

MICHAEL CANNON

Researching by day, writing at night: my 50 years as author and publisher

IN 1963, I was working like a demon researching the Melbourne land boom of the 1880s. Peter Ryan, recently appointed director of Melbourne University Press (MUP), introduced me to Hugh Brain, chairman of the T & G Assurance Co. Ltd. Brain had been closely associated with the WL Baillieu business interests and, for some reason, seemed anxious to tell me what he knew. He also allowed me to photograph an extraordinary list that the National Bank of Australasia produced in 1895 for confidential circulation to its branch managers, showing many secret insolvencies of prominent Melburnians that did not appear in the official records. All this gave me a personal insight into the characters who had manipulated the land boom and its aftermath.

On the front verandah of our little house in East Brighton, Melbourne, I hammered out about 200,000 words for a book that I named *The Land Boomers*. My wife and I discussed many details of the book while pushing our twin babies in a wide pram around the historic streets of Brighton, and trying to visualise life in its boom-time mansions.

As well as journalist and author Cyril Pearl's constant wise advice, other assistance came from the artist Horace Brodzky, son of Maurice Brodzky, the editor of the old *Table Talk*; and Melbourne trade union solicitor Spencer Brodney (née Brodzky). For the chapter on GD Meudell, author of the suppressed *Pleasant Career of a Spendthrift*, the retired manager of Robertson & Mullens booksellers, Frank Campbell, was anxious to reveal all. The scars of

the great land boom and bust had lasted for 70 years, and it was time the full story was told.

I did not see any hope of getting the manuscript published in the rigidly stratified, conservative Melbourne of the time, and prepared to buy a small printing machine to produce a version for private distribution. However, Peter Ryan asked to see the bulky typescript, and passed it on to historian Geoffrey Blainey for an opinion. Geoff thought that it should be published, on literary and historical grounds, provided it was cut by about half. I spent several months typing out a new, shorter version, which was then worked on by an experienced MUP editor, Beryl Hill. On the basis of her tactful explanation of the meaning of editorial style, footnotes and bibliography, I revised the manuscript yet again. This became the shortened version that the press published in 1966 as a clothbound edition of 4000 copies selling at \$7.50 each.

Before publication, Peter Ryan sold serial rights of *The Land Boomers* to the *Financial Review* in Sydney. A few days later, he received an apologetic letter from the paper's editor, Vic Carroll, saying that the Fairfax solicitors had banned publication in their newspapers because of the provisions of the New South Wales *Defamation Act* relating to possible damage to descendants. MUP's Sydney representative, Colonel Alex Sheppard, encountered similar concerns among local booksellers, who were wary of displaying the book. Eventually Sir Frank Packer's *Bulletin* magazine accepted whatever risk was involved and serialised parts of the book over three weeks in November 1966.

Melbourne booksellers, not inhibited by the draconian New South Wales libel laws, went wild over the book, which sold out in seven days. After generally ecstatic reviews appeared in most papers (with the notable exception of the Melbourne *Herald*), copies were changing hands at up to \$50 each. The comments that pleased me most were those of Professor Walter Murdoch in two successive articles that he wrote for his nephew Rupert's *Australian* newspaper. Murdoch had wished to train as a doctor, but was prevented when his widowed mother lost her savings with the crash of the Commercial Bank in 1893. He found my book 'admirable and horrifying'.

Some families of people who had made fortunes out of land speculation were not so impressed. Darren Baillieu, a surviving son of WL Baillieu, wanted to cancel the family's regular donation to the Baillieu Library at Melbourne University. I was informed on good authority that his brother Clive (Lord Baillieu) told him not to be so petty. But Frank Strahan, university archivist, told me that the Baillieu family had reneged on its promise to finance a new archives building, refusing to increase its funding to a university whose press could publish such inflammatory material.

Many editions and versions of the book followed. Today I am not so sure that it is good for a writer to enjoy such an instantaneous success with a first book. The heady success of a bestseller leads people to expect that you can do the same again, and expands your ego to the point where you begin to agree with them. A note of caution also came from the knowledgeable Professor Weston Bate who claimed in *Historical Studies* that my general account of the late-Victorian age was 'oversimplified and often grossly inaccurate'. Uneasily aware of my lack of deep historical knowledge, I did not reply, but tucked the judgement away and thought, 'One day I'll show you buggers'.

