

## Chapter 9

# Through the Lens of an Encyclopedia

*Helen Irving*

There can be very few scholars of constitutional law in Australia today who do not owe a debt of one sort or another to Michael Coper, whether intellectual, professional, or personal. I owe him all three. Indeed, my career as a legal academic is entirely due to Michael. My first undergraduate degree was in political science in the 1970s at Melbourne University. Like most politics students in that era, I was taught almost nothing about the Australian Constitution and, subsequently, as a tutor at Melbourne, I followed suit. The events of 1975 raised awareness of course, but not necessarily knowledge; the Constitution still remained a mysterious stranger, heard-of, but rarely encountered. By the mid-1980s, I found myself tutoring again in Australian politics, this time at Macquarie University. I was moderately interested in my subject (although working on my PhD on British political history), but I had no particular research passion in the field. Then, one day in 1987, I came across the recently published *Encounters with the Australian Constitution*,<sup>1</sup> and a light bulb went on. Suddenly, I saw that numbered sections of a 19th century legal document could be alluring and romantic, and their few words could contain a universe of meaning still open for exploration, not to mention puns, historical references, and musicological and painterly analogies. To be sure, constitutional law is a serious subject, but who could resist?

A few years later, by this time as a lecturer in politics at the University of Technology, Sydney, I encountered the author at an event, and was delighted to find him as warm and funny and knowledgeable as his book had suggested. I spoke to Michael (daringly, it seemed to me) about research I was doing on the origins of the Constitution (stimulated, as it happened, by having attended a British 'Constitutional Convention' in Manchester in 1991), and Michael not only encouraged me, but arranged for me to meet with some of Australia's other leading constitutional law scholars to discuss what I needed to know from the legal perspective, which was, of course, quite a lot. And so, not long afterward, I realised that the law was calling, and I enrolled at Sydney Law School (of which Michael is also an alumnus) and set out on a path that has never lost its interest. So, Michael remains the prologue to the story, and *Encounters* my personal road to Damascus.

Of course, Michael Coper wrote, edited and contributed to numerous other works on the Constitution and its interpretation (in particular, influentially, on s 92), both before and after the publication of *Encounters*. It is, however, universally acknowledged

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1 Michael Coper, *Encounters with the Australian Constitution* (CCH Australia, 1987) (*Encounters*).

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