
Political biography—handmaiden to history?

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Biographers are producing many good accounts of political lives, but are they fully realising the genre's potential to contribute to understanding the political past? Often these biographies are constrained by limited aims that make them more handmaidens to history than central players. Many political biographies are predominantly a narrative of a life, leading to anodyne conclusions that can be little more than character assessments of the subject. Why is this so? And how might political biographers achieve more? A wise choice of subject is just one such means; the main need is for stronger assessment of a subject's policy ideas, achievements and lasting influence—effectively, to establish the individual's place in history.

This article presents an argument for scholarly biographers of major political figures to seek to realise the potential of their work to contribute to the closely related—indeed intertwined—field of political history. The focus here is on biographers in Australia and the rest of the English-speaking world. As a group, they have long brushed aside suggestions that their works do not really constitute history, but are they now fully realising the potential of the genre? I suggest not. They instead are at risk of overestimating the success and influence of their works. By being limited to life narratives alone, political biography is too often—to draw on a comforting cliché favoured by the marginal—failing to punch at its weight, let alone above it.

Biography is rooted in human agency; political history is rich in interpersonal interaction. The two should go together readily and effectively. Biography presents to scholars a platform for exploring the torturous chains of decision, chance and error that characterise the political past and the legacies it imparts. Some venerable figures suggested otherwise, quite unapologetically. R.G. Collingwood famously thought that biography is 'constructed on principles that are not only non-historical but anti-historical' as the 'biological events' that constitute biography create 'a framework not of thought but of natural processes'.¹ G.R. Elton opined in 1967 that 'even at its best biography is a poor way of writing history' as the biographer's task is not to 'be concerned with the history of that individual's times except in so far as it centres upon or emanates from him'.² Such dismissals are less commonly stated so bluntly today, but are still far from unknown. More recently,

1 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 304.

2 G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (1967; London: Collins Fontana, 1969), 169.

the American historian David Nasaw reported that ‘characterization of biography as a lesser form of history stretches far and wide’, to the dire extent that ‘assistant professors are told to get tenure and promotion before taking on a biography’.³ Biography at least has the starting block advantage of popularity with the reading public. In Australia it vies with military history for shelf space in the Australiana sections of bookstores. The story of a life is easy for the reader to identify with, is rarely encumbered with seemingly abstract concepts that can seem tiresome, and can carry readers along with a compelling sense of direction as an entire life unfolds on paper. This potentially powerful form of history should now seek to move from being a slightly awkward cousin loitering in the lower echelons of scholarly history to a full family member.⁴

I draw here also on long personal experience of reviewing biographies, scholarly and otherwise, for newspapers and journals. Most have been of political figures from the twentieth-century Anglosphere. I also take account of my own original research concerning the effervescent Earle Christmas Grafton Page, longstanding leader of Australia’s rural-based Country Party, and fleetingly prime minister in 1939.⁵ Page has been dismissed by some historians, in almost as many words, as a simple rustic. This is despite his having commenced medical studies at the University of Sydney aged all of 15 and subsequently topping his graduation year. The man’s political longevity, seniority and stridently stated enthusiasms in fact make him twentieth-century Australia’s most important advocate of developmentalism, a little-studied stream of thought that assumes that governments can readily lead a newly minted nation to the realisation of its economic potential. This has encompassed measures as varied as land settlement schemes, the fostering of secondary industry, investment in major infrastructure and the subsidisation of mining projects, right up to such unlikely propositions as the Bradfield scheme to divert rivers towards Australia’s arid interior. Competition between optimistic and more sober conceptions of national development is one of the great themes in Australian history. Developmentalist ideas were central to Page’s career, supporting revisionist arguments, such as by political scientist James Walter that Australian political life has been richer in applied thinkers than is widely assumed.⁶ The oft-maligned Page is not only a fine vehicle for studying these powerful concepts in the history of a new nation, but also provided me with a spark for pondering the wider role of biography in history.