I used free time to begin another intensive research program at the La Trobe Library [now the La Trobe Collection, State Library Victoria] skimming through almost every 19th-century Australian book, newspaper and journal it could offer. A wealth of neglected material lay before me. The first fruit of this activity was the rediscovery of the eccentric journalist John Stanley James, who disguised his identity to get jobs in various institutions during the 1870s and 1880s, thereby obtaining the information to write scaring 'inside' articles for Melbourne's *Age* and *Argus*. I condensed his collected *Vagabond Papers* into one volume, discovered his true identity, and wrote a long biographical introduction for the MUP edition of 1969.

The boom in Australian books seemed to be continuing. With the assistance of Patricia Reynolds, then the La Trobe Librarian at the State Library, I decided to publish a facsimile edition of the *Australasian Sketcher*, a monthly, illustrated journal published by the Melbourne *Argus* in the 1870s and 1880s. I selected the year 1880, mainly because the bushranger Ned Kelly was hanged that year and the woodcuts of his final battles and execution were superb. Pat loaned me one of the Library's precious rare volumes, which I took to Graham Enticott, who ran a lithographic film company near the library. He agreed to photograph the pages carefully onto process film, as long as I held the volume open and flat under the arc lights.

Dai Nippon in Hong Kong printed the huge volume beautifully on heavy art paper, and I sold copies mainly by mail order. For as long as the Aussie dollar held up, and offshore print costs remained reasonably low, it seemed like money for jam. I followed the *Sketcher* with about a dozen other facsimile reprints of scarce and valuable books. My biggest venture in this field was to reprint Garryowen's (Edmund Finn) two-volume *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*, with an additional biographical volume that included a comprehensive index by suburban bookseller Neil Swift. Most of these books sold well for the duration of the boom in Australiana before everybody got into the act.

During 1971 I was finally able to abandon the frenetic and frustrating world of newspapers for the more satisfying work of writing and publishing books. As part of deeper research into historical sources, I had already extracted many passages from *Age* editorials of the gold rush era of the 1850s. I selected them not so much for their long-term significance, but for the power and passion of the writing. The best were collected into a book that I called *The Australian Thunderer*, bestowing on the *Age* a cachet it sometimes deserves today. This little book was published through my firm, Heritage Publications, and sold out its 1000 copies at \$3.60 each, leaving me with a modest profit. If published commercially, the retail price would probably have been nearer to \$10.

Meanwhile I was working up my other research into a general survey of the 19th century, which I rather grandiloquently called 'Australia in the Victorian Age'. My method of working was quick and wide-ranging. Photocopying and microfilming were coming into general use, and were comparatively cheap. As I rapidly traversed holdings of the major libraries in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra, I ran their copying departments ragged by ordering thousands of copies of the passages and illustrations that caught my eye. The criterion that I used for selection was simple: anything with dramatic or human content throwing light on the development of Australia was meat for the pot. I studied the material more carefully at home, where firm outlines of chapters almost subconsciously took shape. In the end, while I was able to discard 90 per cent of what I had garnered, all of it helped me to build up a general picture of the nation's pioneering years, which was perhaps slightly distorted by my preference for the revealing anecdote. But most lives are fairly boring in their daily routine: it is only the highlights, the ironies and the tragedies that are remembered.

Around 1972 I applied to the Commonwealth Literary Fund, which was at that time chaired by the former conservative prime minister Robert Menzies, to finance me through some of the extensive research and writing required. I understated the radical tendency that my work seemed to be taking, and was gratified to receive a grant sufficient to keep myself and family for 12 months. The idea that a conservative government would pay me to work in libraries and write at home was a revelation.

The result was the first volume of a general history of Australia from about 1840 to the end of the 19th century, entitled *Who's Master, Who's Man?* Published by Thomas Nelson at the end of 1971, in a clothbound edition designed by the painstaking, brilliant layout artist Alison Forbes, its 5000 copies sold out almost immediately. The volume was subsequently reprinted several times in cloth and paperback editions.

A few academic critics refused to be impressed, clinging to their work, which often sold only a few hundred copies. Some were puzzled by the title *Who's Master, Who's Man?*, apparently not appreciating that a major theme of our history was the weakening of old-world class systems through the end of convictism, the era of free immigration and gold rush, and similar features of frontier society. Other academics thought that I had 'relied too much on my sources'. If you don't believe first-hand observations, what are you going to accept? At least Professor Manning Clark – whatever may be thought of him today – could see what I was trying to do, and lauded my work in the *Australian*. The book received the inaugural Barbara Ramsden Award for the best collaboration between author and editor (I worked with Sue Beaven, later Lady Ebury).

