

## Online Dictionaries of National Biography

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Though not so established or essential an indication of nationhood as a flag, an anthem, or an airline, systematised collections of national biographies have long been commissioned as both research tools and public statements. ‘Let us celebrate the birth of a giant’, the *Australian Book Review* wrote in April 1966 on the publication of the first volume of the *Australian*; ‘[o]nly once does a nation undertake so prodigious a task’. The Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, recently lauded it as ‘our greatest historical work’. The *Canadian* welcomes the reader to a place where ‘you will meet people who played an important role in the formation of what is now Canada’. The *American* presents those ‘whose lives have shaped the nation’; the ‘British’ of those who ‘shaped the history of the British Isles and beyond’. The *Irish* sees itself as being ‘especially important in helping to sustain Irish studies courses in universities throughout the world’. Indeed, the scholar of the Anglophone world is blessed by this type of resource. (1) This is a review of only those dictionaries of national biography that are available online (and are designed so as to be), and are in English. (2) There are too many biographical websites and portals easily, or purposefully, to enumerate, given how many utilise, or cannibalise, the same information from similar sites. Many of them are wikis, most prominently [Wikipedia](#) [13], a source certainly not disparaged by this reviewer, but one for another review.

Gillard was only partly correct about the uniqueness of such an undertaking. There were original, printed, equivalents and/or precursors to most of these dictionaries (which in most cases have been uploaded online themselves): [The Dictionary of National Biography](#) [14] (*DNB*, 1895–1900; 1912–96, though the somewhat hidden ‘archive’ tab on the new *DNB* website serves the same purpose), [The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography](#) [15] (1891–1910) and [The Dictionary of American Biography](#) [16] (1928–36, 1944–95), the [Dictionary of Australian Biography](#) [17] (1949), and the [Dictionary of Irish Biography](#) [18] (1978). In a model it was to retain, New Zealand incorporated biography in the [Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#) [19] (1966). The new versions, with the exception of the *New Zealand*, still originated in printed form. The *Australian* was born in 1957, a national, co-operative enterprise, funded and maintained by ANU. The *Canadian* was founded in 1959, after a bequest to the University of Toronto to create an equivalent of the *DNB*. The first volumes of both the *Australian* and the *Canadian* were published in 1966. The *American* online is entirely new and recent (1999), as is the *Irish* (2009). The *New Zealand* is part of *Te ara* (in Māori, ‘the pathway’) the new [Encyclopedia of New Zealand](#) [20], which, when complete, ‘will be a comprehensive guide to the country’s peoples, natural environment, history, culture, economy, institutions and society’, and so is the only one of the national biographies not conceived of as free-standing. It is the closest to an official publication, being funded by and (overtly) linked to the [Ministry for Culture and Heritage](#) [21]. This is doubtless the main reason the *New Zealand* looks so good (the funding appears generous) and is so culturally sensitive (not just ‘Is Māori’ and ‘Is Not Māori’ as search terms, but what is – very probably – every ‘tribal affiliation’ too). It amounts to a national portal, and demonstrates more than any other reviewed here (the nearest equivalent being the now-defunct [Australian Biography](#) [22]) how national biography can be positioned to reflect and disseminate the collective national experience.

The dictionaries’ remit vary, but are shaped by modern social and cultural sensitivities. ‘The *ADB* does not pretend to be setting up a pantheon of immortals’, the *Australian* says, and as well as the ‘orthodox fields’ of public life includes ‘representatives of every social group and sphere of endeavour ... The *ADB* prides itself on its blend of elitism and egalitarianism’. The ‘British’ included all those present in the original *DNB* (its contents being the very definition of elites), but in many cases revised or replaced; the *New Zealand* claims to have ‘subsumed’ entries from the 1966 *Encyclopedia*, but there are actually many present in the first who are not in the second. In the *Australian* print and online entries are identical, and only factual errors are corrected. The *Canadian* is, essentially, an online reproduction of the print version, republished on CD ROM in 2000 (how limited that medium now appears, though it did not at the time), but there is a pledge that it will be ‘continually expanded and enhanced’. The *Irish* is closely connected to the nine-volume hard copy (indeed links to explanatory and supplementary material produce PDFs of the printed version), whereas the

'British' is subject to three updates a year. The *Australian*, *New Zealand*, and *Canadian* are free, but the *American*, 'British', and *Irish* sit behind paywalls (though the 'British', certainly, is effectively free to the public through manifold library subscriptions).

