are permeated in any case), this is partially a consequence of the 'drawing-together' process of creative decision-making and because some of the issues glossed over here are taken up in subsequent chapters.

2.5.1   Fictional biography

From a scholarly perspective, fictional biography has been defined as a genre and as a form by the work of Ina Schabert, especially in her monograph *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography.* Recent scholarly work, such as that of Susanna Scarparo, has added further perspectives, but fictional biography is often still equated either with literary or historical fiction, or with the use of fiction in a nonfiction biographical work. In the latter case, it can be relegated to the margins of biographical criticism, or as a technique (or failing) of particular writers of biography; in the former, its efficacy as biography may be misunderstood or unacknowledged. Yet it has plenty of exemplars, from the stylish fictions about writers such as Henry James (Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author*) and Sylvia Plath (Kate Moses' *Wintering* and Emma Tennant's *Sylvia and Ted*) to popular depictions of little-known early palaeontologist Mary Anning (Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable Creatures*). Australian examples range from Matthew Flinders (Ernestine Hill's *My Love Must Wait* of 1946) to that depicting Australian-born pianist Noël Mewton-Wood (Sonia Orchard's *The Virtuoso*). There are great historical figures, of course, including Roman emperor Hadrian (Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*) and Simón Bolívar (*The General in his Labyrinth* by García Márquez), but also obscure ones, including the wives of the 'great', such as the poet Milton's

first wife, Marie, in Robert Graves' *Wife to Mr. Milton.* I found Marele Day's extensive imagining of 'the Captain's Wife' in *Mrs Cook* a compelling example for its resonances with my own attempt to write almost entirely undocumented parts of Millicent's life.

Petsinis points out that, in fictional biography, the writer 'redefines his/her subject; often depicting character in ways that provide insights not seen by the [nonfiction] biographer'.[31] This is a key feature of a form that, as Schabert defines it, 'is engaged in the comprehension of a real historical individual by means of the sophisticated instruments of knowing and articulating knowledge that contemporary fiction offers'.[32] Among the foremost of those 'sophisticated instruments' could be posited the imaginative empathy that so irritated Inga Clendinnen but which is encompassed in Grenville's approach and that of other novelists and writers of fiction, including myself. It is, likewise, essential for the writer of fictional biography who understands that what is 'rainbow-like' (to employ Virginia Woolf's famous distinction) about their subject cannot be fully observed or deduced in the same way as that which is 'granite-like' but comes from 'knowing' or relating to the person subjectively.[33] Fictional biography, Schabert asserts, trusts in this possibility.

> The genre acknowledges imagination – a disciplined and well-informed imagination – as the medium of interpersonal knowing. Thus is established, on a new level, the indispensable conviction that communication is possible: a community of comprehension between author and reader with reference to the person who is the subject of the fictional biography supplies the model for the reader's act of understanding the author.[34]

But at the same time as it suggests ways of knowing and writing the subject beyond the processes of nonfiction, fictional biography also remains connected to the person as they are conventionally known and in the particularity of their circumstances. These are not to be changed to better fit fictional purposes: 'narrative conventions are rejected as generalizations that work against the purpose of giving expression to real, unique personhood', Schabert explains.[35] Instead, the form of the narrative seeks to remain true to the idiosyncratic character of the subject person's otherness and unique circumstances. The work

is otherwise in the hands of the writer, however, and it must largely be taken on faith that the knowing of the subject person has not been subordinated to the creative temptations of pure fiction. This is one of the most subtle and potentially problematic aspects of distinguishing fictional biography, as it is outlined here, from 'pure' fiction. Writers of fictional biography must walk a fine line.

In my writing of Millicent Bryant's life as fictional biography, the particularity of the factual circumstances and available evidence came prior to, and underlay, the portrait of her that I developed imaginatively. The form of fictional biography, likewise, allows an accretion of imagined facts to those accepted originally to exist, but does not change the latter; within these parameters, it permitted my development of Millicent's story to range from circumstances only hinted at in the letters, such as the breakup of her marriage, to simpler but necessary connective transitions between events described in detail in the primary sources. Schabert adopts and emphasises William Styron's view that the imagination of the author writing a fictional biography is a 'responsible imagination', an imagination which 'as a rule respects the known facts, yet is free to interpret them, enlarge upon them and supplement them according to the certainties of the empathic act'.[36]

This provided a vital sense of scope for my imagination and writing of Millicent's life but fiction offers a further advantage that it is perhaps the only means of recovering, by recreation, 'lost' stories, subjects and marginalised histories – and women's lives have frequently fallen into that category. Being unrecorded, Susanna Scarparo says that 'their stories—if they are to be told— have to be invented. The stories of the invisible ... can only exist through fiction'.[37] Although Millicent might have been more visible than many, especially for a short time, she was invisible for much of her life.

2.5.2 Nonfiction biography

I consciously add the qualifier 'nonfiction', not only to distinguish this form from fictional biography, but also because writers and critics tend to generalise biography *as* nonfiction biography. This is due to its long connection with historical writing which, since the professionalisation of history in the nineteenth century, became increasingly focussed on 'facts' and a more empirical outlook. Although Barbara Caine's recent study, *Biography and History,* points out that historians in the twenty-first century now appreciate biographical writing for its potential to contribute to ethnographic projects and in producing micro-histories, this still rests, more or less, on a view of biography in the fold of history and mainstream historiography.[38] Perhaps it was from such a view that Nigel Hamilton gravely opined in 2007 that, while biography in the West has become the dominant area of broadcasting and non-fiction publishing, from television to the internet, 'it is now one of the embattled front lines in the struggle between society's notions of truth and imagination'.[39] Yet deconstruction shows that such binary oppositions tend to fall apart under scrutiny, and Hamilton's attitude is redolent of a rear-guard action (echoed in the so-called 'history wars' by Inga Clendinnen and others) to return biography to more simplistic alignments with nonfiction and empirical historiography.

Predictably, biographical writing shows no signs of heeding this call. For one, as becomes obvious in the course of Janet Malcolm's lucid investigation and negotiation of the competing machinations of those with an interest in the legacies of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, biography must be negotiated to a greater or lesser degree: it is, as a whole, a product *created* by the writer.[40] Secondly, it has a diversity of content and style that matches the diversity of its possible subjects; Luke Slattery, writing in *The Australian,* summarised this neatly with his observation that, as well as providing 'character conventionally developed and traverse[ing] the fields of romance, tragedy, pathos', biography offers 'a coherent view of life'.[41] What might be briefly indicated from this is that a view of biography as a strictly nonfiction, historically based form is at odds with not only the needs of individual biographers and subjects but the broader reality of contemporary biographies as *literary* projects.

In my own case, nonfiction biography had been the expected default format for my project while I was reading the letters and evaluating the source material in depth. But, as already explained, most of this was weighted heavily to the end of Millicent's life and was varied in depth in respect of, for example, the nature and extent of her 'heart' interest, her separation from Ned and many aspects of her motoring and flying experience. This disposed me against using a nonfiction biographical form due to the concern that her life might indeed have been too fragmentary, other than at its end, to sustain in a recognisably nonfiction form. Also, biographical works about aviators normally draw on a wealth of technical and factual detail while, quite reasonably, focusing the lives very fully around flying achievements and record attempts. Apart from having less flying detail available, my goal was, however, to explore the development of the personality that led to Millicent becoming Australia's first woman pilot, pointing to the importance of creating a fuller and more complete story of her life that was closer in spirit to my mother's account. These factors, for me, also weighed against a conventional nonfiction form.

Somewhat unexpectedly, most family members also liked the idea of a more creative style, provided I was not creating something inconsistent with what was known; they preferred that Millicent's story be encompassed in a 'good read', especially if it stood a better chance of being published this way.[42] They were not overly concerned with the general question of how true a story can be if it is fiction, suggesting that readers' expectations now were more tolerant of mixed modes. Neither was there particular desire for an historiographic approach; my impression was that they considered Millicent's main achievements to be already a matter of record but that the story of the life and person had largely been 'lost'. Most felt her to be remarkable from their own family knowledge but accepted that only some parts of her life could be verified. Although the evidence could solidly provide for the composition of an historical submission for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in due course, it did not seem sufficient to facilitate the exploration of Millicent's larger life and personality that I was seeking.

2.5.3 Creative/narrative nonfiction

During the research, and well into the writing phase, I had also thought that creative or narrative nonfiction might offer an attractive approach. Originating in the 'new journalism' of the 1960s, Theodore Cheney says this form has also been called dramatic nonfiction, literary journalism and literary nonfiction, among other things. It tells a story using facts but also utilising many of the techniques of fiction such as characterisation, scene setting, compression of information and personal narrative for its 'compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy'.[43]

Lee Gutkind, who coined the term creative nonfiction, claims that 'biographies are often considered to be works of creative nonfiction'.[44] While this may be a provocative statement, it can be argued that there are ways in which fictional biography, in seeking the truth of an actual person, could be similar to creative nonfiction. Smilovitis, for one, argues that the narrative distinctions between fiction and creative nonfiction 'are, at best, marginal'. What informs both genres, essentially, she concludes, 'is the root word, fiction: to shape, or fashion';[45] this concurs with Ramsden's view that the difference between factual and fictional histories 'is the use which is made of these facts by the writer'.[46] Although John Hersey famously argued that there needed to be a 'legend' on a writer's 'license' to say whether their work was 'made up' or not,[47] what can be seen to anchor the nonfictionality of, at least, longer form creative or narrative nonfiction is the sheer quantity of evidence it draws on and the alignment of the writers' narratives with this evidence: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and *News of a Kidnapping* by García Márquez are striking examples. By contrast, one of the more usual features of fictional biography is the lesser quantity of specific (rather than contextual) factual detail available to it.

Gutkind and others speak of creative or narrative nonfiction as a form that does not go beyond the facts, but the use of fictional techniques can make this distinction, in practice, problematic;[48] Matthew Ricketson gives the example that, for a cohort of readers, Helen Garner's *The First Stone* was perceived to be fiction.[49] Factuality itself is, in any case, no reliable distinction because, as Gérard Genette points out, 'fiction too consists of sequences of facts', suggesting that the

(at least easy) determination of a text's status may need to be indicated outside of it in some way.[50]

Alongside these considerations was the question of the kind of approach or format I might have employed. The most obvious and promising involved bringing in my own persona as the researcher and describing my search for Millicent through the networks of family, historical research and the lives in the present that relate to her. However, my concern was that this would have located a significant part of the narrative in the present rather than in Millicent's own time. It would also have brought a cast of contemporary real-life characters, situations and personal reflexivity into the story and foregrounded them. Thus, while it could have made an engaging approach, it would also have risked overshadowing Millicent's own story.

2.5.4   Postmodern forms

A postmodern sensibility features, as Lyotard famously, if simplistically, put it, an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' or grand narratives.[51] More specifically, according to Cavallaro, postmodern works communicate 'a sense of open-endedness that negates the classic realist view of the text as a closed structure capable of conveying notions of harmony and order'; they also reject 'coherent patterning and allow disparate elements to crowd the textual collage'.[52]

Although this might seem to pose risks similar to those of the memoir-style forms noted above, Linda Hutcheon positions postmodern thinking in an approach that appears more broadly situated to explore the past than nonfiction biography. Hutcheon observes, in her well-regarded *Poetics of Postmodernism*, that what characterises postmodernism in fiction is what she calls 'historiographic metafiction'. This arises through the paradoxes that are set up 'when modernist aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity come up against a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world'.[53]

Some of the life writing I found most interesting fell into this category, even if 'category' is not a word that sticks to many postmodern works. Here, fiction may

self-reflexively be aware of its every move, such as in Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*; language's exploratory power can also be used to tell of lives which cannot be (or simply are not) told in an ordinary sense.[54] Some writers even insist that real lives cannot be portrayed in this discourse without emerging as 'other than they are', that is, subverted; Anna Kuhn argues that writers such as Bettina von Arnim and Christa Wolf have highlighted biography's 'failure' in this generic sense by their personal, speculative and open-ended accounts.[55] Anna Banti also does this in her acclaimed *Artemisia*. The writing of lives in a postmodern mode therefore makes it possible to inhabit self-contradictions, liminal spaces, 'absences' and alternatives, and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* is one that encompasses these with remarkable fluidity.

As Modjeska herself says, *Poppy* maintains itself as 'fact and fiction, biography and novel', thus providing a possible model.[56] However, I was again concerned, as with creative nonfiction, about how the location of the narrative would shift from Millicent's own time; as Hutcheon explains, '[p]ostmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological'.[57] But this also has the advantage of opening the way for alternative, even multiple stories: Brian Matthews' postmodern biography of Louisa Lawson is a pioneering example. Perhaps bringing Matthews' use of several narratorial voices up to date, Marilyn Metta recently articulated a method of lifewriting described in her title as 'Reflexive, Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice', and in which her usage of biography as a term describes it as 'co-authored storytelling by both author and subject, and the storymaking by the author'. In what she calls a 'triple braid', three lifewriting narratives are presented – her autobiography, her mother's biography and her father's imaginative biography – with imagination playing a vital role as 'the creator of, created by and in co-creation with the self and hence, with memory itself'.[58]

Although Metta seeks to provide a means of rolling historical and literary possibilities together with psychotherapeutic ones, the lifewriting itself is limited in scope and focused on stor*ies* and personal process; true to its poststructural outlook, it eschews a sense of *telos* in favour of possibilities for

meaning that remain in smaller 'pieces'. My own aim, conversely, was to form some kind of whole rather than variously linking micro-stories. Likewise, I sometimes found the multiple perspectives in Brian Matthews' *Louisa* distracting when the narratorial voices and their arguments overtook the more condensed feeling of Louisa Lawson's presence that readers such as myself might have hoped for.

By contrast, I wanted Millicent more simply to stand out of the shadows and in her own settings and, although my own presence is inseparable from the writing, a strongly self-reflexive approach did not seem the best way to accomplish this aim. Perhaps for similar reasons, as Caroline Lusin remarks in her recent survey of English fictional biography at the turn of the twenty-first century, a significant number of contemporary fictional biographies 'do not engage in postmodernist play with different versions of the reconstructed world, but assert the "truth of fiction" and stage the condition of authorship as such'.[59]

2.6   Summary: fiction as exploratory paradigm

This chapter discussed the choice of fiction as the writing form for the project, specifically the form of fictional biography. The question 'can biography be fiction?' led to a framing of the discourses of fiction and nonfiction and a working definition of what I expected fiction to be able to do. It was followed by an examination of issues and debates surrounding the exploration of the past through fiction. It was argued that this mode could be used in a biographical exploration of the life of a real person, just as Kate Grenville's novel, *The Secret River*, uses fiction's 'different way' of understanding to explore a historical collision of cultures by focusing on one man's story.

This highlighted the key advantage of fiction, namely its unique capacity for imaginative exploration and, allied with this, close focus. The alternative forms considered for the project were either more constrained in the kind of exploration *vis-à-vis* the 'facts' that they could undertake or brought with them a self-referential aspect that might have shifted the focus away from Millicent and

her story. Fictional biography seemed to meet the project's need for a writing paradigm that could explore both the inner and outer dimensions of Millicent's life while performing her rescue from obscurity by enabling her to occupy and remain on centre stage.

The discussion also prosecutes the case for a broader understanding of 'biography' that recognises it not as an unqualified base term but as an area where genres could be freer to intersect and overlap, a 'borderland' which fiction can inhabit as well as nonfiction.[60] The next chapter thus grounds the choice of form by considering how my own practice and that of others similar to it work with fiction, not just in biography but as a *mode* of biography.

NOTES

[1] William R. Siebenschuh, *Fictional techniques and factual works* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 76.

[2] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 194.

[3] Maureen A Ramsden, 'Fictional Frontiers: The Interrelation of Fact and Fiction between the World and the Text', *Neophilologus* 95 (2011), 341.

[4] *Ibid*., 345.

[5] Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future*, Ward-Phillips Lectures in English Language and Literature (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 7.

[6] Hayden White, 'Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality', *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2-3 (2005), 147. White adds the clarification that '[a] simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about what happened in it at particular times, and places can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what 'reality' consists of' (147). Michel de Certeau writes of what history can always seek, further and further back, what is 'within the "real" that legitimizes representation but is not identical to it'. Thus 'historians can write only by combining within their practice the "other" that moves and misleads them and the real that they can only represent through fiction'. (Michel de Certeau, *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward [Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000], 35.)

[7] de Certeau, *The Certeau Reader*, 34.

[8] *Ibid.,* 35. The way in which de Certeau writes here of the 'other' is also redolent of Derrida's challenge to 'logocentrism' and his observation that opposites always bear traces of each other.

[9] Ramsden, 'Fictional Frontiers', 342.

[10] James A. H. Murray, Henry Bradley, W.A. Craigie, C.T. Onions, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

[11] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford Reference Online: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[12] Nonfiction appears to be a recent invention according to Raymond Williams, who notes that it appeared as a 'curious C20 [20th century] back-formation in library or book-trade use' which was 'at times made equivalent to "serious" reading'. He adds that the 'conventional (and artificial) contrast between **fiction** and *fact* … probably contributes to the confidence of this discrimination' [emphases in original]. (Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, revised ed. [London: Fontana Press, 1988], 134.)