Royalties from the book were gratifying, but I could see that they would not continue to support a growing family. What to do next? I had often thought that the original, full version of *The Land Boomers* would make a good historical source book. I approached MUP and Peter Ryan kindly gave me the clothbound rights for incorporation into a new edition. I restored the missing 28 chapters to the MUP edition of 22 chapters and, with additional illustrations, I had the 400-page, large-format volume reset and expertly printed by Dai Nippon. To avoid confusion with the MUP edition, which remained in print, I changed the title to *Land Boom and Bust*, and issued 1000 numbered and signed copies priced at \$15. While this seemed expensive at the time, the stock was sold out within a few days, leaving me well in front.

Soon afterwards I self-published a large-format book entitled *Famous News Pages in Modern Australian History, 1923–1973*. Starting with the front page of the *Sun News-Pictorial* of 5 November 1923 with its remarkable photographs of the notorious Melbourne police strike, I selected the main news events of each year. I would load each heavy volume of bound newspapers from the State Library of Victoria into the back of my VW station wagon and drive to Enticott's, where they were filmed as same-size lithographic negatives. By this time, Hong Kong printers had nearly doubled their charges, and I was now using less expensive, but competent, printers in Taiwan. This enabled me to stay afloat while making the books available at reasonable prices, and this book sold 1000 copies without difficulty.

Pat Reynolds recommended me to the well-known English publishers David & Charles, who were producing a world series of photographic histories. For my contribution, entitled *An Australian Camera 1851–1914*, I was given permission to view the La Trobe Library's entire collection of more than 100,000 original photographs and take selections to be copied on a lithographic

camera, which produced superb reproductions. This venture introduced me to many other sources of pictures that were little used at the time and whose value was only just beginning to be recognised, such as the collections at the Australian War Memorial and the New South Wales Government Printer.

In 1973 the Labor government under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam abolished the Commonwealth Literary Fund and set up the Australia Council under Geoff Blainey, with specialised units including a new Literature Board. Its first awards, granting me a three-year fellowship to continue historical writing, revolutionised my life. To be paid a living wage to do what I liked best for such a long period – this was a fantastic windfall.

During this period, another cogwheel of destiny was beginning to slip into place. Throughout his years as chief archivist at the State Library of Victoria, a former Anglican priest named Harry Nunn had been working behind the scenes to have the government records hived off into a separate institution, along the lines of Britain's famed Public Record Office.

Small in stature, Harry several times mentioned to me his war service as a commando. This gave him the right to wear a Returned and Services League badge, and helped his career considerably. We called him 'the Blue Nun', after a popular brand of wine, because he was rarely seen to laugh. In 1973, Harry succeeded in persuading the new Victorian Liberal government led by Rupert Hamer to introduce his draft of the Victorian Public Records Bill, which was largely copied from the British Act of the same name. Harry's access to Hamer was facilitated by the fact that both were residents of Trinity College during their Melbourne University days.

The establishment of a public record office was long overdue. For 140 years, documents of all kinds had been piling up in government and municipal offices all over Victoria, or had been randomly destroyed to create space for contemporary material. The State Library basement (which was then the home of the State Archives) could hold only a fraction of the most historically important records. Sorting and research facilities were appalling, as I discovered when seeking material for *The Land Boomers*.

After the Bill for separation passed through State Parliament, Harry located a spacious, air-conditioned warehouse at Laverton, Melbourne, which was previously owned by the insolvent Drug Houses of Australia Ltd. The government bought the building at the bargain price of \$1.6 million, and turned it into the main repository for official records.

The profession of 'archivist' was practically unknown in Victoria at the time. Archivists, however, are only glorified filing clerks, and Harry's few assistants were able to get the archives holdings transferred to Laverton in

some sort of logical order. The next difficulty was to find some way of arranging and describing the endless rows of documents so that officials and the public could be given access. Since governments create documents faster than they can be indexed, the problem was almost insoluble and, despite attempts at computerisation, remains so today.

Harry wrote into his legislation a seemingly innocuous clause stating that the keeper of public records (himself) was responsible for publishing suitable extracts from the records. He appointed Gwyn James, who was director of MUP until Peter Ryan took over, as first publications officer. While in the role, Gwyn produced a few reprints of early Blue Books and the like, and a collection of documents on the Eureka rebellion. When Gwyn reached retirement age in 1978, Harry asked me if I would be interested in applying for the job.

