
Preface

JOSHUA BLACK AND STEPHEN WILKS

For those willing to work outside the conventional parameters, is political biography still a helpful form of historical explanation, and does it have an intellectual future (it clearly has a commercial one)? The answer must be a qualified ‘yes.’¹

The relative decline of political history as a sub-discipline of history has not been matched by any evident decline in political biography. Quite the opposite, in fact, particularly among general readers. Perhaps this is due to its capacity for drama and for the high degree of human agency in political events. Yet political biography has long occupied an uneasy position on the spectrum of academic genres of writing. Gone are the days when all of human history was considered simply a story of great men and their deeds. Importantly, we no longer consider the ‘political’ as expressly limited to the realm of mass parties and national legislatures; as Michelle Arrow has comprehensively demonstrated, a popular catchphrase of 1970s Australia—‘the personal is political’—ran directly counter to the notion of a neat and separable division between public and private selves.²

In the intervening years, the rise of life writing has democratised and broadened scholarly understandings of biography, including by fostering a valuable interest in the lives of non-masculine, non-heteronormative and non-Western life narratives. We hope that the articles in this fifth issue of the *Australian Journal of Biography and History* demonstrate that political biography is growing beyond just ‘one damned life after another’, and that there are new and productive paths open for practitioners, readers and critics of this genre. This is not to assert that all such past biographies should be disregarded, but instead that they be reconsidered in a new light; one discussed in this issue is *A Hard Row to Hoe*, a spirited memoir of life as a backbencher by the former state member for Manly Alan Stewart, which appeared in 1988 to little fanfare, but which can do much to illuminate a ‘political history from below’.

In today’s wider cultural environment, the political biography genre has a promising future. Political biographies are continually produced in Australia and elsewhere, and academics from a variety of fields continue to read and interpret them. As Blair

1 Lucy Riall, ‘The Shallow End of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11, no. 3 (2010), 395.

2 Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2019).

Williams demonstrates in this issue, increasing numbers of women are writing and practising political biography and often reinvigorating the genre in the process, even if the parliamentary subjects of these texts remain as a group stubbornly homogenous. Scholars from a number of other disciplines are turning their attention to the genre, reconsidering its opportunities and limitations, its literary properties and its epistemological foundations. As with life writing more broadly, political biography has long occupied an interdisciplinary space where historians, biographers, literary theorists and political scientists alike engage in a discourse about the people, processes and structures of politics past and present. Yet it can nonetheless still readily conjure up an image of very official lives presented in a manner that is (in the worst sense) Dickensian in tone and substance.

This special issue of the journal offers a critical snapshot of the diverse approaches and attitudes to political biography and its variants in contemporary Australia. In particular, it captures the interdisciplinary conversation between contemporary historians, innovative political scientists, experienced practitioners of biography and journalism, and critics of visual culture. It looks beyond the limited perception of political biography as simply the study of great statesmen (or great stateswomen), and proposes instead a widening of what actually constitutes political biography and political life writing. This invites us to consider critically the motives of those who write political biographies, and of those who write first-hand, subjective political memoirs. It calls into question the representativeness of those who have typically been the subject of published biographies, including by calling attention to the longstanding lack of women's political biography in Australia. It may also foster reflections on the many different media through which political lives are refracted, both in terms of variant genres of writing (biography, autobiography, diary, manifestos and so on), and in terms of non-written modes of storytelling (such as painted portraits and other images). In attempting all this, the journal draws upon the diverse expertise of its contributors to offer a lively and spirited conversation about the nature, meaning and function of political life narratives.

This issue also strives to avoid certain traditional pitfalls inherent in the study of political biography. Among other things, we seek to widen the field's longstanding focus on hetero-masculine subjects. In this regard, Williams's contribution offers a discussion on the paucity of women's political biography and, by extension, the lingering paucity of women in politics. We also attempt to divert attention away from preoccupations with the question of 'leadership' in the strictest sense of the term. All elected political representatives are leaders to some extent, but studies of political lives are often entirely bound up with appointed leaders of political parties and, in most Westminster democracies, prime ministerial leadership alone. In this issue, we have sought to avoid protracted analysis of successive prime ministers, leaders of the Opposition and minor party leaders, focusing instead on other features of Australian political lives and their contexts. Instead, the issue seeks to decentre popular understandings of political leadership, and to shift the scholarly gaze towards

the structures and cultures of politics and their impact on political lives. Stephen Wilks's analysis of backbencher memoirs and Daniel Oakman's study of professional sportspeople and athletes in politics are both indicative of this special issue's broader objective to explore political lives as products of culture and context. Wilks calls for more of the foot soldiers of politics—backbenchers, humble and otherwise—to write memoirs as an insight into the working lives of the typical politician, and to explore what wider significance they have as political players. Oakman delineates the links that politics has to mainstream Australian life via that great staple of popular culture, sport. Contesting the notion that 'sport is sport', Oakman accounts for the rise of sporting and athletic professionals as political candidates.