[13] Nelson Goodman, 'Fiction for Five Fingers', *Philosophy and Literature* 6, no. 1 (1982), 162.

[14] Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 8-9, 15. Cohn adds that, in relation to a biographer who goes beyond the facts in his concern for a subject's mental actions and reactions, '[t]he question is not *whether* but *how* he will express these concerns'. (26)

[15] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), 161-162.

[16] Inga Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who owns the past?', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 23 (2006), 20.

[17] Kate Grenville, 'The Question of History: Response', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 25 (2007).

[18] Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who owns the past?', 21.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] *Ibid.,* 27.

[21] Mark McKenna, 'Writing the Past', in *The Best Australian Essays 2006*, ed. Drusilla Modjeska (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2006), 99.

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 151.

[24] Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (unwarranted speculations)* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 319-20.

[25] Camilla Nelson, 'Faking it: History and Creative Writing', *TEXT Journal* 11, no. 2 (2007), 5.

[26] Barbara Tuchman, 'Biography as a prism of history', in *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 132-47.

[27] Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006), 191.

[28] Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who owns the past?', 32.

[29] Tom Griffiths, 'History and the creative imagination', *History Australia* 6, no. 3 (2009), 74.9.

[30] Judie Newman, 'Telling a Woman's Story: Fiction as Biography and Biography as Fiction in Mary Gordon's *Men and Angels* and Alison Lurie's *The Truth about Lorin Jones*', in *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys, Postmodern Studies 5 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1992), 192.

[31] Thomas Petsinis, 'i = Galois: A Fictional Biography of the French Mathematician Evariste Galois (1811-1832), together with a methodological introduction and select bibliography' (Thesis, Victoria University of Technology, 1995), 8.

[32] Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person,* 4.

[33] Virginia Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow: essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), 149.

[34] Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person,* 47.

[35] *Ibid*., 32.

[36] *Ibid.,* 147.

[37] Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction*, 90.

[38] Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 20-26.

[39] Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[40] Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[41] Luke Slattery, 'Biographies: why fact is out-selling fiction,' *The Australian*, September 3-4, 1994.

[42] These indications came from conversations with my mother, my siblings Guy, Claire and Robert, my uncle John, and cousins Mary, Libby, Maki, Marion and Sue, at different times.

[43] Theodore A. Rees Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Fiction Techniques for Crafting Great Nonfiction* (Berkeley/Toronto: Ten Speed Press, 2001), 1-2.

[44] Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (New York: John Wiley, 1997), 6.

[45] Cherie Smilovitis, 'Notions of truth in contemporary narrative: where the truth lies' (Thesis: Edith Cowan University, 2007), 54.

[46] Ramsden, 'Fictional Frontiers', 348.

[47] John Hersey, 'The Legend on the License', *Yale Review* 75, no. 2 (1986). Nelson Goodman adds to this quandary by arguing that '[t]he novel containing a high percentage of literally true statements approaches nonfiction'. See Goodman, 'Fiction for Five Fingers', 162-64.

[48] Lee Gutkind, *Private and Public: The range and scope of creative nonfiction* (New York and London: Norton & Company, 2008), 49.

[49] Matthew Ricketson, 'Not muddying, clarifying: towards understanding the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction', *TEXT Journal* 14, no. 2 (2010) n.p.

[50] Gérard Genette, Nitsa Ben-Ari, and Brian McHale, 'Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative', *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (1990), 756.

[51] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

[52] Dani Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory* (London: The Althone Press, 2001), 164-165.

[53] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), ix.

[54] Natalie Kon-yu notes that while past shame and social approbation make it perhaps impossible to tell some lives, their absence, as if still present in their effects, sometimes cannot be ignored, and can result 'in the emergence of other stories, differently positioned'; in her case, the reader is confronted with the frustration arising from her refusal to 'excavate' a history which has been 'buried' but is, on the other hand, connected with the loss, uncertainty and confusion this represents. (Natalie Kon-yu,' 'The recounting of a life is a cheat': Unreliable narration and fragmentary memory in historical fiction', *TEXT Journal* 16, no. 1 [2012].)

[55] Anna K Kuhn, 'The 'Failure' of Biography and the Triumph of Women's Writing: Bettina von Arnim's *Die Günderode* and Christa Wolf's *The Quest for Christa T.*', in *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender*, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom, *SUNY Series in Feminist Criticism and Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 15.

[56] Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1990), 317.

[57] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 110.

[58] Marilyn Metta, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory: Lifewriting as Reflexive, Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 17.

[59] Caroline Lusin, 'Writing Lives and 'Worlds': English Fictional Biography at the Turn of the 21st Century', in *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking: media and narratives*, *Concepts for the study of culture* (Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 281.

[60] This notion is borrowed from historian John Demos, who coined it in his discussion of how fiction and history overlap. See John Demos, 'Afterword: Notes from, and About, the History/Fiction Borderland', *Rethinking History* 9.2/3 (2005), 329.

3.   True to life: anchoring fictional biography

> [I]magining something is entirely compatible with knowing it to be true.
>
> — Kendall L Walton[1]

3.1   Introduction

The previous chapter outlined some of the connections between fiction, biography and history and established a view of fiction's capacity and suitability for the project. This was not only in the context of making the decision to utilise the form of fictional biography for my project, but also of navigating the very possibility of 'creating' a person's life. It provided the understandings that allow this chapter to directly address the research question and explore methods and approaches that can be employed in writing a life as fiction, both in my own writing and in selected examples from the work of others.

Ina Schabert has provided a poetics, or framework, through which fictional biography can be described; I draw on this and use her work as a reference point during the chapter. This may help to enlarge what Couser calls a 'critical vocabulary' for 'exploring what genres are in order to understand what they do' – in this case, fictional biography.[2]

3.2   Situating fictional biography as a biographical genre

It follows from the early discussion in Chapter 2 that, rather than there being authoritatively objective biographies, there can only be approaches to biography that situate themselves in a discourse of objectivity and utilise its methodologies and formats. Ina Schabert concurs with this and adds that 'critical analysis in a number of cases has discovered features commonly associated with fictional rather than factual literature … the narratives have been shown to be informed by personal and group prejudices, ideological assumptions and conventions of aesthetic patterning'.[3]

This is not to pursue the argument that all biography should be thought of as fiction but to position fictional and nonfiction biography less distantly from each

other. However, it is also apparent that all biography sets out with some initial story, factual or otherwise, which is then researched, broadened, formed more fully and shaped by a variety of personal and extrinsic factors; this makes clearer the value of finding an approach which permits expression of both the 'granite-like' and that of 'rainbow-like tangibility' and which enables them to act as locii of understanding about the subject person instead of irreconcilable binaries.[4]

Fictional biography aspires to such aims. However, while the term announces 'biography' as its primary purpose, the nearest form of fiction to fictional biography is the novel. On one hand, this might mean that a life finds its counterpart in the characters, time sequence, social norms and plot of a realist novel; on the other, Schabert considers that fictional biography subverts these conventions and structures in order to be true to the knowing of the subject person which is its purpose. In this respect, she argues a kinship with the authors who created the psychological novel or 'novel of consciousness', saying they have prepared the way for those who write fictional biographies through their preoccupation with probing the mystery of a person as existential identity.[5] The defining feature is, then, that

> [f]ictional biography does aim neither at a set of psychological and moral generalizations nor at ontological truth. Each specimen of the genre tries to comprehend the subjective being of one, ungeneralizable person and to convey the unique through the relation of the particular contiguities of the person's life and through an ideographic style.[6]

Fictional biography, in these terms, therefore stands distinct from pure fiction as a mode that serves its own purposes or is more concerned with novelistic patterns. However, continual evolution and experimentation in the novel suggests that forms other than the psychological novel written in first person may also be able to meet this condition. The postmodern novel, for example, construed as part of this continuum of experimentation, plays with language, blurs reality and invention, disrupts its own form, and references itself and other fictional works. My own fictional biography, while utilising a substantially realist fictional approach, also crosses the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction by entwining authentic source material from Millicent's letters with the fictional

narrative. Doing so modified the realist approach and created an alternative path by which to chart Millicent's inner course, as well as indicating the work's orientation to the service of biography rather than fiction as its primary enterprise.

3.3   'Real-life orientation' and respect for documentary evidence

It is because of 'the centrality of the real-life orientation in the works in question' that Schabert argues fictional biography is 'a special kind of "biography" rather than a sub-genre of the novel'.[7] Further, she says, it is 'respect for the documentary evidence referring to the other person [that] distinguishes them [fictional biographers] from novelists proper, whereas they share with the latter confidence in the imagination as a truthful principle for the selection, organization and interpretation of the materials'.[8]

One indication of the real-life orientation of *The Fortunes of Millicent Bryant, aviator* is established by the choice of fictional biography itself as a form which can focus more closely on the subject rather than through, for example, the prism of a creative nonfiction memoir or metafiction that might have diverted attention to myself or others. The effect of this kind of choice is not one which Schabert specifically discusses but it affirms the 'centrality of the real-life orientation'. This contrasts with the distancing effect, as Mark McKenna put it, that history seeks to achieve; fiction, as he noted, 'constantly tries to break that distance down'.[9]

Thus, while the historical gap between writer and subject person would seem to increase the possible discontinuities, I was still able, by writing in fiction, to develop a sense of proximity and real-life orientation to Millicent's experiences. This was the case even with her earlier life, as its scarcity of information allowed me greater scope in imagining around the facts. An example is her courtship and wedding, about which nothing is known but the date and a crucial sentence or two in a local newspaper. However, it seems all but certain that she met her husband to be, Edward ('Ned') Bryant, in Manly while helping her mother care

for her siblings and assisting with the 'sea-bathing' that was the suggested treatment for the polio afflicting her brother George (later to be father to entrepreneur Gerry Harvey). While a little was known about the Bryants' lives in Manly, such as where they lived, when they died and where they were buried, the social pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1897 reported in some detail a birthday party of Ned's younger brother, Charles (who become a noted war artist), that I adopted and turned into the meeting with Millicent. This, then, became the entry point for the development of the story of this part of her life: from it, several incidents were then developed which fitted around this one fragment of personal evidence together with the much greater expanse of material recorded about Manly and its environs at the turn of the century.

I also drew on the later letters (1925–1927) to create a way through which Millicent's documented words to John ('Jack') could contribute to the story of her own life. This was not to write the section in epistolary style, although the writing of letters itself represented an empowerment and a way that women, in particular, despite the domestic burdens that generally kept them in the home, could reach out, maintain family and social networks and, in short, relate to the wider world.[10] Instead, I did it, at first, by making the letters to John an integral part of the narrative, quoting Millicent frequently and sometimes turning comments or observations in letters or her diaries into actions or spoken incidents. For example, I turned her notes for a speech into an actual speech within the narrative in the last chapter of Part II; I also used both the details and actual words in her travel diary to construct the story of her trip to England in 1911 in 'Voyages'. This enabled me to expose the reader directly to Millicent and to make her presence stronger, emphasising the roots of the work in her own writings and showing my respect for the documentary evidence.

3.4 Sources as a bridge to fictional exploration

3.4.1 The Letters Collection

The evidence I had assembled and, in particular, the letters, were the texts that I trusted to show me more of the external events in Millicent's life and lead me to some of its inner aspects.[11] As a collection they can be described in relation to particular periods: those before World War I are not only few in number but diverse in purpose, and are mostly not written by Millicent. The travel diary mentioned earlier was invaluable for its record of places and dates, as well as some descriptions, providing an important outline and point of departure for the narrative. The war period features correspondence both to and from her brother Vere up to his death in 1916, as well as testimony Millicent apparently produced of the medical treatment of her youngest brother, Arthur, who died of pneumonia in the Liverpool army camp barely six weeks after enlisting. This is handwritten but also typed out as if for a submission, perhaps to the Royal Commission which was inquiring into conditions in the camp even as her brothers arrived in it. Newspaper clippings in the collection add detail about the deaths and funerals of both brothers, while letters from Dick Wilkins, also from the Wellington district, and who was with Vere in France, provide one of the most poignant and moving accounts of mateship one could ever read.

After the war, some of the most interesting sources in the collection turn out to be small notebooks recording different things such as study notes, favourite poems and music. One of the most fascinating, however, is a reading diary which lists the books Millicent apparently read between 1920 and 1925. Both the range and quantity are remarkable, at least in the present day. Then comes the bulk of the letters, most of which are those corresponding with John and which include his replies. In them comes a large amount of detail about Millicent's everyday life: much more (unfortunately, in some sense) than is specific to her flying activities and the nature of that experience for her. Other notable letters relate to politics, particularly Thomas Rainsford Bavin (who would become Premier of NSW a month before Millicent's death), and the formation of the Women's Progressive Party by Mrs Earle Page, other notable women and wives of politicians, and Millicent herself.

Contrasting with the letters that were intended to be read by others are the 'scraps' of the letters collection, the thoughts, drafts, ideas and feelings Millicent jotted down as notes to herself on whatever scraps of paper and other material came to hand, such as theatre programs, receipts and admission passes. These are recognisably written by the same person but often in a more sketchy and impassioned voice; critically, they also offer just a glimpse of the 'heart interest' outside her marriage that is otherwise unspoken.

As a whole, I utilised the letters collection as source data for many of the events of Millicent's life after her marriage, but especially in the last two years of her life. While further information about the scope of the collection and how I approached it is contained in Appendices 1 and 2, Stanley explains that letters have long been valued in literature studies and history, as well in biography. In the first case, they are *dialogical*: they do not represent just a single person writing or speaking about their life, but a communication or exchange between one person and another or others: there is turn-taking and reciprocity. They are *perspectival* because their structure and content changes according to the particular recipient and the passing of time: they take on the perspective of the 'moment', often with a distinct 'voice' such as the motherly but also adult and frequently confiding tone Millicent develops with John. Similarly, the *emergent* qualities of letters relate to the fact that they have their own preoccupations, conventions and epistolary ethics, which develop over time and change with the correspondent.[12]

In light of these qualities, however, their truth value is less clear. Jolly observes that the textual contract between reader and writer functions on terms more similar to those of fiction than history,

> not only because the truth is often less at issue than entertainment, but more simply, because the truth, with the reader, is defined as particular rather than general. Thus, while the familiar letter may be valued for its personality, authenticity or intimacy, the meaning of those effects is specific not just to time and place but addressee.[13]

These caveats do not, however, lessen the importance of Millicent's letters and personal writings as vital resources for this project. Moreover, their style and

character, mostly originating in the 1920s, also influenced the style of my own narrative and provided the basis for its verisimilitude. As well as taking in the subject matter of each piece, I tried to note its tone, expression and colloquial qualities; although I did not wish to duplicate Millicent's voice from her letters, I wanted to align my own narrative so that fictional dialogue or thoughts would sound natural in proximity to her actual words. I also linked the information contained in letters to other known events in order to establish anchor points for the narrative, around which the key features of Millicent's life could be written: her courtship and marriage, children, house-building and home-making, trip to England, wartime losses and disruptions, and the reshaping of her life post war. By building these up with contextual detail I had researched, the story segments could be strong in terms of factual detail and chronology; they were also recognisably biographical, crossing fictional boundaries by including actual quotations and, in one or two cases such as that of Dick Wilkins, incorporation of whole letters.

3.4.2   'A Life': an autobiographical summary

One source in the Letters Collection emerged as the keystone for the shape of the creative work, the writing fragment 'A Life'. It appears in the Collection along with the outline and beginning of a clearly autobiographical novel about a far western family. 'A Life', however, seemed to be a bridge between this and Millicent's real life because it provides a personal summary of key life events. It includes words and phrases almost as headings such as 'early hopes and false standards – marriage – mistakes – children – despondency – great desire to 'live' and create things', in addition to some sentences, such as about childhood ('shy, reserved, dainty – loving refinements in everything – perhaps overmuch') and the critical one about the 'heart interest' begun during her overseas trip which lasted fourteen years.

This piece of paper, among all of the others, appears to provide Millicent's most personal view of her own life. It was written in a way resembling other, mostly very short, notes to herself in the Collection, that is, as an expression of her thoughts in a particular moment. Thus it is candid and unguarded and in rough note form; perhaps these were notes for a life she might have sketched for the

novel except that it extends away from a summary and becomes a more expressive, personal view that is yet to be finished – though if there were further pages written they are now missing.[14]

An innovation of my practice was to place an image of this actual page in between Parts I and II. I did this, first, because it straddled both sections in terms of time and gave both a sense of order relative to the main sequence of life events. Second, it provided the link which enabled the unusual sequence I employed, in which the story begins with and covers her flying years to her death, and then returns to an earlier period leading up to them. This is because 'A Life' seemed to summarise Millicent's life to the point she had written it, and is simultaneously a viewing of her past: it reflects, in a few words, on her childish qualities, notes her achievements in married life and its disappointments before mentioning the 'heart' interest that captures something of what her life was and might have been. There is her deep aspiration for love, alongside a broader determination and passion for life, to some extent unsatisfied, but which perhaps found an outlet in the romance and adventure of early flight.

