

The 'Life Myth', 'Short Lives' and Dealing with Live Subjects in Political Biography

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Myths, Training and the Biographer's Approach

Initially, I would like to discuss three points. The first is the problem of dealing with a live subject and the question I pose here is 'who owns *the life*?' This is a question that also applies to dead subjects but it is of particular importance with living subjects. We should be aware of the fact that there are different stakeholders in any life or life story — at least three significant types of stakeholders. The second point I want to address briefly is the training of political biographers, and the third is to mount an argument for 'short lives' — less weight and more insight in biographies.

The question 'who owns *the life*?' seems self-evident initially. It does not really strike you until you start trying to unravel the story, but the difficulty with any biography, particularly of a prominent politician is the need to reconcile the subject's own investment in their 'life myth'. People who are somehow engaged in power and power relations to effect forms of social change are of course concerned with their image, they are concerned with posterity and they are concerned with public perceptions. Those are a set of concerns the biographer has to accept and be aware of. These 'life myth' concerns are also linked to the concerns of their family because you will find if your subject is within living memory or recently dead that the family, too, has an investment and there are certain things that the family do not want to tell. But then there are other stakeholders, including the 'followers', party members, political colleagues, members of cabinets (if they were cabinet ministers or a prime minister). Each of these have a particular version of *the life* that they would want to see supported. And, finally, I think the reason why many scholars start biographies is because we are also stakeholders. The subject of the biography may have had an impact on us and we may feel, as a consequence, that we have some right to explore or understand what made them do what they did, why they succeeded or why they failed. I started writing about Whitlam because, like many of the 'baby boomer' generation, he represented to me the great hope of change, and after his election I had gone overseas, thinking the country was in good hands, only to come back and think, 'what happened?', 'why did it go wrong?' So, that is an example of a different set of stakeholder interests.

Importantly, we need to recognise that those different interests are not going to coincide. They each have a different motive behind them, they lead to different clashes and different sorts of issues arise. Once you start writing the book, you become aware of these sorts of things and you are challenged to balance up these interests. You know the family has told you something, you know the political followers have told you something else. As a writer talking to a general audience, you will have different issues you are trying to unravel, to tell your story. These issues are particular to biography because you can never get inside someone else's head. Hence, it always has to be an inductive process. It is not something where you can say: 'I've got all the facts, so here it is'. In terms of political biography, those sorts of stakeholder issues — and I have mentioned three levels but you could probably think of others — are important because they connect the politics with the person. We are after all looking at these people because they had a public impact of some sort. They have exercised power or suffered from power, or driven policy.

The second thing I wanted to talk about is the issue of training, which is one of the most curious aspects about biography. I have had this curious career where I ended up writing a lot of critique of biography and then, every time I wrote an essay, I seemed to be asked by someone else to write another life. And so I developed a whole back catalogue of material on biography, biographical methodology and so on. Then, a couple of years ago, I was asked by the British Academy of Humanities to contribute an essay on the way biographers wrote about biography — and I had great fun doing it, but the main thing is that most biographers, 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. Then, of course, the next generation of biographers take absolutely no notice and they do the same thing over again. And when you actually look at these essays, they are all saying things that Lytton Strachey said in 1915. If you look at the preface to his *Eminent Victorians*, virtually all the methodological issues are raised there. I was struck again by this issue when I read Paul Strangio's really interesting article about the problems of writing biography after his biography on Jim Cairns, *Keeper of the Faith* (2002) came out, and I then mapped it against these earlier essays.

We have this curious process where we do not train people to do biography. As Skidelsky, the great Keynes biographer, said, political biography is not something that has been seen as really quite kosher. I was forever getting people coming to me from History departments and Asian Studies departments asking me to supervise their MA or their PhD on biography because their department would not let them do it. I kept saying I know nothing about New Guinea or Indonesia or wherever but I nevertheless ended up supervising biographies in a range of

fields that I knew nothing about simply because the students wanted to work on biography and they knew I was interested but their department could not see it as a proper enterprise. We do need to start thinking about trying to train people if they are going to engage in biographical work in a way that we would with any other history or politics project.

The third point I want to discuss is what is the key question we want to answer about a particular figure when we write these 'short lives'. Increasingly I have taken up biographical essays in the context of other books. For instance, in my book on political advisers a long time ago, I used biographical essays in each chapter, as illustrative devices, which tell us about institutional change in an historical context and often they tell us exactly what we need to know. We should not write a biography of someone simply because they are *there*, say, they were a prime minister or were some sort of political figure. I think unless there is an interesting question to be answered, then pass through to the wicket-keeper. Political biography surely has to be about answering some sort of question about how politics works, how institutions work, how policy is made and focussing the inquiry on those sorts of questions by writing preferably 'short lives'. And I think they also bring out the methodological issues very fast because you are challenged from the start to say: what is important about telling your story, rather than simply saying it was a calm and stormy night, mum gave birth in the middle of a storm ... People said this man is marked for greatness ... So my plea is for 'short lives' and some introspection.

