
‘Menzies biography mystery’: Robert Menzies and political biography as political intervention

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The silhouette of an unpublished biography of Australia’s longest-serving prime minister flashed briefly into public view when journalist Allan Dawes, 69 years old and in failing health, died in Melbourne in 1969. Dawes’s death brought to mind ‘a secret which has mystified politicians and writers for almost 20 years’, the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph* said, given the commissioning of the ‘distinguished newspaperman, poet and author’ in the early 1950s to write a biography of the then prime minister, Robert Menzies.¹ A *Sun News-Pictorial* report outlined the Scotch College and University of Melbourne-educated Dawes’s career, beginning with the Melbourne *Age* in 1918, then the *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, and the *Argus* and *Star* in Melbourne, before joining the Melbourne *Herald* during World War II where he was an acclaimed war correspondent.² Dawes’s book *Soldier Superb: The Australian Fights in New Guinea*, with drawings by Russell Drysdale and official photographs, was published in 1943.³ After the war he wrote a regular column for the *Herald* and worked in public relations, while continuing to write more broadly; the *Sun News-Pictorial* noted that ‘hundreds of his short stories and verse’ were published over his lifetime.⁴ So Dawes was a seasoned journalist, an accomplished writer and experienced in public relations. A period from 1938 to 1941 working as a journalist in the public service in Canberra under the Lyons and Menzies governments gave him an insider perspective on the business of politics too. Dawes was the experienced, well-rounded author Robert Menzies turned to in 1950 to write a biography that could improve the prime minister’s standing among voters who stubbornly failed to warm to him. Menzies’s move was novel in Australia, which had no tradition of political biography as political intervention, in contrast to the United States where campaign biographies of presidential candidates were routine from the early nineteenth century onwards.⁵ Despite extensive work, the Menzies biography was never published. The reasons for this are contested.

1 ‘Menzies Biography Mystery’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 September 1969, 20.

2 ‘Allan Dawes Dies at 69’, *Sun-News Pictorial*, 8 September 1969.

3 Allan Dawes, *Soldier Superb: The Australian Fights in New Guinea* (Sydney: F. H. Johnston, 1943).

4 ‘Allan Dawes Dies at 69’, *Sun-News Pictorial*.

5 ‘Since 1824, no Presidential election year has passed without a campaign biography, printed about the time a candidate is nominated, chiefly for the purpose of getting him elected.’ Jill Lepore, ‘Bound For Glory: A Critic at Large’, *New Yorker*, 20 October 2008, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/20/bound-for-glory, accessed 15 February 2021.



Figure 1: Pasted cutting of 'Menzies Biography Mystery', *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 September 1969, in National Library of Australia, Biographical cuttings file 'Dawes, Allen d. 1969'.

Source: Author photograph.

Robert Menzies was twice prime minister of Australia, firstly from April 1939 to August 1941 leading a United Australia Party (UAP) government, and later as Liberal leader heading a Liberal–Country Party Coalition government from December 1949 to January 1966. Menzies’s two prime ministerships differed sharply. The first was relatively brief and unhappy, and ended with what the author of his posthumous biography, Allan Martin, calls ‘the most humiliating personal collapse in the history of federal politics’ in Australia. Menzies had the ‘galling’ experience, as Martin described it, of losing his own Cabinet’s support, resulting in his resignation as UAP leader and prime minister.⁶ The conservative government led by his successor, Country Party leader Arthur Fadden, lost the confidence of the House of Representatives several weeks later, and was replaced by the John Curtin–led Labor Government, which saw Australia safely through World War II. That Menzies later returned to the prime ministership and became Australia’s most electorally successful politician is remarkable. It involved not only changed political circumstances, and more than the usual amount of political skill, but also a reworking of his image. Respected Canberra press gallery journalist Don Whittington, who covered Menzies in office, notes that the popular conception of him as the ‘silver-haired orator, the father figure who wooed and won the Australian electorate after 1949’ was at odds with the earlier ‘supercilious, acidulous’ version: ‘The cloak of urbanity he wore with such distinction in later life was then only on the drawing board, to be designed and fashioned and completed in the years of travail he spent in the political wilderness after he was deposed.’⁷

Whittington’s characterisation of the changed public Menzies being the result of a ‘cloak of urbanity’ is apt. Martin cautions that while differences between the two parts of Menzies’s federal political career require exploration, ‘we are dealing with a man who ... changed little in essential ways’.⁸ Martin adds that the ‘old saying that “the Liberals can never win with Menzies” rumbled on’ and that in 1946 Menzies came close to leaving politics. ‘In a bleak conversation over dinner in their club he told his legal mentor and friend, Owen Dixon, that he was returning to the Bar,’ Martin wrote. ‘He knew he was “the subject of dislike and hostility throughout the community” and that the Liberal Party “could not win under his leadership”.’⁹ Menzies was ‘on the outer both within his party and with Empire allies’ notes Anne Henderson in her study of Menzies in this trough between his prime ministerships.¹⁰ So deep was his pessimism about the prospects for personal political resurrection that he pursued but ‘failed to find an overseas posting on some three occasions’, according

6 A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, vol. 2, 1944–1978 (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1999), xiii; Cameron Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 197–253.

7 Don Whittington, *Strive to be Fair: An Unfinished Autobiography* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), 72.

8 A. W. Martin, ‘Menzies the Man’, in *The Menzies Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy*, ed. Scott Prasser, J. R. Nethercote and John Warhurst (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995), 20.

9 Martin, ‘Menzies the Man’, 25.

10 Anne Henderson, *Menzies at War* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014), 171.

to Henderson.¹¹ In 1944 he allowed his name to go forward, unsuccessfully, for the position of Victorian chief justice.¹² Menzies's unpopularity was entrenched, even among his own party's supporters. Cameron Hazlehurst's detailed analysis incorporating Gallup Poll data shows that as late as the middle of 1947, Menzies and the Liberal Party 'were failing to make significant gains in public support'.¹³ Hazlehurst noted that both the Liberal Party's New South Wales and Queensland branches asked Menzies not to campaign in their state elections that year. Some 165 out of 172 members of a Liberal Party branch in Nhill, squarely in the conservative stronghold of Victoria's Western District, supported a motion for a change of federal leader, forwarding it for consideration at the Victorian state council meeting on 17 April 1947: 'Some respondents said Menzies was "too conceited", others that he was "too up in the clouds"'.¹⁴

In contrast to the United States, where biographies of presidential aspirants had long been routine, contemporary political biography was not yet established in Australia as a tool that might improve public perceptions of a politician.¹⁵ No biography of Menzies was published during his active political career, for an adult audience at least. A profile in the American annual *Current Biography* in 1941, revised and updated in 1950, and a short biography for young readers by Ronald Seth in 1960 were the only contemporary biographical works on Menzies while he was a member of parliament.¹⁶ The spectrum of perceptions about him early in his second period as prime minister can perhaps be best conveyed by two eight-page booklets. One is passport-sized, published in 1949, titled *How Well Do You Know This Man?*¹⁷ Only upon opening it is the subject revealed as Menzies. Produced in the run-up to the 1949 election, which Menzies won, the pamphlet was a Liberal Party publication, though this would have been unclear to readers who missed the Liberals' New South Wales Office details printed in tiny type on the back page. 'R. G. Menzies is a man of the people' it begins, amusingly failing to divine that a man of the people would normally use his first name, not his initials.¹⁸ 'He is a fighter ... He has never "squibbed" an issue', is juxtaposed with a smiling picture of him standing with coalminers, leading the reader's mind from the for Menzies politically problematic World War I, in which he did not serve, and World War II, during which his first prime ministership failed, to the Cold War. 'He is pledged to ban the Communist

11 Henderson, *Menzies at War*, 170.

12 Henderson, *Menzies at War*, 183.

13 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 304.

14 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 304.

15 Lepore, 'Bound For Glory'.

16 'Robert Menzies', in Anna Rothe, ed., *Current Biography, 1949: Who's News and Why* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1950), 392–94; Ronald Seth, *Robert Gordon Menzies* (London: Cassell, 1960). A valuable pamphlet by Fred Raven, *History of the Menzies Family in Jeparit* (Jeparit: Jeparit Chamber of Commerce, 1966), covering Menzies's rural Victorian roots and early years, was published in the year of his resignation but after he left office.