3.4.3   The later letters and 'reverse engineering' the younger Millicent

The later letters are the broadest and richest section of the letters collection because they contain a complete correspondence between Millicent and John while he was on his two business trips during this period. Though both sides of the correspondence exist, I was most interested in what was happening in Millicent's life and what she said to John, leading me to focus almost exclusively on her own letters.[15] These provided a wealth of day to day and week to week detail which, though it says less about her flying than I was hoping for, allowed me to construct a story about how her life led to flying, incorporated it and flowed around it. Just as importantly, these letters allowed me to hear her voice, at least as she articulated it to John, in sections of sustained discussion that reveal much about her feelings, anxieties, priorities, conflicts and general state of mind.

They begin with the move from the family home, 'Grenier', to a flat in Neutral Bay. This is the beginning of that part of her life in which she and Ned are no

longer together, although the split is behind them and is never referred to openly in the letters to John. Millicent's anxiety about money and making something with her capital from the house sale results from this and is a constant, but so is her concern for John's wellbeing; she speaks to him as the one person she can share almost everything with, and he provides a point of emotional anchorage and expression. This is apparent in her use of language to him throughout the letters series, and varies from the ironic, business-like, critical and jocular, to over-wrought expressions of affection for her 'darling boy', to whom she sends 'oceans of love and kisses'.[16] These letters reveal a person somewhat driven, who seemed not to suffer fools, who enjoyed cultural pursuits such as reading, ballet and the theatre, who was practical and forceful but also needful of affection – and for whom finding her way in the world after separating from her husband was being experienced as a sometimes depressing and lonely business, despite her qualities of determination and tenacity. The language of the letters is also more varied and occasionally at odds with what is quoted in the newspapers of the day, where her reported words seem at times imperious, off-hand or even falsely modest (at least to my sensibilities, the best part of a century later).[17]

These sources helped develop my attitude to Millicent and my 'knowing' of her, itself a writing resource that is discussed in more depth in the next section. The content of the later letters also gave me a vital insight into how her character might have developed in her early years and what might have been the foundations for the different turns she took and the way she met opportunities. It was with this knowledge that I could give some shape to the almost unknown childhood years and to her early adult life, placing the features of personality evident in the letters into earlier contexts.

An example of this is her will and drive to succeed, which is reflected in her relationship with her father, Edmund: 'Dad is a darling always' she tells John after Edmund came down to support her after Ned's death, relating her father's subsequent financial support in her property dealings.[18] These letters show a doting admiration that seemed unchanged even by his leaving of her mother and establishing a new life for himself at 'Kanimbla' with the former governess, Miss

Allen (who, nevertheless, Millicent finds repugnant and avoids if at all possible). She even followed his example in leaving her own spouse, though the difficulties for her as a woman were greater. This indicated a wilful and perhaps selfish side to her nature that underlay the determination to act in her own interest and, subsequently, not to be intimidated by the difficulties of learning to fly.

These seem to emphasise a close relationship with her father from her earliest years; she was, after all, the first child and a girl. I could therefore better imagine aspects of her childhood, such as her determination to ride and her interest in the management of the property rather than just being in the home. This is corroborated by her attempt to buy her own land at a young age. While this seems to have been an opportunistic move supported or perhaps initiated by her father to buy apparently available land just prior to a change in law, and was overturned, her debt to his tutelage is suggested by the fact she pursued the matter all the way to the NSW Supreme Court when she was only eighteen years of age.[19] Another area of her earlier life that the self-portrayal of her mature personality in the later letters led me to develop was the nature of her courtship with Ned, and her marriage to him, this time in the face of her father's misgivings. Together, these helped to interpret and expand the reason for the sheer brevity of the piece in the *Wellington Times* after the event which, in turn, shaped my portrayal of the wedding itself.

The letters further show, as a flip side to the ambition and impatience, a certain craving for affection; an English cousin of Ned's, Bessie Bryant, writes, as if in response to a confidence Millicent has shared with her, that

> I do wish you were nearer to us and I could occasionally run in for a chat, or have you to stay for a few days. Wouldn't it be nice for us both. I would most certainly give you all the petting you want. I have felt the want of it lots of times myself, and some people like your warm-hearted self respond to the petting so much more than others.[20]

Such letters suggested a view of Millicent's personality that helped me intimate the 'hopes and false standards' in her earlier married life and depict the desire for affection and love that indeed seemed the obverse of her need for action and

achievement: the former passions could be poured into – and perhaps temporarily submerged – in the latter.

The innovation from this part of my practice can be summarised as a kind of 'reverse engineering' in which my story of Millicent's earlier life could be given shape by the evidence, in the letters and associated fragments, of her later personality. The notable benefit of this method was in supporting a *consistency* of persona, although it also supplied ideas for fictional additions to the story that could flesh out her life in an authentic way.

3.5 The imagination as a bridge to biographical 'reality': an epistemology

3.5.1 The dialectic of self and other

The above method shows how a fictional account may be able to build biographical depth through an analytic approach to specific sections of evidence. However, as part of the process of writing Millicent's life, it is joined by the subjective and personal understandings I developed as a base for the imagination of Millicent's personal reality – the subjective engagement and 'truthful principle for the selection, organization and interpretation of the materials' to which Schabert refers. These are the other approaches by which my writing functioned biographically, but not ones easily incorporated in analytical discussion. Given their importance, however, what follows is an attempt to describe them, to explain how I conceived them, and to show how they formed part of my practice. It should be noted that while the discussion negotiates some philosophical depths it avoids or glosses over others in order to retain the focus on practice and the actual utility of these approaches in my work.

The first is understanding my personal relationship with Millicent as an awareness vital to the development of the narrative. Although I was no longer in the grip of the idea that a 'granite-like' account of Millicent was the only means by which I could express this relationship, I was prompted to contemplate more precisely my interest in her as a subject. For instance, was I relating to Millicent

as an 'object' of study, a focus for knowledge like astronomy or the theatre? In part I was, but Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* points to the importance of the word 'interest', the roots of which, *inter esse*, denote that which 'lies between people', or 'between-two', as Julia Kristeva puts it in her reading of Arendt.[21] This notion draws an invisible frame around one's own self and an 'other', asserting my relationship with Millicent in writing her life to be much more intimate than to an object of study and to depend on the one person I could contemplate directly: my 'self'. This connection is more fully developed by Paul Ricoeur, who argues that 'self' from the Latin *ipse* (rather than *idem*) 'involves a dialectic complementary to that of selfhood and sameness, namely the dialectic of *self* and the *other than self*'. This is otherness that is not (or not merely) the result of comparison, otherness 'of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such':

> [S]elfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, instead that one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms.[22]

This does not counter the instability of fixed notions of self that postmodern perspectives assert but describes a unique relationship, different to those we have with other phenomena: it points to the centrality of other humans to our individual being in the world – or even *as* the world – and, thus, of course, to the deeply-seated fascination that stories of others and their lives exercise.

What then seems to follow is that we *can* know 'an other' in a similar way that we know our own self, perhaps through a complex framework of 'like-ness' with other humans that we grow up with, that operates at many levels of awareness, and that is probably taken for granted by many biographical writers, including myself. In this sense, the deepest motivation for reading as well as writing biographical works might be to find or see this 'like-ness': its underlying appeal might be simply the demonstration that 'other' *is* 'like self' in its intelligibility.

Conversely, that which is not an other 'like self' cannot be known in this way because this framework, this internal database of 'like-ness', is not shared with any other beings except in imagined, extremely simplistic or otherwise

anthropomorphised forms (such as in our relationships with some animals). While objective or factual information can also be accumulated about humans, things or others not 'like self' can *only* be known objectively, that is, experienced as external to us rather than via a framework of like-ness to the subject 'I'. The study of a human individual is therefore likely always to be a different enterprise from other studies because an other human can be addressed or approached subjectively: that is, in a like way, or in relation, to 'self'.

Establishing this base suggested my understanding of Millicent therefore turned on how I related to her, consciously viewed her, warmed to her or was critical of her; it also included more than I could be conscious of. How much more did not matter: what was important was being aware that, as I wrote, she stood continually in some kind of relation to me. I could question her 'like-ness' and imagine the kinds of thoughts and actions that would make her intelligible. Understanding this as the place from which I could attempt to write about Millicent in an intimate third person was therefore a vital step, and just as important as if I had chosen to use first person narration in a psychological novel style of fictional biography.

This framing provides an alternative, or addition, to the methodological starting point for fictional biography noted by Schabert, the ideal of 'the self as pure consciousness, effacing itself as much as possible in order to relive the other's being'.[23] Other ways of conceiving how we approach the 'other' have been proposed by Husserl and by dialogists such as Martin Buber, but Schabert particularly notes the systematic method Sartre built on Dilthey's notion of *verstehen*, or practical comprehension of a person;[24] this has, however, been critiqued by Levinas, Foucault and others for the very 'totalization' Sartre seeks to achieve, particularly in his biography of Jean Genet.[25] It is a reminder that works of fiction, though partially eluding the net of factual responsibility, can still be called to account when writing an actual life; that fiction writers have ethical responsibilities is based on the premise that 'fiction (like all art) has the power to make a difference to people's lives', according to Gandolfo.[26] In relation to my own work, my attitude was, on one hand, that the medium of fiction brings the 'created' nature of the work fully into view. On the other, I considered that I

was mediating Millicent in my writing through a continually developing relationship, resulting in a feeling of protectiveness as well as a sense of responsibility to notice where we might really see things differently and to acknowledge the possibility of blind spots.

3.5.2 Two ways of 'knowing' Millicent

This understanding of my relationship with Millicent led to the development of a working usage of what 'knowing' of her might signify and, to try to remain in the epistemological shallows, two relevant and practical points of departure, though reductive of some of the foregoing methods and arguments, were adopted. One is the possibility that I could come to know Millicent as 'an other' directly through my personal senses, instincts, perceptions and experience, all the apparatus that we come equipped with and learn as human beings, an apparatus that continues to operate even in the physical absence of an other. This is the way I myself normally come to know many 'others', present and absent, and to relate them to my own self. (It is from this internal but socially mediated source that we are accustomed also to tell *others* of 'others'.) As a whole, I characterise this as 'subjective' knowing, and it encompasses all ways of knowing, including the objective kind.

'Objective' knowing, however, might be labelled primarily as a more organised and evaluative state of activity that consciously judges its own perceptions and thoughts, establishes its touchstones and decides what can be known or what counts as 'known'. In this process is the familiar categorisation and construction of what I know and through which I am assembling and holding knowledge 'about', as distinct from directly 'of', Millicent. Evidence is accumulated that is beyond, as well as within, my experience; external reference points gain weight and contribute to the deepening of trust in different kinds of knowledge and in some cases to their signification for me as 'fact'. However, I would assert that 'objective' knowing cannot be divorced from 'subjective' knowing, because both function contiguously in the presence and (subjective) consciousness of the knower and reflect the shaping or 'fictionality' of the way we conceive the world. Thus 'objective' knowledge is still a relative usage.

While this view is of a 'knowing' continually in flux and is clearly a philosophical simplification framed to serve a purpose, it addresses the opposing and at times simplistic poles on which the tensions between history and fiction are strung. Except that the distinctions of 'objective' and 'subjective' knowing do not need to represent opposite poles; rather, they can indicate different, complementary or alternative modalities of thought that are utilised simultaneously in fictional biography.

To return to an earlier example, one might learn that marriage in early adulthood was the normal expectation for girls in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the case of Millicent Bryant, the relatively comfortable situation of the family adds to this objective knowledge, but why she married as she did and her feelings about it can only be speculated on or explored imaginatively. At this point, something like the 'different way' of understanding that Grenville employs through the empathetic imagination might become a link to the inner complex of understandings of 'like-ness' with an 'other' human individual. In my own case it informed questions that arose in my mediation of Millicent, such as 'how would she feel about being expected to marry?' and 'how could I imagine the experience of such constraints?'. Filtered through many levels of understanding including my being male, by my own experiences of reaching adulthood and the attendant expectations of my own time, as well as by my research and writing skills, the answers I generated at that moment were expressed in the writing of Millicent's courtship and marriage creating, from my 'knowing' of her, the progress of unrecorded public and personal events.

This practice is, of course, also influenced by the subjective and personal views of Millicent's life communicated by my mother and others, including those contemporaries who knew and wrote to her; these contribute to a picture that can only be complete by being imagined. I worked with the factual, 'objective' knowledge throughout but remaining within it would have limited the portrayal, making it piecemeal and distant. These two forms of 'knowing' therefore gave me a choice of methodologies, enabling me to extend my writing to make a picture that was richer and more truly life-like, both a Millicent who was and who 'might have been'.

3.5.3   Subjective 'knowing' sources

This combination of objective knowledge and subjective knowledge of Millicent, as I have roughly sketched it (and I allow that there may also be other kinds I have not included), facilitated my writing and fictionalisation of both real and imagined incidents in her life. It allowed me to traverse both 'granite' and 'rainbow', drawing on the factual knowledge but also the subjective insights of Bryant family members such as my mother, John Bryant and Bowen's daughters, Libby and Mary, and of Harvey family members and descendants such as Rob Harvey, Gerry Harvey, Jill Fagg and Margaret Stoneman. Relating with these individuals and their stories helped drive my creative composition of incidents such as Bowen's experience of the *Greycliffe* disaster and the funeral; his descendants' experience of him helped me develop a sense of how he was affected. I also characterised more distant figures such as Edmund Harvey through the small and large qualities I could see in these family members, such as humour, ruggedness of character and business acumen.

Talking to aviators such as Nancy Bird, Robert Jones and Arthur Palmer, and hearing the recorded reminiscences of Edgar Percival, gave me a sense of what it took to be an aviator, then and now, and the differences. Nancy and Edgar, for example, were both very sanguine about what flyers had to get in and do; they tended to shrug off the difficulties if not minimise them, as Millicent herself seemed to have done. Robert Jones, on the other hand, gave me an insight from his own experience of the importance of the early 'tombstone' flying lessons and of the many factors that needed simultaneously to be taken into account as a matter of life and death.[27] I also gained a remarkable feeling for what it felt like to be alone in an early open cockpit aircraft from Saint-Exupéry's often poetic *Sand, Wind and Stars.* Millicent's flying log was starkly simple by comparison, and no substitute.

All of these understandings developed around and complemented my objective knowledge, and the way they are integrated is exemplified by the experience of flying. This had arisen very early in the project when I realised the importance of connecting with Millicent's own experience of the early days of flight, and that I therefore had to try to fly in a similar kind of aircraft to the one she had flown in.

Fortunately, de Havilland aircraft of almost this vintage still fly in New South Wales. At first I visited Luskintyre, a private airfield near Maitland, where numerous Tiger Moths, a later model of the same type Millicent had flown in, were both being restored and flying. I was subsequently able to arrange a flight in a Tiger Moth through the Royal Newcastle Aero Club, thanks to the support of the University of New England's School of Arts.

This experience was remarkable. I arrived at Russell Field (also near Maitland) on a baking summer's afternoon in February, 2011, for the flight, only to be told that conditions were too hot to fly in. When I asked why, the Chief Pilot told me jovially that 'the glue gets brittle when it's too hot'. He added that, due to less dense air, and the fact that the Tiger Moth was both a relatively underpowered aircraft and fitted with a cruising propellor, an attempt at takeoff might subsequently require a change of underwear. I deferred to his advice, but arranged to come back the next day for the flight. On the following morning, February 20th, the temperature was 'only' thirty degrees at nine in the morning – however, this was a good deal less than the forty degrees of the previous afternoon, so I was kitted up with goggles, helmet and intercom, then assisted into the yellow painted DH 82 Tiger Moth, VH-RNI, by my pilot, Trevor Bright. We went through the start-up procedure, and I could see how the engine was carefully primed and the wooden propellor spun manually a specific number of times before starting. We took off, bumping along over the grass field until the aircraft slowly ascended and rose to about 1000 feet. One of the surprising things is that the observer's cockpit in these aircraft is (for reasons of balance) in front of that of the pilot, so I sat looking ahead over the nose of the aircraft through a low aero screen. With repeater instruments in front of me so I could see the engine speed, altitude, bank angles and airspeed, I was surprised at how slow the aircraft was; we flew no faster than 70 or 80 knots. What I had not expected either was that the flight was so relaxed and pleasant; you could lean out the side of the aircraft, look over the wing, and generally enjoy being in the air in a way that is impossible in almost any other small aircraft, let alone commercial ones. And with the Tiger Moth flying at a leisurely pace, I really had time to see the landscape and what was below while feeling the winds and the environment at altitude.

