

*Chapter 16*

PUBLIC INTEREST AND  
PRIVATE PASSION

**Ken Inglis on the ABC**

Glyn Davis

‘A lot of history,’ writes Ken Inglis in his introduction to *This Is the ABC*, ‘is concealed autobiography, and this book more than most.’<sup>1</sup> Ken starts the 521-page volume with his own story. Just three years older than the ABC, he recalls the radio voices of his youth. He listened to the wireless with family, trying out radio sets sold in his father’s timber yard, joinery and hardware shop. Ken recalls the unfamiliar British voices, learning about cricket, a coronation and arguments about public policy. Later there would be a world war described each night on the radio, and in adulthood ABC television was part of everyday family life. As a young academic he gave occasional talks on the air and, as professor of history and vice-chancellor at the University of Papua New Guinea, he joined the audience of Radio Australia.

So when the ABC board approached him in July 1976 about writing a history of the national broadcaster, it was an entry into a life already deeply entangled with the ABC as a ‘listener and a viewer.’ Now the professional historian could provide a critical view of a personal passion.

## PUBLIC INTEREST AND PRIVATE PASSION

As Bridget Griffen-Foley observes, ‘Inglis does not write himself into his histories in a self-conscious or fashionable way. And yet he is a subtle presence nonetheless.’<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines how Ken Inglis explored public broadcasting, and his decision to devote years of patient research to producing two large volumes on the ABC – one as an official historian, the second as an independent scholar. It draws on his writings, critical commentary on the books, and two interviews with Professor Inglis, conducted in March and April 2016, about his historical practice. The paper highlights the professional discipline of a man fascinated by his subject but determined never to play favourites.

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Ken Inglis was unsure whether he heard the first ABC radio broadcast on 1 July 1932, those ‘whistles and crackles’ that resolved into ‘voices and music.’<sup>3</sup> Regardless, his first experiences of the wireless remained ‘a thrill in my life.’<sup>4</sup>

Yet the young Ken felt some distance from the new ABC. He remembered that ‘ABC voices were all English, not in my world.’ The earliest broadcasts were modelled on the BBC, complete with Broadcasting House accents. As Maurice Dunlevy notes in a 1983 review of *This Is the ABC*, BBC broadcasters ‘left Great Britain and made a Little England in the ABC. For decades the ABC left Australians with the impression that the way they talked was crook.’<sup>5</sup>

Enchanted by radio, young Ken preferred the commercial stations with their local content and familiar-sounding tones. He listened avidly to *Chatterbox Corner* on 3AW, starring Nancy Lee. The informality in speech rang true – the program could talk to Ken ‘in a way I didn’t

feel the people in the *Argonauts* were talking to me.' A concern with national identity, an important theme in his historical scholarship, was early at work.

For young Ken, broadcasting was not just an interest but a potential career. As he approached the end of his secondary schooling, which had begun at Northcote High and continued at Melbourne High in 1945–46, he and his girlfriend sought work at *Junior 3AW*. The experience proved disappointing. Ken hoped to write radio scripts but instead 'what I ended up doing mainly was reading advertisements for soup!'

Ken began his arts degree as a resident of Queen's College at the University of Melbourne in 1947. During his time on campus, the ABC captured his attention for the first time. He attributed this in part to his roommate at Queen's, who liked to study with classical music on the wireless. Ken liked what he heard, and found himself listening to news and talks. 'I was at the right age to be taken up by radio as a new, cultural form,' he recalled. The ABC was still very British, and 'the BBC was worshipped from afar and I didn't mind – I was indulging those English accents by then.' The university student became a 'devotee of ABC radio.'

