Ian Britain review of Iola Mathews, *Race Mathews: A Life in Politics*

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About 20 years ago, there was a vogue in the Australian news media for lists of the country's top 'public intellectuals'. Race Mathews's name, if I recall aright, did not figure. It is a strange but perhaps all too predictable omission. By most standards, he would seem to be a perfect exemplar. No such active participant in local, state or federal politics (not even his mentor and political hero, Gough Whitlam) could be said to have been more engaged with ideas and the history of ideas in such a rigorous scholarly manner; and no such conscientious thinker and writer could be said to have had a more hands-on involvement with so many matters (social, cultural, educational, as well as political) of wide community concern. Yet—and here's the rub—he remained uninterested in courting celebrity or playing the pundit. Channelling Dante as well as Ben Chifley (his other political hero), Mathews sought to pursue and spread 'the light' (pp. 63, 303). He couldn't have cared less about the limelight.

I had an inkling of all this when—and here I must declare an interest—I was a young lecturer in the history department at the University of Melbourne in the 1980s and I was asked to supervise an MA thesis that Mathews wished to do on the founding members of the Victorian Fabian Society. He was the national secretary of the society, and I had recently published a book on the original British organisation. He was also at this time a senior Cabinet minister in the state Labor government. At first I wondered why—and how—an MP with such responsibilities would be prepared to embark on a demanding academic pursuit. I need not have worried. His capacity for combining a scholarly project with a prominent role in public life quickly became apparent. As he explained it to me, his technique was to spend two or three hours' researching and writing every day before sitting down to breakfast. By this tireless routine, he successfully completed the thesis in under the average time, and it was subsequently published by a distinguished university press. He was very receptive to my supervision, never big noting himself or pulling rank, and we soon found we had other interests in common, including a passion for old British movies, that became the basis for a lasting friendship.

There is a pattern of behaviour here that I, and other readers, can now appreciate more generally thanks to the book under review—an intricate verbal tapestry of Mathews's career and personal life, woven in the early chapters by himself and completed by his wife shortly before he went into a nursing home in 2024, where he died the following year. Tirelessness and passion are two motifs that keep recurring: his tirelessness in

pursuing his multifarious ventures and causes (from the setting up of medical, artistic and cooperative financial institutions to the reform of the Victorian Labor Party on a less factionalised basis); his passion, most obviously, for democratic politics and academic historical research on political and social movements, but also for a range of non-professional activities and people. The last included his two wives (the first of whom died prematurely); innumerable friends; music, sci-fi and live theatre along with the movies; foreign travel; food and conviviality—parties of the social variety continually punctuate the story of his life in the Labor Party.

The narrative suggests, or readers may infer, that there were costs to Mathews's professional commitments and obsessions. Much as he undoubtedly loved all his family, he was too restless to spend much sustained time with them at home, even when there were breaks in his parliamentary career. And some of the causes to which he devoted himself, however worthy, could take on the appearance of dead horses that he would continue to flog. His campaign to push through cooperatives legislation in Victoria in the 1990s looks as if it were lost within his own party long before Labor lost power to the Opposition, yet on and on he fought. It is going too far to suggest he could be a wilful martyr, or was just a naive idealist, but one might be forgiven for the impression that he inadvertently set himself up at times for frustration, disappointment and feelings of betrayal. This, of course, does nothing to detract from the extraordinary record of his positive achievements in politics and academia, which were also a reflection of his doggedness and indefatigable enthusiasms.

Strictly speaking, this book is more a memoir—a joint memoir—than 'the biography' it is purported to be on the blurb. The time is not quite ripe for a fully authoritative biographical treatment of this subject: that would require surveying a wider swathe of evidence than is presently available (the private papers of Mathews's political contemporaries, for example). When that time should come, here is an indispensable first-base guide. It has the advantage of direct and intimate observation of the subject without any sign of egregious partiality or special pleading. It appears to be highly reliable, factually. I could find only the odd misprint, and there a few puzzling omissions in the index—for one, the name of the dazzling English movie star Pamela Brown, who Mathews invokes in the text as 'my first experience of feeling passionate about an actress' (p. 45). The style of the whole book is as lively as it is lucid, without frills but never dull or plodding. Most important, perhaps, and with all its more cautionary episodes, it should serve as a highly inspiring work for anyone entering Labor politics today, providing a guide not only to the life of a single past member but also (as noted by Janet McCalman, historian and current member of the 'Labor Academy' that Mathews helped initiate as a training ground for recruits) 'guidance on how we can do better' (p. i).

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