17 Liberal Party of Australia, *How Well Do You Know This Man?* (Sydney: Liberal Party, 1949).

18 Liberal Party of Australia, *How Well Do You Know This Man?*, 2.

Party, in sharp contrast to the Socialists' policy of private encouragement of the Communists while publicly denouncing them,' the pamphlet continued. At the other end of the spectrum is the cartoon booklet *The Calamitous Career of Dictator Bob*, published in 1951 by the Communist Party of Australia, though, like the Liberal Party pamphlet, this is not disclosed. If *How Well Do You Know This Man?* judiciously dodges the negative aspects of Menzies's record, *The Calamitous Career of Dictator Bob* is a graphic character assassination that takes the reader from 1914—'Resigned from the army to avoid going to war'—via several inglorious episodes to 1950 when 'Menzies introduced his infamous Communist Party Dissolution Act ... to smash all opposition to his policies' and seek 'the powers of a dictator'.¹⁹ 'We don't want fascism here!' is the kicker on the back page, urging readers to 'Vote NO' in the 1951 anti-communist referendum. So Menzies's life and character were dramatically contested territory early in his comeback as prime minister. However, in line with Australian political practice to that time, no biography that might have helped reshape perceptions of him appeared.²⁰

We know somewhat more about Menzies and biography than we do in relation to most Australian prime ministers. Hazlehurst notes that as early as 1934, Menzies himself 'wrote approvingly of what he called a "new historical method" which would

19 Communist Party of Australia, *The Calamitous Career of Dictator Bob* (Australia: CPA, 1951), 2, 7.

20 A Menzies biography for young readers was published in 1960, towards the end of his political career. Seth's *Robert Gordon Menzies* (1960) was part of Cassell's 'Red Lion Lives' series, 'intended for young people who are of an age to be thinking of their future careers'. Explicitly inspirational, each biography portrayed 'one of the most famous men or women of modern times, all of them at the top of their particular professions'; Louis Mountbatten, Harold Macmillan, Don Bradman, Lord Nuffield and Kathleen Ferrier are among the series' other subjects. 'It is (his) tenacious, fight-back quality, and not luck, that has made Menzies what he is,' proclaims the flyleaf.

Cassell's choice of Seth to write the book is interesting. Seth wrote sex advice books under the pseudonym Robert Chartham and, under his own name, a plethora of non-fiction works, mostly on espionage; he had worked in Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) during World War II. Seth wrote three biographies in Cassell's 'Red Lion Lives' series—on Menzies, *Montgomery of Alamein* (1961) and *Sir Archibald McIndoe* (1962), the pioneering plastic surgeon. Written simply, and at around 120 pages long, they were most likely easy earners for a professional writer like Seth—described by British publisher Anthony Blond who occasionally used him as 'a brilliant hack who never slept' ('Glory boys', extract from Anthony Blond, *Jew Made in England* (London: Timewell, 2004), *Sunday Times* (London), 13 June 2004). Seth would go on to publish two more books with Cassell in the 1960s: *Forty Years of Soviet Spying* (1965) and *The Executioners: The Story of Smersh* (1967), altogether five books for Cassell in a decade.

In 'How This Story was Written', the final chapter of his Menzies biography, Seth notes, 'This is the first time that the story of Robert Gordon Menzies's life has been written at any length.' He describes his 'relief and delight' when Menzies's private secretary, Helen Craig, telephoned to say the prime minister would see him one Saturday morning before he went to watch England play South Africa at Lord's; since 'play was timed to begin at 11.30 am, I did not expect I should be able to spend more than an hour with him':

He seemed to sense exactly what I wanted to know, and this helped considerably. At the end of an hour, we had reached about half-way. He glanced at his watch. 'I shall have to be going soon,' he said. 'What else do you want to know?' And he talked for another hour, forgoing his cricket at Lord's to do so.

Also in London, Menzies's wife Pattie and elder brother Frank also agreed to interviews with Seth as did Australia's high commissioner to London, Eric Harrison, and Victoria's agent-general in London, William Leggatt. Seth cites two magazine articles and two books, including Menzies's own *Speech is of Time* (1958), as his other sources. Seth's *Robert Gordon Menzies* is perhaps the ultimate 'friendly'.

“bring the great men and women of earlier days so near to us that, while their heroic proportions may be occasionally diminished, their actual existence becomes credible and significant”.²¹ In a modest way, he tried his own hand at it in 1949, producing a brief study of a subject who was himself a biographer (of the Duke of Marlborough) and, like Menzies at that time, Opposition leader, though in a different polity. Menzies’s ‘Churchill at Seventy-Five’ appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* and was later included in a collection of his speeches and articles, *Speech is of Time*.²² In it he takes a novel tack, casting the profile in response to the question, ‘What was his secret?’²³ This may have been the peg supplied by the commissioning editor at the *New York Times Magazine*, but, irrespective of the inspiration, it prompted interesting insights and anecdotes. Six years later Menzies returned to the theme in ‘Churchill and His Contemporaries’, in an oration to a medical audience at the University of Melbourne.²⁴ Menzies talks of his personal acquaintance, and in some cases close personal friendship, with some of ‘the great men of the era’, then recommends to the psychologists and psychiatrists in the audience contemplation of a ‘strange quirk’ in human nature.

When we are very young and we read our history, we visualize the great men of the past as giants. Their very shadows appear to be enormous as they pass across the dim and distant landscapes of history. I have lived long enough and had sufficient experience to find that historic giants are quite human, that for the most part they are quite intelligible, that in many ways they think and behave just as we do, and that one must discern their greatness, not by standing with dumb amazement before them, but by trying to discover what special quality each of them has which marks him out for fame ... The idea of an incomprehensible genius which once obsessed my mind in contemplating the noble figures of the past has long since deserted me ...²⁵

This idea of a ‘special quality’ led Menzies to defend three interwar British prime ministers: Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain. All three historically suffer, to varying degrees, stigma from catastrophic complacency about the threat posed by Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and are contrasted sharply with Churchill, credited with saving Britain in World War II. Menzies said he has ‘what some of my friends regard as the eccentric belief’ that Churchill ‘could not have done quite so much as he did, but for their work’. Each had been ‘at one time, no doubt, over-praised’ but has ‘subsequently been over-condemned’. To Menzies:

21 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 7.

22 Robert Menzies, ‘Churchill at Seventy-Five’, *New York Times Magazine*, 27 November 1949; reprinted in Robert Menzies, *Speech is of Time* (London: Cassell, 1958), 45–53.

23 Menzies, *Speech is of Time*, 48.

24 Robert Menzies, ‘Churchill and His Contemporaries’, 22nd Sir Richard Stawell Oration delivered at the University of Melbourne, 8 October 1955; reprinted in Menzies, *Speech is of Time*, 54–75.

25 Menzies, *Speech is of Time*, 56.

It does little credit to our good sense that we should swing about so wildly in our judgments, treating today as mere folly our wild enthusiasms of yesterday. After all, if our superficial emotions are our only guide, we have no more assurance that we are right today than that we were wrong yesterday.²⁶

Of course, Menzies's own experience as a failed wartime prime minister must have given him a personal empathy and perhaps even identification with these three British leaders, rendering his defence of their premierships an implicit defence of his own. His analysis and comments on each is nevertheless a stimulating counterpoint to what are sometimes biographical cartoons of MacDonald, Baldwin and Chamberlain burnt into the fabric of twentieth-century British historical memory.

Menzies also reflected on the practical difficulties and implications of writing biography. He mused that many books would be written about Churchill, for example, but most would be, in his view, 'dogmatic and superficial'. This was not solely due to their authors' limitations but also the subject's challenging character: '[T]he great problem for his ultimate biographer will be to discover at what point the great actor, the showman, ended, and the great and dedicated leader took over.'²⁷ Interesting aspects of being a source for the writers of contemporary biography also emerged in correspondence from Menzies to his daughter Heather Henderson about a post-retirement biography of him by a 'journalistic scribbler called Perkins':²⁸

... it is clear from reading his book, which I have done with some reluctance, that his source of material has been the press gallery, the gossip columns and the observations of my political enemies ... The interesting thing about the book is that I have no difficulty whatever in knowing who told him this or who told him that. Yet the next time I see one or other of them, he will assure me with tears in his voice that he thinks the book quite unfair!²⁹

Menzies claimed the Perkins biography of him contained 150 errors of fact. He told Henderson he intended dictating a note correcting them for the benefit of future biographers.

