
Australian political biography and biographers: Revisiting Australian political biography

KATE WHITE

This article is both a personal and academic reflection of my experiences as a student, teacher and practitioner of Australian political biography, and also of working with parliamentarians. It revisits my analysis of the genre published in *Politics* in 1981, but with a different focus.¹ Whereas the earlier article identified various categories of political biography, here I will also be reflecting on my own experience of Australian political biography and of the academics and journalists who write them. As well, I will discuss how political biography has changed in the intervening 40 years and how my views of it have changed.

The 1981 article was influenced by my experience as a teacher and student of Australian political biography. I taught a course on Australian political biography with my colleague Jocelyn Clarke at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology while finishing a PhD (on John Cain senior) in the Political Science Department at the University of Melbourne, supervised by Alan Davies who was then head of the department, and Peter Cook from La Trobe University.² The thesis was initially supervised by Graham Little who introduced me to psycho-social approaches to political biography. Prior to the doctorate, Allan Martin supervised my master's thesis, and in my honours year Allan had offered an elective on political biography that attracted a fascinating group of academics and students, including Inga Clendinnen, Angus McIntyre and Graham Little. In retrospect it was a rather privileged window into the genre. Allan was generous with his mentoring and as I worked on the master's—a political biography of Victorian Liberal premier Thomas Tuke Hollway—we had endless discussions about the man behind the public persona (as Hollway had left unpublished memoirs).³ I remember at the time being influenced by Davies's publications and some of the relevant United States literature. Allan Martin was fascinated by psycho-social approaches to political biography as he was then working on a biography of Henry Parkes. There

1 Kate White, 'Towards an Assessment of Australian Political Biography', *Politics* 16, no. 1 (1981): 130–34.

2 Kate White, 'John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917–1957' (PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Melbourne, 1980); published as *John Cain & Victorian Labor 1917–1957* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981).

3 Kate White, 'A Political Biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway' (MA thesis, La Trobe University, 1975).

appeared to be a tension in his thinking between historical narrative and finding the real man underneath, one that was not ultimately resolved in his *Henry Parkes: A Biography* (1980).⁴

In 1981 I discussed the characteristics of modern biography, including what Maurois called the ‘courageous search for truth’, the recognition of the complexity of human personality, and the desire of readers to identify with the essential humanity of the character portrayed.⁵ Then there were the tactical problems a biographer encountered. One was conveying the sense of time passing or the ‘complex way in which time is experienced’.⁶ Another was the biographer’s relationship with his or her subject. While a biographer’s motives may compromise the ‘courageous search for truth’, Cockshut argued that strong emotional response to one’s subject can be healthy.⁷ A third tactical problem identified was that any interpretation of a life might be over-simple. But I concluded that this was an insurmountable problem because ‘a biography by its very definition is just one interpretation; it is one of many possible interpretations of a life’.⁸

The article also touched on the then current debate on Australian historiography in which Michael Roe identified Australian Whig historians who were commentators on national identity and self-esteem, and who presented the experiences and achievements of white settlers as ‘genial, congratulatory and optimistic’. Roe named W. K. Hancock and various Marxist historians as dominant among the Whigs, while the main anti-Whig was Manning Clark who had gathered to his side many ‘New Left’ historians such as Humphrey McQueen, Henry Reynolds and several feminist writers.⁹ I considered that mention of Australian historiography was pertinent to surveying Australian political biography, because many biographies were written by academic historians and that their approach to history would affect the type of biographies they wrote. I argued that Whig historians tended ‘to stick to “safe” subjects and similarly “safe” interpretations’, and were ‘unlikely to draw on sociological or psychological material to help them explain their subject’s behaviour’.¹⁰

At that time, I noted the lack of reflective material from Australian politicians, with few writing seriously about their time in office. In the intervening 40 years there has been a substantial development in this genre and reflective works such as Keating’s 2016 memoir (cast as a conversation with Kerry O’Brien) have proliferated. However, my focus here will be on biographies of Australian federal and state

4 Full details of this and other biographies referred to in this article are listed in the bibliography.

5 André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 30.

6 A. O. J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Collins, 1975), 13.

7 Cockshut, *Truth to Life*, 14.

8 White, ‘Towards an Assessment’, 131.

9 Michael Roe, ‘Challenges to Australian Identity’, *Quadrant* 22, no. 4 (April 1978): 34.

10 White, ‘Towards an Assessment’, 131.

parliamentarians, not autobiographies or memoirs, or biographies of those who influence politics. Also, in that time there has been a sharp increase in the number of books on Australian politics, including biographies.

In 1981 I identified six categories of Australian political biography: the nineteenth-century-style biography tinged with professionalism; the apologia; the intuitive biography; the tentative, psychologically interpretative biography; the journalist biography (either a ‘quickie’ or a more serious work); and the explicitly psychoanalytical biography. I argued that the first two types belonged to the pre-modern, Whig tradition while the third—the intuitive biography—was transitional between the pre-modern and modern biography (but definitely anti-Whig). The last three types, with the exception of the quickie, were in the modern, counter-Whig tradition. I then discussed examples of biographies in each of these categories.

I concluded that there was a need ‘for a much more analytical approach to researching and writing about our public figures. There is a marked lack of reflection among Australian political biographers’.¹¹ In other words, biographers generally did not reflect on the genre or their personal approach to writing political biography.