After reviewing the holdings, which at that time consisted mainly of 19th-century records, I formed the opinion that the best way to make them reasonably accessible to the public would be to reprint the most important records in a series of volumes along the lines of *Historical Records of Australia*, which had proved to be such a boon to researchers. Gwyn assured me before he retired that such a project was impossible. How nearly right he was!

I recklessly pushed on. By the middle of 1978 I was established at the Laverton repository and able to roam freely among the serried rows of compactus shelving. By August I had worked out a complete plan for publishing a series under the title *Historical Records of Victoria*.

In order to break down the huge mass of material into manageable units, I proposed to begin with a 'foundation series' of several volumes, to cover the first period of permanent government, 1836 to 1839, when Captain William Lonsdale was in charge of the new settlement. Each book in the series would be devoted to a particular topic, such as Aborigines or Crown Lands, and within each volume, the relevant official documents would be printed in full, in chronological order. I recommended that the first series be followed by a more selective series dealing with the 1840s when CJ La Trobe was in charge of the district.

As these matters were being considered, I was busily photocopying everything I could find that bore the magic dates 1836 to 1839. I was hampered in my mission by the appalling state into which Victoria's historic documents had sunk during many years of neglect. For example, in a portable safe outside the Keeper's office I discovered dozens of files of original documents, most of them written by Lonsdale, and unknown to historians. The safe had obviously been tipped on its side during transit to Laverton and the files were a frightful

mess, strewn out of order and unaccessioned. I arranged photocopies of the originals into sequence, and left the originals for someone else to sort out. Similarly, on a shelf in a dark corner of the repository, with no name and no location number, I discovered a crumbling ledger book that contained the magistrate's quill-written records of Geelong's first court cases.

For photocopying I used the only plain paper copier available at the time, which was also one of the earliest Rank Xerox machines. Its drum had a tendency to stick, which would result in the paper wrapped around it soon beginning to char as the heat-setting element remained on. One had to quickly open the machine and extract the paper before it burst into flames. After two small fires, I photocopied with a fire extinguisher in handy reach.

By delving into every corner of the archives I soon had enough copies to begin sorting them into logical order. This process made it apparent that thousands more documents from the early settlement period were missing. Generally these were loose letters from colonial headquarters in Sydney, easy to mis-file, destroy, lose, or be acquired illegally by collectors of Victoriana. I also discovered that, during the First World War, officials had allowed philatelists to rummage through the files, cut the old stamps and postmarks off letters, and sell them in aid of Red Cross funds. To this day, many of those irreplaceable documents have neat little rectangles cut in them, which means that the wording on the reverse has been lost. Other documents were simply falling apart through mould or age, and the ink on many was fast fading into illegibility.

It was essential to go to Sydney to discover if other file copies of the missing and mutilated documents had been preserved. By this time the Public Record Office of Victoria had been transferred from the administrative control of the chief secretary to a new 'umbrella' Department of Property and Services. In February 1979, Harry Nunn wrote to the new director-general, George Rogan (brother of the long-time town clerk of Melbourne, Frank Rogan), asking permission for me to undertake the travel so as to take advantage of 'a unique opportunity to complete the holdings of the Public Record Office in the foundation years'. In this way he was able to disguise for a time the magnitude of our publishing plans. The eight-volume Foundation Series of *Historical Records of Victoria* was finally completed in 2002 only because of the Scottish tenacity of Ian MacFarlane, who had joined the project as my co-editor and saw the final volumes through the press.

Meanwhile I completed a book about John Norton, the notorious early editor of *Truth*. To some extent I was following in Cyril Pearl's footsteps, but I also felt there was much more to be written about Norton's personal

relationships, and their effect on his public actions and incurable alcoholism than Cyril covered in his *Wild Men of Sydney* (1958). Cyril had touched on these but, because Norton's widow was still alive, he had not explored them in any depth. Mrs Norton died two years after Pearl's book appeared, which removed that difficulty for me. I could not, however, discover the whereabouts of Norton's only grand-daughter, who had inherited a substantial estate.

Fortunately, Norton was an extravagant and extroverted character and his writings provided copious information. By comparing these with verbatim court reports of the day, and the versions of colourful incidents written by Norton's plentiful enemies, it was possible to get somewhere near the likely truth of his actions and motivations. As I had suspected, there was much to admire as well as despise about Norton – for how else could one explain the enormous loyalty of the working class towards the old *Truth*, in those innocent days before pictorial sex became its mainstay?

