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For those willing to work outside the conventional parameters, is political biography still a helpful form of historical explanation, and does it have an intellectual future (it clearly has a commercial one)? The answer must be a qualified ‘yes.’

The relative decline of political history as a sub-discipline of history has not been matched by any evident decline in political biography. Quite the opposite, in fact, particularly among general readers. Perhaps this is due to its capacity for drama and for the high degree of human agency in political events. Yet political biography has long occupied an uneasy position on the spectrum of academic genres of writing. Gone are the days when all of human history was considered simply a story of great men and their deeds. Importantly, we no longer consider the ‘political’ as expressly limited to the realm of mass parties and national legislatures; as Michelle Arrow has comprehensively demonstrated, a popular catchphrase of 1970s Australia—‘the personal is political’—ran directly counter to the notion of a neat and separable division between public and private selves.

In the intervening years, the rise of life writing has democratised and broadened scholarly understandings of biography, including by fostering a valuable interest in the lives of non-masculine, non-heteronormative and non-Western life narratives. We hope that the articles in this fifth issue of the *Australian Journal of Biography and History* demonstrate that political biography is growing beyond just ‘one damned life after another’, and that there are new and productive paths open for practitioners, readers and critics of this genre. This is not to assert that all such past biographies should be disregarded, but instead that they be reconsidered in a new light; one discussed in this issue is *A Hard Row to Hoe*, a spirited memoir of life as a backbencher by the former state member for Manly Alan Stewart, which appeared in 1988 to little fanfare, but which can do much to illuminate a ‘political history from below’.

In today’s wider cultural environment, the political biography genre has a promising future. Political biographies are continually produced in Australia and elsewhere, and academics from a variety of fields continue to read and interpret them. As Blair

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Williams demonstrates in this issue, increasing numbers of women are writing and practising political biography and often reinvigorating the genre in the process, even if the parliamentary subjects of these texts remain as a group stubbornly homogenous. Scholars from a number of other disciplines are turning their attention to the genre, reconsidering its opportunities and limitations, its literary properties and its epistemological foundations. As with life writing more broadly, political biography has long occupied an interdisciplinary space where historians, biographers, literary theorists and political scientists alike engage in a discourse about the people, processes and structures of politics past and present. Yet it can nonetheless still readily conjure up an image of very official lives presented in a manner that is (in the worst sense) Dickensian in tone and substance.

This special issue of the journal offers a critical snapshot of the diverse approaches and attitudes to political biography and its variants in contemporary Australia. In particular, it captures the interdisciplinary conversation between contemporary historians, innovative political scientists, experienced practitioners of biography and journalism, and critics of visual culture. It looks beyond the limited perception of political biography as simply the study of great statesmen (or great stateswomen), and proposes instead a widening of what actually constitutes political biography and political life writing. This invites us to consider critically the motives of those who write political biographies, and of those who write first-hand, subjective political memoirs. It calls into question the representativeness of those who have typically been the subject of published biographies, including by calling attention to the longstanding lack of women's political biography in Australia. It may also foster reflections on the many different media through which political lives are refracted, both in terms of variant genres of writing (biography, autobiography, diary, manifestos and so on), and in terms of non-written modes of storytelling (such as painted portraits and other images). In attempting all this, the journal draws upon the diverse expertise of its contributors to offer a lively and spirited conversation about the nature, meaning and function of political life narratives.

This issue also strives to avoid certain traditional pitfalls inherent in the study of political biography. Among other things, we seek to widen the field’s longstanding focus on hetero-masculine subjects. In this regard, Williams’s contribution offers a discussion on the paucity of women’s political biography and, by extension, the lingering paucity of women in politics. We also attempt to divert attention away from preoccupations with the question of ‘leadership’ in the strictest sense of the term. All elected political representatives are leaders to some extent, but studies of political lives are often entirely bound up with appointed leaders of political parties and, in most Westminster democracies, prime ministerial leadership alone. In this issue, we have sought to avoid protracted analysis of successive prime ministers, leaders of the Opposition and minor party leaders, focusing instead on other features of Australian political lives and their contexts. Instead, the issue seeks to decenter popular understandings of political leadership, and to shift the scholarly gaze towards
the structures and cultures of politics and their impact on political lives. Stephen Wilks’s analysis of backbencher memoirs and Daniel Oakman’s study of professional sportspeople and athletes in politics are both indicative of this special issue’s broader objective to explore political lives as products of culture and context. Wilks calls for more of the foot soldiers of politics—backbenchers, humble and otherwise—to write memoirs as an insight into the working lives of the typical politician, and to explore what wider significance they have as political players. Oakman delineates the links that politics has to mainstream Australian life via that great staple of popular culture, sport. Contesting the notion that ‘sport is sport’, Oakman accounts for the rise of sporting and athletic professionals as political candidates.

Where this issue does revisit familiar political leaders, it is with a view to describing the proliferation of a particular narrative or the performance of leadership, rather than simply the personal qualities and attributes of a leader. In a methodological reflection on his award-winning biography Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon (2018), Patrick Mullins critically explores the concerted attempts of the former prime minister to control and manipulate the public and archival record of his life. Similarly, in her account of a quietly controversial and eventually abandoned biography of Robert Menzies early in his second prime ministership, Chris Wallace demonstrates that life stories are powerful but risky commodities in the fast-changing political domain. Moreover, in a sweeping examination of prime ministerial portraiture, Sarah Engledow reconsiders the visual performance of leadership for posterity and, ultimately, questions the biographical utility of such performances.

Importantly, studies of Australian political biography can hardly ignore the heightened prevalence of autobiographical stories in the public domain. Formerly rare, political memoirists and diarists are now taking stock of and richly contributing to the discourses of modern politics in surprising ways. Robert Tickner, our only contributor who was also an elected political practitioner, uses his very personal article to call on others to write political and policy memoirs as a ‘public good’ that helps to encourage the ‘noble enterprise’ of participation in public life. Here, Tickner reflects on the task of writing and publishing his own two volumes of memoirs, and the personal and political motives underscoring them. Wilks also considers this question of insider narratives in his essay on backbenchers’ memoirs. Joshua Black examines the political memoir and diary genres in the broader context of the rise of life writing in the twentieth century. Adopting former minister Neal Blewett’s

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In Australia, political biography should be considered neither a matter of mere historical curiosity nor a form of personalised gossip. As Murray Goot and Tim Rowse indicate in an incisive review essay, political life narratives are implicated in the difficult postcolonial politics of race, representation and recognition. Critically examining Warren Mundine’s political memoir *In Black + White*, Goot and Rowse demonstrate that political (auto)biographies can contribute to active discourses about the policy and politics of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and that autobiographical silences are often louder than words. Indeed, political autobiographies are capable of speaking to many different social and structural problems in Australian national life. As we write this editorial, Penguin Random House Australia has just announced that it has signed former Liberal Party staffer and sexual assault survivor Brittany Higgins to write a memoir about her experiences of the wildly problematic culture in Parliament House. In coming years, we anticipate that political life stories will intervene in the prevailing political culture in important and (we hope) reformative ways.

There is also, in this special issue, an enduring concern with the actual practice of political biography. Forty years after her first critical examination of the state of political biography in Australia, Kate White makes a bold call for academics to ‘rethink their approach’ by considering what novel strategies they can take to ‘move beyond the narrative form’. Effective storytelling, she suggests, remains an utmost concern for good biographical practice. Mullins provides an exemplary tale about the role of the biographer-historian in critically examining politicians’ ownership of their own narratives by reflecting on his own experiences writing *Tiberius with a Telephone*. In this issue, he explains the difficulties he faced while seeking to access McMahon’s personal papers, the challenge of contesting the former prime minister’s own accounts of the past, and his resolution of issues of his book’s structure. Williams offers a purposeful study that draws on two recent biographies of very different female politicians to explore what increasing female participation in politics means for biographers, and in particular the ‘tendency towards excessive personalisation’ in political discourse. She delineates a more inclusive model of feminist research for future political biographies of women and men collectively.

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We hope that this issue will challenge the notion of political biography as confined or limited to prose narratives. Sarah Engledow examines the nature and function of prime ministerial portraiture in Australian history. She considers the social, cultural and political imperatives and logics that have motivated Australian portraitists and politicians to create these likenesses, with particular attention to the traditional conception of a ‘portrait’ as an attempt to capture the essence of its subject. We hope that Engledow’s contribution to this field will encourage and facilitate further discussion and examination of the ways in which political lives and leadership are visually captured and communicated to a mass audience.

Finally, we hope that we and our contributors have collectively established, however partially, the existing variety and widening potential of political biography. There is a multiplicity of productive ways by which it can go forward as a scholarly and popular exercise. If this issue of the journal succeeds, it will be by stimulating wider realisation of this potential of political biography in the contemporary political environment.

We wish to thank each of the authors in this issue for their lively contributions to this field, and for their good-natured engagement with us in the editorial process. We equally thank the readers and peer reviewers who have done much to advance this issue. Our thanks also to the wonderful members of the National Centre of Biography for their valuable feedback on the overarching design of the issue, and especially to editor Malcolm Allbrook for inviting us to produce this special issue, which has been a pleasure and privilege. Finally, our sincere thanks to copyeditor Geoff Hunt, and to the team at ANU Press whose work is crucial in bringing this work to fruition.
Australian political biography and biographers: Revisiting Australian political biography

KATE WHITE

This article is both a personal and academic reflection of my experiences as a student, teacher and practitioner of Australian political biography, and also of working with parliamentarians. It revisits my analysis of the genre published in Politics in 1981, but with a different focus.¹ Whereas the earlier article identified various categories of political biography, here I will also be reflecting on my own experience of Australian political biography and of the academics and journalists who write them. As well, I will discuss how political biography has changed in the intervening 40 years and how my views of it have changed.

The 1981 article was influenced by my experience as a teacher and student of Australian political biography. I taught a course on Australian political biography with my colleague Jocelyn Clarke at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology while finishing a PhD (on John Cain senior) in the Political Science Department at the University of Melbourne, supervised by Alan Davies who was then head of the department, and Peter Cook from La Trobe University.² The thesis was initially supervised by Graham Little who introduced me to psycho-social approaches to political biography. Prior to the doctorate, Allan Martin supervised my master’s thesis, and in my honours year Allan had offered an elective on political biography that attracted a fascinating group of academics and students, including Inga Clendinnen, Angus McIntyre and Graham Little. In retrospect it was a rather privileged window into the genre. Allan was generous with his mentoring and as I worked on the master’s—a political biography of Victorian Liberal premier Thomas Tuke Hollway—we had endless discussions about the man behind the public persona (as Hollway had left unpublished memoirs).³ I remember at the time being influenced by Davies’s publications and some of the relevant United States literature. Allan Martin was fascinated by psycho-social approaches to political biography as he was then working on a biography of Henry Parkes. There

appeared to be a tension in his thinking between historical narrative and finding the real man underneath, one that was not ultimately resolved in his *Henry Parkes: A Biography* (1980).  

In 1981 I discussed the characteristics of modern biography, including what Maurois called the ‘courageous search for truth’, the recognition of the complexity of human personality, and the desire of readers to identify with the essential humanity of the character portrayed. Then there were the tactical problems a biographer encountered. One was conveying the sense of time passing or the ‘complex way in which time is experienced’. Another was the biographer’s relationship with his or her subject. While a biographer’s motives may compromise the ‘courageous search for truth’, Cockshut argued that strong emotional response to one’s subject can be healthy. A third tactical problem identified was that any interpretation of a life might be over-simple. But I concluded that this was an insurmountable problem because ‘a biography by its very definition is just one interpretation; it is one of many possible interpretations of a life’.  

The article also touched on the then current debate on Australian historiography in which Michael Roe identified Australian Whig historians who were commentators on national identity and self-esteem, and who presented the experiences and achievements of white settlers as ‘genial, congratulatory and optimistic’. Roe named W. K. Hancock and various Marxist historians as dominant among the Whigs, while the main anti-Whig was Manning Clark who had gathered to his side many ‘New Left’ historians such as Humphrey McQueen, Henry Reynolds and several feminist writers. I considered that mention of Australian historiography was pertinent to surveying Australian political biography, because many biographies were written by academic historians and that their approach to history would affect the type of biographies they wrote. I argued that Whig historians tended ‘to stick to “safe” subjects and similarly “safe” interpretations’, and were ‘unlikely to draw on sociological or psychological material to help them explain their subject’s behaviour’.  

At that time, I noted the lack of reflective material from Australian politicians, with few writing seriously about their time in office. In the intervening 40 years there has been a substantial development in this genre and reflective works such as Keating’s 2016 memoir (cast as a conversation with Kerry O’Brien) have proliferated. However, my focus here will be on biographies of Australian federal and state

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4 Full details of this and other biographies referred to in this article are listed in the bibliography.  
Australian political biography and biographers

parliamentarians, not autobiographies or memoirs, or biographies of those who influence politics. Also, in that time there has been a sharp increase in the number of books on Australian politics, including biographies.

In 1981 I identified six categories of Australian political biography: the nineteenth-century-style biography tinged with professionalism; the apologia; the intuitive biography; the tentative, psychologically interpretative biography; the journalist biography (either a ‘quickie’ or a more serious work); and the explicitly psychoanalytical biography. I argued that the first two types belonged to the pre-modern, Whig tradition while the third—the intuitive biography—was transitional between the pre-modern and modern biography (but definitely anti-Whig). The last three types, with the exception of the quickie, were in the modern, counter-Whig tradition. I then discussed examples of biographies in each of these categories.

I concluded that there was a need ‘for a much more analytical approach to researching and writing about our public figures. There is a marked lack of reflection among Australian political biographers’. In other words, biographers generally did not reflect on the genre or their personal approach to writing political biography.

The art of political biography

Here the focus will be mainly on those academics and journalists who write Australian political biography rather than on their publications. In the intervening 40 years since my article was published there has been a huge proliferation in Australian biography with the National Library of Australia catalogue recording 8,664 books on the subject. While political biographies are a subset of this number, they are nonetheless popular with publishers because they sell well, although possibly not as well as political memoirs that can sell over 100,000 copies.

There has also in the last 25 years been a significant growth in Australian reflective material on the art of writing political biography, as well as other categorisations of biography proposed. For example, Rhodes identified six conventions in what he calls ‘the British tradition of political life history’: “tombstone” biography, separation of public and private lives, life without theory, objective evidence and facts, character, and storytelling. Meanwhile, Evans categorised political biographies as the job application (“They supply what all ambitious politicians need: their own personally

vetted version of the “log cabin to the White House” narrative,’), the post-career apologia, and the proper history (in which he includes Martin’s two volumes on Menzies). While there is some alignment of these with my categories, the issue of effective storytelling in biography is important and could be described as an overarching focus of biography. Stuart Macintyre, in reflecting on what makes a good judicial biography, argues that ‘the challenge is to bring it to life, to reveal its patterns and show its animating purpose. By such means the biographer makes the judicial personality illuminate the life of the law’. Thus, storytelling of an individual life can throw light on the wider context in which the person operates. Storytelling can appear to be muted in some types of Australian political biography, especially in various biographies written by academics, and it is a matter to which I will return later.

In recent decades there has also been reflective material on what constitutes effective political leadership. In 2001 six prominent Australian historians and biographers assessed the best Australian prime ministers since Federation using the benchmarks of economic management, personal integrity and love of country. Alfred Deakin topped the list of all six, followed by Robert Gordon Menzies and John Curtin. Some of the most reflective work on the craft of Australian political biography has emanated from those academic biographers who were influenced by Alan Davies and Graham Little, and include Judith Brett and James Walter. Walter has written perceptively about the lack of training, even for academics, in writing biography.

Most biographers, he observes:

up until recent times, write about biography only after they have written a biography. None of us was trained to be a biographer. In the course of writing a biography you become aware of the issues and, often at the end of the process, you then write a sort of anguished methodological essay about the problems.

There is a sense here that biographers do not seriously reflect on the nature of their craft before embarking on the task of writing about a political figure; rather it becomes a retrospective process. Moreover, the next generation similarly do not learn from the observations of older biographers. Nevertheless, Jenny Hocking argues that the art of biography ‘lies in … the choices made and the picture painted. This is the difference between documenting a life, and writing a biography about it’.

In 1997 Brett edited a series of essays entitled *Political Lives* in the hope that they would ‘stimulate new interest in psychoanalytically informed biography by demonstrating the illumination psychoanalytic ideas can bring to our understanding of political leaders’. Brett has been plying her craft as a political biographer for some decades. The following reflection addresses Walter’s criticism of biographers and is an insightful analysis of what biographers are trying to do. A political life, she observes:

is not just a life that happens to be in politics. Rather, it is a life which is, in some sense, *made* by politics, and then captured by the political biographer. So, one of the main questions I would seek to ask is: what is the deep source of political energy for that person. What drives the subject especially as politics is essentially an uncertain business? … What were the circumstances and influences? Why did politics have a big attraction for them? How did politics satisfy their psychological needs and what pleasure did it give them?

It is clear here that training in psycho-social approaches to the study of politics continues to influence her method. The motivation for and attraction of a life in parliamentary politics is complex. But I formed the strong view, when working as Director of Research of a state parliamentary committee, that parliamentarians are driven people. To secure a safe seat they need to work hard and to have extensive networks, as well as a fair bit of luck. And once elected they need to have a political energy that seems endless and work long hours every day of the week. So, Brett is right to ask what is the deep source of their political energy. Does it relate to their socialisation within the family, to a fixed sense of purpose or does it stem from a watershed event or series of events in their adult life? For example, Brett described how Menzies in 1942, at a low point in his political life, was ‘re-mooring his sense of political purpose in this close childhood home and his relation with his parents, and the lives of his parents which embodied the values of hard work, independence, service and frugality for which he praised the Australian middle class’. This suggests that fundamental family values were central to Menzies's political energy. And then there is the self-made man in politics. Keating had a sense of steering his own destiny with the observation that ‘we all get carried out in the end … The big question is, what sort of a trail can you blaze, and with what sort of elan’.

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The discussion then inevitably turns to the question of power. What is power and why do people crave it? As a concept it is controversial. Weber defined power as the capacity to enforce someone to do something even if it is against their will. Power is thought to rest on different sources of legitimacy, based on three different types of authority: charismatic, emotional responses to the qualities of an individual; traditional, detailed institutionalised traditions; and legal-rational, formalistic belief in the content of the law and uniform principles. In addition, positional power, that is power vested in the position, can be an important source of power.

Brett discusses how parliamentarians perceive and use their positional power, including:

- why the person wants it; what they want to do with it; how they use it when they have it and, equally, how they do not use it when they have it; what they hold back from; and how they give it up. The biographical project is speculative because it seems to me that we typically only observe how the person exercises power when you see them with it, or they give it up, or have it snatched from them.

These comments imply that it is often difficult to determine the wellspring of this power; rather, as political biographers we observe only how they exercise power and their response to walking away from politics or being forced out.

There are other dimensions to power that a biographer may need to consider. Some politicians may test the limits of their power; for example, in relation to expenses claims, branch stacking and inconsistency with the truth. A few may be narcissists who have amazing confidence that can actually enthuse followers and staff, but can exhaust those around them and make them difficult to manage—except if they are party leaders, when the task of minders managing them can be impossible.

To summarise, this brief analysis of the art of political biography argues that there has been a significant growth in Australian reflective material on writing political biography. Some of the reflective work has been influenced more by the research and teaching of political scientists such as Alan Davies and Graham Little than by academic historians. Central to these reflections is what motivates Australians to choose a parliamentary career and the politician’s use of positional power. The next section examines the approaches of academics and journalists as political biographers.

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Academics and journalists as political biographers

There has perhaps been an uneasy relationship between Australian academics and journalists who research and write political biographies. Rickard comments that ‘Australian academic historians were slow to embrace biography, tending to regard a book about the life of one person as not being “real” history, which they saw as requiring a capacity to generalise’. It is interesting that academic historians, despite their keen interest in political biography over many decades, should continue if Rickard is right to still be ambivalent about biography.

There has been less indication of ambivalence among academic political scientists as political biographers. Rhodes identifies them as making a particularly important contribution to the genre. He considers what he called the ‘wellspring of political life history’ to be the Melbourne School headed by Alan Davies of the Melbourne University Political Science Department which acted:

as a stimulus for innovation. This school may have been ‘evanescent’ but it lasted from 1970 to 1990 and its Diaspora can be traced to this day. The political science profession is small in Australia and it has often been the case that a few individuals can exert a disproportionate influence over the profession’s development.

Rhodes then argues that the Melbourne School were punching above their weight in comparison to political scientists in the United Kingdom and, it could be added, more traditional academic historians as biographers. Political scientists influenced by the Melbourne School who became well-known political biographers include Judith Brett, Angus McIntyre, James Walter and Warren Osmond. James Walter has made perhaps the most thorough application of psychoanalytic theory to biography in his study of Gough Whitlam (The Leader, 1981). Bolton commented that: ‘Many of his findings are valid and plausible, but debate will inevitably continue as to whether a different historian without theoretical foundations might have arrived at very similar conclusions through observation of available evidence.’ However, for those of us who had exposure to the Melbourne School there were benefits of that approach in encouraging attention to detail, and searching for different layers of meaning; in other words, it heightened our awareness and skills as biographers.

30 Thanks to Dr Jocelyn Clarke for these observations.
In 1981 I identified this sixth type as the explicitly psychoanalytic biography, noting only Miriam Dixson’s 1976 biography of Jack Lang *Greater Than Lenin* (she was influenced by the Melbourne School that published the biography) as fitting this category and encouraged biographers to make a ‘stab in the dark’ and explore the underlying forces of the personality that is the subject of their study. However, nearly 40 years on, few biographers other than Walter have published psychoanalytic biographies.

Academic historians have tended to write either the first category I identified, nineteenth-century-style biography, such as La Nauze’s two volumes on Alfred Deakin (1965) and Fitzhardinge’s double volume on W. M. Hughes (1964, 1979), or what I described as the intuitive biography, discussed below. Walter describes the first category as ‘strictly chronological, favouring the public life over the private, description over analysis and the preservation of emotional distance’.31 I noted in 1981 that while this type of biography ‘may be good draughtsman-like history, it does not qualify for the title of good biography’. Rather, as Hocking explains, ‘biography inhabits a world between history and literature: it is both a creative and a scholarly process, grounded in empiricism and brought to life through the same defining techniques of fiction–character and narrative’.32 So, good biography has a creative component that is often lacking in this first category. More recent biographies in this tradition are possibly Ross Fitzgerald’s *“Red Ted”: The Life of E. G. Theodore* (1994), Geoffrey Bolton’s *Edmund Barton: The One Man for the Job* (2000), John Edwards’s two-volume *John Curtin’s War* (2017, 2018), and Liam Byrne’s *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin: The Making of the Modern Labor Party* (2020).

I noted in 1981 the prevalence of the apologist biography—the second category—which includes more popular biographies. Perhaps one of the earliest was Sleeman’s 1932 biography on New South Wales premier Jack Lang in which he wrote: ‘Lang is the greatest product of the Anglo-Saxon world since Lincoln.’33 The tradition continued in biographies on Evatt (Allan Dalziel, *Evatt the Enigma*, 1967, and Kylie Tennant, *Evatt: Politics and Justice*, 1970); Cairns (Paul Ormonde, *A Foolish Passionate Man*, 1981); Bolte (Barry Muir, *Bolte from Bamgani*, 1973); Chifley (L. F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley*, 1961); Menzies (Kevin Perkins, *Menzies: Last of the Queen’s Men*, 1968); Calwell (Colm Kiernan, *Calwell: A Personal and Political Biography*, 1978), McKell (Vince Kelly, *A Man of the People*, 1971); and Curtin (Norman E. Lee, *John Curtin: Saviour of Australia*, 1983). I observed then that apologias had been a continuous type in Australian biographical writing. One factor was often the writer’s familiarity with the subject that produces a dilemma: they can ‘write a frank,

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32 Hocking, ‘It’s a Ripping Good Yarn!’, 69.
full biography and risk a libel action (or if the subject is dead, incur the wrath of the family) or prune the manuscript to suit the subject and relatives and in so doing tell only half the story’. More recent apologies possibly include Madonna King’s authorised biography, *Hockey: Not Your Average Joe* (2014); Robert Macklin’s *Kevin Rudd: The Biography* (2007); and David Barnett and Pru Goward’s *John Howard: Prime Minister* (1997).

Academic historians have been well represented in the third category, the intuitive biography, that marks a transition between the nineteenth-century style and modern biography and between Whig and anti-Whig historical writing. This was a style of biography that was fashionable last century before psychoanalytic thinking began to influence biography. The best examples are John Tregenza’s *Professor of Democracy: The Life of Charles Henry Pearson* (1971) and, recently, Mullins’s biography of William McMahon, *Tiberius with a Telephone* (2018), which, Clark commented, ‘manages to combine the skills and meticulous eye for detail of the academic historian with flair and know-how to spin a riveting yarn’. Another example is possibly Jenny Hocking’s *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (2008), which forensically describes his family, schooling and political development. Kelton described it as ‘the best Australian political biography in decades’, but Thompson noted it ‘still does not give me a “feel” of Whitlam in terms of his persona and personality, vanity and kindness, the “magic” he brought to Australian politics and his capacity to inspire a generation’. Hocking undertook this task thoroughly in her second volume, *Gough Whitlam: His Time* (2012). Further examples are David Day’s *John Curtin: A Life* (1999) and Angela Woolacott’s *Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia* (2019), which demonstrates the art of the possible in politics while exploring the origins of Dunstan’s reformist zeal and the complexity of his personal life.

Academic historians have also experimented with the fourth category, the tentatively psychologically interpretative biography. Two early exponents were Aitkin in his biography of New South Wales Country Party leader Michael Bruxner (*The Colonel*, 1969) and, more importantly, Allan Martin in his biography of Parkes and two volume biography of Menzies (*Robert Menzies: A Life*, 1993, 1999). Bolton said of his approach:

34 White, ‘Towards an Assessment’, 132.
Martin for a time was attracted by the ideas of Erik Erikson (1959) … Little trace of it may be found in his later two-volume life of Menzies, but it may still be that the questions Martin put to his source materials were sharpened by acquaintance with Erikson’s theories.38

This assessment mirrors my comments in 1981 that in the final analysis historians cannot go beyond the narrative, although social science tools may inform their writing.39 More recently, Judith Brett has deftly combined her vast skills as an academic biographer with several psychologically interpretative biographies. The first was Robert Menzies’ Forgotten People (2007), followed 10 years later by The Enigmatic Mr Deakin (2017). Clark praised the latter book for ‘its confident, supple writing style, intelligent inter-posing of political events with Deakin’s inner psychic turmoil and shifts in the wider world; mastery of the facts, and capacity to bring her own balance to understanding a man who was, as she pointed out, enigmatic’.40 Another political biography in this genre is Stan Anson’s Hawke: An Emotional Life (1991).

So, what do the subjects of political biographies—the politicians—think about academic biographers? Apparently Prime Minister Chifley argued that academics should not write about politics because they were ‘too remote’.41 While it can be appreciated that academics may not necessarily understand first-hand the cut and thrust of political life, the pressures of the electorate on parliamentarians, factional party politics and the art of compromise in political decision-making, does it impact on their insights and analysis as biographers?

Journalists understand a good deal about these influences on the performance of politicians, and their biographies were the fifth category I noted in 1981. Many journalists writing political biographies have either worked as advisers/speech-writers for parliamentarians—for example, Graham Freudenberg as Whitlam’s speech-writer, van Onselen as a former ministerial adviser, Troy Bramston as Kevin Rudd’s speech-writer—or, like Michelle Grattan, they have worked for many years in the Canberra press gallery.

Then there are those political biographers who cross over from academia to journalism. One is Don Watson who, after 10 years as an academic historian, went to work as John Cain junior’s speech-writer and later for Paul Keating. Watson published a biography of Keating, Recollections of a Bleeding Heart (2011), which

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40 Andrew Clark, review of The Enigmatic Mr Deakin by Judith Brett, Australian Financial Review, 19 April 2018.  
Kremmer noted ‘set the bar for quality in political writing so high’. Another is Margaret Simons who has managed to combine a career as an award-winning investigative journalist with being a journalism academic.

Journalists, unlike academics, are more likely to write about a politician who is in mid-career, as Allsop observes: ‘Undoubtedly, with their experience of daily deadlines, journalists are well suited to the “rising star” biography genre when speed is required.’ I wrote in 1981 that journalists had taken the initiative from academic biographers because there was more public interest in politics and politicians; publishers were more prepared to take risks with biographies; and there had emerged a new climate of serious journalism. I divided journalist biographies into the ‘quickie’ and more serious biographies often written by journalists in the Canberra press gallery, and offered the observation that:

Because journalists know the nitty-gritty of Canberra politics very well, they write about it, especially in biographies, rather obsessively. This leads to an incestuousness in journalist biographies which detracts from the analysis of the political characters.

Mullins agrees that quickies are usually written by journalists and identifies their characteristics as including publisher-driven, produced on a short timetable, often rely on oral material that leaves them ‘hostage to their sources’, depict politics as a drama, feature the interplay between the writer and subject/s, focus on party leaders or high-ranking ministers, and often cross the boundaries between political history, essay, profile and biography.


More serious journalist biographies, I argued in 1981, were concerned with Maurois’s courageous search for truth and emphasise the complexities of human personality. Mullins says of journalists as political biographers: ‘The use of accessible prose, the
emphasis on character and the interaction of personalities above that of historical or theoretical analysis are part and parcel of telling that story and simultaneously appealing to a broad and popular audience." The focus on storytelling is important and will be discussed later in this article. Recently, journalists have come to attract more attention from academics. For example, the political commentary and biographies of Paul Kelly and George Megalogenis have been the subject of a PhD thesis, and Mullins has examined the genre of journalists writing contemporary Australian political history.

Serious political biographies identified in the 1981 article include Alan Reid’s *The Gorton Experiment* (1971); Laurie Oakes’s *Whitlam PM* (1973) and *Crash Through or Crash* (1976); and Paul Kelly’s *The Unmaking of Gough* (1976). Some of the well-regarded journalist biographies in the last 25 years are Michael Gordon’s *A True Believer: Paul Keating* (1996), James Norman’s *Bob Brown: Gentle Revolutionary* (2004), George Megalogenis’s *The Longest Decade* (2006), focusing on Keating’s and Howard’s prime ministerships, and David Marr’s essays on Rudd and Abbott originally published in *Quarterly Essay* and then as *Rudd v. Abbott* (2013), although these had their critics, as well as his essay ‘Faction Man: Bill Shorten’s Pursuit of Power’ (2015). Ferguson described Marr as ‘perhaps the finest biographer Australia has ever known’. Other recent journalist biographies include Tim Colebatch’s *Dick Hamer: The liberal Liberal* (2014), Margaret Simon’s *Penny Wong: A Biography* (2018), Troy Bramston’s *Paul Keating: The Big Picture Leader* (2017) and, although not strictly biography but good investigative journalism, Niki Savva’s *Plots and Prayers: Malcolm Turnbull’s Demise and Scott Morrison’s Ascension* (2019).

To summarise, there are different approaches to biography among academics. Historians have tended to write the nineteenth-century-style biography or the intuitive biography. However, some have explored the tentatively psychologically interpretative biography, which has also attracted several biographers who were trained as political scientists. Journalist biographies have proliferated, many of which are strong on storytelling and thus appeal to a wide readership.

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New directions in Australian political biography

One noticeable development in Australian political biography has been the multiple biographies written on the same political leader by either academics or journalists. For example, Allan Martin, Judith Brett and Troy Bramston on Robert Menzies; Graham Freudenburg, Jenny Hocking and James Walter on Gough Whitlam; Blanche D’Alpuget and Robert Pullan on Bob Hawke; David Day, Troy Bramston, Don Watson, John Edwards and Edna Carew on Keating; and Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen, and David Barnett and Pru Goward, on John Howard. Another development has been political leaders writing about each other: for example, John Howard’s *The Menzies Era: The Years That Shaped Modern Australia* (2014).

A further development has been publications on a collection of prime ministers and/or state premiers; for example, Michelle Grattan’s edited volume on *Australian Prime Ministers* (2000) and Paul Strangio, Paul ’t Hart and James Walter’s *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership 1949–2016* (2017).

As well, several books on political couples have been published. My biography of Joe and Enid Lyons was one of the first accounts of a political relationship in Australia (*A Political Love Story*, 1987). John Rickard’s book on the private lives of Alfred Deakin and his wife Pattie and the influence of spiritualism on their relationship has been well regarded (*A Family Romance: The Deakins at Home*, 1992), as has Susan Mitchell’s *Margaret and Gough: The Love Story That Shaped a Nation* (2014). Mitchell had access to some of Margaret’s early diaries. More recently, Carolyn Rasmussen’s joint biography of Doris Hordern and Maurice Blackburn was published (*The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambitions*, 2019).

What makes a good political biography?

So, what makes a good political biography? There are several key elements. One is Maurois’s courageous search for truth. This includes understanding the context in which the politician came to power and in which they operated. Judith Brett has insightfully commented about how context and the biographical subject are intertwined:

> what makes a great biography is the person coming to life on the page so that the reader is really interested in what happens to them, and can understand them … so it’s also a way of reading history, but it’s reading history through the identification with that person you’re reading about.49

Then there is the question of motivation, as discussed earlier. What influences them, from where does the energy spring? As well, the public and private person needs to be explored, and any tensions between these two personas. Another key element in a good biography is the art of storytelling. The account of the life should engage the reader from beginning to end. It should be added here that the availability of public and private papers can influence a good biography, as can family, political colleagues and advisers. Biographies of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century politicians rely primarily on parliamentary records, newspapers and any memoirs, letters or contemporary reminiscences. But there is a further consideration: how the story of the biographical subject fits within the available records. Biographers, David Marr notes, need to decide how they wish to write about their chosen subject: ‘you have to make up your mind about the shape of the life you’re writing … you have to decide, because otherwise you’re just left with an examination of sources rather than the story of a life’. In other words, fashioning the story of the subject’s life is key. And the strength of the storytelling, as Mullins has identified, distinguishes a good biography.

Storytelling was key in several of my biographies. After publishing the first biography on John Cain senior in 1981, my family asked me to write a biography they could read (presumably they found this biography too cluttered with footnotes to interest them). Hence, the book on Joe and Enid Lyons was an attempt to do just that; to use the rich data from their personal correspondence to explore their public and private lives and make the story both engaging and accessible. My biography of white-collar union leader Barney Williams (Barney, 1989) again had no footnotes but the sources of correspondence and union documents could be easily traced through the extensive bibliography. On reflection, I was grappling in these two biographies with telling the story of a life that would engage readers. Exposure to the Melbourne School no doubt influenced my approach, as well as perhaps questioning if the historical narrative was the most appropriate form for political biography. Interestingly, histories that I published at that time still followed a traditional approach to historical research and writing and were well footnoted.

So, I return again to the view that storytelling is at the heart of a good biography. Possibly the most gripping recent stories of a political figure are two biographies of Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the British Liberal Party. Michael Bloch’s *Jeremy Thorpe* (2014) sketches Thorpe’s privileged background—educated at Eton and

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51 Mullins, ‘Quick Books, Quick Manoeuvres’.
Oxford and by the age of 30 the Liberal member for North Devon—as well as his extraordinary political career. As Hensher notes of this account, ‘The Thorpe story is, above all, about privilege, and what privilege thought it could get away with in the decades after the war.’

Bloch’s well-regarded biography has perhaps been overshadowed by John Preston’s *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (2016) that was the basis for the popular BBC series with Hugh Grant providing an engaging portrayal of Thorpe. The book explores the unbridled ambition of the man, his middle-class upbringing and supreme sense of entitlement. It also provides an account of his homosexuality in the late 1960s when homosexuality had only just been legalised. But his various affairs did not stop him marrying when, after being appointed leader, he needed a wife to further his political career (he apparently asked his press officer ‘how the Liberal poll ratings might be affected if he were to marry’).

It is a compelling account of one of the twentieth-century’s great political scandals as Thorpe was the first British politician to stand trial for murder.

The shadow over Thorpe’s leadership was Norman Scott with whom he had had an affair. Scott would not be silenced. He let both Thorpe’s mother and possibly his wife know about the affair. According to Preston, attempts to pay him for silence did not succeed. In the end Thorpe allegedly devised a scheme to have Scott killed. But the would-be assassin succeeded only in killing Scott’s dog. When the story finally broke, Thorpe denied there was any evidence to implicate him in the attempted murder and asserted that ‘no sexual activity of any kind took place’.

The account of the court case in the Old Bailey where Thorpe and three associates stood trial in 1979 is riveting. While all were acquitted in what his friend and former parliamentary colleague Peter Bessell claimed was an establishment cover-up of Thorpe’s relationship with Scott, the publicity effectively finished Thorpe’s political career. His attempts to get a peerage were unsuccessful and within a few years he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.

The Preston book is not a conventional political biography. Some critics described it as more like a gripping novel. Its strength is its fine storytelling. It demonstrates Thorpe’s unfailing sense of entitlement to a seat in the Commons, to the leadership of the Liberal Party, and to political colleagues who would protect him from public scrutiny. Preston describes a man who could be both funny and even outrageous but at other times he would wear what Bessell called a mandarin mask to protect himself.

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55 Preston, *A Very English Scandal*, 244.

56 Preston, *A Very English Scandal*, 312. (Bessell did not stand for re-election in 1970.)
This is in the finest tradition of journalist biographies. It has been meticulously researched. Preston drew on a raft of published political biographies and memoirs that are listed in the acknowledgements. He was also given access to correspondence between Norman Scott and Peter Bessell, to Scott’s private memoir and to the case notes made by George Carman who defended Thorpe in the 1979 trial. As well, it has an extensive index. While academic biographers no doubt will ask ‘but where are the footnotes?’ (as they did when Joe and Enid Lyons was published), the reader is provided with relevant dates, private correspondence and dialogue to bring this story to life. And the storytelling is all the stronger for not being encumbered with dozens or even hundreds of footnotes in each chapter.

Some tension between academic historians and political scientists on the one hand and journalists on the other in relation to political biography remains. When John Warhurst reviewed David Marr’s 2012 ‘Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott’, he noted ‘this essay reveals the complete failure of academic writing to be taken seriously in this genre … the academic community did not get a mention’. It indicates almost a sense of annoyance that journalists as biographers do not respect academics. However, perhaps academic biographers need to rethink their approach to writing political biographies and acknowledge that if biography is about storytelling, they might explore various—and even novel—approaches to examining and presenting the life of Australian politicians. We come back to Rickard’s 2017 observation that academics tend to regard ‘a book about the life of one person as not being “real” history, which they saw as requiring a capacity to generalise’. Their inability to be more flexible in writing political biography and to move beyond the narrative form suggests that my comments in 1981 about political biographers being often ‘too timid, too afraid to make “a stab in the dark” for fear of professional ridicule’ may still apply to some academic political biographies.

Bibliography of main biographical works referred to in this article


58 Rickard, review of The Enigmatic Mr Deakin.

59 White, ’Towards an Assessment’, 134.


RESEARCH ARTICLES
Where are the Great Women?
A feminist analysis of Australian political biographies

BLAIR WILLIAMS

Introduction

As women have become more visible in the Australian political sphere, the volume of writing about their lives, careers and experiences has also increased. This has brought to light certain challenges and shortcomings, as well as enduring discursive biases in the existing literature. Political history, for example, and especially political biography, has generally ‘privileged the political activities of men and masculine political institutions’, telling the stories of so-called Great Men while excluding those who do not traditionally belong to this cohort. Any attempt to summarise the current state of biographies written on Australian political women and to assess the extent to which these can be improved must therefore address several overlapping lines of inquiry, the four most fundamental of which have been chosen for discussion in this article. First, I will provide an overview of the institutional and discursive masculine biases of political biographies in general. Second, I will outline the state of biographies written on women politicians, noting the lack of such texts and an increasing turn towards autobiography. Third, I compare two recent biographies on women politicians—Anna Broinowski’s Please Explain (2017) and Margaret Simons’s Penny Wong (2019)—to demonstrate how a tendency towards excessive personalisation can become problematic. Lastly, by exploring feminist approaches to political biography, I provide a working definition of feminist political biography and propose a list of ‘dos and don’ts’ for those political biographers who seek to develop a more inclusive model.

I acknowledge that my expertise does not lie in the realm of political biographies or history. Rather, I am a feminist political scientist who researches the gendered media coverage of women in politics, examining the language that is used. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of my research, I provide a well-rounded and contextualised perspective on women, language and politics that I can apply to public biographical writing of women politicians, resulting in a more holistic and interdisciplinary picture.

Political biographies: Myth-building Great Men

The writing of traditional biographies has generally been defined as the creation of a coherent narrative around significant events in the life story of a chosen subject. Political biography goes beyond this to weave a narrative that not only recreates life, but says ‘something about the conduct of politics’. Through the analysis of letters, diaries, Hansard records and interviews, political biographers can provide nuanced insights into the lives of politicians through which readers can gain a greater understanding of their performances, positions and decisions and their successes and failures. Emphasising the human element, political biographers seek to add life, colour and depth to historical events, ‘in the way human beings actually experience them’. They can further provide a unique perspective on power itself, exposing how it is afforded, exercised and shared. Discursively, political biographers can also create and shape the legacies of the politicians about whom they chose to write, thereby signifying who is ‘worthy’ of being written about and who is overlooked. This can, in turn, shed light on the conduct of civic life in general—who belongs, who is excluded and what are the accepted norms by which we all are expected to abide as citizens.

Most currently available Australian political biographies have been written about men. Despite this clear bias, however, the authors of these biographies tend to largely ignore the gender of their subjects and, as Kate Murphy argues, ‘the masculinity of great leaders and politicians is … thus “invisible” in the broader analysis of character’. While they emphasise male politicians’ private lives, character and disposition, attaching them to their public persona, they do so in a way that avoids a gendered analysis and, instead, positions the latter as manifestations of an assumed universal subject. Masculinity is thereby portrayed as the unseen norm while gender is an attribute only ever identified with women. This is hardly surprising, considering the relative dearth of women in politics for most of the twentieth century, yet it reinforces the public/private gender binary and endorses the idea that parliament is a masculine domain.

5 Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 36.
6 Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 36.
This type of political biography also contributes to the endurance of a popular vision of politics as a succession of ‘Great Men’, a term coined by Thomas Carlyle in a series of lectures published in 1841. For Carlyle, ‘the history of the world is but the biography of great men’.8

They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.9

Unsurprisingly, this theory completely erased the influence of women from the historical record, though it also excluded most of the male population as well, as the distinction of being a Great Man was solely reserved in Carlyle’s estimation for the rich and powerful.10 Though the idea of the Great Man sounds anachronistic to the contemporary ear, this narrative has nevertheless endured in popular and even some scholarly accounts of historical change, and especially in the still remarkably male-dominated sphere of politics, where the cult of the strong leader retains a palpable influence. This is visible not only in extremist movements but also in democratic nation states, gaining even greater traction in recent years with the global rise of right-wing populism.11 Both historical progress and the privilege of political leadership, in this discursive model, are ‘irredeemably masculine’ and Eurocentric, reserved for a certain kind of rich white men.12

This tendency begs the question: can there be Great Women? It appears that the whole discourse is resistant to the existence of such individuals. Lucy Riall’s research examines the Great Man narrative, tracing its influence from Carlyle to its persistent use in the British Dictionary of National Biography (DNB) from the 1880s to the 1970s.13 While not explicitly endorsing Carlyle’s model of history, the authors of the DNB were long guided by the principle of the ‘heroic model of biography’ linking biography and nation, the latter restricted in extent to those who were ‘noteworthy inhabitants of the British Islands and the Colonies’.14 Additionally, their overwhelming preoccupation with the careers of ‘great’ public men, largely the political elite, meant that women were almost entirely excluded from the pages

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8 Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (London: James Fraser, 1841), 47.
9 Carlyle, On Heroes, 1.
of the DNB for many decades. As Riall observes, out of the 63 volumes published by the DNB prior to 1901, women only made up 4 per cent of the ‘noteworthy inhabitants’ and 7 per cent of contributors.\(^\text{15}\) This seems to suggest that, aside from a few exceptions, women cannot aspire to be considered Great in the manner championed by Carlyle and the authors of the DNB, for whom this was a label solely reserved for men. As Linda Nochlin famously argued in her 1971 analysis of the institutional obstacles preventing women from succeeding in the Arts:

> But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault, dear brothers, lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education.\(^\text{16}\)

Historically, women have not had the opportunity to become Great Politicians worthy of a series of biographical texts. As these texts continue to contribute to our collective understanding of those personal and political qualities that comprise ‘Greatness’, and as they are mostly written about men, we therefore habitually connect these qualities with masculinity and maleness. Though biographers have largely moved on from this overarching discourse in recent decades, the field of political biography remains a significantly masculine domain, continuing to imply that women’s lives and women’s stories are not worth recording.

### Feminist political biographies

Traditional political biographies have therefore largely focused on men even while completely ignoring the issue of gender. As Murphy puts it, ‘political historians equated politics with parliaments and (mainly male) parliamentarians, and thus overlooked political activities that fell outside these parameters’.\(^\text{17}\) While history as a discipline has grappled with gender issues since the 1970s, political history in particular, like its ‘male-dominated cousin’ political science, has been especially resistant to questions about women and gender or the value of feminist analysis.\(^\text{18}\) Feminist scholars across the disciplines have challenged this perspective since the rise of the feminist movement in the social sciences and humanities in the 1970s. Through their scholarship, they have aimed to make gender visible—from highlighting ‘women’s history’ to applying a gendered analysis to the actions of men—thereby demonstrating the significance of gender in historical narrative,

\(^\text{15}\) Riall, ‘The Shallow End of History?’, 378.


\(^\text{17}\) Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 21.

\(^\text{18}\) Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 23.
discourse and knowledge. Feminist scholars have played a particularly substantial role in widening the scope of history and have contributed innovative conceptual approaches to this discipline, demonstrating that women’s lives are ‘no less historically important than men’s’. Yet feminist scholars have remained apprehensive about the value of biography, as a genre that has historically emphasised, even constituted, the public ‘autonomous man’. An enduring tendency to focus on public men’s private lives as a counterpoint to or motivating influence on their public successes and failures has been an especially thorny source of tension due to the historical links tying women to the private or domestic sphere. Focusing on women’s private lives to the same extent runs the risk of confirming ‘their status as the second sex’, whereby they are trivialised and either seen as ‘historical exceptions to the rule or as exemplary of their ‘species’”. Bearing this in mind, we might ask: how can we reformulate biographical writing to adhere to a more feminist practice? What is it that interests us about the lives of women? Is it their achievements, life stories or the social adversities they have had to endure? In response to questions such as these, feminist biographers have largely sought to understand how their subjects experienced, rather than constituted, the world around them and, departing from a hyper-individualistic focus, they have emphasised the shared experiences and commonalities between women. As Barbara Caine argues:

[They sought] to know how particular women actually experienced their domestic and social worlds; how they felt about their private and familial life; how they negotiated the social and familial structures that defined or constrained their opportunities as women; what strategies they used to follow their own interests; what support they received and whence it came; and finally what it cost them to follow their own path and to succeed in the field they chose.

Feminist political biography therefore has the potential to go beyond the traditional biography’s chronological narration and static focus on leadership and reputation; it can provide an account that captures the intricacies of women’s lives in the past and present.

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19 Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 21.
The writing of a political biography can be informed by a wide range of methodological approaches, from the chronological approach mentioned above, to psycho-analytic methods, journalistic accounts and historical novellas, yet these are all essentially variations of a narrative-based research methodology. This narrative approach, which prioritises ‘flow’ over analysis, is a major factor for the lack of gendered analysis in biographical works. However, as Murphy argues, ‘political biography need not be bereft of gendered analysis’ and, in fact, such analysis can significantly enrich biographies of male as well as women politicians. Murphy cites the example of Judith Brett’s 1992 biography of Robert Menzies, in which the author presents a nuanced account of the extent to which her subject’s ‘understanding of manly virtue and independence … relied upon … power over women and over other masculinities’ as a fundamental aspect of his ‘social emotional map’. Feminist approaches to political biography such as this have clearly demonstrated that the incorporation of a gendered analysis in conventional political biography is not the sole reserve of women. Likewise, political biography is not inherently feminist just because the subject is a woman. Rather, feminist biographies ask different kinds of questions, have aims of emancipation, and often have a specific focus on power, whether that is revealing or challenging patriarchal power structures or deconstructing power imbalances between biographer and subject. Applying this to more traditional biographical work on ‘significant’ political figures, as in the case of Brett’s biography of Menzies, results in a ‘very detailed understanding of the particular social, intellectual and political circumstances which enabled their rise to prominence and their exercise of power’.