Where this issue *does* revisit familiar political leaders, it is with a view to describing the proliferation of a particular narrative or the *performance* of leadership, rather than simply the personal qualities and attributes of a leader. In an methodological reflection on his award-winning biography *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon* (2018), Patrick Mullins critically explores the concerted attempts of the former prime minister to control and manipulate the public and archival record of his life.³ Similarly, in her account of a quietly controversial and eventually abandoned biography of Robert Menzies early in his second prime ministership, Chris Wallace demonstrates that life stories are powerful but risky commodities in the fast-changing political domain. Moreover, in a sweeping examination of prime ministerial portraiture, Sarah Engledow reconsiders the visual performance of leadership for posterity and, ultimately, questions the biographical utility of such performances.

Importantly, studies of Australian political biography can hardly ignore the heightened prevalence of autobiographical stories in the public domain. Formerly rare, political memoirists and diarists are now taking stock of and richly contributing to the discourses of modern politics in surprising ways. Robert Tickner, our only contributor who was also an elected political practitioner, uses his very personal article to call on others to write political and policy memoirs as a 'public good' that helps to encourage the 'noble enterprise' of participation in public life. Here, Tickner reflects on the task of writing and publishing his own two volumes of memoirs, and the personal and political motives underscoring them.⁴ Wilks also considers this question of insider narratives in his essay on backbenchers' memoirs. Joshua Black examines the political memoir and diary genres in the broader context of the rise of life writing in the twentieth century. Adopting former minister Neal Blewett's

3 Patrick Mullins, *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon* (Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2018).

4 Robert Tickner, *Taking a Stand: Land Rights to Reconciliation* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001); Robert Tickner, *Ten Doors Down: The Story of an Extraordinary Adoption Reunion* (Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2020).

A Cabinet Diary (1999) as a case study, he argues that historians' methods of inquiry remain essential for understanding the literary and material productions of these texts as well as the cultures from which they emerge.⁵

In Australia, political biography should be considered neither a matter of mere historical curiosity nor a form of personalised gossip. As Murray Goot and Tim Rowse indicate in an incisive review essay, political life narratives are implicated in the difficult postcolonial politics of race, representation and recognition. Critically examining Warren Mundine's political memoir *In Black + White*, Goot and Rowse demonstrate that political (auto)biographies can contribute to active discourses about the policy and politics of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and that autobiographical silences are often louder than words.⁶ Indeed, political autobiographies are capable of speaking to many different social and structural problems in Australian national life. As we write this editorial, Penguin Random House Australia has just announced that it has signed former Liberal Party staffer and sexual assault survivor Brittany Higgins to write a memoir about her experiences of the wildly problematic culture in Parliament House.⁷ In coming years, we anticipate that political life stories will intervene in the prevailing political culture in important and (we hope) reformative ways.

There is also, in this special issue, an enduring concern with the actual practice of political biography. Forty years after her first critical examination of the state of political biography in Australia, Kate White makes a bold call for academics to 'rethink their approach' by considering what novel strategies they can take to 'move beyond the narrative form'. Effective storytelling, she suggests, remains an utmost concern for good biographical practice. Mullins provides an exemplary tale about the role of the biographer-historian in critically examining politicians' ownership of their own narratives by reflecting on his own experiences writing *Tiberius with a Telephone*. In this issue, he explains the difficulties he faced while seeking to access McMahon's personal papers, the challenge of contesting the former prime minister's own accounts of the past, and his resolution of issues of his book's structure. Williams offers a purposeful study that draws on two recent biographies of very different female politicians to explore what increasing female participation in politics means for biographers, and in particular the 'tendency towards excessive personalisation' in political discourse. She delineates a more inclusive model of feminist research for future political biographies of women and men collectively.

5 Neal Blewett, *A Cabinet Diary: A Personal Record of the First Keating Government* (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 1999).

6 Nyunggai Warren Mundine, *Warren Mundine in Black + White: Race, Politics and Changing Australia*, 2nd ed. (Neutral Bay, NSW: Pantera Press, 2017/2018).

7 Melanie Kembrey, 'Brittany Higgins Signs Major Book Deal after 'Three-Way Auction'', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2021.

We hope that this issue will challenge the notion of political biography as confined or limited to prose narratives. Sarah Engledow examines the nature and function of prime ministerial portraiture in Australian history. She considers the social, cultural and political imperatives and logics that have motivated Australian portraitists and politicians to create these likenesses, with particular attention to the traditional conception of a 'portrait' as an attempt to capture the essence of its subject. We hope that Engledow's contribution to this field will encourage and facilitate further discussion and examination of the ways in which political lives and leadership are visually captured and communicated to a mass audience.

Finally, we hope that we and our contributors have collectively established, however partially, the existing variety and widening potential of political biography. There is a multiplicity of productive ways by which it can go forward as a scholarly and popular exercise. If this issue of the journal succeeds, it will be by stimulating wider realisation of this potential of political biography in the contemporary political environment.

We wish to thank each of the authors in this issue for their lively contributions to this field, and for their good-natured engagement with us in the editorial process. We equally thank the readers and peer reviewers who have done much to advance this issue. Our thanks also to the wonderful members of the National Centre of Biography for their valuable feedback on the overarching design of the issue, and especially to editor Malcolm Allbrook for inviting us to produce this special issue, which has been a pleasure and privilege. Finally, our sincere thanks to copyeditor Geoff Hunt, and to the team at ANU Press whose work is crucial in bringing this work to fruition.

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