3 David Nasaw, ‘AHR Roundtable Historians and Biography: Introduction’, *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 573.

4 I do not in this article deal with memoirs and diaries by politicians and their ilk, being primary sources rather than biographies. A good account of these is provided by Mark McKenna in ‘The Character Business: Biographical Political Writing in Australia’, in *A Historian for All Seasons: Essays for Geoffrey Bolton*, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Lenore Layman and Jenny Gregory (Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 48–70.

5 Stephen Wilks, *Now is the Psychological Moment: Earle Page and the Imagining of Australia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020), doi.org/10.22459/NPM.2020.

6 James Walter, with Tod Moore, *What Were They Thinking?: The Politics of Ideas in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010).

Limitations

In 1964 the prominent American political scientist Lewis J. Edinger judged that ‘on the whole political scientists, perhaps somewhat disdainfully, have preferred to leave it to others to write about the individual political leader’.⁷ He added that consequently political biographies had been moving ‘toward a greater stress on free-flowing narrative and less on precision of terminology and concept’.⁸ Seventeen years later, the Australian biographer Kate White similarly observed that ‘Australian political biographies overall do not give us much insight into political behaviour’ and ‘lack the immediacy of social history and the drama and intrigue of political history’.⁹ Examples included Colm Kiernan’s biography of Labor Party leader Arthur Calwell, which she thought an ‘apologist biography’ that was ‘little more than a work of piety’; and L.F. Fitzhardinge’s 2-volume study of prime minister William Morris Hughes, which ‘seems to lose Hughes’s colourful personality in the maze of historical detail’. Yet she found herself struggling to explain the prevalence of ‘this uncritical approach’.¹⁰ Today, academic political historians are more likely than ever to produce biographies, but there seems not to have been commensurate change in the impact this output is having on wider history.

Political biographies typically make an imprecise start by not stating with clarity what if any historical goals they are out to achieve. Their authors decline to set themselves specific questions such as those that are posed later in this article. Biographies are elevated to scholarly history only when they look beyond charting a life and character to judge what that life meant for the world about it, including what if any individual legacy reverberated beyond the subject’s death. Many fine political biographies are being produced, but in the constricted sense of serving up a fluid narrative of the trials and tribulations of a political life, without shaping this into a basis for an argument about its wider significance.

Accordingly, turn to a political biographer’s stated conclusions and one frequently finds just a few generalised reflections on the individual in isolation. Many are markedly similar, such as by professing wonderment at the contradictions of character as if this were rare among human beings. Even what is widely (and largely justifiably) acclaimed as the foremost political biography of our time—Robert Caro’s ongoing work on Lyndon Baines Johnson—is avowedly a study of character and how that bore upon the acquisition and exercise of power.¹¹ For this mighty work

7 Lewis J. Edinger, ‘Political Science and Political Biography: Reflections on the Study of Leadership (1)’, *Journal of Politics* 26, no. 2 (1964): 423.

8 Edinger, ‘Political Science and Political Biography’, 424.

9 Kate White, ‘Towards an Assessment of Australian Political Biography’, *Politics: The Journal of the Australasian Political Studies Association* 16, no. 1 (1981): 130–32.

10 White, ‘Towards an Assessment of Australian Political Biography’, 130–32.

11 Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 4 volumes to date, 1982–2012).

to fulfil its potential, Caro still needs to draw together what LBJ's life amounted to and how this resonated beyond his time. This is the challenge that hopefully will be met in his still-awaited fifth and concluding volume. (Caro, an inspiringly dedicated researcher, reportedly plans to undertake field work in Vietnam so as to absorb a personal sense of what it was like at the receiving end of LBJ's exercise of power.) The more workmanlike Robert Dallek in the second volume of his lesser known account of Johnson at least gives us a few concluding pages on his subject's Great Society domestic program ('a study in paradox') and Vietnam ('a larger mistake').¹² In Australia, Allan Martin's 2-volume work on Robert Menzies is the fullest and most scholarly study of this massive figure, but ends with a rambling survey of his subject's successes, failures and characteristics; perhaps its being titled 'Reflections' rather than 'Conclusions' is significant.¹³