The art of political biography

Here the focus will be mainly on those academics and journalists who write Australian political biography rather than on their publications. In the intervening 40 years since my article was published there has been a huge proliferation in Australian biography with the National Library of Australia catalogue recording 8,664 books on the subject.¹² While political biographies are a subset of this number, they are nonetheless popular with publishers because they sell well, although possibly not as well as political memoirs that can sell over 100,000 copies.¹³

There has also in the last 25 years been a significant growth in Australian reflective material on the art of writing political biography, as well as other categorisations of biography proposed. For example, Rhodes identified six conventions in what he calls ‘the British tradition of political life history’: “tombstone” biography, separation of public and private lives, life without theory, objective evidence and facts, character, and storytelling’.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Evans categorised political biographies as the job application (‘They supply what all ambitious politicians need: their own personally

11 White, ‘Towards an Assessment’, 134.

12 Malcolm Allbrook and Melanie Nolan, ‘Australian Historians and Biography’, *Australian Journal of Biography and History*, no. 1 (2018): 4.

13 Jane Messer, ‘Australia is Awash with Political Memoir’, *The Conversation*, 9 September 2015, accessed 1 September 2020, theconversation.com/australia-is-awash-with-political-memoir-but-only-some-will-survive-the-flood-46386.

14 R. A. W. Rhodes, ‘Theory, Method and British Political Life History’, *Political Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (2012): 161.

vetted version of the “log cabin to the White House” narrative.’), the post-career apologetics, and the proper history (in which he includes Martin’s two volumes on Menzies).¹⁵ While there is some alignment of these with my categories, the issue of effective storytelling in biography is important and could be described as an overarching focus of biography. Stuart Macintyre, in reflecting on what makes a good judicial biography, argues that ‘the challenge is to bring it to life, to reveal its patterns and show its animating purpose. By such means the biographer makes the judicial personality illuminate the life of the law’.¹⁶ Thus, storytelling of an individual life can throw light on the wider context in which the person operates. Storytelling can appear to be muted in some types of Australian political biography, especially in various biographies written by academics, and it is a matter to which I will return later.

In recent decades there has also been reflective material on what constitutes effective political leadership. In 2001 six prominent Australian historians and biographers assessed the best Australian prime ministers since Federation using the benchmarks of economic management, personal integrity and love of country. Alfred Deakin topped the list of all six, followed by Robert Gordon Menzies and John Curtin.¹⁷

Some of the most reflective work on the craft of Australian political biography has emanated from those academic biographers who were influenced by Alan Davies and Graham Little, and include Judith Brett and James Walter. Walter has written perceptively about the lack of training, even for academics, in writing biography. Most biographers, he observes:

up until recent times, write about biography only after they have written a biography. None of us was trained to be a biographer. In the course of writing a biography you become aware of the issues and, often at the end of the process, you then write a sort of anguished methodological essay about the problems.¹⁸

There is a sense here that biographers do not seriously reflect on the nature of their craft before embarking on the task of writing about a political figure; rather it becomes a retrospective process. Moreover, the next generation similarly do not learn from the observations of older biographers. Nevertheless, Jenny Hocking argues that the art of biography ‘lies in ... the choices made and the picture painted. This is the difference between documenting a life, and writing a biography about it’.¹⁹

15 Brett Evans, ‘What Makes Them Run?’, *Inside Story*, 5 September 2014, insidestory.org.au/what-makes-them-run/.

16 Stuart Macintyre, ‘What Makes a Good Biography’, *Adelaide Law Review*, 32 (2011), 16.

17 Tony Walker and Jason Koutsoukis, ‘The Good, the Bad and the Couldabeens’, *Australian Financial Review*, 3 January 2001, 28–29.

18 James Walter, ‘The “Life Myth”, “Short Lives” and Dealing with Live Subjects in Political Biography’, in *Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Careers and Administrative Histories*, ed. Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006): 29–34, doi.org/10.22459/APL.10.2006.

19 Jenny Hocking, ‘It’s a Ripping Good Yarn!: Political Biography and the Creative Imagination’, *Adelaide Law Review* 32, no. 1 (2011): 73.

In 1997 Brett edited a series of essays entitled *Political Lives* in the hope that they would 'stimulate new interest in psychoanalytically informed biography by demonstrating the illumination psychoanalytic ideas can bring to our understanding of political leaders'.²⁰ Brett has been plying her craft as a political biographer for some decades. The following reflection addresses Walter's criticism of biographers and is an insightful analysis of what biographers are trying to do. A political life, she observes:

is not just a life that happens to be in politics. Rather, it is a life which is, in some sense, *made* by politics, and then captured by the political biographer. So, one of the main questions I would seek to ask is: what is the deep source of political energy for that person. What drives the subject especially as politics is essentially an uncertain business? ... What were the circumstances and influences? Why did politics have a big attraction for them? How did politics satisfy their psychological needs and what pleasure did it give them?²¹

It is clear here that training in psycho-social approaches to the study of politics continues to influence her method. The motivation for and attraction of a life in parliamentary politics is complex. But I formed the strong view, when working as Director of Research of a state parliamentary committee, that parliamentarians are driven people. To secure a safe seat they need to work hard and to have extensive networks, as well as a fair bit of luck. And once elected they need to have a political energy that seems endless and work long hours every day of the week. So, Brett is right to ask what is the deep source of their political energy. Does it relate to their socialisation within the family, to a fixed sense of purpose or does it stem from a watershed event or series of events in their adult life? For example, Brett described how Menzies in 1942, at a low point in his political life, was 're-mooring his sense of political purpose in this close childhood home and his relation with his parents, and the lives of his parents which embodied the values of hard work, independence, service and frugality for which he praised the Australian middle class'.²² This suggests that fundamental family values were central to Menzies's political energy. And then there is the self-made man in politics. Keating had a sense of steering his own destiny with the observation that 'we all get carried out in the end ... The big question is, what sort of a trail can you blaze, and with what sort of elan'.²³

20 Judith Brett, ed., *Political Lives* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), x.

21 Judith Brett, 'Recording Non-Labor Politics Through Biography', in Arklay, Nethercote and Wanna, *Australian Political Lives*, 25.