Given Menzies's need to revive his political fortunes after failing as prime minister in 1941, and in light of his own musings on biography, the reasons for the lack of a biography during his active career invites reflection. One possible reason is Menzies's privileging of speeches and speechmaking in what he explicitly considered the 'art' of politics. '[A]s we look back over the panorama of history and select ... the political giants, we find ourselves identifying them as above all great artists,' he wrote. 'For the artist is the man who knows how to use his materials; who has

26 Menzies, *Speech is of Time*, 62–63.

27 Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years* (North Melbourne: Cassell, 1970), 11.

28 Kevin Perkins, *Menzies: Last of the Queen's Men* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1977).

29 Robert Menzies to Heather Henderson, 15 May 1968, in Robert Menzies, *Letters to My Daughter*, ed. Heather Henderson (Millers Point, NSW: Murdoch, 2011), 195.

a sensitiveness to his environment and an understanding of humanity, and a great skill in execution.³⁰ Menzies was very much concerned with politics as *performance*. ‘Skill at public speaking was one of Menzies’ most valuable political assets, and had been crucial to his rapid rise in Australian public life,’ in Judith Brett’s estimation.³¹ Clem Lloyd puts Menzies’s ‘life-long espousal of the modulation and timbre of the human voice as the most powerful of political instruments’ at the centre of his analysis of Menzies’s media relations.³² Lloyd argues that for Menzies, rather than politics being the art of the possible, it was the ‘art of the adequate ... In short, do not do more than you have to do.’³³ It is possible that Menzies saw speech as a more potent tool than text for remaking himself politically, or as sufficient in the sense of the ‘art of the adequate’.

Another possible reason was Menzies’s scorn for many, if not all, of those writers of the first draft of history, who also tended to be the writers of contemporary political biographies: journalists. As he told Heather Henderson, ‘[T]he Australian journalist has created a legend about me, my arrogance, my unapproachability, my wicked tongue ... Journalists cannibalise each other. If one starts a legend, the others borrow it and after a few years the legend becomes accepted history.’³⁴ Lloyd points to the unflattering references to journalists in Menzies’s diaries. ‘One was a “noodle”, another “oleaginous”, others were ill-mannered and illiterate,’ Lloyd writes. ‘Even Menzies’ occasional professions of respect were qualified by merciless physical delineation.’³⁵ Menzies’s press secretary, Stewart Cockburn, says that while there were exceptions his prime minister ‘disliked journalists in the main’ and had poor press relations. ‘Basically he didn’t conceal his dislike and/or contempt for most journalists and most newspaper proprietors—that’s a reliable generalization,’ Cockburn says. ‘And they sensed it or recognized it and returned it in kind.’³⁶ Menzies imputed intellectual laziness to the trend he perceived in political journalism towards ‘criticism of persons, and less and less to the examination and criticism of ideas’. Criticising people is easy and ‘can no doubt be great fun’, he wrote. ‘It can, indeed, be quite useful if the reasons for it are spelled out. But to criticise an idea, one must first understand it, and such an understanding involves study and serious thought.’³⁷

30 Menzies, *Measure of the Years*, 5.

31 Judith Brett, ‘Robert Menzies and England’, in *Political Lives*, ed. Judith Brett (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 78.

32 Clem Lloyd, ‘The Media’, in *The Menzies Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy*, ed. Scott Prasser, J. R. Nethercote and John Warhurst (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995), 122.

33 Lloyd, ‘The Media’, 121.

34 Robert Menzies to Heather Henderson, 30 October 1967, in Menzies, *Letters to My Daughter*, 161.

35 Clem Lloyd, *Parliament and the Press: The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery 1901–88* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1988), 126–27.

36 Stewart Cockburn interviewed by Clem Lloyd, Oral History interview TRC 5253/6, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

37 Menzies, *Measure of the Years*, 11.

One would think the most likely explanation for no biography being published as part of Menzies's postwar re-imaging project is his dim view of contemporary biographies. 'The muse of history is an uncertain wench,' Menzies wrote, as Opposition leader, in his 1947 foreword to John Reynolds's *Edmund Barton*, published in 1948. '[T]he course and character of the work and personality of a public man must be studied closely and carefully delineated if the truth is to emerge.' Such close and careful delineation was unlikely in a contemporary biography, he said, and his argument is worth quoting at length:

It is the fashion, and no doubt always was, to over-praise or over-blame statesmen while they are alive, and to forget them or forgive them when they are dead. Biographies of living men are therefore usually extravagant and largely worthless. They are written, as a rule, by ardent admirers, and rarely possess any critical quality. They are, in short, propaganda documents to be discounted by the objective student.

In spite of my disillusioned beliefs on this matter, the extravagances of contemporary writing, both gay and grave, never cease to astonish me. A new cricketer arises; he is before long 'the greatest in the history of the game' according to some writer whose memory embraces less than a small fraction of one per cent. of those good cricketers who have lived and played. 'The greatest speaker', 'the greatest debater', 'the most brilliant mind', 'the greatest scoundrel'; such phrases come trippingly from the mouths or pens of current recorders. Fortunately these flashy judgments do not live. All too frequently, in the reaction which follows the death of some noted man, his memory appears to wither and the contemptuous indifference with which his name is recalled becomes as absurd, and in its own way as extravagant, as the superlatives which attached to him when living.

And then, in due course, there comes along the detached historian to read about him, to study him in the round, to see his lights and shades, to assess his work and influence, to tear away the distortions of propaganda and reveal the true man.

Such a task must be fascinating, but almost incredibly difficult. What material is of value? Nowadays most of us don't write letters except of a commercial kind, and the art of conversation is decaying. What contemporary records, then, are we to search? How can we get at the real inwardness of the statesman? By reading his speeches? I have heard hundreds of speeches in Parliament laboriously read by Ministers of the Crown, of which in most cases not one word was their own. By reading the contemporary press? Heaven forbid, since partisan writers always aim to create a popular picture, and so produce in the receptive mind a series of legends which are basically false. The contest in politics always seems—to the partisan – to be one between the *All Whites* and the *All Blacks*. But in truth it never is. At the best, the greatest statesman is a Grey Eminence.³⁸

38 Robert Menzies, 'Foreword to the First Edition', in John Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979 [1948]), x–xi.

This is probably as good a summation of the case against biography, especially contemporary biography, as one will find directly from a politician's lips or pen. It makes it all the more intriguing that within a few years Menzies, his family and his office was actively cooperating on a biography of him by Allan Dawes.

Dawes's unfinished and unpublished manuscript biography of Menzies was largely unknown beyond political and journalistic circles at the time, and is barely known today. Judith Brett refers to him briefly as 'Menzies' first biographer' and draws on his manuscript, along with the biography for young readers by Seth and the post-prime ministerial biography by Perkins, in her psychobiographical work, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*.³⁹ She comments in a footnote that Dawes's 'draft has been read and corrected by Menzies, so I am assuming that, even if he was not the actual source of all of its material, and he clearly was of much of it, he was happy to regard it as an accurate account of his experience of his childhood and youth'. Perkins, whose post-prime ministerial biography Menzies opposed but who nevertheless gained interviews with Menzies's siblings Frank and Isabel, gave Brett access to his interview tapes, including that of his interview with Frank Menzies. In Brett's account, Frank Menzies said the Dawes manuscript 'was written in 1950 and 1951 and that Menzies gave Dawes access to all his diaries and records', but that Dawes 'only completed a small part of what had been anticipated ... and the work was never published'.⁴⁰ H. N. 'Hank' Nelson claimed in his *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* entry on Dawes that Menzies cooperated with the project but that Dawes 'was drinking heavily and unable to meet deadlines'.⁴¹ The normally impeccable *ADB* fact-checking process failed in this instance: there is no source, no corroboration and therefore no crucial fact-checking 'tick' against the claim that excessive drinking stopped Dawes finishing the Menzies biography in the file underlying Dawes's *ADB* entry.⁴²

The Dawes manuscript gets a second flickering moment of historical attention a generation after Brett's *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, in Anne Henderson's *Menzies at War* published in 2014. Henderson posits the 'possibility' that Brett's analysis is 'not sustainable' because it partly relies on the Dawes manuscript and the Perkins biography. In respect of Dawes, Henderson cites the view of Menzies's former colleague Paul Hasluck, in notes the latter made preparing to review Perkins's 1977 biography of Menzies, damning Dawes in passing as a 'notorious' and

39 Judith Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2007 [1992]), 137.

40 Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, 234.

