
‘A historian’s diary’: Autobiography, life writing and Neal Blewett’s *A Cabinet Diary* revisited

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Introduction

‘Are you, in fact, a historian?’ I have been confronted with that question more than once with respect to studies of political biography and memoir. Experts in fields ranging from English literature and memory studies to cultural studies have suggested to me, almost casually, that a sophisticated analysis of the political memoir or diary can only take place within the framework of autobiographical or memory theory.¹ One cultural studies specialist proposed that these texts belonged within the remit of New Historicism, a branch of literary analysis that assumes that ‘literary texts can in fact tell us something about the world outside of the text’.² In another instance, a conference attendee mused that this kind of research could not constitute the work of a historian, but was instead a facet of the broader field of life writing. The relationship between history and biography—including political biography—remains complex and contested, with the former both shunning and occasionally embracing the latter.³ Studies of the political memoir and diary genres are, I would suggest, even more fraught with intellectual uncertainty.

In this article, I argue that historical inquiry can shed more light on the nature and epistemological utility of the political memoir or diary than any mode of pure literary criticism or life writing analysis. For one thing, life writing emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in ways

1 For literary scholars, landmark texts might include Susanna Egan, *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 [2001]). For autobiographical memory theory, see Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin, eds, *Understanding Autobiographical Memory: Theories and Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For more on the role of popular memory in cultural studies, see Tara Brabazon, *From Revolution to Revelation: Generation X, Popular Memory and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016 [2005]).

2 Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 341. For more see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

3 See, for instance, Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2019 [2010]); Melanie Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography* (work in progress).

that consciously excluded these kinds of texts, and with important social and cultural logics for doing so.⁴ Further, the key theoretical principles of autobiographical literary theory, though useful to some extent, are limited in their application to memoirs and diaries of the political variety. Though such critical theories are often rightly interested in relationships *within* the text, a fuller and more critical interpretation must necessarily investigate the relationships that *constructed* the text. After briefly tracing the evolution of life writing and its stance towards the political memoir genre, this article examines the frailties inherent in autobiographical theory, particularly with respect to those fundamentally historical questions of publishing, representation, audience and impact. As the book historian Leslie Howsam noted, in critical theory as in mainstream historiography, the 'materiality of books is often overlooked'.⁵ In treating the book as a source, however, historians are better placed to ask and answer questions of context and materiality that shape the book. This article draws on the intellectual heritage of book history by repudiating the idea of a bilateral relationship between author and reader. 'Much can be learned' about the significance of books, David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery noted, by 'tracing their progress from creator to consumer, in accounting for production and marketing structures, in studying the effect of print on culture'.⁶

This article adopts the former minister for social security Neal Blewett's *A Cabinet Diary: A Personal Record of the First Keating Government* as a case study.⁷ Published in 1999, Blewett's diary illuminates the major issues of politicians' publications for the historian. *How* and *why* do politicians publish memoirs and diaries? What effects do they have upon the political environment in which they are published? What are the public and personal consequences of this kind of literary product? Though autobiographical theory and life writing scholarship can sometimes illuminate these questions, it is the historian who is best positioned to raise, investigate and resolve questions relating to authorship, audience and the value of the memoir or diary as historical evidence. Drawing on Blewett's diary itself, as well as newly released archival records from the National Archives of Australia, and interviews with Blewett and his publisher at Wakefield Press, Michael Bollen, I demonstrate the ways in which a historical mode of analysis expands our understanding of the text and its context in ways that literary and auto/biography theory may not. Further, although

4 See Julie Rak, 'Are Memoirs Autobiography?: A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity', *Genre* 37, no. 3-4 (2004): 486-87.

5 Leslie Howsam, 'The Study of Book History', in *Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.

6 David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *Introduction to Book History*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013 [2005]), 3.

7 Neal Blewett, *A Cabinet Diary: A Personal Record of the First Keating Government* (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 1999). This case study is drawn from the author's current doctoral research project, which consists of a major study of the modern political memoir form in recent Australian history.

Blewett's book might best be considered *political diary* rather than *memoir*, it raises many of the same questions (if not more) that must be asked of any politician's own publication.

Life writing and political memoir: Divergent paths

In the twentieth century, scholars from a variety of disciplines developed a keen interest in the autobiographical mode of writing. Autobiographies of 'great lives' proliferated concurrently with major historical developments such as the Enlightenment, the age of industrialisation, and decades of 'revolutions and civil wars ... ideological wars and dictatorships'.⁸ From the 1950s onward, scholars began developing a body of autobiographical criticism and analysis 'parallel to the formation of the modern disciplines, including literary studies and sociology'.⁹ For literary scholars, the study of autobiography arose as a quest to reveal the evolution of Western individual consciousness and to chart its literary expression.¹⁰ For historians, sociologists and others, autobiographies were worthy of study because they were 'social documents', distinguishable from fictive modes of writing by their 'historical condition (the condition which allows it to be called to account)'.¹¹ In the late twentieth century, according to the leading life writing theorist Sidonie Smith, auto/biography studies relaxed their disciplinary distinctions and developed instead as 'a field of interdisciplinary literary and cultural studies'.¹² In time, this broad field expanded further in the form of life writing studies, an interdisciplinary inquiry encompassing all texts that 'take "self" or "selves" as their focus'.¹³ Wide though this definition is, others have more recently sought to push that boundary even further, with descriptors such as 'ego-documents' and 'life narratives' capturing modes of autobiographical display that even life writing might not.¹⁴ The expansion of the field has necessarily challenged and innovated contemporary understandings of

8 Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2016 [1960]), 56–57.

9 Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 8.

10 See, in particular, Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951 [1907]); Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*; Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' [1956], trans. James Olney, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 28–48.

11 David McCooey, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

12 Sidonie Smith, 'Foreword', in *The Routledge Auto|Biography Studies Reader*, ed. Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen (London: Routledge, 2016), xix.

13 Mary Besemeres and Maureen Perkins, 'Editorial', in *Life Writing* 1, no. 1 (2004): vii.

14 For a considered discussion of the term 'ego-document', see Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, 'In Relation: The "Social Self" and Ego-Documents', *German History* 28, no. 3 (2010): 263–72. For discussion of 'life narratives', see Ricia Anne Chansky, 'General Introduction', in Chansky and Hipchen, *Auto|Biography Studies*, xxi.

what constitutes life writing, autobiography, memoir and so on. By the same token, the field remains centred on literary modes of study, dominated by the text at the expense of the author, publisher and audience.