Soon Ken would experience the BBC firsthand, arriving at Oxford in 1953 to begin doctoral studies in history. The following year he approached BBC radio about doing some broadcasting. With the Queen on tour in Australia, Ken had remembered an earlier incident in Australian history and thought it worthy of retelling:

No one was mentioning it at the time, but a mad Irish assassin had tried to knock off the son of the Queen, Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh on his visit to Australia in 1868. I wrote a talk and submitted it to the BBC. I got back a very courteous note, thanking me very kindly. But they said to me that this was not

## PUBLIC INTEREST AND PRIVATE PASSION

the time to be recalling such an unhappy event, as Her Majesty was in Australia. That was my career as an author of BBC talks.

On graduating from Oxford, Dr Inglis accepted a role with the University of Adelaide. Now at last came the chance to broadcast. As Ken reflects, 'In Adelaide the relationship between the university and the ABC was rather closer than it had been in Melbourne.' He was 'evangelistic about bringing awareness of Asia to Australia' and used the university-ABC relationship to bring this interest out of the lecture theatre. In 1958 he gave a series of talks on ABC national radio outlining relations between Europe and Asia, building on the first subject he taught at Adelaide, 'Europe and the Wider World.'

There was an invitation to help plan a national television series, *The University of the Air*. The project went to air in 1961 but 'suffered from under-preparation and vagueness about intended audience.'<sup>6</sup> It was dropped in 1966, a year before Ken made a major career change, moving to Port Moresby as professor of history and, from 1972, vice-chancellor of the University of Papua New Guinea. During these years abroad his 'interests in all things Australian were deflected.' It would not be until 1976, as a professor at the Australian National University (ANU) and looking for his next big project, that Ken would resume thinking about the ABC.

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Though the ABC had been part of national life since 1932, expository writing on the national broadcaster remained modest in scope and ambition. The Commission featured in newspaper tussles about alleged bias, occasional learned arguments in journals about the role of public broadcasting, and a 1967 biography by Geoffrey Bolton of

## 'I WONDER'

the ABC's chair from 1945 to 1961, Sir Richard Boyer. There was no detailed chronology available of ABC history and only passing reference in works on Australian life. Few researchers had access to the ABC archives in Sydney.

With the fiftieth anniversary of the ABC approaching, economist Richard Downing, who was appointed ABC chair in early 1973, saw the value of commissioning an official history. The ABC board agreed and during 1975 drew up a short list of potential authors. The list included Ken, along with Allan Martin and Hugh Stretton. Sadly Downing died before the project could begin, felled by a heart attack on 10 November 1975.

Though the ABC was soon enmeshed in political turmoil and budget cuts following a change of government, the acting chair Dr Earle Hackett did not neglect the assignment. As Ken recalled, Hackett approached him in July 1976 'and asked if I would be interested in being commissioned to write a history of the ABC.' Ken was surprised by the offer – such a project had not crossed his mind – but sufficiently interested to negotiate terms. He did not want to be paid by the ABC, since he was a research professor at the ANU, but sought both research assistance and a commitment to editorial freedom. Hackett agreed with a written offer that Ken felt 'guaranteed both independence and support.'

Almost immediately the project came under threat. In July 1976 Hackett was replaced as ABC chair by Sir Henry Bland, a retired senior public servant who had worked under prime minister Malcolm Fraser in the defence portfolio. Bland 'didn't like the look of the contract' Hackett had negotiated and seemed 'suspicious' of Ken because he was not seeking payment for writing the history. The stand-off was brief: Bland proved a controversial chair, quickly enmeshed in arguments

## PUBLIC INTEREST AND PRIVATE PASSION

with ABC staff, community organisations supporting the ABC, and some government backbenchers. He resigned five months into his role after a dispute with the government over the size of the ABC's governing board. His travails were reported, with careful impartiality, in *This Is the ABC*.<sup>7</sup>

The new ABC chair, J.D. Norgard, a retired BHP executive who would serve until 1981, described himself as a 'low-key operator' who knew how to 'get on very well with people, even if we have to differ.'<sup>8</sup> He confirmed the original terms agreed with Ken, and the history project began.