22 Judith Brett, 'Public Life, Private Man: Writing the Biography of Alfred Deakin', Seymour Biography Lecture, Canberra, 3 October 2019, accessed 1 September 2020, www.nla.gov.au/stories/audio/2019-seymour-biography-lecture-with-judith-brett.

23 O'Brien, *Keating*, 748.

The discussion then inevitably turns to the question of power. What is power and why do people crave it? As a concept it is controversial. Weber defined power as the capacity to enforce someone to do something even if it is against their will.²⁴ Power is thought to rest on different sources of legitimacy, based on three different types of authority: charismatic, emotional responses to the qualities of an individual; traditional, detailed institutionalised traditions; and legal-rational, formalistic belief in the content of the law and uniform principles. In addition, positional power, that is power vested in the position, can be an important source of power.²⁵

Brett discusses how parliamentarians perceive and use their positional power, including:

why the person wants it; what they want to do with it; how they use it when they have it and, equally, how they do not use it when they have it; what they hold back from; and how they give it up. The biographical project is speculative because it seems to me that we typically only observe how the person exercises power when you see them with it, or they give it up, or have it snatched from them.²⁶

These comments imply that it is often difficult to determine the wellspring of this power; rather, as political biographers we observe only how they exercise power and their response to walking away from politics or being forced out.

There are other dimensions to power that a biographer may need to consider. Some politicians may test the limits of their power; for example, in relation to expenses claims, branch stacking and inconsistency with the truth. A few may be narcissists who have amazing confidence that can actually enthuse followers and staff, but can exhaust those around them and make them difficult to manage—except if they are party leaders, when the task of minders managing them can be impossible.

To summarise, this brief analysis of the art of political biography argues that there has been a significant growth in Australian reflective material on writing political biography. Some of the reflective work has been influenced more by the research and teaching of political scientists such as Alan Davies and Graham Little than by academic historians. Central to these reflections is what motivates Australians to choose a parliamentary career and the politician's use of positional power. The next section examines the approaches of academics and journalists as political biographers.

24 Max Weber, *Economie et Société*, tome 1, *Les catégories de la sociologie* (Paris: Plon/Pocket, 1995).

25 Charles Handy, *Understanding Organisations* second ed., (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1985).

26 Brett, 'Recording Non-Labor Politics', 25.

Academics and journalists as political biographers

There has perhaps been an uneasy relationship between Australian academics and journalists who research and write political biographies. Rickard comments that ‘Australian academic historians were slow to embrace biography, tending to regard a book about the life of one person as not being “real” history, which they saw as requiring a capacity to generalise’.²⁷ It is interesting that academic historians, despite their keen interest in political biography over many decades, should continue if Rickard is right to still be ambivalent about biography.

There has been less indication of ambivalence among academic political scientists as political biographers. Rhodes identifies them as making a particularly important contribution to the genre. He considers what he called the ‘wellspring of political life history’ to be the Melbourne School headed by Alan Davies of the Melbourne University Political Science Department which acted:

as a stimulus for innovation. This school may have been ‘evanescent’ but it lasted from 1970 to 1990 and its Diaspora can be traced to this day. The political science profession is small in Australia and it has often been the case that a few individuals can exert a disproportionate influence over the profession’s development.²⁸

Rhodes then argues that the Melbourne School were punching above their weight in comparison to political scientists in the United Kingdom and, it could be added, more traditional academic historians as biographers. Political scientists influenced by the Melbourne School who became well-known political biographers include Judith Brett, Angus McIntyre, James Walter and Warren Osmond. James Walter has made perhaps the most thorough application of psychoanalytic theory to biography in his study of Gough Whitlam (*The Leader*, 1981). Bolton commented that: ‘Many of his findings are valid and plausible, but debate will inevitably continue as to whether a different historian without theoretical foundations might have arrived at very similar conclusions through observation of available evidence.’²⁹ However, for those of us who had exposure to the Melbourne School there were benefits of that approach in encouraging attention to detail, and searching for different layers of meaning; in other words, it heightened our awareness and skills as biographers.³⁰

27 John Rickard, review of *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* by Judith Brett, *Australian Book Review*, no. 394 (September 2017): 8.

28 R. Rhodes, ed., *The Australian Study of Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 25.

29 Geoffrey Bolton, ‘The Art of Australian Political Biography’, in Arklay, Nethercote and Wanna, *Australian Political Lives*, 6.

30 Thanks to Dr Jocelyn Clarke for these observations.

In 1981 I identified this sixth type as the explicitly psychoanalytic biography, noting only Miriam Dixson's 1976 biography of Jack Lang *Greater Than Lenin* (she was influenced by the Melbourne School that published the biography) as fitting this category and encouraged biographers to make a 'stab in the dark' and explore the underlying forces of the personality that is the subject of their study. However, nearly 40 years on, few biographers other than Walter have published psychoanalytic biographies.

Academic historians have tended to write either the first category I identified, nineteenth-century-style biography, such as La Nauze's two volumes on Alfred Deakin (1965) and Fitzhardinge's double volume on W. M. Hughes (1964, 1979), or what I described as the intuitive biography, discussed below. Walter describes the first category as 'strictly chronological, favouring the public life over the private, description over analysis and the preservation of emotional distance'.³¹ I noted in 1981 that while this type of biography 'may be good draughtsman-like history, it does not qualify for the title of good biography'. Rather, as Hocking explains, 'biography inhabits a world between history and literature: it is both a creative and a scholarly process, grounded in empiricism and brought to life through the same defining techniques of fiction—character and narrative'.³² So, good biography has a creative component that is often lacking in this first category. More recent biographies in this tradition are possibly Ross Fitzgerald's *"Red Ted": The Life of E. G. Theodore* (1994), Geoffrey Bolton's *Edmund Barton: The One Man for the Job* (2000), John Edwards's two-volume *John Curtin's War* (2017, 2018), and Liam Byrne's *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin: The Making of the Modern Labor Party* (2020).

