In 2002, Chrystopher J. Spicer became an Australian who was first when his acclaimed biography *Clark Gable* was published in the United States by McFarland to mark the centenary of Gable’s birth. *Empire* film magazine observed that the biography had a ‘meticulously researched and respectful approach’.

Spicer has been writing about Australian and American film and history for many years. He was a contributing editor of the former monthly Australian arts magazine *The Melburnian*, and has written for a number of magazines and newspapers in Australia and the United States. He was also a major contributor to the *Encyclopedia of Melbourne* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), the first encyclopedia of an Australian city to be compiled in this country.

Spicer teaches writing at James Cook University in Queensland.
For Phil Pianta,
editor, friend and mentor
‘What man can imagine, man can do!’

Jules Verne
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Australians are so proud of the tradition that no one should do better than another within our culture that we’ve given a name to the practice of cutting down achievers: 'the tall-poppy syndrome’. We’ve assimilated this national harvest that reduces everyone to an equal shortness so thoroughly that it’s become one of our great cultural excuses. As a nation, we have become so smug and self-satisfied in our lucky country that we would rather everyone lose equally than any individual win. We insist that students must not fail in the classroom because competition is too psychologically damaging, and then we decry the country’s lack of business and political leaders when such leaders are forged in the heat of the race to win and honed by the cut and thrust of competition.

Unfortunately for our culture, reducing everyone to the same size in Australia hasn’t meant raising everyone up to the same level; instead, traditionally the practice has been to cut everyone down to the lowest common denominator. Rather than stretch some student minds, for example, the entire class has to be taught at the pace of the slowest. Although Australia hasn’t gone down the extreme paths of other countries that wanted everyone equal and so imprisoned their educators, scientists, talented artists and writers, it transports them instead to a cultural wasteland of inadequate funding, lack of interest
and course cut-backs. Then we wonder why our children know nothing about their own country, let alone about reading and writing. We’re far too civilised to sentence significant Australians to a gulag somewhere near Woomera, but every day we do something far worse and more lasting: we exile them from our collective national memory.

Australia as a country has a short cultural memory except when it comes to footballers and cricket scores. You don’t think so? Alright then, shut your laptop and put away your mobile phone and answer from memory these three questions about Australians: Who was the first person to explore Antarctica from the air? Who was the first woman to circumnavigate the globe in a yacht non-stop and unassisted? Who was the first person to be awarded an Oscar for Best Actor after he died? If you answered all those questions correctly, you belong to a tiny and exclusive group of Australians. If you didn’t, I can only point out that those are all twentieth-century people and rest my case. You see, we are all too ready to adopt Australian symbols, usually because television advertising tells us they’re Australian, but we are too quick to forget the people.

Yet it is in the remembering of those people that we hold the history that defines our nation. Without it, we have no collective sense of who we are as Australian people. Those we remember as important in our history convey to us in the present our sense of identity, our sense of self. In remembering them, we honour not only their achievements but their values and their aspirations. By repeating their stories, we are conveying to the present generation the idea that these achievements, aspirations and values are important in the development of this country. In a way, we storytellers are carrying on the tradition of the classic bards and reciters of odes who have perpetuated since ancient times the memory of legendary heroes who set out into the unknown, met challenges head on, defeated their dragons and returned home victorious.

Australia has its own legendary heroes from many walks of life, not just cricket pitches, football fields or iron man competitions, and a select few have been the first in the world to achieve in their field.
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That’s right—Australians have actually been the first in the world to fly distances, to explore the unknown, to build dreams like monorails and racing cars and television, to save lives with pacemakers and healing methods, to write books and to climb mountains. It is the tall poppies who, in the end, live on in our history and yet who have so often been denied recognition for their achievements within their own country.

This book contains just a few of their stories. This is by no means a definitive list; there are many more stories still to be told. No selection criteria were imposed for this particular group other than an attempt to be representative, that a first achievement was involved and that many of these people are largely unknown. I do realise that ‘first’ is often a qualitative term that is by no means definitive, and so I have often modified the term as ‘first known’ or ‘first recorded’ and I would always consider that is how the term should be considered. In the case of some inventive progressions, it can actually be quite difficult to say who was first, as many inventions rely on the preceding work of others and different patents are awarded in different countries. So I anticipate that some of these firsts may be a little controversial, but if that leads to discussion about aspects of our heritage, then it can only be good. To help with that discussion, I have added a section at the end of many stories to give the reader an idea of where this ‘first’ fits into the broader picture of development in that field.

Above all, I hope that this book encourages readers to learn more about people who are an integral part of Australia’s cultural heritage, such as those featured here. Once you have finished reading it, I also hope that you will become involved in preserving and developing Australia’s culture by passing these stories on to a younger generation who may thus be inspired to go into the future and achieve their own firsts. Let us change this country by growing more tall poppies rather than cutting them down.

Chrystopher J. Spicer
Cairns, Queensland, May 2012