His agreement with the ABC secure, Ken could now focus his scholarly efforts on the history of public broadcasting in Australia. He was assisted from 1979 to 1982 by research assistant Jan Brazier. As a lifelong fan of broadcasting, Ken found the work 'enormous fun.' He was not just allowed but required to 'snoop around' the ABC. He interviewed ABC staff across the nation and watched them at work. Ken particularly treasured an invitation he received to 'sit up with Norman May at the Sydney Cricket Ground watching a rugby test, which I didn't understand a single move of, but which was great fun.'

This remarkable access to the ABC and its archives allowed Ken to achieve depth and breadth in his history. He could watch, record and observe a national institution at work. 'That I had that access was a blessing,' he recalled. 'The one thing that I enjoyed most about the whole process of writing *This Is the ABC* was the access it gave me to creative processes.'

Though editorial independence was guaranteed, Ken could understand the expectations of many involved with the ABC. As its official historian he was permitted to study ABC board minutes, and he was expected to comment on key controversies. For some significant ABC

figures, such as Sir Charles Moses, who served as general manager from 1935 to 1965, an official history was no place for independent assessment.<sup>9</sup> The historian should record, not pass judgement.

The challenge for Ken was to provide a volume that could navigate the tension between chronicler and academic, official history and critical insight. He chose a chronological approach, a single narrative divided roughly into decades. He starts with the first broadcast on 1 July 1932, then examines the development of the organisation until World War Two, its national role in conflict, arguments with government in the postwar era, the arrival of television and the revolution in radio, the growth of public affairs, and the expansion under the Whitlam government and retreat during the Fraser years. The narrative ends in 1983, a time of transition for the ABC. In that year the chair and general manager retired from their roles and an act of federal parliament transformed the Commission into a Corporation. The author had slightly exceeded his mandate, concluding his book fifty-one years after the first radio shows went to air.

In recording a long institutional history, there are judgements implicit in the choice of material, the emphases and the omissions. Ken is a generous interpreter who uses detail to convey complexity, reporting the argument rather than taking sides. The voices of participants carry the story whenever possible. In the introduction to *Observing Australia*, Craig Wilcox describes Ken as a 'vernacular intellectual' because his 'approach to history has been academic in its rigour but vernacular in its taste and style.'<sup>10</sup> In a 2000 interview with Ken for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tony Stephens writes that 'Ken Inglis says the nicest thing ever said to, or about, him came from a student in Papua New Guinea. The student thanked Inglis for a lecture that was "clear but good." Inglis says now: "I'd like to think I was clear but good."<sup>11</sup>

## PUBLIC INTEREST AND PRIVATE PASSION

Geoffrey Bolton found much to praise in the way Ken conveyed his findings about the ABC in accessible language with memorable anecdotes. ‘His style,’ said Bolton, ‘achieves a flair and liveliness which should be a model to others in the field.’<sup>12</sup> In his ability to share extensive detail of a sometimes convoluted institutional history, while bringing alive the internal dynamics of boards and broadcasters and external dramas involving government ministers and program content, Ken’s achievement was considerable: *This Is the ABC* is accessible and precise history. His approach to writing the book and decisions about how much detail to include were informed by ‘that mythical character of the “general reader,”’ he recalled.

While the book describes half a century of change at the Commission, motifs recur in the narrative. Ken suggests that each generation fought the same battles about institutional independence amid government control of the ABC budget. In her review of the volume, Beverley Kingston writes: ‘running through this measured history of the ABC ... are several gently thought-provoking themes, more powerful in their cumulative effect than the narrative for any particular period seems to suggest. Most in evidence is the story of government attempts to control or use the ABC.’<sup>13</sup> An unsigned review in the *Canberra Times* notes that ‘the independence of the ABC from political interference is something [Inglis] examines scrupulously, and no politician who has tried to meddle escapes his radar.’<sup>14</sup>