The websites vary, from the *Irish* being the most aesthetically appealing and the *Canadian* the least, and the *New Zealand* appearing the most 'modern' and the *Canadian* the least; yet the *Canadian* is better in the round than either. The *Australian* has limited functionality: indexing but no hyperlinks, except to the other subjects of an author. The *Canadian* is a little better, with only name and subject links, though the functionality is better than that of the *Australian*, if not the *American*. In the *New Zealand*, biographies are cross-referenced with links between the dictionary and the encyclopaedia as well as galleries with embedded video; the lives themselves are however often little more than sub-headed paragraph after sub-headed paragraph, not unlike their wiki equivalents. The *Irish*, superficially a modern interface, links those *qv*, but nothing else: no links, or clickable headings to navigate longer entries, as do the *New Zealand* and the 'British'. There are no illustrations of any kind; it is print uploaded online. The 'British' has the clearest, most intuitive design. It is also the largest and most extensive, and the only one largely to have been rewritten for the digital age. These are not coincidences.

All were established and are operated under academic auspices. The *American*, *Australian*, 'British', *Canadian* and *Irish* are maintained by universities or university presses, and edited by academics, and the *New Zealand* by government. This is significant, because the value of the individual and collective biographies in guides of this kind depends on the author. The reader is less able to exert the usual scrutiny warranted by the potential purchase or directed reading of a published biography: he or she is in the hands of whomever the editor has chosen to write the life in that particular dictionary. Here again there is great diversity. The 'British' and *Irish* are written by specialists, and peer-reviewed. The *New Zealand* accepts and encourages contributions to the public, as perhaps befits so civic a mission, and even though inclusion is not guaranteed, the information submitted will be retained in a biographical database for the benefit of posterity. Given that entries are usually relatively short – 200 words or so – this cannot be said greatly to matter. In addition to the two general editors, the *Irish* has an editorial board of four senior academics. For the *Canadian* there are two editorial teams, in Toronto and Quebec City, which 'share the work on a geographical basis, with each office taking responsibility for certain regions of the country' and that each entry is an 'original and scholarly treatment of its subject, based on reliable and, as far as possible, primary sources and presented in a succinct yet attractive literary form'. Most authors work 'in the field of education at the university and college levels, but the *DCB/DBC* also recruits authors from among postgraduate students, freelance historians, museologists, archivists, librarians, writers, and others'. The *American* clearly sets out its two general, 18 senior, and 233 associate editors, and a 14-person editorial advisory board; all but four are academics. It is impressive, but makes the relatively limited range of lives covered in the *American* the more surprising. The *Australian* has an editor, supported by editorial staff based at the [National Centre of Biography](#) [23], with four distinguished Editorial Fellows to offer review of entries before publication; but, and consistent with its egalitarian ethos, it is keen to reassure readers that they have lots of authors, but 'not all of them academics'.

Basic information about content can be gleaned. The *New Zealand* has 'over 3000' entries, the *Canadian* 8,400, the *Irish* 9,700, the *Australian* 12,000, the *American* 18,700, and the 'British' 58,000. The *Irish* boasts 700 authors, the *Australian* 4,500, the 'British' 11,500; The *American*, *Canadian*, and *New Zealand* offer no means of collating such information. One of the great limitations of the original dictionaries was that they were effectively Dictionaries of National Male Biography. These all offer 'gender' as a search term (and the *American* offers '[Women's history](#)' [24] as a research idea), but the male to female ratios are: *American* 16,121 male to 2,702 female, the *Australian* 10,512 to 1,397; the 'British' 51,868 to 6,230, *Canadian*, 7,934 to 504, *Irish* 8,913 to 943, *New Zealand* 2,260 to 802 (in this respect, as in others, the most balanced). The better reflection of female lives was explicitly in the remit of the new 'British', but, even with the best of wills, these dictionaries are constrained by the limited opportunities for women to occupy positions of national significance in their national pasts.