In addition to its basis in narrative methodologies, political biography is also a highly interpretive discipline, opening the possibility for feminist analyses. Its highly qualitative nature ‘directs questions about what it means to interpret and experience the world (rather than explain or predict it)’. Unlike political science, in which the presentation of ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ are sacrosanct, political biography eschews this concern with objectivity as ‘there [is] no such thing as biographical truth’. Likewise, feminist biographers—following feminist approaches to research—have also challenged the very idea of a single, universal truth and instead argued for the

26 Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 24.
27 Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 36.
28 Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, 36.
need to recognise the coexistence of multiple truths. Though bias is not a major concern in biography, as it is impossible to eliminate and is therefore generally assumed to be a given, feminist biographers have stressed that it is important to acknowledge that:

The biographer is a socially-located person, one is sexed, raced, classed, aged … And once we accept that ideas are not unique but socially produced even if individually expressed by members of a particular social, cultural and political milieux, then we can also extrapolate this to the ideas and interpretations produced by the biographer: any biographer’s view is a socially located and necessarily partial one.

Through the fundamental goal of feminist biography—to demonstrate the historical importance of women’s lives—feminist biographers have therefore established innovative methodological and theoretical approaches that simultaneously refute ideas of objectivity while acknowledging the influence of the social locations of the author.

Though there have been numerous discussions around what constitutes feminist biography, and the benefits that feminist analyses bring, what would a working feminist political biographical methodology look like? In line with the feminist biographical approaches outlined above, I propose five major principles for such a methodology. First, to prioritise writing about women, trans and gender diverse political actors and activists who have been neglected or ignored by traditional political biography, or to write about male politicians through an explicitly feminist lens. Second, to recognise and deconstruct power imbalances between the researcher and subject, acknowledging the relationship between power, knowledge and language. Third, and following the second aspect, to move towards a more collaborative, cooperative and consensual method that works with the subject(s) in some capacity, aiming to achieve a more nuanced, enriched and ethical account. Fourth, to address broader themes of gender norms and inequality instead of simply describing the lives of women political actors. And fifth, to consciously retrieve the subject’s ‘lost subjectivity’, which has either been historically suppressed or stereotyped through mainstream media coverage, and thereby show the intricacies of their lives and experiences.

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Where are all the Great Women?

Despite the promising possibilities that feminist political biography brings to the discipline, there remains an urgent need for more Australian political biographies focusing on women. To gain some understanding of the current state of the field, using the National Library of Australia's Trove catalogue, I compiled the following list to determine how many biographies have been written on women subjects in comparison to their male counterparts over the last 10 years (see Table 1). I noted the author and their gender, the political subject and their gender, the year of publication, and the book title. Of the 31 political biographies published since 2010, I discovered that only four have been written on Australian women politicians: Penny Wong (2002– ), Pauline Hanson (1997–2002; 2016– ), Patricia Giles (1981–93) and May Holman (1925–39). Initially, I thought the lack of women subjects might reflect the gender of the biographers—that a lack of women authors might explain the lack of political biographies focusing on women. The ratio of women versus male political biographers, however, is relatively even, although it should be noted that all biographies of women politicians included in this table have been written by women.

Table 1. Australian political biographies first published from 2010 to 2020

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Author’s gender</th>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Politician’s gender</th>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Ben Chifley</td>
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<td>Patrick Mullins</td>
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<td>William McMahon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Author's gender</td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Politician's gender</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>John Edwards</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>John Curtin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>John Curtin's War: The Coming of War in the Pacific, and Reinventing Australia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Brett</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Alfred Deakin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>The Enigmatic Mr Deakin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Broinowski</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pauline Hanson</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>Please Explain: The Rise, Fall and Rise Again of Pauline Hanson</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. R. Nethercote (Editor)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Robert Menzies</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Menzies: The Shaping of Modern Australia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Murphy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>H. V. Evatt</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Evatt: A Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy Bramston</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Paul Keating</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Paul Keating: The Big-picture Leader</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Middleton</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Anthony Albanese</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Albanese: Telling It Straight</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lekkie Hopkins</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>May Holman</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>The Magnificent Life of Miss May Holman Australia's First Female Labor Parliamentarian</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Day</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Paul Keating</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Paul Keating: The Biography</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddy Manning</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Malcolm Turnbull</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Born to Rule: The Unauthorised Biography of Malcolm Turnbull</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dino Hodge</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Don Dunstan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Don Dunstan, Intimacy and Liberty: A Political Biography</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Rae</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tony Windsor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Tony Windsor: The Biography</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Weller</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kevin Rudd</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Kevin Rudd: Twice Prime Minister</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madonna King</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Joe Hockey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Hockey: Not Your Average Joe</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey Arklay</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Arthur Fadden</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Arthur Fadden: A Political Silhouette</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Elizabeth Calwell</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Arthur Calwell</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>I Am Bound to be True</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Mitchell</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Tony Abbott</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td><em>Tony Abbott: A Man's Man</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Henderson</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Joseph Lyons</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td><em>Joseph Lyons: The People's Prime Minister</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grantlee Kieza</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lachlan Macquarie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td><em>Macquarie</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lekkie Hopkins and Lynn Roarty</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Patricia Giles</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td><em>Among the Chosen: The Life Story of Pat Giles</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Trove search, National Library of Australia.
The lack of political biographies focusing on women indicated by this table could be partially explained by a prevailing tendency to write about prime ministers—who, aside from Julia Gillard, have all been men—and about leaders of political parties (another highly masculine domain). Yet this fails to explain why neither Gillard nor any woman leader of a political party aside from One Nation’s Pauline Hanson have yet been chosen as the subject for a definitive biography (though selective studies such as Jacqueline Kent’s *The Making of Julia Gillard* do exist).\(^{35}\) Bearing this discrepancy in mind, I posit three key factors that could explain the lack of biographies written on Australian women politicians. First, the sociocultural factor: the lack of gender parity and equality in Australian politics. Second, the discursive factor: the enduring biographic fascination with Great Men. Lastly, the individual and interpersonal factors: the hesitation of women politicians to expose their personal lives to scrutiny and to forfeit agency over their own life stories.

It is not shocking that political biography is largely fixated on male politicians, considering the structural barriers in place that deter women from entering politics. Parliament, as Joan Acker has shown, has long been regarded as a masculine institution constructed by and for men to uphold a culture of traditional masculinity, fostering the development of an institutional sexism that empowers male politicians and disadvantages those few women who have occupied the same roles.\(^{36}\) This is despite formal anti-discrimination rules and regulations, which have done little to dissolve entrenched power hierarchies, norms and expectations that privilege men and masculinity. In fact, there is an outright refusal to acknowledge the extent to which the political process has been defined by ‘masculinities’, which are instead perceived as neutral and genderless.\(^{37}\) This can lead to discrimination and harassment of women in politics due to a perceived incongruence between their stereotypically feminine attributes and unacknowledged masculine occupational norms, causing them to be regarded as less competent and their performances to be devalued.\(^{38}\)

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37 Crawford and Pini, ‘The Australian Parliament’, 82, 94.
The effects are obvious. Despite white women winning the right to vote in Commonwealth elections in 1902, they did not enter federal parliament until 1943, with the election of Dorothy Tangney to the Senate and Enid Lyons to the House of Representatives. Women were more successful in being elected to the state legislatures, beginning with Edith Cowan entering the Western Australian Parliament in 1921. Yet the number of women in federal politics stagnated over the next few decades and, by 1990, they still only comprised 6.8 per cent of the House of Representatives and 23.3 per cent of the Senate. The 1990s saw a surge of women entering politics with the implementation of gender quotas and a more women-friendly Australian Labor Party (ALP), but they were still in the minority. After the 2019 federal election, the Senate finally achieved gender parity with 51.3 per cent women, though the House of Representatives continues to lag behind with 31.1 per cent. While these changes do represent shifts in cultural and social attitudes, women who occupy masculine spaces like parliament continue to be ‘othered’ and disparaged on a regular basis. This can further deter other women from entering politics, reinforcing the idea that parliament is a space for men. Inevitably, the significant lack of political biographies focusing on women must be at least partially attributed to this ongoing gender disparity within the political sphere itself, although it is by no means the only factor at play. Even with the recent rise in women politicians at all levels of the political hierarchy, including the highest positions of prime minister and party leader, biographers have continued to lag behind.

This brings us back to the discursive factor: the problematic endurance of the Great Man narrative. Admittedly, the influence of this narrative, as Riall has shown, did wane over the course of the twentieth century due to the adoption of new social history in the 1970s, which introduced a ‘Marxist emphasis on “labouring men”, [and] displaced “Great Men” from their hitherto dominant role as the driving force of history’. This inspired a widespread shift away from and repudiation of political biography as traditionally written, and especially the tendency to isolate

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40 Elizabeth van Acker, Different Voices: Gender and Politics in Australia (South Yarra: Macmillan Education Australia, 1999), 74.
42 Williams and Sawer, ‘Rainbow Labor and a Purple Policy Launch’, 644.
the individual.\textsuperscript{45} The new biographic models that followed this shift, however, still overlooked women’s roles throughout history, and ‘the focus on males—great or labouring, individual or collective—was common to both approaches’.\textsuperscript{46} Though the Great Man narrative has often been discussed and derided among political biographers, especially in recent decades, the same authors nevertheless continue to write predominantly about men’s lives, tacitly endorsing Carlyle’s vision of history unfolding ‘through the effects of dominant males’ and of leadership as ‘irredeemably masculine’.\textsuperscript{47}

As shown in the table above, the overwhelming majority of Australian political biographies published in the last decade have focused on male subjects, and especially on former prime ministers. For example, two biographies have been written on former Labor prime ministers Paul Keating (in 2015 and 2016) and Bob Hawke (both in 2019) and two on former Liberal prime minister Robert Menzies (in 2016 and 2019), in addition to the stack of already published biographies on these leaders. Yet another biography has been written on Gough Whitlam (2014), and even former South Australian premier Don Dunstan has been the subject of two biographies published just five years apart, in 2014 and 2019. Furthermore, it should be noted that this table only includes the first editions of the political biographies listed—there were numerous reprints of biographies of former male prime ministers, particularly Menzies, Whitlam and Hawke, published during the same time frame. There also appears to be a penchant within this time frame for writing about the lives of the Great Men of Australia’s colonial history, such as early New South Wales governor Lachlan Macquarie (1810–21) and early Victorian premier Graham Berry (1875, 1877–80, 1880–81), and twentieth-century Australian prime ministers, like Alfred Deakin (1905–08), Joseph Lyons (1932–39) and Ben Chifley (1945–49). The overabundance of biographies focusing on foundational patriarchs such as these demonstrates the continuity of a trend towards idolising the supposed ‘Fathers of the Nation’—the Great Men who built and shaped Australia. The hagiographic and frequently nationalistic basis of this tendency appears evident in the titles of some of these biographies, such as J. R. Nethercote’s Menzies: The Shaping of Modern Australia (2016), Angela Woollacott’s Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia (2019) and Sean Scalmer’s Democratic Adventurer: Graham Berry and the Making of Australian Politics (2020), although each text presents a historical case for the title’s claim. Echoing Carlyle’s theory that great men were heroes sent by God to shape the world, the above titles insinuate that these leaders fundamentally fashioned and transformed the supposed ‘terra nullius’ of Australia.


\textsuperscript{46} Riall, ‘The Shallow End of History?’, 380.

Beyond the discursive and sociocultural, the final factor that I have identified as a possible explanation for the under-representation of women subjects in Australian political biography takes us to the level of the individual and interpersonal. Simply put, women politicians might be hesitant to expose their private lives to the same extent as their male counterparts. I have shown in previously published studies on the issue of gendered representation that women politicians frequently experience gendered, and often sexist, media coverage that focuses on their gender, appearance, sexuality, family and private lives in a way that delegitimises them in their political roles. Coverage of a male politician’s personal life may result in opportunities for image-making and can further humanise him, but for a woman, it carries the potential to ensnare in a gendered double bind, inviting judgement about personal choices as a reflection of political and professional capability. Take the family, for example. While male politicians’ families and their roles as husbands and fathers are merely seen as an extension of their identity, women are to a large extent defined by their marital and parental status, demonstrating that ‘maternity remains more relevant than paternity’. Such gendered emphasis on women politicians’ family lives is problematic because it implicitly portrays their choice of professional over domestic fulfilment as an abnormal aberration. Since the personal is a fundamental aspect of political biographies, it is hardly shocking that women in politics might be hesitant to cede agency over their own story and share their private lives with the world. As Mineke Bosch makes clear, ‘women’s quite aberrant private lives … could turn into liabilities for their public careers. Here, also, their biographies became problematic’.

The autobiographical turn

We have established, then, that there is currently a notable lack of Australian political biographies on women subjects, despite a recent rise in the number of women entering politics and even ascending to its upper echelons. We could reasonably assume, however, that a sizeable proportion of at least half the Australian population have some interest in the lives and careers of those women who have made a name for themselves in the political sphere. So, where exactly has this interest been directed? If we turn our attention from the accounts of political women written


50 Bosch, ‘Gender and the Personal in Political Biography’, 23.
by professional writers to those they have penned themselves, a further level of nuance can be added to our analysis by a growing trend in recent years that I refer to here as an autobiographical turn. Autobiographies allow political women to reassert their agency and reclaim their public identity by telling their own life story. The most notable example of this turn is Julia Gillard’s memoir *My Story*, in which she reflects on her life, her time in politics and the turbulent Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era.\(^{51}\) To establish the extent of this phenomenon, I returned to Trove, this time searching for autobiographies written by Australian women politicians during the same 10 years. In all, 12 autobiographies have been published over the last decade by women premiers, party leaders, federal and state MPs and senators, lord mayors and, of course, our first and currently only woman prime minister (see Table 2).

### Table 2. Australian women political autobiographies/memoirs first published from 2010 to 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cathy McGowan</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td><em>Cathy Goes to Canberra: Doing Politics Differently</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona Patten</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td><em>Sex, Drugs and the Electoral Roll: My Unlikely Journey from Sex Worker to Member of Parliament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Aly</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td><em>Finding My Place: From Cairo to Canberra—the Irresistible Story of an Irrepressible Woman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roslyn Kelly</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>Ros Kelly: A Passionate Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine Milne</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>Activist Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sallyanne Atkinson</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>No Job for a Woman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan Child</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Joan: Child of Labor</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Bligh</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Through the Wall</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia Gillard</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>My Story</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn Hirsh</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Politics, Death and Addiction</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine McKew</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>Tales from the Political Trenches</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Delahunty</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td><em>Public Life, Private Grief: A Memoir of Political Life and Loss</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Trove, National Library of Australia.

Autobiography can be a valuable means for women politicians to ‘recover’ their voices, often excluded from canonical accounts of history.\(^{52}\) It can ‘be a way for a protagonist herself to show how competent she [is] and at the same time … to hide her private life, either by actually ignoring it or by describing it as perfect’.\(^{53}\) Again, a glance at the titles of the texts listed in Table 2 reveals how these politicians


have used autobiography to take control of their public image while resisting and exposing the sexist discourses through the perpetuation of which they have been excluded or othered. Cathy McGowan’s title, for example, notes how she ‘does politics differently’ while Sallyanne Atkinson’s encapsulates her experience of repeatedly being told that her occupational ambitions were ‘no job for a woman’. These autobiographies also eschew the stereotyping labels generally given to women in politics, such as ‘hysterical’, ‘emotional’ or ‘compassionate’, instead identifying their subjects with more empowering descriptors such as ‘irrepressible’, ‘passionate’ and ‘activist’.54 These titles immediately make clear that the women whose stories are told in each text have aimed to use the medium of autobiography to reclaim their stories from sexist stereotyping or vilification.

A decade earlier, former leader of the Democrats Cheryl Kernot published her autobiography Speaking for Myself Again.55 In the span of her lengthy political career, Kernot’s public image shifted from that of a successful and popular politician—a media favourite—to someone who was publicly shamed and ‘stoned’.56 Kernot’s abrupt ‘defection’ to the ALP in 1997 received widespread critique and largely triggered her fall from ‘media starlet’ to ‘media tart’.57 As Julia Baird notes:

> once she was heralded as the woman who could win the election for Labor, the media—goaded by her opponents—sank their teeth into her reputation and shook it, which clearly contributed to what was a very public unravelling of a woman once widely respected.58

Like many women politicians before and after her, Kernot faced the sexist malice of the media circus. Clouded by scandals and speculation, she sought with her autobiography to reclaim her voice and share her own perspective of her time in the ALP. The first two pages make this explicit while also pointing to the gendered double standards that women in politics endure. The first page reproduces a political cartoon by Cathy Wilcox stating what ‘nice girls’ are supposed to avoid, concluding with the tongue-in-cheek statement, ‘but MOST OF ALL, if a nice girl does any of those things, she should have the DECENCY to leak it to the media first!’ The opposing page is the Author’s Note, in which Kernot states that she has ‘written this book to give history and those who interpret it a chance to hear the other side… This is the story of a woman, who also happens to be a politician … These are my words’.59

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59 Kernot, *Speaking for Myself Again*, ix.
Throughout her autobiography, Kernot fights back against the media sexism that she experienced, particularly in the last few years of her political career. One chapter, ‘Red Dress, Red Hair and All That Rubbish’, examines the media’s gender bias in their coverage of her actions. From hyper-sexualisation and an apparent obsession with the red dress that she notoriously wore in a *Woman’s Weekly* photoshoot in 1998, to the incessant focus on her personal romantic life, this bias prompts Kernot to ask, ‘why did some in the media pursue me so fiercely?’\(^{60}\) The final chapter, ‘Women, Politics and Pedestals’, similarly critiques the sexist assumptions placed on women politicians more generally. Examining sexist stereotypes and expectations in politics and the direct correlation between these and a lack of women in political leadership, Kernot points to the ‘dominant masculine values and style … starkly evident in Australia’s media’, where ‘women politicians have had a bad deal from the media’s preoccupation with political style over policy substance’.\(^{61}\) By concluding with this chapter, Kernot not only reclaims her voice and perspective within a male-dominated political culture, but reveals the damaging effect this has on all women in politics.

Women in many spheres of public life have used autobiography to write themselves into history and make the invisible visible, yet women in politics, above all, present a clear case study in the extent to which this form of biography can be used to fight against prejudice and assumption.\(^{62}\) Gillard’s autobiography is, once again, a valuable case in point. As Australia’s first woman prime minister, Gillard was subjected to an overwhelming volume of misogynistic media coverage and gendered backlash from colleagues, the mainstream media, and the public she served. Her path to the prime ministerial role in 2010, gained by challenging her predecessor Rudd, was seen as unusual, especially for a woman, and garnered widespread attention. Both immediately after this and throughout her tenure as prime minister, she experienced undue amounts of gendered, often highly negative and even defamatory media coverage that focused on her gender, appearance, childlessness, sexuality, family life and relationship status.\(^{63}\)

It is therefore unsurprising, given her treatment in the media, that Gillard opted to write an autobiography to recover her voice, rather than place her trust in a biographer. *My Story*, presented as her version of the defining events in her political career, achieves this recovery not only through the presentation of her authorial voice but also through several innovations on the conventional biographic format that set the text apart from those dedicated to the lives of Great Men. Most notably,

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60 Kernot, *Speaking for Myself Again*, 141.
63 Williams, ‘It’s a Man’s World at the Top’; Williams, ‘A Gendered Media Analysis of the Prime Ministerial Ascension of Gillard and Turnbull’.
Gillard does not present a traditional chronological narrative of her life story, choosing instead to divide the book into two thematic sections: ‘Section One—How I did it’ and ‘Section Two—Why I did it’. In the first section, she explains how she became prime minister and recalls her experience of the 2010 election campaign, her turbulent relationship with Rudd, and the resilience she needed to succeed in politics. The personal is not emphasised; she does not wax lyrical about the extent to which her lineage, childhood, family, and personal relationships may have influenced her political aspirations and ideology, as commonly seen in traditional political biographies. Instead, she strategically deploys personal anecdotes only as exemplary illustrations of how or why she entered politics. For example, in Chapter 8 (‘My Purpose’) Gillard states that ‘my focus on work comes from childhood and my own personal experience’ and recounts a story about her father’s working-class work ethic and unionism.\(^{64}\) She also mentions her appearance throughout as a way to add humour to her narrative, rather than as an objectifying or derogatory tool. Chapter 2 (‘The First Days’), for example, opens with the words ‘Good day for redheads!’ that she famously uttered on The 7:30 Report on her first day, subsequently noting that ‘joking about red hair became one of the routines of my prime ministership’.\(^{65}\) Through the medium of autobiography, Gillard reclaims her personal life and appearance in a way that would not be possible in a traditional biography.

Even the title of Gillard’s autobiography—*My Story*—represents a reclamation in terms that resonate throughout the book. Chapter 6 (‘The Curious Question of Gender’), for example, is dedicated to calling out the gendered double standards and misogyny that she experienced as prime minister, from Opposition Leader Tony Abbott stating that she should ‘make an honest woman of herself’ to shock jock Alan Jones asserting that she should be ‘put in a chaff bag and thrown out to sea’.\(^{66}\) Gillard notes that ‘words were used to spin an image of me that fitted with our culture’s worst caricatures about women’ and she, as a ‘woman wielding power’ meant that she ‘must be the bad woman, a scheming shrew, a heartless harridan or a lying bitch’.\(^{67}\) In this chapter, as in others, Gillard reclaimed her voice in spite of the sexism and misogyny she experienced, using it to inspire hope that the future will be better for the women who follow her lead.

It is important for women politicians to write their own stories, for the reasons outlined above. However, that does not mean that we should give up on political biographies of women. Rather, we should focus on transforming political biographies to become more inclusive, less hierarchical and more feminist, thereby encouraging women political actors to give consent for their stories to be told. Instead of viewing

\(^{64}\) Gillard, *My Story*, 137.
politicians as neutral subjects to be analysed, political biographers could seek to reduce power imbalances and work with their subjects in a collaborative manner that would result in a more nuanced, ethical and more compelling form of biography.

**Biographies of political women**

The few biographies of Australian women politicians that have been published in the last 10 years vary considerably depending on when and by whom they were written. Despite their differences, however, while political biographies of male politicians have ‘become enriched with all sorts of information on their private lives: their hobbies and habits, political tastes, and to some extent also their family life’, those written about women politicians generally ‘still suffer from an over-personalisation of public women in the past and present’.\(^\text{68}\) There is a persistent tendency to highlight a woman’s family, marital status and intimate life in a way that is far more damaging than it would likely be for her male counterparts. Some understanding of this and other defining traits shared by recent biographies of Australian women politicians, as well as the distinctions that arise from authorial and chronological differences, can be gained by comparing and analysing Broinowski’s *Please Explain* and Simons’s *Penny Wong* through a feminist analysis.\(^\text{69}\) Although, of course, the clearest point of contrast between these two texts lies in their representations of racial identity; the magnitude and complexity of this issue far exceeds the limits of the current argument and so has not been addressed in depth.

Before analysing the features of their respective biographies, it should be noted that Wong and Hanson cooperated with their biographers to differing degrees. While Hanson was suspicious of the author’s intentions, she nevertheless allowed Broinowski complete access to her and her ‘Fed Up’ election campaign in 2015, inviting her to travel with her around New South Wales and Queensland. While reading Simons’s biography, on the other hand, it becomes clear that Wong was uncomfortable with the very idea of its publication. Simons opens the text by noting that ‘Penny Wong did not want this book to be written’, going on to describe her numerous failed attempts to contact Wong for research interviews.\(^\text{70}\) It was not until Simons had nearly finished writing the book, she admits, that Wong finally, albeit reluctantly, agreed to meet in person, granting six interviews over an eight-month period. According to Simons, Wong was hesitant because the biography would:

\[^{68}\text{Bosch, ‘Gender and the Personal in Political Biography’, 13.}\]
\[^{70}\text{Simons, *Penny Wong*, iv.}\]
give a version of her that she would have to deal with and live with and which would be accepted as true—and it would not be how she saw herself … it would not be only a public image but 'your version of me'.

Simons also very perceptively observes that there are relatively few political advantages, and many disadvantages, for Wong to have a biography published at this point in her career. Above all, it could potentially have presented her opponents with a detailed account of her life, which 'must be an alarming prospect' for someone who has consistently faced media scrutiny throughout her political career. It might also have pigeonholed Wong as an Asian, lesbian woman and thereby further heightened the public perception of her divergence from the hegemonic political norm of the white, heterosexual man, thus increasing her vulnerability in the political sphere. In the concluding pages of the book, however, Wong remarks that the possibility of such negative impact also in fact encouraged her eventual decision to cooperate with Simons, as she saw the potential for her to be represented as a 'high-profile gay … role model for others', thereby transforming these antiquated norms.

This raises multiple questions around the issue of consent in feminist work. What is the importance of consent in feminist biographies? Can a biography be feminist if it is written without—or against—the consent of its subject? Despite understanding and sympathising with Wong’s reservations, why did Simons persist? Informed consent is integral to feminist research as it 'makes explicit the importance of respect for those taking part' and protects against exploitation. Feminist methodology also highlights the importance of recognising power imbalances between researcher and researched. Though Wong, as a member of the political elite, does not lack power in comparison to Simons, she also experiences a form of powerlessness as her story is being told without her initial consent. There would have been other, less ethically problematic, ways of telling Wong’s story. For example, rather than focusing on Wong as an ‘exceptional’ individual, Simons could have situated her story in the wider context of Australian LGBTQIA+ pioneers, activists and politicians. A detailed analysis of collective lives ‘offers one of the best ways to explore … the importance of gender, race and class’, and arguably sexuality, and would have shifted the focus from someone who did not consent to a biography to the broader movement.

71 Simons, Penny Wong, xii.
72 Simons, Penny Wong, xi.
74 Simons, Penny Wong, 317.
77 Caine, Biography and History, 3.
Aside from these differences in their relationship with their subject, both books are authored by academics whose writing appears to have been influenced by feminist approaches to political biography. This is most evident in the Preface to each text, in which Simons and Broinowski clarify their political stances and social locations in line with the idea of reflexivity. Reflexivity, as a theoretical concept, reflects a key component of feminist knowledge production, in which emphasis is conventionally placed on the need for readers to be aware of the extent to which a researcher’s subjectivity and worldview can influence their research. Feminist scholars argue that it is crucial for researchers to be reflexive, or aware of their privileges and life experiences to ensure that their research does not perpetuate the inequalities they seek to change or subvert. As Rae Wear argues, ‘writing political biography almost always involves a degree of self-exploration: there is a little bit of autobiography lurking beneath the surface of every biography’. In her Preface, Simons notes that:

Historian and biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook has remarked that for biographers all choices made in writing are autobiographical. So it might be relevant that I, too, arrived in Adelaide at the age of eight and was bullied at school—though in my case for an English accent rather than because of racism. I went to the University of Adelaide, as a contemporary of Julia Gillard, ten years before Penny Wong. I have Jewish ancestry. While I am not in any real sense Jewish, I was raised with a strong awareness of the great evil of racism.

With this reflexive statement, Simons highlights her self-perceived similarities with her subject in an effort to relate to Wong on a personal level and to underline why she, specifically, is writing this biography by indicating how her social locations might influence her version of Wong’s life story. The way Simons discusses Wong here also indicates a clear admiration and respect that remains apparent throughout the text.

Broinowski’s Preface, on the other hand, is slightly more ambiguous. Like Simons, she states her reflexive position, allowing the reader to evaluate how this might influence her account of Hanson. Her self-positioning is made, however, in the form of a recounted conversation with Hanson, rather than directly to the reader:


80 Simons, Penny Wong, xii.
We began to talk, and Hanson was frosty and monosyllabic. But when I told her I was a pro-refugee, pro-environment, pro-reconciliation leftie who had grown up in Asia and disagreed with almost everything she said, she decided to trust me. Hanson prides herself on being a straight talker and values honesty in others.

Towards the end of her Preface, Broinowski also reaffirms that she fundamentally disagrees with Hanson’s politics and clarifies her reasons for writing this biography:

I am not endorsing Hanson’s views, nor am I giving her an uncritical platform. I am deliberately engaging with the debate that the majority of tolerant Australian voters, on all sides of politics, refused to directly engage with the first time Hanson divided Australia, in the 1990s.

Yet Broinowski also frequently compliments certain aspects of Hanson’s persona, stating that she ‘has undeniable X-factor’ and is an ‘irascible, unique and resilient woman’. It is not unusual for biographers to be drawn to the chosen subject for numerous, often personal, reasons. Nor is it uncommon to begin a project disliking the subject only to gain sympathy and admiration through knowing them more intimately. In neither case, however, does such reflexivity serve to create what might be termed a Great Woman narrative, contributing instead to the generation of a more even power dynamic between biographer and subject. Additionally, in her ‘Epilogue’, Broinowski concludes by noting that any sympathy she may have felt for Hanson when they first met in 2009 evaporated following her re-election for the first time since 1998 in the 2016 federal election, prompting Broinowski to realise ‘the damage she [Hanson] continues to inflict on this once open-hearted and proudly multicultural country, and the platform she’s been allowed to wield, are, to me, both unforgivable and horrific’.

In addition to their academic background and apparent deference to feminist biographical approaches, Simons and Broinowski can also be compared for their shared emphasis on the appearance of their subjects, though again with some notable points of distinction. With my previous research, I have demonstrated the extent to which the media often focuses on the appearance of women politicians to draw further attention to their supposed transgressive gender performances—as women entering a highly male-dominated institution, governed around masculine norms—
and thereby to trivialise them in their political roles. By focusing on their feminine image, or lack thereof, women are physically marked as ‘other’ and are subjected to impossible beauty ideals and subsequent scrutiny when they fail to conform to these unrealistic expectations. This bind demonstrates the near impossibility for women to escape the objectifying male gaze that reduces them to novelties, while their male counterparts continue to be regarded as the norm.

This kind of sexist coverage is not solely confined to the mainstream press and appears to be a common trope in political biographies of women as well. Broinowski’s biography appears to echo broader sexist tendencies, particularly where she focuses on and sexualises Hanson’s appearance. For example, the second paragraph in the Preface reads:

It was 9 a.m. on a Sunday but Hanson answered the door dressed for a cocktail party, in head-to-toe white with matching stilettos and pearls. At fifty-four, she was trim and impeccably made-up, her muscled hands the only evidence of the years of hard labour she’d put into her Ipswich fish and chip shop.

Hanson’s appearance is here described before introducing her political role or notoriety as leader and founder of a populist right-wing minor party, reinforcing the idea that ‘[women’s] policies and professional roles are relegated to a position of secondary importance’. It is also important to acknowledge that Hanson did exercise some agency in her public and media representation, often seeking to project herself in a certain way to further her aims. As political scientist Elizabeth van Acker notes, ‘while Hanson often appeared as a vulnerable woman with a shaky voice, she also flaunted her sexuality, combining her femininity with a strong character’. She used the media to ‘promote her own celebrity’ and obviously ‘understood the importance of exploiting her looks, thereby ensuring attention from reporters’. Hanson’s embodiment of a traditional, white femininity further promoted her far-right populist xenophobic ideology. However, while it is useful for Broinowski to analyse Hanson’s use of her appearance, ‘too often the details seem included solely for titillation rather than integrated into an overall interpretation of someone’s life … [it is] simply the personal without the political’.

87 Williams, ‘A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May’; Williams, ‘Gendered Media Representations of Julia Gillard and Helen Clark’.
88 Broinowski, Please Explain, 1.
89 Williams, ‘A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May’, 14.
92 Ware, ‘Writing Women’s Lives’, 418.
An emphasis on Hanson's appearance remains apparent throughout Broinowski's biography. This is particularly evident in her description of Hanson as a ‘pretty’ child ‘born with an unusually telegenic bone structure’, of her figure at 61 as ‘fashionably toned’, and other such objectifying passages of exposition. Broinowski also dedicates numerous pages to a careful description of Hanson's outfits, from her first term in politics in the late 1990s. One jacket in particular is described as an 'uber-feminine cut' in a ‘cheap, eye-catching fabric [which] encapsulates the sartorial style that would see Hanson's wardrobe dissected almost as widely as her policies during her first federal term'. Age is another characteristic often commented on by the mainstream press and in this biography, with Broinowski frequently noting that Hanson is attractive for her age. It is common for women's age to be commented on when examining their appearance, particularly the age of women in the public eye, as their worth is customarily attached to their attractiveness and younger women are popularly perceived as more attractive and therefore more desirable. This kind of levelling discourse is generally not found in political biographies of men, in which personal anecdote or detail tends to support a mythic depiction.

A comparable preoccupation with sartorial style can be noted in Simons's biography of Wong, but this differs greatly in frequency and tone. In Chapter 2 ('Butterflies and Bullies'), for example, Simons describes a photograph of a young Wong serving tea to her grandmother:

Penny wears a pink ruffled dress. She is kneeling on a cushion in front of the old woman, a tray solemnly extended. [Her grandmother] Lai is sitting ramrod straight, with a stern expression, her head inclined to the little girl.

The overall message in this paragraph is not to communicate what Wong was wearing, but to affirm the strong bond and love that she shared with her grandmother. This photograph is also then used as a platform from which to explore Wong's immigrant background and the racism she experienced after moving to Australia as a child. This narrative, threaded throughout the biography, takes pride of place in the depiction in Chapter 7 ('A New Voice') of Wong's maiden speech to the Senate in 2002. Simons describes the outfit that Wong chose for this event as follows:

Standing in the red Senate chamber, Penny looked younger than her thirty-three years. She had yet to adopt her current work uniform of slacks, well-cut jackets, immaculate haircut and simple shirts. She wore a maroon jacket over a black dress, a white necklace and simple pearl earrings.

93 Broinowski, Please Explain, 47, 50.
94 Broinowski, Please Explain, 51.
95 Jamieson, Beyond the Double Bind, 147.
96 Simons, Penny Wong, 26.
97 Simons, Penny Wong, 121.
Simons notes that Wong appeared nervous but that the overall theme of her speech was one of compassion and the absence of this quality in an Australia governed by John Howard, who won by focusing the debate on issues of border protection in the wake of 9/11 and the Children Overboard and Tampa affairs. In contrast to Broinowski’s focus on Hanson’s physical attractiveness, Simons’s preoccupation with Wong’s appearance is neither central to the narrative nor disproportionately concerned with her gender and appearance at the expense of her politics.

Despite the inspiration that both authors have drawn from feminist approaches to political biography, then, both Simons and Broinowski continue to focus on the personal to an extent that would likely be considered unusual or even invasive for a male subject. In her biography of Hanson, Broinowski repeatedly emphasises the latter’s telegenic appearance and the signature clothes she wore during her political term in the 1990s. While Hanson seems to have been happy to show Broinowski some of these outfits, the way in which Broinowski has chosen to describe them and her continual references to Hanson’s appearance throughout her life could be considered objectifying. At times, Hanson is stripped of her agency and represented as little more than a set of clothes or an attractive physical figure—an object for the camera lens. Wong, on the other hand, takes a much more active role in Simons’s biography, despite her initial reluctance to agree to the writing of her life story. Her appearance is only mentioned in passing and in a way that contributes to her overall narrative; Wong is mythologised as an inspirational progressive politician and a committed advocate for sexual and racial diversity and inclusion. Perhaps this difference between the two biographies could be explained by the authors’ divergent perspectives on their subjects and more general social perceptions of each politician. Broinowski might have been more willing to objectify Hanson because of their vehemently opposing ideologies while Simons appeared to have maintained a deep respect for Wong, who is also far more electorally popular and socially palatable than Hanson. Despite this, however, both Hanson and Wong are written about in a way that sets them apart from their male counterparts. Although personal detail is, of course, included in biographies of the latter, the tone, attitude and implications are vastly different. Personal detail in a biography of a man mythologises, while the same level of detail in a biography of a woman tends to demythologise.

Conclusions: Can biographers in Australia do better in this field?

Following Mineke Bosch and reflecting on some of the prevailing tendencies revealed by the comparison of Hanson’s and Wong’s biographies, I propose a list of ‘dos and don’ts’ for future biographers of women politicians. First, biographers would be well advised to avoid an ‘asymmetrical emphasis on the relation between the public...
person and the private personality in the lives of men and women’. While political biographers must meld their subjects’ private and public lives to a certain extent to understand the influences that have shaped their view of the world and, in turn, their politics, this has particularly gendered ramifications for political women. Men are rarely positioned as gendered subjects while women are far too often defined by their private lives alone, emphasising their (gendered) difference from the political norm. Second, biographers could endeavour to avoid attributing a woman’s political career and successes to her ‘(sublimated) lack of (sexual) love or motherhood’ or other such personal issues. Although personal experiences—such as the racism that Wong faced throughout her childhood or Hanson’s relationship with her father—may influence a woman’s political aspirations, it is reductive and sexist to wholly attribute their success to these events. The aim should be to capture their life story without reducing them to their life experience. Third, biographers seeking to represent political women fairly could refrain from describing their appearance or sartorial choices unless these are directly relevant to the narrative. Simons’s biography of Wong is an excellent example of the latter, while Broinowski often mentioned Hanson’s appearance when this had little relation to the overall story aside from drawing attention to her physical attractiveness. It is imperative for the biographers of women politicians to understand the ramifications of emphasising the appearance of their subjects; such emphasis trivialises them and draws attention to their gender while their male counterparts are portrayed as neutral and genderless.

Beyond this, however, there is a need to move past the discursive construct of the Great Man narrative, which remains a palpable presence despite increasing criticism. Framing male political leaders as Great Men who have irrevocably shaped the historic development of modern Australia discursively and literally excludes women, who are not considered to be Great because this narrative is inextricably tied to men and masculinity. The lack of political biographies written on women is simultaneously a result of and a contributor to this myth. However, even if more biographies were written on women politicians, this would not change the fact that their male counterparts, especially former prime ministers, are still framed as Great. In order to achieve parity for women and male politicians in the field of biographies, there is a need to develop a more inclusive discursive model. Feminist approaches to political biography, such as the departure from a hyper-individualistic focus or the cultivation of author reflexivity, offer one possible pathway to this goal and can greatly enrich analysis while providing a more insightful narrative overall. Yet these changes need to be made to all political biographies—including those of men. After all, ‘if we do not develop the new biographical stories we want to listen to, others will repeat the old ones’.

100 Bosch, ‘Gender and the Personal in Political Biography’, 32.
‘A historian’s diary’: Autobiography, life writing and Neal Blewett’s *A Cabinet Diary* revisited

JOSHUA BLACK

**Introduction**

‘Are you, in fact, a historian?’ I have been confronted with that question more than once with respect to studies of political biography and memoir. Experts in fields ranging from English literature and memory studies to cultural studies have suggested to me, almost casually, that a sophisticated analysis of the political memoir or diary can only take place within the framework of autobiographical or memory theory.¹ One cultural studies specialist proposed that these texts belonged within the remit of New Historicism, a branch of literary analysis that assumes that ‘literary texts can in fact tell us something about the world outside of the text’.² In another instance, a conference attendee mused that this kind of research could not constitute the work of a historian, but was instead a facet of the broader field of life writing. The relationship between history and biography—including political biography—remains complex and contested, with the former both shunning and occasionally embracing the latter.³ Studies of the political memoir and diary genres are, I would suggest, even more fraught with intellectual uncertainty.

In this article, I argue that historical inquiry can shed more light on the nature and epistemological utility of the political memoir or diary than any mode of pure literary criticism or life writing analysis. For one thing, life writing emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in ways

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that consciously excluded these kinds of texts, and with important social and cultural logics for doing so. Further, the key theoretical principles of autobiographical literary theory, though useful to some extent, are limited in their application to memoirs and diaries of the political variety. Though such critical theories are often rightly interested in relationships *within* the text, a fuller and more critical interpretation must necessarily investigate the relationships that *constructed* the text.

After briefly tracing the evolution of life writing and its stance towards the political memoir genre, this article examines the frailties inherent in autobiographical theory, particularly with respect to those fundamentally historical questions of publishing, representation, audience and impact. As the book historian Leslie Howsam noted, in critical theory as in mainstream historiography, the ‘materiality of books is often overlooked’. In treating the book as a source, however, historians are better placed to ask and answer questions of context and materiality that shape the book. This article draws on the intellectual heritage of book history by repudiating the idea of a bilateral relationship between author and reader. ‘Much can be learned’ about the significance of books, David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery noted, by ‘tracing their progress from creator to consumer, in accounting for production and marketing structures, in studying the effect of print on culture’.

This article adopts the former minister for social security Neal Blewett’s *A Cabinet Diary: A Personal Record of the First Keating Government* as a case study. Published in 1999, Blewett’s diary illuminates the major issues of politicians’ publications for the historian. *How and why* do politicians publish memoirs and diaries? What effects do they have upon the political environment in which they are published? What are the public and personal consequences of this kind of literary product? Though autobiographical theory and life writing scholarship can sometimes illuminate these questions, it is the historian who is best positioned to raise, investigate and resolve questions relating to authorship, audience and the value of the memoir or diary as historical evidence. Drawing on Blewett’s diary itself, as well as newly released archival records from the National Archives of Australia, and interviews with Blewett and his publisher at Wakefield Press, Michael Bollen, I demonstrate the ways in which a historical mode of analysis expands our understanding of the text and its context in ways that literary and auto/biography theory may not. Further, although

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7 Neal Blewett, *A Cabinet Diary: A Personal Record of the First Keating Government* (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 1999). This case study is drawn from the author’s current doctoral research project, which consists of a major study of the modern political memoir form in recent Australian history.
Blewett’s book might best be considered political diary rather than memoir, it raises many of the same questions (if not more) that must be asked of any politician’s own publication.

Life writing and political memoir: Divergent paths

In the twentieth century, scholars from a variety of disciplines developed a keen interest in the autobiographical mode of writing. Autobiographies of ‘great lives’ proliferated concurrently with major historical developments such as the Enlightenment, the age of industrialisation, and decades of ‘revolutions and civil wars … ideological wars and dictatorships’.8 From the 1950s onward, scholars began developing a body of autobiographical criticism and analysis ‘parallel to the formation of the modern disciplines, including literary studies and sociology’.9 For literary scholars, the study of autobiography arose as a quest to reveal the evolution of Western individual consciousness and to chart its literary expression.10 For historians, sociologists and others, autobiographies were worthy of study because they were ‘social documents’, distinguishable from fictive modes of writing by their ‘historical condition (the condition which allows it to be called to account)’.11 In the late twentieth century, according to the leading life writing theorist Sidonie Smith, auto/biography studies relaxed their disciplinary distinctions and developed instead as ‘a field of interdisciplinary literary and cultural studies’.12 In time, this broad field expanded further in the form of life writing studies, an interdisciplinary inquiry encompassing all texts that ‘take “self” or “selves” as their focus’.13 Wide though this definition is, others have more recently sought to push that boundary even further, with descriptors such as ‘ego-documents’ and ‘life narratives’ capturing modes of autobiographical display that even life writing might not.14 The expansion of the field has necessarily challenged and innovated contemporary understandings of

what constitutes life writing, autobiography, memoir and so on. By the same token, the field remains centred on literary modes of study, dominated by the text at the expense of the author, publisher and audience.

The broadening of the field, it must be said, was entirely needed. Through much of the twentieth century, scholars perceived the typical autobiographer as ‘the man who sets out to write the story of his own life’, and the genre itself ‘peculiar to Western man’.15 Roy Pascal, an authority on the autobiographical medium in the mid-twentieth century, outlined a canon that was dominated by great Christians (Augustine), great philosophers (Jean Jacques Rousseau), great writers (Henry James) and, occasionally, great statesmen (Mohandas K. Gandhi, though, in Gusdorf’s view, Gandhi was ‘using Western means to defend the East’, a highly unsatisfactory summation of his work).16 Evidently, early autobiographical theory and criticism was written through the lens of a prescriptively masculine Eurocentrism, in which the Western ‘great man’ was considered a ‘representative autobiographical subject’.17 With the rise of life writing as a distinct interdisciplinary field came an awareness of other subjectivities and other life narratives. Masculine Eurocentrism began to give way to a more inclusive and collective inquiry that borrowed theories and methodologies from ‘women’s, gender and sexuality studies’.18 By the twenty-first century, memoir and autobiography were no longer solely for the expression of great personalities, and stories about experiences of sexuality, crime, trauma and illness, ageing, grief, race, and many other such life phenomena proliferated.19 Even as it became a popular commodity, diverse manifestations of memoir writing acquired a privileged status within the academy.

Notwithstanding the previous emphasis on great men’s lives, autobiographical theorists actively shunned the political memoir and the political diary as texts. The leading mid-century scholars identified very few that were, in their view, worthy of study. Traditionalists such as Roy Pascal and Georges Gusdorf argued that public figures were, in the main, incapable of great autobiography, no matter what their literary capacities. The former suggested that the ‘weight and complexity of public issues’ precluded genuine self-reflective autobiography, while the latter dismissed the ‘elementary motives’ that drove the average ‘minister of state, the politician, the military leader’ to ‘celebrate their deeds’.20 For the most part, life writing theorists also saw little reason to turn their own attention to these genres. For them, the diffuse and previously overlooked dimensions of cultural and social politics were eminently

17 Smith, ‘Foreword’, xviii.
more interesting than the institutional and prescriptively masculine politics of the nation-state. Magdalena Maiz and Luis H. Pena, for instance, were interested in using Mexican women’s autobiographies to ‘elucidate a “Hidden History” from a female-centric perspective.’ This is not to say that all life writing analysts have avoided the genre; indeed, the past decade has witnessed an uptick in studies of the ‘conjunctions of autobiographical discourse and political discourse, life writing and national and transnational political cultures’. Nonetheless, political biography, autobiography and memoir remain—quite understandably—marginal to the field of life writing, which has focused on giving greater representation to those previously rendered less visible in the autobiographical canon.

Scholars also perceived the commercial prerogatives of political memoir publishing as suspect. According to Julie Rak, memoir—especially those produced by celebrities—symbolised many theorists’ grievances against ‘popular writing’ as a ‘commodity’. Commercialism, they felt, would ‘militate against the original and authentic act of autobiography “proper”’. Even where academics studied popular examples of autobiography, they reiterated that commercial success ‘by itself would never serve as a ticket to canonisation’. Eugene Stelzig, writing in the mid-1990s, intoned that the political autobiography remained ‘among the lowest and most exploited of mimetic forms in the literary marketplace’. Dominant in Europe, these attitudes also shaped scholarly attitudes towards the political memoir in North America and Australia. For these scholars, worthy autobiography constituted literary autobiography (and in the Australian instance, historians’ ego-histoire), while the popular variety was best left in and to the marketplace.

Therefore, prior to the 1980s, political memoirs and diaries largely sat beyond the scholarly gaze. Those who did discuss this literature were in many instances politicians themselves. This is not to say that the political memoir has been entirely devoid of scholarly analysis. Political scientists have intermittently engaged with these texts, with varying levels of enthusiasm. Some, such as Andrew Gamble and Conor McGrath in the United Kingdom, have studied their potential value as primary source material for political research. Others, such as David Richards,
were more interested in the kinds of cultural and political conditioning that shaped political memoirs and the narratives of executive power contained within them. In Australia, political scientists have demonstrated some interest in political memoirs as acts of ‘leader rhetoric’, while in the United States they have been studied for their immediate political effects in the context of election campaigns. Though significant and revealing, memoir remains an understudied phenomenon in the political science tradition.

In historiography, too, the political memoir remains an understudied object. Since the 1940s, historians and journalists have periodically gazed at local and global traditions of res gestae and political apologia. Some scholars, such as George Egerton and David Reynolds in Britain, and Sean Scalmer and Mark McKenna in Australia, have examined broad swathes of literature, observing key trends and developments in political traditions and culture. Egerton’s edited collection Political Memoir, a culmination of his 1989 Conference on Political Memoirs, remains one of the most substantive analyses of political memoir and its place in historiographical discourse. Others such as David Reynolds and Craig Fehrman conducted major analyses of specific political memoirs or diary productions, most notably the former’s In Command of History. Confidently, Egerton concluded in the mid-1990s that the political memoir found its ‘most apposite critical location within the broad camp of historiography’. Pertinent though his observation was, his quest to advance the study of the genre was largely neglected in his wake.