I noted in 1981 the prevalence of the apologist biography—the second category—which includes more popular biographies. Perhaps one of the earliest was Sleeman's 1932 biography on New South Wales premier Jack Lang in which he wrote: 'Lang is the greatest product of the Anglo-Saxon world since Lincoln.'³³ The tradition continued in biographies on Evatt (Allan Dalziel, *Evatt the Enigma*, 1967, and Kylie Tennant, *Evatt: Politics and Justice*, 1970); Cairns (Paul Ormonde, *A Foolish Passionate Man*, 1981); Bolte (Barry Muir, *Bolte from Bamgani*, 1973); Chifley (L. F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley*, 1961); Menzies (Kevin Perkins, *Menzies: Last of the Queen's Men*, 1968); Calwell (Colm Kiernan, *Calwell: A Personal and Political Biography*, 1978), McKell (Vince Kelly, *A Man of the People*, 1971); and Curtin (Norman E. Lee, *John Curtin: Saviour of Australia*, 1983). I observed then that apologias had been a continuous type in Australian biographical writing. One factor was often the writer's familiarity with the subject that produces a dilemma: they can 'write a frank,

31 James Walter, 'Political Biography', in *The Australian Study of Politics*, ed. R. Rhodes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 97.

32 Hocking, 'It's a Ripping Good Yarn!', 69.

33 Bede Nairn, 'Sleeman, John Harvey Crothers (1880–1946)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11, ed. Geoffrey Serle (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1988), 633.

full biography and risk a libel action (or if the subject is dead, incur the wrath of the family) or prune the manuscript to suit the subject and relatives and in so doing tell only half the story'.³⁴ More recent apologies possibly include Madonna King's authorised biography, *Hockey: Not Your Average Joe* (2014); Robert Macklin's *Kevin Rudd: The Biography* (2007); and David Barnett and Pru Goward's *John Howard: Prime Minister* (1997).

Academic historians have been well represented in the third category, the intuitive biography, that marks a transition between the nineteenth-century style and modern biography and between Whig and anti-Whig historical writing. This was a style of biography that was fashionable last century before psychoanalytic thinking began to influence biography.³⁵ The best examples are John Tregenza's *Professor of Democracy: The Life of Charles Henry Pearson* (1971) and, recently, Mullins's biography of William McMahon, *Tiberius with a Telephone* (2018), which, Clark commented, 'manages to combine the skills and meticulous eye for detail of the academic historian with flair and know-how to spin a riveting yarn'.³⁶ Another example is possibly Jenny Hocking's *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (2008), which forensically describes his family, schooling and political development. Kelton described it as 'the best Australian political biography in decades', but Thompson noted it 'still does not give me a "feel" of Whitlam in terms of his persona and personality, vanity and kindness, the "magic" he brought to Australian politics and his capacity to inspire a generation'.³⁷ Hocking undertook this task thoroughly in her second volume, *Gough Whitlam: His Time* (2012). Further examples are David Day's *John Curtin: A Life* (1999) and Angela Woolacott's *Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia* (2019), which demonstrates the art of the possible in politics while exploring the origins of Dunstan's reformist zeal and the complexity of his personal life.

Academic historians have also experimented with the fourth category, the tentatively psychologically interpretative biography. Two early exponents were Aitkin in his biography of New South Wales Country Party leader Michael Bruxner (*The Colonel*, 1969) and, more importantly, Allan Martin in his biography of Parkes and two volume biography of Menzies (*Robert Menzies: A Life*, 1993, 1999). Bolton said of his approach:

34 White, 'Towards an Assessment', 132.

35 John A. Garraty, *The Nature of Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1958).

36 Andrew Clark, review of *Tiberius with a Telephone* by Patrick Mullins, *Australian Financial Review*, 15 November 2018.

37 Greg Kelton, review of *Whitlam: A Moment in History* by Jenny Hocking, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 1 August 2009; Elaine Thompson, review of *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History*, *Australian Parliamentary Review* 24, no. 1 (2006), 269.

Martin for a time was attracted by the ideas of Erik Erikson (1959) ... Little trace of it may be found in his later two-volume life of Menzies, but it may still be that the questions Martin put to his source materials were sharpened by acquaintance with Erikson's theories.³⁸

This assessment mirrors my comments in 1981 that in the final analysis historians cannot go beyond the narrative, although social science tools may inform their writing.³⁹ More recently, Judith Brett has deftly combined her vast skills as an academic biographer with several psychologically interpretative biographies. The first was *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (2007), followed 10 years later by *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (2017). Clark praised the latter book for 'its confident, supple writing style, intelligent inter-posing of political events with Deakin's inner psychic turmoil and shifts in the wider world; mastery of the facts, and capacity to bring her own balance to understanding a man who was, as she pointed out, enigmatic'.⁴⁰ Another political biography in this genre is Stan Anson's *Hawke: An Emotional Life* (1991).

So, what do the subjects of political biographies—the politicians—think about academic biographers? Apparently Prime Minister Chifley argued that academics should not write about politics because they were 'too remote'.⁴¹ While it can be appreciated that academics may not necessarily understand first-hand the cut and thrust of political life, the pressures of the electorate on parliamentarians, factional party politics and the art of compromise in political decision-making, does it impact on their insights and analysis as biographers?