The broadening of the field, it must be said, was entirely needed. Through much of the twentieth century, scholars perceived the typical autobiographer as ‘the man who sets out to write the story of his own life’, and the genre itself ‘peculiar to Western man’.¹⁵ Roy Pascal, an authority on the autobiographical medium in the mid-twentieth century, outlined a canon that was dominated by great Christians (Augustine), great philosophes (Jean Jacques Rousseau), great writers (Henry James) and, occasionally, great statesmen (Mohandas K. Gandhi, though, in Gusdorf’s view, Gandhi was ‘using Western means to defend the East’, a highly unsatisfactory summation of his work).¹⁶ Evidently, early autobiographical theory and criticism was written through the lens of a prescriptively masculine Eurocentrism, in which the Western ‘great man’ was considered a ‘representative autobiographical subject’.¹⁷ With the rise of life writing as a distinct interdisciplinary field came an awareness of other subjectivities and other life narratives. Masculine Eurocentrism began to give way to a more inclusive and collective inquiry that borrowed theories and methodologies from ‘women’s, gender and sexuality studies’.¹⁸ By the twenty-first century, memoir and autobiography were no longer solely for the expression of great personalities, and stories about experiences of sexuality, crime, trauma and illness, ageing, grief, race, and many other such life phenomena proliferated.¹⁹ Even as it became a popular commodity, diverse manifestations of memoir writing acquired a privileged status within the academy.

Notwithstanding the previous emphasis on great men’s lives, autobiographical theorists actively shunned the political memoir and the political diary as texts. The leading mid-century scholars identified very few that were, in their view, worthy of study. Traditionalists such as Roy Pascal and Georges Gusdorf argued that public figures were, in the main, incapable of great autobiography, no matter what their literary capacities. The former suggested that the ‘weight and complexity of public issues’ precluded genuine self-reflective autobiography, while the latter dismissed the ‘elementary motives’ that drove the average ‘minister of state, the politician, the military leader’ to ‘celebrate their deeds’.²⁰ For the most part, life writing theorists also saw little reason to turn their own attention to these genres. For them, the diffuse and previously overlooked dimensions of cultural and social politics were eminently

15 Misch, *Autobiography in Antiquity*, 7; Gusdorf, ‘Conditions and Limits’, 29.

16 See Pascal, *Design and Truth*; Gusdorf, ‘Conditions and Limits’, 29.

17 Smith, ‘Foreword’, xviii.

18 Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades, ‘Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice’, in *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice*, ed. Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018), 1.

19 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 128.

20 Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 6; Gusdorf, ‘Conditions and Limits’, 36.

more interesting than the institutional and prescriptively masculine politics of the nation-state. Magdalena Maiz and Luis H. Pena, for instance, were interested in using Mexican women's autobiographies to 'elucidate a "Hidden History"' from a female-centric perspective.²¹ This is not to say that *all* life writing analysts have avoided the genre; indeed, the past decade has witnessed an uptick in studies of the 'conjunctions of autobiographical discourse and political discourse, life writing and national and transnational political cultures'.²² Nonetheless, political biography, autobiography and memoir remain—quite understandably—marginal to the field of life writing, which has focused on giving greater representation to those previously rendered less visible in the autobiographical canon.

Scholars also perceived the commercial prerogatives of political memoir publishing as suspect. According to Julie Rak, memoir—especially those produced by celebrities—symbolised many theorists' grievances against 'popular writing' as a 'commodity'.²³ Commercialism, they felt, would 'militate against the original and authentic act of autobiography "proper"'.²⁴ Even where academics studied popular examples of autobiography, they reiterated that commercial success 'by itself would never serve as a ticket to canonisation'.²⁵ Eugene Stelzig, writing in the mid-1990s, intoned that the political autobiography remained 'among the lowest and most exploited of mimetic forms in the literary marketplace'.²⁶ Dominant in Europe, these attitudes also shaped scholarly attitudes towards the political memoir in North America and Australia.²⁷ For these scholars, worthy autobiography constituted *literary* autobiography (and in the Australian instance, historians' *ego-histoire*), while the popular variety was best left in and to the marketplace.²⁸

Therefore, prior to the 1980s, political memoirs and diaries largely sat beyond the scholarly gaze. Those who did discuss this literature were in many instances politicians themselves.²⁹ This is not to say that the political memoir has been entirely devoid of scholarly analysis. Political scientists have intermittently engaged with these texts, with varying levels of enthusiasm. Some, such as Andrew Gamble and Conor McGrath in the United Kingdom, have studied their potential value as primary source material for political research. Others, such as David Richards,

21 Magdalena Maiz and Luis H. Pena, 'Between Lines: Constructing the Political Self', *alb: Auto/Biography Studies* 3, no. 4 (1988): 25.

22 Sidonie Smith, 'Autobiographical Discourse in the Theaters of Politics', *Biography* 33, no. 1 (2010): viii.

23 Rak, 'Are Memoirs Autobiography?', 484.

24 Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, 6.

25 Eugene Stelzig, 'Is There a Canon of Autobiography?', *alb: Auto/Biography Studies* 7, no. 1 (1992): 7.

26 Stelzig, 'Canon of Autobiography?', 7.

27 McCooley, *Artful Histories*, 3.

28 Jeremy D. Popkin, 'Ego-Histoire Down Under: Australian Historian-Autobiographers', *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (2008): 107.

29 George Peabody Gooch, *Studies in Diplomacy and Statecraft* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1942); Lord Butler, *The Difficult Art of Autobiography: The Romanes Lecture Delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre, 22 November 1967* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

were more interested in the kinds of cultural and political conditioning that shaped political memoirs and the narratives of executive power contained within them. In Australia, political scientists have demonstrated some interest in political memoirs as acts of 'leader rhetoric', while in the United States they have been studied for their immediate political effects in the context of election campaigns.³⁰ Though significant and revealing, memoir remains an understudied phenomenon in the political science tradition.