The limits of life writing

If studies of the political memoir have diverged so markedly from autobiographical and life writing scholarship, can a simple mediation, a convergence, be achieved? Even if certain observations or ideas from broader life writing theory are

32 Egerton, Political Memoir.
applicable to studies of the memoir, I argue that the foundational theoretical
tenets of autobiography studies are not. Consider, for instance, the notion of the
autobiographical pact, made famous by French theorist Philippe Lejeune. Concerned
with truth and narratology, Lejeune defined autobiography as ‘prose narrative written
by a real person concerning [their] own existence, where the focus is [their] individual
life’, and in which the author, narrator and protagonist were necessarily ‘identical’.35
He advanced the novel concept of the autobiographical pact, which he defined as ‘the
affirmation in the text’ of the external author’s identity. Further, the reader in this
framework is a critical one, alert for ‘breaches of contract’ on the author’s part.36
This theoretical framework recognised a real, embodied author and reader engaged
in a discursive relationship, one limited to strict notions of truth and accountability.
Though an enduring contribution to the field, this theoretical premise neglects
much that is important in the production of autobiographical stories.

Others have given this framework greater nuance with the simple recognition
that autobiography is an activity fraught with ethical complications and authorial
accountability. In particular, successive autobiography and life writing theorists
have pointed out that autobiography and memoir represent not only the author’s
life stories, but inevitably those of other people whom the author represents on
the page. Susanna Egan noted that ‘[a]utobiography … does not stand alone any
more than people do’.37 Similarly, G. Thomas Couser suggested that memoirists’
two chief debts of responsibility were to the ‘biographical and historical record’,
and to the ‘people they collaborate with or represent’.38 They also recognise that
life writing, in a discursive sense, is ‘embedded in a particular culture and history’.39
These contributions are significant insofar as they help to shift the scholarly gaze
from narrow conceptions of truth and narrative, and towards the dynamism of the
relationship between author, subject and the broader world.

Foundational elements of autobiographical and life writing theory are conceptually
restrictive when applied to the political memoir or diary. Most importantly, notions
of autobiographical reading and reception in the existing scholarship are dependent
upon a bilateral understanding of textuality itself. That is to say, the book is the
creation of its author, read in each instance by a single reader. That neat formulation
is to some extent challenged when the reader also happens to be a subject, however
minor, in the narrative. The relationship between author and reader, however, remains
bilateral, uninterrupted by other external forces. That kind of ethereal critical theory is
the product of a long tradition of scholarship that has rejected forms of commercially

35 Philippe Lejeune, On Autobiography, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
1989), 4–5.
37 Susanna Egan, Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt and Identity in Autobiography (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier
39 Egan, Burdens of Proof; 2.
predicated literature. Those interested in the field of book history, or the subject of memoir history more specifically, have argued that such texts never constitute a neat relationship between author and reader, but instead are the cumulative outcome of a process through which they were ‘evaluated, accepted, physically produced, and marketed by a publishing house’. 40 To lose sight of the long and occasionally torturous path to publication is to fundamentally miss the significance of a book’s existence in the marketplace of commodities and ideas. In the case of political memoirs and diaries, various other entities, such as editors, friends and colleagues, disparate audiences, and the state itself, hold a crucial stake in the text, and that tells us something about the political culture and environment of the day.

Finally, autobiographical theory and life writing are poorly suited to the study of the political diary in particular. It is worth noting that political diaries have been the subject of sustained critical study in their own right, as well as within the broader context of political memoir literature. For Gamble, political diaries trump political memoirs: ‘the quality of the material as evidence tends to be higher, because the diarist is recording how things appeared at the moment of writing’. 41 Put succinctly his argument was that political diaries ‘score on immediacy’. 42 In Australia some historians have adopted similar attitudes, arguing that diaries provide ‘insight into the vicissitudes, rhythms, and reversals of political life’, and that their intimate nature leads to ‘unguarded assessments of others, fuller elaboration of motives, and a more complete portrait of the subject of politics’. 43 Egerton, however, recognised that the political diarist ‘writes with a constant eye on publication and the messages to convey thereby’. 44 Defending the diary form, Blewett himself argued in Meanjin that it allowed readers to ‘learn about events before they collect the mythology that transforms them’. 45 Whatever attitude one adopts, it is clear that the political diary makes a kind of truth-claim upon its readers distinct from the retrospective political memoir or autobiography. So too is its communicative form, characterised not by narrative but by diurnal recording. For traditionalists such as Pascal, this marked the diary out for exclusion from the autobiographical canon, for it was likely guilty of ‘uncertainties, false starts, momentariness’ and incapable of ‘a coherent shaping’ of one’s life. 46 Others protested that ‘[n]o genre is more misunderstood’ than the diary. 47 At first glance, the broadening of life writing’s focus to life narratives appears

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46 Pascal, Design and Truth, 5.
to be one that would, unconsciously at least, maintain that existing bias against diaries, which are not life ‘narratives’ in the strictest sense. Though the ground is now fertile for studies of the diary within the life writing field, historians have a key role to play in examining, analysing and interpreting these texts.

The making of Blewett’s diary

Blewett’s *Cabinet Diary* is a prime case study with which to demonstrate the utility of examining the political memoir as a book production in its own historical and political context. Life writing theorists may examine and interrogate the lexis and discourse of the text itself, but historians are compelled to ask critical questions about the origin and creation of the document, especially if they are in the business of using it as a primary source. Blewett’s diary exemplifies the fact that literary productions of this nature owe much to context and circumstance—those of the author and the polity more generally. Further, it demonstrates the importance of existing generic conventions and precedents. It also reflects the important role that other stakeholders performed in the shaping the published text and its picture of politics and power.

One of the chief challenges inherent to autobiographical theory and life writing scholarship is its fairly minimal interest in authorial context, likely a lingering product of Roland Barthes’s notion of the ‘death of the author’, which is the theoretical refusal to treat a text as solely the product of an author’s ‘person’, ‘life’, ‘tastes’ and ‘passions’. Though liberating for some readers, this approach is counterproductive to historians interrogating the construction of a political narrative. The decision to write about one’s own experiences is itself influenced by contextual factors immediate to the author. In Blewett’s case, a combination of background, skills and political circumstance led to the keeping of a political diary. Indeed, the former minister was in a previous life a political scientist and historian:

> I wrote on Edwardian British politics … I had found diaries useful in my own historical writing, and I think I sort of half made up my mind when I was thinking of going into politics that one of the things I could do would be to keep a diary.

As a member of Shadow Cabinet in the early 1980s, Blewett began to record his daily impressions of people and politics, but his relegation to the outer ministry in the early years of the Hawke Labor Government prevented him from witnessing and capturing an insider’s view of Cabinet in the way he had intended. By the

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50 Blewett, *Cabinet Diary*, 1.
time Paul Keating defeated Hawke for the leadership of the Australian Labor Party in December 1991, Blewett had been at the heart of executive government for four years, but had not revived his earlier diurnal practices. With Keating’s ascension, Blewett thought to himself, “If I’m ever going to leave some kind of record behind, I’d better start again.” Hence, his published diaries began with an entry in January 1992, and concluded with the March 1993 election that concluded his ministerial life. Like many political memoirs, the scope of this political diary was influenced by the political events that propelled its author up the ministerial ladder and placed him at the very heart of executive government for 15 months.

If the scope and coverage of the diary owed much to political circumstance, the form of the genre itself owed much to historical precedent. The genre of the Cabinet diary, never before produced in Australia, was nevertheless strong in the United Kingdom, pioneered in its modern form in the 1970s by Labour Minister Richard Crossman. For Blewett, this was a particularly crucial influence:

I met Crossman when I was in England, and attended some seminars at which he spoke about his diary-writing, and in many ways, I think that’s the most impressive diary by a politician, at least in the English-speaking world … Crossman’s was very much, in a sense, a historian’s diary, very much concerned with facts and issues and getting all the details right …

In purpose, as much as form, Crossman was the exemplar. Blewett intended that, like Crossman’s diary, ‘one day historians at least would look at’ his account of the first Keating Government. Mark McKenna noted that Blewett was not alone in drawing upon Crossman for inspiration: ‘Like Crossman, [former foreign minister Gareth] Evans and Blewett came from academic backgrounds and were more conscious of the historical precedents and limitations of the genre.’ A Cabinet Diary sits in the Crossman tradition not only because Blewett wrote in that diurnal medium or borrowed the conventions of his Cabinet diary, but also because he wrote with similar purpose and intent.

Given the locally unprecedented nature of Blewett’s proposed publication, it is important to consider who published the manuscript, and why. These questions, it seems, would largely go unasked and unanswered in the lens of life writing and autobiographical theory, but, when studied empirically, reveal much about the cultural environment that shaped its account. Blewett’s explicit decision to commit to publication occurred during his tenure as Australia’s High Commissioner

51 Blewett, phone interview.
53 Blewett, phone interview.
54 Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 2.
55 McKenna, “Character Business”, 53.
to London, influenced partly by conversations with expatriate friends who were also living in London at the time. ‘I didn’t think it would be an easy thing to get published’, he recalled, ‘and perhaps it was the personal relationships that did it’. In particular, he noted that Professor Brian Matthews of the Menzies Centre and his wife Jane Arms were interested in the project, and in fact, Jane in some ways became a kind of agent for me. Other close friends, such as novelist Alan Gold and journalist Fred Brenchley, gave Blewett further encouragement to publish his account. These relationships were significant in part because they gave the author encouragement to seek publication, and in part because they directly facilitated the engagement of a publisher. Arms helped connect Blewett with South Australian publisher Bollen from Wakefield Press, who became highly enthusiastic about the project. He recalled a number of individuals, Arms foremost among them, helping to build the author–publisher relationship between himself and Blewett. Asked about his initial interest in the project, Bollen recalled his enthusiasm for publishing something that ‘hadn’t been done before’ in Australia, a book that would reveal ‘the mechanics of how things worked’ within the centre of government. Further, he explained that the early drafts were ‘very readable’: ‘you’ve got Keating, you’ve got these fascinating individuals’. Finally, the local ties to South Australia were important: ‘It was kind of a South Australian, Adelaide thing, if you know what I mean.’

To treat the published book as a pure discourse between author and reader would be to neglect these important agents of influence upon its very existence and its style of communication. Without the encouragement and support of Blewett’s local networks in London and Adelaide, there would likely have been no published diary, and without Bollen’s and Arms’s appreciation for the Crossman precedent, his detailed account of executive government may not have appeared in the way that it did.

Though life writing scholars have said much about the significance of interpersonal relationships and their representation within memoirs, they have said relatively little about the importance of such relationships in creating memoirs and diaries. Recent research has begun to consider the formal publishing contract as a document that not only legally binds its signatories, but also reflects ‘an intense lived experience, for authors, publishers, agents, and those close to them’. Of course, many crucial relationships in publishing go undocumented and unrecorded in the legal agreements. These informal relationships were particularly significant in the effort to

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56 Blewett, phone interview.
57 Blewett, phone interview.
58 Blewett, phone interview.
59 Michael Bollen, phone interview with the author, 29 June 2020.
60 Bollen, phone interview.
61 Bollen, phone interview.
62 Bollen, phone interview.
produce Blewett’s diary. ‘I didn’t ever sign an agent’s contract or anything like that,’ he later recalled. ‘Perhaps I should have, but it was all a rather loose arrangement.’ Despite the fact that Arms as a mutual acquaintance had been instrumental in building the partnership between Blewett and Bollen, the former minister recalled that there was ‘no sort of agreement’ about her role as de facto agent, and that ‘the relationship broke down rather badly in the end’. It is important to note, then, that the production of a book is not solely the responsibility of those whose signatures are included in the publishing contract. Rather, other stakeholders are fundamentally implicated in the process of production, and disagreements in the journey towards publication can profoundly disrupt them.

The issue of stakeholders leads inexorably to the broader divergence in the ways that historians and autobiographical theorists treat a text of this nature. Where the autobiographical theorists prefer to treat the text as it is, historians are well-advised to consider the text as it emerged. That is to say, political autobiographies and diaries are products of an iterative process. While residing in London, Blewett recalled, ‘one of the private activities I undertook was getting the diary cleaned up and organised’. Though enamoured with the early manuscript, Bollen recalled that there was ‘quite a lot of repetition’ and a number of ‘things that were just not so fascinating’. According to Blewett, Bollen chose not to demand any retrospective alteration of the manuscript’s flavour: ‘What he did do was to demand significant cuts—ultimately some 70,000 words. For instance, nearly all the local constituency activity was removed. That was partly at his urging, because he didn’t think the whole manuscript was a publishable project. Certainly, the cuts were extensive.’ The remaining manuscript was organised around the central theme of the Keating Government’s quest to survive its date with destiny in March 1993. ‘I think I was editing,’ Bollen recalled, ‘shaping rather than just copy checking. It was trying to get that sort of narrative drive’. The pair sought advice from several quarters to assist in the cutting process. Bollen claimed that Blewett was ‘very easy to work with’ through the editorial process. That statement in itself is revealing, for it reflects the extent to which the construction of Blewett’s diary, in its published form, was a collaborative and collective project, one in which the author’s story was refracted through the interests of the publisher and the participation of other actors.

64 Blewett, phone interview.
65 Blewett, phone interview.
66 Blewett, phone interview.
67 Bollen, phone interview.
68 Blewett, phone interview.
69 Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 4.
70 Bollen, phone interview.
72 Bollen, phone interview.
The portrait of the Keating Government in Blewett’s diary was a complex one. He maintained that the diary was intended to ‘improve the attitude of the public towards politicians. I tried to describe what a ministerial life was really like, the demands and the activities, so that it might have a positive effect in that sense’. This intent shone through clearly in diary entries that referred to ministers functioning with little sleep, or politicians who were badly weathered by the trials and tribulations of politics and the media. As prime minister, Keating appeared as a reform ‘powerhouse’ and ‘politician of vision’ leader whose government was, at times, ‘an administrative shambles’. Cabinet, the central subject of the book, appeared remarkably cynical and opportunist. In his capacity as social security minister, Blewett found himself accepting in 1992 that ‘politics rather than social concern would have to be uppermost in our budget plans’. In his account of a cabinet debate about protectionism and the entertainment sector, he wrote of a strange composite policy that failed to appease either side of the relevant argument: ‘Ultimately no one wanted responsibility for the ghastly hybrid’. Perhaps the most perverse entry concerned the Expenditure Review Committee's (ERC) attitudes towards cost-cutting measures in the 1992 budget: ‘Having abandoned [a] saving that affected only bureaucratic egos, the ERC turned tough on measures affecting thousands of ordinary people.’ Above all, the subject of numerous cabinet discussions appeared to be the government’s own electoral fate. Despite the author’s sincere efforts to enlighten citizens to the real and difficult challenges of discharging a ministerial portfolio in Australia, these impressions have bequeathed to history a picture of a government focused first and foremost on its own survival. In forming judgements and conclusions about this picture of politics, it is imperative to recognise that this text is a product of a collaborative process, one that has profoundly shaped its representation of the political past. Even the most faithful political diary is shaped by its publication process.

Diaries, storytelling and the state

The publication of Blewett’s diary also revealed much about the culture of secrecy in Australian democracy in the late twentieth century. For one thing, he recorded a cabinet debate in July 1992 in which the Keating Government decided to preserve the cabinet notebooks, a valuable primary source that some of his colleagues would

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73 Blewett, phone interview.
74 For instance, he records himself attending a meeting of the ERC (Expenditure Review Committee) immediately following his mother’s death; an extremely unwell Graham Richardson vomiting between answering questions about impropriety in the Senate; and Gareth Evans functioning with just two hours of sleep while managing his ministerial and Senate responsibilities. Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 78, 115, 128.
75 Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 16, 160.
76 Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 69.
77 Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 147.
78 Blewett, Cabinet Diary, 200.
have happily acted to destroy.\textsuperscript{79} More significantly, though, the act of publishing the diary tested the state’s preparedness to tolerate an unprecedented level of disclosure. In the United Kingdom, noteworthy figures such as former Labour ministers Crossman, Tony Benn and Barbara Castle, and former Thatcher minister Alan Clark had published diaries that reproduced confidential cabinet discussions.\textsuperscript{80} In 1976, the Radcliffe investigation into political memoirs proposed that confidential discussions and deliberations within the government should not be published within 15 years of their occurrence.\textsuperscript{81} British Chief Justice Lord Widgery, in a deliberation on the legality of Crossman’s diary, found that cabinet confidentiality was not imperilled by publication of cabinet debates one decade after events.\textsuperscript{82} Blewett argued that, seven years after much of his diary was originally written, the ‘brief Age of Keating already seems to belong to another world’.\textsuperscript{83} Sensibly, he voluntarily removed passages that recorded ‘sensitive foreign policy and intelligence references’.\textsuperscript{84} Even in its aesthetic design, though, the book emphasised its revelatory uniqueness. Bollen and designer Liz Nicholson carefully designed the dustjacket, which featured a shadowy and semi-transparent picture of Blewett carrying a folder. That design, he recalled, was intended to mirror the diary’s ambition for revelation and historical value: ‘it wasn’t meant to be a “here I am” book … It was more a way of being a conduit of what happens in cabinet, and … getting in there for the record, if you like’.\textsuperscript{85} Blewett’s diary was, by design (in every sense of the word), a deliberate act of revelation and democratic transparency. Nonetheless, Blewett was hardly blind to the sensitivities and anxieties of the state with respect to his intended course of action. Out of courtesy, he decided to notify the apex of the bureaucracy in Canberra about his intention to publish. Writing to Cabinet Secretary Michael L’Estrange Blewett quipped: ‘I have no desire to become involved in a prolonged legal dispute, however beneficial that might be for sales.’\textsuperscript{86} L’Estrange forwarded the letter to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), which sought legal advice.\textsuperscript{87} In May, the Acting Chief General Counsel reported that, although the diary’s publication could be punishable under section 70 of the Crimes Act, there would be some difficulty proving that the Act actually

\textsuperscript{79} Blewett, \textit{Cabinet Diary}, 195.
\textsuperscript{82} Blewett, \textit{Cabinet Diary}, 3.
\textsuperscript{83} Blewett, \textit{Cabinet Diary}, 3.
\textsuperscript{84} Blewett, \textit{Cabinet Diary}, 2.
\textsuperscript{85} Bollen, phone interview.
applied to Ministers, and that it was ‘highly unlikely that a claim for damages for breach of confidentiality would be successful’. Though clearly a crime, breaching cabinet confidentiality would be near impossible to prosecute.

In the absence of encouraging legal advice, the Australian Public Service tried to stop publication in a more informal, intimidatory manner, using the imprimatur of the state rather than its coercive legal powers. Secretary of PM&C Max Moore-Wilton drafted a heavy-handed letter to Blewett asserting that ‘ministers should clearly be subject to provisions equivalent to section 70’. Blewett perceived this as a ‘threatening letter’, but reasoned that ‘he left it open to me to take the risks’, and therefore pressed ahead. Extracts of the letter quickly leaked to journalists, who made the pseudo-legal dispute a public story in December 1998. Unsurprisingly, media editorials were largely in favour of less, rather than greater, secrecy. Popular radio host John Laws asked his viewers: ‘Why would “Max the Axe” make that kind of threat. I mean what is there in Neil [sic] Blewett’s diaries that’s going to bother [incumbent prime minister] John Howard I’d like to know.’ Bollen doubled down as well, confirming to journalists that Moore-Wilton’s threat was ‘not a problem at this stage’. Moore-Wilton responded on 16 December 1998 by sending his original letter in its entirety to the *Sydney Morning Herald* for publication: ‘I see little choice but to release the text in the interests of balanced consideration of the issues.’ These attempts at private and public pressure failed to dissuade either Bollen or Blewett, who sardonically remarked to the press, ‘I never asked the poor man for support’. Immediately prior to the diary’s publication, PM&C remained icy about the book. Offering Moore-Wilton some preparatory talking points ahead of its release, Assistant Secretary Barbara Belcher commented that any legal action against Blewett would only ‘delay its appearance on the remainder shelves’. Ultimately, this remarkably public conflict between a former minister and active public servant revealed that the state perceived itself as a stakeholder in the publication of political diaries and the preservation of a culture of non-disclosure. Further, senior public servants revealed their willingness to use soft power and coercion—in the absence of any serious legal options—to curtail publication. This incident would go undetected in a theoretical autobiographical analysis, but tells us much about the political culture of secrecy and confidentiality in Canberra, a culture against which Blewett and Bollen were decidedly acting.

90 Blewett, phone interview.
91 ‘No, Minister!’, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.
Political history: For the present, for the future

Finally, it is worth recognising one further key flaw inherent in autobiographical and life writing theory when applied to the political diary. Lejeune’s *autobiographical pact* assumed an ‘audience’ that was both singular (an individual person) and universal, reading and engaging with books in the same ways. That theoretical assumption is fundamentally flawed. The political memoir or diary is a genre with a multitude of disparate audiences, varying from the general reader to the political aficionado, and from the literary biography enthusiast to the critical political scientist. Further, its effects in the public domain are manifold. In the short term, memoirs and diaries generate a series of immediate political reactions and responses within the ongoing pressure-cooker of daily professional politics. In the longer term, they impact and influence the ways that audiences (including historians, biographers and political scientists) understand the political past. If Lejeune’s framework is wholly inadequate for dealing with these considerations, others should not be dismissed summarily in the same fashion. Egan, Couser and the like have demonstrated a more critical way of approaching these books, recognising them as products in which the presenter and the represented have a vested interest. Moreover, theorists have indicated that memoirs and diaries are discursive actions with long-term consequences, a kind of literary formation that looks ‘forward as well as backward’.

In its production and reception, Blewett’s diary was to some extent shaped by anxieties about how best to represent his former colleagues in the most dynamic and holistic way. Preparing the manuscript, Blewett became concerned about his nightly descriptions of ministerial colleagues being coloured by the policy debates of the day:

> I worried that, too often, that particular one night stand, if you like, would be seen as my view of that particular minister or politician, because they might not appear again for another fifty pages … I thought I should try and give a brief sketch of each of my ministerial colleagues when they were first introduced, so that people could refer back to that as my overall assessment of them …

Blewett’s aspiration was that these sketches would enliven the story, and his publisher was enthusiastic about them: ‘I can remember being delighted when he came back with such, sometimes waspish but on the whole generous, little sketches, and Neal writing them so well. It really did spark up the book.’ Ultimately, the author himself noted that these character sketches were the most impactful aspect of the

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99 Blewett, phone interview.
100 Bollen, phone interview.
book, in public and private. For instance, his description of Kim Beazley (then Leader of the Opposition) as ‘Churchillian in ambition’ but ‘flawed by a streak of most un-Churchillian timidity’ won few favours inside the Labor Party.\textsuperscript{101} Prime Minister John Howard had already taken to declaring that Beazley ‘lacked the ticker’ necessary for the prime ministership.\textsuperscript{102} Michelle Grattan noted the political danger in Beazley’s profile: ‘Blewett’s harsh—but many will think fair—assessment of [Beazley’s] political character won’t strike any joy into a Caucus struggling against a reinvigorated Government.’\textsuperscript{103} The key point here is that political stories, when refracted through the media, have immediate political effects and impacts. Blewett’s character sketches, though intended to offer readers a more well-rounded view of various individuals than they may otherwise have gleaned, were prime fodder for sensationalism at the hands of the press.

The diary also impacted greatly upon Blewett’s personal relationships with his former ministerial friends. In many instances, it was the character sketches with which individuals took issue.\textsuperscript{104} Interviewed for this research, Blewett recognised the frailties of sketching his former colleagues’ personalities in this succinct way: ‘I can see how that affected some of my colleagues. I regret that’.\textsuperscript{105} However, it was not only the character studies that caused conflict. Though not particularly concerned about distant associates and factional opponents, Blewett was disappointed by reactions from fellow travellers to some of his colourful diary entries. His peer in the Centre-Left faction, former treasurer John Dawkins, described him as a ‘blowfly’ on the cabinet wall.\textsuperscript{106} He recalled a ‘terrible quarrel’ with another senior cabinet colleague whose words were reproduced at length in the book: ‘I wrote about [the minister’s] comments on some of his own right-wing colleagues, and as [he] was still of course an active politician when it was published, I could see that would cause factional problems for him.’\textsuperscript{107} Despite these conflicts, some former colleagues celebrated Blewett’s work. Former industry minister John Button privately commended the diary’s ‘waspish comments’, and (subsequently disgraced) former minister for communications Robert Collins phoned Blewett to praise the book. Significantly, Keating was also ‘quite positive in some of the remarks he made about the diary’.\textsuperscript{108} Therefore, any suggestion that Blewett published \textit{in spite} of colleagues is baseless. Indeed, he dedicated the book to his fellow former ministers, a decision that he described as ‘my plea that I’d be forgiven’.\textsuperscript{109} Ultimately, Egan was right in saying that autobiography ‘does not stand alone any more than people do’, but more

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{101} Blewett, \textit{Cabinet Diary}, 18.
\bibitem{103} Michelle Grattan, ‘Belaboured’, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 4 September 1999, 43.
\bibitem{104} Penelope Debelle, ‘Opening the Cabinet Door’, \textit{Sunday Age}, 26 September 1999, 6.
\bibitem{105} Blewett, phone interview.
\bibitem{106} Blewett, phone interview.
\bibitem{107} Blewett, phone interview.
\bibitem{108} Blewett, phone interview.
\bibitem{109} Blewett, phone interview.
\end{thebibliography}
than this, Blewett’s example demonstrates that these interpersonal relationships can shape not only the content and narrative, but also the very shape and format of a published political account.

The publication of Blewett’s diary also had several longer-term consequences, including the implicit affirmation of a minister’s right to reveal cabinet debates after leaving office. In the 12 months prior to publication, *A Cabinet Diary* was subject to censure inside the Howard Cabinet on the grounds that the principle of cabinet-in-confidence was at risk. In June 1998, Howard stressed to his colleagues that cabinet debates must remain secret ‘not only at the time an issue was current, but also into the future’, and that publication of those debates constituted ‘a breach of … personal confidentiality and loyalty’.110 Following Blewett’s publication, Howard reiterated ‘his disapproval of Dr Blewett’s decision to publish’.111 Despite the attempts to uphold cabinet secrecy, former Labor ministers were emboldened to produce insider accounts of serious cabinet debates. Robert Tickner recognised that his account of the Keating Government’s native title debates—which retraced secret departmental advice—was less risk-laden in Blewett’s wake.112 Consider also Bob Carr’s *Diary of a Foreign Minister*, which revealed cabinet debates and personal communications at the most senior ministerial levels.113 Reviewing that book for the *Australian Book Review*, Blewett mused, ‘[d]id Carr too receive an epistle from on high?’114 In this view, the publication of *A Cabinet Diary* was an act that had long-term consequences for cultural expectations surrounding cabinet secrecy and a minister’s autonomy to tell an inside story.

Blewett’s initial intention was to provide future scholars and historians with raw materials for an analysis of the Keating Government. In this way, the book contributed to longer-term shifts in social, cultural and historical knowledge on a variety of political questions. For political scientists, the centralisation of power inside the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) was the crucial story. More than 20 years after publication, Bollen recalled the revelatory power of the book: ‘I remember there’s a fantastic line in the book where he says something like, “The closer I get to power, the less powerful I feel”, or to that effect.’115 Quoting Blewett’s words, directly, eminent political scientist Patrick Weller concluded that this observation about the nature of executive power and centralisation ‘was probably always true and

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111 Memorandum from Barbara Belcher to the Prime Minister’s Office, 3 September 1999, NAA A1209, 1998/1219.
112 See Robert Tickner, this volume.
115 Bollen, phone interview.
always will be’. Anne Tiernan used Blewett’s words to tell a similar story about ‘a powerful and progressively more insular PMO’ in the 1990s. Historians, too, have used the diary as a vibrant primary source in their own research. Ministerial memoirs and diaries are an essential source where alternative documents are either classified or lacking in sufficient detail. Cabinet decisions and cabinet notebooks, declassified after 20 and 30 years in Australia respectively, are often less than a comprehensive guide to the colour and movement of political and policy debate in Cabinet. Blewett’s comprehensive outline of debates within Cabinet, then, possess a comparative advantage as source material. For instance, Noah Riseman has closely examined Blewett’s account of the cabinet debate over the Keating Government’s removal of the ban on homosexuality in the Australian Defence Force. In Riseman’s case, the ‘particulars of the discussion’ in the diary were a prime source in the absence of open-access cabinet papers. Similarly, Melanie Nolan used the diary to explain major shifts in the tenor of Australia’s relationship with New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s, with particular interest in Blewett’s account of debates in Cabinet over New Zealand’s procuring Anzac-class frigates and trans-Tasman cooperation over defence more generally. Treated as a primary source in this way, A Cabinet Diary was studied by its initial intended audience, namely scholars and historians. Further, its medium- and longer-term impacts were manifest in its use as source material for other writers, insofar as it contributed to broader changes in political and historical narratives about Australia, its politics and its past. Evidently, to look exclusively at the diary’s short-term political effects would be to miss its broader function and contribution as a primary record of the political past.

Conclusion

The field of life writing has done a world of good in the past five decades with respect to diversifying the autobiographical canon and bringing marginalised voices to the fore for academic inquiry. What was previously a genre dominated by great, white, heterosexual, upper-class men has become a field of study replete with the voices of women, people of colour, people of varying gendered and sexual identifications, and by people from beyond the Euro-Atlantic confines of high modern literature. In every sense, this has been a good thing, enhancing scholarly awareness of personal and political narratives emanating from non-Western societies, and non-masculine authors. This intellectual inheritance is to be celebrated.

117 Anne Tiernan, Power without Responsibility: Ministerial Staffers in Australian Governments from Whitlam to Howard (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), 65.
That said, autobiographical theory and life writing studies are limited in their capacity to further our collective understanding of the nature and function of the modern political memoir or diary. For one thing, life writing scholarship often treats the text as it is and lingers heavily on the relationship between the text and a seemingly universal imagined reader. As Blewett’s *Cabinet Diary* clearly indicates, that assumption simply cannot stand. The progression from traditional autobiographical theory to life writing studies has involved a move away from questions of truth and towards the issue of the *consequences* of these narratives. However, even in that mode, a literary analysis can only go so far in explaining the essential nature of a political autobiography, and can scarcely scratch the surface of a political memoir or diary’s status as a product in whom many different stakeholders have a vested interest. Drawing on the lessons of life writing, historians can consider the consequences of political autobiography and diary for interpersonal relationships, between friends and political peers. However, the historian’s duty is to go above and beyond that simple recognition, and to locate those relationships within a specific historical moment, a particular political structure and culture. Where the traditional autobiographical theorist fingered these stakeholder relationships as reasons to exclude the political memoir from the canon of study, it is that very attribute that makes the political memoir interesting and valuable for the political historian’s research. Here again, Blewett provides a particularly apt example, for the most cursory account of his diary’s publication reveals the anxieties and concerns it engendered on the part of several interested parties, including the bureaucracy of the state itself. These relationships tell us much about changing cultures of secrecy and disclosure in late twentieth-century Australia, as well as the increasing centralisation of power, the fraught relationship between political parties and former luminaries, and the difficult question of who even owns the contemporary political past. In the tradition of Crossman, Blewett’s *Cabinet Diary* is a diary of the historian, for the historian, written by the historian.

For these reasons, then, the study of the political memoir remains largely within the remit of the contemporary historian. The historian’s investigative methodology and commitment to contextualisation are essential ingredients in the study of any singular political memoir. If politicians’ writings are, as Gooch suggested, the ‘meeting place between history and literature’, it is the discipline of the former that has most to offer in understanding and utilising that literature most effectively.  

In conclusion, this particular area of study has much to offer to the broader field of political historiography and political biography. Our critical and contextually aware approach to the political autobiography or diary is essential if we are to understand this continually burgeoning body of literature.

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120 Gooch, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 227.
It’s not about you: The negligible biographical information in Australian prime ministerial portraits

SARAH ENGLEDOW

Introduction: The epitome and the transient mood

In November 1945, Mrs R. D. Berry of Walcha, New South Wales, wrote to Prime Minister Ben Chifley, offering to send a portrait she had painted of the late John Curtin for his consideration. Chifley directed the deputy secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department, Frank McKenna, to tell her that he would ‘not be in a position to express an opinion regarding its artistic merits’ and to advise her to send the portrait to the chairman of the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board, Gother V. F. Mann. Soon, however, McKenna had to write again to Mrs Berry to inform her that ‘Mr Mann … does not think an amateur without art education could produce the desired result’ in a portrait of Curtin. Kindly but discouragingly, he told her that ‘Mr Mann would be glad to report on your painting if he saw it, but he does not think it advisable to trouble you to send the painting to his office for that purpose.’

Whether or not it resembled Curtin, the principal difficulty would be the unlikelihood that a portrait by an amateur would express something of Curtin’s character or essence. In an essay about the American portraitist John Singer Sargent, author Henry James suggested that the portraitist will attain the ‘highest result’ when he [sic]:

sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problem.

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In 1941, John Rothenstein, director of London’s Tate Gallery, explained the difference between portraits by Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough. Reynolds, he said, ‘possessed the rare power of regarding his sitters with psychological insight … [The] sitter’s permanent characteristics are surely seized by Reynolds and given exalted expression, whereas Gainsborough reveals their most transient moods. The one painter gives a professional apotheosis, an epitome of a career, the other an intimate interpretation’.³

Had Reynolds and Gainsborough both been in a position to tender their credentials in mid-September 1912, when Australia’s new Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (CAAB) invited artists to make themselves known for consideration as painters of portraits to be commissioned by the Historic Memorials Committee (HMC),⁴ Reynolds might well have been the favoured man. Portraiture is ‘a secular art that is about the present, or an aspect of the present, designated for future consumption, for a time when nobody will be able to compare the representation and the original’.⁵ In a national leader’s portrait, it is surely the professional apotheosis, the epitome, that is to be desired over a picture of a person in the throes of a feeling that may pass, however interesting or affecting such a picture may be.

Biographers implicitly suggest the absence of ‘rare power’ or ‘psychological insight’ in any Australian prime ministerial portrait because they rarely mention these works. To take but a few of many examples, Sir John Bunting’s teasingly titled R.G. Menzies: A Portrait features a portrait by Ivor Hele on the cover, but Bunting refers to it only in a brief quotation from a previous biographer.⁶ Troy Bramston does not write of any portrait of Menzies in Robert Menzies: The Art of Politics.⁷ Jenny Hocking’s two-volume biography of Gough Whitlam spans 1,000 pages, but its images comprise photographs only and it contains no reference to any painted portrait of Whitlam, not even that which won Clifton Pugh the Archibald Prize, and about which much could be said.⁸ Entries in the Australian Dictionary of Biography customarily conclude with a note as to where portraits of the person described may be found; rarely, if ever, in the body of the entry are these portraits adduced as evidence of any characteristic of the person under description. In turn, in her book on the artist

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Frederick McCubbin, Ann Galbally mentions his fine portrait of Alfred Deakin only in a list of portraits McCubbin painted between 1901 and 1914. These examples, and many that follow, indicate that painted portraits of prime ministers are not only of negligible value to biographers, but of little interest to art historians. As painter Charles Conder suggested to Australian artist Tom Roberts, “Parliamentary Coves” are usually so beastly ugly.

In this article, I consider portraits of various Australian prime ministers against the contrasting modalities of ‘professional apotheosis’ and ‘intimate interpretation’, seeking to dispel the widespread notion that a painted portrait can convey something about the feelings, experience or inner life of its subject. Series of political portraits exist for reasons other than memorialisation. A group of prime ministerial portraits both represents and buttresses state power, but is also driven by the common human impulse to collect a ‘full set’, and the idea of inspiring a perceived audience. I argue that biographers’ inattention to painted portraits of their subjects indicates that they reveal little of significance.

The rise of civic and political portraiture in Great Britain

It is a cliché that the British brought their enthusiasm for portraits to their colonies. Portraits in England, as in the other mostly Christian capitalist states in which portraiture is practised, were not always expected to express character. Portraiture began there, as elsewhere, with paintings in which a likeness of the person paying the artist was inserted into a scene also including a holy entity (for example, The Withypool triptych, showing Mary, Joseph and Jesus with one Paul Withypoll, a merchant and parliamentarian). The sixteenth century yielded the familiar Tudor and Stuart portraits characterised by small, detailed, expressionless heads atop rigid, rich costumes. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a number of Dutch artists in England lent pictorial support to the mood spread by the new Protestant Church: ‘a practical, dignified but decidedly undemonstrative view of greatness and public responsibility’.

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The proliferation of portraits post-Reformation prompted art historian John Berger to caution scholars of the genre to consider not just the ‘few extraordinary examples’ but the ‘endless’ paintings of local notables in ‘countless’ provincial venues.\(^\text{14}\) The Australian prime ministerial portrait has its roots in a new, drab portrait species that appeared across England during the refashioning of agencies of authority in the second half of the sixteenth century; the individual civic portrait, depicting regional mayors and aldermen, enjoined to carry themselves in a ‘sadd and wise manner’, hidden under monochrome gowns and depicted against plain backdrops of black or brown. Robert Tittler explains that the tenor of these portraits ‘is one of weight and dignity … The jaws are often slack, mouths are closed and often grim. Brows tend to be furrowed, shoulders slightly stooped … eyes lined with age, care and wisdom and marked as often as not by a hollow stare’. While painted bodies of aristocrats often emphasised ‘the virility which was essential to their culture’, portraits of mayors and aldermen focused ‘not on loin or limb … but on the head’.\(^\text{15}\) In Parliament House, Canberra, only in John Gorton’s portrait by June Mendoza is there a hint of loin. Tittler suggests that civic portraits burgeoned in the attempt to reinvent ‘Englishness’ without reference to Catholicism, an effort towards the ‘selective reconstruction of a collective memory in a particular community’ post-Reformation.\(^\text{16}\) Similarly, the mayoral portrait was one of the many strategies employed to entrench an ideology of civilised Australian history in the nineteenth century. In reaction to the establishment of the HMC, an anonymous contributor to the \textit{Age} in 1914 cautioned the committee to limit their range of portrait subjects to holders of only the most elevated office, citing the fun-robbed experience of attending a concert at the Melbourne Town Hall surrounded by many ‘gloomy’ and ‘melancholy’ portraits of past mayors ‘who gaze in mournful regret and pose in stiff attitudes’.\(^\text{17}\) Protestant ideals of respectability and responsibility underpinned the rise of civic portraiture in Australia, as they had in Britain.

Over time, political portraits were afforded their own institutions. The National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG London), opened in 1856, and was the first of its kind in the world. Holding many of Britain’s historical portrait treasures, in recent decades the NPG London has acquired a number of exciting works in unfamiliar mediums, including DNA, frozen blood, manipulated light and stuffed vermin, by artists including Marc Quinn, Chris Levine, and Tim Noble and Sue Webster.\(^\text{18}\) Of its many portraits of British prime ministers, two are notable. John Singer Sargent’s \textit{Arthur James Balfour, 1st Earl of Balfour}\(^\text{19}\) (1908), acquired in a desperate contest


\(^{16}\) Tittler, ‘Civic Portraiture and Political Culture’, 324.

\(^{17}\) \textit{Age} (Melbourne), 2 January 1914, 4.

with an American collector in 2002, was described at the time by a spokesperson for the institution as one of Sargent’s most ‘fluid and luscious’ portraits.\(^\text{19}\) Years before, British writer and critic G. K. Chesterton had called it a portrait of ‘a sad philosopher and a sad statesman’, adding that it evokes feelings of ‘sober truths about the English governing class, its wide and ruinous scepticism, its remaining pillars of responsibility and reason’.\(^\text{20}\) By way of contrast, there is no hint of either responsibility or reason in \textit{Photo Op} (2007), a digital collage of Tony Blair created by activists kennardphillips that the gallery purchased in 2018 and placed in the institution’s ‘Reference Collection’, holding objects providing ‘an alternative and less reverential view’ of sitters than ‘more conventional portraits’.\(^\text{21}\) Applied to \textit{Photo Op}, such anodyne adjectives are comical. Before its acquisition, the \textit{Guardian}'s art writer Jonathan Jones had written that the ‘strange and devastatingly effective quality of \textit{[Photo Op] is that it} really does meld into a luridly believable scene. The collective unconscious accepts this picture as true’.\(^\text{22}\) This mendacious image of a still-working former leader resides in an institution that is a primary instrument of state authority. As the NPG London is government-sponsored, its current chief patron the Duchess of Cambridge, the image is comprehensively ‘authorised’.

The National Portrait Gallery, Canberra (NPG Canberra), established in 1998, was modelled closely on its London precursor, and, to some extent, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. Former NPG Canberra director Angus Trumble has described Washington’s presidential ‘Gallery of Honour’ as ‘in many ways [the staff’s] biggest problem’.\(^\text{23}\) Art historian Sasha Grishin feels that it is advantageous that Australian prime ministers’ portraits remain in parliament, ‘a place where rotten pictures accompany rotten politics’, and do not ‘visually pollute’ Canberra’s National Portrait Gallery as they do Washington DC.\(^\text{24}\) Among the thousands of portraits in the Canberra collection there are no moulded body fluids, taxidermy


or human tissue samples, and it has no ‘Reference Collection’ in which desirable portraits too provocative for the primary collection might be squirreled. Just as there is no Australian prime ministerial portrait that would need be acquired in an international battle, there are none as tendentious as the kennardphillips portrait in any Australian collection.

The origins of Australian prime ministerial portraiture

It is more than a century since one ‘Gallery Boy’ noted a decline in the quality of portraits by Australian artist Norman St Clair Carter, charging him with ‘bringing his art down to the level of public taste, which is not much developed in any country, and is particularly backward in the matter of portrait work, in Australia’.25 (In 1922 Carter was praised not only for his capacity to paint ‘mental power’ but also, more faintly, for following ‘well established traditions’ and painting with ‘sincerity’.)26 Despite artists’, curators’ and educators’ most ingenious efforts, and notwithstanding well-publicised developments in art styles and mediums since the beginning of the twentieth century, even an intelligent Australian layperson's loose expectation of a portrait remains a realist head-and-shoulders or three-quarter length image of a human being, slightly smaller than life-sized, viewed from the front with face on show, painted in oils on canvas or linen. When the human being is a prime minister, governor-general or judge, this expectation is markedly tighter. Being leaders, they deserve no less, but being functionaries, they deserve no more.

Homogeneity in portraits of Australian prime ministers is attributable partly to recommendations to artists set down at the time of the establishment of the HMC in 1911–12, which have changed little to this day. The fact that the majority of Australia’s 30 prime ministers have been Australian-born, middle-aged, tertiary-educated men with experience in law or politics, representing electorates in either Victoria or New South Wales, ranging in age at the time of first taking office from 37 years to 67 years with an average age of 52 years, also helps explain the similarities between the works.27 More often than not, in speaking of portraits of Australian prime ministers we speak of realist paintings of seated blue-eyed white men in their 50s, wearing suits and ties, depicted more or less facing the (male) artist, unsmilingly, from a slightly elevated position at a distance of about 2.5 metres.

26 ‘Mr Norman Carter’, Sydney Morning Herald, 22 May 1922, 4.
Not counting a shady avenue lined with bronze busts of prime ministers in the Ballarat Botanical Gardens, initiated by parliamentarian Colonel Crouch in 1939, Australia has two principal repositories of painted, drawn and sculpted prime ministers’ portraits and prime ministerial paraphernalia: Parliament House, Canberra, and NPG Canberra. Until recently, the old, provisional Parliament House was also home to many such works; it still holds a good deal of ephemera. This essay is mostly concerned with paintings of Australian prime ministers in the Historic Memorials Collection, displayed in Parliament House. This collection was conceived in communications between Alfred Deakin and Tom Roberts, who urged Deakin to act before it was too late to ‘give the future anything that will show what you all were as men to look at’. Incidentally, while his oeuvre comprises truly excellent portraits, Tom Roberts was not destined to paint a prime minister—even Deakin. (The latter was portrayed by Frederick McCubbin during the period of his ‘most brilliant’ works—including a self-portrait said to disclose ‘something of the artist’s mind and soul’. Deakin’s biographer Judith Brett, however, regards McCubbin’s portrait as ‘rather stiff’, favouring one by a Bendigo art teacher, who, lacking the skill to paint the leader’s ‘mesmeric’ eyes, portrayed him shading them with his hand.) By the time Australia had a prime minister, Roberts’s great portraits were past; he had exhausted himself rendering 269 individual likenesses in his monumental painting of the opening of Australia’s first parliament, only to find, during 16 dispiriting years in London, that few were very interested in it.

Deakin prompted the prime minister, Andrew Fisher, and soon a committee was established to consult on Historic Memorials of Representative Men. It comprised—and did at least until 2011—the prime minister, the president of the senate, the speaker of the House of Representatives, the vice-president of the Executive Council and the leaders of the Opposition in both houses. The CAAB was established in 1912 to provide advice on suitable artists and assess the completed works. In 1972 this function passed to the Australia Council. In recent years counsel has been provided by the Senior Curator at the NPG Canberra, but that

28 Herald (Melbourne), 3 June 1939, 6. Crouch, a significant contributor to the cultural life of Ballarat, had already funded the relocation of Adam Lindsay Gordon’s cottage from the rear of Craig’s Hotel to the gardens.
30 Tom Roberts, letter to Alfred Deakin, 11 March 1910, NAA A2, 1912/2035.
position was abolished in 2019. A list of suitable painters for at least one recent prime minister’s portrait was disregarded, the former prime minister’s preference suggesting that ‘Gallery Boy’s’ remarks are as apposite today as in the 1920s.

As soon as the HMC was established, there was waspish press discussion of who its ‘Representative Men’ should be, and what purpose the portraits would serve:

It is proposed to immortalise ‘some’ of Australia’s greatest men who have been connected with Federation … The proposal emanates from the Prime Minister, who seems to be afraid that their names and memories will be forgotten unless there is tangible evidence that they once existed … in some Federal Dead House which might be built in the wildernesses of New South Wales.36

The first 18 portrait subjects, including five prime ministers, were chosen by August 1912, and within weeks an advertisement appeared in the Commonwealth of Australia Gazette inviting qualified portrait painters to tender their credentials to the CAAB. Most portraitists of the first 11 prime ministers trained at the National Gallery of Victoria School between 1872 and 1911; many links may be traced between them. One, William Beckwith McInnes, winner of five of the first six Archibald Prizes in the 1920s and two more in the 1930s, asserted:

English artists have said of us Australians that we are ‘old-fashioned’ … Certainly we in Australia have not been bitten by Cubism or Futurism or any of the other ‘isms’ and fads current now on the other side. And I am glad of it … I cannot think that a failure to adopt the latest tricks … is any reflection upon the genuine expressive work of any man or company of men in Australia.37

The aforementioned Norman Carter is reported to have called ‘contemporary art’ a ‘fungoid growth’.38

The second, long-term chair of the CAAB, G. V. F. Mann, visited Europe in the mid-1920s and appears to have attributed many artists’ struggles to sell their works to the current ‘freakish craze for splottes and blotches, miscalled art’. Mann suggested that the persons depicted for Australia’s National Collection might be extended to navigators, pioneers and explorers closely identified with the early history of Australia. ‘This collection is the nucleus of a national portrait gallery,’ he declared.39 Yet the prime ministerial portraits in the HMC were not absorbed into

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39 Frances Wong-See, ‘The Commonwealth Art Advisory Board from 1912 to 1926: Its Role in the Australian Art World’ (Hons thesis, Department of Art History, The Australian National University, 1991), 45. For Mann’s views on modern art see, for example, ‘Paintings and Sculpture’, Age (Melbourne), 26 October 1926, 15; and ‘Works of Art’, Mail (Adelaide) 31 July 1926. See also ‘The Portraits to be Painted’, Mercury (Hobart), 16 August 1912, 6; Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, no. 59, 14 September 1912, 1580.
the collections of either the National Gallery of Australia (as had also been suggested, from 1918) or the NPG Canberra. On the contrary: the ongoing HMC program freed the NPG Canberra from responsibility to commission or collect portraits of all Australian prime ministers. Nonetheless, it has disparate portraits, acquired more or less opportunistically, of 17 of them, including photographs that may not only serve to document the individuals’ careers but significantly influence historical assessments of them. Only once in the 21-year history of the NPG Canberra have the prime ministers’ portraits been displayed as a group.40

After parliament moved from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927, its central King’s Hall housed the portraits of prime ministers commissioned and approved by the HMC.41 So many busts and paintings were brought to the building that there was insufficient space to install them all, but many were on display. The Telegraph’s critic mentioned the remarkable ‘semblance of life’ of a bust of George Reid, made in 1915–16 when Reid was around 70, by Charles Web Gilbert.42 Along with an exquisitely sensitive head of Stanley Bruce, made in 1939 by the remarkable Australian Barbara Tribe, Gilbert’s Reid remains the outstanding sculpture of an Australian prime minister.43 From 1998 to 2008, when the NPG Canberra occupied part of what was then called Old Parliament House, many prime ministerial portraits were still in King’s Hall. In counterpoint, in 2001 the NPG displayed Martin Wilson’s Fuzzy Prime Ministers, a unique collection of bright tufted woollen portrait rugs of 25 Australian prime ministers. Cultural critic and administrator Leo Schofield judged them ‘serious works of art by a serious artist’; the artist himself said he hoped the collection would ‘unite the country like no other rugs have before’.44 Rebranded MOAD (Museum of Australian Democracy), Old Parliament House exhibited Bidjara artist Michael Cook’s Through My Eyes (2010), an important series of 27 portraits of recognisable prime ministerial faces overlaid with features drawn from photographs of Australian Aboriginal subjects, in 2014.45 It has recently displayed onetoeight (2017), a series

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40 These include David Moore’s Robert Menzies, Lancaster House, London (1956) and President Johnson and Prime Minister Holt at Canberra Airport 1966; Mervyn Bishop’s Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours sand into the hand of traditional landowner Vincent Lingiari 1975; Roger Scott’s Malcolm Fraser, Randwick Racecourse 1975 and Sue Ford’s Discussion between Bob Hawke and Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Burunga Festival, Northern Territory 1988. See works in the focus exhibition Primed, curated and described by the author, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, accessed 16 September 2020, www.portrait.gov.au/content/some-prime-ministers.
41 Scroope, ‘Faithful Representations’.
42 "The National Art Collection at Canberra", Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 14 December 1927, 8. While dated c. 1900 by the National Gallery of Australia, in the collection of which it resides, the Reid bust can be dated accurately from ‘Bust of Sir George Reid’, Sun (Sydney), 1 December 1915, 5; ‘Sir George Reid’, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 January 1916, 12; and ‘The Life That Breathes in Marble’, Herald (Melbourne), 14 February 1916, 1.
of appropriated, reworked portraits of the earliest prime ministers by Alison Alder. In between, in 2015, portraits were ‘cleared from Kings Hall’. Interesting and dynamic portraits of prime ministers including Bob Hawke, Paul Keating and John Gorton remain in the MOAD collection, but are not regularly displayed.

