

Josh Black review of:

Patrick Mullins, *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon*

(Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2018), 784 pp., HB \$59.99, ISBN 9781925713602

From first to last, Patrick Mullins's outstanding biography of Sir William McMahon is delivered as an artful tragedy. The opening pages reveal the spectre of a tired and embittered former prime minister, rife with deeply entrenched character flaws, and enthusiastic to leave his mark upon the historical record of his decades of public service. McMahon's 'intransigence', his inability to 'allow another hand to intervene', are established at the outset (p. 3), and shape the reader's approach to the entire gamut of this colossal volume. Though making no pretence to having produced a psychoanalytical study, Mullins must receive high praise for employing the craft of historical research to the fullest extent in order to penetrate a personality that often proved impossible for observers of McMahon in his own lifetime. The diminished reputation of the subject has prompted many to 'write off' McMahon as the worst prime minister in Australian history; Mullins has made it his mission to write McMahon back into the story of Australia in the twentieth century. He has spectacularly succeeded.

Mullins's exhaustive bibliography and his meticulous investigation of primary sources more than ably make up for the fact that, as he records in his acknowledgements, he produced this account 'without the co-operation of the McMahon family, and without access to McMahon's papers' (p. 637). He has methodically consulted published works of both a popular and a specifically scholarly nature, and has made excellent use of oral histories from the National Library and his own interviews. Even in his account of the trials and tribulations of McMahon's early years, Mullins is able to transcend investigative obstructionism by doggedly trowelling through decades of newspaper clippings, collecting the relevant births and deaths certificates and triangulating the various conflicting stories that McMahon himself told throughout his lifetime. It is this investigative success that enables the author to legitimately embed the tenor of tragedy in the subject's early years. Accounting for 'an errant life, insecure, always in flux', the text records that by age 18 McMahon had endured the deaths of a grandfather, mother, brother and father, leaving him 'well and truly alone' (pp. 8 and 16).

The years between his coming-of-age and his election to the House of Representatives in 1949 appear almost as a lark for McMahon, contrary to the overriding themes of the book. The author describes 'a lax student', sauntering around the halls of

St Pauls College, and ultimately untouched by the ravages of the Great Depression that uprooted the nation around him (p. 24). Whether forced by lack of primary sources or prompted by lack of a compelling narrative to sustain about McMahon in that period, Mullins proves masterly at embarking on useful tangential surveys of the social, political and economic scene in which the subject began to prosper in 1930s Sydney. The audacious figure of Jack Lang; the ego-driven 1939 showdown between Menzies and Earl Page; and the onset of World War II are all woven neatly through the stories of McMahon's time as a legal partner and serviceman. Occasionally, the problem of source availability forces the author to make assumptions about his subject's opinions and experiences, but it is nothing less than this combination of imagination and deduction that enables the narrative to continue uninhibited where sources might be lacking.

As we delve into the political career of the former member for Lowe, we begin to see the antics of modern campaigning on display, as well as the deep-seated, Machiavellian survival instincts that characterise McMahon's style. In 1949, as Menzies sets about appealing to the electorate and rebranding himself as 'Bob', McMahon enlists the help of a nine-year-old boy to help 'spruik his candidature' to constituents and construct a relatable persona (p. 71). This is arguably a mid-century manifestation of what Frank Bongiorno has described as the 'game that virtually every politician with serious leadership aspirations has to play': to appear to be 'one with the people', but simultaneously special.¹ Equally recognisable is the author's espousal of McMahon's broader ethical approach to the 'game' of politics. 'Politics had to be played hard, ruthlessly, if he were to receive his reward' (p. 87). Such an ethos is likely to be both familiar and ugly, intriguing and repulsive, to a politically apathetic contemporary readership.

Relatively early in this biography, the Shakespearean dimensions of McMahon's political career are set in stone. Mullins outlines the three key tenets (and, some argue, flaws) of his approach to ministerial and cabinet government: a love for the perks of the job; a constant search for information outside of the public service; and a 'zealous protection' of his own position (p. 93). It is chiefly for the third reason that he has come to be remembered, in the words of Duncan Hughes, 'as a latter-day Tiberius who constantly shafted colleagues and leaked government secrets to his own advantage'.² Even before Menzies's moves towards retirement, McMahon is

1 Frank Bongiorno, 'Just a Regular Joe (or Bill or ScoMo): How Our Leaders Work Hard at Being "Ordinary"', *The Conversation*, 20 September 2018, accessed 5 March 2019, www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-20/how-our-leaders-work-hard-at-being-ordinary/10284766.

