
Stephen Wilks review of John Murphy, *Evatt: A Life*

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When Herbert Vere Evatt died in November 1965 he was buried at Woden cemetery in Canberra's south. His grave proclaims him as 'President of the United Nations' and reinforces the point by bearing the United Nations (UN) emblem. Misleading as this is—as president of the UN General Assembly rather than secretary-general, Evatt was more presiding officer than chief executive—it broadcasts his proud internationalism. The headstone inscription is equally bold—'Son of Australia'. The Evatt memorial in St John's Anglican Church in inner Canberra is more subtle. This depicts a pelican drawing its own blood to feed its young, a classical symbol of self-sacrifice and devotion.

These idealistic, almost sentimental, commemorations clash with the dominant image of Evatt as a political wrecker. This casts him as the woefully narcissistic leader of the federal parliamentary Labor Party who provoked the great split of 1954, when the party's predominantly Catholic anti-communist right exited to form the Democratic Labor Party and help keep Labor out of office for the next 18 years. This spectre looms over Evatt's independent Australian foreign policy and championing of civil liberties during the Cold War.

John Murphy's *Evatt: A Life* is the fourth full biography of the man, not to mention several more focused studies. This is better than most Australian prime ministers have managed. Evatt invites investigation as a coruscating intelligence with a clarion world view. His foremost achievements were in foreign affairs, a field attractive to Australian historians. He also has a certain dramatic appeal—Evatt depicted as the hero who thwarts Menzies's attempt to outlaw the Communist Party, only to have the split and the Petrov defection cruelly deny him the prime ministership.

The scale of Evatt's papers held by Flinders University is just one of the problems he poses to biographers. How to balance his self-centredness with his high ideals? Did his bellicosity really give Australia a say amongst the world's powers? Was his confidence in UN-led multilateralism justified? Did he cause the split? And were his tantrums mere peccadillos or evidence he was unsuited to public life—indeed, was he mentally ill, as some contemporaries suspected?

The most extensively researched pre-Murphy biography of Evatt was produced by Peter Crockett in 1993 using the same title. This had a strong focus on his subject's intellectualism and underlying psychology. Crockett's critical intensity and semi-thematic approach came at the expense of fluency and clarity. Crockett found Evatt the thinker, seemingly his strong point, to lack originality or even cohesiveness. As a High Court judge before he entered federal politics in 1940, Evatt was a liberal jurist who revered the law but 'expressed emotions through the law rather than revealing them naturally'. Evatt's otherwise formidable legal skills left him underdeveloped elsewhere. His policy responses were distorted by reliance on institutional and legal solutions. Equally seriously for a would-be prime minister, his grasp of economics was patchy.

Yet, as a student, Evatt had excelled at everything from mathematics and ancient history to football and cricket. His publican father died when Evatt was aged just seven and his mother almost cruelly drove her sons to achieve. Two of his brothers died in the Great War. Would young Bert have benefited from a true mentor who guided his talents and nurtured his empathy? The adult Evatt tends to be defined more by his limitations than his strengths, a testament to how glaring these shortcomings were.

Murphy avoids taking previous biographies as navigation points and draws foremostly on primary sources. A well-known firsthand observation came from an American journalist who found Evatt intellectually complex but emotionally simple. Paul Hasluck's typically acerbic analysis in *Diplomatic Witness* is also influential, not least as Hasluck claimed that, with the exception of John Burton, there was 'no other official who saw the minister at closer quarters in his foreign affairs work'. His assessment was that Evatt's 'great intellectual gifts' were 'analytical rather than creative' and limited by 'lack of depth of knowledge of international affairs'. Strangely, few have repeated Hasluck's memorable account of Evatt gesturing to challenge Churchill during a meeting in wartime London only to wilt before Churchill's withering glare. Other contemporaries considered Evatt too complex to sensibly generalise about.

Murphy only cursorily surveys Evatt as judge. More attention is given to Evatt's service in the Curtin and Chifley governments as minister for external affairs and attorney-general, his personal zenith. Evatt's wartime goals were to give Australia an international voice and to secure supplies. Crockett conceded that Evatt won the attention of the major wartime powers but added that his belligerence compromised his effectiveness. The problem with this is that the Australia of the time hardly had any international standing to compromise. Evatt had long strived to assert Australia's still nascent nationhood. His 1924 doctorate on the Crown's relationship with the dominions explored questions of national status. Evatt oversaw Australia's belated adoption of the Statute of Westminster in 1942.

Murphy's use of overseas sources, including the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library and Justice Felix Frankfurter's papers in the Library of Congress, provides evidence of how Evatt appeared to other nations. Roosevelt's quip that Evatt was a burden placed upon him by the Lord is less significant as a reflection of Evatt's personality than of his capacity to seize attention. Beside this, complaints from diplomats about his pugnacity seem twee. Evatt's discovery of the 'beat Hitler first' policy during his 1942 mission to Britain and North America strengthened his determination. His wife, Mary Alice, accompanied him on long, dangerous wartime trips. Hasluck recalled her calming influence on her husband.