**Portraits and the revelation of character**

There is a long background to the idea that individual works within a series of portraits can reveal the differences between people who have occupied a particular role. English portraits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both reflected and fostered the development of a cognitive distinction between a public persona, having to do with the sum of duties or offices held, and a private being, comprising something unique and immutable. As portrait conventions evolved from the seventeenth century onward, each public position had its ‘accepted qualities and its acceptable limit of discrepancy’ on canvas; an idiosyncratic treatment of a monarch or pope was far more acceptable than one of a person of lower rank with a job. Godfrey Kneller, working in England from the late 1670s, fitted the zeitgeist in presenting men and women ‘devoid of glamour, evidently worthy, capable and honourable’. Emphasising both polite and political virtues, his art was ‘a function of civic pride, and drew its justification from the need to reinforce civic values’. Yet the ‘relaxed pose and conversational air’ of one of his famed portraits of Charles II creates a new ambiguity: ‘are we to respond to the presentation of the King or to the presence of the man?’ (Portraits of the Australian prime ministers present a similar quandary.) Between the late 1690s and early 1720s, Kneller completed a set of more than 40 portraits of huge-haired Whig Protestants associated with the ‘Kit-Cat Club’ including Britain’s (and the world’s) first prime minister, Robert Walpole. The Kit-Cat paintings represent an important moment in British portraiture as a uniform group of pictures of men with a conscious project to shape English national identity. Kneller’s portraits, emanating ‘civility’, were an effective image platform for the famous affiliates.

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48 For more on this, see Stewart, ‘Hawke and Keating Portraits Find a Permanent Home’.
The Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gave rise to the ‘personality cult’, a ‘fascination with the particular qualities, idiosyncrasies and actions of a celebrated individual’. One of the principal proponents of the NPG London—the first government-sponsored portrait gallery in the world—was a cultural authority with an inalienable belief in the inseparability of portraits and biography: Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle grew up in the Romantic period but remained a force in British intellectual life for much of the Victorian era. From the 1830s he was increasingly convinced of the need for heroic leaders, notoriously proposing in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* that ‘the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the history of the Great Men who have worked here’. His interest in portraiture was intense, not as an art genre but as a way into an authentic understanding of a human being; Julian North writes of his conception and practice of biography ‘as, itself, a form of portraiture’. Carlyle defined the ‘authentic portrait’ as a likeness made in the presence of the living subject by an artist with the ability to see his subject truly (more than a century after his death, this idea informed the collection policy of the NPG Canberra, which has acquired very few portraits made posthumously). With a fervent interest in human spiritual experience, he tended to trust the authentic portrait over accreted historical accounts. He wrote:

> Often I have found a Portrait superior in real instruction to half-a-dozen written ‘Biographies,’ as Biographies are written;—or rather, let me say, I have found that the Portrait was as a small lighted candle by which the Biographies could for the first time be read, and some human interpretation be made of them.

He suspected, for instance, that dry scholars had misled him about Henry VIII, as viewing Holbein’s portrait he wondered ‘is there not a jolly ringing laugh in him; and on the whole a good deal of fire, insight, generosity … in the inner man?’ North comments tartly that ‘Carlyle’s emotional and spiritual investment in portraiture’s capacity to bring the sitter to life was far from unique amongst his contemporaries, but it was remarkable for its wilful attempt to bury scepticism’.

In 1945, when the idea of Britishness called for inspiring reinforcement, 40 of Kneller’s Kit-Cat portraits were acquired by the NPG London. Author Lord Killanin saw in the better examples ‘an effort to probe deeper than the mere visual aspect of the sitter as Lely and Van Dyck had done … we begin to perceive [an] effort to

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58 North, ‘Portraying Portraiture’, 482.
comprehend character’. Certainly, Killanin perceived much in Kneller’s portraits of writers: ‘There is the witty Congreve, the intellectual Dryden, the humorous Steele and the bitter Pope. His portraits tell, in the clear and simple strokes of the brush, as much of their character as one obtains in reading their diaries.’ To this day, some painters and their sitters perpetuate similar notions. In a recent interview the London-based Australian portraitist Ralph Heimans said that he needs to ‘try to breathe life into a figure. It’s not just a superficial thing of how they look. It’s really how they move, how they feel, how they think’. Even one of the most intelligent of his sitters told the interviewer that the subject of a Heimans portrait is ‘not just seen in physical form but is revealed to be a composite of influences as a person with depth’.

Such fallacious ideas became entrenched as portrait painters from the 1850s onwards faced a strong threat to their livelihoods: photography. John Berger suggests that artists and their circles fanned popular doubt of the camera’s biographical authority by inventing ‘mysterious, metaphysical qualities with which to prove that what the painted portrait offered was incomparable. Only a man, not a machine … could interpret the soul of a sitter. An artist dealt with the sitter’s destiny: the camera with mere light and shade’. Berger asserts that this ‘claims for painted portraits a psychological insight which ninety-nine percent of them totally lack’. The mythology is so pervasive, however, that gallery staff will attest it is not unusual for an Australian visitor to our NPG Canberra to be disappointed—and even to infer some institutional disrespect—if any person they admire is represented in a photograph rather than a painting.

‘Conveying interiority’: Different portraits of Stanley Bruce

In the well-known correspondence between Richard Casey and Stanley Bruce is a reference to Casey’s visit to Madame Tussauds, London, in May 1928. There, he saw Bruce portrayed life-sized in wax. Describing the experience as ‘horrifying’, Casey predicted his friend’s shabby effigy would be mistaken for ‘a wide range of popular celebrities varying from Mussolini … to the late President of the Mexican Republic’. Early the following year, he wrote to Bruce: ‘I see that you have agreed

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to the Bruce Toby Jug being sold to the public. I inquired of the potters about it and got two of them. I think they have turned out very well indeed. If you want any I can get them and send them out.”

Madam Tussauds, London, with storage facilities at many locations, regretfully reports inability to find any record of the fate—or current whereabouts—of either the Bruce waxwork, or that of William Morris Hughes (commonly referred to by Bruce as ‘Little Hughes’) that stood, too, in its display of Colonial Premiers in 1928–29. The jug to which Casey refers, monochrome, with the stylised face of Bruce on its prow, was one of a numbered limited-edition series made at Surrey’s Ashtead Pottery, established in 1923 to provide employment for disabled ex-servicemen. Number 1 of the 500 Bruce character jugs is in the collection of the NPG Canberra, its full provenance, exasperatingly, unknown.

No one would expect to learn anything of the character of Bruce from studying his costumed dummy, or, despite its generic name, the ‘character jug’ that incorporates his face (although we can infer a little about Casey’s intimacy with Bruce, and certain assumptions the two men shared about dress, class, nationality and taste from Casey’s few words). Charlotte Townsend-Gault advances the idea that the difference between an effigy and a portrait is that the latter relies on ‘conveying interiority’. The usefulness of this distinction can be tested by comparison of various representations of Bruce. William McInnes’s ‘sad statesman’ profile portrait of him in the HMC recalls Tittler’s description of portraits of men of ‘sadd and wise manner’ against plain backdrops of black or brown. Its sombre palette is relieved only by delicate flesh tones and flashes of white with a glint of gold. The curve of the sitter’s back is reprised in the chair arm. His long fingers are relaxed, his nails gleam discreetly. Heavy silk tassels balance the composition. With its exceptional quality of stillness, its sitter the very model of composure, the work is a good example of a portrait that might be said to ‘convey interiority’. Indeed, soon after it was painted, it was deemed ‘a striking and searching revelation of the man’. Striking it may be; but while those who approach the portrait knowing something of Bruce’s background and personality may find either their admiration of his ways or their mistrust of his politico-social milieu confirmed, no amount of searching the painting will reveal anything more about Bruce than will searching the Ashtead jug (which actually has an interior). The mystique of the ‘searching revelation’ is punctured by a photograph of Bruce sitting on a platform as McInnes goes about his job in

64 Hudson and North, My Dear P.M., letter dated 31 January 1929, 451.
68 ‘Prominent Personalities: WB McInnes’, Table Talk (Melbourne), 11 November 1926, 17.
his Alphington studio in May 1925. All the painting can reveal is that McInnes chose to paint Bruce’s patrician profile, and asked him to look at a point across the room. The most reliable thing the portrait can tell us is that we are primed to interpret a ‘faraway’ gaze as indicative of introspection. Neither of two very different biographers of Bruce mentions it.

An ‘incisively observant’ portraitist paints William McMahon

Between 1950 and 1958 the handsome artist Ivor Hele, who painted more works on commission than any other Australian portraitist, had 17 works exhibited in the Archibald Prize and was victorious five times. In 1954 he won for his portrait of Robert Menzies, a man who, according to biographer Troy Bramston, ‘even looked prime ministerial’ for reasons including his height and weight. Hele’s last portrait sitter was Malcolm Fraser. In between Menzies and Fraser he painted a prime minister shorter and lighter than either of them: William McMahon, described by Menzies as a ‘little brute’. In Tiberius with a Telephone, Patrick Mullins compares McMahon to a third big prime minister, suggesting that the electoral contest between McMahon and Gough Whitlam had as much to do with their appearance as their policies: ‘He was short where Whitlam was tall; thin where Whitlam was broad-chested. He was faint-voiced where Whitlam’s [voice] was sure; bald where Whitlam sported a full head of hair. Abuzz and flighty where Whitlam was deliberate, McMahon simply could not help but appear a pitiably small figure by comparison.’ He alludes to cartoonists’ drawings of McMahon ‘as a gnome-like figure, short and weedy, a big-eared, ageing dwarf’.

Curator Jane Hylton writes that as Ivor Hele was ‘incisively observant’ his sitters were confident they would be portrayed as dignified and strong … and that some aspect of their closely observed personality would enliven the completed picture. Yet a glance through Tiberius with a Telephone illustrates the difficulties this expert painter faced in rendering either a professional apotheosis or an intimate interpretation of this inconsistent subject:

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69 ‘Happy Voyagers: Feeding the Workless: Mr Bruce’s Portrait’, *Herald* (Melbourne), 27 May 1925, 18. The portrait was hung in Queen’s Hall in October 1926. ‘Mr Bruce Takes His Place’, *Herald* (Melbourne), 21 October 1926, 6.


Averse to late nights, favouring a good night’s sleep, disdainful of conversations without meaning or purpose … an immensely charming man … At dinners and at parties, in meetings, and indeed in idle conversations, McMahon could be witty and lively, humorous and quick. ‘He is a charming and generous host and a gracious guest and is surprisingly attractive to women,’ Don Chipp would later say … ‘He could be charming, but he was always trying too hard,’ journalist Mungo MacCallum … said later.

Mullins writes that to Alan Ramsey, ‘McMahon’s failings, inconsistencies and lies were simply a matter of character: “That was just the manner of the bloke”.’ Laurie Oakes said he was a ‘pathological liar’ who bordered on diseased; but his staff members did not think so. What aspect of this ‘closely observed’ personality was Hele to render?

Hele tackled McMahon’s portrait over several sittings at his studio in Aldinga, South Australia, towards the end of July 1972. McMahon said he found the artist ‘a delightful companion, interesting and amusing’. Notwithstanding that one of McMahon’s staffers said he had never seen him sit still for more than half an hour, the prime minister said: ‘I regard myself as a very self-disciplined person … If I know I have to do something I resign myself to it.’ The finished portrait was hung in Parliament House, Canberra, on Friday 1 June 1973, and pictured in the Canberra Times the following day beneath a report of the fatal stabbing of a shearers’ cook 80 miles north of Hay the previous night—a reminder that often, articles about new official portraits are juxtaposed with more interesting news. (In August 1909 a report of the unveiling of a portrait of one of Manly’s mayors ran alongside an account of the departure from Redfern railway station of the Chinese illusionist Chung Ling Soo, with assembled conjurors producing flags from thin air to wave as the train left the platform.)

Tiberius with a Telephone is 776 pages long, but neither features nor mentions Hele’s portrait of McMahon. It can only be concluded that Mullins wrote nothing about McMahon’s portrait because it added nothing to his understanding of his subject.

Practical challenges of prime ministerial portraiture

Prime ministerial portraits are affected by a variety of professional and practical challenges having nothing to do with the characters of their subjects. The file in the National Archives of Australia pertaining to William Dargie’s portrait of Arthur

75 Mullins, Tiberius with a Telephone, 472, 311.
76 ‘PM Poses for Ivor Hele’, Canberra Times, 26 July 1972, 1.
77 Evening News (Sydney), 7 August 1909, 5.
78 Mullins, Tiberius with a Telephone.
Fadden—prime minister for a mere 39 days between the giants Menzies and Curtin—reveals little about Fadden, but speaks of the frustrations of the professional portraitist. Commissioned in 1941, Dargie soon began work, but progress was delayed for various reasons. In January 1943 the CAAB inspected the portrait and asked Dargie to ‘effect several alterations’. A year later the HMC decided to accept it, subject to his being asked to ‘consider the remodelling of the forehead on the left-side and … the avoidance of the pinched appearance of the mouth’. On reinspection in October 1945 the HMC requested a completely new portrait. In July 1946 this was accepted, ‘subject to slight alterations, principally to the fingers and eyes’. The portrait was formally accepted in September 1947. Yet with his right arm drastically foreshortened and his hand in the foreground of the work, Fadden seems trapped in perpetuity too close to the picture plane, awkwardly cramped between artist and canvas. Dargie won the Archibald Prize eight times between 1941 and 1956, but it is conceivable that his trials with Fadden’s portrait gave rise to advice in his *On Painting a Portrait*:

Imagine you have begun your painting and after a certain length of time you realise that one arm, and, of course, the hand at the end of the arm, is pointing almost directly at you. Now any painter will find it very difficult to paint a hand and arm in this position: the foreshortening is abrupt, and the appearance of the hand is directly opposed to our natural idea of what we might call the ‘lengthiness’ of the hand when the wrist and fingers are at right-angles to the line of vision. The almost inevitable result will be that the hand and arm in the painting will look stumpy and unnatural … This, then, is the first hint for the amateur painter beginning a portrait: see that your subject is arranged in such a way that there is no abrupt foreshortening in either the arms, hands, or legs. The simplest way to achieve this result, of course, is to have your subject seated sideways on to the painter, so that the full length of the near arm and leg is clearly visible.\(^79\)

The foreshortened Fadden appears very unsophisticated compared to the languid and long-lashed Bruce, prudently rendered by McInnes side-on.

The HMC set of Australian prime ministerial portraits was imperilled in the mid-1940s, as both Curtin and Chifley—each customarily ranked among Australia’s outstanding, or inspiring, prime ministers\(^80\)—died before portrait projects commenced. Chifley was painted from photographs by Archibald Colquhoun in 1952.\(^81\) The National Archives’ file on the portrait of John Curtin runs to 134 pages. Letters therein reveal that in March 1943 one Frank Carter wrote straight to Curtin asking to paint his portrait, acknowledging that his direct approach was

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\(^81\) ‘Chifley’s Portrait for Canberra’, *Sunday Herald* (Sydney), 7 December 1952, 5.
unusual but explaining he was ‘fortified in some measure by the striking success which has resulted from your own direct methods’. We have read of the offer of Mrs Berry. Ivor Hele, however, was the CAAB’s choice. Initially, there was doubt over whether Captain Hele could be paid for a commission while on military service; Curtin put off sitting to him before travelling to England in 1944. There was some hope that Hele could set to in the autumn of 1945, but a sitting did not ensue; later, Hele refused the CAAB’s request to paint Curtin from a photograph. Will Rowell, commissioned to paint Curtin in March 1946, died in August that year. Ultimately, Curtin was painted from a photograph by the Sydney artist Antonio Dattilo Rubbo. The resulting portrait was acquired along with Joshua Smith’s characteristically disquieting rendering of Frank Forde, who appears to be snooping through papers on someone else’s desk. Cavaliere Rubbo’s portrait was minimally successful. According to the *Age*, Curtin’s features were there, but his ‘character’ was not; the painted man, a ‘cold ascetic’, was ‘scarcey recognisable as the sensitive emotional imaginative man who led Australia through its darkest hours’.\(^8^2\)

**Portraits to inspire: The professional apotheosis versus the intimate interpretation**

Portraits exist for various reasons other than to ‘give the future anything that will show what you all were as men to look at’, in Tom Roberts’s words. The idea that portraits of heroes, dutiful citizens or the eminent are able to inspire or edify a viewer dates to the late sixteenth century or before.\(^8^3\) Thomas Carlyle envisaged the NPG London as a place where ‘unconsciously but very veritably, the better parts of the soul of all might worship’.\(^8^4\) Marcia Pointon notes the gratification of the trustees of that institution when tidy working-class lads, ‘charity children’ and ‘those belonging to the humblest classes’ visited.\(^8^5\) Faith in the capacity of portraits to spur the viewer to achievement apparently underlies the comments of a reviewer of John Singer Sargent’s 1917 portrait of Woodrow Wilson:

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\text{[T]he expression is one of thoughtful contemplation rather than attention. It is
dignified, simple and extremely reticent … It is the portrait of a scholar, a man of
thought rather than action, and of a tired man at that … One cannot but feel a shade
doing disappointment.} \quad \text{\_8\text{6}}
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\(^8^2\) ‘News of the Day: Notables in Oils’, *Age* (Melbourne), 9 October 1947, 2.
\(^8^3\) West, *Portraiture*, 25.
\(^8^4\) North, ‘Portraying Portraiture’, 470.
In 2008 the *Guardian*’s visual arts critic, Jonathan Jones, wrote about a work in the collection of the Parliament of the United Kingdom: *Tony Blair MP* (2007) by Philip Oliver Hale. Hale painted Blair from an elevated perspective, looking across an implied interior in an apparently moody way. (Subverting the notion of the portraitist’s X-ray gaze, the artist said he was ‘lucky’ that Blair had things other than his portrait to worry about; ‘he didn’t perform, and I didn’t divine.’) Jones observed that while the portrait was ‘honest’ and had ‘gravitas’, Blair looked ‘knackered’ and ‘fed up’ in it. The two critics’ reactions, nearly 100 years apart, raise the question of desirable qualities in a portrait of a leader. I suggest that ‘dignity’, ‘simplicity’, ‘honesty’ and ‘gravitas’ are characteristics of a ‘professional apotheosis’ portrait, while a weary or exasperated appearance may conduce to an ‘intimate interpretation’. Cherie Blair, for her part, said at the time of the unveiling that the subject of Hale’s portrait did not look like the man her husband was ‘today’—post-prime ministership.

The intimate interpretations of Wilson and Blair contrast with an example of an energetic ‘apotheosis’ portrait in the Australian Historic Memorials Collection: Alfred Deakin’s by Frederick McCubbin. In 1914–15 McCubbin created a painted man whose bright eyes and slight smile bespeak energy and curiosity; his forward step implies purpose and a ‘man of action’. By contrast, in early October 1914 the real Deakin saw himself as ‘so small, so superficial, so shadowy, so little even reflected of the man I once was’. Upon its assimilation into the HMC in March 1915, the *Argus* commented ‘Mr Deakin’s portrait is undoubtedly good, though it is hardly the Mr Deakin of today’. The epitome/transient mood dichotomy may be expressed as a question: on what day should a prime minister be portrayed?

### Contrasting, contemporaneous views of Joseph Cook

The wall of prime ministerial portraits in Canberra’s Parliament House is a logical place for school groups to gather and be informed that many of the Australian prime ministers inched towards the top job from impecunious childhoods in small country towns and working-class suburbs. Joseph Cook is outstanding among the Australian prime ministers whose childhood was not easeful. Born in an English mining town, he started work as a pit boy at nine, returning to support his family when he was 13, driving horses, oiling machinery and hewing at the coalface (Cook actually *was* a ‘little digger’). He taught himself auditing and bookkeeping and grew into a Primitive Methodist, with ‘no interest in sport, and little sense of humour.

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88 Brett, *Enigmatic Mr Deakin*, 414.
He never touched alcohol, and he detested gambling and tobacco. He ... was a
poor and unwilling dancer. He disliked travel and preferred to spend his holidays
working at home. He enjoyed singing, but only hymns’. 90

Biographer Frank Crowley described Cook as ‘hard-working, physically tireless and
shrewd’. 91 However, Cook’s Historic Memorials portrait, unusual in the display
(along with William McInnes’s portrait of Scullin and Vincent Fantauzzo’s of Julia
Gillard) in that the subject faces the viewer at close range with no hands visible,
is a ‘tired-man’ painting. Norman Carter was commissioned to paint him in 1916.
By that time Cook was minister for the navy; in 1917 he became deputy prime
minister. Carter was busy himself, teaching at Sydney Tech and in demand for
portraits. Records show that the artist made two attempts at Cook before a gentle,
almost tender ‘oil sketch’ was accepted by the HMC in May 1921. The painted
Cook’s pointed beard and moustache, a soft pale grey, are nattily trimmed, the
moustache tips upturned. But neither natty nor puissant does he look. With his
eyebrows slightly drawn together, his darkened eyes downcast, the painted Cook
looks weary, distant, a little lost. The portrait could well be read as an intimate
interpretation of the toll taken by the execution of public duty during a tragic and
tumultuous period of history, but it is not an image likely to inspire a young person
to a life in public service.

At 87, Norman Carter recalled the juggling act of concentrating on a canvas while
observing and listening to a sitter:

It [can take] a fairly long time to do a picture—you’ve got to study a man, get
his character ... Usually, I used to get him to talk ... But the difficulty is dealing
with certain people. Some sit too still and the result is you cannot get them as they
are. Then you strike some fortunate subject that draws out the man—for instance
politicians, particularly, you’d speak about their enemies and you can’t stop them
from talking. In studying for a portrait of a man you have to draw the man himself
out, not merely do it to a certain principle ... You gradually get to know that man,
separated from all the rest of the people; find out what he is.

The artist recalls ‘There was one sitter I had that wouldn’t talk—and people’s first
thing they said when they saw the picture was “it looks as though he didn’t talk”. I
said “He didn’t—he wouldn’t”’. 92 Was it Cook? Or did Cook ‘sit too still’ for Carter

90 John Murdoch, Sir Joe: A Biographical Sketch of Joseph Cook (Stoke on Trent, UK: A Silverdale Historical
91 F. K. Crowley, ‘Cook, Sir Joseph (1860–1947)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography,
The Australian National University, adh.anu.edu.au/biography/cook-sir-joseph-5763/text9765, published first in
92 Norman St Clair Carter interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Hazel de Berg collection [sound recording], 1962,
to ‘get him as he was’? Certainly few would suspect that the man in Carter’s portrait, soon to be appointed Australia’s High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, would ‘immensely [enjoy] London’s social round’.  

While the Carter portrait was in train, Joseph Cook and William Morris Hughes were both painted by the Scottish artist James Guthrie in preparation for his whopping group portrait *Statesmen of World War I* (1930). This painting, in the NPG London, is readily confused with one in the Imperial War Museum, London, *The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles 28 June 1919* (1919) by William Orpen in which Hughes also features. Sixteen of the men in Guthrie’s painting posed for him individually and his oil studies were acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland in September 1920. So it is that the National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, now holds the luminous oil sketches, made in 1919, of Hughes and Cook. The latter shows a pale-eyed man in a shaft of light, his slight squint conducing to a determined, visionary look, his crow’s-feet suggesting a very faint smile (did we not know, from reading, that he did not, we might infer Cook had a sense of humour). His dark moustache dangles into his uneven, paler beard. His elbow rests on the back of his chair; his hand hangs loosely yet the closed fingers convey an impression of resolve. Appearing to be looking at the ceiling cornice on the other side of the room, alone, he seems to be listening. (In Guthrie’s finished *Statesmen of World War I* (1930), he seems, as do others, to be listening to Arthur Balfour.) Perhaps Cook simply had a better time with Guthrie than he did with Carter; but Cook’s future biographers would do well to note that the man in the portrait refined and reworked by Carter in Australia between 1916 and 1921 looks older and more dispirited than the one painted by Guthrie in 1919 in a study for a work representing an imaginary scene taking place in World War I but not completed until 1930.

**Branding, power and the impulse to collect**

Series or sets of portraits of mayors, directors and prime ministers are not mere evidence that various people have existed and held jobs. To a significant degree, they exist for purposes of state or corporate branding and assertion of power and continuity. The expectation of portraits in sites of control such as private schools, courts and houses of parliament is ideological; we hardly see them, let alone

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93 Crowley, ‘Cook, Sir Joseph’.  
95 ‘Empire War Statesmen’, *Times* (London), 8 September 1920, 8.  
97 Francis Crowley twice uses the word ‘humourless’ in his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Cook.
wonder why they exist, or what their subjects were like to be around. Art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault refers acidly to the bland physiognomies of subjects of contemporary portraits of ‘patent mediocrity’ in the ‘dining halls of the universities and the Inns of Court, the head offices of the banks, the reception rooms of the Royal Society, the grand staircase of the Royal College of Physicians, the boardrooms of Times Newspapers and United Biscuits’. She argues that institutional portrait collections, typically exhibiting very little stylistic deviation (as in the case of the Australian prime ministerial portraits), amount to a Foucaultian ‘code’ imposing discipline and normalisation.98

Portrait sets are also impelled by an impulse common to many children and some adults to collect—expressed at its utmost by dedicated collectors with defined goals, progress towards which will bring pleasure and fulfilment of which will bolster self-esteem. (Some Australian prime ministers have been represented on ‘collectables’ of a domestic nature: the National Portrait Gallery, London, has Ardath ‘Empire Personalities’ tobacco cards representing Stanley Bruce and Joseph Lyons,99 and in the author’s possession is a miniature portrait of W. M. Hughes on silk, issued with purchase of BDV Cigarettes as part of its series ‘Great War Leaders’ in 1916.) Compared with the proclamation of power and normativity, amassing a complete set seems like an ingenuous driver; yet there is also a palliative purpose. It has been noted that, often, adult collectors maintain that their hoards represent an artistic and historic legacy that will benefit ‘future generations … [imbuing] collecting with a heightened sense of purpose and destiny’.100

Once announced and commenced, the accumulation of a public collection cannot halt without management of public expectations. On the website of the Sydney Town Hall is a one-minute voice recording about the many portraits on display in the building. A full 10 seconds of the audio are given over to explaining why not all mayors are represented.101 Visitor services staff know that an incomplete set is dissatisfying, and possibly even alarming, to the public. Questions will be asked, as they are about the commissioned John Howard and Janette Howard (2000) by Josonia Palaitis in the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, posited as the first in a series of portraits of Australian prime ministers and their life partners, but also the last such image created, for various personal and practical reasons.102 Although the current prime minister is not expected to be represented within their term, the set of prime ministerial portraits in Parliament House, Canberra, is currently well out of

date: portraits of Kevin Rudd, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull are outstanding. It is to be hoped that they will materialise soon. Non-fulfilment of the collection may imply broader political and cultural inertia, indecisiveness and obliviousness to tradition, possibly giving rise to anxiety on the part of those few concerned with certain cultural practices.

Rejected: George Reid and W. M. Hughes

Looming large in such discussion as exists of Australia’s prime ministerial portraits is a painting of Sir George Reid undertaken in 1913. By that time Reid had already been the subject of countless Australian caricatures; a fine plaster medallion by Nelson Illingworth that, according to the *Sunday Times*, his friends were using to adorn their homes and his enemies a target for pistol practice; and a 5-inch ‘paperweight or ornament’ of Lithgow iron manufactured in commercial quantity in 1910.103 (Among a good handful of portraits of Australian leaders held overseas are photographs of Reid held in the Library of Congress, Washington.)104 In August 1912 the new CAAB recommended the creation of portraits of Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin and Reid, by then living in Britain as Australia’s first high commissioner.105 The HMC commissioned Reid’s portrait from George Washington Lambert, formerly of Sydney but by then working among the most exciting painters in Edwardian London. The fate of the ensuing work is notoriously indicative of the CAAB’s conservative, narrow ambitions for prime ministerial portraiture in Australia.

In the collection of Sydney’s Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences is a pencil drawing, indicating Lambert’s attention to the distinctive elements of Reid’s face, conceivably made in preparation for the portrait.106 The finished painting is stark and sharp-focused. Appearing to have wedged himself into a low-backed ‘Savonarola’ chair, Reid looks towards the viewer with bespectacled head slightly cocked. His hands, hanging loosely over the tips of the chair arms, and his splayed legs, terminating in shiny shoes, look small compared to his large torso. Nearby are a curtain and

a table on which lie two books, sandwiching a dangling document. Art historian Anne Gray writes that the work was ‘unexceptional’ among portraits by respected contemporary British artists; British critics thought it combined ‘good portraiture, accomplished artistry and a subtle sense of humour’; Sir George was ‘delighted’ with the painting; and Bertram Mackennal, the CAAB’s agent in London, approved of it. However, in the body of existing Australian portraiture it was anomalous.107

The HMC, which Gray calls ‘a cautious and conservative body with a preference for tonalism’ and a propensity to return works for revision, felt that the oil portrait of Reid lacked dignity.108 Gray reports that the Bookfellow of 14 December 1914 judged: ‘Sir George Reid deserved better treatment than some of the others; if he has got worse, that fits the evil fortune which dogs nearly all Government attempts to patronise art.’109 In early 1915 the Sydney Evening News reported that the HMC felt it inadvisable, for the present, to hang the portrait publicly as ‘it has met with much criticism, which is likely to bring discredit upon the artist and the board’.110 Melbourne’s Punch was unsurprised that London’s Morning Post picked up on the committee’s ‘grotesque’ treatment of the artist. Calling Lambert a great painter and deeming the portrait of Reid ‘easily the finest of the portraits the orders of the Memorials Committee have produced’, Punch’s correspondent argued that Reid, a man of ‘enormous disproportions’, could not be made picturesque, for ‘he is in some sense a national caricature, and admits the fact every time he gets on his heels before a crowd’.111

George Lambert’s portrait of Reid was accepted by the HMC, and it hung briefly in Parliament House, Melbourne, but by early 1925 it had been replaced by a portrait of William Morris Hughes fared scarcely better. Having rejected a portrait commissioned from Norman Carter, Hughes sat to a Bendigo artist, Marion Jones, of whose portrait he said, ‘It’s not justice I require, but mercy, and I’ve found it’; but the HMC did not acquire Jones’s effort.112 Hughes sat to Lambert 12 times in February 1927, but repudiated the finished work.113 In 1930, Lambert died, aged 56. In 1947 Hughes conceded to the display of Carter’s painting, rectifying the long absence of any portrait of Hughes in the King’s Hall display,115 but shortly after Hughes’s death, the

108 Gray, Art and Artifice, 56–57.
110 Evening News (Sydney), 29 January 1915, 4.
111 Punch (Melbourne), 11 February 1915, 13.
112 ‘In the Public Eye’, Observer (Adelaide), 17 January 1925, 35.
115 ‘Rejected Portrait of Mr Hughes Finally Accepted’, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 September 1947, 7.
portrait by Lambert, the more highly regarded painter, took its place. Lambert’s Hughes still hangs in the prime ministerial array in Parliament House, ratifying Walter Benjamin’s observation that after a few generations, any portrait is ‘no more than a testimony to the art of the person who painted it’.

In his biographical study George Reid (1989), W. G. McMinn mentions neither Lambert’s portrait of his subject, nor any other—even Charles Web Gilbert’s marble bust, presented to Reid, somewhat unusually, by his Commonwealth Office staff on his retirement in 1916. The only portrait-related story Reid tells in his own copious memoir My Reminiscences (1917) concerns how he was sometimes mistaken in London for the Scottish portraitist Sir George Reid, president of the Royal Scottish Academy; he recalls the time ‘a very distinguished lady paid me a number of charming compliments upon a painting of her husband I had done’. Our Reid was in the United States when the Scotsman died and found ‘his American obituary notice dwelt quite as much upon my excellence as a painter as upon the events of my public career’.

A note on the multi-medium memento-set

This essay has sought to cast doubt on Henry James’s poetic fancy of the capacity of portrait painters to see deep into their subjects, undergo them, absorb them, discover in them new things that were not on the surface, ‘and, in short, elevate and humanize the technical problem’. Oil portraits are ideological in certain locations, but they are not the only form of portraiture. Perhaps other forms of exhibited media are better suited to conveying something of the biographical subject’s interiority. John Berger wrote in the 1960s that he doubted any important portraits in traditional mediums would ever be produced again. However, he could imagine them superseded by ‘multi-medium memento-sets devoted to the character of particular individuals’. What would this look like? The MOAD collection includes a trove of mundane personal objects associated with prime ministers such as a pair of shoelaces, instructions for a rechargeable shaver and some contact lens equipment that were Bob Hawke’s; a tie and a bike of Tony Abbott’s; and Edmund Barton’s Star of the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George. It has furnishings known to have been handled by prime ministers and is a stakeholder in electronic resources allowing enthusiasts to locate objects such as Ben Chifley’s toaster or Joe Lyons’s satchel in Australian collections. Such items can be, and many have been,

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exhibited among other, diverse material in a biographical ‘portrait’ of an individual such as the National Archives of Australia’s ‘multi-medium memento-set’ exhibition Stanley Melbourne Bruce: Prime Minister and Statesman in 2009–10, or Sir Edmund Barton: Australia’s First Prime Minister, in Parliament House at the time of writing. Future developments in this kind of exhibit, especially the incorporation of digital video, may prove more illuminating to the political biographer than an oil portrait, as each artefact triggers reflection on an aspect of a personality or career, rather than purporting to encapsulate either. However, such exhibitions demand the input of curatorial, conservation and design personnel, are potentially costly to mount, require a good deal of space and are rarely shown in perpetuity. Even vintage photographs cannot be displayed constantly. There is this to be said for oil portraits: once commissioned, completed, approved and hung, they are no trouble.

Conclusion

The idea that skilled professional portraitists afford an almost ineffable insight into their subjects’ characters is tenacious. Consideration of the circumstances of production of portraits in series, such as successive prime ministerial portraits, may shift public assumptions about the nature and purpose of portraiture. The practicalities of staging a portrait, including the historical moment of its production, will often militate against a portraitist’s capacity to reveal the authentic subject, even if they were capable of that in the first place. It is demonstrable that Australian prime ministers’ biographers have rarely, if ever, examined oil portraits in an attempt to know their subjects better. Biographers and subjects alike have occasionally favoured portraits by lesser artists over those by artists of higher reputation; occasionally critics have decried outcomes of the HMC commissioning process. Prime ministerial portraits in Australia, like many series of portraits elsewhere, are driven by motives other than showing ‘what you were as men to look at’. They fall more often into the category of ‘professional apotheosis’ than ‘intimate interpretation’; even those works that suggest the subject’s ‘interiority’ may be misleading. Prime ministerial portraits have been created for purposes of bolstering and reproducing the public authority of the office itself, of inspiring perceived audiences, and satisfying on the part of the interested public an impulse to ‘collect a set’. Recently, the heterogeneity of the Australian prime ministerial set was interrupted by the inclusion of a shiny portrait of the country’s first female prime minister, its artist chosen by its subject. Whether or not future biographies of Julia Gillard will refer to that portrait remains to be seen.

‘They have put a cyclist in’: The political lives of Australia’s sporting champions

DANIEL OAKMAN

Winning the federal electorate of Corio has not been easy for Australian conservatives. Never has this been more apparent than in 1949, when the Geelong-centred seat, 80 kilometres west of Melbourne, was firmly in the hands of Australian Labor Party firebrand and minister for postwar reconstruction John Dedman. Nonetheless, the recently formed Liberal Party moved their challenger and his family to the electorate and prepared him for battle against one of Labor’s most experienced and respected members. When the Liberal leader, Robert Menzies, learned of his party’s preferred candidate, he was understandably concerned. He told Dedman’s private secretary, unable to hide his dismay, that ‘they [my party] have made a present of Corio to your minister’, as ‘they have put a cyclist in’.¹

The cyclist was no ordinary pedal-pusher. Better known as ‘Oppy’, Hubert Opperman had been an international sporting icon of the 1920s and 1930s and a unifying symbol of Australian fortitude during the Depression.² Although his sporting halo had begun to fade, he remained in the pantheon of Australia’s sporting legends, alongside the cricketer Sir Donald Bradman and the racehorse Phar Lap. As the Brisbane Courier announced in 1932, just a few months after the horse’s death in America: ‘There was only one Phar Lap: there is only one “Oppy”’.³

Opperman pedalled his Malvern Star around the electorate, reminding his would-be electors of his once-prominent place in the national imagination. Federal president of the Liberal Party Richard Casey lent credibility to Oppy’s campaign, declaring that the former sporting hero had a ‘more thorough and sympathetic understanding of the needs of the Australian people than [he] had heard in a long time’.⁴

³ “‘Oppy’ Comes at Last”, Brisbane Courier, 2 August 1932, 3. See also ‘High Gear’, ‘Cycling’, Telegraph (Brisbane), 29 January 1932, 11.
⁴ ‘Thinks “Oppy” Will Defeat Minister’, Advocate (Burnie), 9 June 1949, 5.
Overconfident, Dedman campaigned from outside the electorate. He crowed that come election day he would be as far ahead in the poll as Opperman would be if they were riding to Canberra on bicycles.5

The cricket-loving Menzies might have preferred a representative of the noble game, but the gamble with a cyclist paid off. In one of the major upsets of the election, Opperman won by a few hundred votes. Dedman never quite got over the humiliation of losing to a mere bike rider and failed to retake Corio at the next two elections. Opperman thrived in his new role. He held Corio for 17 years, serving as government whip, minister for shipping and transport (1960–63) and minister for immigration (1963–66) before he retired to become Australia’s first high commissioner to Malta.

As one of the few to have scaled the heights of both the sporting and political arenas, Opperman stands apart, but not alone.6 While no comparable sporting great has ever held ministerial portfolios of such significance or influence, he belongs to a rich national tradition of the sportsperson-turned-politician.

**Sporting politicians**

While not unique, Australia’s enthusiasm for sport extends deeply into the cultural life of the nation.7 It has also left an indelible mark on its politics. ‘The myth that politics and sport don’t mix dies hard indeed,’ wrote the pioneering sports historian Colin Tatz in 1995, ‘especially in Australia.’8 Since the 1850s and the establishment of the colonial legislatures, former sportsmen and sportswomen have played a significant role in every elected assembly in Australia. As a group, sportsperson-turned-politicians offer a fascinating prism through which to explore the intersection of sport, class, race, gender, social mobility and the significance of place. This article explores each of these themes and aims to provide a more finely textured understanding of Australian political life and its relationship to sporting culture. It surveys a range of experiences and describes when and where former sports champions have found success. It explores why some of Australia’s greatest sporting heroes chose to pursue public office and how they adapted to life as elected representatives. It also examines their political legacy. As well as reviewing the careers of sportspeople who attained political office, there is a brief survey of those who failed to achieve their political ambitions. Questions about why sporting prowess

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6 Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in Australian Culture* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 64.
As historian Bill Mandle has argued, Australia’s passion for sport and athletic excellence has, since British settlement, been an important way to quash fears about ‘the possible physical degeneration of the English race in the bright Australian climate’. Australia prided itself on the healthiness of its population and sport became central to debates about national identity and character. Importantly, Australians have not only been mere enthusiastic watchers of sport. Surveys routinely show that almost a third of Australians participate in a sport organised by a club, association or other organisation. As writer Gideon Haigh puts it, ‘We’re a nation of amateurs, a bastion of dabblers and duffers.’ Australia’s participant culture, while not exceptional, has fostered a deep understanding of the work, discipline and sacrifice necessary to excel at the highest level.

Scholars have written extensively about the political and cultural symbolism of sport, especially its role as a signifier of national identity. Yet, given the cultural pervasiveness of sport, it is surprising that the phenomenon of the competitor-turned-politician has not been subject to a more detailed study. The political scientist Joan Rydon briefly turned her attention to the subject in her magisterial study of the composition of the Commonwealth Parliament, published in 1986. She estimated that between 1949 and 1980, about 9 per cent of new members were known for their ‘sporting prowess’, although she does not provide any detail on how she defines it. Sporting interests, Rydon argued, have been as conspicuous as military service in the lives of Australian politicians. Of Commonwealth parliamentarians, 125 served during the colonial wars and World War I and 164 saw active service during World War II. In state legislatures, the numbers are likely to be similar.

During the mid-twentieth century, it was common for parliamentarians to have a sporting and military background. Granville Ryrie, a veteran of the South African War and World War I before he embarked on his successful political career, enjoyed

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12 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 64.
success as a heavyweight boxer. Ross Hutchinson played football in Western Australia during the 1930s and 1940s, flew with the Royal Australian Air Force in the skies over Europe, and then held the state division of Cottesloe in 1955 for the Liberal Party for over two decades. Empire Games rowing gold medallist Gordon Freeth flew Beaufort bombers in New Guinea during World War II before winning a seat in the Menzies-led Coalition Government in 1949. He held the seat until 1969 and then served as ambassador to Japan and high commissioner to the United Kingdom. Before Labor stalwart Tom Uren became a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II, he had shown considerable athletic promise. In the 1930s, he swam competitively and played rugby league for Manly-Warringah. But it was boxing that he ‘lived for’. In 1940, he challenged Billy Britt for the professional heavyweight championship of Australia.\(^\text{16}\) Opperman, too, had served with the Royal Australian Air Force in Australia during World War II in training and leadership positions.

For this article, I define a sportsperson-turned-politician as someone who had a significant sporting career before their election to public office instead of individuals who were simply physically active or occasional participants in competitions and games. By significant, I mean professional or amateur players and athletes who engaged in representative, competitive sport at the highest level. These individuals covered a broad spectrum of competitive achievement, including those who might have played a few seasons of football or first-grade cricket, through to elite sporting figures who won national champions or captured international attention.\(^\text{17}\) Even by this restricted definition, the numbers are significant. Based on my review of Wikipedia and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, I estimate that no less than 175 sporting figures of this calibre have held public office at federal, state or local levels.\(^\text{18}\) Almost 70 per cent (119) entered state assemblies, with nearly 18 per cent (31) elected to Commonwealth Parliament (both the House of Representative and the Senate). Just over 16 per cent (28) served on local councils.

Particular states have shown more consistent support for sportspeople-turned-politicians than others. For instance, in Western Australia, about 30 members of the state parliament have played one or more games of Australian Rules football. Some of the more prominent players-turned-politicians include John Dolan, Stanley Heal, Ray McPharlin and Trevor Sprigg.\(^\text{19}\) The electors of Tasmania have expressed a clear

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\(^{19}\) ‘History Brief: Footballers in the House’, Parliamentary Library, Western Australia, 2013.
preference for sportspeople, electing no fewer than 17 high-profile former cricketers and footballers to the state assembly since the 1860s, such as Rex Townley, John Devine and Ray Groom.

Among the steady stream of former cricketers and footballers that held seats before World War II were a handful of rowers, swimmers and track athletes. Postwar, the sports played by politicians expanded to include boxing, cycling, powerlifting, billiards, skiing, basketball, bodybuilding and auto-racing. There were some notable exceptions.

The only wrestler to hold office in Australia was the former Queensland champion John Atkinson, mayor of Toowoomba in 1913. A skilled debater, boxer and mathematician, he stood for the state Legislative Assembly on two occasions, but without success.

The North American game of lacrosse was another of the more uncommon sports mastered by an Australian politician. As a young man, John Latham, member for Kooyong (1922–34) and chief justice of Australia (1935–52), played for the University of Melbourne and represented Victoria in interstate matches. In 1907, he played against a visiting Canadian team in the first series of international lacrosse matches ever held in Australia. Latham maintained a lifelong interest in the game, at various times patron and vice-president of the Victorian Lacrosse Association.

The arch-conservative Sir Arthur Campbell Rymill, lord mayor of Adelaide in 1950, excelled at the most unusual mix of sporting interests of any Australian public officer. Rymill representing South Australia in interstate polo matches from 1933 to 1951, including the Gold Cup tournament in Sydney in 1938. A keen golfer and yachtsman, he also raced speedboats. In 1933, he drove his father’s boat to victory in the Australian hydroplane championships. The following year, Rymill and his crew were lucky to survive an accident during an interstate championship race when his boat flipped at 113 kilometres per hour.

The summer game

For all the variety of sporting talent exhibited by Australian politicians, cricket overwhelmingly shaped the composition of the colonial assemblies and the early decades of the Commonwealth Parliament. Cricket was part of colonial society’s cultural fabric and nurtured the social connections vital for any player with political ambitions. Belonging to the close-knit cricket fraternity—and being seen to belong—

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21 In the 1920s, Latham, along with Earle Page, was the tennis champion of the federal Cabinet.
was the first step for many on the path to power. Once elected, many politicians continued to play cricket and took up senior administrative roles, further extending their influence.\(^\text{22}\)

A long career or on-field prowess did not necessarily matter. Adye Douglas, premier of Tasmania in the mid-1880s, played only one first-class match for Tasmania, scoring a duck in his first inning and six in his second.\(^\text{23}\) His association with the Launceston Club proved more enduring and formed the bedrock of his social and political reach. He launched his political career a year after his rather forgettable on-field display. He became one of Tasmania’s most prominent citizens.\(^\text{24}\)

In the 1880s, businessman and aspiring politician John Beveridge crafted an image of himself as a well-rounded gentleman, astute in matters of money, culture and colonial politics. Cricket, however, lay at the heart of his self-image. As the *Illustrated Sydney News* explained in series of profiles of leaders of the ‘mercantile world’:

> A thorough believer in the old maxim, that a healthy body makes a clear head, Mr Beveridge attributes much of his success in business to his devotion to the noble game of cricket … For the last ten years he has been captain of the Surrey United Cricket Club … Any afternoon during the season he can be seen intensely interested in the game he loves so well.\(^\text{25}\)

Elected to the Redfern Municipal Council in 1886, Beveridge served briefly as mayor in 1891. He was instrumental in making the suburb the first in Sydney to have electricity and electric street lighting.

