

John Curtin: Taking his Childhood Seriously

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There are many different approaches to biography and political biography. If I had the skills and training of Judith Brett I may well have tried her psychological approach. But I did not and I was left to fall back on a largely narrative approach. This address is mainly about the writing of *John Curtin: A life* (Day 1999).

I came upon John Curtin very early as a student in Melbourne University when I was doing an essay on the reaction in the Victorian Labor movement to the outbreak of the First World War. I was very struck by Curtin's opposition to the war, right from the beginning, when everybody else (with notable exceptions, such as John Cain senior) was taken up with the jingoism. I experienced a powerful bond of shared experience with Curtin's principled opposition to what he saw as an imperialist war, and his willingness to go to gaol because of conscription.

Later on, writing books on the Second World War, I came across a different Curtin — a Curtin then *introducing* conscription. I have a personal interest in that because I, like Curtin in the Great War, went to gaol during the Vietnam War. I wanted to pursue this *empathy* with Curtin and I also wanted to try to reconcile the apparent contradictions between his anti-conscriptionist stance in the First World War with his conscriptionist position in the Second World War. As I looked more closely at Curtin's personal history, and in particular at his father, I realised that I needed to take his childhood seriously. Thinking about my own life, if I had to write my own life, I would have to take my own childhood, and family relations, seriously. I was struck by the fairly derisory approach that most people take to childhood. It is something to be rushed through until coming to the serious phases of adulthood and, particularly in political biographies, periods in power.

So I started investigating his father. Lloyd Ross (1983), author of the other big biography of Curtin, had also looked at his father because Curtin had talked about his father being the sergeant of police in Creswick in country Victoria, near Ballarat (Ross 1977). Ross found out that, in fact, Curtin senior was not a sergeant at all by writing to the Commissioner of Police and asking for the record of Curtin's police service. The Commissioner sent back a very brief letter with the bare bones of that service, saying that he had been a constable in Creswick basically. I do not know whether he would have been able to obtain the full

service record. The full service record is quite different and shows the burden of shame that Curtin's father took with him to Creswick.

Those of you who have not read *John Curtin: A life* (Day 1999), come with me on a journey down Base Street, Port Melbourne, with Curtin's father on his nightly rounds as a constable, going past Mrs Jolly's Lolly Shop, seeing the shop assistant put up the shutters and following her down the corridor, grasping her to him and fondling her breast and planting a big kiss on her. And then, when she, affronted, calls the proprietress, Curtin senior just goes off on his rounds as if nothing had happened. This was very striking and opened up all sorts of questions as to what was going on here with Curtin's father.

Later on, when he resigned from the police force, with rheumatoid arthritis, so it was believed, there is a whole file in the police records about his medical examination, showing this in order for him to get superannuation. It seemed to confirm the story of the rheumatoid arthritis but, then, I am not sure that Ross ever got the death certificate of Curtin senior. The death certificate tells a different story — that he, in fact, died of syphilis and it was the effects of syphilis apparently that forced him to leave the police force. This was covered up in order for him to get superannuation.

This gave insights into the sort of childhood that Curtin would have had in Creswick. It was not an idyllic country childhood, a rural childhood, at all. He lived with an irascible father, a father who probably suffered from the same sort of bipolar disease as Curtin himself. Once this was understood, it was obvious that the childhood could not be dealt with in a few pages or even in a single chapter. I took several chapters to bring Curtin to age 18.

There was another incident in his childhood as well that I hinted at in the book but was too speculative to give full-blown treatment. But what I tried to do was explore the reasons why Curtin became so strongly committed to politics at so early an age. It seemed that it probably occurred not in the back streets of Brunswick with his deprived childhood so much, but possibly in the vestry of the Catholic Church in Carlton where Curtin was an altar boy. Ironically the Catholic priest who baptised him earlier in Creswick later came to Carlton. It seemed to me from various tantalising glimpses throughout Curtin's life that he may well have been abused as an altar boy in Carlton. This is something that I hinted at but, for fear of being shot down in flames, did not put explicitly into the book. It raises many questions as to what you do put in and what you do not.

I did not allude to this possibility just because child abuse was the flavour of the month — it was in the newspapers at the time. It was also suggested in Curtin's reaction to the church itself and his refusal to admit a priest at the Lodge when he was dying. He never went into a Catholic church or any other church again once he had left the Salvation Army in his teenage years. Even if close

friends were marrying, he would not go to the wedding, though he would go to the reception afterwards. The only time he was prevailed upon to go to a church was in Canberra when his close female friend Belle Southwell prevailed upon him to attend the re-dedication of the Presbyterian church and the minister was struck by the way he was shuddering from fear or anxiety when he was prevailed upon to speak during the service. So I was trying to make sense of all these things but there was no way of confirming it.

But it raised many questions about what to put in and what not to put in. I also realised how confronting it is to write a biography — not only for the biographer but also for the family of the person, particularly if there are still living children. Had I been able to meet Curtin's son, he may well have been able to give me some insights into this. But he simply refused to meet, and did not want another biography of his father. He was not only Curtin's son but Curtin's namesake, so he did not want another book about John Curtin because he said he would face ribbing down at the bowling club if there was another book in the bookshop. We had a nice conversation on the telephone, quite a long one, but that was as far as he would allow me to go.

It raised all sorts of questions for me, then, knowing that he was opposed to me even writing a biography, and he was quite sick at the time as well. As to who owns the lives of dead politicians, is it the biographer? In one sense — as a subject — Curtin 'belongs' to David Day, biographer. In another sense, Curtin — or rather, his memory — belongs to his children and grandchildren.

So how sensitive does the biographer have to be to the wishes of the family and, as well, I guess, to the wishes of the political party, and political supporters or even to academic colleagues down the corridor who have fixed ideas as to what constitutes a political biography?