41 H. N. Nelson, 'Dawes, Allan Wesley (1900–1969)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dawes-allan-wesley-9924/text17573, published first in hardcopy 1993, accessed online 7 April 2021.

42 Australian Dictionary of Biography, file on Allan Wesley Dawes (1900–1969), ANU Archives, The Australian National University, Canberra.

'bloated, and frequently sozzled journalist'.⁴³ Hasluck cast this slur not in relation to Dawes's Menzies biography but over an unrelated task Dawes undertook while in government employ during World War II, relaying a message at Menzies's behest to Liberal member of parliament Harold Holt after the Canberra air disaster.⁴⁴ Historian Tom Frame does not support Hasluck's characterisation of Dawes. In his biography of Holt, Frame describes Dawes as 'a distinguished journalist who had been press secretary to Geoffrey Street', minister for the army and one of the Canberra air disaster fatalities.⁴⁵ Hasluck's reputation for having a jaundiced view of journalists is further cause for caution about his slur against Dawes. Don Whittington, for example, acknowledged Hasluck as an 'outstanding historian' while also noting his prejudicial view of journalists despite Hasluck having been one briefly himself. Hasluck 'vilified journalists' and newspapers in general, according to Whittington, while having 'neither comprehension nor knowledge of the intricacies of newspaper work ... having been confined to one conservative newspaper with a monopoly in Perth twenty years earlier'.⁴⁶ Hasluck's comments on Dawes, in the absence of corroborating evidence, should carry negligible weight.

The biographical projects of Dawes and Perkins were in any case not only distinct but sharply at odds, and should not be conflated. Dawes was writing a commissioned biography in league with his subject, Menzies, with the help of Menzies's staff and family; whereas Perkins wrote a biography against Menzies's wishes that, by not cooperating, Menzies resisted. Nor should Dawes's manuscript become collateral damage in critiques to which it is incidental, namely Henderson's critique of Brett's *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*. Despite an extensive search, no private or public reference or any other evidence has been found to substantiate Hasluck's slur against Dawes, or to evidence the claim that appears in the *ADB* entry on Dawes that excessive alcohol consumption stopped him finishing his Menzies biography.

Reporting Dawes's death in 1969, the *Sunday Telegraph* did not mention alcoholic incapacitation as a factor in the missing Menzies biography:

Mr. Dawes, a distinguished newspaperman, poet and author, was commissioned in the early 1950s to write an official biography of the then Prime Minister, Mr. Menzies.

43 Henderson, *Menzies at War*, 21; Paul Hasluck, notes for a review of the Perkins biography of Menzies, attachment to a letter from Nicholas Hasluck to A. W. Martin, 2 October 1996, Allan Martin Papers, MS 9802, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

44 The comments relate to actions following the Canberra air disaster in 1940, in which three Menzies Government cabinet ministers and the Army chief of general staff died. Menzies recalled Liberal MP Harold Holt, then undergoing AIF training at Puckapunyal, to the ministry. He used Dawes, then employed as a public servant in Canberra, to relay the message to Holt. Hasluck disputed the likelihood of Menzies choosing a colourful journalist like Dawes as the messenger. Hasluck's disbelief, however, does not mean it did not happen.

45 Tom Frame, *The Life and Death of Harold Holt* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 22. The source of the Dawes-Holt messenger story is not supplied in the footnotes.

46 Whittington, *Strive to be Fair*, 129.

The PM co-operated to the full, answering questions into a tape recorder and much valuable material was gathered.

The manuscript was written, but never published and over the years various stories have gone the rounds as to what happened to it. The most popular theory is that the material unfortunately was lost ...

It can be revealed here that the material is in the Menzies' family archives.

The manuscript consists of at least 13 chapters, setting out the details as Sir Robert saw them of events leading up to his resignation as Prime Minister in 1941, about which so little has been written. ... The material written by Mr. Dawes is a valuable contribution to our political history—let's hope that one day we may see it in print.⁴⁷

Dawes's manuscript biography of Menzies—at least part of it—was indeed in the Menzies archive, and ended up in the Menzies Papers at the National Library of Australia (NLA). It was this surviving manuscript material that Brett partly drew on in *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*.⁴⁸ Allan Dawes's papers are also at the NLA.⁴⁹ They include another part of the surviving manuscript along with papers that raise another possible explanation for, as the *Telegraph* put it upon Dawes's death, the 'Menzies Biography Mystery'.

Dawes was certainly a drinker, in line with the cultural norms of journalism at the time, but a high functioning one. In his memoir *Strive to Be Fair*, Whittington describes Dawes as 'outstanding', and includes him in his list of Australian journalists who 'would have held their own, and excelled, anywhere in the world'.⁵⁰ He was respected across the political spectrum. Appointing Dawes to a travelling party inspecting Canada's war effort in 1944, Prime Minister John Curtin referred to his 'high reputation as a writer' and 'wide experience in operational areas'.⁵¹ Whittington, also selected for the Canada visit, said it was a 'pronounced success' and that Dawes, 'a born thespian and an enthusiastic drinker, was an enormous attraction in the faded correspondent's uniform he wore throughout the tour'.⁵² Other journalists shared Whittington's opinion, including Cecil Edwards who, as Stanley Melbourne Bruce's press officer in the 1925 election, observed Dawes on the campaign trail. Edwards wrote of the 'restless genius' that was 'slender, bubbling Allan W. Dawes, who could charm information from the grumpiest, scariest politician, and write like an angel'.⁵³ Dawes developed 'a Chestertonian figure which, somehow, he managed to haul up and down the mountains of New Guinea, when he was a war

47 'Menzies Biography Mystery', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September 1969, 20.

48 Papers of Robert Menzies, MS 4936, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra.

49 Papers of Allan Dawes, MS 8792, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra.

50 Whittington, *Strive to be Fair*, 55, 60.

51 'Three Press Delegates for Canada', *Sun* (Melbourne), 27 March 1944.

52 Whittington, *Strive to be Fair*, 94–95.

53 Cecil Edwards, *The Editor Regrets* (Melbourne: Hill of Content, 1972), 37.

correspondent'.⁵⁴ Late in the war, Edwards said, when the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) 9th Division was to march through Melbourne, the Melbourne *Herald* planned to run matching pieces by its two war correspondents who had been with the 9th: Dawes who covered it in New Guinea, and Jack Hetherington who covered it in the Middle East.

Hetherington lodged an excellent piece in good time, tailored for the allotted space. No copy from Dawes. No Dawes either, or word of him. Edition time approached. Someone found Dawes fast asleep somewhere in the office after a heavy night. They woke him and sat him at a typewriter. Copy came in slip by slip. 'Just cut it off when you've got enough,' he said. It just caught the edition. Dawes's piece written against time out of a none-too-clear head, was the better.⁵⁵

When the war ended, Dawes was middle-aged, overweight and a keen drinker but, Edwards's anecdote suggests, still writing very well. Dawes left the *Herald* and freelanced for, among others, the 'Liberal Party organization ... to reorganise its public relations office'.⁵⁶ This was not his first contact with conservative politics. From 1938 to 1941 Dawes did press work as a public servant for the Lyons and Menzies governments.⁵⁷ Initially he was employed to work on the Lyons Government's planned but eventually abandoned 'National Insurance' scheme, and later transferred to Army public relations where he worked as Army Minister Geoffrey Street's press secretary. After Street's death in the Canberra air disaster, Dawes moved to the newly formed Department of Labour and National Service; reporting the appointment, the Melbourne *Herald* described Dawes as 'one of Australia's most brilliant journalists'.⁵⁸ Dawes's repeated appointments as a press aide in the Lyons and first Menzies governments, Curtin's comments when appointing him to the wartime Canadian tour, and his reorganisation of the Liberal Party public relations office in 1948 attest to his capacity. What is more, his good reputation continued right up to his death. Dawes had the 'flamboyancy and rough humour of copybook war correspondents', the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported when he died in 1969. 'But he also had a strict regard for the truth.'⁵⁹

Analysing Morgan Gallup data during Menzies's career from 1941, Hazlehurst concludes that 'the level of approval and support for Menzies as party leader and Prime Minister fluctuated significantly'.⁶⁰ Hazlehurst cites Menzies's press secretary at the 1946 election, Charles Meeking, that Menzies was astonished by his loss to Chifley, and notes the Melbourne *Herald* report two days after the election attributing to Menzies a significant role in Labor's success:

54 Edwards, *The Editor Regrets*, 38n.

55 Edwards, *The Editor Regrets*, 38n.

56 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1948.