Surveying the subject's character seems to be the end in itself, almost eschewing consideration of how this influenced broader history. The substantive conclusions that many political biographers do provide are frequently inserted at various points along their account of the subject's life. This not only imparts some element of interpretative analysis, but also subordinates it to a descriptive narrative that remains firmly dominant. Presenting analysis as disconnected shards hanging off a succession of anecdotes effectively signals that historical interpretation is a secondary consideration that the reader must bear with in the course of navigating the story of a life.

Often only cursory significance is attached to even the most seminal of a subject's policy statements. Ben Pimlott's widely esteemed 1992 biography of Harold Wilson details the then new Labour leader's famed 'white heat' speech of 1963 that ringingly called for a technologically empowered Britain. Wilson was hailed as his nation's coming man, with 'a cohesive and inspiring new doctrine'.¹⁴ Pimlott covers its immediate political reception but addresses the translation of this shining vision into government policy in summary form only. His book is a fine narrative of a political life but could have been even more, petering out into an inconsequential account of Wilson's years in retirement. By so often lacking fully fleshed assessments of their subject's impact on wider events, political biographers conform, albeit unintentionally, to *sotto voce* reservations about biography as a field. What we are left with can resemble compendiums leavened by only occasional glimmers of commentary, parcels of semi-digested evidence rather than full scholarly assessments.

12 Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, first published 1998), 625–26.

13 A.W. Martin (assisted by Patsy Hardy), *Robert Menzies: A Life* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, vol. 1 1993, vol. 2 1999).

14 Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (1992; London: HarperCollins, 1993), 305, 526–27.

Political biographies invariably and quite properly survey the subject's relations with other important personages—such as Pimlott on how Wilson worked with Barbara Castle ('the only member of the Cabinet who ever felt a really human sympathy for the Prime Minister') and Richard Crossman ('Harold liked and distrusted him').¹⁵ But they do not routinely assess how such individuals had to work as a group in driving the decision-making process, as is commonly the case. We are too often given mere statements of bilateral relations, so to speak, with limited reflection on the implications for outcomes.

Closely related is a tendency to fail to capture a sense of the sheer messiness and seeming irrationality of so much of political life. This basic reality is at odds with the biographer's instinct for smooth narrative flow. Most major political decisions are shaped by efforts to strike an acceptable compromise between conflicting aims and contrary pressures, conducted amid onrushing floods of pressing new events. Conventional historians and biographers alike can fail to take full account of this. Pimlott on Wilson is a worthy exception; another is Walter Isaacson in his 1992 biography of Henry Kissinger. A chapter detailing how Kissinger as National Security Advisor coped during a not atypically chaotic fortnight in September 1970 provides a neat biographical corrective to how 'historians naturally treat the world in an unnatural way, plucking a particular event or crisis out of context, analyzing it, then moving on to the next one, even if they were in reality all jumbled up'.¹⁶ Denis Murphy, in his biography of T.J. Ryan (a strong candidate for being the best prime minister that Australia never had), also touched on the need for political biographies to consider how their subjects dealt with issues as they emerged and not artificially separate them out, even making such juggling part of their assessment of the individual's political ability.¹⁷ As a senior Australian government official once sagely told me, 'always look first for the stuff-up rather than the conspiracy'.

Australian political biographies frequently display distinctive limitations of their own. Too many fail to convey fully what policy ideas and ideals their subjects held. Readers are more likely to be the beneficiaries of abbreviated references to a belief in social justice, seeking opportunity for all, courting big and powerful friends, and suchlike. Admittedly, this raises a question of whether such shorthand is primarily attributable to authors or more necessarily arises from the limitations of their subjects. Our local, Australian product is frequently also commensurately weak on formative experiences. It is not unknown for as much text to be provided on a pre-politics sporting career or what football team a subject publicly supported (often a careful political choice) as on reading habits or any other known intellectual influences. Many past accounts of the aforementioned Earle Page largely ignored the

15 Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, 337, 335.

