The life of a long-distance satirist: how to write a book about Bruce Petty

Abstract for Life Writing Symposium
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Context

When your subject has published at least weekly and often daily since 1963 (apart from annual leave and a brief hiatus of 2 months in 1976), your problem is one of profusion. When your subject has also made a dozen animated features, hundreds of prints, several sculptures, and half a dozen books, your problem with profusion is not exactly dissipating. When your subject has led a personal life that in many ways exemplifies the social changes in Australia in a period spanning the Depression to the present, and is happy enough to talk about them, sanity demands that you view profusion as a realm of happy opportunity.

Six years ago, I started writing an article on the career of cartoonist and illustrator, Bruce Petty. It seemed a sensible thing to do with part of a study leave. The project has grown under my hands and I can now see that there’s plentiful material there to support a multi-volume opus. However, I think it very unlikely that a publisher would touch anything over 300 pages, even a book with many illustrations, as this one would have. So I need to scope a project that will fit into the reasonable constraints of publishers and, indeed, of readers. The target audience for the eventual book is not strictly academic. Non-specialist readers with an interest in recent Australian culture, politics, and history should be able to read it with pleasure, and if I have to hide my footnotes in a director’s cut on a digital repository that’s a price I’ll happily pay.

Core issues

The central issue is that I want to provide a primarily public rather than private life. Cartooning is a public thing – a satirical commentary on contemporary events – and it is also enormously distributed over time and space. While it is possible for a reader of a biography to ‘know’ the work of even a prolific novelist, film-maker, or poet, it is an enormous work of research or daily attention to ‘know’ a body of work distributed over thousands of newspapers and journals across several decades. There are several books collecting some of Petty’s work, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. And the persistence of the critical attention to public life is a very large part of the point.

Consequently, the book has a particular responsibility to gather and assess the distributed body of Petty’s works. The really interesting story is not the life but the works, and consequently the book needs to be rather more impersonal than a life of Brett Whitely or of Patrick White would want to be. If the scale of recent biography ranges from the powerful memoir of Gaita’s Romulus My Father to the austerity of Rowse’s account of Nugget Coombs (where the biographer obeyed his subject’s request not to interview his wife or bring her more than minimally into the picture at all), my project is towards the Rowse end.1 As this suits my temperament,

1 All the examples given here are deliberately of male lives, as being more cognate with Petty’s than female lives over the same period of massive change for women’s roles and opportunities. This seems the right filter to place on the examples, but I would welcome criticism on whether this is really so.
participants had better test whether it is valid or wishful on my part. There is an inner detachment in Petty, both personally and in his work. In this sense he is very much a child of the Depression years rather than of the post-War Baby Boom. Anyone who meets him notices his gentleness, politeness, and self-deprecation. This personal reserve has led to a relatively undramatic private life, and it disguises a hardness, a moral and intellectual steel, that underlies his art and satire.

While I have just described the private life as undramatic, it would be more accurately called a life which maps much of the social change in Australia since the 1930s. My inclination is to write it as exemplary of these movements, rather than as intensely individual. This suits Petty’s reserve, and also my desire not to pry. Can a biographer be reticent and do the job properly? Dare a biographer admit to reticence to a publisher?

My interest lies in political and cultural history as well as (perhaps more than) a desire to tell an individual life. And I have an underlying interest in exploring the ways of satire, which comes from my formation as a Swift scholar and literary critic. The question is whether these predilections can be squared with the over-riding desire to write a book that a few thousand people will voluntarily read. I have moved from eighteenth-century studies to modern Australian cartoons in pursuit of a wider and physically closer audience, so it would be silly to let pre-occupations imperil access to this audience.

Four pragmatic issues

1. There are many types of materials to gather and balance in this project:
   - Cartoons (by their nature distributed and expensive to collect); Petty does not have much of his own work collected, and it is very disordered.
   - Work in other media, from film to sculpture; the books are the easy bits.
   - Interviews with Petty, professional colleagues, and (hardest of all) friends and family members.
   - Various intellectual disciplines to get an adequate grasp of, from political history to fine arts and the theory of satire.
   - Archival records and collections of original artwork.

2. Gaining the subject’s trust while retaining intellectual independence is a constant challenge. With some subjects, this would be impossible and the choice would be between authorized and unauthorized biography. With Petty it is feasible and essential, as a biography without permission to reproduce cartoons and other artwork freely would be altogether useless. It is essential that I retain Petty’s support and desirable that this be as little of a constraint as possible.

4. That he is married to Kate Grenville, an artist of roughly equivalent stature in an adjacent field (fiction), is an interesting problem. To do a joint life would require equal treatment and would be a much larger project, but I can’t exactly ignore the fact in the way that newspaper profiles of both of them often tend to do.

3. The book is, in my mind at least, essentially like a literary biography, and I am aware of the tendency of such works to become idealized autobiographies. I’m free of direct envy, as can’t draw to save myself, but do rather fancy the role of satirist. This
is not a problem, more a thread of engagement, as long as I tell the story of Petty’s engagement with Australian political and cultural history, not a projected version of what I think they ought to be.

**Conclusion**

This paper has two (I hope complementary) aims:

1. to provide the core of a book proposal that can be sent out very soon to potential publishers;
2. to build a rationale and case study for the sort of biography (principally public rather than private) it will be.