The results of my research were published in 1981 as *That Damned Democrat*, along with extracts of Norton's writings on baby farming, trade monopolies, women's rights, and many other questions of social justice. Peter Ryan leaped on the manuscript for publication by MUP, and soon sold 4000 clothbound copies. Even better, the *Sydney Morning Herald* bought the serial rights, and published the complete text in daily episodes.

In 1976 Al Knight, a former Royal Navy officer who was my publisher at Nelson's for the final two 'Victorian Age' volumes, started the publishing company Hyland House and asked me for material. I produced an additional collection of John Stanley James's Vagabond texts, consisting of his descriptions of rural Victoria in the 1880s and 1890s. These forgotten articles were collected into the book *Vagabond Country*, which was beautifully designed by Alison Forbes, and published in a lavish clothbound edition. Despite good reviews, the book didn't sell too well: I suppose its natural audience, living in locations scattered throughout Victoria, were not book buyers.

One day towards the end of 1981 I had a call from John Ross, who had long ago left the editorial chair at *Fashion News* to become a successful book publisher, first at Macmillan, then with Lloyd O'Neil in South Yarra. John had worked out a deal with the State Library to publish one of its most valuable holdings, a large album of original watercolours by ST Gill, which the artist called *The Victorian Gold Fields 1852-3*. I provided a lengthy biographical introduction, and descriptive captions to each of the paintings. Publication was subsidised by Carlton and United Breweries Ltd, fittingly enough, since Gill had died of the effects of alcoholism. The subsidy enabled the large-format clothbound work to be published in full colour at \$35.

Australiana was still booming during the expansionary decade of the 1980s. In 1982 John suggested to me that we should begin preparing a pictorial essay, to be entitled *Australia: A History in Photographs*. This would be an enlarged and more systematic version of the pictorial histories already published by Cyril Pearl and myself. After I prepared the framework of major historical events since 1788, my young, English-born niece, Jane Fenton, visited every Australian capital city to search for photographs suitable to the structure.

From several thousand excellent pictures, most of them unpublished, we selected a few hundred that could be fitted into the book's 250 pages. I wrote introductions and captions, and the book was issued in 1983, in what seemed to me a huge edition. Fortunately a Sydney book club ordered several thousand copies for sale to its members as a 'Book of the month'. Most newspapers gave the work extensive reviews, so the remaining copies soon vanished. The book was updated and reprinted as a paperback in 1988.

The success of this photographic history made John keen to try a similar approach using historic 'genre' paintings. People were beginning to plan for Australia's 1988 bicentennial celebrations, and we could foresee a flood of competition unless we got in first. The planning for this book, called *Australia: Spirit of a Nation*, made me think deeply for the first time about what aspects of Australia I really admired. For a mildly radical historian, this was a jolting experience and I began to realise that it is easy to criticise the movers and shakers of society for their occasional mistakes, and not give enough credit for their constructive activities.

What was it that made me proud and glad to be an Australian? The continent, I realised, could have been snatched from the Aboriginal tribes by anyone – Dutch, Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese. It was a fortunate historical accident that Lieutenant James Cook 'discovered' the fertile east coast on behalf of an expanding British Empire. His 'discovery' particularly suited Britain as it needed strategic bases in the Pacific, and had thousands of convicts in overcrowded gaols available to export as cheap labour.

I continued in my research and in the book right through the remarkable story of how free Australians had shaken off the convict heritage, explored the huge continent, made the land bear fruit, fought in Britain's wars, established a federated democracy, achieved high living standards, and produced some of the world's best sportsmen and women. It still saddens me to think that some people, including writers, teachers and academics, can be ashamed instead of proud of what has been done, and imbue the impressionable young with their cynicism.

Picture researcher Debby Cramer did not find it difficult to locate good

paintings and other illustrations, mainly in the nation's public galleries and libraries, to illustrate my 120,000 words. Many of the paintings were completed at times of great national passions, and were a true reflection of the ambitions that made Australia what it was. The book's editor, Helen Duffy, who also laid out the pages, was able to marry text, verses, and illustrations into a coherent whole that expressed pretty much everything I wanted to say about the positive side of Australia's development from 1788 to 1983.