16 Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1992), 285.

17 Denis Murphy, *T.J. Ryan: A Political Biography* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1990, first published 1975), xx.

reading and other formative experiences of this ideas-rich individual and how they came to be reflected in his innumerable proclamations about Australia's national destiny. This is only partly the consequence of Australian public figures acting on a smaller and more culturally provincial stage than that of the United States or Britain; it more fundamentally suggests a disinclination to attach importance to seemingly abstract ideas.

Assisting from the wings is the indifferent standard of reviewing in this country. Reviewers typically and implicitly accept that biography is a genre of limited range and set their sights accordingly. 'Hodgepodges of conventional wisdom and middlebrow advertorial', proclaimed Gideon Haigh of Australian literary reviewing, admittedly somewhat harshly.¹⁸ Newspaper and magazine reviewers of Australian historical biographies too often fail to compare the work in question with earlier books on the same subject. Should they do so, they may well find that the work they are reviewing contains little new coverage, and even less in the way of novel interpretation. The career of the first governor of New South Wales, Arthur Phillip, has been addressed by a string of worthy and mostly welcome books over the years, but none add greatly to Alan Frost's 1987 biography.¹⁹

Many such criticisms of political biography have been made before, albeit sometimes passingly. In 2007 James Walter wrote of Australian biographies being at least until late last century predominantly 'strictly chronological, and favoring public life over private, and description over analysis'.²⁰ Five years later R.A.W. Rhodes, in critiquing the conventions of 'the British tradition of political life history', wrote of the importance of focusing on 'the webs of significance that people spin for themselves', and of how good biographical works 'use life history to address issues beyond the life itself'.²¹

And, indeed, there are honourable exceptions to the seemingly dire situation that your author so disapproves of. Here are several Australian examples (only 3 of which present an entire life, incidentally). Judith Brett's *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* explores the great man's ideas and values, making it one of the most intriguing political life studies to appear anywhere.²² State premiers are patchily covered by biographies, probably partly as they present problems of limited sales markets, but *Playford's South Australia* is a little-known collection of incisive essays assessing the legacy of that state's long-serving premier.²³ Tim Colebatch's study of Victorian

18 Gideon Haigh, 'Feeding the Hand That Bites', *Kill Your Darlings*, no. 1 (March 2010): 9–11.

19 Alan Frost, *Arthur Phillip, 1738–1814: His Voyaging* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987).

20 James Walter, 'Political Biography', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics*, ed. Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2007), 413.

21 R.A.W. Rhodes, 'Theory, Method and British Political Life History', *Political Studies Review* 10 (2012): 161, 171.

22 Judith Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (Chippendale, NSW: Macmillan Australia, 1992).

23 Bernard O'Neil, Judith Raftery and Kerrie Round, eds, *Playford's South Australia: Essays on the History of South Australia, 1933–1968* (Adelaide: Association of Professional Historians Inc., 1996).

premier Dick Hamer concludes with a full assessment of its subject.²⁴ Patrick Weller's conclusions in *Malcolm Fraser PM* adroitly relate the person to policies and outcomes, albeit with more emphasis on individual political style than on critically assessing the widespread perception that the Fraser Government failed to arrest national economic decline.²⁵ Jenny Hocking's 2-volume biography of Gough Whitlam is strong on his early influences, both familial and intellectual.²⁶ And Peter Edwards has contributed to the small but growing genre of biographies of political players who were not actually politicians, notably Arthur Tange and Justice Robert Hope.²⁷

A contributing problem is the preponderance of 'instant' political biographies, written at high speed while the subject is still of sufficient public interest to commercially justify the exercise. As publishers' urgent deadlines invariably make such works the first to reach the shelves, they help set public expectations. Some are effectively ephemeral campaign biographies clearly geared to furthering their subject's career prospects. Again, there are also some relatively solid works that constitute exceptions within this genre, such as Peter FitzSimons on Kim Beazley.²⁸ But more often a shortage of substance sets the bar decidedly low and contributes to an acceptance of biographers conforming to a modest standard. At worst, they are the late-night television of biography, more addictive than a constructive use of a reader's time. More reflective and substantial works can challenge such accounts, but usually appear only very much later. The first volume of Martin's account of Menzies appeared 15 years after his subject's death, preceded by interesting but far less consequential efforts by Kevin Perkins, Percy Joske and John Bunting.²⁹ Historians are following in the wake of such works.