Cricket has not been the exclusive pastime of the socially and politically conservative.\(^\text{26}\) Just as a declared interest in cricket connoted social respectability, it also exposed class tensions. Born in Cabramatta in 1829, Richard Driver fell in love with cricket in his mid-20s when he started playing for New South Wales. He launched his political career advocating for the rights of native-born Australians at around the same time. To his critics, Driver’s passion for the British game was at odds with his belief that those born in Australian suffered discrimination at the hands of the English-born. Just who did he seek to represent, asked the *Southern Cross*, ‘the cricketing clubs’ or ‘the Cabbage-Tree Mob?’\(^\text{27}\) (A predecessor of the larrikin, gangs of rowdy youths were known as cabbage tree mobs because of their distinctive hats made from native palm leaves. It was also a pejorative term for native-born

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26 Hutchins, ‘Social-conservatism,’ 57–58.
27 ‘Young Impudence’, *Southern Cross*, 5 November 1859, 2.
Australians.) For the independent-minded Driver, representing the interests of the Australian-born did not preclude a passion for a game synonymous with the mother country. Indeed, it proved the opposite. Aware of cricket’s importance to Australia’s emerging national identity, he was a chief organiser of the visits of English cricket teams and intercolonial matches. Driver went on to spend 25 years in the New South Wales colonial assembly. A popular figure in Sydney, he also enjoyed rowing, sailing and horse-racing. He was instrumental in preserving Sydney Common (Moore Park), and while minister for lands he secured funds to improve the Sydney Cricket Ground. A road on the west side of the ground bears his name.

In the decades after World War II, sport underwent a major revival and diversification. Schools began to diversity their sports programs from the traditional pursuits of rugby, cricket and rowing. Australian success at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne also left a legacy of interest in other athletic pursuits, including track and field, swimming and track cycling. The popularity of cricket waned against a fresh enthusiasm for tennis and Australian Rules football, both games boosted by radio and television coverage.

Across the country, the number of sporting figures elected to parliaments rose dramatically. Political parties of all stripes courted prominent sportsmen (the first sportswomen to enter parliament was still decades away), each hoping to gain votes from a population with more leisure time to enjoy and identify with sport. Both sides of politics, however, had failed to entice cricketing legend Don Bradman into the fold. ‘The idea is not even in the back of my mind,’ he said when the offers started in the late 1930s. After a decade, he had grown tired of the overtures and constant speculation. ‘I hope this will be the last time I have to answer this question,’ he said in 1948, finally dispelling a rumour that he had sought endorsement to stand for the Liberal Party at the next federal election.

Cricket had already started to lose its influence over the political arena, despite a few fabled players still prepared to take to the hustings, such as Sam Loxton, Rex Townley and Gil Langley. Overall, footballers were in the ascendancy. Nowhere was this more evident than in Victoria, where football had been the leading winter entertainment of suburban Melbourne since the 1860s. By mid-century, Victorians were increasingly happy to vote for the players they had once barracked for during the weekend rounds.

Not to be outdone, the rugby (league and union) playing states elected several high-profile ex-players into office during the postwar decades, including Michael Cleary, Clive Evatt, Paul Gibson, Mike Horan, Mike Veivers, Ron McAuliffe and Kevin

28 Haigh, Silent Revolutions, 9.
29 ‘Don Bradman’, Newcastle Morning Herald, 30 May 1938, 7.
Ryan. One sportsman and rugby player who enjoyed a long political career was Francis ‘Frank’ Stewart.31 As a soldier in World War II, Stewart was the Australian Army Service Corps’ light-heavyweight boxing champion. He played first-grade league football for Canterbury-Bankstown between 1948 and 1950. A member of the Labor Party, Stewart won a seat in federal parliament in 1953, where he served until 1979. In 1974, as minister for tourism and recreation, he appointed the study group that recommended establishing the Australian Institute of Sport.

Pathways to power

‘Sport is not and never has been the great classless institution in Australian life,’ wrote the historian Brian Stoddart: ‘sport for many Australians is a major area where class and status are most commonly encountered.’32 It is also true that sport has enabled players of all social rank and economic standing to attain political office, even if they have tended not to transcend their class backgrounds.

As we have seen, cricket provided a conspicuous pathway to power for the socially and economically privileged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But other sports have helped prominent citizens maintain political influence. In 1923, the Adelaide Observer described how the then premier of South Australia Henry Barwell used lawn bowls as a forum for ‘meeting and fraternising’ with ‘men of all professions’.33 Barwell was a skilled bowler and played competitively as well as socially with members of his Cabinet. The high point of his bowling career came after he left politics when he represented Australia at the 1934 British Empire Games.34

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Australian Rules football produced popular players with strong community associations, which could be parlayed into electoral success. And, like cricket, football clubs provided networking opportunities for players to build a political identity. Footballer Jack Galbally exemplified the seamless connection between a political and sporting life. In 1933, at the age of 22, he joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and started playing for Collingwood. A life member from 1943, Galbally also acted as club solicitor. Two years after his election to the Victorian Legislative Council for the ALP in 1949, he commenced a decade-long stint as vice-president for his beloved Collingwood.35

32 Stoddart, Saturday Afternoon Fever, 55.
34 ‘Game for Statesmen’, News (Adelaide), 2 November 1929, 5; ‘Empire Games’, Mercury (Hobart), 7 August 1934, 8.
Another sportsman with deep links to working-class politics was the Tasmanian footballer Darrel Baldock. Best remembered for captaining the St Kilda Football Club to their first and only premiership in 1966, the famously gifted player was also a lifelong supporter of the ALP. Baldock won a seat in the Legislative Assembly of his home state in 1972 and held several ministerial positions. He resigned from parliament in 1987 to become coach of his old club. Yet, Galbally and Baldock are not typical of politicians to emerge from Australian Football League (AFL) ranks. In fact, sports with working-class roots like Australian Rules football have produced far fewer left-leaning politicians than one might expect. Of the 80 ex-footballers elected to public office, 50 per cent (40) represented the Liberal, National or Country parties. Just 25 per cent (20) stood for the ALP. Less surprising is that most of Labor’s football-playing politicians were elected between the Depression of the 1930s and the 1970s when the game rose in popularity among the working classes as an inexpensive entertainment. Since then, most ex-players with political aspirations have represented conservative parties, perhaps due to football’s corporatisation and the professionalisation of sport more broadly. A recent exception to this trend is the election of former AFL player Joel Bowden to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly for the Labor Party in 2020. Bowden had previously been the general secretary of Unions NT, the peak body for the Northern Territory’s labour movement.

Making a difference

The reasons offered by sports figures for entering politics are as varied as the sports they represent. In the nineteenth century, professional and amateur sport was generally considered a respectable precursor to public office. Many sporting figures made an almost seamless transition into political life without ever saying why. However, some sporting figures were more willing to articulate how their experience of athletic competition had shaped their identity and life chances. This was more notably in the twentieth century, especially among high-profile sportspeople and politicians.

Olympic swimming medallist, politician and businessman Frank Beaurepaire claimed that ‘out of amateur sport’ he had ‘gained part of my education and a great deal of my progress through life’. Beaurepaire won six medals at three Olympics between 1908 and 1924 before becoming a Melbourne city councillor (with two years as mayor). In 1942, he was elected to the Victorian Legislative Council, where

he sat for a decade. Beaurepaire’s faith in athletic endeavour influenced his many philanthropy acts, including a £200,000 gift to the University of Melbourne for a sports centre.38

Don Chipp, inaugural leader of the Australian Democrats, prided himself on his athletic skills. As a young man, he had been a talented professional sprinter (he narrowly lost the prestigious Stawell Gift in 1953) and footballer (he played in both Victorian leagues, including with the 1951 Victorian Football Association premiership winners, Prahran). According to his biographer, the foundation of Chipp’s identity had come ‘from the primal stuff of sport’. Chipp believed his sporting experiences taught him self-discipline, gamesmanship, ‘how to pace himself [and] how to go beyond apparent endurance’.39

A few were born to their ideological convictions, following the political values they had learned in their early years into adulthood. A sense of civic duty or a desire to improve living conditions in their electorates motivated others. Some seemed to run for no other reason than an established political party asked them to do so.40 Joan Rydon has suggested that a desire to remain in the public eye may have attracted some sporting figures towards a political career. A combination of these factors motivated Dawn Fraser, swimming legend of the 1950s and 1960s, to launch her bid for election.

After years in the limelight, Fraser struggled to adjust to the relative obscurity of post-sporting life. ‘The letdown was something I couldn’t have imagined,’ she said. In the 1970s, there were few opportunities to earn money speaking at corporate functions or through product endorsements, so Fraser worked as a swimming coach, sales representative and consultant. For a time, she worked for a pool manufacturer and then ran the Riverview Hotel in Balmain. When she struck financial difficulties in the 1980s, the prospect of a four-year term with a decent salary was appealing. ‘I felt I could make a difference and … I needed to find work,’ she recalled.41 Fraser had been concerned at the declining state of the local roads, schools and other services. Outspoken and energetic, she ran a vigorous campaign as an independent for the electorate of Balmain at the 1988 New South Wales elections. A prominent local figure, she capitalised on her sporting status and a simple policy platform. Fraser won and became the first female member in the Sport Australia Hall of Fame to win parliamentary office.

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40 For example, see Jim Rosevear, ‘Gil’ Langley: The Humble Hero (Adelaide: Jim Rosevear, 2002), 93.
41 Dawn Fraser, Dawn: One Hell of a Life (Sydney: Hodder Headline Australia, 2002), 294.
Professional sportspeople can sometimes lead cosseted, insular lives. However, for international test cricketer Tom Veivers, the travel demanded by his sport broadened his world view and shaped his political outlook. In the 1960s and 1970s, Australia’s test cricketers often played in countries riven by inequality and racial injustice. The extreme poverty Veivers witnessed during the 1964 tour of India started him thinking about political, economic and social issues. A tour of South Africa two years later also left an indelible impression:

Like most Australians at the time I subscribed to the view that sport and politics should not be mixed … Apartheid was then strongly entrenched … I came away concerned about what was happening … I think I was one of the few sportspeople at the time who supported the idea of sporting bans on South Africa as a means of getting some justice and merit back into the system.\(^{42}\)

Attracted by Labor’s strong position on South Africa, Veivers joined the party and stood as a candidate in the 1972 federal election. Although unsuccessful, he tried again in Queensland in 1983, this time winning a seat in the Legislative Assembly, which he held for three years.

Phil Cleary, the former Australian Rules footballer and independent politician, developed his class-consciousness during his childhood and on the football field. His ideas became more sophisticated after he studied politics at La Trobe University in the 1970s, where he discovered the writings of Karl Marx. ‘I read Marx and that just made sense to me,’ he told an interviewer, ‘power was connected to class and that economic considerations were so often the imperative in the decision-making process; in political decisions of all kinds.’\(^{43}\) In 1992, he won the Melbourne electorate of Wills, previously held by Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

**Be a good sport**

While the public has shown a consistent willingness to vote for former sports stars, the presence of sports stars in parliament has sometimes disturbed the tribal closeness of the major parties. Political scientist John Warhurst has suggested that while political parties have coveted the votes and attention the sports star might bring, they have been ambivalent and occasionally hostile about their place in the political arena, especially if they did not belong to a major party or had the temerity to frustrate the passage of legislation.\(^{44}\)

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In 1943, the attorney-general and minister for external affairs, Herbert Vere Evatt, attempted to shore up support for legislation transferring certain powers from the state to the federal government. The Commonwealth powers bill had stalled in the Tasmanian Legislative Council, in which former test cricketer Joseph Darling had led a forceful campaign to preserve state autonomy. Regarded as one the best captains in history, Darling had played for Australia between 1894 and 1905. Elected to the Tasmanian Legislative Council in 1921, he retained his seat until his death in 1946. Fiercely independent, Darling had never been a man to take lightly, either on the pitch or in the parliamentary chamber. Evatt, an avid cricket fan, saw an opportunity to fawn over his childhood hero. ‘When a boy I saw you play cricket and was a great admirer of yours,’ he wrote in a letter to Darling. ‘Your name as a sportsperson was well known throughout Australia, so continue to be a good sport and vote for the Bill.’ Enraged, Darling voted the Bill down, telling the press that Evatt’s approach had been insulting. ‘He started off to flatter me for all he was worth, and then said: “Change your vote, old chap.”’

Evatt had made a similar overture to another former test cricketer who sat in the parliament alongside Darling, Charles Eady. Evatt’s entreaties had a similar effect on the towering former batsman who had played with Darling on the 1896 tour of England.

Apart from a few jibes that he had more muscle power in his thighs than his brain, Opperman was rarely attacked for his athletic pedigree. Personal insults have become a common (and more widely publicised) feature of public discourse in recent decades, intended to delegitimise and undermine a political opponent. Dawn Fraser found her rightfulness to hold office called into question. ‘I was not your regular politician,’ she recalled. ‘I wasn’t especially cunning or tough about how I performed and I more or less performed from the heart.’ Her Labor rivals soon exploited her self-doubt, implying that she had neither the intellect nor the political skill to represent her electorate: that she was someone who had ‘made people feel good’ in the 1950s and 1960s but needed to leave the business of governing to the professionals.

The colossal former rugby prop Glen Lazarus cut an unlikely figure in the Senate chamber of federal parliament. In early 2015, after speaking out against the Coalition’s tertiary education reform legislation, the former Canberra Raider known as ‘The Brick With Eyes’ earned the ire of Peter Reith, a former minister in the Howard Government. Offended by what he considered was Lazarus’s unparliamentary language, Reith lambasted Lazarus as someone unworthy of

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47 Fraser, *Dawn*, 297.
48 Fraser, *Dawn*, 303.
holding public office, ‘a dud from the start’.49 ‘The broader lesson from the saga is that a candidate for Parliament should not be promoted simply because he or she was good at sport,’ wrote Reith. ‘It happens, but, fortunately, not too often.’ He cited Hubert Opperman, a fellow Liberal, as a rare example of a sportsperson who successfully transitioned from sport to politics.50 Yet, if Reith’s attack said more about ‘The Brick’s’ tendency to vote against the government’s legislation, it also showed how vulnerable those from outside the political classes have always been.

A world and a whirl you never knew existed

Once elected, Australia’s sporting champions arrived at their respective parliaments with almost no knowledge of the process of government or what was expected of them. They relied on government whips and their newfound colleagues to guide their first months. In a strange environment, they were a long way from being prepared for the amount of reading they needed to do, the correspondence they were required to answer and the meetings they had to attend. For most, the transition was physically and mentally overwhelming.

Although accustomed to leading a busy life in the public eye, Hubert Opperman described the transition as ‘that of a frog to a prince … [and] into a world and a whirl you never knew existed’.51 After each sitting of parliament, Opperman flew to Melbourne and drove his car back to Geelong. Exhausted, he often had to stop the car and walk around it for a few minutes to remain alert for the rest of the journey. The workload and time spent travelling also meant he had no time for exercise. He put on 6 kilograms in the first six months. After 10 years, he was 20 kilograms overweight and had his first heart attack in his late 60s.52 As he told the House:

during my sporting life I was often bone tired and right down to what appeared to be the last drop of energy—when competing, say, in the Tour de France … In those days I was never so utterly fatigued, unhealthily fatigued, and devoid of enthusiasm and ambition, as I have been after weeks of incessant sittings of this House, and travelling to and from it.55

50 Warhurst, Sydney Morning Herald, 18 March 2015.
52 Oakman, Oppy, 239, 309.
Not much had changed three decades later. Fraser thought that being a member of parliament would be a regular Monday to Friday job. She soon discovered that she was on call seven days a week, 24 hours a day and often spent the night in her office, sleeping on a couch.  

The more theatrical dimensions of parliamentary life, such as question time, left most former sporting champions in various states of disbelief. Opperman was shocked at the intensity of debate in the House of Representatives and the ‘sheer aggression’ on display. Fraser expressed her surprise at the ‘muckraking and stirring that went on’. Phil Cleary was more direct. ‘It was just as I … expected. It was full of bullshit, like in many ways it’s a sort of farce,’ he said in 1996 after losing his seat.

Former sports stars can appeal to voters precisely because they are not career politicians. Yet, their inexperience and ignorance of parliamentary protocols has sometimes caused embarrassment and brought unexpected attention. Kirstie Marshall’s former career as a world champion aerial skier played well among disengaged voters in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs during the 2002 Victorian election (she won the seat of Forest Hill for the ALP with a swing of 10 per cent). She held the seat for the next eight years. Unfortunately for Marshall, her place in political history did not come from her sporting background or any notable contribution to a parliamentary debate but by her unwitting breach of the standing orders. On 26 February 2003, she was ejected from the Lower House for breastfeeding her 11-day-old baby during question time. In the public outcry that followed, a special room was created for MPs to feed their children without fear of bringing unelected individuals into the House.

For professional sports stars used to being fawned and ‘fussed over’, life on the backbench could be frustrating. Richard ‘Ric’ Charlesworth is one of Australia’s most successful sportsmen and coaches. He played first-class cricket for Western Australia and international field hockey for the Kookaburras (the Australian national team), winning a silver medal at the 1976 Summer Olympics. A trained physician, Charlesworth’s experience as a locum in general practice at which he observed

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54 Fraser, Dawn, 300.
55 Oakman, Oppy, 239.
56 Fraser, Dawn, 300.
57 John Harms, ‘Interview with Phil Cleary,’ 129.
social and economic disadvantage first-hand, shaped his political views. He joined the Labor Party in 1980 and, leaning heavily on his sporting reputation, won the seat of Perth at the 1983 federal election. For the first five years in parliament, Charlesworth continued to play hockey for Australia. Nevertheless, he aspired ‘to be more than a humble backbencher attending to the needs of his local constituents’. After retiring from hockey, he hoped that Prime Minister Bob Hawke would offer him a ministerial portfolio. No offer was forthcoming. He later conceded that the process of choosing the Cabinet was opaque, governed by factional deals rather than merit. ‘I’d rather have a group of selectors choosing [the Ministry]’, he said. Frustrated with his failure to advance to the front bench and disillusioned with what he saw as Labor’s pursuit of short-term political advantage rather than social reform, Charlesworth chose not to contest the 1993 election. From 1993 to 2000, he was head coach of the Australian Women’s hockey squad, the Hockeyroos, a team that included future parliamentarian Nova Peris.

Not every former sports star has looked for greater public attention or sought to shape government policy. Many have been content to focus on representing their constituents and quietly assisting the passage of legislation. Former tennis champion John Alexander won the federal seat of Bennelong for the Liberal Party in 2010. He has remained on the backbench, dutifully voting with his party and attending to matters in his electorate. Similarly, Bob Marshall, Australia’s greatest billiard player since Walter Lindrum, recalled that after entering the West Australian Parliament in 1962 and delivering his maiden speech, he barely uttered a word in the House for the next three years.

Some sports stars ended their political careers disappointed by their inability to attain positions of influence or bring about social change. Many more left with increased respect for their parliamentary colleagues and what they been able to achieve. By the end of his career, Opperman’s admiration for his parliamentary colleagues knew no bounds. For him, they served in the ‘toughest and most exacting occupation in Australia’. In time, Fraser came to see her time in parliament as ‘three of the most interesting years’ of her life. ‘The problem was,’ she reflected, ‘that just as I started to get into it and knew what was going on, it was over.’

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61 Stoddart, Saturday Afternoon Fever, 64.
62 ‘Plunging into Politics’, About the House, 2001, 7; Tony Barker, Ric Charlesworth: This Sporting, Medical and Political Life (Cardiff, UK: Association of Cricket Statisticians and Historians, 2009), 52–64.
63 Cyril Ayris, Bob Marshall: My Life and Times (Western Australia, 2002), 77–78.
64 Hansard, House of Representatives, 11 May 1967, 2062.
65 Fraser, Dawn, 303; Anthony Sedunary, Dawn Fraser: Australian Swimming Legend (Melbourne: Reed Library-Cardigan Street, 1996), 38–41.
Sport, politics and place

An abundance of sunlight, an urbanised population, weekend leisure time and the provision of parks and grounds have helped Australia—and particularly Victoria—lead the world in the development of spectator sport. ‘You can be assured of a crowd in Melbourne,’ said Ron Leahy, Queensland president of the Lawn Tennis Association, in 1972, ‘It is the home of sports watchers whether it be cricket, tennis, football or anything else.’66 Victorians have also been particularly likely to vote their sporting heroes into public office. Of the individuals assessed for this article, almost a quarter were from Victoria.

The electors of the inner Melbourne division of Prahran have shown a particular preference for players-turned-politicians. A member of the Bradman-led ‘Invincibles’ tour of England in 1948, Sam Loxton was a legend of the game. For any political party, having Loxton on their ballot was the next best thing to having ‘The Don’ himself on the hustings. Famed for his aggressive displays with the bat, he had also played in the Victorian Football League (VFL) for St Kilda.

When Loxton joined the Liberal Party in 1950, he was still playing and had no desire to stand for election. In the months before the 1955 Victorian state election, Loxton was overheard arguing with a fellow member of his cricket club. Word of his spirited performance found its way to Henry Bolte, then leader of the Victorian Liberal Party, who persuaded him to contest the safe Labor seat of Prahran. ‘You won’t win,’ Bolte reputedly said, ‘but we’d like you to fly the flag.’67 Undeterred, Loxton told Bolte that he did not go into anything intending to lose.

During the campaign, Loxton played in the grade cricket final for Prahran and his seven wickets and 129 runs helped secure victory. The game also kept his name in the papers. Loxton won by just 14 votes, added by preferences from the Democratic Labor Party, which had recently broken away from the ALP. At 34, Loxton was the youngest member of the government and the first international cricketer to take a seat in the Victorian Assembly.68

During his first three years in parliament, Loxton continued to play first-class cricket. A conscientious representative, he even took his electoral correspondence to his matches to read while waiting for his turn to bat.69 Holding Prahran was never easy. Its mix of working-class and lower middle-class residents made it a perennially marginal electorate. Loxton’s slender victories meant that he often faced stern

66 Dick Tucker, ‘They Will Flock to Watch Anything’, Daily Mirror (Sydney), 10 January 1972, 36; Rickard, Australia, 89, 92.
67 Haigh, The Summer Game, 260.
68 ‘Loxton Home by 14’, Argus, 7 June 1955, 1.
69 Haigh, The Summer Game, 102.
competition for his seat, with the Labor Party keen to pitch some of its own sports
stars against the retired test cricket hero. In 1961, amateur boxer and local councillor
George Gahan made the first of two attempts to win Prahran. He tried again in
1967, but without success. At the same election, the ALP pitted the ex-footballer
and working-class idol Jack Dyer against Loxton. Known as ‘Captain Blood’, Dyer
had been one of the most feared ruckmen in the game.

After 24 years in office, Loxton retired before the 1979 poll. Without his profile, the
Liberals lost the seat to Labor. Fittingly, the new member was yet another sporting
identity. Bob Miller had played as a centre half-back for the Melbourne Football
Club in the 1960s. The club had deemed him worthy enough to wear number 31,
previously worn by Ron Barassi. Miller held the seat until 1985, himself resisting
a vigorous challenge by former international golfer Peter Thompson in 1982.70
In 1985, Liberal Don Hayward became the first non-sportsman to win Prahran in
30 years, bringing to an end a remarkable period in which a sporting career seemed
all but essential to winning the support of voters.

The depth of sporting talent vying for election in Prahran was rare, but throughout
Melbourne, ex-footballers have served in parliament and on local councils. Alex
Gillon, Kevin Hardiman, Maurie Sheehy and Jack Gervasoni are just a few of
the local mayors who had significant football careers. Since the 1970s, Victorian
governments have appointed more ex-footballers to lead the sports ministry than
any other legislature, with Brian Dixon, Neil Trezise (see below) and former Carlton
ruckman Justin Madden each having had responsibility for the portfolio.

Sport has long been a vital component of Geelong’s regional identity. In the twentieth
century, its growing working-class population and a single (and successful) football
team helped sustain the region’s reputation for being especially devoted to the
weekend game. Like Prahran, political representation in the area remained firmly in
the hands of former sporting heroes for almost half a century.

In 1949, when the Liberal Party selected Opperman as their candidate for Corio
in the upcoming federal election, they did so not because he had shown any
political conviction. Rather, party leaders reckoned that the once national sporting
idol might appeal to the voters in the ‘sports-mad town’.71 In the by-election that
followed Opperman’s resignation in 1966, the Liberal Party lost to another sporting
star. Labor’s Gordon Scholes had been the amateur heavyweight boxing champion
of Victoria in 1949. The switch from the professional cyclist to boxer-turned-engine
driver seemed an appropriate symbolic shift for the rapidly industrialising region.
Labor has held the seat ever since. Scholes served as minister for defence and then
minister for territories, before his retirement in 1993.

71 Oakman, Oppy, 234.
Geelong residents voted a local sporting hero into state parliament, an ex-footballer affectionately known as ‘Nipper’. Neil Trezise played 185 games for the Geelong Football Club between 1949 and 1959, helping the club to two premierships. He won office in 1964 and represented the city for almost three decades. In 1982, he became minister for youth, sport and recreation, a portfolio he held until his retirement in 1992. Trezise embodied the region’s passion for sport and Labor politics, both in his role as an elected representative and, it seems, as a father. His son, Ian, recalled his father setting rules for family life: ‘He used to say, “in our house if you don’t vote Labor and you don’t barrack for Geelong you don’t get fed.”’

Although he lacked his father’s sporting talents, Ian also pursued a political career, representing Geelong in the Victorian assembly for Labor from 1999 to 2014.

**Wannabees and couldabeens**

The sportspeople who made unsuccessful bids for public office can reveal as much about Australia’s political and social history as those who succeeded. While their stories can be harder to find, they provide a more comprehensive picture of the democratic process and the motivations of those who have sought election.

Failures, too, can illuminate some of the less orthodox attempts to pursue a political life. In 1985, former ruckman for the Carlton Football Club, Peter ‘Percy’ Jones, led a waggish but unsuccessful bid to enter the Victorian Parliament with the campaign slogan ‘Point Percy at Parliament’. International rugby player Mal Meninga famously bowed out of his embryonic political career during a live-to-air radio interview in 2001 only moments after announcing his candidacy.

More sinister was the attempt by former boxing champion Rocco ‘Rocky’ Gattellari to enter the New South Wales Parliament in 1995 as a candidate for the Liberal Party. Revelations of Gattellari’s violent past (revealed in his autobiography, *The Rocky Road*) and his use of aggressive language to describe his intention to defeat his opponent, Labor’s Reba Meagher, brought national attention. Meagher subsequently sought an apprehended violence order against him, which she withdrew after soundly defeating Gattellari at the ballot box.

One of the more notable sporting figures to fail in their attempt to enter parliament was Shirley de la Hunty (née Strickland). The West Australian track star won seven Olympic medals between 1948 and 1956, in an era when Australian women

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72 Norrie Ross, ‘Neil Trezise was a Champ’, *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 22 August 2006.
exelled at track events. De la Hunty held the record as the most decorated female in Olympic competition until 1976 when Polish sprinter Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska equalled her tally.

De la Hunty knew that sport ‘opened doors’ and she always ‘hoped to be seen ultimately as … more than just a sports person’.

A committed environmentalist, de la Hunty was an articulate and popular public figure. She was a perennial candidate for state and federal office for the three decades, the first prominent female sporting identity in Australia to pursue a political career. De la Hunty’s insistence on a conscious vote on education, sport and environmental matters precluded her from standing for election with any of the major political parties. She first campaigned as an Independent before joining the Australian Democrats in 1977, contesting seven federal elections with the party.

Although never elected to a parliament, her profile and political activism helped her gain election to the City of Melville council. She served two terms from 1988 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2003. Throughout her life, de la Hunty remained a lobbyist and advocated for issues around conservation and environmentalism. A Member of the Order of the British Empire since 1957, in 2001 de la Hunty was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for service to the community, particularly in the areas of conservation, the environment, local government and athletics. She was one of the first Australian women to challenge male dominance in the sporting and political spheres. Her varied career demonstrated the variety of life experiences that women could pursue outside the family. The Western Australian Government honoured her with a state funeral, the first-ever for a private citizen.

Some of Australia’s most celebrated athletes-turned-politicians have found that national reputations could contract rapidly to the localities they represented. Attempts to broaden their political reach became futile. A Commonwealth and Olympic medallist and holder of 17 world records, Ron Clarke had been an inspirational figure in Australian athletics during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, as a promising young runner, Clarke lit the Olympic flame at the opening ceremony for Summer Olympics in Melbourne. Still a recognisable figure in south-eastern Queensland in his late 60s, Clarke was elected mayor of Gold Coast in 2004. In 2012, he resigned to contest the division of Broadwater (an electorate that includes the northern suburbs on the Gold Coast) in the Queensland state elections. Standing as an independent, Clarke had overestimated his personal following and attracted only 4.6 per cent of the primary vote.

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76 At the 1993 federal election, Strickland stood as an independent candidate for the seat of Canning in Western Australia.
Trailblazers

Until the 1990s, the sportspeople who pursued a political career were more likely to be white, able-bodied and male. Change has been slow, but the increasing diversity in sport has started to influence the composition of Australian parliaments.

One of the first Indigenous sports stars to turn to politics was Australian Rules footballer Maurice Rioli. One of the greatest players of his era, Rioli’s storied career spanned three decades from the 1970s. In 1992, a year after his retirement, he won a seat in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly for the ALP, which he held until 2001. He was inducted into the Australian Football Hall of Fame in 2016.

As a member of the Australian women’s hockey team at the 1996 Olympic Games, Nova Peris was the first Indigenous Australian to win an Olympic gold medal. In 2013, after Prime Minister Julia Gillard invited her to stand as a Labor candidate in the Senate for the Northern Territory, Peris became the first Indigenous woman elected to federal parliament. She entered parliament with no ideological agenda other than a determination to ‘make use of the platform I was privileged to find myself on’ and speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians when she could. Like many professional sportspeople, Peris had been preoccupied with improving her athletic performance. ‘I’ve always been focussed on the task at hand,’ she wrote, ‘when that was completed, I was already switching my attention to the next goal, and the next.’ Peris believed that her sporting background helped her become a better politician:

My upbringing, plus my years as an athlete under such demanding coaches as Ric Charlesworth, helped me to form a tough skin. I certainly needed it during my time in parliament!8

Nine Olympians have entered local, state or federal politics: Frank Beaurepaire (swimming), Ric Charlesworth (hockey), Nova Peris (hockey), Ron Clarke (athletics), Dawn Fraser (swimming), Wilfred Kent Hughes (athletics) and Shirley de la Hunty, née Strickland (athletics). Aerial skier Zali Steggall is the most recent Olympian to win a seat in an Australian parliament. She was an independent candidate for the Sydney electorate of Warringah at the 2019 Australian federal election and defeated the incumbent member, former prime minister Tony Abbott.

Paralympians, however, have taken longer to blaze the trail. During her sporting career, Liesel Tesch won three medals in women’s wheelchair basketball and two gold medals in sailing (with partner Daniel Fitzgibbon). In 2017, she entered the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for the Labor Party, becoming the first

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Paralympian to enter an Australian parliament. The following year, Australia’s most successful Paralympic swimmer, Matt Cowdrey, won the federal seat of Coulston in South Australia for the Liberal Party.

**Legacy**

Australian historian Greg Dening once said that ‘there is nothing so momentary as a sporting achievement, and nothing so lasting as the memory of it’.\(^{79}\) Making a mark in either sport or politics is rare; leaving a legacy in both fields of endeavour rarer still. For Australia’s former sporting champions, translating their cultural authority into effective political action has not been easy. Nor has it always proved the best way to bring lasting change. A few, however, have contributed to cultural and political life in ways that have threatened to overshadow their place in sporting history.

Wilfrid Kent Hughes represented Australia on the track at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp. The following year he travelled with the Oxford ski team on a tour of Europe, becoming the first Australian to ski competitively overseas. He is far better remembered for his distinguished political career and his pivotal role in organising the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games.\(^{80}\)

Australian Football Hall of Fame inductee Brian Dixon was a stalwart of the Melbourne Football Club during the 1950s and 1960s. He entered the Victorian Parliament for the Liberal Party in 1964 when he was 28 years old and continued playing for another four seasons. In 1975, as minister for youth, sport and recreation, he initiated the ‘Life. Be in it’ campaign, which became one of the best-known health promotions in Australian history.

Opperman’s legacy is more complicated. The public controversies that dogged his time as the minister for immigration in the mid-1960s went some way to obscure the important legislative reforms he helped make to Australian immigration law. On leaving parliament, he expressed disappointment at his political legacy, believing that he:

> did more really for Aust. in the 20s and 30s in Europe as a pedaller than as a politician—there were plenty who could have done my Ministerial job—but a few less who could have got over the Alps or the Pyrenees.\(^{81}\)


\(^{81}\) Letter, Opperman to Heydon, 25 July 1968, MS 3155, Box 18, Folder 151, National Library of Australia.
It is tempting to agree that Opperman’s sporting triumphs will outshine his contribution to the parliament. Yet we should remember that he received his knighthood in 1968 for services to politics, not sport. Opperman’s role in the liberalisation of Australia’s immigration laws in 1966 is sometimes ignored, in part because subsequent changes made his reforms appear less significant. At the time, however, Opperman’s workmanlike approach to reform had been vital in building the consensus that allowed the changes to pass, first through Cabinet and then through parliament. Journalist Max Walsh reported in 1971: ‘Sir Hubert sat down with the same dogged determination that must have made him a top athlete and set out to learn the problems and … the aspirations of the department.’ Of course, the consequences of those small changes were not evident in the late 1960s. Indeed, it would be another three decades until Opperman’s role in the dismantling of the White Australia policy received any public recognition. In 1996, Jamie Mackie, one of the founders of the Immigration Reform Group who worked with the former cyclist when he was minister, felt compelled to set the record straight. In an article for the *Australian*, Mackie explained that while the Labor Party had established a new set of liberal immigration policies in the early 1970s, ‘the ground-breaking work of changing public opinion had largely been done’. It was ‘Opperman [who] began the process by breaking the ice irrevocably [and] deserves the nation’s thanks,’ he wrote. The changes to immigration policy he initiated as minister were part of a more gradual reorientation that would, in time, change the cultural composition of the nation; a change that has proved more enduring than his contributions to Australia’s sporting glory.

The beguiling promise

Sport permeates almost every facet of Australian life and sportspeople are among our most recognisable and exalted public figures. Fourteen sporting identities have been Australians of the Year, starting in 1962 with yachtsman Jock Sturrock. Historically, we have looked to them in times of economic and social crisis as symbols of unity and national purpose. We still look to sporting heroes to inspire and unite, and guide us through important social and ethical issues. As paragons, when they disappoint—or cheat—they are said to have damaged the national reputation. When they become politicians, we hope that they will rise above partisan bickering and

bring the integrity they showed in competition to the assemblies in which they sit. ‘The beguiling promise of sport is that everyone is treated equally,’ write Matthew Klugman and Gregory Phillips, ‘that it transcends politics through meritocracy.’

This survey has attempted to show that Australian sports figures have sought to go beyond their role as abstract signifiers of national identity for over 150 years. They have been willing to risk their celebrated status to make a more direct and tangible contribution to the process of government. Motivations have varied, as has their effectiveness as politicians. Many have had long parliamentary careers, including some of the longest in Australian political history.

The enduring myth of Australian sport as an egalitarian meritocracy has helped sporting champions in their election bids. Yet, it has proved less useful to navigating the process of government or achieving change. Perversely, the inevitable compromises that come with a political career have tended to negate the cultural gravitas that has enabled sporting figures to win election in the first place. They have had to learn new skills to sustain their political futures.

The lives surveyed here might encourage us to be more circumspect about what our sports stars can realistically achieve once they step beyond their hallowed grounds. Nevertheless, their role in public life seems assured. Surveys show that since the late twentieth century, community trust in politics and democratic institutions has declined. In such a climate, the opportunities for sporting identities with political ambitions are likely to increase.

There are other influential public positions, still largely untapped by Australia’s sporting legends. Vice-regal office may hold the opportunity to foster social change without the polarisation that comes with elections or the compromise of party politics. Only three sporting champions have served in vice-regal positions in Australia. John Landy, Olympic medallist and the second man to break the four-minute mile, was the governor of Victoria between 2001 and 2007. Marjorie Jackson-Nelson was governor of South Australia from 2001 to 2007. Known during her athletic heyday in the 1950s as ‘The Lithgow Flash’, she finished her sporting career with two Olympic and seven Commonwealth Games gold medals and six individual world records. The appointment of two shining lights from Australia’s sporting past was relatively benign. The appointment of former footballer and Yorta Yorta man Douglas Nicholls as governor of South Australia in 1976 was not.

87 Stoddart, Saturday Afternoon Fever, 55–57.
88 Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2019 (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2019).
Nicholls rose to prominence as a dynamic Australian Rules footballer in the 1920s and 1930s. As the first publicly recognised Indigenous man to play at the game’s highest levels, he endured racist abuse and discrimination. He nevertheless became a popular and outspoken figure, rarely missing an opportunity to speak publicly about the problems faced by Aboriginal people. As his playing career subsided, he coached the first Aboriginal All-Stars football team and was chairman of the National Aboriginal Sports Foundation. He later became a pastor and campaigner for reconciliation and social justice. Nicholls was not a politician, but he was undoubtedly a political figure. Football gave him a platform, which he used to advocate for the rights of Indigenous Australians.

The sporting public soon forgot about Nicholls. (To this day, the AFL has decided not to include him in its Hall of Fame.) Recognition came instead from the reformist premier of South Australia Don Dunstan who, in the mid-1970s, selected Nicholls to be the state’s next governor, a decision that the Canberra Times described as the ‘acid test of [the state’s] racial tolerance’. The retiring governor, Sir Mark Oliphant, actively opposed Nicholls’s appointment. In a strongly worded letter to Dunstan, he questioned every aspect of the ‘background of the proposed incumbent’, such as his birthplace, religion, and whether Government House would be ‘filled to overflowing by his relatives and tribesmen’. Oliphant then asked, ‘Does his fame as an athlete and footballer make up for this?’ He answered the question himself, in racial terms: ‘there is something inherent in the personality of the Aborigine which makes it difficult for him to fully adapt to the ways of the white man.’ Sport alone, in the 1970s, would not dislodge trenchant racism. But Dunstan saw a chance to use Nicholls’s standing to challenge community expectations. ‘I know that there is still racial feeling in the community,’ he wrote in his reply to Oliphant, ‘but I think it is necessary constantly to war against it.’ Nicholls became the first Indigenous man to hold vice-regal office. Poor health forced his early resignation, cutting short the career of one of the state’s most prominent citizens.

The trajectory of Nicholls’s career—from Indigenous football hero to governor—is remarkable. It was an important symbol for the nation and remains so today. As with many of the people examined in this article, his life demonstrated both the potential and the limits of sports cultural and political power. Nevertheless, given its mass appeal in Australia, sport remains one of the few enterprises with the potential to transcend divisive politics and build the cultural and political accommodations

90 Age (Melbourne), 20 August 1981.
necessary to face an uncertain era. Can sport ever make good on its beguiling promise to create a new sense of nationhood that attends to questions of sovereignty, inclusion and social justice?

Should Australia become a republic, the community will have a say about who will become the head of state, regardless of the model finally adopted. With sport likely to remain at the centre of Australian cultural life and national identity, the elevation of a former sporting champion to the position is possible. Just who that person might be is an intriguing thought indeed.

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

CHRIS WALLACE

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.

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

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. 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 Whitington, 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.’

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’. 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”’. 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. 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

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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
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

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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”.

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.

In it he takes a novel tack, casting the profile in response to the question, ‘What was his secret?’ 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. 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 …

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.
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’:

… 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!28

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.
a sensitiveness to his environment and an understanding of humanity, and a great skill in execution." 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. 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. 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!’ 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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.’

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30 Menzies, Measure of the Years, 5.
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

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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. 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’. 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’. 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.

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

40 Brett, Robert Menzies’ Forgotten People, 234.
42 Australian Dictionary of Biography, file on Allan Wesley Dawes (1900–1969), ANU Archives, The Australian National University, Canberra.
‘bloated, and frequently sozzled journalist’. 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. 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. Hasluck’s reputation for having a jaundiced view of journalists is further cause for caution about his slur against Dawes. Don Whitington, 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 Whitington, 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’. 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.
46 Whitington, 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.  

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. Allan Dawes’s papers are also at the NLA. 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’. 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’. 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’. 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’. Dawes developed ‘a Chestertonian figure which, somehow, he managed to haul up and down the mountains of New Guinea, when he was a war

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.
correspondent’. 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.

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’. 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. 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’. 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.’

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’. 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:

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54 Edwards, *The Editor Regrets*, 38n.
56 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1948.
57 ‘Allan Dawes Dies at 69’, *Sun* (Melbourne), 8 September 1969, 11.
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

\(^{63}\) Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 308.
\(^{64}\) Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, 308.
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.’ 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.

The Liberal Party campaign included the publication that year of 330,000 copies of the booklet *How Well Do You Know This Man?* 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’. 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.

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

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.

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. 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. 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’. 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’.

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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.


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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.’\textsuperscript{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.’\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{76} Allan Dawes, \textit{Caesar’s Ghost: The Journalist, the Statesman, the Spokesman} (Melbourne: Trustees of the Arthur Norman Smith Memorial, 1946), 1.

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

\textsuperscript{78} Dawes to Menzies.

\textsuperscript{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.
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.’ 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.’ Menzies’s brother Frank estimated Dawes worked on the book in 1950–51. 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.

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. 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

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89 Dawes, ‘Biography of Mr. R. G. Menzies’, 4.
90 Brett, Robert Menzies’ Forgotten People, 137.
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’. 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’.

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.

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. 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!’

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. 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.

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.

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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”—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 incapacity 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. 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.

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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-299728501findingaid#biographical-note.
‘None of you will believe it’: Control, truth and myth in the life of Billy McMahon

PATRICK MULLINS

Introduction

Widely regarded as one of Australia’s worst prime ministers, William—‘Billy’—McMahon laboured in his retirement to produce an autobiography that would put forward the story of his life and laudable career as he saw it. But McMahon’s inability to reconcile that story with the archive of documents he had compiled, and the stories that his colleagues told in their own books, ensured that progress on his autobiography would be incomplete by the time of his death in 1988. This essay traces McMahon’s efforts to assert control of his story, via his archive and work with ghost-writers and publishers on his autobiography, and the effect that this had on the biography of McMahon that I published in 2018.¹ I reflect on the two stories that my biography tells—of McMahon’s life, as I have understood it, and McMahon’s attempts to understand and portray his life—and the effect of each on the ontological stability and certainty of the other.

A ‘contemptible little squirt’?

William—or Billy—McMahon (1908–1988) is commonly regarded as one of Australia’s worst prime ministers.² Coming to office in 1971, after more than 20 years continuous service as a minister in the Menzies, Holt and Gorton governments, McMahon’s time as prime minister was to be short and fraught. Vicious party infighting, a reactive policy agenda and a loss of public confidence in McMahon’s capacities to handle affairs all combined to erode the government’s standing in the polls. In December 1972, after 21 months in office, McMahon led the Liberal–Country Party Government to defeat at the election that brought the Whitlam-led Labor Party to power. It left him an ignoble figure.

¹ Patrick Mullins, Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon (Brunswick, Vic.: Scribe, 2018).
He was already controversial. Beneath the veneer of public civility, McMahon had been much disliked by his colleagues. Robert Menzies called him a ‘contemptible little squirt’ and ‘the most characterless man ever to have been prime minister’. During the Holt Government (1966–67), in a dispute that was policy-based and intensely personal, McMahon had warred with the Country Party leader, deputy prime minister and minister for trade, John McEwen. When Holt drowned in 1967, McEwen humiliated McMahon—first by vetoing his putative candidacy to succeed Holt, and then by helping a relative newcomer, in John Gorton, to become prime minister (1968–71). Antipathy between Gorton and McMahon was also pronounced. After the 1969 election, McMahon unsuccessfully challenged Gorton for the Liberal Party leadership; was moved against his will to the External Affairs (later, Foreign Affairs) portfolio; succeeded Gorton as prime minister in 1971 amid spectacular circumstances; and then sacked Gorton from the defence ministry five months later for leaking from Cabinet.

In the years that followed the government’s loss of office, the divisive regard for McMahon from his colleagues became public. The Liberal Party’s attempts to distance itself from him involved some airing of the aforementioned internal disputes; in subsequent decades, the publication of autobiographies and diaries by contemporaries confirmed that ‘contemptible little squirt’ was far from the worst that had been said of McMahon. The advent of more subjective journalism in the 1970s and 1980s similarly revealed harsher assessments of McMahon than might have been made in earlier eras, and seemingly confirmed McMahon’s poor reputation.

McMahon remained in parliament for almost a decade after his prime ministership, serving largely on the backbench. He was aware of his reputation and how it might outlive him. He believed, however, that his reputation was wrong and that the record of his time in government had been marred by distortions and inaccuracies. In January 1982, he resigned from parliament promising that he would correct the record with an autobiography.

Over the next six years, McMahon would labour over that autobiography, writing and rewriting in hopes of finishing a book that would correct the record and prompt the reassessment he believed was his due. But nothing of that book would be published by the time of his death, in 1988, and in its absence a broad consensus formed about him—that he was, truly, Australia’s worst prime minister.

I began researching McMahon’s life with a view to writing his biography in 2014. Having completed a PhD on the biographies of contemporary political figures in Australia, I was looking for a challenge and believed myself prepared for the issues that I would encounter in producing the book that eventuated. Looking back on the biography now, the most immediately pressing, the most enduring and the most

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influential issue lay in the interstices of control, truth and myth in McMahon's life, story and archive. The aim of this essay is to account for how these factors influenced my work; in particular, how it led me to the alternating structure of the book—the life of William McMahon, and the stories of William McMahon.

‘Ownership and control will, of course, remain with me’

Throughout his political career, William McMahon maintained and grew a voluminous archive of official and unofficial papers that included cabinet submissions and minutes, defence reports, diplomatic cables, economic and industry briefings, speeches, correspondence, extracts from Hansard, books, pamphlets, newspaper and magazine clippings, and a series of aides-mémoire of his own authorship of events and conversations that he thought significant. Of some use to him during his career, he was well aware of the historical value of this material afterwards, and therefore intent on ensuring that he retained control and ownership of it.

He most notably exercised this after the loss of government in 1972. Within days of the 2 December election, erstwhile government staffers working at McMahon’s instruction assembled, packed and temporarily stored in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) ‘certain papers’ from the McMahon office. These were then transferred, again at McMahon’s instruction and without input from PM&C officials, to the National Library of Australia alongside various tapes and recordings from the press office. McMahon’s press secretary, Reg MacDonald, meanwhile had transferred to his home a batch of papers from the press office. In addition to papers relating to the McMahon Government, this ‘batch’ included records of the Menzies, Holt and Gorton governments that had been left in the office by former press secretary Tony Eggleton. MacDonald subsequently delivered some of these papers to the Liberal Party secretariat, retained others for further sorting and consigned the remainder to the then Commonwealth Archives. MacDonald was aware that in doing so he had disobeyed McMahon’s instructions. According to a record of a subsequent phone call, MacDonald had ‘taken the view that, because of the nature of the papers [he had taken home for sorting], they should be boxed separately according to the prime ministership and sealed and delivered to the custody of the Archives’. When contacted by the National Library about these papers, he was told that he had been wrong to send them to the archives. McMahon’s contact at the
library, a Dr Fenning, had ‘disagreed with him [MacDonald] that [the] Archives was the appropriate place for the papers and had said it was only appropriate for official papers, not personal papers, to go to archives’.\(^4\)

The division made here, between official and private papers, was to become a fault-line in the handling of McMahon’s papers, and the basis for McMahon’s control of them. For, in April 1973, having been contacted by the National Library, having heard of MacDonald’s actions, and now receiving word of plans by PM&C to check for any ‘official material’ among the papers now held by the archives, McMahon reacted quickly. He telephoned Sir John Bunting, secretary of PM&C, and told him that ‘he would regard the papers from the Eggleston/MacDonald office as being papers from the private office and therefore of the Min[ister]s.’ personally.\(^5\)

In a subsequent call to a deputy secretary, Geoffrey Yeend, McMahon ordered the department to desist from any checking of the material. ‘This was none of our business,’ recorded Yeend, of this conversation. ‘He would make any separation into official or private.’ In the meantime, all of the papers concerned were to be delivered to the National Library. MacDonald, McMahon said, had been presumptive and had defied instructions.\(^6\)

McMahon was adamant that all of the papers from his office were his. His transfer of the papers to the library came with condition that this was acknowledged: ‘I have confirmed with Mrs Fanning that the documents will be retained in your custody,’ he wrote to the library, in April 1973, ‘until I have occasion to request them and that ownership and control will, of course, remain with me whilst they are in your custody.’ He was willing to fight to force both the archives and PM&C to accept that. He contacted former prime ministers Menzies and Gorton, and Dame Zara Bate (widow of Harold Holt), to obtain agreement where the papers relating to their prime ministerships that had been recovered from the press office should go. He claimed ownership of files that were ‘of a continuing nature’ in the prime ministerships of Menzies, Holt, Gorton and himself.\(^8\) In June 1973, he telephoned another deputy secretary of PM&C, Peter Lawler, to insist that all of the papers were ‘his personal papers’, that ‘there were no provisions in Australia to deny this’, and that if the matter were not resolved in his favour then he would ‘either approach the prime minister or go to his solicitors’.\(^9\)

Advice tendered to Bunting, Lawler and Yeend by their department provided little clarity on what should be done. The advice noted that ‘there is no satisfactory definition of the distinction between private and official papers’, and that individual

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\(^5\) Bunting’s notes, on Bunting to McMahon, 10 April 1973, NAA A750, 1969/721.