It is nevertheless possible, however impressionistically, to sketch portraits of the nations, made possible only because these are digital resources. The *Australian* provides a 'Faceted Browse' whereby the reader can peruse records by definition, such as occupation (1,532 Members of Lower House, 121 emancipists, one ice-skating rink owner ([James Bendrodt](#) [25], 1891–1973, roller skater and restaurateur)). This is a helpful tool to the researcher, but also the reviewer of national biographies, as it reveals in black and white what constitutes this particular dictionary. The *Canadian* offers 'browse by identification', and also has a novel (but wholly justifiable) option to search geographical location. Thus the province of [Nunavut](#) [26] has furnished four individuals deemed worthy of note in Canadian history, and no one since 1930. The function is also global: there are 1,370 Canadians connected to the UK, 247 to France, and 31 to the whole of Africa. In the *New Zealand*, North Island produces nearly twice as many (2,336) lives as South Island (1,430). The *Australian* contains 2,949 Anglicans, 1,199 Catholics, 243 Jews, and one Jehovah's Witness ([John Barnes](#) [27], 1904–1952, publican and politician). 'Ethnicity' records 4,541 English, 1,537 Scottish, 164 'indigenous Australian', and one Pakistani ([Dervish Bejah](#) [28], 1862–1957, camel driver). The *Canadian* offers 54 varieties of aboriginal people (and '[Blacks](#)' [29], of which there are 39 individuals). The *Irish* offers the opportunity to browse only by subject or contributor, which is browsing of rather an unfaceted kind. Advanced search includes categories for place, religion, floruit date (date of activity), and occupation/field of interest. There are also manifestations of linguistic sensitivities. The *Canadian* is available in English and French, and the *New Zealand* can be read in English and M?ori; the *American*, *Australian*, 'British' and *Irish*, have no Spanish, Welsh, or Gaelic functionality, only English (though culturally-sensitive research threads exist: the *American* offers 'Black history', 'Native American heritage' and 'Hispanic American heritage' as research ideas). The *American* and 'British', however, offer much more in every other sense. One cannot easily avoid the conclusion that elsewhere breadth may have been sacrificed to depth; the least 'politically correct' dictionaries are also the most academically useful in form. Contemporaneity is affected by format as much as funding. For some, the online publication of biographies appears still to be dictated by the paper version: the 'British' includes those who died as recently as 2008; those wishing to read in the *Australian* about Sir Donald Bradman are still waiting over eleven years after his death.

The *American* and the *Irish* have helpful mini-historiographical essays in addition to biographical bibliographies, and the latter has the valuable option of opening and saving a biography as a PDF. The 'British' allows not only the ability to search by author, but also to see all the author's (linked) contributions. Some dictionaries are very well-connected. The *Australian* links to [Obituaries Australia](#) [30], a digital repository of obituaries published in newspapers, journals, magazines, and bulletins, as a 'sample of the Australian experience' (again no Bradman) and [People Australia](#) [31], a quick reference service (still no Bradman), and [Women Australia](#) [32], which does the same (where Bradman's absence is less problematic). The 'British' links entries, where possible, to their presence in the old *DNB*, the [National Portrait Gallery](#) [33], the [National Register of Archives](#) [34], [Who Was Who](#) [35], and the [Bibliography of British and Irish History](#) [36]. Only the 'British' offers extensive and specific reference lists, reference groups, and feature essays; the *American* has 12 '[research ideas](#)' [37], supported by the *Oxford Companion to United States History*, which offers many cross-references. All, in fact, provide more than mere cross-referencing: duplicated – or substantially similar – lives include those of James Madison (1751–1836) by Lance Banning in the *American* and the 'British', Sir Robert Menzies (1894–1978) by A. W. Martin in the [Australian](#) [38] and the 'British', Sir Robert Borden (1854–1937) by Robert Craig Brown in the [Canadian](#) [39] and the 'British', Constance Markievicz (1868–1927) by Senia Pařeta in the *Irish* and the 'British', and Sir Keith Park (1892–1975) by Vincent Orange in the [New Zealand](#) [40] and the 'British'. The common thread is clear; whether this is through historical or through publishing ties is more a matter for debate, and perhaps another review.