Reviewers like Dinny O'Hearn and Russel Ward were generally enthusiastic about this cheerful approach to the past, but David Grearson in the *National Times* thought it was 'a queer sort of history indeed', suitable mainly for 'third-form history classes'. Fortunately general readers disagreed, and the volume sold out rapidly. Australia Post ordered a second edition, magnificently quarter-bound in leather, which became part of their bicentennial effort, and which was issued in conjunction with replicas of historic stamps. In 1988, Viking O'Neil published a third, clothbound edition, printed on heavier matt art paper. The work has long been out of print and, like the subjects with which it dealt, no doubt appears to modern readers as a 20th-century curiosity.

My book *The Long Last Summer*, a study of Australia's embryonic upper class before the First World War, was not so successful. Valerie Haye, an editor working from her home in Fitzroy, suggested the work and its title to me. Val travelled interstate to do the picture research and produced a collection of photographs copied from the albums of several long-established families. Once again I planned the chapters, tried to impose unified themes, and wrote the introduction and captions. The clothbound book was published by Nelson's in 1985, and launched at Rippon Lea mansion in Elsternwick by Sir Rupert Clarke. It sold poorly, however, partly because Nelson's thought they could get \$45 a copy from wealthy people who were assumed to be its main market. Not so. Other reactions were amusingly mixed. Mark Thomas in the *Canberra Times* decided the book gave an 'honest insight into what made Australia tick'; but one customer at Webber's Bookshop in Melbourne returned his copy with the angry comment that 'the author must be a communist'.

A little later, I had a call from Meg Fraser, general books editor of the Reader's Digest organisation in Sydney. I flew up to meet the publisher, Iain Parsons, who wanted me to prepare a lavishly illustrated book to be called *The Exploration of Australia*, dealing with the subject from ancient times to the era of satellite mapping. I had barely touched the fringes of the subject in earlier books, and was immediately enthused.

While my working hours were now more profitable, they were even more onerous. Every morning, seven days a week, I crawled out of bed at five

and began work on the exploration book. To get new perspectives, I went back to the explorers' original journals and diaries, in the form of photocopies, comparing what they had written with modern survey maps. By lunchtime my brain was reeling with the overload of new information, so I changed for a couple of hours to plastering and painting the house. Late afternoon and evening were devoted to work on the current volumes of *Historical Records of Victoria*, after which early nights were essential. No wonder I didn't need a TV, stereo, or any books beyond those treating the subjects on which I was working.

This intensive period meant that I finished the exploration book in double-quick time. My good friend Brigadier Lawrence FitzGerald, who had been in charge of the Royal Australian Survey Corps for many years, kindly checked the entire manuscript and saved me from several technical bloopers. Digest book editor Vere Dodds acted as a devil's advocate and tried to punch holes in what I had written. People can say what they like about the Digest's puerile methods of merchandising their books but, from an editorial point of view, I found the organisation most impressive ... one of the few publishers with whom I have worked that sought both complete accuracy and reader-friendly writing. Iain Parsons took a gamble and decided to print 60,000 copies of *The Exploration of Australia*. About 50,000 were sold by mail order. For some reason most newspapers were reluctant to review Digest books, but the remaining copies trickled out through booksellers at various prices. It remained one of the most satisfying books I have ever done, and certainly the biggest selling. A further edition was published in 1999, making total sales of nearly 70,000 copies. A Canadian edition followed later.

My interest in the fate of 19th-century Aborigines was sparked by work on *Historical Records of Victoria*. White settlement had practically obliterated the native inhabitants, but no one knew how it had happened. The generally accepted version was that brutal squatters and their convict servants had massacred the several thousand Aborigines who wandered across the fertile grasslands that were now converted to sheep and cattle grazing. But there seemed something wrong with this story. Police, magistrates and Aboriginal protectors had been instructed to report every murder that occurred or was even rumoured to have happened in their district. At most, these could account for only a few hundred killings. As I read through thousands of pages of handwritten contemporary reports, the real story started to emerge. By and large, Aboriginal genocide was caused not by squatters' guns, but by disease, a change from hunting to handouts, and loss of tribal pride. It still amounted to genocide, but was somewhat subtler in its causes than outright murder.