*This Is the ABC*, a much-awaited volume, was published in a year of significant change for the ABC. In his speech at the book launch at the Sydney Opera House, Ken declared, ‘The ABC is dead, long live the ABC.’ Not everyone was pleased. When Ken greeted Sir Charles Moses, who had read the manuscript before publication, his proffered



## 'I WONDER'

hand was rejected. 'I don't want to speak to you,' he replied. 'You will hear from my lawyers.'<sup>15</sup>

Sir Charles subsequently raised a list of fifty items for which he demanded correction or retraction. Fortunately for Ken, no legal action followed. Melbourne University Press persuaded the former general manager that he 'would be crazy to pursue the issues that he complained about.' Ken concluded that Moses 'still thought of it as *his* ABC, and if I thought I could appropriate it, I had another thing coming.'

While Sir Charles was unhappy with the volume, most reviewers recognised the respect, and often admiration, that guided Ken in writing about the national broadcaster. J.D.B. Miller calls it a 'splendid book on a difficult subject.' Miller had worked for the ABC and marvels at how well Ken understood the organisation:

The ABC I knew is very clearly recognisable from what Inglis has written. I was continually surprised at this knowledge and insight about something which I joined when he was 10 years old; but that is what happens when one reads the work of a good historian.<sup>16</sup>

Writing in *Australian Society*, Peter White admires the detail in the volume but feels it emphasised the 'administrative edifice' of the national broadcaster. White attributes this focus on bureaucracy to a bias in the archives – 'inter-office memoranda are much easier to store than bulky reels of film and magnetic tape.'<sup>17</sup> In *24 Hours* John Moses – no relation to Sir Charles – wants to read more about the ABC's 'great impact on Australian society.' For Moses this 'detailed and obviously deeply researched history' needed even more content, further discussion of the 1930s broadcasters, and more on music, drama, poetry and literature. Above all, Moses wants the volume to convey the excitement

## PUBLIC INTEREST AND PRIVATE PASSION

of broadcasting, of ‘watching the sweep hand tick off the seconds until the cue comes from the control room and an announcer draws a quiet breath and says ... “This is the ABC ...”’<sup>18</sup>

Before endnotes and references, the text of *This Is the ABC* runs to more than 200,000 words. It works hard to be fair. Ken did not intend to write a polemic or pass judgement on the failings of individuals. Historians, he counselled, should ‘write about people who did not know what was going to happen next.’<sup>19</sup> The text avoids overt criticisms of people, alive to the pitfall of historical writing that sees an author assume that he or she could have done better than the people they are writing about. It is the characteristic stance of this vernacular historian, a way to evoke a world through detail and personal stories. The comprehensive nature of the coverage provides the balance Ken sought.

Not surprisingly, the strongest words came from those who demanded Ken take sides. ‘It is a pity,’ laments Geoffrey Bolton, that Inglis ‘did not spell out his own ideas on the role and opportunities for a public broadcasting authority, particularly on that nebulous quality “balance.”’<sup>20</sup> Maurice Dunlevy is more cutting. The book, he suggests, ‘shows all the signs of having been written primarily for an audience of ABC bureaucrats.’<sup>21</sup> He continues:

Impartiality, objectivity and balance are its hallmarks, although it never seriously examines the functional meaning of those terms in the ABC, nor indeed does it indulge in any serious theorising about either the nature of organisations or the nature of the electronic media.

In the 2000 interview with Tony Stephens, Ken reflected on some of this commentary. He noted the critical voices and those seeking more

## 'I WONDER'

explicit value judgements, but made clear this was not his preferred path. He balances narrative and analysis in his histories. Stephens observes:

The stories in history and legend have captured Inglis's life. He recalls historian Vincent Harlow saying at Oxford University in the 1950s that every historian had to struggle between the demands of narrative and analysis, and the advice from W.H. Dray that historians engaged in "explanatory narrative." Inglis says: "I am first and foremost a storyteller."<sup>22</sup>

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With the publication of *This Is the ABC*, Ken completed his commission from the ABC. His research focus shifted to war and its consequences, including the widely admired *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, published in 1998. Yet the ABC did not let go of his imagination, and towards the close of the century he returned to the subject.

