

Writing Political Autobiographies

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My own contribution to the 'John Button ego poll genre', as I call it, has always been unplanned and relates to circumstance. In my last two or three years in Parliament, after I had made it clear I had had enough of politics and wanted to leave, I had approaches, indeed pleadings, from seven publishers about writing my memoirs or autobiography. I did not want to do that. I wanted to finish what I was doing in Parliament and then think about all that at a later stage. I never contemplated writing an autobiographical book at all. What I did want to write was the book I, in fact, *did* write — *Flying the Kite* (1994), a different kind of book because the topic really interested me, about my experiences travelling as a politician and particularly as a minister.

I had many experiences travelling. I thought these things should be shared. For instance, I went to Reagan's America once. The first lunch I had there was with David Packard, the founder of Hewlett Packard. He was very deaf, and he took out his hearing aid and put it in the middle of the table. I did not know throughout the entire lunch whether I should speak at the hearing aid or at him. I had a terribly embarrassing time. The same with a quasi-criminal prime minister of Ireland called Charles Haughey. He was a delightful fellow but thoroughly wicked.

After *Flying the Kite* publishers would say to me, what about the memoirs? At that time I was writing a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. Some of these columns were published as a book called *On the Loose* in 1996 which has some of my best writing, if I might say so myself. *As it Happened* waited until 1998. By the time I got round to it I was really a bit exhausted.

How did I approach the writing of my memoirs? First, I did not do it very deliberately, not at all in fact. It came, in a sense, as a response to publishers. As I say in the book, I had no diaries — just occasional little notes to myself, some of which I did put in diaries — comments like: 'I decided today that the prime minister is clinically insane'. I put little notes like that in diaries on key occasions, but nothing else. So I started a bit behind with what I called the *bric-a-brac* of a political career — press clippings, scrawled notes and letters from friends and enemies. I checked on many facts with staff and party colleagues.

What I tried to do was hang the narrative around various events or experiences which were particularly vivid to me. Many of those events were outside politics. For example, I was involved with a theatre in Melbourne which was a wonderful experience — quite depressing and bizarre in some ways, but still wonderful.

I always had something of an ambivalent relationship with politics. I enjoyed it, but I also had other interests. Every night I read for an hour before I could go to sleep, unwinding, and I read novels. It was about unwinding from the day's politics. When we were ministers, Neal Blewett and I used to sneak off to the movies together. That was regarded as very abnormal behaviour in Parliament. There were very few people who read books in the Parliament, and few people who were interested in outside activities, certainly in Canberra.

Publishers of memoirs, of course, are concerned about commercial sales. I have to make the point that for ex-politicians who want to write, the progression from the first book to the third is downhill all the way. *Flying the Kite* sold 26,000 copies; by the time I got to *As it Happened* and *On the Loose* it was about 12,000 or 14,000 copies, so it went down very suddenly in four or five years.

What did I hope to do in *As it Happened*? I wanted to let people understand what politics was like and what it was like to be in politics. Above all, I wanted to make it readable, hoping more people would gain an understanding of a life in politics. I think now I was very unsuccessful in this because what the book really says is what it was like for *me* to be in politics, not what it would be like for the *reader* to be in politics. In some sense, a daily diary gives a better picture of what it is like to be in politics. It captures the mundane nature of it all. Also it records what political people have said on particular occasions and this retains an importance.

Hence, in Britain, Alan Clark's diaries (1993-2000) are pre-eminent as a great political diary, not only because of what he records, but because he constantly illustrates his own personalities and neuroticisms. So, one diary entry starts: 'Woke up this morning feeling awful. I think my lymph glands have stopped working'; or, 'I had the hots for the redhead at the local exchange'. His diaries are really extraordinary, but eminently readable. I do not know what they sold but they are so readable. People will form a quite eccentric but nonetheless interesting view of the sort of things that happened in political circles. Often he is unserious: 'I was talking to my loathsome namesake Kenneth Clarke this morning, and he was going on about inflation, and I said to him have you ever been to Argentina? 2,000% inflation and you can still get a bottle of wine and a woman'. He is so politically incorrect! Yet you get a great insight into the political processes.

In Australia, Paul Hasluck's 'memoirs', *The Chance of Politics* (1997), are similarly important. I do not think any research was done for him; rather they are very personal reflections on colleagues and circumstances — and a very readable book. I also think Neal Blewett's memoirs (Blewett 1999) have similar insights in so many ways.

I recently reviewed Harold Macmillan's diaries (2003). You see the difference between diaries and biography if you look at Macmillan. His diaries are so boring;

the military moustache concealed a stiff upper lip — and did it ever! Here is a man who is in national politics and his wife is the mistress of a fellow Conservative for 34 years I think, and Macmillan never mentions that guy in a 600 page diary except in an aside about ‘Loud mouth Boothby’, as he calls him, and that is the only reference in the whole book.

There is also the dominant role of his mother. She arranged what class he was to be in at Eton. When he went to Oxford and his tutor was Ronald Knox. She thought that Macmillan was being influenced by this papist tutor and had Ronald Knox dismissed from the staff at Oxford — this sort of thing goes on throughout his life. At his wedding, when he married the Duke of Devonshire’s daughter, and all the royal family are the guests of the bride. His mother then arranges for the Macmillan list of famous authors to be the guests of the bridegroom. So Henry James and all sorts of people find themselves at this wedding. They had no idea they were there merely to balance up the royal family. In the diaries there is not a hint of that sort of thing.

So, what *should* we write on in political autobiography? It is a very subjective question. I think the answer is that you write about the things which have impinged on your consciousness and try and write them as well as possible and share them with the reader. The role of political memoirs only seems to me to be a very limited one. It gives a personal but more rounded picture to a period, or a government, and the way in which a government works.

If readers want to understand more systematically what happened in my political life, then read *Dodging Raindrops* (Weller 1999). First of all it is well researched. I had no researchers. I just plucked things out of the air and wrote about them. But Pat Weller had a fantastic researcher, sort of like a daschund after a truffle. She went everywhere and I learned a lot about my family which I never previously knew. She found out, for example, that one of my great-great-grandparents was a tobacconist in London and owned property in America, and three or four brothers were killed in the American civil war defending the family’s tobacco properties. I knew nothing about all that.

Finally, I wish to underline one last distinction. There is a huge difference between professional biographers and amateurs. The professional biographer plans a work and researches it. The amateur does not. The amateur has to rely on flair, if possible, and the amateur generally gets larger indulgence from reviewers. Amateurs have to rely on titles like *Flying the Kite*, *On the Loose*, *As it Happened* — what they lack in self-discipline, they have to make up for in accessibility and charm.