57 'Allan Dawes Dies at 69', *Sun* (Melbourne), 8 September 1969, 11.

58 'New Post for Mr. A. W. Dawes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 1941, 11.

59 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1969, 1.

60 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 294.

There is a wide feeling that this can only be explained by the fact that in its personalities, the Liberal Party still lacks electoral appeal.

Most members of the Labor Party claim that for election-winning purposes, Mr. Menzies is their greatest individual asset.

Throughout his campaign, for instance, Mr. Chifley played heavily on Mr. Menzies, and usually concluded his addresses with a declaration that 'the alternative to a vote for Labor was a vote for a Menzies Government'.

There has been evidence lately that Mr. Menzies's public standing has increased; but the election result hardly suggests that it has increased to the point where he is again a popular leader.⁶¹

The *Herald* report continued that the Liberals were likely to retain Menzies as leader out of gratitude for his strenuous efforts—and because the 'Parliamentary Liberal Party remains so bankrupt of outstanding personnel that no big figure is available to succeed' him.⁶² Chifley's announcement in August 1947 that he intended to nationalise Australia's banks proved deeply unpopular. In late October the Morgan Gallup organisation reported that Chifley 'would be fortunate to escape defeat if an election were held now'. Hazlehurst points out that while the Liberal Party's polling improved during this period, Menzies's popularity actually slipped, and that by November 1947 he was the first choice as Liberal leader among only 41 per cent of Liberal and Country Party voters, ahead of Liberal Party federal president Richard Casey on 40 per cent by the slimmest of margins.⁶³ Luckily for Menzies, Casey did not have a seat in parliament at that time. The polling evidence suggests, according to Hazlehurst, that in the short term at least, 'Menzies did not personally benefit from the overwhelming surge of anti-Labor sentiment' and that it took a 'renewed development of anti-communist attitudes ... to give Menzies a boost'.⁶⁴

As anti-communism swelled as a domestic political issue, so the man wielding the anti-communist cudgel grew in stature, a symbiotic process. By January 1949, Menzies was the preferred Liberal leader among 53 per cent of Liberal and Country Party voters with Casey's support ebbing to 27 per cent. That same month, however, as Ian Hancock notes, the Hansen-Rubensohn Company, in a public relations campaign proposal to the Liberal Party organisation, said Menzies was 'known' to few electors and that the party's prospects at the next election 'will largely depend (on) the public conception of the possible Prime Minister'.⁶⁵ Voters had to be acquainted with 'the real Mr. Menzies', interested in things other men were interested in, the

61 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 295–96.

62 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 295–96.

63 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 308.

64 Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 308.

65 Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent? The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944–1965* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 92.

Hansen-Rubensohn pitch continued: 'The illusion that he is the champion of the "moneybags", the aloof somewhat enigmatic cynic could, we think, be dispelled by a discreet, well-conceived public relations campaign of a personal character.'⁶⁶ Hancock describes in detail the 'subtle offensive' subsequently conducted by Sydney journalist and public relations operative Stewart Howard during 1949 to give Menzies a 'human face':

Menzies was variously depicted chatting to miners with a beer in his hand, ironing a dress at a Bathurst factory, and smiling benignly in Kurri Kurri at the few who jeered and called him 'Pig Iron Bob'. Meanwhile the organisation was busy constructing its own version of 'Bob Menzies' as the homely father figure and the people's friend to match 'R. G. Menzies', the statesman and the gifted speaker and intellect.⁶⁷

The Liberal Party campaign included the publication that year of 330,000 copies of the booklet *How Well Do You Know This Man?*⁶⁸ At year's end, on 10 December 1949, Menzies was restored to the prime ministership with a massive 27-seat majority in an election dominated by the Coalition parties' trenchant anti-communist rhetoric.

In office, Menzies's popularity among conservative voters rose. Whittington points out, however, that despite the continuing potency of the 'communist bogey', the Menzies Government lost three seats of its own as well as a conservative Independent at the next federal election on 28 April 1951. In Whittington's estimation, it 'was obvious something drastic was required if the Government was to retain office' at the next election, likely to be held in 1954. Menzies's handling of inflationary pressures was maladroit, Opposition leader Bert Evatt was operating effectively, and Labor had not yet split under pressure from the anti-Communist Catholic 'industrial groups'.⁶⁹ While hard to credit in retrospect, the view of Menzies in 1951 as a prime minister with a limited future was widely held among senior Canberra press gallery journalists according to Menzies's press secretary from 1951 to 1954, Stewart Cockburn:

Charlie Meeking was his first press secretary, then Jack Hewitt of the Information Bureau, who died of a ruptured duodenal ulcer, filled in, as did Mick Byrne on loan from Artie Fadden for a time. Then I came in. Menzies didn't want a press secretary. Menzies reckoned he could handle his own public relations best and in my view he probably could. But the cabinet stood over him and said, 'You must have a press secretary'. Reg Leonard, who was reorganising his public relations on loan from the *Herald*, as I understand it, probably said to him, 'well, try Irvine Douglas or try Alan Reid', and they of course wouldn't have a bar of it.

66 Hancock, *National and Permanent?*, 92.

67 Hancock, *National and Permanent?*, 92–93.

68 Hancock, *National and Permanent?*, 93.

69 Whittington, *Strive to be Fair*, 126–27.

So that all the more obvious choices were canvassed and most of them, I believe, thought Menzies would be down the drain at the 1951 double dissolution election—or if not then, very soon afterwards. They had no faith in him, at that stage, having a long and successful career in federal politics. Well, they were wrong and eventually it came down to me because Menzies evidently said to Leonard, ‘Well, what about that young bloke I met in London in 1948?’⁷⁰

Cockburn had been the Melbourne *Herald’s* London correspondent in 1948 when Menzies, then Opposition leader, visited England on a trip that was ‘partly holiday, partly work’. Cockburn saw Menzies daily, got some good stories out of him and grew to like him. ‘He evidently remembered me and picked my name out of the hat’ when the press secretary appointment was reluctantly embraced.⁷¹

It is easy to see how an image-burnishing biography of Menzies could have been an element of the conservatives’ political strategy for re-election in 1954. The Liberal Party organisation’s campaign to give Menzies a human face with its *How Well Do You Know This Man?* pamphlet may well have proved encouraging.⁷² In this light it is unsurprising that in the early 1950s Menzies entertained the thought of a friendly biography—not despite his perception of such works as ‘propaganda’ but rather because of it.⁷³ Alternatively it may have been something accepted by Menzies with reluctance, like the idea of a press secretary foisted upon him by Cabinet; or perhaps it was part of Leonard’s advice concerning the public relations revamp of the Menzies operation. Either way, a biography of Prime Minister Robert Menzies was by 1950 underway.