In historiography, too, the political memoir remains an understudied object. Since the 1940s, historians and journalists have periodically gazed at local and global traditions of *res gestae* and political apologia. Some scholars, such as George Egerton and David Reynolds in Britain, and Sean Scalmer and Mark McKenna in Australia, have examined broad swathes of literature, observing key trends and developments in political traditions and culture.³¹ Egerton's edited collection *Political Memoir*, a culmination of his 1989 Conference on Political Memoirs, remains one of the most substantive analyses of political memoir and its place in historiographical discourse.³² Others such as David Reynolds and Craig Fehrman conducted major analyses of specific political memoirs or diary productions, most notably the former's *In Command of History*.³³ Confidently, Egerton concluded in the mid-1990s that the political memoir found its 'most apposite critical location within the broad camp of historiography'.³⁴ Pertinent though his observation was, his quest to advance the study of the genre was largely neglected in his wake.

The limits of life writing

If studies of the political memoir have diverged so markedly from autobiographical and life writing scholarship, can a simple mediation, a convergence, be achieved? Even if certain observations or ideas from broader life writing theory are

30 Adam Masters and John Uhr, *Leadership Performance and Rhetoric* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 65–68; Ryan Neville-Shepard and Kirsten Theye, 'Writing a Candidacy: Campaign Memoirs and the 2012 Republican Primary', *American Behavioural Scientist* 52, no. 12 (2013): 1704–15.

31 George Egerton, 'The Lloyd George "War Memoirs": A Study in the Politics of Memory', *Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 1 (1988): 55–94; George Egerton, ed., *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1994); David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Penguin Books, 2005); Sean Scalmer and Nathan Hollier, 'I, Diarist: Examining Australian Politics from the "Inside"', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 55, no. 2 (2009): 170–89; Sean Scalmer, 'The Rise of the Insider: Memoirs and Diaries in Recent Australian Political History', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 56, no. 1 (2010): 82–104; Mark McKenna, "'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.

32 Egerton, *Political Memoir*.

33 Reynolds, *In Command of History*; Craig Fehrman, 'Reagan and the Rise of the Blockbuster Political Memoir', *American Literary History* 24, no. 3 (2012): 468–90.

34 George Egerton, 'The Anatomy of Political Memoir: Findings and Conclusions', in Egerton, *Political Memoir*, 348.

applicable to studies of the memoir, I argue that the foundational theoretical tenets of autobiography studies are not. Consider, for instance, the notion of the *autobiographical pact*, made famous by French theorist Philippe Lejeune. Concerned with truth and narratology, Lejeune defined autobiography as 'prose narrative written by a real person concerning [their] own existence, where the focus is [their] individual life', and in which the author, narrator and protagonist were necessarily 'identical'.³⁵ He advanced the novel concept of the *autobiographical pact*, which he defined as 'the affirmation in the text' of the external author's identity. Further, the reader in this framework is a critical one, alert for 'breaches of contract' on the author's part.³⁶ This theoretical framework recognised a real, embodied author and reader engaged in a discursive relationship, one limited to strict notions of truth and accountability. Though an enduring contribution to the field, this theoretical premise neglects much that is important in the production of autobiographical stories.

Others have given this framework greater nuance with the simple recognition that autobiography is an activity fraught with ethical complications and authorial accountability. In particular, successive autobiography and life writing theorists have pointed out that autobiography and memoir represent not only the author's life stories, but inevitably those of other people whom the author represents on the page. Susanna Egan noted that '[a]utobiography ... does not stand alone any more than people do'.³⁷ Similarly, G. Thomas Couser suggested that memoirists' two chief debts of responsibility were to the 'biographical and historical record', and to the 'people they collaborate with or represent'.³⁸ They also recognise that life writing, in a discursive sense, is 'embedded in a particular culture and history'.³⁹ These contributions are significant insofar as they help to shift the scholarly gaze from narrow conceptions of truth and narrative, and towards the dynamism of the relationship between author, subject and the broader world.

Foundational elements of autobiographical and life writing theory are conceptually restrictive when applied to the political memoir or diary. Most importantly, notions of autobiographical reading and reception in the existing scholarship are dependent upon a bilateral understanding of textuality itself. That is to say, the book is the creation of its author, read in each instance by a single reader. That neat formulation is to some extent challenged when the reader also happens to be a subject, however minor, in the narrative. The relationship between author and reader, however, remains bilateral, uninterrupted by other external forces. That kind of ethereal critical theory is the product of a long tradition of scholarship that has rejected forms of commercially

35 Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4–5.

36 Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 14.

37 Susanna Egan, *Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt and Identity in Autobiography* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2011), 2.

38 G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 80.

39 Egan, *Burdens of Proof*, 2.

predicated literature. Those interested in the field of book history, or the subject of memoir history more specifically, have argued that such texts never constitute a neat relationship between author and reader, but instead are the cumulative outcome of a process through which they were 'evaluated, accepted, physically produced, and marketed by a publishing house'.⁴⁰ To lose sight of the long and occasionally torturous path to publication is to fundamentally miss the significance of a book's existence in the marketplace of commodities and ideas. In the case of political memoirs and diaries, various other entities, such as editors, friends and colleagues, disparate audiences, and the state itself, hold a crucial stake in the text, and that tells us something about the political culture and environment of the day.

Finally, autobiographical theory and life writing are poorly suited to the study of the political diary in particular. It is worth noting that political diaries have been the subject of sustained critical study in their own right, as well as within the broader context of political memoir literature. For Gamble, political diaries trump political memoirs: 'the quality of the material as evidence tends to be higher, because the diarist is recording how things appeared at the moment of writing'.⁴¹ Put succinctly his argument was that political diaries 'score on immediacy'.⁴² In Australia some historians have adopted similar attitudes, arguing that diaries provide 'insight into the vicissitudes, rhythms, and reversals of political life', and that their intimate nature leads to 'unguarded assessments of others, fuller elaboration of motives, and a more complete portrait of the subject of politics'.⁴³ Egerton, however, recognised that the political diarist 'writes with a constant eye on publication and the messages to convey thereby'.⁴⁴ Defending the diary form, Blewett himself argued in *Meanjin* that it allowed readers to 'learn about events before they collect the mythology that transforms them'.⁴⁵ Whatever attitude one adopts, it is clear that the political diary makes a kind of truth-claim upon its readers distinct from the retrospective political memoir or autobiography. So too is its communicative form, characterised not by narrative but by diurnal recording. For traditionalists such as Pascal, this marked the diary out for exclusion from the autobiographical canon, for it was likely guilty of 'uncertainties, false starts, momentariness' and incapable of 'a coherent shaping' of one's life.⁴⁶ Others protested that '[n]o genre is more misunderstood' than the diary.⁴⁷ At first glance, the broadening of life writing's focus to *life narratives* appears

40 Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 19–20. See also Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?', *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 67.