Then I had another surprise: Trevor asked me if I'd like to take control of the aircraft for a short time. While he would keep his hand near the controls, all I had to do was use the stick and the rudder and steer the aircraft along. I did this for about ten minutes, and it was fascinating to hold the aircraft as Millicent might have done, to feel it move, and to feel the movement of the wind against and over the wings and control surfaces. I flew west, following the glittering twists of the Hunter River, dipping the wings to turn and enjoying how easy it was to fly at this level. Much more, however, would have been required of Millicent for her test, and it required her to be aloft and remain at 6000 feet for more than an hour. After getting the feel of the aircraft, and having a wonderful sense of controlling it in flight, I handed control back to Trevor in order to take some photos and be aware of what else was going on for the rest of the flight. Eventually we came down to land at Russell Field and I felt the plane lose speed, float gently, and then, very lightly, and only doing about forty knots, touch down and bump along the grass.

This became a critical experience for me to be able to imagine and write authentically about flying in an aircraft in the 1920s. Clearly, it was not Millicent's experience, it was mine. However, if similar enough, perhaps 'like' could stand in place of the original and enable it to be evoked as if it was she who was in the cockpit, an approach biographer Richard Holmes richly describes[28] and of which Paul Murray Kendall says that

> [t]his complex, subtle, frequently inarticulate relationship between biographer and *locale* affects not only the simulation of the life but also the simulation of the life-relationship, heightening the interaction of biographer and subject by the biographer's direct, sensory experience of the matrix from which the subject's experience has been shaped.[29]

Drawing on my personal 'knowing' and relating it to Millicent's own experience thus gave my writing authenticity through added vividness, detail and unforeseen insights, but also through the drawing out, in the narrative, of a sense of her being as I 'knew' it. This 'drawing out' included sensing or questioning what I had *not* already considered about Millicent's own experience: how she felt in a bodily way in the forward cockpit, her confidence in the

machine and the 'newness' of its flying technology, the reasons for the kind of bravado her letters occasionally reveal, the different sense of landscape it might have given her, as well as comparing things I myself had felt and how I had felt them, and even the way flying might have been the occasion for unrelated thoughts and feelings. This, I found, was not so much a generation of material but of a way of unfolding very real possibilities through the imaginative constructions of my writing.

3.5.4   Writing as 'knowing' in practice

These were also some of the means that brought both 'that of rainbow-like tangibility' and 'that of granite-like solidity' into my writing without making an artificial separation between them. In respect of this, Ray Monk also considers that Woolf's conviction that, lacking access to the inside of another's head, we cannot really understand them, is founded on too rigid a separation between the internal and the external. He argues that '[i]n our ordinary language, these two are not so separate'.[30] Wittgenstein, he notes, draws our attention to how we customarily describe people and we can see 'that it does not require a great artist to do this':

> Each of us combines the granite and the rainbow, the external and the internal, on a
> daily basis. Far from being impossible, it is the most ordinary thing in the world.[31]

A possible caveat to Monk's assertion might be, however, that representing such perspectives mentally and in speech, which is the kind of thing we might well do every day, could be very different to the modes of composition required in writing a life. While 'knowing' might be thought of as an overarching and often unconscious mental activity, writing, here practised in life depiction, is a form in which knowledge is expressed and built up in a highly organised way so that it need not exist in memory alone and can be reproduced in a form for sharing with others. The person is not just held in the writer's 'knowing' but emerges in the expression.

If we allow Monk's proposition that we naturally combine both internal and external, it suggests that my writing of Millicent's life might be a kind of 'knowing in practice', a notion well expressed by Hayden White's argument that

narrative is the solution to the problem 'of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*' [emphasis in original].[32] This supports a potent framing articulated by Hannah Arendt in her reading of the Aristotelian notions of *poïesis*, the product of artistic activity, and *praxis.* The latter is viewed as

> an *action* … that is not construction (*fabrication*) but rather 'the possibility of the human being'. The activities which take place in this view of praxis are then 'exhausted within an action which is itself full of meaning'.[33]

Seeing my writing as linked to my 'knowing' of Millicent through this notion of *praxis* helped to affirm, for me, the efficacy of biographical writing undertaken as creative process: writing in fictional biography could be said to be expressing the knowing of another life through its actual *praxis* of telling. Millicent was not an object of study in terms of the creation of my narrative but mirrored and formed through my writing. This helped me remain aware of the creative process that was taking place and that it was permitting a sense of Millicent's reality, constructed though that necessarily was, to emerge.

Arendt encompasses this in writing that 'the essence of who somebody is – can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story', an assertion emphasising the importance of narrating a life as an originary impulse of recognition.[34] Viewing this aspect of Arendt's thinking from the perspective of deconstruction leads Antonia Pont to add that '[i]n our praxis of telling, we in fact *call into being the very thing purportedly narrated*. When we narrate life, in other words, we invent the life narrated'.[35]

3.6   'Knowing' and telling a life in other works of fictional biography

The above sections try to articulate some of my working processes in writing fictional biography. They add to Schabert's conception that fictional biography is about a subjective engagement with the other person as existential reality by grounding this in some specific ways by which the person can be approached: first, as an 'other' like self to relate with, opening up pathways for recognition and empathy; second, in terms of objective and subjective knowing and; third, in

terms of writing the subject into existence – inventing the life by narrating it, the *praxis* of telling. These were specific methods and approaches employed in my writing of Millicent's life that can be added to those that it shares with nonfiction biography such as the systematic building and analytic interpretation of evidence.

While there is a range of twentieth and twenty-first century works that explore more or less well-known lives in fiction, such formative aspects of the writing exhibit themselves most clearly in postmodern metafictional works. One fictional biography in which this praxis is particularly visible, and powerful, is Anna Banti's *Artemisia,* based on the life of the Italian Baroque painter, Artemisia Gentileschi. Banti's novel offers a fictional dialogue, in which the painter herself is apparently consoling the author about the loss of a one hundred page fictional manuscript about Gentilischi. This story 'emphasises the role of writing and fiction in (re) creating historical memory', according to Susanna Scarparo, who adds that '[t]he effort to remember that which is lost—be that Artemisia's real history, Artemisia's fictional history, or women's history at large—becomes part of the narrative'.[36] Banti's approach thus foregrounds processes of fictional biography that seem similar to my own: the relation of other to 'self', subjective as well as objective knowing, and the invention of the life in its narration. As Banti writes, 'we are playing a chasing game, Artemisia and I'.[37]

Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, perhaps a 'meta' fictional biography, seems, by its own sly admission, to get nowhere with the attempt to write about the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert. A different kind of chasing game, it appears to do the opposite of Sartre's own envisioning of Flaubert in his enormous *L'idiot de la famille* – indeed criticising the latter for trying to 'enclose and subdue the master writer'.[38] Working creatively in what Schabert calls an 'ambivalently negative mode',[39] Barnes brings together fragments, like a collage, multiple perspectives which, in enacting a kind of dialectical movement of their own, seem to be trying to show the impossibility of grasping a person in the past and, yet, offering myriad glimpses that, as it were, animate Flaubert in the quasi-fictional awareness of his narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite. While claiming to avoid any attempt at Sartre's totalization, Barnes' achievement is of a more mosaic kind,

and apparently aloof from the project of existentially knowing the other. The sense of a connection with Flaubert's remote otherness that Barnes declines to offer is not at all like, say, Robert Graves' sense and writing of Marie in his *Wife of Mr. Milton*, or my own. Yet I would argue that there is still an obvious *inter esse,* an engagement in both objective and subjective terms, and a 'knowing' that arises through the narration. Though disclaiming that any knowing has occurred, Barnes perhaps delivers it as a glistening play of his character's thoughts and experiences, obliquely coming to grips with a sense of Flaubert *as* those thoughts and experiences. Schabert suggests that Barnes' 'negatives', 'which are all that is accessible to our experience, have to be taken as indications of a mysterious positive truth';[40] Braithwaite's apparent failure to find a way to engage with his subject's existence paradoxically opens, through the story of this 'failure', ways for the reader to engage with it.

Australian examples of fictional (or partly fictional) biography with distinct similarities to Barnes' style include Brian Matthews' *Louisa,* which employs competing subjective and fictional voices to approach the life of the feminist, publisher and mother of Henry Lawson. *Louisa* could thus be described as polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense but, as with Barnes, the narratorial voices exert a powerful influence. These voices, representing the viewpoints of the author, the biographer and his imagined alter ego, Owen Stevens, have a certain schizophrenic quality in that they are at odds with each other, and the volume of their narrative threatens to drown out the whispers of Louisa that a reader might, perhaps, be trying to 'hear' within themselves. This is not to argue the point that, like Barnes, Matthews is working from a postmodern awareness that a unified sense of Louisa is an illusion and that the truth is fragmented and unfixed. But even if this is the only sense of Louisa that is truly available, it may confuse or overly complicate things for the reader; as one reviewer put it, '[t]he irony of the drama of different selves is that, like Dr Frankenstein, the author has indeed created a monster … biography becomes gothic'.[41] Yet the work is nevertheless attempting a specifically personal rapprochement with Louisa Lawson, with each narrator adding their experiential or intellectual viewpoint, and this brings both objective and subjective approaches into view. Although it might have been more cohesive (and this might not have interfered with its

overall movement), *Louisa* is still able to provide a resonant and insightful engagement with Louisa Lawson out of the narratorial tussle.

Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, as Helen Thomson notes, incorporates 'slippages between biography, autobiography and fiction' that Thomson believes Brian Matthews was eager to avoid.[42] Modjeska, reflecting on this subsequently herself, said that if *Poppy* ended up 'on a line between fact and fiction, between imagination and evidence', this was because it reflected 'the collapse of certainty that accompanied the events that led up to writing it'. She did this because

> [i]n the struggle to write about the unhappiness of good-hearted people, to give narrative shape to the jumble of the past that pressed on me with my mother's death, I was drawn into fiction, away from my early assumption that I'd find the marrow in the papers I'd scooped up when we emptied the trunks in her attic.[43]

In writing about Millicent I found myself similarly drawn, and with a similar experience in regard to her letters. However, a more straightforward third person fiction offered me a way to write about Millicent beyond her letters and records while providing an alternative to creating an inner world through first person narration. But Modjeska plays with a number of writing approaches at once, and while Thomson argues that the resulting slippages 'are precisely the gaps where Drusilla Modjeska's text offers its most suggestive meanings',[44] *Poppy's* seamless entwining of the fictional, factual, biographical and autobiographical led Curthoys and Docker to describe it as belonging to a hybrid genre of life-writing that, because its works lack

> a system or set of conventions for indicating how the stories they tell may relate to any historical sources [they] cannot enliven history; they must continue to stand, uneasily, outside it.[45]

While this statement is partly justified, in *Poppy's* case, by the lack of a paratextual indication (eg. 'A Novel') at the beginning, it seems to fall back on set borderlines between history, fiction and biography. Modjeska, though, in her acknowledgements at the end of *Poppy*, refuses this separation: she says that to give up facts would have defeated the purpose with which she began but that to

stick only to them 'seemed to deny the fictional paradox of truthfulness' – a statement that vividly encapsulates a key strength of fictional biography.[46]

Susanna Scarparo, in her analysis of *Poppy* and other works as gendered metafiction, further challenges Curthoys and Docker's conclusion, asserting that 'there can be no unmediated recovery, discovery or recreation of women's lives: it is impossible to represent the past as it really was'. She says the authors of these works, instead, are dispensing with 'oppositional modes of thinking, and enact a dialogic relationship with the past and the present'.[47] Thus, the works of fictional biography considered here seem to illustrate and support the argument that fictional narration is itself a method of 'knowing' the subject. This may be particularly so with women's stories excluded from historical records which 'if they are to be told—have to be invented', as Scarparo asserts.[48]

While gendered metafiction provides a particularly clear context for this argument, there seems no reason for it not to apply to 'lost' lives – and not only of women – imagined in less self-reflexive forms. For example, Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* is not a postmodern work (it first appeared in the 1950s), but the force of its deeply researched and imagined realisation reaches for the 'lost' personal story of Hadrian in a way that is no less powerful, although the Emperor was hardly one of those marginalised by history. On the other hand, while works such as *Louisa* and *Poppy* achieve their effects using subjective as well as objective resources, they also add a sense of uncertainty and flux to the narratives that evokes the idiosyncratic movements of the life which Schabert says help define fictional biography.

3.7   Summary

The chapter examined fictional biography as a form, as well as the means by which practice could establish itself within it. Although one of the most essential features of the form, according to Schabert, is that it serves biographical purposes rather than purely fictional ones, this may not be easy for readers to ascertain. While one measure of a work's faithfulness to a biographical subject is

that all known, accepted facts are respected, she notes that the reader's ability to discern this may often depend on whether the writer provides indications such as notes on sources.[49] Her fundamental measure for recognising a work as fictional biography is that the shape of its narrative follows the unique, idiosyncratic movement of the subject's life rather than a trajectory determined by fiction *per se*; however, this may still require readers to judge whether a particular fictional biography is genuinely and primarily concerned with knowing the subject person and being *faithful* to them. In this respect, questions such as the following can be offered as possible additional yardsticks: *Is fiction the form or is it the objective of the work? Does the work realise biographical truth in terms of both fact and the person?*

The chapter has sought to articulate different methods and approaches fictional biography can employ, and to situate both the promise and problems of the form, as my own practice has engaged with it, in relation to the work of other writers. However, the discussion has also been in the context of how fictional biography can explain itself, how it can show that it incorporates 'a system or set of conventions for indicating how the stories they tell may relate to any historical sources', to borrow Curthoys and Docker's words. By contrast, Chapter 4 shows how aspects of my writing remained constrained until I found an approach that I felt allowed the work to be more exploratory – and this meant engaging the biographical project more strongly as fiction.

NOTES

[1] Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13.
[2] G. Thomas Couser, 'Genre Matters: Form, Force, and Filiation', *Life Writing* 2, no. 2 (2005), 155.
[3] Ina Schabert, 'Fictional Biography, Factual Biography, and Their Contaminations', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1982), 2.
[4] Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow: essays by Virginia Woolf*, 149.
[5] Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person,* 38.
[6] *Ibid*., 112.

[7] *Ibid.*, 4.

[8] *Ibid.*, 48.

[9] McKenna, 'Writing the Past', 99.

[10] Romani characterises women's epistolary writing as an empowerment and one which came to symbolise modern femininity. This was in contrast with a lack of education and associated illiteracy in earlier times. See Gabriella Romani, 'Women Writing Letters: Epistolary Practices in Nineteenth-Century Newspapers, Manuals and Fiction', in *Across Genres, Generations and Borders: Italian Women Writing Lives*, ed. Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson, *Monash Romance Studies* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 27.

[11] This is discussed more fully in Appendix 1.

[12] Liz Stanley, 'The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences', *Auto/Biography* 12, no. 3 (2004), 202-203.

[13] Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, 'Letters as/not a genre', *Life Writing* 1, no. 2 (2005), 92.

[14] The potential, as well as actual, missing material, especially in the case of letters or parts of correspondences, is a constraint that needs to be taken into account – although it can also be a defining feature of their use.

[15] This also provided a notional boundary to prevent the story from sprawling.

[16] MMB to JHB, 3 August 1925.

[17] As suggested by, for example, 'A Triumph for Aero Club Instruction', publication unknown, c. 8 February 1927, n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook; 'Woman Will Soar', publication unknown, c. 8 February 1927, n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

[18] MMB to JHB, 21 February 1926; MMB to JHB, 10 March 1926.

[19] 'Harvey v. Minister for Lands', *The New South Wales Law Reports* XVII, 264-70.

[20] Bessie Bryant to MMB, 23 January 1912.

[21] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182; Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, trans. Frank Collins, The Alexander Lectures (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 14.

[22] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2-3.

[23] Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person*, 3.

[24] *Ibid.*, 11-14.

[25] David Jopling highlights the potential and actual risks of Sartre's desire and drive for total transparency in his biography of Jean Genet and that, despite Sartre's perception he had been more than fair to his subject, Genet felt himself 'stripped naked' and was plunged into a psychological 'void' which lasted for six years. Jopling contrasts this with Levinas's argument that our primary connections with others are on social and ethical rather than cognitive grounds. (David A Jopling, 'At the limits of biographical knowledge: Sartre and Levinas', in *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, ed. Ian Donaldson, Peter Read and James Walter [Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, 1992]). This fascinating argument goes much further, at least as far as the corruption of compassion into condescension, and Susan Tridgell teases it out at length. See Susan Tridgell, *Understanding Our Selves: The Dangerous Art of Biography*, European Connections (Bern, Berlin, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 134-156.

[26] Enza Gandolfo, 'It's all make believe: ethics, fiction and a writer's responsibilities', The *Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds* Papers – the refereed proceedings of the 16th Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (2011), 6.

[27] Robert Jones, personal conversation, Schipol Airport, Amsterdam, 2 August 2009.

[28] Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985).

[29] Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), 150-51.

[30] Ray Monk, 'Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding', *Poetics Today* 28, no. 3 (2007), 565.

[31] *Ibid*.