This review has been worthwhile if for no other reason than that no such assessment appears to have been conducted before. Some conclusions are possible: first, that national biography is a minor, but not inconsiderable, appurtenance of nationhood, and national heritage, as variegated as both terms have become since the cultural turn; second, the internet has made the transmission of those values, and the reviewed

content, almost limitless; third, the evolving nature of the internet makes innovation possible, but these dictionaries differ in their embrace of it; fourth, they are spirits of their age in consciously seeking a more representative portrait of their national histories than would have been obtained from the old Dead White European Male dictionaries; and fifth, finally, and frankly, these resources are as useful as the funding they have received. Two caveats should be made: first, whilst it is possible to compare content, usability, presentation, and ‘added value’, the works reviewed are inherently unbalanced, given that the resourcing and scale of each publication varies so, and while some are effectively peer-reviewed, others are more ‘democratic’, and akin to wikis; second, this is – in one sense – somewhat of an otiose review, in that the reader has no option but to refer to the dictionary of the nation of which their subject was a national.

It has also to be admitted that some of the biographies on *Wikipedia* are as good, or better, and often longer, more transparent, and better-referenced, than the equivalent in their national dictionary, and should assuredly be read alongside them. The *American*, ‘British’, and *Irish* generally feature works of compressed scholarship for a serious readership; the *Australian*, *Canadian*, and *New Zealand* feel closer to the general reader and browser, something free access encourages. It is likely – and it should be put no more strongly than that – that the researcher, undergraduate, or postgraduate student, will find the first three more satisfactory than the second, and that the general reader find the second three more approachable than the first. Only the *New Zealand* is truly a product of the internet – the others originated in print, and have made varying efforts to adapt – but for the serious student or researcher that is not a recommendation: the worth of these dictionaries is as sources of reference, and for that reason resides in the written word. There is a limit to what new technologies can do to enhance the written word beyond facilitating access, such as through indexing, grouping, ordering, linking, and cross-referencing. Portals for the general reader need primarily to be accessible; for the specialist they need principally to be reliable: of those reviewed, the ‘British’ is pre-eminent because it is both. Certainly, the ‘added value’ – the extraordinary opportunities to locate and process information online – suggests that (for research) the days of possessing these great dictionaries in their printed forms for anything other than decoration have passed.

## Notes

1. The pioneer, the [Nouvelle Biographie Générale](#) [41] (1853–66) has been uploaded, although only as PDF page images. So too, in very varying modes of digitisation, the [Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie](#) [42] (1875–1912), the [Neue Deutsche Biographie](#) [43] (1953–), and the [Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie](#) [44] (1995–2003, which contains 75,000 entries, although only 1,300 are full lives written by experts, and so is actually on a much smaller scale than those reviewed here). The [Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani](#) [45] (1960– ) has recently been (very impressively) digitised (under the auspices of Istituto Della Enciclopedia Italiana), as has the 46-volume [Polski S?ownik Biograficzny](#) [46] (1935–). The [Diccionario Biográfico Español](#) [47] (1999–) has not, which is perhaps just as well given its multiple, and on-going, editorial controversies. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (1926) has not been digitised, nor has the *Dictionary of South African Biography* (1968–72); the [New Dictionary of South African Biography](#) [48] (1999) has, but only as PDF page images of the printed volume. The one-volume [Dictionary of Indian Biography](#) [49] (1906) is another PDF mutation, and [The Indian Biographical Dictionary](#) [50] (1915) is of the (then) living. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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