Nor is it surprising that Dawes should be the person to undertake such a project for—or should one say, with—Menzies. He had done biography-based image work for conservative politicians before. Working as Geoffrey Street’s press secretary in the first Menzies Government, for example, Dawes ‘made sure that editors were served with lively biographical material on his chief’.⁷⁴ He had done the same as a war correspondent. In New Guinea for the *Herald*, Dawes ‘propagated digger characteristics that Australians wanted to read about—shop-assistants and stockmen transformed into tough, independent soldiers, “lean and hard and muscular”, fostering Australians’ belief in themselves as jungle fighters, men in loose “faded, sweaty, mud-stained green” with Owen guns slung’.⁷⁵ Dawes’s A. N. Smith Lecture

70 Stewart Cockburn interviewed by Clem Lloyd, Oral History interview TRC 5253/6. The Australian News & Information Bureau (ANIB) was a federal government agency, founded in 1947 as the Department of Information, renamed ANIB in 1950 and renamed again in 1973 as the Australian Information Service. It was later absorbed into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

71 Cockburn interviewed by Lloyd, Oral History interview TRC 5253/6.

72 Cockburn interviewed by Lloyd, Oral History interview TRC 5253/6, 93.

73 Menzies, ‘Foreword to the First Edition’, in Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, x–xi.

74 Cameron Hazlehurst, *Ten Journeys to Cameron’s Farm* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013), 212, doi.org/10.22459/TJCF.11.2013.

75 Nelson, ‘Dawes, Allan Wesley (1900–1969)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

in 1946, 'Caesar's Ghost: The Journalist, the Statesman, the Spokesman', showed he had thought long and hard about the power and techniques of image-making.⁷⁶ In 1948 he was sufficiently trusted by the Liberal Party to reorganise its press operations—something hardly credible if he was not known to and trusted by Menzies. Two years later he would have been a logical choice to write a sympathetic political biography of Menzies.

Dawes's biography of Menzies was developed partly through direct interviews and partly through dictated lists of questions tape-recorded by Dawes, transcribed by Menzies's staff and relayed to Menzies for response. 'Mr. Prime Minister—you were good enough, when last I spoke to you to tell me the inside running of the case of Mrs. Freer ...' begins one seven foolscap page transcript that has survived in the Dawes Papers.⁷⁷ Appended to its front is a typed note from Stewart Cockburn, on 'Prime Minister, Canberra' letterhead: 'MR MENZIES: I have roughly corrected a very rough transcript of this reel.' There is no sign of a sozzled journalist at work in the transcript. Rather the Dawes memorandum shows an experienced journalist diligently pursuing the story. At times, for example, he pushes Menzies: 'I feel there is more to that story than meets the eye. I wonder if you would tell me that?' Dawes is asking about Menzies's departure from the McPherson Ministry in Victoria in 1929 ostensibly over a policy disagreement—an old and possibly uncomfortable memory for Menzies who subsequently did the same in his federal career, in a move considered by some a stunt to destabilise his then leader, UAP prime minister Joe Lyons. Here Dawes shows he carefully checked facts, even trivial ones: 'Would you tell me again your story about your Aunt and the South Street competitions, which you once told to a photographer and myself when we were travelling in a car from Kew to the City, I think, but my memory of it is imperfect and I would like to hear it again.'⁷⁸ There is no doubt the biography is a collaboration, one in which the author allowed the subject's hand to move invisibly, as the subject considered necessary, over the text. 'No book of this character would be complete without a few "Billy" stories,' Dawes says of former Prime Minister Billy Hughes, still a member of parliament. 'Have you any printable such? They need not necessarily be attributed to you, though it would be much better if they were.'⁷⁹ A little later in this memorandum, Dawes's acceptance of Menzies's veto is revealed as explicit. Asking about another controversial incident in Menzies's Victorian political career, Dawes says: 'If this proves embarrassing or a betrayal of confidence, don't bother

76 Allan Dawes, *Caesar's Ghost: The Journalist, the Statesman, the Spokesman* (Melbourne: Trustees of the Arthur Norman Smith Memorial, 1946), 1.

77 Allan Dawes to Robert Menzies, note, c. 1950, transcript, 7 pp., Papers of Allan Dawes, MS 8792, NLA, 1.

78 Dawes to Menzies.

79 Dawes to Menzies, 2.

with it.⁸⁰ Yet the memorandum is full of reminders that, while Menzies has a veto, Dawes is not supine. Here he disagrees with Menzies and asks him to reflect again on an issue:

The press, you say, must bear a heavy responsibility for the decline in the standards of Parliamentary conduct and practice over the last fifty years; but don't you think that the press was pretty corrupt in the days when Federal Parliament operated from Melbourne and was pretty corrupt in its association—in the Victorian governments, to say the least—before Federation?⁸¹

Dawes did not rely on Menzies alone as a source, the memorandum shows:

White, Parliamentary Librarian, told me of your encounter with Somerset Maugham, hitchhiking in Europe. He also told me you succeeded in getting manuscripts for the National Library from Maugham. I wonder if you could tell me this story? Did Maugham have anything to say on Australia and Australians? I believe he once described Melba as 'a superb monster'.⁸²

Dawes encouraged Menzies to tell more, not less, even when the matter is sensitive. This example relates to the interwar scandal concerning World War I hero Thomas Blamey whose police badge was found in the hands of a man caught in a Fitzroy brothel raid in 1925:

In the Victorian era in your political life—did you have any association with the appointment or the subsequent removal of Blamey as Commissioner of Police, and if so, were you thereby embarrassed in selecting Sir Thomas Blamey as the Leader of the A.I.F.? I seem to recall some conferences [*sic*, confidences] on the part of Brigadier Street, when I was working for him in the Department of the Army. You may be assured that I do not intend any muck-raking in this matter; but history is history, and the facts might be set down without any loss of taste, I think. Of course, there is no need to quote you in the matter and I will be guided by you as to whether we go into the question at all.⁸³

Dawes established a pattern recognisable to journalists: pushing for more, then reassuring lest the subject be scared off, sometimes adding domestic touches which by association de-escalate any rising tension. After the Blamey parry, Dawes asks Menzies whether he had experienced any 'period of honest doubt' on the matter of religion:

Once again, if some of these questions touch too closely, do not hesitate to wipe the ribbon clean; in fact to say 'What business is it of yours at all'. In playing these questions back I am impressed with their general grim solemnity—I trust you won't answer them in the spirit in which they are asked! (That, by the way, was a kookaburra under my window—apparently he feels the same way about it as it [*sic*, I] do.)⁸⁴

80 Dawes to Menzies, 2.

81 Dawes to Menzies, 3.

82 Dawes to Menzies, 3.

83 Dawes to Menzies, 5.

84 Dawes to Menzies, 5–6.

The memorandum—the transcript of one of Dawes's tape-recorded sets of questions for Menzies—is the only one that survives, and part of it is missing. The seventh page ends mid-sentence, as Dawes compares 'parliamentary morality' and 'parliamentary usage' in the Australian parliament's earlier decades with that of the mid-twentieth century:

I remember ... the general attitude of disregard for private morals and public interests which characterised the lower grades of politician at the time. Parliament House itself was the scene of many unpleasant scenes which could not but inspire a certain contempt for the men who were the tribunes of the people; but to use Parliament House as they might the Tower of London Night Club! There were even people who used it as a means of escaping the bailiffs—they rushed in when they saw the 'bluey' coming up the steps and they stayed there!

I don't see that going on in Parliament today—in Parliament House, I mean. You can say of some of the lesser politicians of today that they are dull fellows but they mean well enough, I suppose. Of course, you have your Ed Wards but we had our equivalents, I think, in those days (who) used their parliamentary position for purposes which were not entirely ethical.⁸⁵

At the point the missing pages begin, Dawes has moved on to 'parliamentary usage' and is canvassing the difference between 'Miss 1900 and Miss 1950' in a way that is unfortunately inexplicable without reference to the missing page or pages.

Another document in the Dawes Papers—what looks like a roneo-copied transcription from another Dawes tape recording sent to Menzies via his office—includes a detailed plan for a work of 27 chapters, including chapter titles and chapter contents, and contains extensive notes by him on his approach to the project. Dawes refers to 'a visit to The Lodge' at which he gathered materials, and also to his use of Menzies's diaries: 'I will have to submit the material at some stage for his careful perusal as there may be much of this so personal that he would not be inclined to expose it outside of his family circle.' That Menzies trusted Dawes with his diaries speaks for itself. In this document Dawes also mentions interviews with Menzies's cousin, Douglas Menzies QC, and High Court judge Owen Dixon, and foreshadows forthcoming interviews with two more judges, all for the chapter on Menzies's legal career tentatively titled 'The Rustle of Silk'.⁸⁶ After that, Dawes continues:

I contemplate visiting a number of other people in the field of law including Sir John Latham, who has also agreed to help me, and a number of colleagues and adversaries at the Bar, who will doubtless be able to give me a better picture of such cases as the Engineers' Paper Sacks, and other cases which seem to tell a story.⁸⁷

85 Dawes to Menzies, 7.

86 Allan Dawes, 'Biography of Mr. R. G. Menzies', in Papers of Allan Dawes, MS 8792, NLA, 3.

87 Dawes, 'Biography of Mr. R. G. Menzies', 3–4.

Thus the picture further builds of a serious research enterprise that, while in the service of what is effectively an authorised biography with all its attendant veto rights, is not trivial in its intentions.