[32] Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 7, No. 1(Autumn) (1980), 5.

[33] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, 14.

[34] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 193.

[35] Antonia Pont, 'Inventing (a) life: deconstruction and the praxis and poiesis of narrative', The *Strange Bedfellows or Perfect Partners* Papers: the refereed proceedings of the 15th Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (2010), 7.

[36] Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction*, 11, 13.

[37] Anna Banti, *Artemisia*, trans. by Shirley D'Ardia Caracciolo (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 121.

[38] Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 13.

[39] Schabert, *In Quest of the Other Person*, 206.

[40] *Ibid*., 204.

[41] John Docker, 'Note on Brian Matthews' *Louisa*', *Meanjin* 48, no. 2 (1989), 399.

[42] Helen Thomson, *Bio-fictions: Brian Matthews, Drusilla Modjeska and Elizabeth Jolley*, The Colin Roderick Lectures 1993 (Townsville, Qld: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1994), 27.

[43] Drusilla Modjeska, *Timepieces* (Sydney: Picador, 2002), 72-73.

[44] Thomson, *Bio-fictions*, 27.

[45] Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 'Is History Fiction?', *UTS Review* 2, no. 1 (1996), 34.

[46] Modjeska, *Poppy*, 317.

[47] Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction*, 159.

[48] *Ibid*., 90.

[49] This is the approach I have taken. However, a very fine example of notes on sources is provided in Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian.*

4.   True to the person: releasing fictional biography

The truths of biography and history rest in the value of minds through which they pass.

— Anon., *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS)[1]

4.1   Introduction

The previous chapter showed how my writing practice and research contributed answers to the overall research question, and this chapter continues by discussing the constraints to the creative work that were encountered and how they were overcome. These arose primarily from concerns about how the fictional narrative could sustain its direction when the detail of the source material I was drawing on became more dense; however, it also became apparent that the constraints were in terms of my own conception of the limits of fictional biography.

The solutions involved rethinking and, perhaps, moving outwards from this understanding. This was not to leave the form behind but to establish ways that it might be conceptually extended. Doing so helped release constraints I felt to a further shaping of the creative project, and involved taking a distinctive hermeneutic perspective of my practice. This enabled me to more strongly 'make the reader a proposal', to borrow Hilary Mantel's words, and show them a way towards knowing Millicent that they, too, might wish to pursue.[2]

4.2   Narrative challenges

I had looked forward to writing about Millicent's flying years as this was the best documented part of her life and the part for which she came to fame. I felt I could see a great deal more of her personality, her concerns and her family and social life; I could also piece together the life events as she wrote about them in her letters to John and tie them in with the records of her flying from the logbook held by the National Library. However, I was using the information from the source material in much the same way as I had when this information was far less dense; that is, I was incorporating as much detail as was available, due to the

way this had previously anchored the fictional narrative. In this section, however, the amount of everyday detail, though interesting in its own right, began to make Millicent more biographical in one sense but less alive in another. This was partly due to the way the letters were written by her: they are monologues full of questions, small talk, business information, pep talks and political observations as well as the minutiae of a week's family news. But, heavily drawn on in the final chapters of both Parts I and II, this kind of sequential detail, especially Millicent's repetitive airing of money fears and investment possibilities, threatened to straightjacket the writing.

I realised I had fallen back, without really noticing it, on a yearning for the 'granite-like' by relying too heavily on Millicent's own words: this was resulting in too much weight and not enough movement. I was, for example, deferring to Millicent's voice in the letters to John, and the factual evidence they provided, in a way that relinquished my own 'knowing' of her and, thus, the aims of my portrayal. In part, this resulted from the niggling concern that this 'knowing', though it had become a complex and personal interaction entwined by the letters and deepened by the stories of others, was still partial and unfixed rather than some kind of stable unity.[3] Although this instability is what makes fictional biography possible at all, the anxiety nevertheless had its effects on the writing by making me too cautious about what I felt I could create and build around facts in Millicent's story, especially gossamer-thin ones such as the intimations in her writing fragments about her emotional state and the brief, oblique notes referring to her apparent heart interest of fourteen years standing.

What I needed was a greater underlying confidence in going beyond the sources, not unlike that with which I had begun, in order to creatively explore and expand Millicent's persona to ensure that she was more than just a sequence of her apparent concerns. Fictional biography had given me a certain freedom, and a form in which to work; however, I now needed to find a further freedom, and the following sections set down the conceptual advances that provided the impetus to push my writing, and my understanding of fictional biography, through its constraints.

4.3 'Storying' a life

An important clarification and support for a way forward came from realisation of the importance of 'story'. This had its origins earlier in the project when, having been struck by the scarcity and imbalance of factual information, I saw that no biographical project has a complete set of facts, and that an approach which equated biographical richness solely with factual accumulation would, ironically, always be struggling with its own incompleteness. This is perhaps because 'fact' is fixed by definition; it cannot move and cannot provide 'motion' other than as part of the fabric of a narrative. To put it in the converse, why is it that factual gaps do not make biography impossible? The answer, it seemed, was that the telling or relating of a life not only provides the motion but also circumvents fragmentation; it parallels our sense of 'flow', of the continuous quality of our experience of living. This does not mean that factual gaps, large or small, do not exist, just that they are integrated into the narrative, becoming features of it rather than interrupting it. This reflects the operation of a forming and trans-forming process, both intentional and creative, which is the bringing of a biographical work into being *as* 'story'.

Story can be characterised as 'any narrative or tale recounting a series of events'.[4] However, Walter Benjamin wrote of it as an essential 'ability to exchange experiences' and, when shared with others, it represents what Hannah Arendt called the life that is 'specifically human'.[5] My preference for the term 'story' is due to a sense of its wider connotations, its simultaneous sense of completeness and potential that goes beyond *what* is narrated, told or recounted. It is taken to be the essence of knowing and telling, or relating, and to stand for the process as a whole. While 'story' does not, therefore, specifically belong to the writing of a life more than to other events or ideas which can be related, it is still fundamental to biographical works because there is no biography existing somewhere on its own without its having been being formed or narrated. A biographical work, fictional or otherwise, could thus be said to be the product of 'storying': without story, there is no biography.

Julia Kristeva, in her reading of Arendt and Aristotle, distils the art of writing a life narrative down to the ability 'to condense the action into an exemplary

moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a *who*'. But such a 'who' is not an exposure of something pre-existing. Rather,

> the demonstration of a *who* works in an oracular manner, as Heraclitus says: oracles 'do not speak nor do they hide, but they make a sign.' That sign is a condensed one, incomplete, fragmentary: it launches an infinite action of interpretation. [6]

Some action or event is thus related to a moment of time, such as 'the first solo flight by a woman in Australia'. 'Who' begins as a bare signification but why he or she matters then depends on the story that is created from this core. Even the form of biography which might be considered 'natural' because it appears simply to tell the life by means of a chronology, still involves selection, organisation of sources and so on due to a sense that there *is* a story. Whatever form it takes, story represents the paradigm for choosing and mediating all kinds of content, and is, arguably, the way that the writer enacts the 'infinite action of interpretation' to create the shape and movement of the life in question and write it into being. This is further emphasised by the fact that no two biographical works will ever be the same, even if the facts at their disposal somehow happened to be: there is no single, referential account of a life existing somewhere, reified by facts or anything else.

As a creative construction and interpretation of the subject person, story not only underlies the biographical work but is expressed in its literary values. Such an example in nonfiction biography might be exemplified by Ray Monk's biography of Bertrand Russell; Susan Tridgell argues that these values enabled Monk, to a greater degree than other biographers of Russell, to evoke and balance the possible impact his daughter's tragic suicide might have had on the philosopher.[7] An example of these values where they lie closer to fiction might be in Peter Robb's *M, a Biography of European Painter Caravaggio*, joint winner of the National Biography Award in 2000; one reviewer indicates the power of Robb's imaginative approach by his ability to create 'the everyday atmosphere of palazzos and tennis courts; their air of indolence and danger, the street corner subcultures of a world in which beauty and brutality, the grotesque and the exquisite, rubbed cheek to cheek'.[8] 'Painting' around Caravaggio in this way, Robb merges a partly known, partly imagined world with the mostly unrecorded

and thus explicitly imagined day-to-day actions and feelings of his subject. A risky but vital aspect of this storying, which itself helps to prevent the confinement of his subject between historical facts, is the creation of a suitably grungy, 'urban' vernacular to give his portrayal of Caravaggio a quality of vivid presence.

What these examples illustrate is the need for biographical writing, in different degrees, to occupy an imaginative space and to sublate notions of fact and fiction as opposites where one or the other must be excluded; in this respect, recognising the creation of a biographical work in terms of 'story' possibly opens it to more conscious and 'alive' portraiture. This helped me to see that my imagination had to be more strongly and purposefully involved (as it had been earlier) if my writing was to assert the truth of Millicent's life, and that story, building on the 'exemplary moment', was a necessary means of doing so.

4.4   Inventing the life narrated: worldmaking

This crystallised an important method by which I could further 'invent the life narrated', as Pont put it. As a key process of fictional biography it is, however, paralleled by what Nelson Goodman calls 'worldmaking'. Goodman argues that we construct reality as different 'worlds' and that we do so in words or symbols continually because there is no one world that can be described without frames of reference: that is, without another 'world'. Consequently, we do not make our 'worlds' from nothing 'but from other worlds ... already at hand; the making is a remaking' Goodman says,[9] echoing Robert Scholes' assertion, noted earlier, that '[a]ll writing, all composition is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it'.[10]

However, if the historian, the biographer and the fiction writer were all to work on the same subject each would likely construct a different 'world'. Do these then conflict? Can we ever have agreement? What about differentiating 'truth' and 'imagination'? Goodman's answer is that accepting that there may be countless true or right world versions does not mean that 'anything goes' but

that 'truth must be otherwise conceived than as correspondence with a ready-made world'.[11] This acknowledges that there are only *versions* rather than some foundational 'already-made' or 'true' world, as Bruner puts it.[12] In the same way, there would be only versions of a 'life' rather than some foundational one – and no biography waiting to be 'discovered'. Goodman himself says that works of fiction, and their counterparts in other arts, play an important role in our worldmaking: our worlds, he says, 'are no more a heritage from scientists, biographers, and historians than from novelists, playwrights and painters', adding that fiction, 'albeit metaphorically … operates in actual worlds in much the same way as non-fiction'.[13]

The import of this is to point to a similarity of process that strengthens the claim of fiction to be able to function as biography: the narrative strategies of fiction and nonfiction biography can both be related to the practices involved in worldmaking. This is demonstrated by Caroline Lusin, who uses worldmaking as a lens to frame a discussion of two of the fictional biographies (or hybrid novels as she also calls them) referred to earlier, David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master.* Lusin examines the components of worldmaking identified by Goodman (composition and decomposition; weighting; ordering; deletion and supplementation; and deformation) and shows how they match the narrative strategies involved in fictional biography as well as nonfiction biography. Both Tóibín and Lodge have created works of fiction about the writer Henry James, and Lusin's analysis and comparison of the two shows how worldmaking, in the artistic portrayals of both, is able not only to evoke a biographical representation but to highlight the epistemological and ethical qualities of narrative, negotiating the tension between the 'truth of fact' and the 'truth of fiction' and showing their authors' accomplishment in 'seeking to achieve knowledge via the very process of narrative worldmaking'.[14]

While Lodge or Tóibín might not view their work as worldmaking rather than novel writing, this conceptual frame shows them to be reconstructing Henry James as a highly realized 'world' from the evidence of documents 'which can be considered as 'worlds' in themselves', according to Lusin.[15] Worldmaking could thus be used as a focusing tool to populate and characterise the 'world' or

'worlds' one is creating, using the components Goodman suggests. I found it a useful way to strengthen awareness of the directions of such creative processes, to see how certain choices fitted one 'world' or another; this provided a kind of reality check about just what constructions I was making.

4.5   Fictional biography as the 'becoming' of meaning

'Storying' and worldmaking provided further insights and methods useful for the creation of fictional biography. However, I needed a causal framework for bringing them into play, a stance that would allow me to restart the writing so I could incorporate their use in my work. I still felt concerned about what I might be doing in extending my imagining and creation of Millicent's life: how should these acts of imagining function in terms of my own 'knowing' of her? How was I getting closer to Millicent through them – and how could a reader? A powerful and useful answer to these questions was then suggested by the notion of 'becoming' in the work of the late Australian philosopher, Brian Birchall. 'Becoming' also enlarges Hannah Arendt's framing of *praxis* because Birchall's terms, applied to such a creative process, resist denoting it as 'a product' or '*an* experience', another case of the particular, but see it as the realisation, or 'becoming', of *meaning.*

One crucial way Birchall expresses this is in a metaphoric 're-vision' of hermeneutics that provides a strongly resonant reading in the context of fictional biography. In this philosophical sketch, Birchall (re)turns to the term's origin in the name of the mythological Olympian god, Hermes, one of whose functions, he explains, was to lead the dead to the underworld:

> As the guide between the two worlds, he [Hermes] acted as an inter-mediary; an inter-mediary between life and death … Hermes was a symbol of what brought life and death, being and not-being, together… Hermes must be, in other words, a symbol of <u>becoming,</u> for it is only becoming that is able to bridge the gap between the two worlds.[16]

Likewise, we could say the writer of fictional biography, in attempting to cross the threshold of time and space and evoke an experience of an other person's life, 'become[s] Hermes, not in the literal but the metaphorical sense' as Birchall puts it, an intermediary who brings together *non-being* – that is, an original experience or person that is in some sense removed (such as Millicent) – with *being*: he or she who is living in the present, such as a potential reader. In this way, the writer, conceived as an intermediary, is metaphorically inviting the reader to undertake a similar journey by entering the space of the imagination (in which a particular place and time may be evoked) and thereby approaching the other, the subject of the biographical work. This extends Walter Benjamin's understanding that '[t]he storyteller takes what he tells from experience … [a]nd he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale'.[17]

Fictional biographies, my own included, can, arguably, make the invitation to the reader more broadly or explicitly than nonfiction biographies, because theirs is an invitation to enter an imaginative experience and 'knowing' of the 'subject' person which is outside the scope of nonfiction biography. Critically, though, this is not to provide its meaning as a 'thing' that can be given, ready-made, or consumed by the reader who, to know more than what is signified or denoted about the subject, must undertake their own metaphoric journey – and this, Birchall asserts, is the *becoming* of meaning.

This understanding articulates an alternative to binary oppositions of the kind which can ensnare biographical writing (and which were part of the constraint I had been experiencing). Though it is clear we require the distinctions of 'fact' and 'fiction', or 'truth' and 'imagination', for normal, analytic thinking, this is what Birchall distinguishes as the modality of reference, the mode in which we refer *to* things that can be signified, such as 'fact' or objective knowledge: that which either *is* or *is not* the case.

The difficulty, as Birchall suggests, is that this mode does not – and cannot – encompass meaning. Why not? Because he asserts that meaning is not something that can be *signified* or that is 'out there' to be found in the world. While it is normal to speak of meaning in the sense of one thing standing for or signifying another, this is, according to Birchall, what Hegel called the 'common

view' as distinct from the philosophical or 'speculative' view, the modality of meaning. That which is genuinely speculative content, or meaning, cannot be referred *to*. For example, we cannot speak of the meaning of love or time or a flower in the modality of reference, because this is not something that can be signified or denoted. Instead, according to Birchall, we must undertake a phenomenological shift to the modality of meaning, utilising what Heidegger called the hermeneutic 'as' (as distinct from the apophantic 'as' of assertion, which concerns itself with the 'present-at-hand') in order to reach out to 'a totality of involvements'.[18] As Birchall puts it,

> [m]eaningful content … does not take the form of the proposition whose truth is independent of its meaning, but takes the form of the concept or conceiving, whose meaning becomes its truth … [thus] we *conceive (think) Truth as One.* We do not *perceive or observe that Truth is One.*[19]

Meaning, in these terms, cannot therefore be given, denoted or found; rather, the meaning of what is articulated is inseparable from *its being articulated*, according to Birchall. For example, though the meaning of a flower might be articulated by a poem, it cannot be found *in* the poem (except as a reference to a style or technique which itself cannot embody the meaning in question). In fictional biography, then, meaning comes not through particular words or content but through the encompassing of these in the whole action of *being written* and in *being read*.

Birchall's hermeneutic view, as I have related it to biographical writing, articulates more broadly Kristeva's assertion that the narration of a life 'launches an infinite action of interpretation'. Birchall's perspective is also supported by Paul Ricoeur's approach in several respects; Valdés explains Ricoeur's view that '[t]he task of hermeneutic interpretation must be focused at the intersection of the two directions of language, that is, neither exclusively with the writer's text nor with the reader, but in the encounter between the two'.[20] The configuration of the work is therefore refigured in the act of reading;[21] both the writer and the reader exert thought and effort as they put the story together.[22] In this way it is perhaps possible to see the nonfiction biographer as 'Hermes', the intermediary, leading the reader towards the life as

it is known from sources. The writer of fictional biography, on the other hand, may draw on the same sources but makes a further 'invitation' to the reader to journey beyond them.

