

Preface

Political biography is a window to a previous world of political practice. From this window, we see politics through the eyes and experiences of an individual subject. We follow their actions and inactions, see their behaviour, experience their world from afar. Often we are treated to insider stories — their observations, reflections, understandings, and motivations. We read events from their vantage point or interpretations. Biography is the celebration of the personalised account.

Many biographies and autobiographies have been written about or by leading figures in government and politics. In particular, the last decade of the twentieth century — as the century of the Federation approached — witnessed a spate of biographies of Australian political figures and, in a couple of cases, even senior administrative figures. Australian prime ministers figure prominently as subjects although only a few have composed memoirs or penned accounts of major events in which they were involved. Other political and governmental personalities at both the national and state level have also featured prominently in this emerging literature. A few ministers have written autobiographical accounts and a small number at the national level themselves have been subjects of biography. But there the trail tends to turn cold.

Those undertaking the task of biography, the biographers, have typically been historians, political scientists or journalists. In choosing historical subjects, their motivations have occasionally been some distant knowledge of the subject or the times in which they lived, but, where the subject is still alive or only recently dead, there it is often some personal factor that draws the biographer to the task. Most, but not all, have a sympathy for their chosen subject. They usually furnish a largely favourable portrait. Herein lies the ambivalence of the genre.

Political biography sometimes sits uncomfortably with the more conventional writing and scholarship on politics and political science. It is often regarded as ‘less academic’, overly subjective, and too partial. It does not appear ‘explanatory’ in orientation or theoretical in approach; it does not articulate a rigorous methodology shared by likeminded scholars. It is sometimes not even regarded as quite kosher; its standing as proper scholarship may even be suspect. Some biographers are not regarded as part of the ‘academic club’ or belong only at the margins.

Nevertheless, biographies (and autobiographies) have much to offer the student of politics. Political biography is an alternative narrative of events — a personalised view stressing the familiar and the specific. It contributes the views of political actors — sometimes in a contemporary context, sometimes with the benefit of hindsight. It can reinforce existing accounts of events or produce new accounts. It can add new perspectives and insights to existing accounts. It provides a medium through which the personal ‘take’ on politics is able to be

'written in' to conventional accounts. Crucially, political biographies are often the most accessible and widely read form of political writing, attracting readerships beyond the purely scholarly interest or the political junkie market. We recognise 'good biographies' and praise them for their contribution to knowledge. We regard them as essential reading to give depth and flavour to political actors, or to provide a sense of urgency or poignancy to political events.

Accordingly, it was timely to convene a workshop on political biography and administrative histories, to survey the field and appraise the achievements. It took place at University House in The Australian National University in May 2005. Interest ranged from the purpose and role of biography, the choice of subject, methodologies of and obstacles to research, and the style and structure of the book itself. The workshop provided a means of prompting biographers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to reflect on their craft and to consider how this form of research contributes to the study of government and politics. We intentionally invited participants who had made contributions from a wide range of biographical traditions: historical and political biographies, studies of political leaders, biographies of influential but non-elected figures, biographies of administrators, autobiographies and memoirs of key practitioners.

This monograph thus brings together some of the best practitioners of the art and craft of political biography in Australia. They are simultaneously some of our best scholars who, at least in part, have turned their attention to writing Australian political lives. They are not merely chroniclers of our times but multidisciplinary analysts constructing layers of explanation and theoretical insight. They include academic, professional and amateur biographers; scholars from a range of disciplines (politics, history, sociology, public administration, gender studies); and politicians who for a time strutted the political stage. The assembled papers explore the strengths and weaknesses of the biographical approach; the enjoyment it can deliver; the problems and frustrations of writing biographies; and the various ways the 'project' can be approached by those constructing these lives. They probe the art and craft of the political biographer.

The workshop was organised by Tracey Arklay and John Wanna with the support of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. Tracey Arklay is herself engaged in doctoral research for a biography of Sir Arthur Fadden, leader of the Country Party from 1940 to 1958 and Prime Minister of Australia in 1941. John Nethercote and John Wanna assisted her in preparing the papers presented at the workshop for publication in this volume. At a later stage, John Butcher assisted in copyediting and oversaw the finalisation of the text. We would like to thank those who helped in the organisation of the event — especially Patrick Weller from the Centre for Governance and Public Policy at Griffith University who assisted with funding the workshop, and Mary Hapel, Jenny Keene and Rod Rhodes from the ANU. We are indebted to many others

who attended the workshop as participants and gave generously of their time, comments and experience — those we would like to acknowledge who are not included in this volume are: Jenni Craik, Derek Drinkwater, James Mathews, Brendon O'Connor, Andrew Podger and Anne Tiernan.

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July 2006