41 Andrew Gamble, 'Political Memoirs', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4, no. 1 (2002): 143.

42 Andrew Gamble, 'Political Memoirs', *Politics* 14, no. 1 (1994): 36.

43 Scalmer and Hollier, 'I, Diary', 170.

44 George Egerton, 'Politics and Autobiography: Political Memoir as Polygenre', *Biography* 15, no. 3 (1992): 232.

45 Neal Blewett, 'The Personal Writings of Politicians', in *Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Careers and Administrative Histories*, ed. Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006), 93, doi.org/10.22459/APL.10.2006.15.

46 Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 5.

47 Alexandra Johnson, *A Brief History of Diaries: From Pepys to Blogs* (London: Hesperus Press, 2011), 12.

to be one that would, unconsciously at least, maintain that existing bias against diaries, which are not life 'narratives' in the strictest sense. Though the ground is now fertile for studies of the diary within the life writing field, historians have a key role to play in examining, analysing and interpreting these texts.

The making of Blewett's diary

Blewett's *Cabinet Diary* is a prime case study with which to demonstrate the utility of examining the political memoir as a book production in its own historical and political context. Life writing theorists may examine and interrogate the lexis and discourse of the text itself, but historians are compelled to ask critical questions about the origin and creation of the document, especially if they are in the business of using it as a primary source. Blewett's diary exemplifies the fact that literary productions of this nature owe much to context and circumstance—those of the author and the polity more generally. Further, it demonstrates the importance of existing generic conventions and precedents. It also reflects the important role that other stakeholders performed in the shaping the published text and its picture of politics and power.

One of the chief challenges inherent to autobiographical theory and life writing scholarship is its fairly minimal interest in authorial *context*, likely a lingering product of Roland Barthes's notion of the 'death of the author', which is the theoretical refusal to treat a text as solely the product of an author's 'person', 'life', 'tastes' and 'passions'.⁴⁸ Though liberating for some readers, this approach is counterproductive to historians interrogating the construction of a political narrative. The decision to write about one's own experiences is itself influenced by contextual factors immediate to the author. In Blewett's case, a combination of background, skills and political circumstance led to the keeping of a political diary. Indeed, the former minister was in a previous life a political scientist and historian:

I wrote on Edwardian British politics ... I had found diaries useful in my own historical writing, and I think I sort of half made up my mind when I was thinking of going into politics that one of the things I could do would be to keep a diary.⁴⁹

As a member of Shadow Cabinet in the early 1980s, Blewett began to record his daily impressions of people and politics, but his relegation to the outer ministry in the early years of the Hawke Labor Government prevented him from witnessing and capturing an insider's view of Cabinet in the way he had intended.⁵⁰ By the

48 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 143.

49 Neal Blewett, phone interview with the author, 26 March 2020. See Neal Blewett and Dean Jaensch, *Playford to Dunstan: The Politics of Transition* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1971); Neal Blewett, *The Peers, The Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

50 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 1.

time Paul Keating defeated Hawke for the leadership of the Australian Labor Party in December 1991, Blewett had been at the heart of executive government for four years, but had not revived his earlier diurnal practices. With Keating's ascension, Blewett thought to himself, "If I'm ever going to leave some kind of record behind, I'd better start again."⁵¹ Hence, his published diaries began with an entry in January 1992, and concluded with the March 1993 election that concluded his ministerial life. Like many political memoirs, the scope of this political diary was influenced by the political events that propelled its author up the ministerial ladder and placed him at the very heart of executive government for 15 months.

If the scope and coverage of the diary owed much to political circumstance, the form of the genre itself owed much to historical precedent. The genre of the Cabinet diary, never before produced in Australia, was nevertheless strong in the United Kingdom, pioneered in its modern form in the 1970s by Labour Minister Richard Crossman.⁵² For Blewett, this was a particularly crucial influence:

I met Crossman when I was in England, and attended some seminars at which he spoke about his diary-writing, and in many ways, I think that's the most impressive diary by a politician, at least in the English-speaking world ... Crossman's was very much, in a sense, a historian's diary, very much concerned with facts and issues and getting all the details right ...⁵³

In purpose, as much as form, Crossman was the exemplar. Blewett intended that, like Crossman's diary, 'one day historians at least would look at' his account of the first Keating Government.⁵⁴ Mark McKenna noted that Blewett was not alone in drawing upon Crossman for inspiration: 'Like Crossman, [former foreign minister Gareth] Evans and Blewett came from academic backgrounds and were more conscious of the historical precedents and limitations of the genre.'⁵⁵ *A Cabinet Diary* sits in the Crossman tradition not only because Blewett wrote in that diurnal medium or borrowed the conventions of his Cabinet diary, but also because he wrote with similar purpose and intent.

Given the locally unprecedented nature of Blewett's proposed publication, it is important to consider who published the manuscript, and why. These questions, it seems, would largely go unasked and unanswered in the lens of life writing and autobiographical theory, but, when studied empirically, reveal much about the cultural environment that shaped its account. Blewett's explicit decision to commit to publication occurred during his tenure as Australia's High Commissioner

51 Blewett, phone interview.

52 Richard Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, 3 vols (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975–77). For more see Kevin Theakston, 'Richard Crossman: The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister', *Public Policy and Administration* 18, no. 4 (2003): 20–40.

53 Blewett, phone interview.

54 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 2.

55 McKenna, "Character Business", 53.

to London, influenced partly by conversations with expatriate friends who were also living in London at the time. 'I didn't think it would be an easy thing to get published', he recalled, 'and perhaps it was the personal relationships that did it.'⁵⁶ In particular, he noted that Professor Brian Matthews of the Menzies Centre and his wife Jane Arms 'were interested in the project, and in fact, Jane in some ways became a kind of agent for me'.⁵⁷ Other close friends, such as novelist Alan Gold and journalist Fred Brenchley, gave Blewett further encouragement to publish his account.⁵⁸ These relationships were significant in part because they gave the author encouragement to seek publication, and in part because they directly facilitated the engagement of a publisher. Arms helped connect Blewett with South Australian publisher Bollen from Wakefield Press, who became highly enthusiastic about the project. He recalled a number of individuals, Arms foremost among them, helping to build the author–publisher relationship between himself and Blewett.⁵⁹ Asked about his initial interest in the project, Bollen recalled his enthusiasm for publishing something that 'hadn't been done before' in Australia, a book that would reveal 'the mechanics of how things worked' within the centre of government.⁶⁰ Further, he explained that the early drafts were 'very readable': 'you've got Keating, you've got these fascinating individuals'.⁶¹ Finally, the local ties to South Australia were important: 'It was kind of a South Australian, Adelaide thing, if you know what I mean.'⁶² To treat the published book as a pure discourse between author and reader would be to neglect these important agents of influence upon its very existence and its style of communication. Without the encouragement and support of Blewett's local networks in London and Adelaide, there would likely have been no published diary, and without Bollen's and Arms's appreciation for the Crossman precedent, his detailed account of executive government may not have appeared in the way that it did.