2 Duncan Hughes, 'Tiberius with a Telephone Review: Patrick Mullins' Life of a Neglected PM', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 2019, accessed 5 March 2019, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/tiberius-with-a-telephone-review-patrick-mullins-life-of-a-neglected-pm-20190128-h1akh6.html.

seen trying to gather the numbers for an eventual leadership tilt. One of the most often repeated accusations against McMahon in this work is that of leaking cabinet deliberations to journalists for personal gain.

For historians, political scientists and constitutional scholars, there are several facets of the narrative that deserve lengthy attention. This biography is exciting not just for its character portrait, but also for its fusion of agent-centrism and structural evolution when accounting for public policymaking in this period. For one thing, on the political front, the heated clashes in the Holt, Gorton and McMahon cabinets reflect not only personality differences, but also serious ideological challenges in the Coalition partnership between the Liberal and Country parties. McMahon and the implacable John McEwen are in many ways signifiers of the almost irreconcilable differences between the two parties, their guiding philosophies and their competing constituencies. For another, the book situates McMahon's laborious ministerial efforts in the context of the evolution of the public service from a postcolonial shell to a vast bureaucracy, replete with the creation of a National Urban and Regional Development Authority (later expanded into the Department of Urban and Regional Development), the restructuring of the newly named Department of Foreign Affairs and the fusion of the prime minister's department and cabinet office into the modern bureaucratic juggernaut, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. McMahon's own role in these evolutions vacillates between that of departmental reformer and overdemanding tyrant. Beyond that, Mullins is unsurpassed in his efforts to account for the changing nature of Commonwealth–state relations during McMahon's career, driven chiefly by 'the steady accretion of power towards the Commonwealth' (p. 339). In each of these areas of public administration, personality and political drama are balanced brilliantly with a historian's respect for the structural processes of institutional change.

One of the features of the book is the way in which diametric opposites and bipolarities steadily drive the narrative towards its prime ministerial and retirement endgame. The robust debates between McMahon and McEwen over protectionism speak to well-worn schisms in the government. McMahon, backed by the Treasury, appears as a precursor to the path toward neoliberalism in the 1980s, making the case for attracting foreign capital and relying less on taxpayer-funded industry subsidisation. McEwen, backed by the Department of Trade, incessantly argues for preserving predominantly Australian ownership of corporations and advocates for the protection of industries with the potential to be impacted by the changing economic realities of the post-1945 new world order. McMahon's time as Treasurer, as recounted here, is dominated by this great clash of egos, economic ideologies and party allegiances. Mullins beautifully balances the politics of trade and protectionism with the politics of personality until the disappearance of Harold Holt, at which point this rivalry becomes deeply personal and politically spiteful. Petty though

McEwen's veto against McMahon appears, the subject himself still appears frightfully un-empathetic when we read of his anxiety to get to Canberra and his first words upon learning of Holt's death: "But Jack's already there!" (p. 236).

Having detailed McMahon's time as foreign minister under Gorton, Mullins paints a portrait of a tragic and uninspiring prime minister, a victim to the forces of change around him rather than the master of those forces. From the first instant, McMahon is weak on his feet, appearing second best in a no-confidence moved by the imposing Gough Whitlam. The diabolical dynamics of the McMahon–Gorton relationship are laid bare, with the fullness of their impact on Cabinet and parliament accounted for. Some of the more amusing passages might lead one to conclude that McMahon's was a tragedy of style; stories of his notoriously botched toast at the White House, his poor responses to the Labor Party at the despatch box and his dreadful performance on the hustings in 1972 create the illusion of a man totally incapable of undertaking the job he had coveted, and into which his colleagues had desperately thrust him in March 1971. Indeed, the image of a tired PM 'sitting at his desk, pale, head back, knuckles white' on the arms of his chair visually crystallises his leadership like no other description in the text (p. 558). That said, however, a number of the things about which he felt aggrieved were clearly at the peripheries of his control: the changing dynamics of the popular press; the constant public attention given to more popular figures, including Gorton, Whitlam and rising ACTU President Bob Hawke; the total collapse of Liberal Party unity ('He was going to have to fight the election alone' [p. 573]); and the public sidelining of his government's policy achievements in childcare reform, Papua New Guinean self-government and the withdrawal of combat troops from Vietnam.