But this is neither an acceptable nor complete excuse. More fundamentally, the problem seems to be one of political biography being constrained by unstated but pervasively limited expectations. To judge from some of the works most widely available, many publishers and readers alike implicitly accept that anything stretching beyond a suitably diverting life story constitutes a pretentious intrusion. The limitations of such narrative-based biography may be behind what does not exactly constitute a trend, but is at least an interesting phenomenon—that of narratives of important lives eventually being followed and complemented by anthologies

24 Tim Colebatch, *Dick Hamer: The Liberal Liberal* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2014).

25 Patrick Weller, *Malcolm Fraser PM: A Study in Prime Ministerial Power* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1989).

26 Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2009); and Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: His Time* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2012).

27 Peter Edwards, *Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006); Peter Edwards, *Law, Politics and Intelligence: A Life of Robert Hope* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2020).

28 Peter FitzSimons, *Beazley: A Biography* (Pymble, NSW: Harper Collins, 1998).

29 Kevin Perkins, *Menzies: Last of the Queen's Men* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1968); Percy Joske, *Sir Robert Menzies, 1894–1978: A New, Informal Memoir* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1978); John Bunting, *R. G. Menzies: A Portrait* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988).

of interpretative essays. The 1991 biography *Playford: Benevolent Despot* was followed by the aforesaid *Playford's South Australia* in 1996.³⁰ Martin's first volume on Menzies was followed in 1995 by the collection *The Menzies Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy* and, in 2016, by *Menzies: The Shaping of Modern Australia*.³¹ And Wilson post-Pimlott has his *Harold Wilson: The Unprincipled Prime Minister? Reappraising Harold Wilson*.³²

Possibilities

So how exactly does political biography reach beyond such limited horizons? What follows is an admittedly idealised outline of what might characterise political biography that realises its historical potential—a checklist, perhaps, but at least a start.

Of foremost importance, naturally enough, is selection of a rewarding subject. Wise choice of subject does not alone make a good biographically based history, but it most certainly helps. The ideal is someone who had a purpose in their politics, making them rich in ideas and potentially also in policy influence. The 'quickie' by FitzSimons on Beazley acquires gravitas from its subject's clarity of policy vision and consequent sense of purpose. Another typical feature of a suitably sound subject is political longevity. A long public career, such as that of Earle Page, which stretched over 50 years, is obviously more likely to have navigated developments over time in the political environment and the workings of government. How a subject responded—adroitly or not—can help draw out the historical implications of these changes.

Subjects who were not denizens of the very front rank of public life need not be readily dismissed. Many influential figures were never heads of government, or at least were not for long. To take Australian examples, think of Black Jack McEwen and his driving of trade and industry policy, Gareth Evans on foreign and infrastructure policies, Neal Blewett on health care and John Dawkins on higher education. And an individual's skills of observation and perception can more than make up for a relative lack of official standing. Someone who reflected intelligently on events is not only a source of evidence but possibly also a subject in themselves.³³

30 Stewart Cockburn, *Playford: Benevolent Despot* (Stepney: Axiom Publishing, 1991).

31 Scott Prasser, J.R. Nethercote and John Warhurst, eds, *The Menzies Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995); John Nethercote, ed., *Menzies: The Shaping of Modern Australia* (West End, Qld: Connor Court, 2016).

32 Andrew S. Crines and Kevin Hickson, eds, *Harold Wilson: The Unprincipled Prime Minister?: Reappraising Harold Wilson* (London: Biteback, 2016).