Though life writing scholars have said much about the significance of interpersonal relationships and their representation *within* memoirs, they have said relatively little about the importance of such relationships in *creating* memoirs and diaries. Recent research has begun to consider the formal publishing contract as a document that not only legally binds its signatories, but also reflects 'an intense lived experience, for authors, publishers, agents, and those close to them'.⁶³ Of course, many crucial relationships in publishing go undocumented and unrecorded in the legal agreements. These informal relationships were particularly significant in the effort to

56 Blewett, phone interview.

57 Blewett, phone interview.

58 Blewett, phone interview.

59 Michael Bollen, phone interview with the author, 29 June 2020.

60 Bollen, phone interview.

61 Bollen, phone interview.

62 Bollen, phone interview.

63 Sophie Masson, 'Signing on the Dotted Line: The Lived Experience of Book Contracts in Contemporary Australian Small-Press Publishing', *New Writing* 17, no. 4 (2020): 472.

produce Blewett's diary. 'I didn't ever sign an agent's contract or anything like that,' he later recalled. 'Perhaps I should have, but it was all a rather loose arrangement.'⁶⁴ Despite the fact that Arms as a mutual acquaintance had been instrumental in building the partnership between Blewett and Bollen, the former minister recalled that there was 'no sort of agreement' about her role as de facto agent, and that 'the relationship broke down rather badly in the end'.⁶⁵ It is important to note, then, that the production of a book is not solely the responsibility of those whose signatures are included in the publishing contract. Rather, other stakeholders are fundamentally implicated in the process of production, and disagreements in the journey towards publication can profoundly disrupt them.

The issue of stakeholders leads inexorably to the broader divergence in the ways that historians and autobiographical theorists treat a text of this nature. Where the autobiographical theorists prefer to treat the text *as it is*, historians are well-advised to consider the text *as it emerged*. That is to say, political autobiographies and diaries are products of an iterative process. While residing in London, Blewett recalled, 'one of the private activities I undertook was getting the diary cleaned up and organised'.⁶⁶ Though enamoured with the early manuscript, Bollen recalled that there was 'quite a lot of repetition' and a number of 'things that were just not so fascinating'.⁶⁷ According to Blewett, Bollen chose not to demand any retrospective alteration of the manuscript's flavour: 'What he did do was to demand significant cuts—ultimately some 70,000 words. For instance, nearly all the local constituency activity was removed. That was partly at his urging, because he didn't think the whole manuscript was a publishable project. Certainly, the cuts were extensive.'⁶⁸ The remaining manuscript was organised around the central theme of the Keating Government's quest to survive its date with destiny in March 1993.⁶⁹ 'I think I was editing,' Bollen recalled, 'shaping rather than just copy checking. It was trying to get that sort of narrative drive'.⁷⁰ The pair sought advice from several quarters to assist in the cutting process.⁷¹ Bollen claimed that Blewett was 'very easy to work with' through the editorial process.⁷² That statement in itself is revealing, for it reflects the extent to which the construction of Blewett's diary, in its published form, was a collaborative and collective project, one in which the author's story was refracted through the interests of the publisher and the participation of other actors.

64 Blewett, phone interview.

65 Blewett, phone interview.

66 Blewett, phone interview.

67 Bollen, phone interview.

68 Blewett, phone interview.

69 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 4.

70 Bollen, phone interview.

71 Blewett, phone interview; Jane Wheatley, 'Two of Us: Neal Blewett & Robert Brain', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 2000, 14.

72 Bollen, phone interview.

The portrait of the Keating Government in Blewett's diary was a complex one. He maintained that the diary was intended to 'improve the attitude of the public towards politicians. I tried to describe what a ministerial life was really like, the demands and the activities, so that it might have a positive effect in that sense'.⁷³ This intent shone through clearly in diary entries that referred to ministers functioning with little sleep, or politicians who were badly weathered by the trials and tribulations of politics and the media.⁷⁴ As prime minister, Keating appeared as a reform 'powerhouse' and 'politician of vision' leader whose government was, at times, 'an administrative shambles'.⁷⁵ Cabinet, the central subject of the book, appeared remarkably cynical and opportunist. In his capacity as social security minister, Blewett found himself accepting in 1992 that 'politics rather than social concern would have to be uppermost in our budget plans'.⁷⁶ In his account of a cabinet debate about protectionism and the entertainment sector, he wrote of a strange composite policy that failed to appease either side of the relevant argument: 'Ultimately no one wanted responsibility for the ghastly hybrid'.⁷⁷ Perhaps the most perverse entry concerned the Expenditure Review Committee's (ERC) attitudes towards cost-cutting measures in the 1992 budget: 'Having abandoned [a] saving that affected only bureaucratic egos, the ERC turned tough on measures affecting thousands of ordinary people'.⁷⁸ Above all, the subject of numerous cabinet discussions appeared to be the government's own electoral fate. Despite the author's sincere efforts to enlighten citizens to the real and difficult challenges of discharging a ministerial portfolio in Australia, these impressions have bequeathed to history a picture of a government focused first and foremost on its own survival. In forming judgements and conclusions about this picture of politics, it is imperative to recognise that this text is a product of a collaborative process, one that has profoundly shaped its representation of the political past. Even the most faithful political diary is shaped by its publication process.