Journalists understand a good deal about these influences on the performance of politicians, and their biographies were the fifth category I noted in 1981. Many journalists writing political biographies have either worked as advisers/speech-writers for parliamentarians—for example, Graham Freudenberg as Whitlam's speech-writer, van Onselen as a former ministerial adviser, Troy Bramston as Kevin Rudd's speech-writer—or, like Michelle Grattan, they have worked for many years in the Canberra press gallery.

Then there are those political biographers who cross over from academia to journalism. One is Don Watson who, after 10 years as an academic historian, went to work as John Cain junior's speech-writer and later for Paul Keating. Watson published a biography of Keating, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart* (2011), which

38 Bolton, 'The Art of Australian Political Biography', 6.

39 White, 'Towards an Assessment', 133; see also J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

40 Andrew Clark, review of *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* by Judith Brett, *Australian Financial Review*, 19 April 2018.

41 Richard Allsop, 'People, Pundits and Prime Ministers: What Biographers Reveal About Australia's Political Culture', *IPA Review* 59, no. 3 (October 2007): 10–14.

Kremmer noted 'set the bar for quality in political writing so high'.⁴² Another is Margaret Simons who has managed to combine a career as an award-winning investigative journalist with being a journalism academic.

Journalists, unlike academics, are more likely to write about a politician who is in mid-career, as Allsop observes: 'Undoubtedly, with their experience of daily deadlines, journalists are well suited to the "rising star" biography genre when speed is required.'⁴³ I wrote in 1981 that journalists had taken the initiative from academic biographers because there was more public interest in politics and politicians; publishers were more prepared to take risks with biographies; and there had emerged a new climate of serious journalism. I divided journalist biographies into the 'quickie' and more serious biographies often written by journalists in the Canberra press gallery, and offered the observation that:

Because journalists know the nitty-gritty of Canberra politics very well, they write about it, especially in biographies, rather obsessively. This leads to an incestuousness in journalist biographies which detracts from the analysis of the political characters.⁴⁴

Mullins agrees that quickies are usually written by journalists and identifies their characteristics as including publisher-driven, produced on a short timetable, often rely on oral material that leaves them 'hostage to their sources', depict politics as a drama, feature the interplay between the writer and subject/s, focus on party leaders or high-ranking ministers, and often cross the boundaries between political history, essay, profile and biography.⁴⁵

Quickie biographies include biographies of Chipp by Tim Hewat and David Wilson (*Don Chipp*, 1978) and of Bjelke-Petersen by Lunn (*Job: The Life and Political Adventures of Johannes Bjelke-Petersen*, 1978). More recent biographies in this category include Michael Duffy's *Latham and Abbott* (2004), Robert Macklin's *Kevin Rudd: The Biography* (2007), Nicholas Stuart's *Kevin Rudd: An Unauthorised Political Biography* (2007), Jacqueline Kent's *The Making of Julia Gillard* (2009), Susan Mitchell's *Tony Abbott: A Man's Man* (2011), and Annabelle Crabb's *Stop at Nothing: The Life and Adventures of Malcolm Turnbull* (2016).

More serious journalist biographies, I argued in 1981, were concerned with Maurois's courageous search for truth and emphasise the complexities of human personality. Mullins says of journalists as political biographers: 'The use of accessible prose, the

42 Christopher Kremmer, 'Political Tracts: The Good, the Bad and the Badly Written', *The Conversation*, 15 June 2016, theconversation.com/political-tracts-the-good-the-bad-and-the-badly-written-61074.

43 Allsop, 'People, Pundits and Prime Ministers'.

44 White, 'Towards an Assessment', 133.

45 Patrick Mullins, 'Quick Books, Quick Manoeuvres: Disentangling the Dangers and Opportunities of the Quickie Political Biography', *The Creative Manoeuvres: Making, Saying, Being Papers – The Refereed Proceedings of the 18th Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs*, 2013, 7, accessed 10 September 2020, www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Mullins2013.pdf.

emphasis on character and the interaction of personalities above that of historical or theoretical analysis are part and parcel of telling that story and simultaneously appealing to a broad and popular audience.⁴⁶ The focus on storytelling is important and will be discussed later in this article. Recently, journalists have come to attract more attention from academics. For example, the political commentary and biographies of Paul Kelly and George Megalogenis have been the subject of a PhD thesis, and Mullins has examined the genre of journalists writing contemporary Australian political history.⁴⁷

Serious political biographies identified in the 1981 article include Alan Reid's *The Gorton Experiment* (1971); Laurie Oakes's *Whitlam PM* (1973) and *Crash Through or Crash* (1976); and Paul Kelly's *The Unmaking of Gough* (1976). Some of the well-regarded journalist biographies in the last 25 years are Michael Gordon's *A True Believer: Paul Keating* (1996), James Norman's *Bob Brown: Gentle Revolutionary* (2004), George Megalogenis's *The Longest Decade* (2006), focusing on Keating's and Howard's prime ministerships, and David Marr's essays on Rudd and Abbott originally published in *Quarterly Essay* and then as *Rudd v. Abbott* (2013), although these had their critics, as well as his essay 'Faction Man: Bill Shorten's Pursuit of Power' (2015). Ferguson described Marr as 'perhaps the finest biographer Australia has ever known'.⁴⁸ Other recent journalist biographies include Tim Colebatch's *Dick Hamer: The liberal Liberal* (2014), Margaret Simon's *Penny Wong: A Biography* (2018), Troy Bramston's *Paul Keating: The Big Picture Leader* (2017) and, although not strictly biography but good investigative journalism, Niki Savva's *Plots and Prayers: Malcolm Turnbull's Demise and Scott Morrison's Ascension* (2019).

To summarise, there are different approaches to biography among academics. Historians have tended to write the nineteenth-century-style biography or the intuitive biography. However, some have explored the tentatively psychologically interpretative biography, which has also attracted several biographers who were trained as political scientists. Journalist biographies have proliferated, many of which are strong on storytelling and thus appeal to a wide readership.