This was, to me, a crucial articulation of how writing Millicent's life in a still more creative form could be undertaken while remaining within a biographical mode. The hermeneutic metaphor, in allowing me to conceive of myself as an 'inter-mediary', a guide to the reader, made it conceptually possible to move past the constraints I had placed on my own use of fiction in telling Millicent's life; it also offers a convention through which the writer and reader can relate to sources in a variety of ways, perhaps providing the relation that Curthoys and Docker say is missing with hybrid works like *Poppy* and which therefore prevents such works from enlivening history.[23]

4.6   Creative refigurations

By adopting this hermeneutic perspective I was able to begin refiguring my work more creatively, employing a stronger sense of the story (or stories) I could tell and an awareness of worlds I was both creating and moving between – leading, for example, to the 'shifted' rather than fully chronological time sequence that steps the reader immediately into Millicent's flying life. Looking at particular stories within this period led me to return to the letters, where I focused more closely on particular parts of their content rather than using as many short quotations to create a sense of 'dialogue' as I earlier had. The letters could then become a feature of Millicent's story rather than seeming to narrate it; thus, when John (Jack) leaves on the ship to go to England, I frame the letters more strongly as Millicent's ongoing conversation with him, signalling this to be the way readers would be hearing about moments in her life and gaining insights into her personality. Although I retained a number of smaller quotations, I was more selective and tried to better integrate them with major movements of 'story' as I constructed them. In this way, and staying within the third person narrative by which I had written the rest of the life, I took particular incidents or conversations from the letters as 'exemplary moments' that could illustrate

themes such as Millicent's finding of her emotional direction outside the family as well as within it: the motoring trip to Bowral, which relates more expansively her attempt to break out of her social isolation, is one example. Another was the steady elevation of her crisis with George and its partial resolution as an indication of her real priorities in the world. Overall, I refined the writing by letting go of a considerable amount of detail and, indeed, a number of the letters themselves because they did not strengthen the story in a way that articulated the 'becoming' of Millicent's life.

There was one area, however, in which I chose to limit or, at least, very carefully shape, my refiguration, that relating to the 'heart' interest which, if we are to trust the fragment, 'A Life', lasted fourteen years. Objectively, this is the only direct reference to it in the letters collection, although there are some inferences and some other smaller fragments that appear to address this loved figure – 'he', as I simply chose to call him.[24] This could have been the opportunity for a more romantic and perhaps appealing writing of Millicent's life but that 'he' was a physical presence other than at the beginning of this relationship, did not, subjectively, as well as objectively in terms of the evidence at hand, ring true. I sensed that 'he', though probably real, remained an idealised figure for Millicent, and he was most important as an anchorage for her heart through what seemed to be increasingly difficult years of marriage. Though she certainly broke convention in leaving Ned, there seems no indication, or likelihood, given the sentiments related in the letters, that she would have considered a physical liaison outside marriage. 'He' is no less important, however, as a liaison only of the heart – perhaps more so – and I have placed him as more of a secret presence whom Millicent could keep to herself as an intimate confidant linked by a thread of correspondence. When this 'vision' ended owing, as Millicent writes in 'A Life', to 'a marriage', this makes her reaching out to her sons to find this companionship all the more obvious.[25]

A purposeful creative change concerned the more deliberate use of Millicent's own writing in the text. This began with the division of her life story in the creative project into two halves and the separation of these with a reproduction of the handwritten sketch, 'A Life'. Another example was the use of 'Sunshine

and Water', a typescript piece Millicent appeared to have submitted for publication; it provides an ironic linking of her expression of the beauty of Sydney Harbour to her own fate. I also inserted some images of phrases or sentences from her writing fragments into chapters in Part II, as this part charts different emotional currents in Millicent's life to Part I. 'He', for example, could be suggested in these, overcoming the silences of social constraints and taboos by being set apart from the letters in the main narrative in which only certain things could be said openly. I included, further, pages of her reading diary at the beginning of the last chapter as an intriguing record of what perhaps occupied her mind and influenced her decisions at that time.

Added to quotations from actual letters within the main narrative, these reproductions of Millicent's own writing offer a further guide that might help the reader connect with the reality of the life I have written as fiction. This approach plays with conventions of nonfiction biography in which photographs are commonly inserted into the centre pages, while seeking to avoid the strongly referential impact that images of actual people or places might have on the reader's 'act of interpretation' based in the writing. In this way, it inverts W G Sebald's fiction-in-the-form-of-biography in *The Emigrants,* which employs images that are suggestive but without any actual connection to the stories being told.

However, these images of writing – simultaneously two different but related texts – function as disruptions by which the fictional biographic narrative crosses the boundaries of nonfiction to utilise source fragments that boost its vitality and authenticity. I had earlier thought myself to be doing exactly what David Shields apparently wishes to avoid in his nonfiction 'manifesto', *Reality Hunger*, by telling Millicent's story in a novelistic structure; by this means, however, I was able to experiment with the kind of collage Shields advocates by breaking visually suggestive chunks of reality into my story to draw attention to its positioning as a 'true' story rather than an invented one. As well, the series of images of writing together provides an alternate text, a thread that separates itself somewhat from the fabric of the primary narration, and through which Millicent can, perhaps, be encountered slightly differently by the reader.

4.7   Art and the writing of lives

These changes were part of a less constrained process of story creation that was empowered by the location of my narration and story in Birchall's hermeneutic terms. However, his distinction of the 'modes' of reference and meaning also corresponded with the subjective and objective distinctions of 'knowing' that have been part of my own process. His argument makes it clear that subjective knowing tends to be mistaken for, and treated as if it were, objective knowing – that is, in the language of reference. Fiction allows a clear escape from this mode and, though it does not leave 'objective' knowledge and facts behind, fictional biography is more concerned with realising its truth as coherence rather than correspondence. This equates to Birchall's modality of meaning, which is also, he asserts, the modality of art. This is because, in a work of art,

> we articulate a theme, which is to say, realize and reveal a meaning whose truth *is* its realization and revelation. Themes do not exist 'out there' independently of being articulated. Were this the case, all art would be representative, concerned solely with the reproduction of the ready-made.[26]

Art in biography is thus crucial, Birchall asserts: art is what reveals character, because this cannot be signified by any one thing or incident.

> It has a being in the world. It does not appear as appearance or fact, but as notation or script, that needs to be enacted or performed for it to be 'known' as such.[27]

This notation might be musical, visual or conceptual, as well as written, but all have to be enacted or performed if their meaning is to be realised, because, Birchall asserts, 'the real-izing of character is the embodiment of meaning' and this has to be re-created by both reader and biographer. Genuine biography presupposes a realisation or embodiment of meaning on the part of the biographer, who must grasp the 'meaning of that whose appearance in the world he is investigating'; in my own case, I grasped this from a story of my mother's and went on to create the notation for the reader in, and as, my fictional biographic portrayal.

Without art, Birchall adds, 'biography loses a sense of meaning as anything other than signification – of life as anything other than vulgar'.[28] Much biography might fail such a test but, to the extent that it finds a way to tell the truth of its subject, a biography in any form is art-full and meaning-full. Fictional biography, however, though not as imaginatively free as pure fiction, is less constrained in this respect than nonfiction biography. If it is art-full, however, it articulates the biographical truth of its subject in a way that beckons to the reader through the truth of fiction and, while using facts with care, avoids losing a sense of meaning as anything other than signification – and thus, as Birchall pungently puts it, of (the) life as 'anything other than vulgar'.

4.8   Summary: a way forward for practice

The concerns that perhaps posed some of the most unexpected barriers to my writing arose through the senses of constraint and uncertainty discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Although this did not mitigate against the use of fiction *per se*, my writing required some conceptual advancements to enable it to further relate Millicent's life to the hypothetical reader. 'Story' and worldmaking suggested the methods that could be engaged; however, my practice was released imaginatively when it conceived itself as a means of linking the living with the dead, myself and potential readers with Millicent. A subsequent insight is understanding my writing as a journey of meaning through this process, which, though inseparable from the construction I make of Millicent referentially through sources and other evidence, is not defined by it.

Modjeska's *Poppy* and Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* are relevant though quite different examples of this journey; so, perhaps, is Peter Carey's Ned Kelly. This is because Carey does so well what Hilary Mantel, subsequently, has done, in bringing the full power of the novel to illuminate an individual person from the past while keeping faith with history. That Carey achieves an astounding sense of 'voice' which becomes 'a heroic act of *divinatio* on a grand scale' is because, according to Paul Eggert, he realised, as Boldrewood had realised before him, 'that if he could invent the voice, if he could *perform* it with utter inwardness,

everything else would follow'.[29] This encapsulates the kind of processes that this chapter argues are necessary for vibrant fictional biography.

NOTES

[1] David Novarr, *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography 1880-1970* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1986), 136.

[2] Ruth Scurr, 'Hilary Mantel's revolutionary acts', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 May 2012. http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1034520.ece

[3] Such assumptions are challenged by the postmodern denial of the possibility of an ontological centre of being. Stuart Hall, for example, asserts that 'identity does not signal that stable core of the self … the bit of the self which remains always-already "the same", identical to itself across time'. Rather, identities are never unified but increasingly fragmented and fractured; they are constructed within discourse, not outside. This suggested that to know an 'other' involves learning of that person's identit*ies* and the way they are constructed, not just by conceiving them, or ourselves, as a single 'core' identity. See Stuart Hall, 'Who needs indentity?', in *Identity: a reader*, ed. Jessica Evans Paul du Gay, and Peter Redman (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications / The Open University, 2000), 17.

[4] Baldick.

[5] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 83; Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, 7.

[6] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, 17-18.

[7] Tridgell, *Understanding Our Selves: The Dangerous Art of Biography*, 184.

[8] Culturecrammer, "Peter Robb – 'M'," http://culturecrammer.com/2009/09/08/peter-robb-%E2%80%93-m-bloomsbury-2000

[9] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Harvester Studies in Philosophy (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), 22.

[10] Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future*, 7.

[11] Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 94.

[12] Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 96.

[13] Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 103-4.

[14] Lusin, 'Writing Lives and 'Worlds', 283.

[15] *Ibid*., 267.

[16] Brian Birchall, 'Hermeneutics' (Armidale, NSW: unpublished philosophical sketch, c.1987), 552. Reproduced as Appendix 3 with kind permission of Syd Birchall Jr and the Birchall family.

[17] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 87.

[18] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time [Sein und Zeit]*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, 1st English edition, The Library of Philosophy and Theology (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1962), 200-201.

[19] Brian Birchall, 'The Hermeneutic AS' (Armidale, NSW: unpublished philosophical sketch, c.1991), 2.

[20] Mario J Valdés, 'Introduction', *A Ricoeur reader: reflection and imagination*, Mario J Valdés, ed. (Hemel Hempstead, Herts; Sydney: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 15.

[21] *Ibid.,* 28.

[22] Allen Hibbard, 'Biographer and Subject: A Tale of Two Narratives', *South Central Review: The Journal of the South Central Modern Language Association* 23, no. 3 (2006), 33.

[23] Curthoys, 'Is History Fiction?', 34.

[24] Referring to the subject of this 'heart' interest as 'he' is not only consonant with the hidden and private nature of this relationship but an acknowledgment of the taboos in this period against the 'naming' of certain relationships and the people associated with them. See the chapter 'The Power of Naming' in Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[25] 'A Life', writing fragment.

[26] Birchall, 'The Hermeneutic AS', 2.

[27] Brian Birchall, *The Importance of Being Obscure* (Palmerston North, N.Z.: ThisOne and Co, 2002), 284-85.

[28] *Ibid*., 286.

[29] Paul Eggert, 'The Bushranger's Voice: Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) and Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter (1879)', *College Literature* 34, no. 3 (2007), 126.

5.   Conclusion: fictional biography as a *praxis* of imagination

[A] coherent model of the past … must not only conform to the evidence, it must have the power to capture the imagination of contemporaries, so as to seem real for them. It shares this quality with the work of fiction. For both writer and historian, form is the shape of content.

— Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters*[1]

5.1   Double ends: fiction and biography

From the perspective of this exegesis, the research question has kept company with numerous other questions that have arisen in the course of the project, from the relationships of Millicent's family members to questions of knowledge and identity. All these have contributed to the larger and longer journey through which the question '*what writing approaches and methods can create a biographical portrayal in fiction?*' has been considered.

My research and creative practice have provided a number of answers, although they first needed to consider the double-ended question: *can* fiction be biography, or biography be fiction? The affirmation that it can be seems a short one but required defining the scope of 'fiction' and considering the way it could relate to history and biography before asserting its appropriateness and value to the project as an exploratory mode. The focus then moved to the different methods and approaches I employed in writing fictional biography; as well as ways of working with sources, I sought to describe and conceptualise imaginative approaches, including establishing the importance of the human relationship between subject and 'self', relying on my 'knowing' of Millicent in subjective as well as objective terms, and recognising how narration itself is a means of translating the 'knowing' of a person into 'telling'. These means were related to the work of other writers of fictional biography.

However, the writing practice came to a point at which I had to turn to the other end of the equation, the writing of the life as a work of fiction in order for it to more fully develop. This was because, notwithstanding the important anchorages of the evidence, the writing became constrained by dense source

material in the sections covering the last parts of Millicent's life when she became a pilot. My difficulty was to find a way of conceiving my own practice that would allow me to overcome the concern about what a more extended imagining of Millicent's life beyond the source material would produce, and how faithfully it could explore the formation of the personality that led to her becoming Australia's first woman pilot.

'Story' was articulated as a vital component of the practice required, and the lens of worldmaking, as Nelson Goodman has conceived it, recognised a parallel process of creating 'worlds' when we represent reality; moreover, in distinguishing 'right from wrong versions [of worlds]', Goodman notes that 'we cannot, I am sure, do it on the grounds that fiction is fabricated and fact found'.[2] However, Brian Birchall's hermeneutic metaphor suggested that I could write creatively by conceiving myself as a guide to the reader, figuratively showing the way, like Hermes, from one 'world' to another. This understanding empowered my further imagining of Millicent's life and completion of the creative work. Birchall's broader assertion that meaning cannot be reduced to referential terms but 'becomes' in its expression (as in a work of art), also provides a possible conceptual account of Kate Grenville's 'different way' of understanding while more generally supporting the aspirations and creative process of fictional biography.

This also strengthens the recognition of fiction as a way to 'recover' the lives of those, such as women, who are obscured in the view of history. Millicent's flying achievement made her visible but, prior to that (unless one counts her presence in the Supreme Court as an appellant at the age of eighteen), she was not. The difficulties I encountered in writing her early life emphasise this, as does the fact that it is almost entirely through letters that a personal view of her can be glimpsed; perhaps similarly, Anna Banti, according to Scarparo, considered that the recovery of history is necessarily mediated by means of fictional writing and that historical memory is only accessible through a process of interpretation.[3]

While my narrative has attempted to redress Millicent's obscurity in this sense, a self-reflexive and involved approach such as Banti's or Barnes' threatened to shift the focus from her and to foreground myself (or another character) if I

went down the same path. Instead, my fictional biography is closer to a realist novel but with innovations such as using quotations from actual letters within my narrative and adding fragments of 'reality' via the inclusion of images of Millicent's writing. This created several kinds of stories, weighted very differently but reflecting on each other and mingling, just as the two 'halves' of the creative work do overall. They also offer an alternate notation for readers, perhaps empowering them to find other dimensions of Millicent beyond my narrative.

In these ways, both my research and practice support arguments for the efficacy of fictional biography as a means of portraying a historical individual. However, they also suggest that it functions by fixing its subject in place *less*, rather than more, than nonfiction. To put it another way, fiction exhibits propositions about the subject person that do not claim to be definitive of the life in question but which can create powerful demonstrations of its possible shape and movement that are beyond the scope of other forms. The question 'but is this Millicent?' is not to be answered with either 'yes' or 'no' because, as Birchall asserts, this form of enquiry can only deal with questions of content or reference (on which nonfiction biography is normally more focused). Rather, fictional biography, while incorporating historical evidence, is able to seek its subject through a broader creative journey – and it is my hope that the fictional biography of Millicent Bryant offers such an opportunity.

5.2   Suggestions for further research

This exploration of fictional biography as a path to knowing Millicent has covered a relatively limited territory and glossed over large tracts. For example, ideas of self and other are only briefly set out; fuller studies or contemplations on alterity, or self and identity, might improve the current argument, as could a revisiting of the epistemological simplifications and assumptions which the needs and scope of the current project imposed.

In terms of a poetics of fictional biographical writing, further study could examine whether recent works have employed similar methods to those Schabert outlines, and if they conform to her test for fictional biography. It would be particularly interesting to examine the extent to which writers of fictional biography are concerned with engaging their work as historically based enterprises that can be imaginatively driven. In this regard, Susanna Scarparo's study of women's fictional biographies as gendered metafiction could be viewed as bringing Schabert's work up to date, while perhaps situating this kind of metafiction as the 'new generation' of fictional biography.

