

***Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia* by Angela Woollacott**

(Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2019), 344 pp

Clare Parker
The University of Adelaide

It has been 40 years since Don Dunstan resigned as premier of South Australia (SA), and 20 years since his death. It is remarkable that it has taken so many decades for a comprehensive biography of his life to be published. There is certainly no shortage of content; Dunstan's political career and personal life are both ripe with colour and controversy. Yet, Angela Woollacott's excellent *Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia* is the first attempt at a full examination of his life in its own right.

Woollacott's study of Dunstan's life is, in many ways, a classic biography, drawing upon elements of his upbringing and episodes from his childhood and young adult life to show how Dunstan's views developed and were shaped by the people and injustices he encountered. Much of the material regarding his political career, and some elements of his personal life, will be familiar to anyone who lived in Dunstan's SA or has some knowledge of his legacy, but Woollacott adds value to the re-telling with new (and sometimes surprising) sources. In other places, it is the simple act of linking events in his life—noting a recurring theme or allowing the chronology to juxtapose public and private events—that shows the true worth in the biography. Precisely because there is so much to remember Dunstan for, it is valuable to bring together the themes that dominate his life rather than examine them in isolation.

It is a rigorous and scholarly work, comprehensively referenced and never overplaying claims where evidence is lacking. Themes of social justice, belief in democracy and civil liberties are neatly highlighted as Dunstan's life unfolds, but the book is also eminently readable and easily enjoyed

and understood without ever checking an endnote. The reader who does venture into the extensive notes section will be rewarded with a rich array of sources: Woollacott has truly scoured Dunstan's collection of papers donated to the Flinders University Library, as well as many published sources. She has also drawn upon new and existing interviews with former friends, colleagues and family members. She interviewed Dunstan's partner Steven Cheng and son Andrew, and Dunstan's daughter Bronwen fact-checked the work and provided many of the photographs.

Woollacott provides a comprehensive account of Dunstan's political career and his championing of key reforms. She focuses in particular on his push for Aboriginal rights in a dedicated chapter, and highlights the long, slow path to electoral reform to end the state's gerrymander. Here, as elsewhere, she notes Dunstan's political nous: he was a politician willing to work over a sustained period in often tiny increments to shape the state to his vision. It was his electoral reform, she argues, that permitted so much of his other reforming work to come to fruition. Chief among these were his pioneering of women's rights, including the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*, his championing of the arts, and economic measures such as the diversification of the state's industries and the development of overseas relationships with cities such as Penang. Woollacott also traces Dunstan's involvement with the Australian Labor Party on a national level and his work with Gough Whitlam—a relationship that suffered somewhat once a conflict between federal and state rights became apparent during Whitlam's prime ministership.

The Salisbury Affair is also considered in some detail, revealing how the dismissal of SA police commissioner Harold Salisbury reflected ongoing themes in Dunstan's public and personal lives, including his distrust of the police and his sexuality. Dunstan's fight against the SA establishment is a theme to which Woollacott regularly returns, while noting that he was, really, part of the same establishment himself due to factors such as his family connections and his schooling at St Peter's College. While the point is not laboured, the extent to which Dunstan was an astonishing contrast to the prevailing political atmosphere and social (especially masculine) norms of SA is apparent throughout. On almost every measure, he was a radical departure from the preceding generation of politicians who had personified the socially conservative, masculine-dominated and largely Anglophile society that had prevailed.

Dunstan's personal life is revealed in candid accounts of the open nature of his two marriages and the toll these arrangements took on the relationships. His other lovers, female and male, are discussed, but never gratuitously. Priority is given to consideration of Dunstan's sexuality in the context of its interaction with his political life, such as his employment of John Ceruto. Ceruto was clearly inappropriate for the job for which he was hired and his views on homosexual law reform made this appointment more controversial still. The chronological progression of Dunstan's life and relationships reveals the changing nature of how open he could be about his bisexuality. This, of course, neatly mirrors the wider experience of bisexual and gay men during Dunstan's lifetime. As Woollacott elucidates: 'Dunstan's life story helps us to appreciate just what a watershed era the 1960s and 1970s were in Australia.'¹ It does this in several ways: politically, by reminding us of the enormous social changes that came about in those decades and Dunstan's active role in them; and also by showing how Dunstan's own life was representative of the experiences of so many who found themselves newly liberated by the legal reforms and evolving social norms of the period.

One of the most original elements of the book is Woollacott's detailed exploration of the influence of Fiji on Dunstan's life. It is evident just how fully he was shaped by the years he spent in Fiji, the country of his birth. Woollacott's writing is at its most evocative as she weaves the Dunstan family's experiences with the nature of Fijian society at the time. It is clear that the rigid racial and class stratifications that framed young Don's friendships and early working life formed the foundation of his political convictions. Exact details of Dunstan's childhood are in parts difficult to come by, but Woollacott compensates by using other sources to flesh out the social and physical environment. Most creatively, she draws upon the memoir of Betty Friedman, a Fijian-born child of Australian parents, the same age as Dunstan, to illustrate the relationship that white children could have with their Indian and Fijian household servants. Surprisingly, some of the subsequent discussion is supported by Dunstan's own words in the form of an unpublished novel he wrote in the 1980s. Although disclaimed as autobiographical by Dunstan, Woollacott makes a convincing case for its basis in real life, often only superficially disguised. It is in this writing that the impact of Dunstan's Fijian upbringing is made most clear. The existence of the novel is also one of the most significant revelations

1 Angela Woollacott, *Don Dunstan*, ix.

of the book. Woollacott notes that it would surely have had more success with a publisher had it been written as a straight autobiography, and in that form would have provided a valuable counterpoint to *Felicia*, Dunstan's strictly political autobiography published in 1981.

The impact of Fiji extended beyond Dunstan's political views. His well-rounded life outside politics was also grounded in his Fijian years. His musical sensibilities and, importantly, his culinary tastes were developed among the singing, tropical fruit and Indian and Chinese cuisines of the diverse Fijian community. Indeed, food emerges as a constant theme in Woollacott's account of Dunstan's life, beyond his cookbook and restaurant, framing the book. The first words of Dunstan she quotes are his memories of banana mashed with sugar, papaya with lime juice, mangoes and mud crabs; her account of the final night of his life is punctuated by the arrival of a large pot of chicken curry brought to his house by, and for, his gathered friends. The immediate sensory engagement offered by descriptions of food serves to draw the reader closer to Dunstan's world. It also goes beyond a simple reminder that he was interested in food culture: as in his politics, much of his taste in food was ahead of its time and SA took a while to catch up. When Dunstan took a faintly condemnatory tone to his analysis of Australia's food tastes in his 1976 cookbook, it perhaps hinted at what he would like to have said about his constituents' views on some other matters. Yet, in his cookbook, as in his politics, he reveals a faith in the capacity of Australians to do better and make the most of the resources at their disposal.

It is this fundamental belief in improving lives by extending opportunity through equality that shines through in this account of Dunstan's life. His electoral reforms (eventually) granted equality of political representation, which in turn allowed him to enact his vision of greater economic and social equality for South Australians. Woollacott has done justice to the complexity of Dunstan's life, and provides the reader with a new understanding of his beliefs and how he went about using them to fundamentally change the state he led.

This text is taken from *ANU Historical Journal II: Number 2*,
published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.