\(^7\) McMahon to Fleming, 30 April 1973, NAA A750, 1969/721.

\(^8\) McMahon to Fleming, 30 April 1973, NAA A750, 1969/721.

documents could very easily fall into one category or the other—or both. Yet it also advised that the National Library was an inappropriate custodian for papers that were official and/or classified, such as cabinet documents, as the library did not apply ‘government access policy to official material in its custody’. The best outcome, the advice went, would be for the whole of the McMahon papers to be deposited in the archives. The related issue, of ownership, remained vexed. The legal position was far from clear; there would doubtless be political pressure over the matter; and any interim or premature surrender of the papers would make getting them back far more difficult than maintaining them.\textsuperscript{10}

Lawler believed that the problem of the McMahon papers needed to be resolved quickly. He wanted nothing to upset the lately announced Whitlam Government intentions to reform the national archives system. In conversations with colleagues in September 1973, Lawler said that he would ‘prefer at this stage to “lose a battle but win the war”’, and did not want to ‘fight in the ditch’ over the matter.\textsuperscript{11} Thus the decision to give in. Lawler agreed to transfer all of the McMahon papers from the archives to the library on the understanding that papers in the collection deemed to be ‘other than private papers’ would be held under the same custody and access provisions as at the archives.

The library, meanwhile, was grateful but also wary. In January 1973, having received four filing cabinets ‘full to bursting with folders’ of material relating to McMahon’s period as Treasurer, library officials had been alarmed to discover that half of the papers were classified up to secret and top secret level, with a large component also of original Treasury minutes and cabinet documents. They had reached out to the Department of Foreign Affairs for advice on sensitive departmental cables, which in turn contacted PM&C, which quickly took custody of the material and placed it with the archives—and thus prompted McMahon’s calls shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{12} The bulk of that material, sans at least some of that classified material, was subsequently returned to the library in December 1973.\textsuperscript{13}

The flurry of correspondence and calls in 1973 left McMahon disdainful of the archives and unwilling to countenance their involvement in the handling of papers that he claimed as his own. It also served to leave archive officials wary of McMahon and concerned about the papers held by the library. Recapitulating the aforementioned events a decade later, archivist David Easter concluded: ‘Mr. McMahon made it obvious during this course of events that he did not want any of his material to be in the custody of Archives. … An approach should definitely not be made to McMahon or to his staff offering our personal archives services.’\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Scott, 28 September 1973, NAA A750, 1969/721.
\textsuperscript{13} Powell to Dunner, 4 December 1973, NAA A750, 1969/721.
\textsuperscript{14} Easter to the Archives NSW Regional Office, 30 July 1982, NAA A463, 1983/901.
McMahon’s aim in entrusting custody of the papers to the library over the archives was threefold: first, he wanted to resolve in his favour the question of ownership of the papers. Second, he wanted to retain control of access to the papers. Third, he wanted to ensure that the papers would be at his disposal when the time came. He would be successful on the second and third aims, but the first would continue to be the object of contest.

When he retired in 1982, and announced he would commence work on his autobiography, McMahon requested the papers be sent to the office he had set up in Westfield Towers, Sydney. The library sent the whole of the McMahon papers—now filling 22 filing cabinets—to McMahon in May the following year and expressed a wish that he return them once he had finished his autobiography. McMahon gave this short shrift. ‘May I put, only for accuracy purposes,’ he wrote, ‘that the words “on loan” do not accurately reflect the ownership of the papers. In the original letter written I said that the property would remain with me; you agreed to this.’ The library quickly conceded the point: ‘We have noted that the papers remain your property and are glad to consider it highly probable that they will be returned to the National Library on completion of your book or books.’

McMahon’s sense of proprietorship was hardly unique. Malcolm Fraser, who lost office to Bob Hawke at around the same time as the papers were returned to McMahon, was affronted by the way in which functionaries from the archives swept his office clear of documents and subsequently mixed official papers with what he believed were personal papers. As Gideon Haigh reported of Fraser’s subsequent efforts to unscramble this omelette:

Many files had become commingled, and the NAA [National Archives of Australia] at first insisted on the broadest possible definition of what was theirs: any folder, no matter how much personal correspondence it contained, in which reposed a Commonwealth document, no matter how minor … At one stage, a University of Melbourne reference archivist, Katie Wood, spent seven weeks in Canberra evaluating key documents; at great expense, Stephen Charles, QC was jointly retained to provide clarifying definitions.

But there would be no such moment of settlement for the papers that McMahon claimed. For while he now had custody of the papers and, in his view, settled the question of their ownership, officials within the public service continued to nurse doubts and concerns. When Brian Toohey reported in May 1983 that McMahon’s home had been bugged by ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation)

15 W. D. Richardson, acting National Librarian, quoted McMahon to this effect: see Richardson to Lawler, 15 October 1973, NAA A750, 1969/721.
17 McMahon to Santamaria, 2 May 1983.
18 Santamaria to McMahon, 5 May 1983.
agents in the 1960s, McMahon wrote to ASIO to request a physical security assessment of his office. Notice of the subsequent inspection prompted PM&C officials to recall that they had little idea of what papers McMahon had retained after leaving the prime ministership. They were aghast when they received a copy of the report, which noted that the inspecting ASIO officer was ‘amazed’ at the papers McMahon held. It was the nature of those papers that spurred the report’s recommendations that an alarm system, false ceiling, approved shredder, and lockable power supply switch for the photocopier be installed in McMahon’s office, and that the office’s file storeroom be equipped with a mortise lock, microswitch and infrared intrusion detection system. PM&C officials were averse to the quoted $22,000 cost of these measures but alarmed by McMahon’s continued custody of the papers: ‘The issue that does concern this Department is that of retention by a former prime minister of highly classified official documents.’ Nothing, however, had been done about the matter by 1985. ‘We have reached the position where we are aware that Sir William McMahon is in “unauthorised” possession of a substantial number of Cabinet documents’, ran a January 1985 note for file. It appears that what caused officials to hold back was repeated advice that McMahon was in the late stages of writing his autobiography and that the papers would be returned soon: ‘Sir William has now finished his book and only some finishing touches are needed. In such an eventuality Sir William may well not need to retain many of the documents he presently holds.’ Another factor in the decision to hold back was McMahon’s continued hostility to the archives and to separation of the papers. He would have ‘no truck’ with the archives and their processes; they would have no involvement with him. This left the problem with PM&C alone. ‘He has official documents, particularly cabinet papers, in his possession; he should be asked to return them,’’ officials insisted, privately. And yet, as they knew, McMahon would never agree to a divide of the papers along official and private lines: ‘He does not appear to accept the distinction.’

Thus the department sought other ways to resolve the issue. As a note of a meeting with Geoffrey Yeend, now secretary of PM&C, in September 1985 put it, the department would leave McMahon ‘content alone’ and, in the meantime, improve its relationships with the library and archives to ensure that official papers from then on were held by the archives only. And, while not willing to provide the money to

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21 ASIO director-general (security) to Yeend, 7 June 1983; Gallery to Lance, 30 June 1983; and Bell to Rosalky, 5 August 1983; all in NAA A463, 1983/901. What is also notable is that it appears little had been done to sort the papers. McMahon staffer Robert Ashley recalled that upon moving into Westfield Towers the boardroom was ‘wall-to-wall paper’. ‘When I arrived,’ he said later, ‘there were papers everywhere’: personal interview, 28 November 2017.
22 Rosalky to Bell, 12 August 1983, NAA A463, 1983/901.
25 ‘Mr Selth: after discussion with Secretary’, 2 September 1985.
implement the ASIO-recommended measures in McMahon’s office, the department agreed to install an approved safe to contain the sensitive material. In October 1985, PM&C officials contacted McMahon’s office to say that they would provide a B-class container, at a cost of $1,600, for the storage of sensitive papers. But McMahon’s staff were confused by the offer. The office had already ‘three Chubb combination safes’ in which to store sensitive material, they pointed out. That said, they added, there were still a considerable number of files around the office—files that might better be kept in a safe.

‘My autobiography will be published’

McMahon’s claims about finishing his autobiography were repeated throughout the six years between his retirement and death. Before his retirement from parliament, one staffer recalled, the former prime minister was determined to write the book—even anxious to do so. At a farewell press conference in 1982, he promised that the public would soon read the book and be amazed at its revelations. ‘What we achieved in those twenty months [I was prime minister] was unbelievable,’ he said at one point. ‘When I tell of the things I had to put up with,’ he said at another, ‘none of you will believe it.’ In conversations in public and in private thereafter, McMahon spoke repeatedly of writing an autobiography that would also be a grand, historical chronicle, that would bridge the gap between participant and historian. Eschewing the anecdote and partial stories that characterised the autobiographies of non-Labor politicians such as George Reid, Billy Hughes and Robert Menzies, McMahon’s intentions appear to have been to mimic Churchill’s efforts and style, drawing on records not yet public in order to write a work that was definitive.

Given the enormous volume of papers that McMahon had assembled and maintained control of, he was well placed to write that work. The return of those papers was invaluable, as was the aid of staff members he retained under his entitlements as a former prime minister. So too, in spite of his reputation, was the status and prestige he possessed as a former prime minister.

In 1983, he attracted a literary agent after informing him that a manuscript was almost complete. That agent, Michael Morton-Evans, introduced McMahon to the Sydney-based publisher Thomas Nelson. But the publisher lost interest soon

26 Doeel to Selth and Jackson, 1 August 1985, and Templeton, 4 October 1985.
31 Reid explicitly called his ‘reminiscences’ only; Hughes wrote of ‘stories’ that remained reticent; and Menzies called his a ‘patch-work quilt’. See W.M. Hughes, Crusps and Crusades (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1947), v; Robert Menzies, Afternoon Light (Melbourne: Cassell, 1967), 2; George Reid, My Reminiscences (London: Cassell, 1917).
after seeing the manuscript. According to Morton-Evans, they were aghast at its size, which was allegedly so voluminous that it would have run to four volumes. Morton-Evans’s suggestion that McMahon make revisions to address this concern was brushed aside: ‘The concept of someone fiddling with his words was anathema to him.’\textsuperscript{32} Morton-Evans ceased to be his agent shortly afterward.

Towards the end of the year, however, this resistance had been eroded: McMahon was open to the idea of hiring an editor to work on the manuscript. The publisher at Williams Collins Ltd, Richard Smart, met with and impressed on McMahon the need for an editor while making clear that McMahon would not necessarily need to accede to wholesale revisions.\textsuperscript{33} Accepting this, McMahon began to cast around for help. He approached former public servants, academics and other authors, including Sir Halford Cook, Sir Henry Bland, Cameron Hazlehurst, Mark Hayne and Ian Wilson. In January 1984, on a recommendation from the chief of staff at the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, McMahon approached David Bowman, a South Australian journalist and former editor of the \textit{Canberra Times} and \textit{Herald} who had left Fairfax in 1980 and since worked as a media critic.\textsuperscript{34} Bowman agreed to a six-month contract during which he would edit McMahon’s manuscript to publishable length and quality.

Bowman’s experiences provide a crucial window into McMahon’s continuing efforts to control his story. Bowman’s reaction to the voluminous manuscript written by McMahon and rejected by Thomas Nelson was unfavourable. He believed it poorly structured, full of irrelevant detail and overly fixated on the actions of others. A considerable amount of the material was already on the public record, and what was not was variously ‘dull’, ‘hollow’ and ‘incomprehensible’. The material that officials in the public service were so concerned by does not appear to have been included in the manuscript; if it did, it did not much excite Bowman. Overall, he was blunt: ‘It is very badly done.’\textsuperscript{35} He found, moreover, that the vast manuscript of which McMahon had begun to boast was nowhere near the oft-stated 400,000 words. Bowman’s reading revealed duplication and extraneous material such as letters and unabridged speeches. ‘By the time it’s cut into shape,’ Bowman wrote in his notes, ‘we shall probably have no more than 50,000–60,000 words.’ And yet, as he saw it, the problems were such that a mere edit would be insufficient to make the manuscript publishable. It needed to be almost entirely rewritten.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{32} Michael Morton-Evans, personal communication, 27 September 2016.
\textsuperscript{33} Richard Smart, personal communication, 24 August 2016.
\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, his later effort: David Bowman, \textit{The Captive Press} (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988).
\textsuperscript{35} Notes made by David Bowman, January 1984, in the author’s possession.
\textsuperscript{36} David Bowman diary, 18 January 1984, in the author’s possession.
Bowman knew that this might be dangerous to suggest. When he first told McMahon that there were problems in the manuscript, he observed that McMahon’s eyes narrowed to ‘small blue spots’. Taking advice from McMahon’s staff about how to handle this drastic recommendation, Bowman put his argument carefully, and was attentive to McMahon’s pride. He undertook to ghost-write the revised manuscript, and argued in flattering terms that it was necessary that McMahon be the central figure of the autobiography: ‘Only rarely should he step aside for some other character to dominate the stage.’ McMahon initially seemed willing to countenance a large-scale revision, though he apprehended that the nature of Bowman’s employment would have to change if a revised manuscript would be produced. But he repeatedly questioned and reconsidered the argument. In mid-February 1984, Bowman presented McMahon with drafts of two new chapters of a kind that might be used in a revised manuscript. McMahon returned them with comments saying that friends had insisted that his early life be in the book. Then, he expressed second thoughts about abandoning the first manuscript, speaking favourably of its limited scope and fixation on the powerful people he had known. Bowman now wondered whether McMahon was reconsidering the nature of the work. He asked if McMahon wished to produce an autobiography—in which events and people were presented sequentially, comprehensively, with documentation, as he had always said—or a memoir. McMahon replied that he wished to produce the latter.

This new desire threw Bowman; but what came to trouble him even further, and slowed work on the manuscript, was what at times appeared to be McMahon’s failing memory and at others his insistence on the integrity of that memory. Bowman had been warned of this. One of McMahon’s fellow staffers passed him a slip of poetry:

Ah! What avails Sir William’s sense,
And what the cultured word,
Against the undoctored incident
That actually occurred.

Stories Bowman had been told by McMahon’s staffers had alerted him to quirks of McMahon’s behaviour; what he observed in a fortnight of work left him aware those stories were likely to be true. He saw repeated lapses of memory, from the trivial and transient to the significant and problematic. ‘He confuses periods as well

38 Bowman to McMahon, 12 March 1984, copy in the author’s possession. These points were initially made orally but were put into writing in March amid a dispute over the manuscript’s direction and the nature of Bowman’s work.
40 Bowman diary, 5 March 1984.
as forgetting names and places,’ Bowman wrote. Aware of the effect it could have on the book, he lamented that McMahon had left the job so late: ‘He should have written the book ten years ago.’

The problem had infected the manuscript that Bowman was now trying to wholly rewrite, leaving what in Bowman’s eyes were incredible claims that needed to be supported by evidence. McMahon claimed, for example, that Menzies’s antipathy towards him was the result of the influence of Dame Pattie Menzies, who was supposedly angered by McMahon’s supposed refusal to accede to her supposed wish that he marry her daughter. McMahon recalled significant differences in the ministry about the government’s handling of the Suez crisis that were not recorded elsewhere: ‘Can these versions be reconciled?’ Bowman asked. Then he had claims about the governor-general and his relationship with Harold Holt in the days and weeks preceding Holt’s disappearance and death in 1967. These claims astonished Bowman: ‘That would have been a giant upheaval. It is difficult to believe now that it was ever in the realm of practical politics.’ Mindful that this material would need to be supported, Bowman added: ‘I think the reader will need to be persuaded.’

But McMahon appeared to regard persuasion with contempt. Again and again, he insisted on his version of events, even in the face of clear contradictions found in credible evidence. For example, McMahon insisted that the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh had been present at an event of controversy during McMahon’s period as minister for the navy and air. Bowman pointed out that the timing of the event and the Queen and Duke’s visit were months apart. To this, McMahon ‘kept on and eventually trailed off into incoherencies’.

On another occasion, the refusal to face up to the contradiction was brazen. McMahon claimed to have visited troops in Korea in Christmas 1952, and wished to have this recorded in the manuscript. Bowman found that McMahon’s passport was dated with a 14 December 1952 return to Australia. This did not convince McMahon that he was mistaken: ‘He was certain.’ McMahon suggested Bowman call Sir Thomas Daly, an army general who had been serving in Korea during McMahon’s visit. Daly backed Bowman. ‘He says he has a distinct memory of that Christmas and you were not there,’ Bowman wrote to McMahon. ‘He recalls your carrying a message from the Army Minister, Jos Francis, for delivery to the troops. However, the men were widely scattered and only a few could be brought together.’ To this, McMahon denied carrying

41 Bowman diary, 2 February 1984.
42 Bowman would later use this information when he wrote Dame Pattie Menzies’s obituary. See ‘Dame Pattie Menzies’, Daily Telegraph (London), 21 August 1995, 19. For that daughter’s response, see Heather Henderson, A Smile for My Parents (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013), 213.
43 Bowman to McMahon, 22 May 1984, in possession of the author.
44 Bowman annotation, ‘Death of Holt, sixth draft’, manuscript, p. 35, in possession of author.
45 Bowman diary, 28 February 1984.
46 Bowman diary, 20 February 1984. Bowman’s emphasis.
47 Bowman to McMahon, 21 February 1984, copy in the author’s possession.
a message from Francis and said he would call Daly himself. Then McMahon cited the Parliamentary Handbook, said he was in Japan and Korea from November to December, and ‘that should be good enough’ for the manuscript. Bowman threw McMahon’s passport onto the desk: ‘Then what do I do—burn this?’ McMahon brandished the Parliamentary Handbook and asked the same question. Bowman tried to point out that the Handbook was correct, that McMahon had been in Japan and Korea in November and December—but that it did not mean he was there at Christmas. McMahon would not hear it. He left Bowman’s office, arguing as he went, only to return a few minutes later and announce, ‘I don’t want to pursue it further’.

At least some part of the problem appeared to arise from the reliability of McMahon’s records. In the filing cabinets that cluttered the Westfield Towers office were copious aides-mémoire that purported to be records of conversations and moments of significance. Yet these were suspect. First, McMahon could hardly be relied upon to make accurate records. His staff noted that his records reflected how he wished the conversations and moments had gone rather than necessarily what had happened in them. His memory, as one staffer said, was ‘always shaded to himself. Always’.

Second, these aides-mémoire were the subject of repeated revision at the time of their making. As that same staffer wrote, later: ‘He would repeatedly hone whatever he was working on, sometimes making six or seven drafts. It used to drive his secretaries mad!’ Third, those aides-mémoire continued to be subject to repeated revision for years afterward. McMahon would write additional notes on them, thereby corrupting the integrity of the original document by adding new material or reframing the record in light of subsequent events. Thus a lengthy aide-mémoire about McMahon’s relationship with John McEwen, originally drafted in 1967, in the wake of Harold Holt’s death, continued to be revised and redrafted even after 15 years time.

All of this caused Bowman’s difficulties with McMahon to mount. By May 1984 McMahon was dissatisfied with progress, disliked the drafts Bowman was producing, and would not accept that rewriting the manuscript, as he had agreed, should actually involve rewriting. He wanted the book merely to be edited. He emphasised that editing was what the book’s publisher, Richard Smart, had said. McMahon wanted the book published quickly: he claimed that if it did not come out by the end of 1984 then he would be forgotten. McMahon’s attempts to have Smart act as an umpire between he and Bowman went nowhere, as did Bowman’s repeated statements to McMahon that everything he produced was a draft, open

49 Peter Kelly, personal communication, 1 October 2016.
51 An unamended copy, ‘Short history of difficulties with Mr. McEwen’, may be accessed at NAA M3787, 32. A copy bearing McMahon’s handwritten, undated annotations and revisions is in the author’s possession.
to revision if he did not like it. Meetings to resolve the problems repeatedly trailed into irrelevancies and questions about obscure details and sources. In one especially digressive meeting, McMahon insisted that all that was necessary was to make the manuscript a bit more readable. The book had to be in his style, he told Bowman.  

Bowman, however, was by now so frustrated that he offered his resignation and left three weeks later, at the end of June 1984, noting as he did that McMahon was left with eight fully drafted and credible chapters. They could be redrafted and revised, of course, but otherwise were readable, coherent, shorn of repetition and adhered to accepted fact. Bowman did not think they would be used: ‘None of this matters much, at this stage anyway,’ he wrote, ‘because Sir William has taken all the material referred to above, and rewritten it and restored earlier material. I have not seen the outcome.’

McMahon continued to work on the manuscript thereafter. In the wake of Bowman’s departure he terminated his relationship with Richard Smart and Collins Ltd, and cycled through many of Australia’s other publishers. A litany of ghost-writers, editors and aides also came and went. The most effective, it appears, was journalist Paul LePetit, who claimed to have brought the work to a near-publishable standard. McMahon continued to talk well of the book, proclaim that it would set everything straight, that it was all coming together. ‘My autobiography will be published shortly and, I believe, it will be one of the most readable and interesting insights into Australian politics yet written … I can assure everyone the book is well worth waiting for.’

But he would die, in March 1988, with the book unpublished. All work on it would cease. The papers that he had successfully kept in his control were packed into boxes for transfer to Canberra, to the National Library. Officials in PM&C saw the opportunity to recover the papers they believed should never have been ‘lent’ to McMahon. Commenting on the letter sent to McMahon by the library in 1983, which conceded that the papers ‘remain your property’, officials were scathing, ‘What do the Library think now—what steps are they taking to recover?’

They contacted McMahon’s staffers, hoping that they would help sort the papers and influence McMahon’s widow, Lady Sonia McMahon, to agree to give back material that the officials believed were either on loan or Commonwealth property. Yet they were also wary about any suggestion that it was a matter for negotiation:

52 Bowman diary, 4 June 1984.
53 Bowman to George Campbell, 29 June 1984, copy in the author’s possession.
‘With all due tact and sensitivity, we need to get the message across that decisions on Commonwealth records are not for the family to take,’ wrote one official.56 Thus the letter to McMahon’s secretarial staff on 5 May 1988:

We believe that Sir William may have had substantial numbers of Cabinet documents and other Commonwealth records including documents loaned to Sir William to aid him in the production of his autobiography. As a preliminary step it may be helpful for a member of my staff to visit you to undertake an initial survey of the extent of this holding and discuss with you the means by which these documents can be identified and our proposals on their future location.57

But Lady Sonia McMahon did not seem willing to revisit the point. Telling the public service to henceforth address this correspondence to her, she emphasised that the papers ‘are the property of my husband’.58

It does not appear that the officials succeeded in going through those papers again. Files of the correspondence peter out in 1988. The McMahon papers were returned to the National Library, which holds them still, with access under the control of the McMahon family.

‘Perhaps this is the worst deceiver of all’

Among my first acts when I began my biography of McMahon was to request access to his papers at the National Library and the cooperation of his family. Given the derision with which he had been treated, I prepared a proposal for the family that, I hoped, would show that I was committed to coming to a fair judgement of McMahon using sound historical practices. As I have documented elsewhere, in doing so I was attempting to address what I believed was the family’s sensitivity towards writings about him.59 It was to no avail. My request for cooperation was refused and access to McMahon’s papers was denied.

By the time of that decision I was well into the work and unwilling to cease. I had read many of the memoirs and autobiographies of McMahon’s contemporaries, listened to oral history interviews, reached out to sources for interviews and begun to read material deposited in the National Archives of Australia. Not all that long after I received word of the family’s decision, I accessed and read the files that documented McMahon’s success at retaining control of official and private papers from his political career, and I spoke with David Bowman, who gave to

56 Annotation on Bonsay to Lucas, 26 April 1988.
57 Glanville to Woods, 5 May 1988.
58 Sonia McMahon to Glanville, 17 May 1988.
me a box disinterred from his basement containing papers gathered during his six months working for McMahon. Among the contents were typed extracts and drafts of McMahon’s autobiography, letters, memos, notepads, payslips, Christmas cards, a plethora of aides-mémoire and—perhaps most illuminating—a loose-leaf diary that Bowman had maintained while working for McMahon. Vivid and detailed, bearing the newsman’s instinct for what was important, the diary reiterated a point I was already coming to understand: that, having succeeded in keeping ownership and control of the archive of papers he had built up during the course of his career, McMahon remained determined, despite his failing health and memory, and despite the arguments of aides and editors, to similarly retain control of his life and story. McMahon’s insistence on the autobiography being ‘his style’ was, in my view, not merely about grammar and syntax: it was about the substance and nature of the story told, the ‘life myth’ that he understood and wanted recorded for posterity.  

But the diary, the drafts and the extracts were also evidence of the failings and falsities of that life myth. Stories by their nature are selective, but those that McMahon told about himself and his life seemed especially so. In public comments and in drafts of the autobiography, McMahon portrayed himself as generally a wise, calm figure, always honourable, often vindicated by the turn of events, who was hardworking and energetic, who had risen to the top by dint of his efforts alone—and who had been wronged by jealous and malevolent colleagues, who had been hampered by the failings of less able peers, and whose qualities had never been understood by the public-at-large thanks to a partisan press. It was not a convincing portrayal, in part because the man emerging from it was so unblemished. The cynic in me thought of Orwell’s assessment of Salvador Dali’s memoirs: ‘Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.’

How had McMahon become so set on this patently false life story? Writing on the nature of autobiography, the American psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that the stories we tell about ourselves are constructed artefacts. There is a basic similarity between those stories and the life from which they have been constructed, and that similarity is due to the imitation that a story must make of life in order to be credible. But the autobiographical story—whether written in old age or offered in the heat of the moment—demands a reflexivity that creates the self that is present

61 This was not a point that had occurred to me alone. See Mark Hayne, ‘The Autobiography That Never Was’, Sydney Morning Herald, 11 April 1988, 15.
in that story; that is, the autobiographical narrative becomes self-fulfilling. 'In the end,' Bruner declares, 'we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives.' In this telling, it became clear that McMahon’s story about his life, and his determination to see that story told in his autobiography, was the result of the imperative to explain who he was in 1982–88, when, in retirement, he was trying to redeem his ignominious reputation. But why the abundance of contradictions between McMahon’s story and those of his colleagues and those evidenced in records? Because, as Bruner also explains, the selectivity required of storytelling involves a fundamental distortion of the events they repute to relate. As the story is told and retold, the facts that might run counter to the story are slowly shorn off, worn away—and, in the end, forgotten by the teller. In Bruner’s theory, McMahon’s insistence on the correctness of his autobiography stemmed from an acute psychological need to be the subject of the story he told about himself. That story, like stones in a fast-moving river, had become worn and smooth in its constant retelling, to the point that McMahon believed it to be the truth and nothing else. He lived as its subject: as a man who had been wronged, whose reputation was in need of redemption via an autobiography, and who thus had to have reasons for that redemption.

But this narrative had to be viable in the cross-streams of other stories. Bruner points out, citing Sartre, that life stories have to mesh with a whole community of other life stories. This occurs at both a structural level, in which stories may be shaped as (for example) tragedies or comedies, as well as a truthful, verifiable level, where readers would accept the claims contained therein. To surmise from his diary, Bowman accepted this. But McMahon could not. He could not accept a story that had to be supported so, nor accept a story that, in meshing with others, diverted so far from his. Hence his vehement reactions to Bowman’s questions and his critical fact-checking. McMahon could not comprehend or fathom how they might be necessary. To answer and consider them might be to suggest that his story was wrong. But that could not be. His story was the real story. His story was the right one.

‘Perhaps this is the worst deceiver of all,’ wrote Doris Lessing, ‘we make up our pasts.’ It seemed that McMahon, in acceding to that deep need to tell his story as he saw it and refusing to see that there could be other ways of seeing his story, had fallen victim to that deceit: he had ensured that his story would never be accepted.

64 Mark Hayne would write later that McMahon seemed to have ‘built up a protective barrier which screened out criticism of himself and which reinforced his perception of his importance in the eyes of history and the public’: see ‘The Autobiography that Never Was’, 15.
let alone see the light of day. Hence the repeated failure, between 1982 and 1988, to produce a manuscript acceptable both to him and to the seven publishers to whom he submitted drafts before his death.66

‘A new and entirely different order of reality’

In the absence of a published manuscript, it was almost inarguably the case that McMahon ceded control of the story of his life. Even before his death, his story was being told by others. When long-time colleague and intimate Peter Howson published a voluminous section of his diaries in June 1984, McMahon was outraged, claiming to have found errors and falsities in Howson’s record: ‘In each case Howson was a liar; emphatically a liar,’ wrote Bowman.67 But the appearance of Howson’s book and McMahon’s adverse reaction were harbingers of the future. Amid a proliferation of published autobiographies and memoirs by non-Labor politicians in the 1980s, McMahon’s reputation and story was taken from his hands and shaped by others.68 In the absence of his autobiography, the claims and views of colleagues and opponents went nearly unchallenged.69 Thus, in my view, the consensus about McMahon’s life and his prime ministership had consolidated to the point where he was regarded as one of Australia’s worst prime ministers.

I did not approach the task of McMahon’s biography with any intent to rescue him from this ignominious plight. Nor did I approach McMahon with any intention of damning him further. I had neither hatchet nor halo in hand: I chose to write a biography about McMahon because, in the absence of both an existing biography and putative biographer, I could blaze a path across a field that was clear, hopefully meeting the methodological and ethical challenges presented by biography writing. This somewhat neutral regard for McMahon did not survive long. My reading about McMahon began to provoke what Richard Holmes calls ‘the biographer’s most valuable but perilous weapon’: empathy.70 This arose, initially, from my curiosity about McMahon’s autobiography and his failure to publish it. As I got further into my research, my interest and faith in the value of that interest unmistakeably—and uneasily—paralleled McMahon’s. It was perhaps most acute when the journalist

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67 Bowman diary, 4 June 1984.
69 Paul Hasluck’s The Chance of Politics, ed. Nicholas Hasluck (Melbourne: Text, 1997), is perhaps the most famous and enduring.
Alan Ramsey asked, in a tone of beggared disgust, why on earth I was doing the project. I had to catch myself from bleating, per McMahon, that I thought it would be interesting and worthwhile.

Then there was the empathy that was provoked by Bowman’s diary. The dilemmas that he had faced paralleled my own. Already, each and every day, in what I was doing and what Bowman had attempted to do, I saw an abyss: between what the manifold documents could and could not establish; what the individuals I was listening to in person or on CDs at the National Library could recall, forget and believe; between different ways of reading and understanding the past; between reality and perception; between truth and falsity. Bowman had repeatedly asked himself the same question that I was asking: *What actually happened?* In no small way, thanks to McMahon, Bowman had been unable to answer that question. I was determined to find answers, but I could not help but feel that a string of failures undermined the ontological certainty of my biography of McMahon even as I was writing it.

This was particularly acute when I probed claims whose basis could not be tested or known. Bowman had noted a conversation with McMahon about the origins of the *Aged Persons Homes Act*. Passed by the Menzies Government in 1955, it had allowed the federal government to match, on a pound for pound basis, private donations to the construction and maintenance of nursing homes. The Bill had provided a model for subsequent schemes to build women’s refuges, and housing for the young and Indigenous. Reputed to have been the idea of Dame Pattie Menzies, McMahon—according to Bowman’s notes—claimed differently. I was ready to discount the claim when I turned the page to read about a phone call Bowman had subsequently made to McMahon’s parliamentary colleague Billy Wentworth. Bowman had raised the claim and Wentworth had confirmed its veracity. There was no further mention of it in the notes and papers. What to make of it? There might well have been material on the point among McMahon’s papers in the National Library—but how to be sure? How to know?

It was a similar case when I studied John Gorton’s fall from office. It is widely believed that McMahon—barring his backgrounding against Gorton—had no hand in the matter. But Malcolm Fraser, whose resignation from the defence ministry had sparked Gorton’s fall, was suspicious that McMahon *had* been involved, principally by leaking word that the Joint Intelligence Organisation was compiling reports on the Army’s efforts at ‘Vietnamisation’ in Vietnam. This information, spun as suggestion that there were problems between Fraser and the Army, was central to the conflict that gave Fraser impetus to resign. Was McMahon involved?

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71 Bowman diary, 5 April 1984.
None of you will believe it

This kind of unanswerable question added to the challenge I was already grappling with, as articulated by James Olney:

If *bios* is ‘the course of a life, a lifetime’, and if it is already spent and past, then how is it going to be made present again, how is it ever going to be recaptured, how is that which is no longer living going to be restored to life? When ‘is’ has been transformed into ‘was’, when the unique moment of the present slips into the huge abyss of the past, if it remains in any sense real at all, then it must be within a new and entirely different order of reality from that informing the present.\(^{73}\)

In the description of the challenge, however, lay the solution. Olney’s passage offered permission and opportunity to eschew the kind of dutiful ‘claim, counter-claim, evaluation’ that would otherwise have clogged the pages of my biography. The ‘new and entirely different order of reality’ suggested a way to acknowledge the inability to resolve claims like the above and reflect on the meaning and ramifications of that inability. Perhaps even more notably, it also became a way to portray and understand the story that McMahon told about himself—the life myth that he persisted so earnestly and doggedly to try to put forward in his autobiography.

Using the documents and material that Bowman had given me, I could recreate the years where McMahon and his ghost-writers had tried to present this story, paralleling their efforts: just as I was trying to ascertain the facts, so too had Bowman and the scores of other ghost-writers that McMahon had employed. I could portray, discuss and contextualise their efforts, implicitly drawing attention to my own, and describe how and why those gaps had opened up. I could show how McMahon had come to see himself—and why his views diverged so far from his colleagues and peers. I could also show how and why McMahon’s reputation had been formed, and how and why he had failed, ultimately, to write the autobiography that he had promised. Moreover, rather than banish this material to a concluding chapter at the end of the book—as a strict chronological approach would have had it—I could make it the central thread of the biography. Intertwining an orthodox biographical narrative that was, as much as possible, fact-based with an account of McMahon’s attempts to write the story that he believed in, I could draw the reader’s attention to the problems and limits of recreating the past, of understanding a life, of writing a type of ‘history’. In sum, that ‘new and entirely different order of reality’ thus took on a rather literal meaning: a biography that reckoned with the ‘life’ and the ‘stories’ of William McMahon.

Who owns the life?

Ownership remains a vexed question in biography. As James Walter points out, there are many stakeholders in a biography—from the subject to their family and friends, to their colleagues and peers, to the wider public that may never interact with a subject but live nonetheless in a country affected by them. McMahon’s children, who now perhaps have greatest claim to an ownership, never commented on my book, though one of McMahon’s nephews wrote to insist, notwithstanding that he had not read the book, that I had certainly got his uncle wrong. He might well be right. The McMahon family’s refusal to cooperate with me means that there are facets of his character that I was not able to capture; their refusal to allow access to McMahon’s papers, at the National Library of Australia, means that I was unable to take into account information that might well be contained there. It may well be that another biographer, who wins access and cooperation, comes to a very different view of McMahon than that portrayed in my book. Until this time, however, the silence of the family and the restrictions on his papers reiterates the truth of McMahon’s declaration in 1973: ‘Ownership and control will, of course, remain with me.’

REFLECTIVE ARTICLE
The challenges and rewards of political memoir writing

ROBERT TICKNER

Introduction

I have unexpectedly been invited to share the ‘behind the scenes’ story of two autobiographical books that I have written concerning aspects of my public and related personal life. I was at first reticent to undertake the process of sharing the inside account of how a political autobiography is conceived and ultimately carried forward into print. Reticent, because I always knew that I was not a gifted creative writer and that, like the process of making sausages, knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes in the creation of a political memoir—or any book for that matter—is not always entertaining, enlightening or uplifting.

I have agreed to do it, however, because I believe that many more people who have had the privilege to serve in significant ministerial or other senior public roles have their own stories and valuable insights into the process of government, as well as the processes and tactics that lead to the achievement of beneficial social change. Comparatively few commit to the task of writing a political autobiography or memoir, or collaborate in the writing of one. If a parliamentarian has had the opportunity to serve at ministerial level, and their story relates to the achievement of great and positive shifts in public policy, their stories take on a much wider relevance. There is potentially a real utility for the public good in recording and publishing these stories. My intention is to be fully transparent in sharing my own modest ‘sausage making’ processes, and to do so confidently as I know the primary readers of this reflective article are likely to be academics, writers and maybe even parliamentarians who may take heart from my experiences and one day make their own contribution to the bookshelves of political autobiographies. At least this is my profound hope.

Finally, I should also stress that in writing this background to my books, I have sought to make it practical and down to earth rather than academic in nature. My books, I hope, are written in a similar vein, although I have striven to ensure historical accuracy at all times. I also wanted them to be read by the general community and not just by the academic community.
I have been privileged to spend 18 years as an elected person in public office, six of them as an elected member of the Sydney City Council, including a very brief period as acting lord mayor during one of the most volatile and high-profile eras of council politics during the twentieth century. During this time, the politics of the council were substantially transformed by the election of a progressive group of Australian Labor Party (ALP) councillors (called Aldermen at that time). We were committed to environmental protection, the defence of the heritage buildings of the city and to many other pioneering innovations in city council policies. We were also prepared to stand up to some rapacious developers who had previously had a dominant role in shaping the policies of previous administrations of the council. There was so much to write about concerning those heady days that I planned to write a book about it all, but I was catapulted unexpectedly into the Parliament of Australia just as my council term ended. My remaining 12 years of public service was as the federal member for Hughes (1984–96), the latter six years as Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (1990–96). I was honoured to become—and remain—the longest serving minister in that portfolio. Some may not understand, but I honestly believed that to be the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs was the greatest honour and very best job in the parliament, next to being prime minister.

Arising from my time in public office, I have written two books that are partly autobiographical. However, both have a heavy emphasis on public policy discussion and analysis, and this dimension of my writing distinguishes me from some other political memoirists. To be frank, I have never cared much for the internecine power plays within political parties that form the core of many political memoir narratives. I have always been much more interested in the policy drivers for legislative change, which inspired my interest in public life in the first place, and in what I was able to achieve while I was there. I was never in it for the ride.

My first book, Taking a Stand, was published by Allen & Unwin in 2001, and it summarises the full six years of my holding the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. It also puts the reforms of that era in the context of the longer-term history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public policy, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations, in Australia. My second book, Ten Doors Down, arose because, at the same time as my ministerial tenure, I went through an extraordinary adoption reunion process. I first met my birth mother on the steps of the Sydney Opera House in early 1993, and later my birth father and then two sisters and two brothers. All this occurred while serving as a minister in what is now known as the ‘Mabo debate’, in which the country struggled to come to terms with how to respond to the historic High Court decision in 1992 recognising the continuing existence of native title to land.

Twenty-two years after losing my seat in the 1996 election, I was able to secure a publisher for Ten Doors Down. It is a book interspersed with the political backdrop of my ministerial life during what is now known as the ‘Mabo debate’, in which the country struggled to come to terms with how to respond to the historic High Court decision in 1992 recognising the continuing existence of native title to land.
in this country. I propose to deal with these two books in parallel but sequentially, examining a wide range of issues including my motivations for writing these books; the actual writing process itself; the format they have taken; the soul-searching judgements that were involved along the way; the publishing and editing processes; the major decisions involving covers, designs, titles, endorsements and such; and finally the book launch and aftermath. I should emphasise that the two books are very different, and the background to the writing and publication were also very different. By way of example, securing the publication of *Taking a Stand* was much easier to achieve by virtue of the early and strong support I received from renowned Australian publisher John Iremonger.

I write now as a person no longer engaged in partisan politics, and not even as a member of a political party, although I remain values driven and engaged as a public policy advocate. By reviving the controversies of my work of almost three decades ago, I will to a degree be surrendering a part of my private life, which these days I value enormously. I will inevitably again be exposing myself to potential public scrutiny and even perhaps criticism from people who still consider themselves to be my political opponents despite that passing of over 25 years since I last sat in the national parliament. In doing this, I am acting consistently with my preparedness over recent years to participate in comparable projects such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ‘The History Listen’ podcast, which dedicated two episodes to the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair, a political controversy that came into my life in 1994 and stayed there until the year 2001. In that year, the Federal Court of Australia vindicated the Aboriginal women who had claimed for heritage protection, as well as my own actions as minister, and that of key others who had been caught up in the issue. The lesson in all of this I have learnt is that once you are a public figure there is a huge danger of being typecast for life, like the actor who enjoys the 10-year run in the same sitcom and then has to work hard to reinvent themselves in other roles. I hope I have succeeded in escaping this fate.

**My motivations**

The primary motivation for *Taking a Stand* was always very clear in my mind. I wanted to leave a historical record of my time in the portfolio, not only to record the achievements, but also to tell the backstory to some of the major advances in public policy. There were also lessons for those who followed me in the portfolio and in parliament, should they care to read it, because the book also seeks to explain the challenges that remained for our nation to achieve a just reconciliation and to meet the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I knew by early 1996, as the country moved towards the looming federal election to be held on 2 March that year, that I had lived through a momentous time in Australian public life. I also knew that I was battle-scarred by the process and that I may not be re-elected.
in my own marginal seat. Hughes was always marginal, but had become more so in recent years, and I was assailed on a regular basis on Sydney talkback radio by those commentators who had strongly opposed my support of Aboriginal rights. The issues I had dealt with included the launch of the reconciliation process with the unanimous support of the parliament in 1990, intended to run through until Australia’s centenary of Federation on 1 January 2001; support of the leadership of Paul Keating in responding to the aforementioned Mabo judgment; the national response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; the call for a public inquiry into the Stolen Generations; the establishment of the Indigenous Land Fund to purchase land for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who would not be able to prove their continuing interest in the land under the *Native Title Act* 1993; my work in the Northern Territory in achieving a record number of Aboriginal land titles under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* 1976 following the successful claims made under that Act; as well as other key issues that were to be subsequently accorded chapter status in my book. I was fortunate with my background as a former Aboriginal Legal Service lawyer to be a participant in these events, and I was truly humbled to have worked with so many outstanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders during this time, such as Lowitja O’Donoghue, and many others across the country.

I knew that there was a lot of Australian political history made in those six years, and I believed it was important that there was a lasting, accurate and intimate insider record of that time. Further, I was confident that I could write it. I also believed that there was much unfinished business in meeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations. For example, I had sustained serious setbacks in an effort in 1995 to convince the Labor Government of the need to support the Centenary of Federation Infrastructure proposal, which focused on addressing Aboriginal health issues. There was also the issue of the third-stage response to the Mabo decision, namely a social justice package of measures to address Aboriginal disadvantage that had not been delivered during our tenure. I wanted my book to record the successes and offer paths for future policy development.

For me, a public life is a noble enterprise, a judgement I offer not in any sanctimonious or elitist way but because, being a legislator and especially a minister, you do have the potential to change the course of history and to help make our country and sometimes the world a better place. Thus, a further core motivation in writing *Taking a Stand* was my belief that we devalue our parliaments in this country and we fail to give credit to the fact that there are many people of intelligence, integrity and good will in almost all of our political parties and among the independents. I find that sometimes in the community and in the media, people who themselves are not actively engaged in building a better world by their own social activism are so very ready to cynically dismiss the calling of public life and the absolute necessity of finding ways to bring out the best in our elected members. Cynicism
in the electorate will never be the wellspring of reform and good government and, in some ways, cynicism breeds more cynicism and alienation on the part of some parliamentarians themselves. We need to find ways to bring idealism and passion to our lobbying processes that inspire progressive change, and to never forget that protest movements, however noble and critical to drive social change, do not deliver change on their own. We need the support of the community and of our elected members to legislate the changes required to tackle injustice, and to drive equity and fairness in our society. I have belonged to and engaged with various community-based social reform movements since I became politically active in my early 20s, and remain involved in this way. In all my work, I have never become cynical about or embittered by parliamentary processes, and I have never lost sight of the fact that securing a parliamentary majority for social reform is every bit as fundamental to achieving social change as a mass demonstration or a million likes on Facebook. Therefore, the work of ministers and parliamentarians is critical, as is our engagement with them. Legislation hardly ever gets through simply on the basis of a clever speech in Cabinet, and many of the really big reforms are so often driven by social movements and the interactions of the people with their parliament.

It is important therefore that people of good will in the parliament who have stories to tell about those processes that help shape the course of history are prepared to share those stories with the rest for us. In my view, that is one of the most important contributions of a good political autobiography. In Taking a Stand, I wanted to show openly and honestly that the work of Aboriginal people and organisations and their many supporters in the community did change the course of history during my time in the portfolio. My book seeks to reveal how that was done; for example, in the lead up to the passage of the Native Title Act.

I had a personal interest in telling the story because I am very proud of my work and leadership, both behind the scenes and publicly, during my ministerial tenure. However, this was never the primary motivation. From the beginning, I was conscious of the need to keep my ego in check, and to ensure that the book did not descend into self-promotion or self-justification. My focus was going to be, unlike most political autobiographies and memoirs, not on the personalities of my fellow ministers but rather on the battle for ideas, the public policy debates and their outcomes. Unlike some others, I was also not motivated by money in writing either of my books, and any surplus from Taking a Stand was directed to the Aboriginal Law Centre at the University of New South Wales. While Taking a Stand is a book with a primary focus on public policy, I have openly acknowledged that my previous experiences (including as a lawyer with the Aboriginal Legal Service) helped shape my political and public policy work as a minister.

My motivation for writing Ten Doors Down was different. Here, I was long driven to honour the reunion with my birth mother, my birth father and two brothers and sisters, who I met when I was in my early 40s. I also wanted to write respectfully
about my adopted mum and dad and the great gift they had given me by bringing me up in such a loving environment. However, when I met my birth mother I found out that she had suffered greatly because of my adoption, and at one point she told me that there had never been a day when she had not grieved that adoption. She had also never been able to have any other children as a result of that grief, because of a deep fear that any other child would also be separated from her. She had died some eight years before the book was eventually published in 2020, and much of the book focuses on her life, loss and longing to meet up with her long-lost child. Honouring her in particular became a huge driver for me to write this book. One reason why the story is remarkable is because of the extraordinary coincidences in my narrative, including the fact that when I met my birth mother, she was living only ‘ten doors down’ from my adopted grandmother.

Another motivation for writing the book was that I wanted to write about the serious public policy issues concerning forced adoption in Australia during the latter half of the twentieth century, which included my own experience. Several chapters of the book either directly relate to or touch on these public policy issues. Again, I was not motivated by money in writing *Ten Doors Down*, and any proceeds are going to the cause of prison and criminal justice reform through a newly established national organisation I am closely associated with, ‘The Justice Reform Initiative’.

Finally, I did intentionally seek to weave into the book numerous aspects of contemporary political developments that I was involved in. I wanted to share this very personal story, to show that parliamentarians (I prefer this to the word ‘politician’, which has been devalued) are people too! By humanising myself and sharing huge parts of my private life, I wanted to send the message that MPs have lives too, and they are like everyone else in that they have strengths and human frailties, and challenging life situations that they must work through as the daily ministerial workload proceeds apace. I have had a lot of positive feedback about this dimension of the book. I was also conscious that my first book, *Taking a Stand*, could almost have been a public policy textbook or a work of history (as it modestly was) rather than a personal political autobiography designed for the sharing of the self. There is certainly at least some of that in my earlier book, but it is limited.

**Writing the memoirs**

The writing process for the two books was at least in part very different. When I wrote *Taking a Stand*, internet access was extremely limited in my world. I wrote the entire book by hand in my own awful handwriting. I often compare my writing to that of an eight-year-old child who has comprehensively failed both writing and spelling, and both were truly shocking. The entire book was thus transcribed from my handwriting, and subsequently edited, by my heroic friend Diane Hudson,
before it went to a publisher. Di was also my office manager for the six years I served as a minister. Without her help and support, I could not have written the book, and that is why I dedicated it to her.