I wrote the results of this research in a book called *Who Killed the Koories?* On the advice of my journalist friend Bill Green, I took the manuscript to John Timlin, who ran The Almost Managing Co. literary agency in Carlton. John cleverly played one potential publisher against another to win what seemed to me a large advance on future royalties. Eventually Louise Adler, then publisher at William Heinemann Australia, agreed to pay Timlin's demands. Although the book retailed at \$34.95, I doubt if Heinemann ever made a profit from the deal, while I remained rather conscience-stricken about profiting from the story of those long-dead Aborigines. The 5000 clothbound copies eventually sold out, and the book was reprinted as a paperback early in 1994 under a new title, *Black Land, White Land*.

While researching material for *Life in the Country*, I came across *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, a remarkable first-hand memoir of the gold rush and land boom eras. Written by John Chandler, who later became a leading hardware merchant, it described his incredible hardships as a boy and young man struggling for survival. In his old age Chandler became a religious fanatic but, by judicious editing of his more outlandish passages, I was able to produce what still seems a rare and enthralling narrative of life at the lower levels of society. Fortunately some of Chandler's descendants were still living: their information on family and company history added considerably to the book's value. Roy Farrell's publishing firm, Loch Haven Books, produced the work in 1990 in editions of 2000 paperbacks and 1000 clothbound copies. The paperbacks sold very well, the cloth copies not so well, for such is the unpredictable nature of small-time publishing.

In the early 1990s most of us were convinced that the current economic recession was only a passing storm. Roy Farrell and his wife Elizabeth agreed to sink some of their capital into the lavish production of *Old Melbourne Town: Before the Gold Rush*. This work was largely based on material that I had gathered over the years about Melbourne in the 1840s, which had not been included in *Historical Records of Victoria* or Garryowen's pioneering *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*. It seemed to me that researchers using all three sources would have a complete guide to the foundation years of an extraordinary city. Moreover, since my 1976 publication of an index to Garryowen's *Chronicles*, and the careful cross-indexing of my new volumes, all aspects of settlement would now be readily available for reference and even enjoyment.

Old Melbourne Town turned out to be a 500-page epic, supplemented by colour plates from contemporary paintings. It covered many forgotten and remarkable aspects of life, including the sordid history of the Batman family, and Melbourne's first great land boom and bust of the 1840s. As with *Who*

Killed the Koories?, I was constantly surprised by the fact that all this material was lying in libraries and archives ready to be picked up, but had scarcely been touched by other historians.

The book was an instant success, even at the high price of \$69.95. It reached the bestseller list at Angus & Robertson in Melbourne in 1991, and one week even scrambled into the *Bulletin* top ten. I was delighted that the Farrells's gamble had paid off, and began gathering material for a sequel, entitled *Melbourne after the Gold Rush*. This was published in 1993 with colour reproductions of hundreds of rarely seen paintings and sketches, mainly from the State Library's La Trobe Collection and the State Parliamentary Library. For some reason it did not sell nearly as well ...

When my mother died in 1992 after a 60-year journalistic career, she left a mountain of press cuttings and other material. Most were concerned with her work for the Mornington Peninsula's 'Angel of Mercy' helicopter ambulance service, which in its own way had led the world. There were also a couple of boxes of family memoirs into which I had seen her dipping from time to time, in attempts to write the story of her noted journalistic father, Montague Grover. But her overworked old mind was beyond it: all she succeeded in doing was to scramble the material out of any kind of order. Some months after she died, I decided to have a look through it, and was delighted to find a bundle of Monty's autobiographical writing, describing his early days working for Melbourne and Sydney newspapers. Most of it appeared to have been written about the time of the First World War, possibly when he relinquished editorship of the Sydney *Sun* to concentrate on building up the *Sunday Sun*. To any journalist, writer or historian, the manuscript was a goldmine of first-hand information about the days when the main outlet for literary endeavour lay in printed newspapers and journals.

However, Monty did not refer to his family history. I had already spent a good deal of time tracking down the family's military and convict ancestors in Britain and Australia, and decided to write an introductory essay showing how a man like Monty, and his successful newspapers, could only have been produced in the context of Australia's peculiar history. Monty's 25 chapters of press reminiscences were sorted out and added to his hilarious *Bulletin* satire 'The last day – a sub-editor's dream'. The result was a satisfying book entitled *Hold Page One. Memoirs of Monty Grover, Editor*, published by Loch Haven Books as a paperback. The production was largely ignored by contemporary metropolitan newspapers, who owed their very existence to the pioneering work of Grover and others like him. Provincial papers, where many old-time journalists retained a sense of the continuity of history, gave it a better run.