46 Mullins, 'Quick Books, Quick Manoeuvres', 8.

47 Paul Kemp, 'Paul Kelly and George Megalogenis: Media Intellectuals in Australian Politics' (PhD thesis, School of Social Sciences, University of Adelaide, 2017); Patrick Mullins, 'Chasing the Future: Journalists Writing Political History', *Australian Journalism Review* 37, no. 2 (2015): 95–107.

48 Richard Ferguson, review of *Faction Man: Bill Shorten's Pursuit of Power* by David Marr, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 September 2015.

New directions in Australian political biography

One noticeable development in Australian political biography has been the multiple biographies written on the same political leader by either academics or journalists. For example, Allan Martin, Judith Brett and Troy Bramston on Robert Menzies; Graham Freudenburg, Jenny Hocking and James Walter on Gough Whitlam; Blanche D'Alpuget and Robert Pullan on Bob Hawke; David Day, Troy Bramston, Don Watson, John Edwards and Edna Carew on Keating; and Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen, and David Barnett and Pru Goward, on John Howard. Another development has been political leaders writing about each other: for example, John Howard's *The Menzies Era: The Years That Shaped Modern Australia* (2014). A further development has been publications on a collection of prime ministers and/or state premiers; for example, Michelle Grattan's edited volume on *Australian Prime Ministers* (2000) and Paul Strangio, Paul 't Hart and James Walter's *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership 1949–2016* (2017).

As well, several books on political couples have been published. My biography of Joe and Enid Lyons was one of the first accounts of a political relationship in Australia (*A Political Love Story*, 1987). John Rickard's book on the private lives of Alfred Deakin and his wife Pattie and the influence of spiritualism on their relationship has been well regarded (*A Family Romance: The Deakins at Home*, 1992), as has Susan Mitchell's *Margaret and Gough: The Love Story That Shaped a Nation* (2014). Mitchell had access to some of Margaret's early diaries. More recently, Carolyn Rasmussen's joint biography of Doris Hordern and Maurice Blackburn was published (*The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambitions*, 2019).

What makes a good political biography?

So, what makes a good political biography? There are several key elements. One is Maurois's courageous search for truth. This includes understanding the context in which the politician came to power and in which they operated. Judith Brett has insightfully commented about how context and the biographical subject are intertwined:

what makes a great biography is the person coming to life on the page so that the reader is really interested in what happens to them, and can understand them ... so it's also a way of reading history, but it's reading history through the identification with that person you're reading about.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Judith Brett, 'Making Biography and History Come Alive', The Garret Podcast, 24 April 2019, accessed 20 October 2020, thegarretpodcast.com/judith-brett/.

Then there is the question of motivation, as discussed earlier. What influences them, from where does the energy spring? As well, the public and private person needs to be explored, and any tensions between these two personas. Another key element in a good biography is the art of storytelling. The account of the life should engage the reader from beginning to end. It should be added here that the availability of public and private papers can influence a good biography, as can family, political colleagues and advisers. Biographies of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century politicians rely primarily on parliamentary records, newspapers and any memoirs, letters or contemporary reminiscences. But there is a further consideration: how the story of the biographical subject fits within the available records. Biographers, David Marr notes, need to decide how they wish to write about their chosen subject: 'you have to make up your mind about the shape of the life you're writing ... you have to decide, because otherwise you're just left with an examination of sources rather than the story of a life'.⁵⁰ In other words, fashioning the story of the subject's life is key. And the strength of the storytelling, as Mullins has identified, distinguishes a good biography.⁵¹

Storytelling was key in several of my biographies. After publishing the first biography on John Cain senior in 1981, my family asked me to write a biography they could read (presumably they found this biography too cluttered with footnotes to interest them). Hence, the book on Joe and Enid Lyons was an attempt to do just that; to use the rich data from their personal correspondence to explore their public and private lives and make the story both engaging and accessible. My biography of white-collar union leader Barney Williams (*Barney*, 1989) again had no footnotes but the sources of correspondence and union documents could be easily traced through the extensive bibliography. On reflection, I was grappling in these two biographies with telling the story of a life that would engage readers. Exposure to the Melbourne School no doubt influenced my approach, as well as perhaps questioning if the historical narrative was the most appropriate form for political biography. Interestingly, histories that I published at that time still followed a traditional approach to historical research and writing and were well footnoted.⁵²

So, I return again to the view that storytelling is at the heart of a good biography. Possibly the most gripping recent stories of a political figure are two biographies of Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the British Liberal Party. Michael Bloch's *Jeremy Thorpe* (2014) sketches Thorpe's privileged background—educated at Eton and

50 David Marr, 'On Writing Non-Fiction', The Garret Podcast, 29 November 2018, accessed 20 October 2020, thegarretpodcast.com/david-marr/.

51 Mullins, 'Quick Books, Quick Manoeuvres'.

52 Robert Murray and Kate White, *State of Fire: A History of Volunteer Fire Fighting and the Country Fire Authority in Victoria* (North Melbourne: Hargreen, 1995); Robert Murray and Kate White, *A Bank for the People: A History of the State Bank of Victoria* (North Melbourne: Hargreen, 1992); Kate White, *An Open Account: 72 Years of Unionism in the State Bank of Victoria* (Melbourne: Finance Sector Union of Australia, 1992); Robert Murray and Kate White, *Dharug and Dungere: The History of Penrith and St Mary's to 1860* (North Melbourne: Hargreen, 1988).