To understand the precarious and fragile nature of the writing process for *Taking a Stand*, it is important to note that most of it was written during a time when I was experiencing a period of long-term unemployment after the election in March 1996 until early 1998 when I managed to obtain part-time work on the Residential Tenancies Tribunal in New South Wales. Understandably, unemployment and particularly a substantial period of unemployment is bad for personal health, and I wrote the book under very difficult circumstances. However, I did have strong faith in the project from the beginning, and had thought about what the shape of the book may look like before the election. Quietly, I began to accumulate all of the relevant documents I could find in my office that might have proved useful to the writing of a substantial political memoir. I was aware that none of my predecessors as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (except Gough of course), to the best of my knowledge, had undertaken such a project, and that I had a special obligation to do so given that I was by far the longest-serving minister in that portfolio, and that I had a hell of a story to tell. My efforts to secure my office records, videos and tapes, which contained a treasure trove of historical material, were dealt a terrible blow when one of my staff unfortunately and inadvertently threw out masses of material following the election. Thankfully, key cabinet documents had already been secured, and were not caught up in this deeply regrettable loss of source material.

After the election, when I came to terms with the shock and impact of the loss of my seat, I was then living in a rented shed at Stanwell Park, my marriage having ended a year earlier. I began to slowly write the book, interrupted by a voyage of self-discovery and a road trip around Australia in my late father’s old family car that I undertook in the six months following the election itself.

I wrote most of the book in coffee shops, as this had become my way of working from my 20s. I have never been comfortable to work for long stretches desk-bound in an office, and am stimulated if not driven to higher performance when I am surrounded by people in public places like parks, restaurants and, particularly, cafes. When I took up duties with the tribunal in early 1998, I was mostly given country circuits. During the next two years, I did a significant amount of the final writing and preliminary editing of the manuscript during those country trips for the tribunal. I stayed at very modest and sometimes dingy country motels, which formed a regular part of my circuit. I did sometimes think of the reputed stories of Abraham Lincoln working modestly by candlelight in that log cabin. I was of course not equating anything with Abraham Lincoln more than the very modest environments in which I was working and writing, but modest and often dismal they truly were.
The writing of my second book occurred in very different circumstances. I had done some preliminary work before I went overseas, but I undertook the bulk of this project in 2016 following my return from working as the under-secretary general of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Federation in Geneva. I had anticipated immediately seeking an executive position comparable to my previous role as CEO of Australian Red Cross when I returned. However, I quickly realised that I had no appetite for taking on such a role, but rather would now claim my life for myself. I decided to devote the rest of my working life to the causes I believed in, and to work on a pro bono basis. This gave me control of my life, and one of the consequences of this control was that I had the time to finish writing this book, which had been building up inside me for some time.

Again, I wrote almost all of the book in local Balmain coffee shops, and in local parks. I also wrote the entire book in an email format, sending these emails to myself and simply adding new text to each successive email. This was how the book took shape. When chapters were finished, the emails would be converted to Word documents, and then I undertook a succession of edits and embellishments as the ideas became clearer to me. I know that many people would think this a crazy way to work, but I must say it works well for me. I never lost any of the work due to IT problems, and I was easily able to convert the emails to text in Word documents.

In the case of both books, I wrote in the style I am most comfortable with, namely that I do not plan the detail of my chapters in advance but write intuitively, with the manuscript taking shape and evolving into different and hopefully improved incarnations over time. In hindsight, this is one of the key bits of advice I would give to people, and that is to dive right in to the writing process. Do not overthink the process of the first chapters. Dive right in and get some words on paper, and you can always come back and edit and reshape what you have done. Nothing beats getting those foundational words and a draft first chapter on the screen in front of you.

In terms of the source materials for Ten Doors Down, I clearly had to undertake research for the public policy and historical references to past adoption laws and policies, and for some other areas such as the chapter on the Stolen Generations (see later). However, most of the book was written as part of my life story, including the history of my early life with my adopted parents, and then the long, drawn-out and complicated developments that occurred as I first met my birth mother, my birth father and then my two brothers and sisters. I was assisted in the telling of this tale by the fact that I possess all of the original letters I had written to my birth parents, and their replies to me. These were all included in the book, and my task was to insert them in a creative way, a task made easier because I had decided to tell the story chronologically. This made reference to and inclusion of the letters easy in the body of the text.
Writing *Ten Doors Down* was, in so very many ways, a labour of love, in that I knew I had a cracker of a human-interest story. Of course, I had lived through this story as a personal journey, and it was one that continued to touch me deeply as readers of the book will understand. Although I was perfectly at peace with my life as an adopted person, I had to confront the reality, as the adoption reunion proceeded, that my mother had had a very different experience. As my book reveals, when we first met, she was extraordinarily fragile, and it took at least the first five years of our relationship for her to settle. By then, she knew that I was not going to leave her, and she was to be part of my life forever. But of course, I always carried the sadness and grief of my mother, a sadness that she carried such a well-kept secret for so many years.

So, when I typed her story into my iPad in all those public places, rivers of tears flowed. I do not mind confessing that I would also often be moved to tears again in the years ahead as the book got closer to publication, when I read extracts of what I had written. I continued to find them deeply moving, and intimately personal. I must have been quite a sight in some of those coffee shops with tears streaming down my face as I punched out those many hundreds of emails on my battered little iPad. I should also add that, although I found the writing process for both books a very solitary (and with respect to *Ten Doors Down* an emotional) one, I also became deeply immersed in the projects and found the effort deeply enjoyable and uplifting in both cases.

The structures and chapter layouts in each book involved different processes and considerations. In the case of *Taking a Stand*, I had made an earlier decision to divide up the book into chapters based on the particular subject areas of public policy under discussion. Some key examples include ‘The Reconciliation Process’, ‘ATSIC: A Radical Shift Towards Self-Determination’, ‘Aboriginal Deaths in Custody’, ‘Getting the Native Title Act Over the Line’, ‘Heritage, Culture and Hindmarsh Island’, and so forth. As the titles of these chapters indicate, I had covered all the major areas of my work in the portfolio and, even today, almost 30 years down the track, so very many of these issues are still on the policy public landscape. Intentionally dividing up the book in this way, I hope I made it accessible to students and to people who want to understand the policy context and timeline of each area of policy development. It does not purport to be just one chronological record. Within each chapter there is a chronological record of what happened in each of the major public policy areas I worked in and have written about.

In *Ten Doors Down*, the chapter headings show the very different focus of the book on my personal life, with political and public policy chapters and other references interspersed throughout. Most of the chapters were about episodes or developments in my personal journey (such as ‘Birth and Adoption’, ‘Leaving the Nest’, ‘First Steps Towards Meeting my Birth Mother’, ‘An Exchange of Letters’). Other chapters, such as ‘Adoption Practices in NSW in the 1950s’ and ‘The Stolen Generations’, were
about broader public policy issues. As can be seen by the chapter headings, they have been given simple titles reflecting the chronological unfolding story of my early life and the adoption reunion, although I have broken them up into chapters that enable the reader to get a comprehensive understanding of what took place in each separate piece of the unification puzzle. In other words, I largely deal with the events leading to the meeting of my father in relatively self-contained chapters and, within the penultimate chapter events are in chronological order to allow that story to unfold.

**Searching the soul**

If any author wants to deliver a work of integrity that they can be proud of, it will be necessary to sometimes confront tough questions on possible content that may be embarrassing or cause other difficulties. There will invariably be pressures to engage in self-censorship at various times when issues arise that are politically or personally sensitive to the writer, yet that may need to be included to ensure textual integrity. There are no black and white answers to these questions. I also make no apologies for being an unreconstructed idealist, in that I truly believe that the opportunity to serve as a minister in a national government in Australia is an enormous privilege. In my experience, there are many others in the parliament that share that view on both sides of the political fence. This way of approaching public life played a role in determining the shape and content of the narratives.

By way of example, when I wrote *Taking a Stand*, I was conscious that an honest account of what was happening behind the scenes during the development of the Mabo response would involve some very sensitive writing. I was not always in agreement with the strategy that Paul Keating was adopting; namely, to seek agreement with state premiers and chief ministers, and then to get Coalition support in the Senate for the passage of the Native Title Act. I never believed that it was possible to do this, and if such an agreement was reached, it would have been at the expense of Aboriginal rights. However, despite the likely adverse consequences for me putting my views on the public record in the book, I determined, in good conscience, that I had no choice but to give a faithfully honest account of these issues. However, I did so making it clear that I was very much in admiration and support for the final view that Paul adopted, with his realisation that the priority had to be given to meeting Aboriginal aspirations. Additionally, at the end of the day, there was a realisation that there was no chance the Coalition would support the legislation in the Senate. This meant that only a majority of ALP, Democrat and Western Australian Greens senators could get the legislation through. I therefore treated Paul Keating exceptionally well in the book for his leadership on this issue, as indeed I believed he was entitled to be treated.
An example of a second challenge I faced was whether to name the person who I refer to in the book as an ALP colleague who, at one of the most critical times towards the pointy end of the government’s Mabo response, was spending much of his time actively undermining me internally, including within the office of the prime minister, in order to advance his own future ministerial prospects. I decided not to name this person, not because I was afraid to do so, but rather because I thought it would divert focus from other, more important, aspects of the book. There was nothing to be gained by naming them. I did, however, keep the reference in the book to the undermining that had occurred, and have since forgiven the person concerned.

I also had to make judgement calls about other people’s privacy. For instance, I had to decide whether I would include a fax (some will remember them) sent to me the night before the 1993 election by Michael Wooldridge, then the shadow minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. In that very private communication, he celebrated the fact that we had been true to our consciences and achieved a wonderful thing by securing the unanimous passage of the legislation setting up the reconciliation process. I took the view that, although it was obviously a very private communication between two individuals, its publication could only reflect with great credit on him, which it did, and I resolved to quote from it.

Yet another huge and tough judgement call was how I would treat the Hindmarsh Island issue that was, at that time of publication, still before the courts. I decided to be courageous and to take a strong stand in support of the approach I had taken in dealing with the challenging issues before me in that matter, even though there was a danger that a post-publication court decision could be released that could find against me. In that scenario, the words in the book would then come back to haunt me. However, I knew I had acted with integrity, and so I stood my ground in my account as set out in the book, and was soon to be vindicated by the decision of the Federal Court of Australia.

Finally, I should mention that there was one other issue I had to deal with, and that I thought could give rise to major problems. Part of my mission in writing the book was to show the diverse pressures and sources of advice that were coming to the government from bureaucratic departments and agencies. One of those major sources of advice was from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. I always intended to include quotations and some substantial extracts from departmental documents in the book. I knew that there were potentially serious adverse consequences from quoting these documents, but was also conscious that I would not be the first to breach the cabinet-in-confidence rule. I was aware, for example, that my former colleague Neal Blewett had published his *A Cabinet Diary,*
in which there were detailed disclosures of cabinet discussions.\footnote{Neal Blewett, \textit{A Cabinet Diary: A Personal Record of the First Keating Government} (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1999).} I was aware that no adverse consequences were suffered, although Neal had received a threatening letter from the department before his book was published. I took courage from the fact that he had pressed on, and resolved to continue with my intention to quote from the cabinet submissions and from the advice given to ministers by relevant government departments. These revelations were important to the book, and showed very clearly how difficult it was for Aboriginal advocacy to prevail within the government. Twenty years down the track not one single journalist, political opponent, government official or any other person has ever raised a concern about the publication of these cabinet submissions. This is a good thing, as it is an indication that a more liberal climate of thinking is prevailing around open public debate on public policy issues by former ministers and others.

In relation to sensitive judgment calls that I had to make in relation to \textit{Ten Doors Down}, there were also ethical challenges. One reality I had to face was that I had to secure the full support of my birth family for the publication of the book, otherwise I could not in good conscience allow it to be published. I was not prepared to sacrifice my newly found beautiful family and my relationship with them for the publication of a book. This meant submitting the manuscript to them all, to my father and brothers and sisters and my stepmother Lola. My birth mother had already passed away in 2012. Submitting the manuscript was a very big deal because, until that time, my father and the family had no idea of the sadness and grief that the adoption had caused my mother, and I was worried that these issues would cause them concern about the publication of the book. I was conscious that I could not allow them to have a blanket veto on content, but I was prepared to listen to any suggestions they had for improvement if indeed there were any. As it turned out they all loved the book, and the very minor concerns they had were about particular words or phrases. They were so minute and, to me, extremely marginal and minor concerns that I could easily accommodate them with no threat to the integrity of the manuscript. All writers of autobiography, I assume, will run into ethical issues of this kind and it is important to make the right calls to maintain the integrity of the manuscript and indeed that of the writer.

\section*{Editing and publishing}

My experience of finding a publisher for these books was markedly different. In the case of \textit{Taking a Stand}, the process was relatively easy. In my years as a political activist in Sydney, I had met the highly respected publisher John Iremonger, who was at that time one of the senior people at Allen & Unwin. In informal conversation with
John, in circumstances I do not directly recall, he expressed interest in publishing the book. For that, I am forever grateful. I did not have a literary agent, and my relationship was directly with Allen & Unwin.

In the case of *Ten Doors Down*, I was brimming with confidence when I finished the manuscript that I would easily find a publisher. One reason for this confidence was that I had personally paid for editing support from someone I became friends with in Balmain after my parliamentary life had ended. I had shared a house with the young editor Nicola O’Shea who, at that time, was working for HarperCollins. Nearly 20 years later, Nicola was one of Australia’s most respected independent editors. She first gave me structural advice on how to reorder the first draft of the chapter titles and suggested helpful deletions. I took this advice and the draft manuscript was significantly improved as a result. Nicola also gave me great advice about how to include dialogue in the book. I was, however, only prepared to include dialogue where I could actually meaningfully recall the conversations that I was writing about. I wanted the book to be honest and true, and therefore ruled out creating any dialogue that I could not personally recall. Again, the book was hugely improved by the inclusion of this authentic dialogue. Nicola also did a detailed copyedit and this also made the book ready for publishing in my view. I realised, of course, that if I was successful in securing a publisher, they would likely appoint an in-house editor to undertake further work.

I have not counted the numbers of personal letters I wrote to publishers, but it must have been close to 20. Again, I did not have a literary agent. Perhaps naively, I included a hard copy of the manuscript and even copies of some of the amazing photos that I thought would be great for the book. I have a collection of approximately 19 personal rejection letters from just about every major publisher in Australia. Almost all of them are respectful letters that acknowledge the beauty of the story I had written but noting that the economics of publishing simply did not stack up, and that the book was not projected to sell sufficient copies to deliver an adequate return to the publisher. This ‘heartbreak hill’ of rejections was mine to climb. This whole process took nearly two years, and still I had no publisher.

In March 2018, I wrote personally to Henry Rosenbloom, head of Scribe Publications in Melbourne. Finally, in December of that year, I received an email from Henry while I was at my house at Patonga Creek near the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, north of Sydney. I remember vividly where I was in the house when I looked down at the email and read, to my absolute delight, Henry’s words: ‘I’ve spent some time mulling over your manuscript. I don’t think its commercial prospects are great, but you write sensitively and movingly, and tell an unusual and important story.’ He agreed that Scribe would publish the book. I was just delighted by the news that my beloved project had found a home.
From the publisher’s perspective

In terms of the publisher’s final editing process I had very different experiences with the two different books. In the case of Taking a Stand, my allocated sub-editor by Allen & Unwin was Venetia Somerset, who was based in Victoria. I placed myself in her hands, given that this was my first experience in publishing. At the end of the day, I think the outcome was as I wanted it, in that we produced a historically accurate book, and one that was made better by the publisher’s editorial suggestions, including the insertion of a timeline of major events in the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I had not seen one like this before, and although it is not a particularly sophisticated document, many people have found it of great value. One of the great benefits of such a document is that it reminds readers of just how recent are the many atrocities that have been meted out to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The so-called ‘black arm band view of history’ is not some ancient occurrence, and the atrocities and the wounds they created are raw and recent as if they were yesterday. This clearly shows up in the timeline.

There was also the challenge of doing a substantial index, and this was undertaken in the editing process. It was not, however, a process without challenges, and Di Hudson (herself an accomplished editor) and I had to deal with two totally reviewed versions of the manuscript, checking for historical accuracy as well as other changes in the text before signing off on them. At the end of the day, however, working with the editor, our collective methodical and determined focus on historical accuracy paid huge dividends, because I have never had anyone (including my then political opponents) highlight an error of fact in that book.

In relation to the final editing process for Ten Doors Down, I was allocated Anna Thwaites from Scribe’s in-house staff to be my editor. She was very accomplished in her work, and was well suited to a very different style of book. Again, I surrendered myself to the sub-editing process that first involved some suggestions about major structural changes and additions that were easy to accommodate. They recommended that I include an additional chapter in the text focused on the Stolen Generations, which I had already written in and removed from an earlier version of the manuscript, unbeknown to Anna. She also wanted more references to my contemporaneous political experiences in the book, and again this was easy to do because I had already written this material in earlier drafts of the book but had taken it out on the recommendation of others.

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In the process of editing both books, I found it important as an author to hold my ground in my dealings with editors on issues of principle. I am, overall, easy to get on with and amenable to suggestions to improve a manuscript, but will always hold my ground on issues of historical accuracy and integrity. I also confess to having personal idiosyncrasies and perhaps some old-fashioned ideas of civility that are manifest in my writing. I remember having long battles in editing Taking a Stand, because I insisted on describing my then political opponents not by their surname but rather as ‘Mr’ Howard, or ‘Mr’ Fisher etc. These minor old-fashioned courtesies are important to me in my writing as matters of principle.

Covers, titles and endorsements

For Taking a Stand, Allen & Unwin had very clear views on what the cover of the book should look like, and I was quite comfortable to go along with their vision. They did a mock photo of an apparent non-Aboriginal person pouring sand into the hand of an Aboriginal person, in the manner of Gough Whitlam returning the Gurindji lands to Vincent Lingiari while he was prime minister. I had also done this when I returned the Booderee (formally Jervis Bay National Park) to Aboriginal ownership, so I was quite comfortable with the concept.

As for photographs, the publisher really only allowed for one. I chose a shot of Patrick Dodson, Paul Keating and myself, taken after the first meeting of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, which was taken in the Prime Minister’s courtyard. My working title was ‘No Turning Back’, which I thought captured the sentiment that the progress of addressing Aboriginal human rights issues that confronted the nation was not capable of being thwarted by future governments. I honestly believed that, through the momentum generated by the reconciliation process, the progress of further reforms was unstoppable. I could not have believed in the later 1990s that over 20 years later we would have made such limited progress in Closing the Gap. I was dead wrong, because the change of government not only stopped progress but set it significantly backwards, as the country soon understood. So, by the time the book was ready for publishing, I was happy to live with the title ‘Taking a Stand’, although I was concerned that it could be inadvertently read as somehow acclaiming my own personal record of achievement, which I do not think was ever the intention of the publisher and certainly not mine.

In relation to Ten Doors Down, Scribe Publications, I freely admit, came up with the title for the book, which was much better than my working title of ‘For the Love of Family’. We also reached easy agreement on the cover design, which included two photographs that demonstrated powerfully why the book title Ten Doors Down was just perfect. The photographs showed that when I was a small boy, I had been just 10 houses away from my birth mother, Maida, in the same street in western Sydney.
where my adoptive grandmother had lived. Finally, Anna and I reached an easy and quick accommodation and decision on what photographs should be used in the book, and she was a delight to work with.

Securing endorsements for the book is a common practice, and my experience is that this became my responsibility to organise. In the case of Taking a Stand, I managed to get Professor Henry Reynolds, Lowitja O’Donoghue and Mick Dodson to do endorsements for the book. In the case of Ten Doors Down, I again went with Mick Dodson (one of the people conducting the Stolen Generations inquiry), and particularly wanted to make sure he was comfortable with the chapter I had written on the Stolen Generations. I was just a bit sensitive to ensure that, as I had made clear in the book, I had included the chapter not because the Stolen Generations were to be equated in any way with the forced adoption practices in the non-Indigenous community, but because no book about the theft of children and the grief of Australian mothers could possibly be complete without some acknowledgment of the racist assimilation policies that underpinned the taking of Aboriginal children from their mothers. I also sought an endorsement from Nikki Gemmell, who I had met long ago during my ministerial life when she was an ABC journalist in the Northern Territory. Nikki wrote some truly lovely words in support of the book. The third endorsement, successfully sought, was from Anthony Albanese, not only because I respect him very much as a person and that we shared a deep relationship with the late Tom Uren, but also because Anthony had his own momentous family reunion, when he finally found out that his father had not passed away as he had been led to believe, but was in fact still alive in Italy, as were members of his extended family.3

Releasing the memoirs

Though it is not strictly part of the writing and publication process, this piece would not be complete without some feedback to prospective autobiographers and memoirists about the importance of having a book launch and generating significant publicity for a book. I also want to reinforce the importance of the wonderful feedback that can come to a writer following the publication of a book if well written.

I did not get to have a formal launch for Taking a Stand, partly because I was then long-term unemployed, and because the political climate at that time was very much dominated by the advocacy of Pauline Hanson and the policies of the newly elected Howard Government. I did have a number of favourable reviews, but regrettably the book initially did not get the publicity I thought it deserved. Since then, however,

3 For more, see Karen Middleton, Albanese: Telling It Straight (North Sydney: Random House, 2016).
I truly believe that my book has grown in stature, and I know it is in the catalogues of many of the leading universities and city libraries of the world. It has also been cited as a source by many academics and other social commentators as an inside record of the Indigenous Affairs portfolio during the six years I was the minister.

When it came to *Ten Doors Down*, I had a series of successful launch events in Sydney, but was also astounded to have achieved a huge amount of publicity associated with the book, with coverage in most capital city newspapers, radio and television interviews, and human interest interviews such as the ABC *Conversations* program. The Sydney Institute was one of a number of organisations that produced podcasts during the COVID-19 lockdown, when live events were not possible.

The feedback from this book has been truly remarkable and, of all the things I have done in my life, nothing has brought me that degree of warmth and positive response from readers across the political spectrum. By way of example, one Canberra resident wrote a very moving letter to me in which she said she was ‘very touched by your sensitivity towards your adopting parents in your search to avoid them feeling hurt. I would like to thank you for writing the book so openly and honestly and to let you know how inspiring it has been for me’.

The story has shown that politicians can be people too, and that readers have derived pleasure from being able to read the beautiful, heart-warming story of my adoption reunion. I hope that, by sharing this background to my two books, I will encourage others to tell their own stories in their own forms. That is my objective. We all learn so much from each other in this world, and there are many parliamentarians with much to share about their political lives and the common humanity that shapes their work.
REVIEW ESSAYS
Backbenchers to the front: A case for political history from below?

STEPHEN WILKS

I always voted at my party’s call,
And I never thought of thinking for myself at all.
I thought so little, they rewarded me
By making me the Ruler of the Queen’s Navee!

Sir Joseph Porter KCB, gratefully reflecting in *HMS Pinafore* on his ultimately rewarding time spent on the backbench.

Wars have led to innumerable fine memoirs by foot soldiers. Less so Australian politics. Memoirs of note by backbenchers reflecting on their service in an Australian parliament are few. The journalist and military historian Max Hastings once wrote that he did not seek interviews with surviving military officers of very senior rank as due to their age the result was usually ‘a conversational train running upon familiar railway lines’; the recollections of regimental and battalion commanders were of greater historical value.¹ My own observations of published writings on government are that senior ministers and departmental secretaries are typically so weighed down by personal baggage that they often default to a reassuring account that invites only minimal reflection on the author’s own record. Could those sitting quietly on the backbench (or even at a lonely desk in a government agency) have acquired a more cogent understanding of events, less weighed down by reputational self-interest?

I argue that the quality and openness of the observer matters more than their nominal position. Even if not the case, can a backbencher’s story still be of inherent interest as a historical perspective on the life political? As effectively the foot soldier of parliamentary life, the daily chores of the humble backbencher are the raw material of politics. Life as a backbencher constitutes the entire parliamentary experience of most of our legislators. One reason they are little known as potential historical sources is simply that only a few of them have published memoirs of high quality. The two foremost exceptions are the main subjects of this review article. I write here mainly of published full-length memoirs by backbenchers who represented major parties in Australian parliaments, and so exclude Independents operating entirely on their own or in collaboration with a government that requires their support. Such

circumstances mark them as a distinct category. Peter Andren, Cathy McGowan, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor have produced memoirs, but tended to see themselves as Independents rather than backbenchers per se.²

One could well assume that backbenchers, as political practitioners, would not require great encouragement to talk about themselves. Yet Australian backbenchers have only occasionally gone the next step of taking to the pen or keyboard, and then locating a willing publisher. Those who have done so have usually been consigned to the secondary ranks of the publishing world in the form of academic or minor independent publishers, not to mention often self-publishing. Accounts by backbenchers in other parliamentary systems are hardly common but nor are they especially rare; examples from Westminster itself have been produced by the Conservative MP Sydney Chapman and the Labour member turned Tory insider Woodrow Wyatt.³ The British political scientist Peter G. Richards in 1972 perceived an ‘added vigour of members’ over the preceding decade, but in reaching this conclusion added that ‘autobiographies and biographies about Members are of varied quality’.⁴ Lack of knowledge of the bedrock layer of political life can lead to underestimation of the historical place of those seemingly mundane denizens of the chamber. As R. A. W. Rhodes wrote, ‘the surprise is that mainstream political science should have had so little to say about the occupation of politician’.⁵

One reason for this is that some scholarly assessments of backbenchers have made little use of their personal experiences. A widely read and relatively early analysis was ‘Democracy’s Dodo’ by Helen Nelson (note how the title is a conclusion in itself), included in the third iteration of the justly celebrated Australian Politics readers that she co-edited with Henry Mayer.⁶ This is a trenchant but aggregated summation of the apparently insurmountable constraints that she held to explain the lack of backbencher initiative. Backbenchers are presented as a near-uniform class that can appropriately be dealt with collectively, with little reference to individual experience. The entry is really about the functioning of parliament in the broad, not backbenchers themselves. Perhaps this was because there were so very few decent backbencher memoirs to be drawn upon in 1973. Seven years earlier, an account

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³ Sydney Chapman, Back to the Drawing Board: Memoirs of a Back Bencher (Haverfordwest, UK: Absolute, 2010); Woodrow Wyatt, Confessions of an Optimist (London: Collins, 1985). Wyatt was briefly a junior minister under Clement Attlee.
⁴ Peter G. Richards, The Backbenchers (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 9, 236.
in *Current Affairs Bulletin* by an unnamed ‘Commonwealth backbencher’ (reported by Nelson to be Harry Turner, the long-serving Liberal member for Bradfield) similarly emphasised the constraints facing backbenchers, but ended with a plea for establishing policy-oriented parliamentary committees as a basis for their playing a more constructive role in the legislative process.\(^7\)

Even the more recent proliferation of prime ministerial memoirs usually treat backbenchership purely as a passing phase, ideally to be disposed of in a page or two at most. Malcolm Turnbull, the most recent such memoirist, does however provide a five-page chapter on his brief sojourn on the backbench, in which he records his disapproval of expectations he would be a ‘hopeless’ local member, and reflects on his puzzlement at Peter Costello’s public displeasure over an innocent but sincere effort to contribute to tax reform.\(^8\) Most other prime ministerial memoirs almost imply that doing time on the backbench was endured as an unavoidable necessity of limited inherent interest before commencing on an inexorably upwards career path.

The first book-length memoir by an Australian backbencher to attract widespread attention was the eponymous *Andrew Jones M.H.R. by Himself*, published in 1967 when the author held the federal seat of Adelaide.\(^9\) Jones had been elected in 1966 at the precocious age of 22. He was nonetheless a strident social conservative who seemed out of kilter with much of the 1960s, cutting across the book’s attempt to impart a ‘regular guy’ image (aided by cartoons from Paul Rigby portraying Jones as an amiable innocent). Much of the book is dedicated to countering its author’s reputation for impetuosity and a much-publicised comment that many of his parliamentary colleagues seemed to have an alcohol problem; most of the remainder is more dedicated to extended self-reflection than to assessing the role of a backbencher. A *Canberra Times* reviewer thought that ‘Andrew Jones’ only redeeming point is his youth, but time, alas, will even take care of that’.\(^10\) He failed to be re-elected in 1969.

That same year Edward St John produced *A Time to Speak*, surely the most anticipated of all Australian backbencher memoirs and, judging from press reports, the most widely read.\(^11\) Like Jones, St John’s single term in parliament and book were dominated by reactions to his frank comments; in his case concerning the behaviour of Prime Minister John Gorton, and the investigation into the loss of HMAS *Voyager*. Unlike Jones, he saw himself as firmly on the Liberal Party’s progressive wing. Another *Canberra Times* reviewer was only slightly less unimpressed, perceiving that St John ‘presents himself in part as an Old Testament prophet, recalling us to

\(^7\) ‘Backbenchers’, *Current Affairs Bulletin* 37, no. 11 (18 April 1966).
righteousness’. In 1976 Charles Russell produced *Country Crisis*. Russell was the Country Party member for the federal Queensland seat of Maranoa for one term in 1949–51, amid which he left the party to sit as an Independent. His book mostly provides advice on how to radically reshape the nation’s economy.

Rather more durable backbench authors were the Labor MHRs Gil Duthie and Les Haylen. Duthie’s book bears the arresting title *I Had 50,000 Bosses: Memoirs of a Labor Backbencher 1946–1975*, a reference to his electors in the central Tasmanian seat of Wilmot that he held from 1946 to 1975. He duly noted Wilmot’s importance as his electoral base, and contrasted ‘the quainter rituals of Canberra and the strains, ambition and rivalry among colleagues’ with ‘basic work’ in his electorate. Diary extracts illustrating the typical chores of a backbencher are essentially a short descriptive digression—helping a destitute family secure better public housing, attending monthly branch meetings, aiding constituents in navigating puzzling bureaucracies, and suchlike. Duthie also provided for the aspiring backbencher a handy checklist of ‘main fields of operation’. Unsurprisingly, these are the electorate office, out visiting in the electorate, the parliament, and the party.

These passages are but modest interludes amid Duthie’s observations on bigger events. Despite the book’s title, his electors mostly remain in the background. He reflected little on the role of the backbencher, nor did he dwell on celebrating it as a worthy station in life. His most compelling observation was to defend the party system as ‘the answer to dictatorships’, for a parliament of Independents ‘would be unthinkable chaos’. He did, however, bring a backbencher’s perspective to some bigger issues and events. Gough Whitlam as deputy leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) under Arthur Calwell appeared to be ‘a taste of things to come’ with ‘a real capacity to minimise hostilities’, but also a worrisome tendency to the odd ‘split second of indiscipline’. Goings-on in the wider world elicited few insights beyond summations of local reactions, hence we are informed of the impact of the 1967 Six Day War on Tasmanian apple and pear growers. Duthie served on the ALP national executive, and his anguished account from this perspective of the 1955 split forms the core of his book. A notable contribution was his organisation of a rural committee within his electorate as a means for local farmers to advise the ALP, the first of its kind.

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15 Duthie, *I Had 50,000 Bosses*, 192.
16 Duthie, *I Had 50,000 Bosses*, 338.
17 Duthie, *I Had 50,000 Bosses*, 341.
18 Duthie, *I Had 50,000 Bosses*, 191, 205.
Haylen, by contrast, dwelt on the backbencher experience mainly to complain about it, but at least his book is more quotable than Duthie’s more equable account. Hence there was ‘nothing so desolate as the landscape of a dead issue and a lost cause’, and whenever ‘a weary Minister moved the “question be put”’ then ‘the numbers rolled like tanks and we went home with the tracks of the juggernaut on our weary shoulders’. 19 Otherwise he recounted a broadly similar story to Duthie’s of victory in 1943 in the seemingly unwinnable seat of Parkes (in suburban Sydney, not the later rural seat in western New South Wales), and enduring much of the long Menzies era before losing Parkes in 1963. He was less hopeful than Duthie that Whitlam, ‘the young brolga’, would provide salvation for the ALP. 20 Haylen’s reflections on being a backbencher did not advance much beyond reiterations of his frustration. Anecdotes were deployed at the expense of coherent narrative, making his memoir an uneven slog.

Gordon Bryant was the federal Labor member for Wills in inner Melbourne from 1955 to 1980 (including serving as a minister under Whitlam), encompassing a policy-rich era during the 1960s when Labor was in reconstruction. He published not a full-length memoir but rather an article that was included in the first of the Mayer readers, written when he was still firmly on the backbench. Although short, his account included an informative rendition of the backbencher’s work routine. Bryant reported that ‘in the Labor Party, the federal members are becoming in effect the Public Service of the Party’ by serving on party policy committees and developing discussion papers, in retrospect a powerful unintended reflection on the subsequent decline of the bureaucracy’s policy-advising role. 21

Of the several other autobiographies and memoirs by individuals who served as a backbencher, few are mainly about their political service. In most, parliament was but an extended interlude in a longer, often much richer life, with the result that most do not add greatly to an understanding of the backbench experience. Henry ‘Jo’ Gullett wrote fluently about his varied life encompassing Oxford, journalism, the military, parliament and diplomacy, but his account of serving as a federal Liberal backbencher (1946–55) dwells mostly on impressions of the famous figures he encountered. 22 Wylie Gibbs, surgeon turned federal Liberal member for Bowman (1963–69), described how an impromptu examination of Harold Holt raised doubts about the prime minister’s physical fitness, which might have had a bearing his disappearance just days later. 23 Bob Whan provided a succinct summary

20 Haylen, Twenty Years’ Hard Labor, 177.
of the difficulties of political survival as Labor member for the federal rural swing seat of Eden-Monaro during the Whitlam years, with most of his time taken up by making himself available for personal interviews in all 42 communities in the electorate.\footnote{Bob Whan, \textit{Chops for Breakfast: A Lucky Generation in an Age of Accelerating Change} (Carss Park, NSW: published by the author, 2014).} Although Whan was wrong to doubt that such a demanding and insecure seat would ever produce a minister (Gary Nairn, Mike Kelly and Peter Hendy were to come, not to mention Whan’s distant predecessors Austin Chapman and John Perkins), he otherwise wrote with a prescience suggestive of a strong feel for both politics and policy. The title of Peter Fisher’s detailed memoir of holding the federal seat of Mallee for the Nationals from 1972 to 1993, \textit{Backbench}, promises much, but contains more exhaustive detail than insight.\footnote{Peter Fisher, \textit{Backbench: Behind the Headlines} (Brisbane: CopyRight Publishing, 2011).} Gordon Dean as Liberal member for the federal Queensland seat of Herbert (1977–83) winsomely reflected that ‘although I had always thought of myself as innately shy and had to push myself to perform, when performing I enjoyed it’.\footnote{Gordon Dean, \textit{A Simple Country Lad: A Kind of Autobiography} (West End, Qld: published by the author, 2007), 70.}

Sometimes parliamentary experience features mainly as a backdrop to personal tragedy. Carolyn Hirsh, a Labor member of the Victorian Parliament, endured the suicide of a daughter, followed by bouts of alcoholism that led to Premier Steve Bracks demanding her resignation.\footnote{Carolyn Hirsh, \textit{Politics, Death and Addiction} (Melbourne: Brolga, 2013).} Colin Caudell describes the accidental death of his then wife, but also provides a graphic account of the 1996 overthrow of South Australian Premier Dean Brown and his deputy, as witnessed in the party room. The scene ‘resembled an act from a Shakespearean play, as the condemned men made their way to the political gallows’.\footnote{Colin Caudell, \textit{Pick Myself Up & Dust Myself Off} (Coolum Beach, Qld: The Book Studio 2019), 78.}

Among backbench senators, the most interesting account was provided by Nancy Buttfield, who became a Liberal senator from South Australia in 1955.\footnote{Nancy Buttfield, \textit{Dame Nancy: The Autobiography of Dame Nancy Buttfield} (North Adelaide: published by the author, 1992), 106.} She wrote, among much else, of being the being the first woman to drink at the formerly exclusively male Members’ Bar in Parliament House (with encouragement from Robert Menzies, incidentally). Interestingly, she thought that ‘many people failed to realise the power of the backbench to frustrate a Minister’s Bill and ensure amendments before it went into the Chambers’\footnote{Buttfield, \textit{Dame Nancy}, 106.}. She was particularly surprised to find that even lobbyists rarely appreciated this.

Stephen Loosley, senator for New South Wales (1990–95), was a major figure in the New South Wales ALP, yet his account in his 2015 \textit{Machine Rules} of how the party machine actually worked was far from incisive and raised more questions
than it answered.\textsuperscript{31} Like Haylen’s effort, Loosley’s book relied on anecdote, but gained from drawing liberally on the breadth of his reading, proudly displayed in leading the reader through various political tales and ponderings. He spun suitably entertaining yarns about life in the ALP state headquarters in Sussex Street and ‘the camaraderie of Senate life’, but did not delve deeply into the joys and vicissitudes of the backbench.\textsuperscript{32} Loosely also exhibited a love for the ideal of public service and a pleasing preparedness to accept selected members of the opposing party as colleagues and even friends. Sam Dastyari, also once an ALP senator from New South Wales, provided in his 2017 \textit{One Halal of a Story} a very personal account that is more about his family than politics, an example of Melbourne University Publishing’s then openness to all sorts of writings by political figures.\textsuperscript{33} He depicted himself as constantly trying to rise above being a mere backbencher. A contemporaneous oddity is Jim Snow’s \textit{Keating and His Party Room}, effectively an extended survey of the Keating Government’s policy record laced with accounts of caucus members lobbying ministers, authored by the backbencher who was chair of caucus (1993–96).\textsuperscript{34}

That most of the books mentioned so far are, with some partial exceptions, superficial and lacking in stylistic distinction makes the next book I discuss all the more interesting.

That ‘all politics is local’ may seem to be something of a cliché. This sage advice is said to have been coined by Thomas ‘Tip’ O’Neill, one-time speaker of the United States House of Representatives, and is most often applied to the United States where local government is far stronger than in Australia. It becomes a deadly reality even in Australia if one happens to be the holder of a swing seat or, even worse, one usually held by another party. This definitely concentrates the political mind and, in one case, has given us a remarkable political memoir. \textit{A Hard Row to Hoe} by Alan Stewart is a shining nugget not just among memoirs by backbenchers, but also amid the shelf loads of self-serving memoirs by prime ministers, would-be prime ministers, prime ministerial spouses and just plain ministers.\textsuperscript{35} It may well be unique in the Australian political memoir pantheon, for few if any other such works have so thoroughly and attractively documented the day-to-day reality of life—or, in Stewart’s case, of temporary survival—as an honourable, hard-working and (mostly) humble backbencher.

\textsuperscript{32} Stephen Loosley, \textit{Machine Rules}, 43.
\textsuperscript{33} Sam Dastyari, \textit{One Halal of a Story} (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2017).
\textsuperscript{35} Alan Stewart, \textit{A Hard Row to Hoe: People and Politics in New South Wales} (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1988).
Stewart was the Labor member for the normally Liberal-held seat of Manly in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly from 1978 to 1984, courtesy of the ‘Wranslides’ of 1978 and 1981.\textsuperscript{36} He set the tone of his memoir with an epigraph from Francis Bacon, recording wonderment that public figures harbour a desire ‘to seek power over others and to lose power over a man’s self’. Stewart recorded in detail an experience unique in his life, albeit with occasional less worthy digressions into score settling. He dwelt entirely on how a backbencher is forced to operate, in this case one spurred on and burdened by a combination of pride and knowledge that an early demise was near inevitable.

Stewart’s title was drawn from a 1976 speech by Whitlam, forewarning of the difficulties facing a Labor candidate in the Manly area. It is common for Australian political memoirists to all too casually assert that their entry into politics was essentially accidental. This can induce wariness (and weariness) in seasoned readers of such tomes—assertions broadly along such lines as ‘well, I never really wanted to, but I was practically forced to run for parliament; so please remember that I’m a regular guy (or girl) unlike all those others!’ That Stewart does not labour unduly to project such a persona enhances his credibility as an observer. \textit{A Hard Row to Hoe} opens with a vignette of his witnessing Neville Wran, not yet premier, addressing a crowd at Manly Beach. Stewart reflected that he had no inkling that this was a harbinger of his own future. He otherwise provided only a summary backstory about himself, recording that his working life began as a jackaroo and that later he was a field officer with the state ministry of agriculture. Campaigning for Whitlam in 1975 inspired his political interest, and when Manly came up he was undertaking a doctorate at Macquarie University concerning kangaroo interaction with livestock.

The ALP needed a candidate for Manly at the forthcoming state election of October 1978. Stewart was assured by the secretary of the local state electorate council that he had no chance of actually winning. He put himself down for ‘an interesting experience’, even if ‘the ensuing defeat might be painful’, effectively a confession that he was not entirely indifferent.\textsuperscript{37} He duly told his family that he could not win, whereupon the adjacent seat of Earlwood, vacated by the former Liberal premier Eric Willis, fell to Labor at the ensuing by-election. Things started looking serious in Manly, and Stewart seemed to be acquiring the political contagion. He checked for campaigning tips from ‘a young graduate in political science’, one Steve Loosley, then already assistant general secretary of the New South Wales ALP.\textsuperscript{38} Stewart’s science background was decidedly atypical among MPs from all parties, but a campaign photo was nonetheless contrived depicting him sporting a white lab coat.

\textsuperscript{36} The Liberal Douglas Darby, who held the seat from 1945 to 1978, lost party preselection and stood successfully as an independent Liberal at the elections of 1962 and 1965; he was readmitted to the party in time for the election of 1968.
\textsuperscript{37} Stewart, \textit{A Hard Row to Hoe}, 13.
\textsuperscript{38} Stewart, \textit{A Hard Row to Hoe}, 14.
and seated by a microscope. (One wonders if this would be done today, when props used in candidate photos are usually a family with dog or a local football team.) A campaign visit by the Wran Government’s attorney-general, Frank Walker, proved stimulating, not least as he told a wide-eyed Stewart that he was likely to win. They embarked on a flurry of drop-ins at local establishments, a ‘whirlwind of smiling faces and outstretched hands’.\(^{39}\) Stewart started to enjoy campaigning, guided also by some worldly-wise local ALP cadres, and went on to win comfortably.

Over the following five years and five months, his sense of wonderment changed in nature but never seems to have entirely faded, probably contributing to his eventually writing about his experiences. On election night, Stewart’s reaction to winning was subdued, and he soon started working through some basic essentials: setting up an electorate office, hiring personal staff and having a one-on-one audience with the premier. He was warned by his new colleagues against accepting overtures to share a friendly drink with Rex Jackson, later jailed for taking bribes. The importance of party factions was very evident to Stewart, but he was unsure how to engage with them—the essential rules of life in the parliamentary Labor Party were unwritten but nonetheless seemed to be well understood by others. He soon appreciated that any challenge to authority within the party would not be readily forgotten, and noted the disconcerting readiness with which innocent gestures were interpreted as signalling which faction one would join; suspicion that he was of the Right derived in part from a religious picture spotted in his mother-in-law’s house on election night. Factionalism seems no less strong in his day than now, with the Right acting to ‘ruthlessly to crush any move which has not been the subject of a deal behind closed doors’.\(^{40}\)

Initially resistant, he found himself conforming to the sub-tribalism expected of a Labor MP by gravitating to the Left. He was also drawn into a continuing struggle for survival at the next election. Stewart appeared to lack a personal power base in the party, but as Manly was an unlikely a seat for Labor to hold, there was little danger of preselection challenges. Most of the next several years of his life was necessarily dominated by work in his electorate and the lobbying of ministers accordingly. He became absolutely determined to beat his irritatingly confident, smirking Liberal challenger for the forthcoming 1981 election, a former lord mayor of Sydney who Stewart referred to as ‘the tooth fairy’. By comparison, his presence in the chamber of the Legislative Assembly seems minor; likewise in the caucus. Stewart displayed little reverence for parliament as an institution. At the opening of his first parliament, he experienced a surge of panic at ‘how had I got mixed up with such a strange looking bunch?’\(^{41}\) He was not greatly surprised to notice that few other members used the excellent parliamentary library.

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40 Stewart, A Hard Row to Hoe, 178.
41 Stewart, A Hard Row to Hoe, 64.
Wran was then at his peak and already almost legendary, but Stewart appears to have found him distant, verging on the Delphic. Cabinet minister Paul Landa, initially abrasive and perpetually impatient, gradually took a shine to Stewart and became an exacting guide. Stewart was bluntly counselled by senior figures like Landa that achievement derived from toeing the party’s line, no matter how demeaning this seemed in the interim. He was pointedly tutored in such basic skills as how to politically manage a deputation seeking a minister’s agreement (check in advance with his or her staff that the answer will be ‘yes’, and later take all credit arising from being seen to have made the minister acquiesce).

Stewart remained burdened by an underlying self-awareness of being a political outsider who was unlikely to last. Evidently preferring to have been a biologist—he continued work on his doctorate—his whole tenure in parliament was both a learning experience and an effort. Stewart was not exactly, as Richard Nixon famously said of himself, ‘an introvert in an extrovert’s profession’, but nor was he a natural politician, and so sensibly remained open to advice from Landa and other wise souls. His ambivalence pushed him more towards reflectiveness than self-aggrandisement as a parliamentarian. But even he at one point acquired the itch of aspiring to be a minister, if only to have proven that he was ‘as good as some of the party hacks’.

Lengthy descriptions establish that Manly was an urban seat with an unusually strong sense of regional identity and host to some highly charged local issues. Stewart was drawn into a politically risky public debate held on the Manly Corso with his Liberal challenger on the vexed issue of managing the discharge of sewerage into waters off North Head. Both sides ‘employed some effective tricks’, but Stewart’s effort to appear moderate and bipartisan did not prevent proceedings from approaching violence before a sudden downpour came to the rescue. For all his opponent’s public polish, Stewart perceived ‘some weakness behind the façade’, notably a resort to bluster when denied the comfort of rehearsed lines. He was disgusted on election eve during a ball organised by the local mayor to find his opponent’s daughter paraded as lead flower girl for the guest of honour, Sir James Hardy. Narrowly re-elected, he felt ‘forced into a tight mould’. A University of Sydney study later concluded that the ALP ‘was lucky in the choice of the opposition candidate, a man who by contrast emphasized the strengths of their own candidate’ of being unambiguously a local, and a member of a government that generously targeted Manly as a seat it wanted to retain. In his appealing honesty,
Stewart admitted that the largesse bestowed on Manly by the Wran Government encouraged ‘a kind of cargo cult’, with emergent problems greeted by ‘whack-a-mole’ responses.47

Tending to his electorate was usually more a necessity than a pleasure. Stewart stands out also for having captured the sheer banality of so much of political life. The public demanded the satisfaction of pet causes and the solving of personal problems. Constituent work generated the usual array of worthy cases, ‘regulars’ and decided oddities. The sinister owner of a local theatre who tried to warn Stewart off from investigating complaints about his noisy and alcohol-sodden establishment turned out to be the ‘Woolworths Bomber’, a failed extortionist. Stewart prudently declined an invitation to inspect the interior of a local brothel that could have been operating in contravention of state law.

Much of all this sounds—and is—unsurprising. Yet Stewart recounted his experiences with immediacy and vividness. The occasional humour he imparted is of the driest variety. For all his efforts in Manly, his vote rose and then fell with shifts in Wran’s popularity. What he did not cover in his memoir is also significant. He showed little interest in parliamentary committees, otherwise a staple of backbenchers trying to attract attention and simulate the exercise of influence. There was also little interest in how government formulates or implements policy. The state’s public service was simply a presence, portrayed merely as an occasional impediment to the delivery of largesse. Issues of accountability in government hardly mattered for the holder of so marginal a seat.

Stewart’s career in Manly moved into a final phase when he visibly tired of local politics. A rumour that he had lost interest in retaining his seat seemed confirmed when he absented himself from a state party conference to visit Taronga Zoo, there to ponder the metaphoric implications of chimpanzee behaviour. He vowed to use what time he had left in parliament to look beyond his electorate to the wider issues, mainly environmental, that first drew him to politics. His efforts to make a policy difference did not involve statements in the chamber, nor the introduction of private member’s bills, but rather appeals directly to ministers. The book ends abruptly yet strongly with Stewart, defeated soundly at the election of March 1984, declaring himself to have been mentally ready for ‘other doors to find’.48 He did not express bitterness, other than noting that preoccupation with his electorate cost him his doctorate: his submitted thesis was rejected by its examiners as lacking sufficient research. (Later he completed a doctorate at Griffith University on environmental approval processes.)

47 Stewart, A Hard Row to Hoe, 139.
48 Stewart, A Hard Row to Hoe, 208.
A Hard Row to Hoe stands out from other backbencher memoirs because of the care and vigour with which Stewart recounted the raw detail of his working life. This may well be unique in the Australian political memoir genre, making for a fine testament of politics at its most fundamental. Also, Stewart’s electoral insecurity and the foreknowledge that he will eventually lose his seat helps give his book a sense of direction, at times almost of drama, with every act of his contributing (or otherwise) to his prospects for re-election. The inevitability of political extinction and the artificiality of political life helped to render him highly thoughtful. He remained a relative outsider to party politics, willing to bear sceptical witness to what to a machine man like Loosley must have seemed the natural order of things.