One of the greatest strengths of this book, lying latently within the narrative, is its implicit comparison with the contemporary political malaise. By way of biographical narrative, we are subtly encouraged to question certain sociopolitical issues raised by McMahon's experiences that are yet to be satisfactorily resolved. For one thing, the status of women in the Liberal Party is cast into doubt in Mullins's account of the 1949 elections, in which no woman was preselected for the NSW Liberal Senate ticket. Edith Shortland called it "unofficial discrimination against women within the party" (p. 69). Though *Tiberius* was written well before the 2018 leadership spill, the modern parallels here are obvious to the conscious reader. Passages about McMahon's approach to industrial relations turmoil on the waterfront also necessitates questions about the party's underlying assumptions. In its assault on the Waterside Workers Federation in the mid-1960s, Howson tells us that the "party has never been so united" (p. 175). Once again, parallels can be drawn with a contemporary Coalition Government united by little other than its anti-unionist attitudes. For the media's part, there are episodes of intense interference by Rupert Murdoch, intervening on John McEwen's behalf, and then on the ALP's behalf, against McMahon; this is all too familiar for a contemporary readership who, in 2018, was reminded that,

internationally, ‘there is concern about the ability of Murdoch to influence political debate’.³ On the world stage, McMahon’s acute difficulties deciding on diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China is reminiscent of the anxieties modern Australia still experiences when it feels itself torn between the US Alliance and the imperative to engage constructively with the superpower of our own region. The issue of what to do with former and recently deposed prime ministers in Australia is also one that spans the generational divide here: scenes with exiled ministers and prime ministers smouldering on the backbench recur throughout this book, and arguably connote that vivid phrase recently coined by Malcolm Turnbull, ‘miserable ghosts’.⁴ Of the many pertinent questions that McMahon’s political life should raise, these are perhaps some of the most pressing for our own consideration.

A word must be said about the unique, dual-narrative structure of this book. Interspersed between the chronologically organised chapters are scenes, or rather short sketches, of McMahon’s enormous difficulty writing his autobiography (better understood as memoir). Mullins’s innovative approach to structure and foregrounding of the challenge of life writing forces us to question the reliability of the sources and sometimes distrust the words of McMahon where they appear. On page 1, McMahon aspires to ‘write history himself’. His failure in this task, and his failure to work with the not-so-indefatigable ghost-writer Bowman, serves as the perfect linchpin for the entire biography. As the subtitle of the book hints, McMahon figures in these sketches as a man of many stories, some of which were more credible than others, and some of which were downright false. The reader is neatly sutured to the perspective of Bowman; we are, like him, confronted by ‘the gulf’ between McMahon’s version of events and the primary sources (p. 110). Bowman and Mullins, as ghost-writer and biographer respectively, share the same challenge to establish a reliable narrative. The difficulty of that task is never more evident than in assessing McMahon’s role in Gorton’s downfall: ‘The trail simply ran cold’ (p. 399). Despite, or perhaps in spite of, these challenges, Mullins has managed to make McMahon a uniquely frustrating but painfully human biographical subject. Like Bowman, we see the “unpleasant little turd” in his character, but so too do we feel impressed by the subject’s capacity for relentless hard work (p. 88). Mullins’s structural choices allow him to more fully extrapolate the curious character of the man under investigation, and it is the pinnacle achievement of this author’s production.

3 Anne Davies, ‘Inside the News Corp Tribe: How Powerful Editors Shape the News’, *Guardian*, 21 September 2018, accessed 5 March 2019, www.theguardian.com/media/2018/sep/21/inside-the-news-corp-tribe-how-powerful-editors-shape-the-news.

4 Nick O’Malley, ‘Why are Some Politicians Better Equipped for Life After Leadership than Others?’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 2018, accessed 5 March 2019, www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/why-are-some-politicians-better-equipped-for-life-after-leadership-than-others-20181206-p50kr7.html.

In the end, the ultimate tragedy established by this remarkable and ground-breaking biography is that Sir William McMahon's legacy, however great or small the reader may feel that to be, has gone undefended, without an author to preserve it for posterity. As Mullins puts it, the 'legacies of McMahon's time in office would be overshadowed, and even built over' (pp. 599–600). His laborious efforts notwithstanding, McMahon never published a memoir or autobiography and his defence of his legacy was essentially left to fade with his death. Patrick Mullins has set about addressing that imbalance in the historical record, and scholars nationwide must laud him for the monumental work he has thereby created.

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