Oxford and by the age of 30 the Liberal member for North Devon—as well as his extraordinary political career. As Hensher notes of this account, ‘The Thorpe story is, above all, about privilege, and what privilege thought it could get away with in the decades after the war.’⁵³ Bloch’s well-regarded biography has perhaps been overshadowed by John Preston’s *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (2016) that was the basis for the popular BBC series with Hugh Grant providing an engaging portrayal of Thorpe. The book explores the unbridled ambition of the man, his middle-class upbringing and supreme sense of entitlement. It also provides an account of his homosexuality in the late 1960s when homosexuality had only just been legalised. But his various affairs did not stop him marrying when, after being appointed leader, he needed a wife to further his political career (he apparently asked his press officer ‘how the Liberal poll ratings might be affected if he were to marry’).⁵⁴ It is a compelling account of one of the twentieth-century’s great political scandals as Thorpe was the first British politician to stand trial for murder.

The shadow over Thorpe’s leadership was Norman Scott with whom he had had an affair. Scott would not be silenced. He let both Thorpe’s mother and possibly his wife know about the affair. According to Preston, attempts to pay him for silence did not succeed. In the end Thorpe allegedly devised a scheme to have Scott killed. But the would-be assassin succeeded only in killing Scott’s dog. When the story finally broke, Thorpe denied there was any evidence to implicate him in the attempted murder and asserted that ‘no sexual activity of any kind took place’.⁵⁵ The account of the court case in the Old Bailey where Thorpe and three associates stood trial in 1979 is riveting. While all were acquitted in what his friend and former parliamentary colleague Peter Bessell claimed was an establishment cover-up of Thorpe’s relationship with Scott, the publicity effectively finished Thorpe’s political career.⁵⁶ His attempts to get a peerage were unsuccessful and within a few years he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.

The Preston book is not a conventional political biography. Some critics described it as more like a gripping novel. Its strength is its fine storytelling. It demonstrates Thorpe’s unfailing sense of entitlement to a seat in the Commons, to the leadership of the Liberal Party, and to political colleagues who would protect him from public scrutiny. Preston describes a man who could be both funny and even outrageous but at other times he would wear what Bessell called a mandarin mask to protect himself.

53 Philip Hensher, review of *Jeremy Thorpe* by Michael Bloch, *Guardian*, 14 January 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/14/jeremy-thorpe-michael-bloch-review-political-scandal-century.

54 John Preston, *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 84.

55 Preston, *A Very English Scandal*, 244.

56 Preston, *A Very English Scandal*, 312. (Bessell did not stand for re-election in 1970.)

This is in the finest tradition of journalist biographies. It has been meticulously researched. Preston drew on a raft of published political biographies and memoirs that are listed in the acknowledgements. He was also given access to correspondence between Norman Scott and Peter Bessell, to Scott's private memoir and to the case notes made by George Carman who defended Thorpe in the 1979 trial. As well, it has an extensive index. While academic biographers no doubt will ask 'but where are the footnotes?' (as they did when *Joe and Enid Lyons* was published), the reader is provided with relevant dates, private correspondence and dialogue to bring this story to life. And the storytelling is all the stronger for not being encumbered with dozens or even hundreds of footnotes in each chapter.

Some tension between academic historians and political scientists on the one hand and journalists on the other in relation to political biography remains. When John Warhurst reviewed David Marr's 2012 'Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott', he noted 'this essay reveals the complete failure of academic writing to be taken seriously in this genre ... the academic community did not get a mention'.⁵⁷ It indicates almost a sense of annoyance that journalists as biographers do not respect academics. However, perhaps academic biographers need to rethink their approach to writing political biographies and acknowledge that if biography is about storytelling, they might explore various—and even novel—approaches to examining and presenting the life of Australian politicians. We come back to Rickard's 2017 observation that academics tend to regard 'a book about the life of one person as not being "real" history, which they saw as requiring a capacity to generalise'.⁵⁸ Their inability to be more flexible in writing political biography and to move beyond the narrative form suggests that my comments in 1981 about political biographers being often 'too timid, too afraid to make "a stab in the dark" for fear of professional ridicule' may still apply to some academic political biographies.⁵⁹

Bibliography of main biographical works referred to in this article

Aitkin, Don. *The Colonel: A Political Biography of Sir Michael Bruxner*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1969.

Anson, Stan. *Hawke: An Emotional Life*. Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1991.

Barnett, David with Pru Goward. *John Howard: Prime Minister*. Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1997.

57 John Warhurst, 'Much Ado Abbott Nothing: Marr's Quarterly Essay Misses the Mark', review of David Marr's *Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott*, *The Conversation*, 18 September 2012, theconversation.com/much-ado-abbott-nothing-marrs-quarterly-essay-misses-the-mark-9627.

58 Rickard, review of *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin*.

59 White, 'Towards an Assessment', 134.

- Bloch, Michael. *Jeremy Thorpe*. London: Little, Brown, 2014.
- Bolton, Geoffrey. *Edmund Barton: The One Man for the Job*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000.
- Brett, Judith. *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017.
- Brett, Judith. *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*. Chippendale, NSW: Macmillan, 1992.
- Bramston, Troy. *Paul Keating: The Big-Picture Leader*. Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2016.
- Bramston, Troy. *Robert Menzies: The Art of Politics*. Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2019.
- Byrne, Liam. *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin: The Making of the Modern Labor Party*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2020.
- Carew, Edna. *Keating: A Biography*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988.
- Colebatch, Tim. *Dick Hamer: The liberal Liberal*. Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2014.
- Crabb, Annabelle. *Stop at Nothing: The Life and Adventures of Malcolm Turnbull*. Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2016.
- Crisp, L. F. *Ben Chifley: A Biography*. London: Longmans, 1961.
- D'Alpuget, Blanche. *Bob Hawke: The Complete Biography*. Cammeray, NSW: Simon & Schuster Australia, 2019.
- Dalziel, Allan. *Evatt the Enigma*. Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1967.
- Day, David. *John Curtin: A Life*. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Day, David. *Paul Keating: The Biography*. Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2015.
- Dixson, Miriam. *Greater Than Lenin: Lang and Labor 1916–1932*, Melbourne Politics Monograph series no. 4. Parkville, Vic.: Political Science Department, University of Melbourne, 1976.
- Duffy, Michael. *Latham and Abbott*. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2004.
- Edwards, John. *John Curtin's War*, 2 vols. Melbourne: Penguin Random House, vol. 1 2017, vol. 2 2018.
- Edwards, John. *Keating: The Inside Story*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1996.
- Errington, Wayne and Peter van Onselen. *John Winston Howard: The Biography*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2007.
- Fitzgerald, Ross. *Red Ted: The Life of E. G. Theodore*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1994.