Diaries, storytelling and the state

The publication of Blewett's diary also revealed much about the culture of secrecy in Australian democracy in the late twentieth century. For one thing, he recorded a cabinet debate in July 1992 in which the Keating Government decided to preserve the cabinet notebooks, a valuable primary source that some of his colleagues would

73 Blewett, phone interview.

74 For instance, he records himself attending a meeting of the ERC (Expenditure Review Committee) immediately following his mother's death; an extremely unwell Graham Richardson vomiting between answering questions about impropriety in the Senate; and Gareth Evans functioning with just two hours of sleep while managing his ministerial and Senate responsibilities. Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 78, 115, 128.

75 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 16, 160.

76 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 69.

77 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 147.

78 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 200.

have happily acted to destroy.⁷⁹ More significantly, though, the act of publishing the diary tested the state's preparedness to tolerate an unprecedented level of disclosure. In the United Kingdom, noteworthy figures such as former Labour ministers Crossman, Tony Benn and Barbara Castle, and former Thatcher minister Alan Clark had published diaries that reproduced confidential cabinet discussions.⁸⁰ In 1976, the Radcliffe investigation into political memoirs proposed that confidential discussions and deliberations within the government should not be published within 15 years of their occurrence.⁸¹ British Chief Justice Lord Widgery, in a deliberation on the legality of Crossman's diary, found that cabinet confidentiality was not imperilled by publication of cabinet debates one decade after events.⁸² Blewett argued that, seven years after much of his diary was originally written, the 'brief Age of Keating already seems to belong to another world'.⁸³ Sensibly, he voluntarily removed passages that recorded 'sensitive foreign policy and intelligence references'.⁸⁴ Even in its aesthetic design, though, the book emphasised its revelatory uniqueness. Bollen and designer Liz Nicholson carefully designed the dustjacket, which featured a shadowy and semi-transparent picture of Blewett carrying a folder. That design, he recalled, was intended to mirror the diary's ambition for revelation and historical value: 'it wasn't meant to be a "here I am" book ... It was more a way of being a conduit of what happens in cabinet, and ... getting in there for the record, if you like'.⁸⁵ Blewett's diary was, by design (in every sense of the word), a deliberate act of revelation and democratic transparency.

Nonetheless, Blewett was hardly blind to the sensitivities and anxieties of the state with respect to his intended course of action. Out of courtesy, he decided to notify the apex of the bureaucracy in Canberra about his intention to publish. Writing to Cabinet Secretary Michael L'Estrange Blewett quipped: 'I have no desire to become involved in a prolonged legal dispute, however beneficial that might be for sales'.⁸⁶ L'Estrange forwarded the letter to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), which sought legal advice.⁸⁷ In May, the Acting Chief General Counsel reported that, although the diary's publication could be punishable under section 70 of the Crimes Act, there would be some difficulty proving that the Act actually

79 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 195.

80 John F. Naylor, 'British Memoirs and Official Secrecy: From Crossman to Thatcher', in Egerton, *Political Memoir*, 330–41.

81 *Report of the Committee of Privy Councillors on Ministerial Memoirs: Radcliffe Report* (Cmnd 6386) (London: HMSO, 1976). For more on this, see David Richards and Helen Mathers, 'Political Memoirs and New Labour: Interpretations of Power and the "Club Rules"', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 12, no. 4 (2010): 498–522.

82 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 3.

83 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 3.

84 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 2.

85 Bollen, phone interview.

86 Letter from Neal Blewett to Michael L'Estrange, 30 March 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

87 Letter from Michael L'Estrange to Neal Blewett, 15 April 1998; Letter from Martin Bonsey to Robert Orr, 17 April 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

applied to Ministers, and that it was 'highly unlikely that a claim for damages for breach of confidentiality would be successful'.⁸⁸ Though clearly a crime, breaching cabinet confidentiality would be near impossible to prosecute.

In the absence of encouraging legal advice, the Australian Public Service tried to stop publication in a more informal, intimidatory manner, using the imprimatur of the state rather than its coercive legal powers. Secretary of PM&C Max Moore-Wilton drafted a heavy-handed letter to Blewett asserting that 'ministers should clearly be subject to provisions equivalent to section 70'.⁸⁹ Blewett perceived this as a 'threatening letter', but reasoned that 'he left it open to me to take the risks', and therefore pressed ahead.⁹⁰ Extracts of the letter quickly leaked to journalists, who made the pseudo-legal dispute a public story in December 1998. Unsurprisingly, media editorials were largely in favour of less, rather than greater, secrecy.⁹¹ Popular radio host John Laws asked his viewers: 'Why would "Max the Axe" make that kind of threat. I mean what is there in Neil [sic] Blewett's diaries that's going to bother [incumbent prime minister] John Howard I'd like to know.'⁹² Bollen doubled down as well, confirming to journalists that Moore-Wilton's threat was 'not a problem at this stage'.⁹³ Moore-Wilton responded on 16 December 1998 by sending his original letter in its entirety to the *Sydney Morning Herald* for publication: 'I see little choice but to release the text in the interests of balanced consideration of the issues.'⁹⁴ These attempts at private and public pressure failed to dissuade either Bollen or Blewett, who sardonically remarked to the press, 'I never asked the poor man for support'.⁹⁵ Immediately prior to the diary's publication, PM&C remained icy about the book. Offering Moore-Wilton some preparatory talking points ahead of its release, Assistant Secretary Barbara Belcher commented that any legal action against Blewett would only 'delay its appearance on the remainder shelves'.⁹⁶ Ultimately, this remarkably public conflict between a former minister and active public servant revealed that the state perceived itself as a stakeholder in the publication of political diaries and the preservation of a culture of non-disclosure. Further, senior public servants revealed their willingness to use soft power and coercion—in the absence of any serious legal options—to curtail publication. This incident would go undetected in a theoretical autobiographical analysis, but tells us much about the political culture of secrecy and confidentiality in Canberra, a culture against which Blewett and Bollen were decidedly acting.