*Whose ABC? The Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1983–2006* was published in 2006.<sup>23</sup> This time Ken wrote as an independent scholar interested in extending his work on the ABC; the volume was not an official history. As Ged Martin observed, sufficient time had passed since *This Is the ABC* that 'the historian had become part of the subject of his own study.'<sup>24</sup>

The style of *Whose ABC?* is instantly recognisable, yet there are important differences in approach and emphasis. As commissioned history, *This Is the ABC* enjoyed access to ABC archives and people, and reflected those sources in its account. In writing *Whose ABC?*, Ken was on his own. He could rely only on interviews and occasional summaries of decisions from the Corporation. He lacked the resources

of the earlier project and looked to a commercial publisher, Black Inc., rather than a university press, to reach his audience.

The subject matter too shifts in subtle ways. The risk of political interference to the ABC was always present in the pages of *This Is the ABC*, but the relationship between the ABC and government, and between the Australian people and their public broadcaster, is the central focus in the second book. Though similar in length to the first volume, *Whose ABC?* covers a much shorter period, and so investigates controversies in greater detail. The narrative is chronological, as it is in *This Is the ABC*, and the fairness palpable – Gideon Haigh describes the book as ‘limpid and scrupulously even-handed history’<sup>25</sup> – but this time chapters are structured around specific events and people rather than decades or governments.

*Whose ABC?* offers a greater focus on contextual media and political events. The sense of an ABC under threat runs through the volume, given impetus perhaps by the extensive interviews Ken conducted. As Jock Given notes, ‘Inglis has talked to everyone who will talk, and he works over the evidence carefully, sparing neither side of politics.’ There is a greater sense of drama in the book, of conflict and high stakes. ‘For connoisseurs of boardroom and political dynamics,’ concludes Given, ‘it’s enthralling.’<sup>26</sup> The change in tone owed something to the grave perils facing the ABC, and the different research approach.

Still, for some readers Ken remained too cautious. Dame Leonie Kramer, chair of the ABC in 1982 and 1983, wanted the good praised and the bad blamed. In her review of *Whose ABC?*, Kramer complains that ‘throughout [Inglis] refrains from making judgements, and from interpreting or even speculating about the motives of some of the key players.’<sup>27</sup>

## 'I WONDER'

For another reviewer, the key challenge was sources. Bridget Griffen-Foley much enjoyed the character sketches throughout *Whose ABC?* but found the narrower range of evidence an 'unsatisfactory element in this book.' The circumstances supporting *This Is the ABC* allowed for close scrutiny of archived material. By contrast, *Whose ABC?* includes a list of informants and summaries of sources for each section, but researchers wishing to pursue numerous specific points would be hard-pressed. A bibliography is a regrettable omission.<sup>28</sup>

Ken took a different view. He found that distance from the Corporation allowed a degree of freedom and that the lack of access to ABC boardroom minutes and archival material did not prove a significant restriction. Through contacts and reputation, he had created his own networks inside the national broadcaster and found people willing to talk. As he recalled, 'It was much easier for me to get access to primary sources than secondary without any permission the second time.'

In writing *This Is the ABC*, Ken had to seek ministerial approval to quote archives. For *Whose ABC?* he could talk directly with the players and quote the wider array of materials now in the public domain. He could draw on his own quarter century researching and writing about national broadcasting. The result, said one review in the *Canberra Times*, is two volumes that serve as 'the definitive works on the broadcaster and with good reason. Inglis's research is meticulous. He leaves no stone unturned, but more than that, he knows where the bodies are buried.'<sup>29</sup>