The crucial thing about this second document in the Dawes Papers is how far down the track it reveals Dawes was in writing the biography, how long he had been working on it, and how at least one credible reader—Justice Sir Owen Dixon—had reacted positively, on Dawes’s account anyway, to excerpts of it. ‘Something has been written of practically every chapter but the new material I have recently obtained induces me to rewrite pretty well everything I have written already in the light of what has now been disclosed to me,’ he wrote. ‘Some of this material I doubtless should have had to begin with, but I was unaware precisely where to find it.’⁸⁸ By the final page of this document, notes, most likely written by Stewart Cockburn, begin to appear interspersed with the transcription of Dawes’s comments. ‘Dawes next proposes,’ one reads, ‘to ask the Prime Minister to confide to him those records of crises in his career which he discussed with Dawes just before his recent departure for abroad.’ Another reads, ‘Dawes has shown some of his material to Sir Owen Dixon and is obviously very pleased by what he terms “Sir Owen’s heartening reactions”.’ A crucial comment transcribed on the last page suggests the date of this memorandum as most likely 1952 since the transcription has Dawes saying, ‘The last chapter will deal with the recent tour abroad and the prospect for 1953.’⁸⁹ Menzies’s brother Frank estimated Dawes worked on the book in 1950–51.⁹⁰ Dawes’s comment in this memorandum suggests the time frame was more likely at least 1950–52, if not longer. This is confirmed in the draft chapter by Dawes titled ‘The Sampson Line—Menzies in Parliament’, contained in the Menzies Papers and personally annotated by Menzies himself, which refers to the death of his former cabinet colleague Sir George Pearce in 1952.⁹¹

So what is there of this manuscript, this mystery biography of Menzies? The Dawes Papers contain a chapter with pages numbered 1 to 48 titled ‘In the Middle East’ covering Menzies’s visit to the Second AIF in 1941, en route for Britain.⁹² There are pages 55 and 56 from the same typewriter and on the same paper stock, which appear to be the final two pages of a chapter on Menzies’s school education. There are five unnumbered pages, four of which concern Menzies’s attitudes to literature while the other canvasses his views on rhetoric. There is a 12-page chapter on Menzies’s ‘Jubilee Pilgrimage’ in 1935. There are several pages that are heavily marked up early drafts of the foregoing material, all of which is on quarto paper. The rest of the Dawes Papers are on foolscap paper. There are five pages from the

88 Dawes, ‘Biography of Mr. R. G. Menzies’, 4.

89 Dawes, ‘Biography of Mr. R. G. Menzies’, 4.

90 Brett, *Robert Menzies’ Forgotten People*, 137.

91 Allan Dawes, six chapters of biographical manuscript concerning Robert Menzies, Papers of Robert Menzies, MS 4936, Series 10, Box 354, NLA, ‘5. The Sampson Line—Menzies in Parliament’, 20, annotated by Menzies.

92 Page 46 is missing.

'Beleaguered Britain' chapter concerning Menzies's long visit to Britain in 1941; nine pages, numbered 6 to 14, which appear to be from the same chapter; and seven pages covering the same period, with pages numbered 123 to 129. This last section, given its page numbering, appears to be from a later draft in which Dawes had begun numbering pages cumulatively. It leaves us on page 129 with Menzies still in London, and still prime minister first time round.

How does this compare to the surviving Dawes's manuscript in the Menzies Papers?⁹³ There are three copies of the opening six chapters of the Dawes manuscript, including one personally marked up by Menzies himself. There is also a typewritten memo from Menzies's confidential personal secretary, Eileen 'Lennie' Lenihan, and another typewritten note likely to also be by Lenihan. The memo is addressed to 'Mr. Frank'—almost certainly Menzies's brother, Frank. Writes Lenihan:

The copy I've taped up, and with the note attached, is for the P. M.—because I have marked in ink on the various pages the special bits I've brought to his attention.

Copy herewith for you;
Also a copy for Stewart Cockburn
if he wants.
I've taken 3 copies down to Melb. and
all the rest of the papers
are in the office here—except
that I'm also including herewith
the actual manuscript from which
I've worked—on the basis that
I don't expect Mr. Dawes will
be chasing it this weekend.
Lennie/⁹⁴

The other typewritten note, which is adjacent in the papers and likely accompanied the memo, reads:

This is the whole of the manuscript sent to me by
Mr. Dawes (barring one chapter which
Stewart C. is doing)/⁹⁵

These two notes show how the Dawes biography was treated by Menzies and those closest to him as effectively a group project. Lenihan herself marked up a copy before passing it to the prime minister for his mark-up and comments. Frank Menzies and press secretary Stewart Cockburn are intimately involved. So no fewer

93 Dawes, six chapters of biographical manuscript concerning Robert Menzies, MS 4936, Series 10, Box 354, NLA.

94 Eileen Lenihan to 'Mr. Frank' (likely Frank Menzies), memo, n.d., Papers of Robert Menzies, MS 4936, Series 10, Box 354, NLA. Note: The quote has been double-checked and 'taped' is correct, not a typographical error.

95 Anonymous memo, likely to be from Eileen Lenihan to Frank Menzies, undated, Papers of Robert Menzies, MS 4936, Series 10, Box 354, NLA.

than the prime minister, his confidential personal secretary, his press secretary and his brother all devoted serious time to it. Menzies and his office took Dawes and his manuscript seriously. There is no evidence the project fizzled out for the reason Nelson alleges, that Dawes was 'drinking heavily and unable to meet deadlines'.⁹⁶ That leaves the question of how to square the conflicting evidence of the mere six chapters in the Menzies Papers, and the far lesser and different material in the Dawes Papers, with the report in the *Sunday Telegraph* report of Dawes's death in 1969 that he wrote 'at least 13 chapters' including one 'setting out the details as Sir Robert saw them of events leading up to his resignation as Prime Minister in 1941'.⁹⁷

The obvious suspicion arising is that Menzies or one of his staff lost or disposed of the up to seven other chapters the detailed *Sunday Telegraph* report of Dawes's death suggests were written, before the Menzies Papers went to the National Library. A prima facie, and apparently powerful, defence against this charge is that the Dawes Papers themselves do not contain them. However, the provenance of the Dawes Papers is not what it seems: they did not come from Dawes or his family. Rather they came to the National Library courtesy of Cockburn, Menzies's press secretary at the time the manuscript was being written, according to correspondence between National Library staff member Cathy Santamaria and Cockburn in which she thanks him for the material.⁹⁸

There are three matters that do not prove, but do lend weight to the possibility, that Menzies cooled off, and ultimately ran dead, on the project after reading the six chapters that are in the Menzies Papers, whether Dawes went on to write another seven chapters or not.

The first is the fact that none of the manuscript material in either the Dawes Papers or the Menzies Papers covers Menzies's controversial rise to the prime ministership. Some considered Menzies to have engineered this over the dead body of Joe Lyons, whom he was perceived to have systematically undermined—something of which, even cast in a benign light in a friendly biography, it might ultimately have been judged unwise to remind voters. Menzies's period as attorney-general in the Lyons Government is the last point reached before a break occurs in Dawes chronological narrative, which suddenly resumes in a chapter called 'The Living Present' that has Menzies as prime minister during World War II, touring the Middle East. If Dawes wrote anything about the ugly mechanics of Menzies's rise to the prime ministership first time round, it does not survive in the Menzies Papers. It is possible that parts of the Dawes manuscript that cover controversial incidents too candidly or cast Menzies in too unattractive a light—even whole chapters of such material—were lost or actively deleted from the Menzies archive.

96 Nelson, 'Dawes, Allan Wesley (1900–1969)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

97 'Menzies Biography Mystery', *Sunday Telegraph*.