88 Letter of Legal Advice from Robert Orr to Martin Bonsey, 11 May 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

89 Letter from Max Moore-Wilton to Neal Blewett, 9 June 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

90 Blewett, phone interview.

91 'No, Minister!', NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

92 Transcript of 2UE, The John Laws Program, 10 December 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

93 Michael Bollen quoted in Julia Baird, 'Legal Threat to Keating Expose', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

94 Letter from Max Moore-Wilton to Bernard Lagan, 16 December 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

95 Neal Blewett quoted in Julia Baird, 'PM's Office Steps Up Pressure on Blewett', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1998, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

96 Memorandum from Barbara Belcher to Max Moore-Wilton, 27 August 1999, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

Political history: For the present, for the future

Finally, it is worth recognising one further key flaw inherent in autobiographical and life writing theory when applied to the political diary. Lejeune's *autobiographical pact* assumed an 'audience' that was both singular (an individual person) and universal, reading and engaging with books in the same ways. That theoretical assumption is fundamentally flawed. The political memoir or diary is a genre with a multitude of disparate audiences, varying from the general reader to the political aficionado, and from the literary biography enthusiast to the critical political scientist. Further, its effects in the public domain are manifold. In the short term, memoirs and diaries generate a series of immediate political reactions and responses within the ongoing pressure-cooker of daily professional politics.⁹⁷ In the longer term, they impact and influence the ways that audiences (including historians, biographers and political scientists) understand the political past. If Lejeune's framework is wholly inadequate for dealing with these considerations, others should not be dismissed summarily in the same fashion. Egan, Couser and the like have demonstrated a more critical way of approaching these books, recognising them as products in which the presenter *and* the represented have a vested interest. Moreover, theorists have indicated that memoirs and diaries are discursive actions with long-term consequences, a kind of literary formation that looks 'forward as well as backward'.⁹⁸

In its production and reception, Blewett's diary was to some extent shaped by anxieties about how best to represent his former colleagues in the most dynamic and holistic way. Preparing the manuscript, Blewett became concerned about his nightly descriptions of ministerial colleagues being coloured by the policy debates of the day:

I worried that, too often, that particular one night stand, if you like, would be seen as my view of that particular minister or politician, because they might not appear again for another fifty pages ... I thought I should try and give a brief sketch of each of my ministerial colleagues when they were first introduced, so that people could refer back to that as my overall assessment of them ...⁹⁹

Blewett's aspiration was that these sketches would enliven the story, and his publisher was enthusiastic about them: 'I can remember being delighted when he came back with such, sometimes waspish but on the whole generous, little sketches, and Neal writing them so well. It really did spark up the book.'¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, the author himself noted that these character sketches were the most impactful aspect of the

97 This is also true of contemporaneous biographies of serving politicians. See Chris Wallace, 'The Silken Cord: Contemporaneous 20th Century Prime Ministerial Biography in Australia and its Meaning' (PhD dissertation, The Australian National University, 2015).

98 Couser, *Memoir*, 177.

99 Blewett, phone interview.

100 Bollen, phone interview.

book, in public and private. For instance, his description of Kim Beazley (then Leader of the Opposition) as 'Churchillian in ambition' but 'flawed by a streak of most un-Churchillian timidity' won few favours inside the Labor Party.¹⁰¹ Prime Minister John Howard had already taken to declaring that Beazley 'lacked the ticker' necessary for the prime ministership.¹⁰² Michelle Grattan noted the political danger in Beazley's profile: 'Blewett's harsh—but many will think fair—assessment of [Beazley's] political character won't strike any joy into a Caucus struggling against a reinvigorated Government.'¹⁰³ The key point here is that political stories, when refracted through the media, have immediate political effects and impacts. Blewett's character sketches, though intended to offer readers a more well-rounded view of various individuals than they may otherwise have gleaned, were prime fodder for sensationalism at the hands of the press.

The diary also impacted greatly upon Blewett's personal relationships with his former ministerial friends. In many instances, it was the character sketches with which individuals took issue.¹⁰⁴ Interviewed for this research, Blewett recognised the frailties of sketching his former colleagues' personalities in this succinct way: 'I can see how that affected some of my colleagues. I regret that'.¹⁰⁵ However, it was not only the character studies that caused conflict. Though not particularly concerned about distant associates and factional opponents, Blewett was disappointed by reactions from fellow travellers to some of his colourful diary entries. His peer in the Centre-Left faction, former treasurer John Dawkins, described him as a 'blowfly' on the cabinet wall.¹⁰⁶ He recalled a 'terrible quarrel' with another senior cabinet colleague whose words were reproduced at length in the book: 'I wrote about [the minister's] comments on some of his own right-wing colleagues, and as [he] was still of course an active politician when it was published, I could see that would cause factional problems for him.'¹⁰⁷ Despite these conflicts, some former colleagues celebrated Blewett's work. Former industry minister John Button privately commended the diary's 'waspish comments', and (subsequently disgraced) former minister for communications Robert Collins phoned Blewett to praise the book. Significantly, Keating was also 'quite positive in some of the remarks he made about the diary'.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, any suggestion that Blewett published *in spite* of colleagues is baseless. Indeed, he dedicated the book to his fellow former ministers, a decision that he described as 'my plea that I'd be forgiven'.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, Egan was right in saying that autobiography 'does not stand alone any more than people do', but more

101 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 18.

102 Michelle Grattan and Steve Lewis, 'The Plot Gets Ticker and Ticker', *Australian Financial Review*, 3 September 1998.

103 Michelle Grattan, 'Belaboured', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September 1999, 43.

104 Penelope DeBelle, 'Opening the Cabinet Door', *Sunday Age*, 26 September 1999, 6.

105 Blewett, phone interview.

106 Blewett, phone interview.

107 Blewett, phone interview.

108 Blewett, phone interview.

109 Blewett, phone interview.

than this, Blewett's example demonstrates that these interpersonal relationships can shape not only the content and narrative, but also the very shape and format of a published political account.

The publication of Blewett's diary also had several longer-term consequences, including the implicit affirmation of a minister's right to reveal cabinet debates after leaving office. In the 12 months prior to publication, *A Cabinet Diary* was subject to censure inside the Howard Cabinet on the grounds that the principle of cabinet-in-confidence was at risk. In June 1998, Howard stressed to his colleagues that cabinet debates must remain secret 'not only at the time an issue was current, but also into the future', and that publication of those debates constituted 'a breach of ... personal confidentiality and loyalty'.¹¹⁰ Following Blewett's publication, Howard reiterated 'his disapproval of Dr Blewett's decision to publish'.¹¹¹ Despite the attempts to uphold cabinet secrecy, former Labor ministers were emboldened to produce insider accounts of serious cabinet debates. Robert Tickner recognised that his account of the Keating Government's native title debates—which retraced secret departmental advice—was less risk-laden in Blewett's wake.¹¹² Consider also Bob Carr's *Diary of a Foreign Minister*, which revealed cabinet debates and personal communications at the most senior ministerial levels.¹¹³ Reviewing that book for the *Australian Book Review*, Blewett mused, '[d]id Carr too receive an epistle from on high?'¹¹⁴ In this view, the publication of *A Cabinet Diary* was an act that had long-term consequences for cultural expectations surrounding cabinet secrecy and a minister's autonomy to tell an inside story.