- Fitzhardinge, L. F. *William Morris Hughes: A Political Biography*. Vol. 1, *That Fiery Particle, 1862–1914*; Vol. 2, *The Little Digger, 1914–1952*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1964–79.
- Freudenberg, Graham. *A Certain Grandeur: Gough Whitlam in Politics*. South Melbourne, Vic.: Sun Books, 1978.
- Gordon, Michael. *A True Believer: Paul Keating*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1996.
- Grattan, Michelle, ed. *Australian Prime Ministers*. Chatswood, NSW: New Holland 2000.
- Hewat, Tim and David Wilson. *Don Chipp*. Camberwell, Vic.: Widescope, 1978.
- Hocking, Jenny. *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History: The Biography Volume 1*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2009; *Gough Whitlam: His Time: The Biography Volume 2*. Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2012; published jointly as *Gough Whitlam: The Definitive Biography*. Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2014.
- Howard, John. *The Menzies Era: The Years That Shaped Modern Australia*. Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.
- Kelly, Paul. *The Unmaking of Gough*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976.
- Kelly, Vince. *A Man of the People: From Boilermaker to Governor-General; The Career of the Rt. Hon. Sir William McKell*. Sydney: Alpha Books, 1971.
- Kent, Jacqueline. *The Making of Julia Gillard*. Camberwell, Vic.: Viking, 2009.
- Kiernan, Colm. *Calwell: A Personal and Political Biography*. West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1978.
- King, Madonna. *Hockey: Not Your Average Joe*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2014.
- La Nauze, J. A. *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1965.
- Lee, Norman E. *John Curtin: Saviour of Australia*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1983.
- Lunn, Hugh. *Joh: The Life and Political Adventures of Johannes Bjelke-Petersen*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1978.
- Macklin, Robert. *Kevin Rudd: The Biography*. Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Marr, David. 'Faction Man: Bill Shorten's Pursuit of Power'. *Quarterly Essay*, no. 59, Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2015.
- Marr, David. 'Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott'. *Quarterly Essay*, no. 47. Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2012.
- Marr, David. *Rudd v. Abbott: Two Classic Quarterly Essays*. Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2013.

- Martin, A. W. *Henry Parkes: A Biography*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1980.
- Martin, A. W. *Robert Menzies: A Life*. 2 vols. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, vol. 1 (assisted by Patsy Hardy) 1993, vol. 2 1999.
- Megalogenis, George. *The Longest Decade*. Melbourne: Scribe, 2006.
- Mitchell, Susan. *Margaret & Gough: The Love Story That Shaped a Nation*. Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2014.
- Mitchell, Susan. *Tony Abbott: A Man's Man*. Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe Publications, 2011.
- Muir, Barry. *Bolte from Bamganie*. Melbourne: Hill of Content, 1973.
- Mullins, Patrick. *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon*. Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2018.
- Norman, James. *Bob Brown: Gentle Revolutionary*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004.
- Oakes, Laurie. *Crash Through or Crash*. Richmond, Vic.: Drummond, 1976.
- Oakes, Laurie. *Whitlam PM*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973.
- O'Brien, Kerry. *Keating*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2015.
- Ormonde, Paul. *A Foolish Passionate Man: A Biography of Jim Cairns*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1981.
- Perkins, Kevin. *Menzies: Last of the Queen's Men*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1968.
- Preston, John. *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment*. London: Penguin Books, 2018.
- Pullan, Robert. *Bob Hawke: A Portrait*. Sydney: Methuen, 1980.
- Rasmussen, Carolyn. *The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambitions*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2019.
- Reid, Alan. *The Gorton Experiment*. Sydney: Shakespeare Head Press, 1971.
- Rickard, John. *A Family Romance: The Deakins at Home*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1992.
- Savva, Niki. *Plots and Prayers: Malcolm Turnbull's Demise and Scott Morrison's Ascension*. Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2019.
- Simon, Margaret. *Penny Wong: A Biography*. Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2018.
- Strangio, Paul, Paul 't Hart and James Walter. *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership 1949–2016*. Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2017.
- Stuart, Nicholas. *Kevin Rudd: An Unauthorised Political Biography*. Carlton North, Vic.: Scribe, 2007.

- Tennant, Kylie. *Evatt: Politics and Justice*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970.
- Tregenza, John. *Professor of Democracy: The Life of Charles Henry Pearson, 1830–1894, Oxford Don and Australian Radical*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1968.
- Walter, James. *The Leader: A Political Biography of Gough Whitlam*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1980.
- Watson, Don. *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM*. Milsons Point, NSW: Knopf, 2002.
- White, Kate. *Barney: The Story of Rees D. Williams, Architect of the White-Collar Movement*. North Melbourne: Hargreen, 1989.
- White, Kate. *A Political Love Story: Joe and Enid Lyon*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1987.
- Woollacott, Angela. *Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2019.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:
No. 5, 2021, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.05.2021.01