Murphy explores Evatt's world-view. In a September 1944 speech he proclaimed a vision of the emerging 'world organisation' as central to the postwar world. This explored the constitutional machinery that the future UN would require to uphold world peace, the importance of economic justice in international stability and how the UN could maintain a balance between great and small nations. Yet Murphy agrees that Evatt was prone to a short-termism and lacked a sophisticated grasp of world affairs. He made only one ministerial trip to Asia (other than stopovers)—to occupied Japan in 1947. His interest in Asia seems to have settled on how to expand Australia's role in the region in cooperation with the colonial powers.

Evatt made Australia's foreign policy his own. His efforts to sideline Frank Forde as nominal leader of Australia's delegation to the 1945 San Francisco conference to draft the UN Charter have entered folklore. The story of a local shipbuilder who had to provide separate ships for Forde and Evatt to christen simultaneously seems to be essentially true. Such antics obscure Evatt's considerable contribution to the UN charter. The legalistic nature of the San Francisco conference suited Evatt. His deep faith in the UN system, lauded at the time, now casts doubt on his judgment.

The foremost mystery about Evatt is why he came to be Labor leader following Chifley's death in 1951. It is not just that he was a middle-class professional leading a solidly working-class party. Evatt lacked grounding in the party's organisation and closely intertwined trade union movement. Murphy concludes that Evatt was chosen simply as the party's ranks were so depleted. Anointing Evatt saddled the Australian Labor Party with a leader who disdained teamwork and ignored its formal structures. Worse still, Evatt took the party reins at a critical time of rising internal tension. His reluctance to compromise and lack of a solid power base within the party made him ill-suited for averting the split.

This raises the other great Evatt mystery, an exercise in counterfactualism. Would this most damaging of Labor schisms have been averted had Evatt not been leader? Crockett concluded that, although Evatt did not fundamentally cause the split, he contributed 'to a considerable degree'. Murphy considers that this question 'goes to the heart of biography', because 'it asks whether our subject is an actor with a degree of control, or is acted upon by overpowering events and influences'.

He decides that, although Evatt determined when the split happened, it is hard to see it not occurring at all even without him: the powder keg already existed and it was a deeper struggle than Evatt could decisively influence, especially in Victoria. The split actually prolonged Evatt's leadership. Not only was there still no obvious alternative, but also his removal would have been seen as a victory for the right.

Evatt's October 1955 Molotov speech—when he solemnly informed the House that the Soviet foreign minister had assured him documents on espionage provided by Petrov were fakes—stands second only to Earle Page's 1939 attack on Robert Menzies as Australia's most notorious political statement. It was not a naive effort to genuinely ascertain the truth, but more the product of Evatt's legalistic belief that Molotov be allowed a say. There is no greater instance of his misjudging the reactions of others.

More appealing Evatt traits included charity and a fondness for children. He retained enough self-awareness to envy the socially adept. His cultural hinterland extended far beyond politics to encompass classical music and modern art, not to mention pretensions to be a historian. This resulted in his 1938 study, *Rum Rebellion*. Characteristically, he wrote as Governor Bligh's advocate, reducing his account to a simple polarity. A telling indication of how he saw the world is his declaration that historians had insufficient training in the law to reach sound conclusions—the law, he knew, could bring out all truths. Evatt's biography of Premier William Holman was a better book but was more an account of early New South Wales Labor than of Holman the person. We are not dealing with a good historian wasted on politics.

Murphy is reluctant to indulge in bush psychology, but would a more socialised Evatt have been so driven to pursue politics? Politics brought out his worst traits of self-importance, suspicion and naivety. A particularly black mark is that he habitually failed to return borrowed books. Late in life, Evatt was drawn to the Tom Bass sculpture at Melbourne University depicting the trial of Socrates, hinting at a self-image of a misunderstood defender of liberty who would ultimately triumph.

Murphy is not so much sympathetic to Evatt as concerned to explore his subject, finding him 'sad rather than mad'. During the split, Evatt was 'somewhat unhinged', but it is hard to determine if this was physiological or the 'the extreme reaction of a paranoid narcissist put under incredible pressure'. Murphy stays properly cautious about assertions of a medical condition or use of damaging drugs, but is clear that dementia took hold after Evatt exited politics in 1960 to become chief justice of New South Wales.

This foray into biography succeeds. Murphy tasked himself to 'make sense' of his subject by delineating both character and identity. Evatt's duality lends itself to such analysis, but less attention is paid to what his achievements and failures imply for

the wider history that swirled around him. Significantly, Murphy's picture of Evatt differs from those by Crockett and Hasluck more in detail and emphasis than in fundamentals. His balancing of chronology and analysis sustains narrative clarity.

Evatt does not inspire regret that he failed to become prime minister. The real loss is that he was too contorted to make full use of his high intelligence and abundant energy. Nominal commitment to good works is, alone, no proof of greatness; it needs to be matched by the ability to implement them. The stress most accounts of Evatt place on the split and his misperformance before the Petrov royal commission may seem unbalanced, but these embodied the fundamental flaws that undermined his effectiveness.

Yet, after reading Murphy, it is still possible to warm a little to Evatt's high ideals, eccentricity and ultimate sadness. The fact remains that, like Menzies, John Latham, Gough Whitlam, Dick Hamer, Don Dunstan and other gifted lawyers, he chose a life of public service over personal gain.

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