98 Kylie Scroope, NLA staff member, email communication, 26 June 2014.

The second reason Menzies may have cooled on the biography is a shift in the political climate. From the backdrop of a 1951 election in which the government's majority declined and Menzies was unpopular, to a 1954 election in prospect with Menzies's popularity rising and the Liberals buoyed by his use of the Petrov Affair to make the Cold War central to Australian political debate, the atmospherics changed decisively. Hazlehurst points out that support for Menzies as leader among Liberal and Country Party voters was 87 per cent in October 1954, on its way to peaking at 90 per cent in April 1955.⁹⁹ Against the backdrop of these extraordinary levels of support, Menzies may have correctly calculated he had potentially more to lose from a biography—even a friendly one—than he had to gain.

The third possible reason Menzies may have cooled on the biography lies in his attitude to the Dawes manuscript, as indicated by Menzies's own annotations on the six chapters that survive in his papers. Dawes had a 'declare then demolish' technique of including politically adverse allegations and elements of Menzies's story and resolving them in his favour. This must have made uncomfortable reading for Menzies who might well have preferred difficult episodes simply not appear at all. While Dawes's defence of him is trenchant, some of the content was undoubtedly embarrassing to Menzies and, in the hands of political enemies, possibly still damaging. It is little wonder that Menzies annotated two chapters with a sharp message to his press secretary, 'See me about this!'¹⁰⁰

The *Sunday Telegraph's* source on there being 'at least 13 chapters' of the Dawes manuscript could have been Dawes himself, other journalists, Dawes's widow or sons, or perhaps parliamentary or press gallery hearsay. The reliability of the statement, absent of other evidence, is impossible to evaluate. Should the half-dozen manuscript chapters in the Menzies Papers and the lesser amount in the Dawes Papers therefore be accepted as all that Dawes in fact wrote? Possibly. A typewritten note included with the six chapters in the Menzies Papers says, 'This is the whole of the manuscript sent to me by Mr. Dawes ...'. However, the chapters are not numbered, and even if they were it would not preclude the possibility of others later being written, and even sent, that were eliminated from or otherwise not included in the Menzies Papers. The documents that *do* survive show Dawes not as H. N. 'Hank' Nelson's unreliable drunk but rather as a diligent professional working methodically at his task—perhaps too diligently, in the sense of too independently, for Menzies's liking. There is no evidence the biography was not completed and published because of Dawes. Rather it is more likely the result of a decision by Menzies, whose calculations of risk and return from such a project may well have changed both because of his strengthening political position as well as Dawes's perhaps unexpected 'disclose all' style. Crucially, the sense of an author

⁹⁹ Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 345.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Menzies annotation by hand on Allan Dawes draft Menzies biography manuscript, Dawes Papers, MS 4936, Series 10, Box 354.

disintegrating under the influence of alcohol is not conveyed by the chapters that survive in the Menzies Papers and the somewhat dubiously named Dawes Papers, which close archival research reveals came to the National Library via Menzies's press secretary Stewart Cockburn, who could well have weeded them with his former employer's 'S.C. See me about this!' manuscript notations in mind. The surviving chapters are uniformly strong, without the trailing-off quality one would expect from a professional writer succumbing to alcoholism.

Correspondence in 1961 between political scientist L. F. Crisp, at The Australian National University (ANU), and Longmans, publisher of Crisp's *Ben Chifley: A Biography*, suggests that Menzies's office propagated the story that Dawes's drinking derailed the Menzies biography.¹⁰¹ In contemporary parlance, the Menzies office 'backgrounded' against Dawes. Longmans had asked whether Crisp might follow up his Chifley biography with one of Menzies, who was still in office. 'Now about your question on the life of Menzies,' Crisp began:

I ran into one of his Press Secretaries on Saturday morning and asked him straight out what the position was. He confirmed what I already knew, that some eight or nine years ago a well-known Melbourne journalist called Allan Dawes ... had undertaken such a work, but was beaten by the bottle which had been his enemy for some time previously and had had the job withdrawn from him. According to this local source there is no biography in progress at the moment though he tells me that Menzies carefully files away papers of biographical significance and he believes that Menzies has in mind to write memoirs himself.¹⁰²

Canberra's population at this time was 52,000 with the bulk of residents in, or connected to, the business of government. Given this version of the Dawes's Menzies biography's demise was being retailed by Menzies's office, it is unsurprising it would have permeated in the intervening period as far as the office of an ANU academic. That Crisp also heard it directly from a Menzies staffer, who added that the job had been 'withdrawn' from Dawes with Menzies himself planning a memoir, intensifies the caution—in the absence of any corroboration and in the face of considerable circumstantial evidence contradicting it—one should bring to the story that alcoholic incapacitation stopped Dawes finishing the book.

Thus Australia's longest-serving prime minister governed without a biography during his combined 18 years in office, other than the biography for young readers written by Ronald Seth in 1960 for Cassell, with whom Menzies had a long association.

101 ANU was then Canberra University College; L. F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley: A Biography* (Croydon: Longmans, 1961).

102 L. F. Crisp to Michael Turnbull of Longmans Publishers, 3 July 1961, Papers of L. F. Crisp, MS 5243, National Library of Australia, Canberra. Crisp declined to pursue the suggested Menzies biography: '(T)he fact of the matter is that many, many source materials would be shut off from your author. So much indeed as to make it a much harder job than I would care to take on myself in the circumstances—though I admit that some very interesting contemporary biographies have been written on an authorized basis and without access to all the official documentation.'

Cassell published Menzies's *Speech is of Time* (1958), *Central Power in the Australian Commonwealth* (1967) and, after his retirement, *Afternoon Light* (1967)—'[it] has made the Cassell directors most excited'¹⁰³—and *The Measure of the Years* (1970). The 'cloak of urbanity', as Whittington describes Menzies's public face, was not lifted during his active political lifetime.

Menzies's hostility to contemporary political biography and reservations about biography overall, his cooperation in the production of one nevertheless, the growing alarm that emerges in his personal notations on draft chapters, and the project's ultimate lack of fulfilment all point to his ambivalence about Dawes's book. The reason the biography was not finished and published remains moot. There is no evidence to support the claim it was due to alcoholic incapacitation on Dawes's part. There is, on the other hand, circumstantial evidence of Menzies's concern about Dawes's disclose-and-rebut style rather than diplomatic silence about contentious aspects of Menzies's career. There is the likelihood, too, that Menzies's changed standing between the 1951 election, when it was weak, and the 1954 election by which time his personal polling was extraordinarily high, eliminated the perceived need for it, leading him to run dead on the project. A political biography's potential as a political intervention is contextual. If the context changes, as Dawes's abandoned biography of Menzies suggests, so might the risk and reward calculus attending it.

So it was that Menzies's novel engagement with what would have been Australia's first example of political biography as political intervention lapsed. In retirement, Menzies chose British expatriate Lady (Frances) McNicoll (née Chadwick) as his official biographer.¹⁰⁴ McNicoll, a personal friend, was a long-time *Economist* correspondent who had never written a book. Given Menzies's bleak view of the genre, she was perhaps the perfect choice: the biographer who did not write a biography. McNicoll was engaged for the project in 1969. When Menzies died in 1978 the biography was not finished and never would be.

103 Robert Menzies to Heather Henderson, 5 July 1967, in Menzies, *Letters to My Daughter*, 150.

104 'Lady McNicoll met Sir Robert Menzies in 1959 and corresponded with him intermittently in the 1960s. It appears that in 1969 they agreed that she should write his biography. In 1972 Menzies altered his will to give her exclusive access to his personal papers during his lifetime and for three years after his death. In 1972–73, while she was living in Ankara, Lady McNicoll had an extensive correspondence with Menzies and on her return to Australia she recorded a number of interviews with him. She worked on the biography for several years, but does not appear to have progressed beyond some first drafts. In 1982 the Menzies Family lifted the restriction on most of the Menzies Family Papers and in late 1983 it was decided that Dr Allan Martin should take over as the biographer of Menzies.' Biographical note, Guide to the Papers of Lady Frances McNicoll, National Library of Australia, accessed 8 April 2021, nla.gov.au/nla.obj-299728501/findingaid#biographical-note.

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