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*Whose ABC?* concludes with a chapter titled ‘Towards 2032?’ – that is, looking ahead to the centenary anniversary of Australia’s national broadcaster. While Ken notes trials ahead – the willingness of governments to curtail ABC independence through legislation, the troubled future of SBS, debates on advertising for the ABC, the move to electronic media, concerns about whether broadcasting will survive the coming decades – he does not despair. He expects that despite the changing nature of media the ABC’s mandate to speak to Australian circumstances would make it ever more important amid globalised offerings. ‘All in all,’ he predicts, ‘it is likely that viewers and listeners in the digital age will become ever more reliant on public broadcasters for electronic representations of their nation’s character and the human condition.’<sup>30</sup> For only the ABC, and its equivalent organisations elsewhere, can ‘address their audiences as citizens, not consumers.’ So the Inglis account of seventy-four years of ABC history ends on an optimistic note. Under ‘whatever name or nickname,’ he writes, ‘the ABC will still be enriching Australian lives in 2032.’<sup>31</sup>

*This Is the ABC* and *Whose ABC?* are important and enduring works of scholarship. They convey a complex institutional history with depth and accuracy. In Ged Martin’s words, ‘it seems unlikely that a single author will ever again succeed in handling a project of such magnitude.’<sup>32</sup> The two volumes are the standard work on public broadcasting in Australia. The conflicts between government and broadcaster, a key theme of Ken’s writing on the ABC, seem unlikely to change or disappear. As Margaret Simons observed in 2006, ‘Faced with this future, Inglis’s digest of the past is indispensable for the perspective it brings and for its underlining of a simple but indisputable fact: the ABC is far and away our most important cultural institution.’<sup>33</sup>

## 'I WONDER'

In a speech to the National Press Club in 1983, Ken wondered whether a historian looking at the first century of the ABC will do anything 'so old fashioned as a book.' But whatever the form of the jubilee history, he noted, 'I like to think that someone reviewing it will say what John Douglas Pringle says at the end of his review of my book about the ABC: "What would we do without it? To some of us, at least, it still represents civilisation."<sup>34</sup>

A decade after finishing his second ABC history, Ken retained a quiet optimism about the ABC, along with a sense of time passing. As someone who grew up with the national broadcaster, he was superbly placed to understand and explain its trajectory. He knew the journey was not over. The ABC evolves, and will eventually change beyond the recognition even of its most eminent scholar. For, as Ken said:

I think people were aware, and I'm aware, of changes that took the subject out of my world. When I first heard the word podcast from a friend from Radio National in 2004, I knew that whole digital world wasn't for me. I had a sense, and people had a sense, that what I had done, and what I had celebrated, was now something that was over.

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks Bill Gammage, Jay Winter and Seumas Spark for their initiative in organising a two-day meeting at Monash University to honour the life and work of a great Australian historian, Ken Inglis. Thanks also to University of Melbourne colleagues Lachlan McKenzie and Gwil Croucher, who helped with research on this paper, oversaw transcription of interviews and provided astute advice along the way. Murray Goot forwarded valuable contextual material about the media in Australia, and Jock Given kindly offered comments and suggestions on the text. Above all, gratitude to Ken Inglis, whom I had known and admired since my days as a doctoral student at the ANU writing about the political independence of the ABC. In his

## PUBLIC INTEREST AND PRIVATE PASSION

gentle way, Ken encouraged and enthused. Interviews for this paper provided a welcome excuse for two enjoyable lunches with Ken in North Carlton, and Ken also took time to provide detailed editorial comments on an early draft, those careful pencil marks on manuscripts familiar to students and colleagues over a lifetime of scholarly contribution.

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## 'I WONDER'

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**Author/s:**

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**Title:**

Public Interest and Private Passion: Ken Inglis on the ABC

**Date:**

2020

**Citation:**

Davis, G. (2020). Public Interest and Private Passion: Ken Inglis on the ABC. Browne, P (Ed.). Spark, S (Ed.). 'I Wonder' The Life and Work of Ken Inglis, (1), pp.260-276. Monash University Publishing.

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