33 Such as Paul Hasluck in his *Diplomatic Witness: Australian Foreign Affairs 1941–1947* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1980).

Political biographies benefit from both a stated purpose and a consolidated analysis. They should dwell on policy ideas and their influence, seeking always to relate the individual to wider events. The details of a life can be a backbone that provides a means to the end of interpreting the past. What was the nature of the subject's engagement with the wider world? What did he or she influence and inspire, and how lastingly? Anecdotes should ideally serve a purpose by being chosen for the light they cast on such points of historical significance. At the very least, consideration can be given to what a subject eventually came to symbolise. The biographer might even consider eschewing the historian's best friend—chronology—for a more overtly analytic thematic structure. But as chronology provides an instant organising principle that captures changing contexts around a subject and also meets the expectations of the typical reader, this should never be done lightly.

We can ask, too, what the subject set out to do. Did policy ideas sit at the core of their public life? If so, the biography should attempt neatly to marry life with ideas. Was their vision clearly stated? Was it distinctive or a borrowing of the ideas of others? Past assumptions about their having limited goals should be critically assessed—such as some past writings about Page. Did the individual embody a more broadly held set of ideas, such that their single life can be used to illuminate a much wider theme? Reading around a subject is almost as important as reading about them. Depth of knowledge of their cultural surroundings in time is a basis for appreciating what they influenced and what influenced them. Historians thrive on context; so should political biographers.

How do we assess an individual's influence? This is not easy amid the fog of history. There are, for example, competing proposals as to who was most responsible for establishing the Commonwealth Bank of Australia in 1911, variously claimed by and for King O'Malley, Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes.³⁴ And who was behind Commonwealth funding of the postwar explosion in Australian universities and student numbers in the 1950s? Menzies? What about deeper antecedents, stretching back to prime ministers Chifley and John Curtin, or even beyond them to Treasurer Richard Casey in the 1930s?³⁵ The closest we can get to answering such uncertainties is by tracing in detail how an idea evolved through time, from gestation to practical policy. Political biography, possibly stretched to cover more than one subject, is a means of doing so by looking at the individual players in a decision, anatomising complex chains of events in a way that recognises and indeed revels in the messiness of political reality.

34 See, for example, David Day, *Andrew Fisher: Prime Minister of Australia* (Pymble, NSW: 4th Estate, 2008), 249–52.

35 See A.W. Martin, 'R.G. Menzies and the Murray Committee', in *Ideas for Histories of Universities in Australia*, ed. F.B. Smith and P. Crichton (Canberra: Division of Historical Studies, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, 1990), 94–115.

In attempting all this, the absence of new primary sources should not be a decisive obstacle. Naturally enough, the periodic release of hitherto embargoed documents can present an opportunity to reassess a political life. But more important is preparedness to critically re-evaluate what, if anything, has been previously claimed about a subject. In striving to build on existing biographies, authors should not feel compelled to emulate their often extreme length; sheer wordage is never a match for quality of interpretation. Related to this is that they also need not feel rigidly obliged to produce a whole life. They often can more effectively focus on selected points of importance. A mass of detail can actually obscure the subject's main significance. With many big political figures, one of the most pressing questions is simply 'where do I stop?' The answer is when the author has done enough to justify his or her assessment of their significance.

How far a subject has receded into the past can be important. The deeper this is the greater the scope to put them in historical context and judge the persistence or otherwise of their legacy. It took over 70 years for a politically powerful view to emerge that Alfred Deakin's great mistake was to commit the young Australian Commonwealth to trade protectionism.³⁶ The passage of time might even provide a step towards tying down that most elusive of concepts, an individual's place in history.