Further fruits of my years among the neglected files of the Public Record Office now began to ripen. My attention was attracted by the Crown Law Department's archived case files of capital offences – that is, serious crimes that attracted the death penalty before Rupert Hamer's government's abolition of hanging in 1975. Since 1842, some 200 people had been judicially executed in Victoria for murder and serious sexual offences. Many volumes would have been needed to survey fully the circumstances of each crime and punishment. Among those hanged were five women and, since the hanging of women arouses particular horror, it seemed to me that it would be better to deal only with their cases. The result was a book entitled *The Woman as Murderer: Five who Paid with their Lives*. To my amazement, the transcripts of evidence showed that, by any modern standard, only one of them, Jean Lee, should have been hanged, even if we believed in capital punishment for premeditated murder. I self-published the book in 1994, with an epilogue written by Dick Hamer. The small edition of 1000 clothbound copies attracted favourable notice from the *Age*, and sold out rapidly. The *Herald Sun* reprinted several chapters in full.

By this time computer technology had reached the point where typography and illustrations could be processed electronically, with large savings in time and cost. My youngest son was expert in this type of work and, using the latest Macintosh computers and software, he was able to take much of the weight off my shoulders, which led to the development of a more ambitious project. The immigration files of the Public Record Office and State Library provided copious information on the hardships that were endured by early immigrants to Australia, yet no historian had utilised this material to any extent. With the assistance of descendants of the pioneers, I developed *Perilous Voyages to the New Land*, which incorporated many woodcuts and photographs. My son processed the material into a large-format paperback that we printed in Melbourne in 1995 by the economical direct-plate method. I assumed the market to be about 1000 purchasers, but received about 1500 orders for direct-mail copies. This success led to the production in 1997 of 2000 copies of an even more elaborate clothbound edition, including large colour plates depicting sailing ships and seaports of the era.

For many years I had also been collecting photographs and information on the tragic depression years in Australia, roughly 1929 to 1939. I could recall some of my own observations as a child during those years and I was dissatisfied with the somewhat bloodless accounts of the period written mostly by economists and academics. In 1995 I sat down to sort out the mass of material in my files, to see if I could produce a more satisfying book. It occurred to me that many people still living would also have clear memories of their experiences of the 1930s. I wrote to hundreds of them, and received

excellent replies from people as diverse as BA Santamaria, Jim Cairns and Dame Elisabeth Murdoch. These memoirs formed about a third of the book, and balanced my interpretation of events. The result was *The Human Face of the Great Depression*, a large tome published in 1996 as a clothbound edition of 950 copies, which soon sold out. For the first time since *The Land Boomers* I received hundreds of deeply affecting letters from readers whose lives had been twisted out of shape by their family experiences of the Depression. A large-format paperback edition followed, by which time I was glad to have the professional distribution services of Dennis and Lee Jones to handle bookshop sales, even though there was little profit in those.

About this time I was selected by the Australia Council as the last recipient of its Emeritus Award, which was given to writers with a long history of contributing to the literary scene. One of Paul Keating's final acts as prime minister was to present the awards at a function at the Forum Theatre in Melbourne. At 67, I felt this was a fitting conclusion to my writing years, and sat back to enjoy what time was left.

Again fate stepped in. During my *Age* reporting days, I met the greatly admired solicitor-politician Bill Slater when he was attorney-general. I had been watching the progress of his law firm Slater & Gordon, mainly through newspaper reports of their efforts to win compensation for victims of industrial accidents. Occasionally I thought of trying to write the firm's history, but backed off because I believed that solicitors would never give me full access to their clients' files.

Out of the blue in 1996, Teresa Pitt, then publisher at MUP, rang and asked if I would be interested in writing the history of 'a radical law firm'. 'What, Slater & Gordon?' I blurted - 'Yes, but only if I can have complete access to their files.' In that strange manner developed my last major work, *That Disreputable Firm: The Inside Story of Slater & Gordon*. This involved nearly two years of intensive research, interviewing and writing, and was published by MUP in a clothbound edition of 3500 copies. The work showed me how essential it is to have law firms that are not part of 'the Establishment', but which genuinely believe in using legal methods to win some sort of justice for helpless people damaged by the industrial system.

In 2013 MUP was also able to bring *The Land Boomers* back into print as a POD (print on demand) paperback. Additional details on how I came to write *The Land Boomers* are contained in the new 'Introduction' to the 2013 edition. That is how my literary life turned full circle back to the 1960s.

This article comprises extracts from an unpublished autobiography.