Brian Birchall's metaphoric view of hermeneutics and his articulation of reference and meaning as different modes could be further explored as a means of understanding the potential of fiction and art in the writing of lives. His work could also be illuminating in other settings, but a thorough-going study of his philosophical *oeuvre* has, however, yet to become available. Paul Ricoeur's work on hermeneutics and on the self and narrative, where these have been beyond the scope of the present discussion, likewise merits further study: Hibbard notes that Ricoeur's work 'might also help us account for yet another important, under-theorized component of biography studies: the relationship between the reader's life and the life of the biographical subject as constituted by the biographer'.[4] The place and practice of fictional biography could also be considered in terms of Susan Tridgell's view of biographies as arguments for viewing the self in a certain way, as well as via Ray Monk's adoption of the Wittgensteinian notion of the 'understanding that consists in seeing connections'.[5]

5.3   Final reflections

I take stock of the project at this point by looking, figuratively, towards the horizon because while I have produced a broadly realised fictional biography which is certainly complete in one sense, it has not – yet – quite reached the goals I set for it.

But this is, in part, because these goals have moved towards a more creative focus on Millicent's personal life: my fictional biography could therefore incorporate additional refinements, building on the kind already discussed in Chapter 4. I have begun to see how this might be done by reconsidering some situations raised in the letters and imagining more extensively how Millicent might have been affected by, and responded, to them, as well as to personalities such as George, Edgar Percival, Captain Leggatt, and even Kingsford Smith. The 'chasing game' is therefore bouncing from Millicent's own words in her letters to my imagination of where these words could have taken her – a theme of the project. Although still writing in the third person, the aim would be to more strongly perform Millicent 'with utter inwardness', to use Paul Eggert's term. This, hopefully, will be the ultimate stage of the project.

It leads to a final observation. This is that the process conceived here, utilising the openness of fiction to the subjective, and moving beyond the referential mode to that of meaning, requires a commitment by the writer that goes beyond 'mere' fictionalisation, or of writing from a subjective perspective one moment and an objective one the next. Put another way, one of the most significant insights from my practice has been that a fictional biography requires enough impetus, as fiction, to escape the 'gravity' of its own facts.

The difficulty for writing that conceives itself as biographical is trusting that launching from the 'ground' of fact does not send one spinning out into a personal universe disconnected from the individual one wishes to discover and relate with. However, most of the exemplars of fictional biography I have examined have demonstrated this commitment; this is also evident in accomplished works of fiction that explore historical lives while not explicitly in the service of biography, such as Peter Carey's and Hilary Mantel's works. Writers, thus, must trust in the *praxis* of the imagination. Fictional biography does not achieve its goals by limiting itself to the terms of 'granite' or 'rainbow' and neither does the best of nonfiction biography. Instead, it must encompass both: factuality enables it to be authentic, but trust in the imagination is what frees it to explore beyond these bounds. As Millicent recorded in her reading

diary, Nietzsche (in the voice of Zarathustra) observes that only '[h]e who has chaos within him may give birth to a dancing star'.[6]

NOTES

[1] Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117.
[2] Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 107.
[3] Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction*, 15.
[4] Hibbard, 'Biographer and Subject: A Tale of Two Narratives', 33.
[5] Monk, 'Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding', 567.
[6] Millicent Bryant, quoted from her Reading Diary (MMBLC) n.p. It is unclear the edition of Nietzsche she was referring to; my 2003 edition records these words as 'one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star'. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R J Hollingdale [London: Penguin Books, 2003], 46).

APPENDIX 1: 'MILLICENT MAUDE BRYANT LETTERS COLLECTION' INVENTORY

Description: A collection of letters, documents, writings, photos and ephemera by, and relating to, Millicent Maude Bryant (1878–1927) held by Millicent E Jones.

Location: Kendall, NSW.

Abbreviations: MMB = Millicent Maude Bryant

JHB = John Harvey Bryant;

MEJ = Millicent E Jones

Inventory

This inventory is a simple description of the contents of the folders and other containers in which the collection is housed as of March, 2009. The inventory is primarily aimed at ascertaining the scope of the collection, and does not describe all the contents in detail or catalogue them.

CONTENTS

1. OLD FAUX-LEATHER COVERED BRIEFCASE

Large buff envelope

Notes and thoughts by MMB on her own character and events in her life. Includes 'Sunshine and Water', typed (prose) about the beauty of Sydney Harbour and water reflections. 'A Life' writing fragment, autobiographical, with summary phrases about her life.

Bright green manila folder

1. Photocopies of family history;
2. Some of the Aero Club documents and clippings referred to above (scrapbook?);
3. Beginning of family history of Jones from North Wales;
4. Clippings and press photos of MMB, including flying and funeral.

White envelope

Bernadette Power's short draft beginning of MMB's story. c. 2002.

Manilla folder with bright green sticker

Papers relating to Edward James Bryant (1863–1926) including:

1. Info by MEJ on Edward's funeral;
2. Info on trip with MMB and family to Festival of Empire;
3. Info Letter of Intro from PMG's Department for Edward's private visit to London;
4. Letter of Passport for Edward Bryant and family;
5. Chequebook from Bank of NSW, September 1911;
6. Invitation for lunch at Magdalen College, Oxford

Brown manila folder

1. Family Tree (probably from Bernadette Power) of the Harveys of Wellington; several family tree jottings by J. H. Bryant about Harveys.

Dark maroon exercise book.

Book by Margery Taylor (MMB's grandmother) about her early life, for her children. She was married to Edmund George Harvey (Snr) (b.1815). Also clippings mostly about his death and about the Harvey family migrating to Australia going broke. Said to be dictated and written down by a child or grandchild who was a teacher.

Red envelope folder

1. Jottings about thoughts MEJ collected in her readings, including the letters, about Millicent and her character;
2. Loose pages with list of all the times MMB mentioned going flying in her letters to son John, with dates of her letters (mostly 1927).

Beige manila folder

Various unsorted writings and thoughts by MMB, including literary fragments and newspaper clippings.

Large buff envelope

Notes and talk by Millicent Jones to Royal Aeronautical Society in Canberra on 18/11/75 to celebrate International Women's Year and the role of women in aviation, held in the Academy of Science Building.

Green envelope folder

1. Old photos (various);
2. Solo flight article;
3. Info on recent exhibitions on women aviators;
4. Pamphlet describing and naming people represented in the Australian Civil Aviation Memories Mural in the Civil Aviation Authority head office;
5. Details of MMB's grave in Manly c. 2003;
6. Original papers relating to an enquiry about the death of MMB's brother, Arthur Harvey, in an Australian Army camp a month after his departure from home in 1915;
7. Clippings about *Women Take Wing* grant for Margaret Lanagan from 1991 (book to be written and published);
8. CD-ROM (see entry below).

Scans on CD-ROM (in green manila envelope folder) of scrapbook of MMB memorabilia held by J R H Bryant. Scan files have been renamed and organised as follows:

1. Newspaper clippings, training, first solo, licence and funeral;
2. Aero Club correspondence;
3. Dept of Defence correspondence;
4. Aero Club Handbook and brochure.

Loose

Jottings by MMB to be sorted and eventually added to small brown fibre suitcase.

GREEN SPRING FOLDER 1

Labelled 'Letters to Millicent Maude Bryant from various 1902–1918'

GREEN SPRING FOLDER 2

Labelled 'Letters from John Harvey Bryant to Millicent Maude Bryant 1926'

GREEN SPRING FOLDER 3

Labelled 'Letters from John Harvey Bryant to Millicent Maude Bryant 1927'

2. SMALL BROWN FIBRE SUITCASE

Contents (from bottom)

- Postcards, in envelope, of St Albans – mementos of MMB's family trip in 1911. Most not written on.
- Postcards, in envelope, of Brussells – mementos of JHB'S trip c. 1925.
- Notebook, very small (2x4"), black-covered. Contains just a few pages with notes of music/concerts and composers, plus a quotation from Rolland.
- Notebook, small (3x6"), black-covered, with rounded corners. First page explains: 'Extracts from Spanish ballads from Longfellow's stories of his travels. From the Ballad of the Five Farthings and Alfonso the Eighth (epic of doomed love). Other poems too, e.g. Francisco Xavier and extracts from other (love) ballads.'
- Notebooks, small, (3x6"), two stuck together as one, rounded corners. Contains quotations, observations on men and women (13/5/1897) on selfishness. Notes about lessons in massage (from Dr Roth?) and books about physiology.
- Postcards, in envelope, blank, of England and Sydney.
- Harrington's Photo Folder containing, in one half, photos of 'SGS Form 2 1916'; Georgiana Sarah Harvey (and husband? – not labelled); Margery Taylor and Edmund Harvey; George B Bryant; small snaps, untitled, of a homestead and three schoolchildren. Other half contains photos of JHB and car; France and/or Belgium (?); Gibraltar (presumably from JHB's 1925 trip).
- Notebook, small (3x6"), thick, black-covered, labelled 'Psychology extracts' on cover. Begins with minutes of a meeting of the 'Women's Committee of Reinforcement Referendum, Roseville Branch' dated 23/11/1917. MMB

elected secretary. (Relates to Billy Hughes conscription referendum of 1917). Also notes about results of referendum count in Roseville area. Followed by a glossary of psychological terms and extensive notes from Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious.* Includes notes (in Jung's notes) on Freud. About 3/4 of book filled.

- Travel Diary, narrow (2.5x7"), blue, hard-covered. Records basic itinerary of MMB and family's trip to France and England in 1911. Includes comments on Versailles, cathedrals, house and other places in England, a quote in Latin about the martyrdom of Joan of Arc, and Bowen's sickness.

- Photo folder. Main photo is Bridget Bryant, also photos of Anne Bryant and Genie Reid.

- Glass negative, in envelope, with prints of Vere Harvey and postcards from him (after enlistment and before going overseas?).

- Card, black and silver, announcing death of Margery Harvey on 4/12/1909.

- Notebook, small (3x6"), black-covered, square corners, labelled 'Notes on literature and writing of ... '

- Christmas cards, from 'Milly and Edward'; from Adrian and Jane Seligman.

- Receipt for wedding flowers, dated 9/8/1933 (for Prue Bryant?) from Mr Bryant (must have been JHB) of 43 Macleay St, Potts Point.

- Postcard to Bowen Bryant from JHB, in envelope.

- Prescription for Mr Harvey, in envelope. Actual prescription unintelligible.

- Solicitor's letter from Launceston on 24/11/1925 to JHB in Purley, possibly re: estate of Margery Taylor.

- Photo folder, brown, with photo of Georgiana Sarah Harvey (nee Bartlett)

- Membership card, Alliance Française, for Mrs Bryant for 1922.

- Locks of hair, George Bryant and Vere Harvey in envelopes.

- Ledger book, blue, with calendars for 1911 and 1912 on back, containing poems by Tagore on front page then meditations and quotations on friendship from authors from Pythagoras to Thoreau. Also enclosed photos (unlabelled) of WWI cemeteries. (taken by JHB?)

- Newspaper clippings about Vere's death and his mate Dick Wilkin's story about it.

- Newspaper clippings of Ruth Elders' Atlantic flight attempt and escape.

- Christmas cards, in envelope, from MMB and Edward from 'Delos', Manly (no year noted); from Dick Wilkins; from 'Arthur' to 'Mill and Ned'; sympathy cards (like business cards – for who? Vere?) and a specimen signature card identifying MMB for Post Office (funds or parcel collection of some sort).
- Reading Diary. Index book, maroon, hard cover, with 'Where is it?' printed in gold. Contains, in one end, a lengthy list of books (presumably) read. Dates from 1920 to 1925. Contents from classics to Hardy, Rolland to Pirandello. At other end, and filling half the book, are quotations and literary comments on writers and poets from Byron and Congreve to Shelley, some very extensive.

APPENDIX 2: ADDITIONAL NOTES ON SOURCES AND RESEARCH

A life in letters

Working with the Letters Collection

To draw together the pieces of Millicent's story and to turn it into a full 'life-story' appeared to be a formidable task; there were so many gaps, so little really known, and it seemed it would take a long time to find out enough to tell the story fully. However, the opportunity to work on it full-time meant that such a project could be planned and undertaken. When I began, however, what I had was my mother's short talk and an initial reading of the letters in the collection: this didn't seem like very much.

This prompted me not only to search for more material but to carve out the clearest possible view of Millicent from the material that I had. So I began by creating a basic inventory of what kinds of items the letters collection contained. When this was done, it was clear that there was a greater variety of evidence about the events of Millicent's inner life, as well as the outer life, than I had supposed. As listed in Appendix 1, the collection contains not only letters, but also notebooks of poems, of travel and of reading as well as literary fragments, personal notes on a variety of subjects, accounts, and various ephemera. This led to a second reading of the letters collection and, subsequently, of all the other small pieces of writing, notes and fragments. This took a considerable time because of the difficulty in reading Millicent's handwriting, and the way she had scribbled notes on any piece of paper or paper material that came to hand. Yet, these pieces of writing offer insights not present in the letters; moreover, with ideas and comments written on the back of train tickets or theatre programs, it was often possible to date and place them.

The bulk of the letters (the correspondence with John 1925–1927) gives the everyday detail of Millicent's life in this period. As I began to progress, however, it began to seem that my original aim of transcribing most of them might not be practicable, due to the amount of material and the difficulty in deciphering poor

handwriting, usually on both sides of thin paper and frequently around the edges as well. Thus, I reassessed how I intended to use the resources of the letters collection. I had wanted to leave open the option of a diaristic-type use, if the content and style proved amenable, with the aim of allowing Millicent's voice to come through and tell her own story; I still wanted to do this but decided that this would only be possible – and worthwhile – for a select range of incidents. I therefore limited transcription to what seemed like important or useful quotations (which could be as extensive as required), while summarising the rest of the letter's content.

As with transcription, this involved entering notes (typing or using dictation software) into a table in a document file while my mother read the letters aloud to me. But the disadvantage was that some details not included later turned out to be important or necessary. While the time and effort needed to transcribe the letters seemed, at the earlier juncture, too great even considering the three year notional time frame for the project, the need to preserve all the details gradually became paramount. As the directions of Millicent's life twisted and turned, it became less and less certain what could be excluded; the act of summarising was a kind of pre-writing which risked losing material from earlier parts that would be important to later parts. Thus, over time, most of the letters became fully transcribed, and, as the second year progressed, my sister, Claire Daniel, agreed to assist this process by typing out some of the letters and sending me the files. In this way it gradually became possible to easily refer to the letters and their contents and to quickly check details (rather than a summary), while not being constrained by handwriting. However, only the letters and some of the other major fragments have been transcribed; the small notes have been sorted into piles by subject and theme so they could be turned to at a later time when I wanted to know more about a certain area of her life.

Content: the letters

As this reading of the letters proceeded and their content and style became more familiar, an impression of Millicent began to form. I started to gain a sense of someone with great energy, considerable intensity and pragmatism. Yet this didn't seem to reconcile with her own view of herself as shy, perhaps reserved;

in many of the letters I observed someone quite forceful. It could be supposed that in the letters, especially to John, to whom she was writing in 1926 and 1927, she could be more relaxed. It was very hard to know how she was with other people in normal social situations or in business situations, although in some newspaper interviews she sounds opinionated and even, on one occasion, crass. The overall impression is that she was reserved socially (and perhaps more so with the flying fraternity of the Aero Club at Mascot), conforming mostly to the mores of the times except with people she knew well – a perfectly normal scenario.

The largest part of the collection consists of a conversation with Millicent's second son, John, during the first (1925–1926) and second (1927) of his business trips to England. Crucially, it contains both sides of the correspondence, thus providing a vital picture of how Millicent herself spoke, the relationship between mother and son, what her preoccupations were at that time, and the everyday events and the movement of her life during this time. By contrast, the pre-war letters (from about 1901) and war-time letters (other than those to Vere evidently returned to her after his death) are mostly to Millicent, rather than being written by her; however, they highlight certain events in Millicent's life and, as virtually the only source of information about these, were vital to the factual reconstruction of her story. Their origin and content ranges from a doctor's letter about her brother George's sickness and his treatment for polio, which took the family and Millicent to Manly (and the meeting with Edward Bryant that would decide the direction of her life) to letters from cousins overseas referring to travel details and personal confidences. There is also formal correspondence from the Queen Victoria Home for Consumptives charity organisation, with which she was involved for a period, and personal correspondence with Vere (her second younger brother), though surprisingly little from her parents. As primary sources, these letters reveal her feelings and priorities as well as offering a record of events and dates.