The complexity of political decisions and their origins points to a case for more use of group biography. It is indeed hard to delineate an individual's legacy—might that of a group tell us more? As suggested, decisions are rarely neatly those of one person. More often they arise from networks of individuals churning their way through the testing of each other's relative strength before finally settling on a collectively acceptable compromise. Hence the case for a study of how members of a group interacted. This is not to be confused with a mere anthology of separate brief lives. Sheila Fitzpatrick has used a true group study of Joseph Stalin's inner circle to contribute to a reinterpretation of how he functioned in power, demonstrating that this was not as well understood as had long been assumed.³⁷ If instead choosing to stay with one individual, biographers can at least ponder how this subject worked with others in negotiating his or her way towards their own ends.

Perceptions of a subject's political failure is not necessarily a limitation. This can instead be harnessed to address important questions. How exactly did he or she fail, and what does this imply about the wider political and social environment? Considering why something did not succeed can be significant in explaining the past, not least as it can help delineate the borders of practical possibility in a political

36 See Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The Story of the 1980s* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 43–45, 66, 76–78, 98.

37 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

culture. Past controversies that ultimately failed to leave a lasting legacy can also tell us what was once seen as important. Page was unable to create new states within the Australian federation, to spread hydroelectricity across the continent and to embed economic planning in the structures of government, but these were all once the subject of major debates.

An undue preoccupation with that oft-sought goal of discovering the inner person, an ill-defined concept, can be another pitfall. This great white whale of biography is engaging to speculate about, especially if the person in the best position to authoritatively contradict a biographer happens to be no longer of this world. With political figures it is outcomes, influence and legacy that should come first, being of widest impact. Inner life can be engrossing and highly significant, but foremost when pursued for what implications it ultimately had for public policy. There can also remain the interesting possibility that the subject did not really know themselves. It is common, for example, for self-declared rationalists like Page to have been far more emotive than they ever realised.

Also—and despite the preceding point—we should still try to delineate how the subject formed their political ideas. An individual's early education, reading, personal interactions, and pleasant and unpleasant experiences can tell us much about their later goals. The range of books that constituted Menzies's personal library, preserved at the University of Melbourne, implies much about his worldview. One biographer who attaches significance to this collection is Troy Bramston in his recent book on Menzies.³⁸ Take 2 other Australian prime ministers; imagine young McEwen each night after labouring on the farm forcing himself to read by the light of a kerosene lamp; or the child Ben Chifley sent off to live with his grandfather and endlessly reading, reading.

Nor should we shirk from conveying a sense of drama. Almost any political biography is bound to deal with remarkable events, should its subject be of any worth at all. Caro does not just convey the drama surrounding LBJ's acquisition and use of political power—he has the rare ability to make even the duller of legislative proceedings sound engrossing as he explores the nature of such power. His eye for the interplay of personality and influence invigorates every chapter of his Johnson saga.³⁹ This is also an example of a biographer being self-aware of a personal strength and endeavouring to play to this. In the right hands, drawing on such a strength to display an individual voice is a powerful tool. One reason why Richard Bosworth's *Mussolini* is arguably the finest international biography by an Australian—aside from the harnessing of a lifetime of scholarship—is a sharp wit liberally applied using understated drollery.⁴⁰

38 Troy Bramston, *Robert Menzies: The Art of Politics* (Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2019), 267–68.

39 Caro, *Lyndon Johnson*.

40 R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Arnold, 2002).

A last suggestion. All serious biographers should strive to produce something 'definitive' but hesitate to claim to have actually done so. No work of history is, biography included, no matter how well executed. By not doing so, we rightly anticipate and welcome those historians who will surely come after us.

To conclude and propose. These suggested approaches, skilfully combined, may ideally draw what would otherwise be a raw narrative and shards of analysis into a full and consolidated account of a political life's historical significance. Political biography is most productively treated as a basis for garnering, organising and then interpreting evidence, a versatile vehicle for exploring the past. Imparting an overriding sense of purpose beyond just recording life and times is vital. By being drawn together into something coherently conclusive, a political biography is more likely to justify recognition as a fine interpretative history. In doing so, it will help to elevate the entire genre to the higher status it is so well capable of. Indeed, might they even also help resuscitate public interest in Australian politics and history?

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