Blewett's initial intention was to provide future scholars and historians with raw materials for an analysis of the Keating Government. In this way, the book contributed to longer-term shifts in social, cultural and historical knowledge on a variety of political questions. For political scientists, the centralisation of power inside the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was the crucial story. More than 20 years after publication, Bollen recalled the revelatory power of the book: 'I remember there's a fantastic line in the book where he says something like, "The closer I get to power, the less powerful I feel", or to that effect.'¹¹⁵ Quoting Blewett's words, directly, eminent political scientist Patrick Weller concluded that this observation about the nature of executive power and centralisation 'was probably always true and

110 Martin Bonsey, Note for File, 22 June 1998, NAA: A1209, 1998/1219; Cabinet Minute, 22 June 1998, NAA A14370, JH1998/216.

111 Memorandum from Barbara Belcher to the Prime Minister's Office, 3 September 1999, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.

112 See Robert Tickner, this volume.

113 Bob Carr, *Diary of a Foreign Minister* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014).

114 Neal Blewett, "'Slow Boring Through Hard Boards': Acuity and Self-Indulgence from an Ex-Foreign Minister', *Australian Book Review*, June–July 2014, 13.

115 Bollen, phone interview.

always will be'.¹¹⁶ Anne Tiernan used Blewett's words to tell a similar story about 'a powerful and progressively more insular PMO' in the 1990s.¹¹⁷ Historians, too, have used the diary as a vibrant primary source in their own research. Ministerial memoirs and diaries are an essential source where alternative documents are either classified or lacking in sufficient detail. Cabinet decisions and cabinet notebooks, declassified after 20 and 30 years in Australia respectively, are often less than a comprehensive guide to the colour and movement of political and policy debate in Cabinet. Blewett's comprehensive outline of debates within Cabinet, then, possess a comparative advantage as source material. For instance, Noah Riseman has closely examined Blewett's account of the cabinet debate over the Keating Government's removal of the ban on homosexuality in the Australian Defence Force. In Riseman's case, the 'particulars of the discussion' in the diary were a prime source in the absence of open-access cabinet papers.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Melanie Nolan used the diary to explain major shifts in the tenor of Australia's relationship with New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s, with particular interest in Blewett's account of debates in Cabinet over New Zealand's procuring Anzac-class frigates and trans-Tasman cooperation over defence more generally.¹¹⁹ Treated as a primary source in this way, *A Cabinet Diary* was studied by its initial intended audience, namely scholars and historians. Further, its medium- and longer-term impacts were manifest in its use as source material for other writers, insofar as it contributed to broader changes in political and historical narratives about Australia, its politics and its past. Evidently, to look exclusively at the diary's short-term political effects would be to miss its broader function and contribution as a primary record of the political past.

Conclusion

The field of life writing has done a world of good in the past five decades with respect to diversifying the autobiographical canon and bringing marginalised voices to the fore for academic inquiry. What was previously a genre dominated by great, white, heterosexual, upper-class men has become a field of study replete with the voices of women, people of colour, people of varying gendered and sexual identifications, and by people from beyond the Euro-Atlantic confines of high modern literature. In every sense, this has been a good thing, enhancing scholarly awareness of personal and political narratives emanating from non-Western societies, and non-masculine authors. This intellectual inheritance is to be celebrated.

116 Patrick Weller, *Cabinet Government in Australia, 1901–2006: Practice, Principles, Performance* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), 168.

117 Anne Tiernan, *Power without Responsibility: Ministerial Staffers in Australian Governments from Whitlam to Howard* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), 65.

118 Noah Riseman, 'Outmanoeuvring Defence: The Australian Debates Over Gay and Lesbian Military Service', *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 61, no. 4 (2015): 572.

119 Melanie Nolan, 'Welfare Limbo?: Social Welfare and Citizenship Debates about New Zealanders Living in Australia', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 53, no. 3 (2015): 265.

That said, autobiographical theory and life writing studies are limited in their capacity to further our collective understanding of the nature and function of the modern political memoir or diary. For one thing, life writing scholarship often treats the text as it is and lingers heavily on the relationship between the text and a seemingly universal imagined reader. As Blewett's *Cabinet Diary* clearly indicates, that assumption simply cannot stand. The progression from traditional autobiographical theory to life writing studies has involved a move away from questions of *truth* and towards the issue of the *consequences* of these narratives. However, even in that mode, a literary analysis can only go so far in explaining the essential nature of a political autobiography, and can scarcely scratch the surface of a political memoir or diary's status as a product in whom many different stakeholders have a vested interest. Drawing on the lessons of life writing, historians can consider the consequences of political autobiography and diary for interpersonal relationships, between friends and political peers. However, the historian's duty is to go above and beyond that simple recognition, and to locate those relationships within a specific historical moment, a particular political structure and culture. Where the traditional autobiographical theorist fingered these stakeholder relationships as reasons to exclude the political memoir from the canon of study, it is that very attribute that makes the political memoir interesting and valuable for the political historian's research. Here again, Blewett provides a particularly apt example, for the most cursory account of his diary's publication reveals the anxieties and concerns it engendered on the part of several interested parties, including the bureaucracy of the state itself. These relationships tell us much about changing cultures of secrecy and disclosure in late twentieth-century Australia, as well as the increasing centralisation of power, the fraught relationship between political parties and former luminaries, and the difficult question of who even owns the contemporary political past. In the tradition of Crossman, Blewett's *Cabinet Diary* is a diary *of* the historian, *for* the historian, written *by* the historian.

For these reasons, then, the study of the political memoir remains largely within the remit of the contemporary historian. The historian's investigative methodology and commitment to contextualisation are essential ingredients in the study of any singular political memoir. If politicians' writings are, as Gooch suggested, the 'meeting place between history and literature', it is the discipline of the former that has most to offer in understanding and utilising that literature most effectively.¹²⁰ In conclusion, this particular area of study has much to offer to the broader field of political historiography and political biography. Our critical and contextually aware approach to the political autobiography or diary is essential if we are to understand this continually burgeoning body of literature.

120 Gooch, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 227.

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