The Problems with Live Subjects

There is much we could say about dealing with live subjects in political biography. Most of the work I have done has been based on elite interviews — in-depth interviews with people who work with key figures. The book on Whitlam started off as a study of the post-war prime ministership. But I never got any further with *that* project. As a political scientist, I have been driven by questions about institutions and how they operate, but in the case of Whitlam, they led to broader questions about how he got to the prime ministership, how he crafted his rise to power. I think Whitlam, with Menzies, is probably the most brilliant Opposition leader that we have seen in Australia. Both rebuilt parties in a way that no other political leader in the post-war period has matched. So the question then became: if Menzies could effectively build the Liberal Party after the disasters of 1941, then come back into power and play a key role in entrenching the party in government and himself as prime minister for another 16 years, what of Whitlam? As party leader, Whitlam was absolutely astonishing in rebuilding the Labor Party in the 1960s but then we have his three years as prime minister.

I never meant my book to say his government was a disaster. In fact it was a very exciting time, and a lot of the things it did were truly ground-breaking.

Rather, my question then was: why did it all go so badly? Part of the answer was because of history: the context changed, they had an agenda for a world that had shifted beneath their feet. So, his problems were not all associated with mismanagement and failure. Yet there was a very substantial amount of mismanagement and failure by him as leader — especially in the end — to accommodate himself with the people he worked with and to economic changes.

So my book was a critical book, and I want to reflect on what happens when you write about 'loaded figures' and you venture into criticism. This relates back to the earlier point about who *the life* belongs to. It was always my view that the stakeholders I was writing for were not the party, and certainly not the leader and acolytes, or the families for that matter. I was writing for the rest of us who may have voted for them, or engaged with them, or possibly even opposed them — but whose lives had been in some way affected. I did not set out to give them the portrait they wanted, but to persuade them of why things turned out as they did, why things happened in the way they happened.

There are three aspects to this: access and intellectual stance; reception of the study; and how you are interpreted later. The first aspect is negotiating access and wrestling with the issue of your intellectual relationship with the party or movement and the philosophy from which you are approaching the study. Writing about Labor figures you quickly come face to face with the tribalism inside the party. The more I got into the research, I was conscious that some people who had reservations about talking to me only talked to me because somebody else said, 'No, that's OK. Jim was a branch member in Melbourne. He's been active in the Labor party. He's one of us.'

Now I do not think you have to be of the same political persuasion to write a good biography about a political figure. There have been some terrific political biographies in Australia by authors not of the same persuasion. Take, for instance, Warren Osmond's biography of Eggleston (1985). When he started writing about a key new liberal figure of the end of the First World War period he had himself been a fairly active member of the radical left at Monash University. In the course of his, unfortunately, all-too-brief life, Osmond moved quite a long way across the spectrum but he started out from this radical position yet wrote a terrifically sympathetic and empathetic intellectual history of the man. We do not have enough intellectual biographies.

The point is you do not have to be a Labor person to write about a Labor figure, nor do you have to be a conservative to write sympathetically about people who are Liberals and various sorts of conservatives. But I found from my experience that while my background helped with getting access it created some problems later with Labor's tribalism, in particular, the notion that if you find out things that are less than positive, it somehow should all be kept in the family.

The second aspect concerns the reception of the study when you are critical. When my book about Whitlam came out, it was immediately tagged as a dreadful rightwing book by many Labor people. Someone actually said to me, you have to be from the other side because it is a critical study. This missed the main point of the analysis — what I was trying to explain was the Labor project and how the Labor enterprise failed. The sense of tribalism and partisanship starts to cut across what is the objective purpose which in my case was to investigate what were the strengths and failures of this sort of administration. What effects did it have on us? Where did it succeed? Why did it go wrong?

The third aspect concerns how subsequent readers relate to the book or essay. This comes back again to 'who owns *the life*?'. You cannot prescribe how you will be read as a biographer. I remember a review of the Whitlam book which was never printed but which the reviewer kindly sent to me. The gist of the review's message was this: I had not written about the Whitlam he could recognise. The review ended with these words: 'You didn't give my Whitlam back to me'. The person who wrote this review was himself a writer of good critical biographies of literary figures who effectively wanted a biography that presented the sort of hero he wanted to read about. I had tackled this issue in the last chapter of my book which had been about why do we look for heroes and where does that lead us. So my only response to the reviewer was that my main aim was to interrogate our own responses to these figures, not to reinforce a sort of idealised picture of somebody who failed because he was misunderstood by the Australian people.

Finally, let me conclude by noting a few problems associated with authorised biographies. Years ago I was introduced to a committee fishing around trying to get what they considered to be a good life of Doc Evatt. In a sense it was not an authorised life because the family were not commissioning it, but it was driven by people who thought we ought to have a good Labor biography of Evatt. The trouble with this approach is that it comes at the detriment of biography. There are so many people busy behind the scenes with a particular version of the hero 'they want to be given back to them', that they set up something that is bound to fail. In this case the failure was the biography of Evatt by Ken Buckley *et al* (1994) which was the result of a committee trying to get the right life of Evatt. The pen-portrait of Evatt by Paul Hasluck may be only 3,500 words but it is much more perceptive than the Buckley *et al* biography. So, too, is the Peter Crockett biography of Evatt (1993) which tells me much more about Evatt than his 'official life' authorised version.

This may be why we will never see a good biography of Whitlam. In a similar scenario played out some years ago, Richard Hall was going to write the authorised biography. Unfortunately Richard died before he completed his work, but his starting point when he took on the job was to write demolition jobs on

everybody who had previously written about Whitlam. Such efforts from the authorised biographer seem to fall into the category of advocacy biographies — passionate, partisan and engaged in reconstructing the hero. That is the difficulty with authorised biography as a genre. In many ways it makes the biographical project more, not less, difficult and comes back to that fundamental question about ‘who owns *the life*’.