While the collection only begins around the time of Millicent's marriage in 1900, even the material in the fourteen years before World War I is relatively sparse; the variety and quantity in the war and post-war phases, by contrast, are far

richer. In the pre-war period, one of the most useful items is a travel diary Millicent wrote on her trip to England in 1911 which is invaluable for its record of places and dates, as well as some descriptions; there were also postcards and other ephemera from this trip, plus letters referring to it written to her afterwards. As earlier noted, the war period features correspondence both to and from Vere up to his death in 1916, as well as testimony Millicent apparently produced of the medical treatment of her brother, Arthur. A small number of newspaper clippings in the collection add detail about the deaths and funerals of both brothers, as do the remarkable, heart-felt letters from Dick Wilkins.

Millicent's world and self

Initially, the letters served to provide vital factual fabric for the telling of Millicent's life – even if, as a complete tapestry, the greater part was comprised of holes and, as previously stated, they relate to the period of her life following her marriage. Through the letters, however, many of the events of Millicent's life become visible which were not previously; many of those that were are given detail, clarified or more accurately or evocatively characterised. Relationships are brought to life, particularly those with family members. Incidents are related, conversations discussed and life events mentioned. Although much silence still surrounds Millicent's relationship with Edward, her husband, Millicent provides enough detail in relating his illness and death to John that something of what was between them can be perceived. The letters do not cover their separation so no light can still be shone on what was a crucial part of her personal story, though John's surprisingly cold response to news of his father's death provides room for speculation.

In developing the story of Millicent's life, earlier letters were relied upon for their location or corroboration of places, times and events. They also became a more prominent feature of Millicent's life (as 'told') than they would otherwise have been; even when factual details are small they become large in the story because that is all there is to work with. In this way, the early letters have had a distorting effect on the biographical account, which is not the case with the later ones. With the letters to John from 1925, the everyday fabric is sufficiently detailed and continuous that the portrayal can be deep and finely nuanced

enough to develop its own authenticity. The physical surrounds and contents of the flat in Neutral Bay, for example, show it to be close to the water and cramped to begin with, but from it Millicent writes of looking out to see if the weather was suitable for flying. Likewise, these letters show the vulnerability of early flying to the vicissitudes of weather, as Millicent would often be told the wind had suddenly become too adverse for flying when she arrived at Mascot, even after stopping to phone ahead en route. These letters also locate her place in the fraternity of the Aero Club. She was not one of the younger set, unlike the two other women, Evelyn Follett and Margaret Reardon, who were also receiving instruction, so the Club may have had less of a social focus for her than them. Even so, the letters mention news of other aviators and of various aerodrome and flying incidents (such as crashes or broken propellors) which were a part of this world.

Self and other: Millicent and John

The letters to John (and the other few, earlier letters of her own in the collection – to Vere, for example) are particularly important for the biographical project because of the authentic sense of voice they make available. As well, with their conversational quality, these letters bring the reader close to Millicent's personal presence. This does not avoid the notion that she was writing for 'somebody' but gives a sense of how she liked to speak to that somebody. In the letters to John, Millicent comes across as both motherly and pragmatic, with a sometimes scathing impatience toward those who do not live up to her expectations (or their own self-importance), from Aero Club officials to newspaper editors, and even her mother. Her tone at times has an edge of protestant self-righteousness; she expected others to do what they said they would, as they could expect of her. She is sometimes judgmental in this respect, with her harshest criticisms being directed at her eldest son, George, whose selfishness she clearly finds not just exasperating but hurtful. Yet one feels she would rarely give vent to such feelings, except in a letter to someone she could confide in, and the unconstrained nature of her exchanges with John suggests not only affection and closeness but the trust of equals: she treats him as a mature and intelligent adult whose judgment could be as perceptive as her own. No doubt this stroked my

grandfather's ego to a degree, and certainly he is her main confidant – it might be guessed that he partly supplanted his father in this way even before his parents' separation. Indeed, the earliest of his trip letters written on the TS *Port Hunter* show him addressing Millicent as 'my dear little woman' and deprecating his own worthiness in her affections while she is equally effusive, signing letters in return 'your Itz' with 'lots of hugs and kisses and loving thoughts', 'happy dreams' and 'oceans of love and kisses' (e.g. MMB to JHB 13/7/25). While there is no indication of other than maternal affection, its effusiveness prompted my mother's comment that 'I'd almost say this more to my lover than my son.' My own sense is that to John, in his absence, she allowed full expression of her feelings and emotions, not only in the manner above but in the constant and even obsessive concern for his well-being. Many letters are filled with her pondering aloud as to his whereabouts or how much money he might need or his business prospects, etc. Her attention would have been smothering in person but in the letters it shows an almost constant anxiety, linked, in part, to her activity as an investor and the need to generate an income. This is one of the most frequent subjects of her conversation in the letters.

John's own letters to his mother, though, usually more full of his travel news and business ideas, certainly reflect back some of her concerns. However, this project seeks to tell her life rather than his, and to listen to her voice and tell her story. For this reason, and with time for further transcription in short supply, his letters were not transcribed. Though interesting as a conversation they are not the subject of this study other than for providing ways of understanding things or corroborating matters directly affecting Millicent.

Fragments of self

In addition to actual letters, the 'Letters Collection' contains, as noted above, much other material: notebooks of poems, travel and reading, literary fragments, personal notes on a variety of subjects, accounts, and various ephemera. These have served to provide details of incidents in Millicent's life not recorded elsewhere, or to fill out features mentioned in passing. There are notebooks, one with newspaper clippings on how to present manuscripts and articles, indicating an interest in writing and journalism. This explains why there is also a sketched

outline with characters and the beginning of a story about a western plains family; this pointed to parts of her own early life story, as does the vital fragment, 'A Life'. There is another notebook with quotations from favourite poets, and her tastes apparently ranged from Longfellow and Thomas Aldritch to Eric Mackay, Roderic Quinn and Margaret Sangster. There are drafts of political speeches given or planned. Even more fascinating is the reading diary in an index book, mentioned earlier, which covers roughly the period 1920–1925; inside are listed the books she apparently read and, in the index section, memorable quotations. Along with much literature, middle as well as high brow from Barrie and Galsworthy to Maupassant and Tolstoy, there are recorded works of poets, books on world affairs and psychology, including Freud and Jung, as well as plays – Shakespeare, of course, but also a great number by Ibsen in the period 1920–21. These, with their evocation of conflicts and repressive mores within society and between men and women, suggest influences on her mental state leading up to her separation with Ned; the latter is clearly alluded to (as 'you') in a series of notes as if for an argument with him she may or may not actually have had. Other fragments and notes are scarcely less interesting and, ranging from a line or two to several paragraphs, have been grouped by themes such as 'On men and expediency', 'His and Her', 'Emotions and alone-ness'. Some of these are perhaps mawkish in the sentiments and heartache; my mother has noted that they are 'rather wafty, jottings in philosophical vein that continually stress the inadequacies of life in general … lonely soliloquies as if she had nobody to share these thoughts with'.[1] Others are quite deeply questioning: '[d]oes the reading [of] iconoclastic matter materialise and lessen the poetic happiness?'[2]

Seeking Millicent

The above shows the ways that Millicent's world, as well as her person, emerge both from the letters she wrote to others and the thoughts, questions, quotes and ideas she wrote, presumably for her own benefit, to both express and reflect upon. This points back to the key considerations of using the letters to gain knowledge of what happened, where, when (and, where possible, why) in Millicent's life, but also in order to develop a broader sense of 'who' Millicent

was and what her life meant so as to portray it. Because, while my desire was initially to let the material of the letters speak directly, I eventually realised that they simply provided too much detail and that this would divert readers of her story *from* her story in the form I have come to feel it should be told in.

While this is a reminder that the Millicent who emerges in the narrative is ultimately a projection of my own ideas, research and instincts in many of the subjective and objective ways that have been earlier discussed, it must also be remembered, likewise, that Millicent herself is not necessarily the same as the person 'appearing' in the letters. Margaretta Jolly advises a 'suspicion' of personal letters that they represent the 'spontaneous outpourings of the true self'. She goes on to describe letters as inhabiting an interesting ontological as well as epistemological 'space', situated as they are 'on the boundaries of the personal and impersonal', and that the letter's truth status 'is even more ambiguous than that of the auto/biographer or diarist'.[3]

In this respect, the use of Millicent's letters as a resource might be accommodated more easily for a fictional biography than in a nonfiction setting. While issues of interpretation are still present (and just as important in terms of the attempt to discern Millicent's 'truth'), their use as a stimulus for the imagination and in the creation of my story of Millicent requires less justification. Thus, the writings in letters and those elsewhere in the collection remain a foundational resource that 'holds' a complex knowledge of Millicent in readiness for the telling of her life's story.

Other research activities

While most external research was conducted in the National Library of Australia and in the NSW State Library and State Records, it was apparent that much could be gained by a research trip and visit to meet members of the Harvey family still living in western New South Wales. This trip eventuated, with my mother accompanying me and providing much vital discussion and reflection on the places we visited and meetings that we had with family. The trip also opened the

door to direct experience of the kind of country Millicent grew up in, and this made it possible to create descriptions using the actual landforms, rivers, land-use practices and the houses she lived in. This became an imaginative resource: having placed myself where she had been, and become familiar with the physical sensations, textures and views which Millicent would have experienced, I was better able to create stories of her childhood and adolescence. I could also gain a sense of her family, of who the Harveys *were* through who they are today, as well as their stories and records. Their attitudes, sense of country and of the life of a grazier were also ones that informed my own understanding and imagination.

I was also fortunate to be shown old photographs in the possession of family members, some of which were old enough to show people wearing the clothing of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how gardens and surrounds of homesteads looked. There was also some sense, though almost unstated, of the presence of Aboriginal people; here, though, there were silences similar to those elsewhere in country New South Wales. Aboriginal people, it seemed, were 'distant' from the farmers and country people of the Wellington, Narromine and Trangie districts who volunteered information or who I asked; there seemed little knowledge of them. The only notable comment was that, occasionally, 'we saw the smoke from their fires' even though, historically, some had been stockmen or domestic help – Millicent Jones's talk mentions the former specifically. However, the only local history I came across, Phillip King's 1979 *History of Narromine and District*, includes little more than an account in which a landowner, dressed in full Scottish regalia, supposedly thwarted an attack by Aboriginal tribesmen by blowing the bagpipes.

From the meetings in this research trip came a sense of the character of the community Millicent might have grown up with: she was one of them. There was also a slight sense of the times, or an attitude to earlier times, in the way locals spoke about the district, their memories and connections to it. I tried to grasp what I could of this outlook, and to imagine my way into it. The meetings with people, almost always generous and engaged, helped me also to develop my sense of kinship with them and, as well, how Millicent had been kin.

But there seemed to be no end to the factual questions that remained. I learned where she had been born, and saw and experienced several places she lived, but Millicent herself was still at a distance, and a sense of her personal presence was elusive. I could hardly 'hear' her voice as a younger person – except by imagining a younger version of the adult voice that comes through much later in the letters. Indeed, the result of this trip and of the attempt to accumulate more factual material did not change the situation that information about events from the other end of her life was far easier to obtain. For example, material exists in the NSW Archives that relates to the period her brothers went to school in Manly. Photographs and property title searches, plus archival and newspaper records in the local history section of Manly Library, were also very helpful. Manly was one place, at the end of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, that was well-documented, while western New South Wales was far less so. But this is not to minimise the trip's importance to the biographical project; while there was scant evidence of Millicent in the particular, I returned with a far stronger sense of her world, enabling me to sketch it and even colour it in, even if she herself was a relatively small and indistinct figure in hat and white skirts in the middle distance.

While the writing proceeded, I continued to accumulate material. When visiting the NSW State Records, I was able to look up the coroner's reports of the *Greycliffe* disaster, including the medical records of examination and Bowen Bryant's statement identifying his mother's body. I also checked through public school records to see if enrolment dates existed for Millicent's younger brother, Macquarie, at Manly Public School. On another occasion I visited Sydney Grammar School, where the archivist, Gordon Cooper, kindly gave me access to the School's enrolment records so I could check exactly when Millicent's sons had attended. Other research included newspaper records in the State Library of NSW, the local history section of Manly Library, and late nineteenth and early twentieth century property records in the registry of the NSW Department of Lands. This led to clarifications and some revelations about Edmund Harvey's property dealings.

Few interviews as such were undertaken. I had interviewed Nancy Bird Walton prior to the beginning of the project, but since then only informally conversed with several older Harvey and Bryant relatives. However, I spoke with other pilots, including my younger brother, Robert Jones, who gained his own licence privately, and who gave me considerable help with test processes, going solo and flying in general. Towards the end of the project I also met former Chief Pilot, Arthur Palmer, who read and commented on the flying sections of the narrative.

After visiting western New South Wales, most of the factual research that could not be conducted online was almost complete. However, one important source remained, Millicent's logbook and licence, which had been donated by my mother to the National Library in Canberra. This source was particularly useful as it accurately showed the dates, time in the air and basic tasks which Millicent undertook in her instructional and solo flying. It also showed the actual day of the flying tests through which Millicent gained her licence. There was not, however, a great deal of detail about the course of tuition, weather conditions or actual tasks and exercises Millicent had to perform in the aircraft: these came from Aero Club source material. However, while in Canberra, I also checked the National Film and Sound Archives to see if there happened to be any film of early flights relevant to my investigation. There was not, but relating to the *Greycliffe* disaster was film of the RMS Tahiti, steaming through Sydney heads and out to sea only hours after she cut the ferry in two near Bradley's Head. This was haunting footage.

NOTES

[1] MEJ, personal note, n.d.
[2] Black notebook rounded corners, untitled.
[3] Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, 'Letters as / not a genre', *Life Writing* 1, no. 2 (2005), 92.

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Hermeneutics

One of the twelve Olympian Gods, Hermes had many functions, one of which was to lead the dead to the underworld. As the guide between the two worlds, he acted as an inter-mediary; an inter-mediary between life and death. A precursor of the Holy Ghost, Hermes was a symbol of what brought life and death, being and not-being together. But only that which is <u>not</u> something that comes into being and passes away can bring life and death, being and not-being together. Hermes must be, in other words, a symbol of <u>becoming</u>, for it is only becoming that is able to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Hermes does not relate <u>to</u> Time, but relates <u>with</u> times and, in doing so, real-izes <u>Time</u> or that which is not explicable in terms of time<u>s</u>, i.e., is not explicable in terms of time present (bein<u>g</u>) or time past (not-being). Hermes is not the sign of some social or political function, but is the symbol of relating <u>vis-a-vis</u> the world other than that of <u>to</u>. He is not, in other words, some function to be understood, but a symbol whose meaning is to be real-ized either implicitly or explicitly. To grasp the meaning of Hermes, you have to <u>become Hermes</u>, not in the literal but the metaphorical sense of Hermes him-self. You cannot understand the passage from life to death, but you can grasp its meaning, but its meaning is not itself such a passage. It is not itself a case of what comes into being and passes away. Hermes is not a sign of something <u>qua linear time</u>, but a symbol of <u>cyclical time</u>.

It is no wonder, then, that we speak of the herm-eneutic circle. Wherever we have a consideration of meaning, as distinct from signification, we have Her-mes and the hermeneutic circle. For that circle <u>is</u> the circle of Time or Becoming; the circle of meaning, where content undergoes an alchemical metamorphosis as form. Hermes does not describe the passage from life to death, from being to not-being, but defines it, or, more strictly perhaps, is a symbol of definition as distinct from description; a symbol and not a sign. Mythologies are not to be read as stories about the world, but as symbolic notations of the world as symbol-ic, i.e., as meaningful. They have to be re-enacted, since what is comprehended, in the case of meaning, is its being comprehended. The hermeneutic circle, in oth-er words, is not a description of anything, but a symb-ol of becoming or the real-ization and revelation of meaning. As such, it symbolizes a <u>phenomenology</u>, a way of relating <u>vis-a-vis</u> the world, rather than signify something in the world to which we relate. But its com-mon description in terms of the inter-dependence of whole and parts suggests that it is, like a brick wall or a parliamentary constitution, something in the world to which we are called to relate. The structural inter-dependence of whole and parts in the case of a brick wall or parliamentary constitution exists independently

of its being comprehended as such. But in the case
of meaning, the dialectical interdependence of the
circle of time and its phases or moments is not some-
thing that exists independently of its being compreh-
ended as such. The hermeneutic circle is the circle
of the what as the how. It is the circle of Time that
is both time-less and time-ful. We do not comprehend
it; it comprehends us. Wherever we are concerned with
meaning, we are concerned with the passage from life
to death; the passage from being to not-being - Hermes
and the hermeneutic circle being symbols of the only
passage that is meaningful: the meaning of passage or
the passage of meaning.

Notes

1. Much is made of hermeneutics today, largely through
   the work of Gadamer, but it is in no sense new, and
   by that I do not mean that it originated in Schlieir-
   macher or Dilthey. I mean that it is the common ent-
   erprise of any genuine philosophy: the real-ization
   and revelation of meaning. The hermeneutic circle is,
   in an important sense, a sybol of the way of philo-
   sophy. But the phenomenological distinction between
   analysis and hermeneutics; between linear time or
   reference and cyclical time or meaning, should not
   be lost.

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