Such scepticism and lack of defensiveness also helps make Hard Row to Hoe a pleasing read. Stewart is a very competent stylist. Although more anecdotal than analytical, the anecdotes are assembled to add up to a rich picture. He also has the advantage of having written well before Australian political memoirs conformed to the formulaic cardboard style that is now standard. References to his family life fill out the picture of being a backbencher, but do not dominate.

Politics was much more central to the wider life of another Labor backbencher, the late Ken Fry, federal member for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) seat of Fraser, 1974–84. Although his A Humble Backbencher presented his life in full, its core is his time in parliament. The title sounds to have been meant somewhat ironically, hinting at the greater issues that he nonetheless pursued. Pleasingly, he dedicated his memoir ‘to all backbenchers, who also serve’. Like Stewart, Fry wrote long after leaving politics, and not so as to promote a still unfolding career.

As Fry was strongly entrenched in his local community and ALP branch well before entering parliament, his memoir lacks the sense of ongoing discovery that animated Stewart’s. He entered parliament at the age of 53, after long experience as a soldier, farmer and public servant. Unlike Stewart, Fry won a safe Labor seat. His main political battle was in securing preselection, defeating Peter Wilenski and Susan Ryan. Like Stewart, he had a sense of being an oddity among his political peers, but otherwise swam relatively happily in political currents. He dwelt more knowledgeably than Stewart on the Labor Party’s entrenched factionalism, and recounted efforts by the New South Wales Right to exert power over the ACT branch. Fry attributed much of the Right’s personal hostility to his having defeated it in two preselection battles (the other was in 1967 for the state seat of Bathurst, which he failed to win at the election of the following year).

Some of the interest in Fry’s account lies in his holding an ACT seat before the advent of self-government, and so representing a constituency governed by the Commonwealth alone. Hence he faced an even wider range of demands from

electors than did his parliamentary colleagues, extending from nature strips to international affairs. Both Fry and Stewart testified to the importance of engaging loyal and tolerant electorate assistants skilled in handling truculent electors and dealing effectively with the bureaucracy, though Stewart seems to have been more discriminating regarding pleas for assistance. Fry even personally guaranteed a small loan to an alcoholic constituent to stave off the repossession of her washing machine. By contrast, Bryant in the 1960s had markedly less access to personal staff and usually dealt directly with the public service himself. Joan Child, the first female Speaker of the House of Representatives and whose memoirs were published posthumously in 2015, appears to have positively enjoyed dealing with her electors in the suburban Melbourne seat of Henty.⁵⁰

But Fry’s great contribution were his reflections on how a backbencher can be effective beyond a local role. Holding a safe seat increased his latitude to pursue national and international issues that had little to do directly with most of his constituents, notably concerning the environment and, especially, East Timor (Timor-Leste). He had much in common with another member who also used a memoir to push some very particular views, the ardent free trader Bert Kelly (a junior minister for nigh on three years under Holt and Gorton but more usually an incorrigibly outspoken backbencher).⁵¹ The conclusion of Fry’s book is that ‘the role of a backbencher can be effective and satisfying’, especially as they can ‘make a positive contribution to the Parliamentary process by using avenues of communication both inside and outside the Parliament to develop and present alternative viewpoints and policies’.⁵² This is especially so, he thought, when in Opposition, during which members experience greater freedom courtesy of less pressure from the frontbench than when in government, and have more opportunity to use committee work to help guide policy development in good time for the eventual return to office.

Most importantly, Stewart and Fry dwelt on the exact means by which they tried to step beyond their limitations as backbenchers and influence policy. Both showed that a backbencher with focus and determination can do much. In some instances they needed to be prepared to risk their seat. Stewart was well aware that protecting the rainforests of his state’s north-east, ‘the single issue that could justify my political career’, was far removed from Manly yet still found himself in a late-night meeting lobbying Wran on their importance.⁵³ As the only biologist in the parliamentary party, he was abruptly directed to effectively lead a crucial visit by MPs to the threatened Terania Creek forest, an outcome of Deputy Premier Jack Ferguson’s having more gently and effectively persuaded Wran. Fry described how he sought to build positive personal relationships with ministers responsible for his own

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areas of policy interest and so, for example, targeted John Dawkins as minister for finance on ending the tax deductibility of land clearances. On international issues, Fry found that he could use his status as an MP to exercise influence beyond the parliament through excursions into his own brand of diplomacy, including lobbying foreign governments and giving activists access to fellow MPs. He listed other backbenchers who were also active outside the parliament on respective favoured issues, including Kelly on free trade, Alan Missen on human rights and Neville Bonner on Indigenous affairs. (Fry, incidentally, also finished a PhD—in Australian history at The Australian National University after having left parliament.)

Neither Stewart nor Fry appear to have been deeply moved by causes anchored in their electorate. Yet Stewart remains the standout for using his memoir to provide such a convincingly fulsome account of what it was actually like, how it felt, to be a backbench MP, with only a late and productive diversion into a bigger issue. He offered few reflections on government beyond his own direct experiences: his story was essentially a simple one of being a political foot soldier.

Stewart and Fry demonstrate how potentially valuable further backbencher memoirs might be. Barring many sitting unpublished in archives, they are not so much untapped historical sources as ones that need to be created in the first place. Their foremost potential importance is in providing a record of political and parliamentary experience. Anyone writing on a political life is likely to benefit from a sense of the gritty daily reality that their subject must have endured early in their career, an essential stepping stone to whatever exceptional achievements came later. To be aware of the initial individual experience of politics—whether delight, trepidation, uncertainty, or even a sense of entrapment—can help enliven an otherwise idealised account.

A second potential benefit is to provide a better historical sense of how backbenchers have tried to exert policy influence, and so of what place they occupy among the wider array of such forces. The backbencher memoir, should it ever reach the critical mass needed to constitute a genre, could be a basis for collectively helping to reassess the role of the backbencher in determining policy, not openly in the chamber but by activity undertaken less visibly in the proverbial corridors of power. Stewart’s attraction to the rainforests intensified as his interest in local affairs dimmed; Fry stepped far outside conventional parliamentary politics in pursuing his interest in international issues. Both authors, along with Buttfield, produced accounts that seem very broadly consistent with the much later findings of Brenton Prosser and Richard Denniss concerning the influence of ‘marginal members’. 54 Their study placed more emphasis on minor party crossbenchers and Independents than on

backbenchers from the major parties, and did not refer to the memoirs of Stewart or Fry. They did, however, interview some major party members, who each spoke of exercising influence via the party room, committees and private members’ bills.55

The best political memoirs are by those who are simultaneously thoughtful, free of an urge to defend a major policy record, and devoid of any plan to return to politics—individuals like Stewart and Fry. Mainstream publishers are probably reluctant to take backbenchers on as authors, for most lack the celebrity heft needed to make them a ready commercial proposition. Is there a special role here for academic publishers? Publishers and historians alike, let us consider that someone does not always have to have been at the top of the tree to play the role of seer effectively. Never underestimate the potential power of subordinates as observers, and even as rarely appreciated influencers.

55 These were John Langmore, Judith Troeth and Ron Boswell. Troeth and Boswell did, however, serve as parliamentary secretaries, and Boswell was also leader of the Nationals in the Senate and a shadow minister. None of the three was ever a minister.
Indigenous autobiography is a flourishing genre, but few of their authors are or have been political figures. Warren Mundine—at various times a shire councillor, president of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and unsuccessful Liberal Party candidate—is the most seasoned Indigenous political figure yet to attempt an autobiography. *Warren Mundine in Black + White: Race, Politics and Changing Australia*, Mundine’s memoir of his family, marriages and political career, is also his incomplete political manifesto. Mundine is not looking back in tranquillity; he is in the midst of a political career that could yet see him in the Australian Parliament. His book is written with the confidence of someone who is frequently before the public, a respected and at times iconoclastic commentator on public affairs.

Incomplete manifesto? We say ‘manifesto’ because his story not only offers his views about how Australia ought to approach Indigenous policy issues, it also seeks to justify them by referring to his family history. (In this he is very like Stan Grant.) We say ‘incomplete’, because Mundine says hardly anything about the positions that he has taken on one of the most important ‘Indigenous issues’ of the recent past: whether and how to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia’s Constitution. We will argue here that Mundine has emerged as an important figure in what now appears to be the failure of the campaign to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution. You would not know from his book that from 2010 to the end of 2016, there were roughly 40 items in the *Australian* and a clutch of the Fairfax (now Nine) newspapers that referred to Mundine’s sceptical views on constitutional recognition. We will describe the most important of his interventions in more detail later, but the fact for the reader to note immediately is that in these press reports, Mundine is represented as dismissive of positions argued by many Indigenous leaders. Even before the Julia Gillard–appointed Expert Panel had published its recommended changes to the Constitution (in January 2012), he had publicly rejected what proved to be the panel’s most contentious proposal: that

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1 The authors wish to thank the anonymous referees and the editors of this article.
the Constitution be amended to forbid laws and policies that discriminate on the basis of ‘race, colour or ethnic or national origin’ except where such discrimination is ‘for the purpose of overcoming disadvantage, ameliorating the effects of past discrimination, or protecting the cultures, languages or heritage of any group’.  

Mundine’s early critique of what some had begun to call Indigenous constitutional ‘overreach’ made him a ‘go-to’ commentator for journalists writing in the *Australian*, the main platform for debate about constitutional recognition since 2011; he was a reliable source for News Corps media, more generally, keen to publish Indigenous views sceptical of ‘symbolic’ change and in favour of ‘practical’ change—for example, on the issue of Australia Day. So respected by recognition-sceptics had Mundine become by 2015, especially on the Right, that when he turned his fire on another possible reform of the Constitution—dedicated ‘Indigenous’ seats in the Australian Parliament—Greg Sheridan remarked that ‘If you can’t sell this proposal to Warren Mundine, you can’t sell it to middle Australia’. A few weeks earlier, Marcia Langton had positioned Mundine as representing a ‘minority’ of Indigenous opinion; she urged readers not to expect Aboriginal ‘consensus’.

Mundine’s memoir mentions neither of these attempts to position him; he chooses not to narrate his many interventions (2011–16) in the debate on constitutional recognition. This is not because he is embarrassed about his heterodox Indigeneity or his ‘middle Australia’-ness. On the contrary, he uses the approving phrase ‘regular people’ (p. 191) to refer to those Australians with whom he imagines himself aligned, and he celebrates his ‘radical’ independence of mind as a loathed scourge of ‘the Aboriginal establishment’ (p. 230); for some, he is part of an Aboriginal ‘counter-establishment’, and part of a minority within that. His book’s almost total neglect of the constitutional recognition debate can be explained as a consequence of his view—shared by a number of other Indigenous figures, including those not on the Right—that the Constitution is not relevant to Indigenous advancement. The Constitution sets out ‘the structures and processes of government, and the division of powers between the Commonwealth and the states. It doesn’t and shouldn’t, mandate how that power is exercised’ (p. 453). It was consistent with this position that his immediate response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart was to dismiss

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5 Noted in Chris Mitchell, ‘Media and Politicians Misread the Public Mood by Relying on Social Media’, *Australian*, 1 February 2021.


its call for entrenching a Voice to Parliament in the Constitution. However, as we will show, Mundine has not been able fully to detach himself from the ongoing debate about constitutional recognition, and he now occupies an important position within it.

The Mundine line: Don’t rely on government

Mundine was born at the Grafton Hospital in 1956, into a large family (Bundjalung father, Gumbaynggirr mother) that had never lived on a mission or reserve. His ancestors had survived invasion under the informal protection of pastoralist patrons, Edward and Frederick Ogilvie, who occupied land on the Clarence River in the 1840s, calling it Yulgilbar Station. Local Bundjalung made ‘a truce of sorts’ that included the Ogilvies setting aside some land for the families of Aboriginal workers and Edward’s attendance at ceremonies. The Ogilvies sold Yulgilbar to the Hordern family in 1926, and the Horderns demarcated land for Aboriginal families that came to be known as Baryulgil; his father, Roy, was born there between 1916 and 1919, into a family that led the Baryulgil community.

Under such a privatised version of ‘protection’, the state protection laws applied to the people of Baryulgil only to a limited extent. Mundine tells a story of the Hordern family patrons keeping the police from harassing his grandfather Harry (p. 33). According to Mundine, neither government nor mission authorities rationed the Baryulgil mob; they found their own food and water, and built their own shelters. Mundine presents himself as deeply formed by this tradition of hard-working self-sufficiency, the ability to live at least partly off the country. ‘One thing my family modelled for me was that you don’t wait for government or anyone else to give you self-determination. You take it’ (p. 31). Roy Mundine was able to attend the Baryulgil public school, and as an adult was an avid reader. Mundine recalls with gratitude that he grew up ‘in a culture of working, where work was seen as a virtue, as the most important thing you could do’ (p. 504). The Mundines were proud but also watchful of their place in a society that, under Australia’s post–World War II ‘assimilation’ policy, continued to be racially stratified.

Mundine’s parents, Roy and Dolly, met in Grafton where both had found work; after the birth of their first child, they began to live in South Grafton, first renting and then buying a home in 1947. As a literate, employed ‘half caste’, Roy qualified to be an ‘exempt Aborigine’ sometime in the 1950s. Because Australian mores included ways to remind ‘upstanding’ (p. 74), voting, home-owning and upwardly mobile Aboriginal people that they were, nonetheless, ‘still Abos’, ‘us kids grew up

learning to hang back in shops and not cause trouble or draw attention to ourselves’ (p. 73). The Mundines ‘experienced a hybrid life between the full restrictions of the law and the freedoms everyone else had’ (p. 7). After paying off their house in 1962, the family moved to Redfern in 1963 and then to Auburn, seeking better education and opportunities, and finding a less abusive ‘protection regime’ (p. 83). Roy was a staunch member of the Australian Workers’ Union, and so Mundine grew up in a Labor household. ‘Labor values were very much about the dignity and value of work and its contribution to the family and the community’ (p. 505).

Mundine’s wider political awareness was stimulated by observing African-American resurgence in the 1960s and, by the early 1970s, still in high school (Marist Brothers), he had a ‘passion for politics’ (p. 98). When he enrolled for an Associate Diploma in Community Development at the South Australian Institute of Technology in 1982, his reading included Milton Friedman (1912–2006) the Nobel Prize–winning economist who gave intellectual authority to fiscal and monetary policies that undermined many of the public policy achievements of postwar social democratic liberalism. Mundine remained, at that time, ‘more of a Keynesian’ (p. 121). More formative was his participation in demonstrations in Brisbane (during the 1982 Commonwealth Games) against Queensland’s continuing ‘protection’ regime. His immersion in Aboriginal movement politics continued as he attended talks at Tranby College in Sydney. There he met the Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou to whom he attributes the argument that colonised peoples must modernise to survive. Mundine sees precedent for that view in the 1938 statement ‘Aborigines claim citizen rights!’ whose Koori authors had spurned programs that professed to conserve native culture, ‘like koala bears’ (p. 129).

A vehicle of Koori modernisation soon appeared: the New South Wales (NSW) Land Rights Act 1983. Mundine served for a year on the Interim NSW Aboriginal Land Council. It is important to remember how ambivalently NSW Aboriginal people greeted this statute. The Act, which handed over the remaining 6,000 acres of reserve land to the Aboriginal communities that resided there, was complemented by another that retrospectively validated the theft of 25,000 acres of ‘old reserve’ lands created since 1911.11 In its concession of ‘land rights’, the Wran Government confirmed a longstanding and deeply felt Koori distrust of the state government. Nonetheless, this was the ‘land rights’ that they had to work with. In 1985, Mundine and his new wife Lynette Riley moved to Armidale where Mundine became coordinator of the Northern Tablelands Regional Aboriginal Land Council; that work formed what became his abiding view that ‘commerce, private ownership, jobs and education’ were essential to Aboriginal advancement. He observed that other Aboriginal people, no less committed than he to the principle of land rights, did not

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11 Heather Goodall, Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972 (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 357.
necessarily agree with his belief that land was a platform for economic development. They seemed to him to lack the confidence to start enterprises and the know-how to make them last. Some local Aboriginal Land Council functionaries were not literate or numerate and had not grasped elementary principles of governance. To these problems the ‘activist clique’ in the NSW land rights movement had no answers, he laments. They blamed ‘the past’ and looked to government for assistance (p. 142). Thus, his participation in statutory ‘land rights’ administration confirmed Mundine’s long-held tendency to see government as either irrelevant or as part of the problem: looking to government was a self-defeating habit of Aboriginal politics.

A Labor man?

Nonetheless, Mundine remained a Labor man. What he saw as the economic liberalism of the Hawke and Keating governments, including the legislation of ‘native title’ as a property right in 1993, sustained his faith. However, Mundine goes to some trouble to prepare us for his eventual break with the Party. Reading Friedman again, he realised he ‘wasn’t a socialist after all’ (p. 144). What had changed in his life is not clear. Whether it was Friedman’s views on monetary policy (influential since the mid-1970s) or on income redistribution (something elements of the Labor parliamentary Left, including Lindsay Tanner, finance minister under Gillard and Kevin Rudd, embraced later), he doesn’t say. ‘For the time being,’ Keating remarked of his monetary policy, at the time of Friedman’s visit to Australia in 1975, ‘there’s too much resistance within the Labor caucus … for Friedman’s ideas to be embraced by the [Labor] government’. Under Mundine’s ‘heroes’, Hawke and Keating, whose economic policies he admired (p. 143), many said Labor was no longer socialist—if it ever had been. So, the break with Labor was still some time off, driven less perhaps by ideology than by Mundine’s lack of advancement.

In his first bid for political office, he stood as an Independent in the 1991 Armidale City Council election, without success. In late 1992, he and Lynette moved to Dubbo, for Lynette’s career. Mundine found no job but there were many opportunities for activism in football administration and community arts. Such work aroused his interest in standing for the Dubbo City Council. Presenting himself again as an Independent in 1995, he succeeded. Having been helped by Dubbo’s Daily Liberal, it is not surprising that the Liberal Party then offered him membership. But this did not align ‘with who I was and where I’d come from’ (p. 168), so he became a member of the ALP, deciding to join the Right faction rather than the Left because, he recalls with calculated bathos, the Left faction dinner would have cost him $25, while the Right’s dinner was without charge (pp. 168–69).

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Mundine began to involve himself in the Labor Party. At the 1999 New South Wales state election, he stood for the ALP in Dubbo. Described by Bradley Bowden as Labor’s ‘high profile candidate’ and ‘a leader of the electorate’s large Aboriginal community’, Mundine received just 20 per cent of the vote.\footnote{Bradley Bowden, ‘The Nationals and Rural Politics’, in \textit{From Carr to Keneally: Labor in Office in NSW 1995–2011}, ed. David Clune and Rodney Smith (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 34.} Although he ‘did well … in the “redneck towns”’, he says, and reports that his first preference vote represented a ‘huge swing’ to Labor (p. 177), Labor’s first preference vote fell by a third; in fact, the ‘huge swing’ was only evident in the rise from 32 to 39.5 per cent on the two-candidate preferred.\footnote{Our thanks to Antony Green for the figures.} Two years later, he secured the third position on Labor’s Senate ticket for New South Wales—a position, he says, Labor expected to win. Labor could not have won it.\footnote{Rodney Cavalier, ‘Warren Mundine Comes Home’, \textit{Southern Highlands Newsletter}, no. 231, vol. 2 (2019), 53; also, Malcolm Mackerras, pers. comm., 5 November 2020.} Had the number three spot in 2001 been winnable, Mundine might not have been the party’s choice. The award of a Centenary Medal may have brought some consolation.

While he was ‘gutted’ not to have been elected, the contest built his self-confidence. ‘If you’re willing to have a go, possibilities open up’ (p. 186). Convinced that he was a ‘political operative’ in his ‘own right’ (p. 185), he stood for deputy mayor in Dubbo’s City Council elections in 2002 and was elected; he held the position until 2004. In 2001, 2002 and 2003, he was named Councillor of the Year by the NSW Local Government Aboriginal Network, and from 2002 to 2004 he served on the executive committee of the NSW Local Government Association. With Labor in government, under Bob Carr, Mundine served as a commissioner of the NSW Local Government Grants Commission (2002–04), a member of the NSW Attorney-General’s Juvenile Crime Prevention Committee (2002–04), and as a member of the Macquarie Area Health Board (2002–06).\footnote{Who’s Who in Australia 2020 (Southbank, Vic.: AAP Directories, 2020), 1209.}

In 2004, Mundine challenged the sitting Labor member, Julia Irwin, for Labor preselection in the federal seat of Fowler. The challenge was unsuccessful. Having shown scant knowledge of the party’s preselection procedures, and relying on ‘senior factional leaders’ (p. 246) rather than the local branches, Mundine covered for Head Office’s failure to deliver for him by declaring his support for affirmative action (pp. 244–48).\footnote{Rodney Cavalier, ‘Warren Mundine Comes Home’, 53.} In 2012, in a final attempt to represent Labor, Mundine threw his ‘hat in the ring’ to replace former NSW party secretary Mark Arbib in the Senate, only to feel ‘shafted’ when the ‘Labor back room’ backed Carr (pp. 355–36). The Right, ‘structured to seek and receive reports on emerging possibilities’, says Cavalier, had ‘mark[ed] his card’ as “encourage in pursuit of prizes unwinnable, lavish flattery recommended, useful for shop window”.’\footnote{Cavalier, ‘Warren Mundine Comes Home’, 55. For a more sympathetic account, see Stephen Fitzpatrick, ‘A Survivor Pulls No Punches’, \textit{Weekend Australian}, 9–10 December 2017.}
One 'shop window' was the party presidency. In 2003, eight years after joining the Labor Party, Mundine headed the Right's ticket for the party presidency, 'deeply uncomfortable' though he was 'with some hard Right policies'.\(^{19}\) After coming third with 12.4 per cent of the vote, in the first postal ballot of party members, Mundine was elected (along with Carmen Lawrence who came first and Barry Jones who came second), ensuring that it would be his turn to serve as junior vice-president in 2004, senior vice-president in 2005 and as president in 2006. All three worked well together, says Jones\(^{20}\)—their views on refugees no doubt at odds with those of Mark Latham, elected member for Werriwa in 1994 and Labor leader from December 2003 to October 2004.\(^{21}\) Mundine told members unhappy with the party to 'stop whingeing, get in there and fix it'.\(^{22}\)

In his memoir, he highlights one episode of his presidency. He publicly confronted Queensland Labor Premier Peter Beattie to demand that his government cease appeasing the Police Union and prosecute Sergeant Chris Hurley for killing Cameron (Mulrungi) Doomadgee inside Palm Island police station. In Beattie's memoir, *Making a Difference: Reflections on Life, Leadership and Politics* (2005), the killing does not rate a mention.\(^{23}\)

The succession of ALP offices afforded Mundine a good position to observe Latham. Although he found Latham's leadership appalling—was he aware that, in 2004, Latham championed a community-based model to replace the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and resisted exhortations from Labor's head office in New South Wales to 'bash the blacks'?\(^{24}\)—his view of the Labor Party would evolve along lines similar to Latham's. Like the former leader, Mundine would form the view that Labor has lost touch with prospering working-class people (pp. 350–51), and that Labor loses the 'country and suburban' vote to the extent that it panders to inner-city 'bleeding heart types' (p. 193), the people 'sitting in cafes in the inner city' who do not like mining (p. 353)—and, though he does not say, who do like refugees. If the difficulty of bridging those two Labor constituencies is now the ALP's ongoing torment, it was one reason for Mundine to attenuate his Labor affiliation and, in 2012, to let his membership lapse; no more

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\(^{19}\) Mundine's reservations are noted in Barry Jones, *A Thinking Reed* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006), 470–71.


\(^{21}\) Latham would have 'been comfortable' voting for John Howard's *Tampa* legislation; Mark Latham, 'Left Wrongness', *Australian Financial Review*, 10 August 2013, reprinted in *Latham at Large* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2015), 126.

\(^{22}\) Quoted in John Langmore, 'Howard's End', in Jones, *Coming to the Party*, 203.

\(^{23}\) The killing is examined in Chloe Hooper, *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island* (Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2008).

'get[ting] in there and fix[ing] it'. 'Labor didn’t know its heartland any more’, he had concluded (p. 354). So mindful of its membership was the party, that no one contacted him to ask why he was not renewing (p. 350).

But Mundine gave an interview to the Australian—an effort to inform the world, ‘especially the Liberal Party’, that he was no longer an ALP member.25 In February, during a meeting with Tony Abbott (leader of the Opposition) and George Brandis (shadow attorney-general) to discuss constitutional change, Abbott had joked with Mundine that he was ‘on the wrong team’. Though still a Labor man, ‘Mundine seemed pleased’.26 A friendship between the two men had ‘blossomed’ in 2008, after Mundine had been asked by Jenny Macklin, minister for Indigenous affairs, to negotiate with Abbott, her Shadow, ‘over the reintroduction of the Racial Discrimination Act in the Northern Territory’.27

Mundine’s distancing from the ALP began, even as he rose within it, with two steps. He took the first by agreeing to play a public role in the Howard Government’s reconstruction of Indigenous Affairs. In November 2002, the government initiated a review of ATSIC. After receiving the report in November 2003, it announced in April 2004 that it would abolish ATSIC and replace it with a National Indigenous Council (NIC), chaired by Sue Gordon, whose members would be chosen not as representatives but for their policy experience. Mundine—now a vice-president of the ALP—agreed to be a council member and thus a policy adviser to a non-Labor government; he would later be one of the Indigenous voices in support of the Coalition’s Northern Territory intervention.28 Mundine writes that the Labor colleagues whom he consulted about this decision, including Latham, urged him to accept Howard’s invitation (p. 280). The NIC held its first meeting in December 2004.

The other step Mundine took was to issue a media release, shortly after his NIC appointment was announced, in which he questioned the value of what he labelled ‘communal’ land tenure and advocated ‘home ownership, economic development and profit-making businesses’ (p. 222).29 He took this step as CEO of NTSCorp—the company providing native title services for Aboriginal traditional owners in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. For Mundine, the primary significance of land to Aboriginal people is that it is a strategic economic asset and

26 Shireen Morris, Radical Heart: Three Stories Make Us One (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2018), 65.
29 See also Mundine’s remarks in January 2005 on ABC Radio’s Counterpoint, quoted in David Ritter, Contesting Native Title: From Controversy to Consensus in the Struggle over Indigenous Land Rights (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2009), 42–43.
a basis for families to own homes; the values Mundine took from his home, says Rodney Cavalier, minister for education in the Wran and Unsworth governments, were ‘four-square Liberal Party’.\textsuperscript{30} Well before June 2005, when he had restated his position, in ‘one of the most important speeches’ in his life (p. 226), to a hostile audience at the National Native Title Conference, Mundine tells us that he had become ‘one of the most loathed people in Indigenous Affairs’ (p. 222). Almost immediately, he was awarded the Bennelong Medal for being ‘a brave advocate for change’, including change to ‘the way community owned land is controlled’.\textsuperscript{31}

While the Labor Party in 2004 was quick to say that it was not reconsidering its support for ‘communal land tenure’, it allowed Mundine to serve out his term as senior vice-president and then president. That the Party had grounds by then for judging him politically unsound does not occur to him. More than he cares to consider, Mundine talked himself out of the ALP’s favour. The year after letting his membership lapse, he married Elizabeth Henderson, daughter of two of the stalwarts of conservative politics in Australia, the Sydney Institute’s Gerard Henderson and Anne Henderson; Warren had met Elizabeth, in 2009, at an institute dinner (p. 331). Free of Labor, his ties with the conservative side of politics grew. In 2012, he became an Alan McGregor Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies.

Coalition Government interest in Mundine continued. Shortly after coming to office, in 2013, Abbott appointed him to chair the government’s Indigenous Advisory Council; in 2016, Linda Burney, the Labor member for Barton, attacked Mundine for:

\begin{quote}
oversee[ing] … the demolition of child and family services across Australia, the demolition of half a billion dollars out of the Indigenous affairs budget, the demolition of Aboriginal legal centres that support women to pursue issues of domestic violence, and the demolition of most of the advocacy services in Aboriginal affairs, including the withdrawal of federal funding from a number of Aboriginal programs that specifically work at the community levels dealing with family violence.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

In 2017, Malcolm Turnbull, who had replaced Abbott in September 2015, reconstructed the council, which had not met since May 2015, and Mundine was dumped. Mundine, who had gone public with comments critical of Turnbull’s decision to call a royal commission into the Don Dale Detention Centre—the more

\textsuperscript{30} Cavalier, ‘Warren Mundine Comes Home’, 52.
\textsuperscript{31} ‘Bennelong Society’, Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bennelong_Society. For his subsequent emphasis on leasing rather than selling land, see Maddison, Black Politics, 92.
important problem, he implied, being the violence Indigenous women suffered from their Indigenous partners—was quoted, a few months later, as saying that Turnbull had ‘no interest in Indigenous affairs’.

Under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, established by Abbott, under which all Aboriginal organisations, regardless of their size, had to compete for funding, the Turnbull Government, in June 2017, had given Mundine’s company Nyungga Black Group $220,000 to provide advice on remote economic development, and $110,000 to fund *Mundine Means Business* on Sky News. In 2018, the Turnbull Government gave another $220,000 to help fund a second series of this show—both grants awarded on the basis of a direct approach rather than a tendering process, BuzzFeed reported. It was very likely, the relevant minister conceded, that no other Indigenous business person had been ‘offered the opportunity to receive government funding for a television program’. Mundine has been Chair of the Australian Indigenous Chamber of Commerce since 2008, Elizabeth also serving in recent years as a Director and Company Secretary.

In January 2019, Mundine won Liberal endorsement for the marginal, ‘must-win’ seat of Gilmore, the New South Wales executive of the Party intervening on behalf of the Prime Minister to overturn the local party’s choice, Grant Schultz. Polling in Gilmore, conducted in November, ‘came back really good’ for Mundine, according to a senior Liberal source. ‘While he’s an outsider to the Liberal Party, that’s his strength,’ the source explained. Once endorsed, Mundine stood down as chair of RISE Ventures, a company with government contracts to provide Indigenous employment services, and took steps (including hiring a QC) to divest himself of all other business interests. ‘Make no mistake,’ wrote Anna Caldwell,

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40 Ryan, ‘Government Spent $330,000 Funding a Sky News Program’.
state political reporter for Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, ‘Mundine has the potential to be a devastatingly effective warrior in the government’s battle to stop Shorten becoming prime minister’. Mundine was now a columnist for the *Telegraph*—with pieces attacking socialism and defending coal. To Liberals ‘whingeing’ over Scott Morrison’s ‘installation’ of Mundine, Caldwell counselled that Mundine had ‘the potential to be one of the nation’s great politicians’. Having previously considered entering the New South Wales Parliament as a Liberal Democrat, Mundine now saw the Liberals ‘as the true party of the working class’. As well as knowing ‘how to take on the headkickers of the left’, Mundine believed he could ‘bring the indigenous vote of the South Coast with him to the coalition’. Mundine not only failed to win Gilmore, a Liberal-held seat, he suffered a 16.1 percentage point swing on first preferences—evidence perhaps of the inability of polling to measure in advance the transaction costs of a ‘captain’s pick’.

Fortunately, for Mundine, there was a safety net to catch him. In late 2020, he became the chair of Liberty Works and of CPAC (the Conservative Political Action Conference). He was also appointed to the Board of SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), the government overriding the advice of its independent nominations panel. Commentator Peter Brent suggested, implausibly, that he had been picked not ‘to be elected’ as the member for Gilmore, but rather ‘to flesh out the wider Liberal image of the campaign: a successful, conservative businessman with a Labor background … happy to explain … why Bill Shorten shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near the Lodge’. With the Liberals, Mundine has found the kind of home that Labor never gave him.

### What is Aboriginal development?

Mundine professes to admire societies that have rapidly renovated themselves in response to colonisation, and he devotes several pages to east Asian autocracies, China, Japan and South Korea (pp. 259–61, 267–70). In Japan’s Meiji Restoration

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43 Caldwell, ‘Civil War in Gilmore’.
44 Taylor, ‘Government Gave a $220,000 Grant to Warren Mundine for His Sky News Show’.
46 Caldwell, ‘Civil War in Gilmore’.
from 1867, an elite coalition of *daimyo*, imperial princes, court nobles and samurai formed a government that pre-empted Western powers’ occupation by imposing new institutions and technologies modelled by the nation-states of Europe and the North Atlantic. This made Japan strong enough to colonise Formosa (1895), defeat Russia (1905), to annex Korea (1910), to take over Germany’s spheres of influence in China (1919), followed by invasion of northern China (1931–35). After the Japanese empire was defeated in 1945, South Korea’s economic development program included enduring many years of authoritarian rule under General Park Chung Hee (1961–79). China emerged from Japan’s rule under Communist Party direction by 1949, but it abandoned a socialist program after 40 years to pursue an authoritarian version of state capitalism whose poverty-relieving results Mundine admires. At no point in his discussion of these East Asian transitions from colonisation to mass prosperity does Mundine consider the cost to ‘Liberal values supporting individual rights’ (p. 229) that these regimes were willing to pay. For an Indigenous moderniser who believes that ‘liberal democracy, the rule of law, the Separation of Powers convention, separation of church and state, the free market economy and civil liberties’ are ‘the strongest values and institutions any nation can adopt’ (p. 274), the political options are more limited than Mundine’s admiration for these Asian models implies. He insists that the Aboriginal mindset (‘that participating in the modern economy means turning your back on your culture’) is ‘wrong’. But with what political measures would Mundine correct it? Perhaps what Mundine really admires about these regimes is that they required people to work to survive. What he most dislikes in the Left is that, in his view, they perceive work as bad. ‘Anyone who cares about social justice should want people to work,’ he responds (p. 505). Work is a moral foundation for living—imperilled by advocates of welfare, he believes.

As well, as we noted above, Mundine promotes certain models of property right, arguing that ‘communal’ land tenure constrains Aboriginal development. In his memoir, he writes that his criticism of ‘communal’ tenure affronted three kinds of belief or opinion: a ‘left’ suspicion of ‘private ownership and commerce’ (p. 218); a belief that to legislate ‘communal’ tenures is to show respect to continuing Aboriginal custom; and a pragmatic fear that Aboriginal land ‘would become like a Swiss cheese, peppered with holes of private title’ (p. 220). He took ‘a battering from the Aboriginal establishment’ (p. 230). The Howard Government saw him as expressing ‘Liberal values supporting individual rights and home ownership’ (p. 229). In 2007, without consulting the Northern Territory Land Councils, it amended the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* to facilitate leasehold on Aboriginal land. Mundine is confident that ‘across the country’ many Aboriginal landowners are now approaching land as an economic asset, as he has advocated (p. 229).
One practitioner of the Northern Territory Aboriginal land rights system, Leon Terrill, has questioned Mundine’s characterisation of the traditional owners’ and residents’ evolved property-owning practices as ‘communal’. Terrill’s work as a lawyer for the Central Land Council taught him that wherever people reside in small townships (former missions, settlements and pastoral homesteads) situated on larger tracts of Aboriginal land, they have evolved ‘informal tenure arrangements’ that ‘provide individuals and organisation with relatively exclusive rights to particular land holdings and buildings’. Of course, this may not be ‘modern’ enough to satisfy Mundine’s hope that Northern Territory Aboriginal people will adapt custom to capitalist, home-owning Australian norms.

Counselling Howard, Abbott and Turnbull

Mundine’s willingness to become counsellor to Coalition governments is a corollary, in part, of his historical sense that non-Labor governments have been as helpful as Labor in their Indigenous policies (pp. 442–50). Laborites delude themselves that they are the natural party for Indigenous Australians, he argues; they are merely better than non-Labor at promoting what they have done (pp. 435–41). But his relationship with Abbott also reflects his view that both had ‘grown in this area’. They no longer saw Indigenous Australians as ‘sacred koalas’ that ‘needed to be helped … We don’t isolate indigenous affairs from the wider community. We see indigenous people as Australians, part of the Australian economy and part of the social fabric of Australia’. Mundine’s association with Liberal prime ministers has nonetheless brought occasional discomfort. He judges Howard ‘stubborn’ for refusing to apologise to the Stolen Generations; Howard was ‘overwhelmed by defensiveness over Australian history’ (p. 281). ‘You can’t ignore the anger and sorrow that any group of people feel about past wrongdoings that are relatively recent in history and where the flow-on effects of it are still being felt. But you also can’t be weighed down by it’ (p. 283). He was pleased that Rudd apologised in February 2008. Mundine also questions whether the Howard Government should have suspended the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 when legislating the Northern Territory Intervention in 2007, as it implied that the policy was racist when, in his opinion, it was justifiable as securing the lives of Aboriginal women and children. Mundine also thinks that, ‘in its implementation’ (p. 293), the Intervention was arrogant and too much directed from Canberra. On what Howard thought of Mundine, his autobiography Lazarus Rising (2013) throws no light.

Advising Abbott was made easier for Mundine by the fact that under Rudd and Gillard (notwithstanding Rudd’s ‘socialistic’ response to the Global Financial Crisis, pp. 326–28) the ‘mindset’ of the Australian Government had shifted from ‘welfare-dependency’ to ‘economic participation’ (p. 325). It was unfortunate, Mundine concedes, that Abbott’s promotion of the reformed mindset included saying, on one occasion, that remote Aboriginal people were making a regrettable ‘life-style choice’ (p. 395) and, on another occasion, that before British colonisation Australia had been ‘unsettled’ (p. 393). Abbott seemed, at times, clueless about how Aboriginal people understand themselves. Mundine did not form a close advisory relationship with Malcolm Turnbull, finding that he was responsive to ‘inner-city elites and the ABC lefties’ (p. 414) but not genuinely interested in Indigenous affairs (p. 417); in Turnbull’s memoir *A Bigger Picture* (2020), Mundine passes without mention.

Mundine nonetheless hails as the great legacy of the Abbott and Turnbull governments the Indigenous Entrepreneurs Capital Scheme—a government fund designed to reduce the risk of commercial lending to mature and established Indigenous businesses that cannot otherwise access finance. Labelling the scheme a ‘game changer’ (‘I feel the tide has finally turned’, p. 420), Mundine overstates the innovation that he has striven to bring about. There has been something like this scheme in Australian Government policy since 1968, when the Gorton Government passed the *Aboriginal Enterprise (Assistance) Act 1968*. The bipartisan aspiration that some Indigenous Australians will become entrepreneurs, like the long-standing willingness of governments of both kinds to lend for Indigenous home-ownership, has a lineage deeper than Mundine knows or at least admits. The position that he occupies in debates about ‘Aboriginal development’ is part of an established field of options; his views do not ‘disrupt’ an ‘establishment’ but join one side of a familiar debate that began in the late 1960s.

To understand how Mundine could experience himself as more novel than he is we need to consider three innovations within that field of debate that have intensified it without changing its polarities. First, there is more ‘property’ in play; the *Native Title Act 1993*, substantially amended in 1998, has hugely extended the Indigenous land and sea estate and has created and continues to create many new Indigenous property-owning corporations. More than ever, there is reason to ask what such property is good for and to expect a variety of answers—not least because the emergence of Green politics since the 1980s has complicated the moral choices of ‘development’ (pp. 422–32). Second, through innovations in official statistics, the state has developed its capacity to measure socioeconomic disparity between Indigenous Australia and Australians as a whole: the ‘gap’ that the nation is obliged to ‘close’. Mundine rightly points to the biennial Closing the Gap report as propaganda (not his word but ours) for programs of Indigenous development such as he favours (pp. 309–10, 323, 383–87, 458–59). Third, the neglected needs of Indigenous women and children have been given more and more exposure since
around 1990, creating a sense of crisis in Indigenous Australia that puts all extant policy settings on the defensive. Mundine gives ample attention to each of these three developments; they endow his voice with urgency because they give frequent and vivid exposure to the problems that concern him.

Mundine in the constitutional recognition debate

In November 2010, Julia Gillard commissioned an Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition to come up with options for amending the Australian Constitution by referendum so that it ‘recognised’ Indigenous Australians. Within days of the Expert Panel’s final meeting on 8 December 2011 and a month before it released its recommendations, Mundine was criticising its suggestions. We will go through them, one by one, describing Mundine’s position in 2012.

First, the panel suggested getting rid of any mention of Commonwealth power to deal with people as if they were members of a ‘race’, such as Section 25 (allowing a state to exclude a ‘race’ from voting) and Section 51(xxvi) allowing the Commonwealth to pass laws about any ‘race’, with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders conventionally understood to be a ‘race’ or two ‘races’. Before the report was released, Mundine was quoted as welcoming this recommendation.52 ‘I’m not part of an “Aboriginal race” or a “black race”;’ he would later insist. ‘I’m an Australian’.53

Second, because the ‘race’ power in Section 51 is the constitutional anchorage of such important statutes as the Native Title Act, it would be necessary to ensure the validity of certain Commonwealth laws by replacing Section 51 with a new power ‘to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’. The words for describing this power would be part of a preamble to Section 51 that would recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as prior occupants of Australia with a continuing relationship to lands and waters and continuing culture; the preamble would also acknowledge these peoples’ ‘need’ to ‘secure … advancement’. Before the Expert Panel released its report, Mundine was quoted as objecting that the proposed preamble would encourage High Court litigation on the issue of whether a law or policy would secure ‘advancement’—a chance for lawyers to ‘line their pockets for a 100 years’, when the point of constitutional reform was to ‘simplify the Constitution’.54 A few weeks later, Mundine again expressed ‘very grave reservations’ about this suggestion,

54 Quoted by Karvelas, ‘Mundine to Fight New Race Power in Constitution’.
fearing that it would ‘create scope for the courts to interpret government legislation in new ways … I prefer laws to be made by elected parliamentarians, not members of the judiciary’. Litigation on constitutional validity could delay vital policies and programs, he added.55

Third, the panel recommended that the Constitution be amended to prohibit racial discrimination by any government in Australia—unless the discrimination was intended to overcome disadvantage, or to reduce the adverse impact of racial discrimination in the past, or to protect culture, language or heritage. In the words of Greg Craven, a constitutional lawyer, what the panel was proposing was ‘a one-clause bill of rights’.56 Along similar lines, Mundine’s commentary ‘was vicious’, Shireen Morris from the Melbourne Law School would later remark. She quoted Mundine as saying: ‘I’m concerned about the impact the advancement clause will have on the cultural practice of taking child brides in some aboriginal communities’.57

It would empower courts to overturn decisions by elected governments.58 From the February 2012 meeting that she and Mundine had attended, Morris concluded that Abbott and Brandis ‘wanted Parliament to retain its power to discriminate’, rather than accept a general equality provision, and Mundine ‘seemed to be nodding in agreement with Abbott and Brandis’. Cape York Aboriginal leader and Expert Panel member Noel Pearson, once debriefed, thought Mundine needed to ‘harden up a bit’. Mundine seemed ‘basically a minimalist’, like Abbott.59

Fourth, while acknowledging English as Australia’s ‘national language’, the Expert Panel wanted Australians to recognise that there remain other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. We do not know Mundine’s views about this recommendation, and it has been all but forgotten in the subsequent debate on constitutional recognition.

It quickly emerged that Mundine’s views were shared by members of the Opposition. Shadow Attorney-General Brandis (Liberal, Queensland) urged Australians to heed Mundine’s warning, describing him as ‘one of Indigenous Australia’s most intelligent and respected figures’; and he warned of the High Court’s recent inclination to take ‘a robust view of its powers to assess jurisdictional boundaries’.60 A few days later, the Australian reported that Mundine had met with Abbott in order to formulate a combined attack on the second panel recommendation: the addition of words that require legislation to promote Indigenous ‘advancement’.61 One of the unintended consequences that Mundine raised with Abbott was child brides: ‘Some could argue

57 Morris, Radical Heart, 62.
59 Morris, Radical Heart, 66, 69–70.
60 George Brandis, ‘Modest Change Is Within Reach’ Australian, 21 December 2011.
it is about cultural rights, it could be used under the advancement clause.\(^\text{62}\) In the same issue of the *Australian*, Stuart Rintoul quoted Mundine as describing the panel’s recommendations as the work of ‘lawyers and intellectuals and academics’.\(^\text{63}\) No praise there.

So, before the Expert Panel had formally submitted its recommendations, senior Opposition figures had initiated a line of criticism that they would make repeatedly with Mundine’s support: that the proposed amendments to the Constitution would encourage litigation in the High Court to clarify which actions by government advanced Indigenous interests and which did not. To counter accusations that this position was racist, they could point out that ‘one of Indigenous Australia’s most intelligent and respected figures’ shared their views.\(^\text{64}\) In addition, two prominent Aboriginal women, Sue Gordon and Bess Price, were reportedly critical of the panel’s recommendations.\(^\text{65}\)

One commentator whose views were close to the panel’s acknowledged that Mundine and Brandis had pointed to a difficulty in the second recommendation: ‘advancement’, George Williams, Professor of Law at the University of New South Wales, agreed, was a ‘vague and probably unhelpful’ word to put into the proposed Section 51 preamble. He canvassed substitutes such as ‘benefit’, ‘wellbeing’ or ‘welfare’.\(^\text{66}\) Clearly, these words would be no less open to interpretation by judges. The same problem arose in relation to the third of the panel’s recommendations that would have made it necessary for the High Court (if the matter were litigated) to judge whether a government was committing ‘racial discrimination’ whenever a law or policy singled out Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders for special treatment. The defining feature of the arguments by ‘constitutional conservatives’ against the panel’s second and third proposals was their warning that Indigenous affairs laws and policies should not be any more vulnerable to the possibility of High Court litigation than they were under the existing Constitution. As Philip Ruddock, attorney-general in the last Howard Government explained, it would have been more difficult for the Howard Government to abolish ATSIC in 2004 and 2005 had the Constitution then included the proposed ‘advancement’ preamble and the ‘anti-discrimination’ Section.\(^\text{67}\) Abbott expressed a similar fear.\(^\text{68}\) This is precisely what commended the proposal to people on the other side of this debate.

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\(^\text{62}\) Morris, *Radical Heart*, 62.


\(^\text{67}\) Stuart Rintoul and John Ferguson, ‘Ruddock Warning on Constitutional Fallout’, *Australian*, 26 December 2011.

The Liberal and National parties remained firm in the view that the legislature and executive should not be further constrained on ‘Indigenous’ matters by a reformed Constitution. When the Coalition parties took office on 18 September 2013, under Abbott, it was time for advocates of recognition to reconsider whether to continue to press for a referendum embodying the panel’s second and third recommendations. Although Abbott led a government hostile to these recommendations, some kind of constitutional recognition was still possible, Pearson argued, not only because Abbott had long supported recognition, but also because Mundine was advising the government on how to increase the rate of employment of Indigenous Australians. Pearson’s reasoning was that ‘without demonstrable traction on the practical agenda, the symbolic reform [constitutional recognition] will face sceptical Australians, black and white’.69 Pearson, as a member of the Expert Panel, was hinting that it would be best to acknowledge that the constitutional conservatives had won the political debate on the ‘advancement’ (second) and ‘anti-discrimination’ (third) proposals and that it was time to reconsider the Expert Panel’s ‘rights’ agenda of constitutional change.

Pearson had started a manoeuvre that, over the next three years, would recast the debate on constitutional recognition and alter Mundine’s position within the debate. Pearson’s Quarterly Essay, ‘A Rightful Place’ (2014), endorsed removing ‘race’ from Sections 25 and 51(xxvi) but urged respect for constitutional conservatives’ fears of ‘judicial activism’ whose ‘views’ it was important to take ‘on board’.70 In return, he asked constitutional conservatives to consider how to guarantee ‘the indigenous voice in indigenous affairs’.71 When writers in the Australian applauded Pearson’s Quarterly Essay, one—Paul Kelly—singled out Pearson and Mundine as two admirably pragmatic Aboriginal leaders to whom Abbott must listen.72 However, as Mundine soon made clear, he would not support establishing an elected Indigenous Voice, insisting that Indigenous Australians are entitled only to the vote that every other voter gets at a general election.73

The idea of a national Voice was strongly affirmed in the 13 constitutional conventions (12 regional, 1 national) convened by the Referendum Council between October 2016 and May 2017. Pearson’s proposal that there be a constitutional referendum to require the government to create a ‘Voice to the Australian Parliament’ was warmly endorsed by the ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’ (May 2017) and

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then by the Referendum Council in its *Final Report* (June 2017). Mundine endorsed the Turnbull Government’s rejection, in October 2017, of this form of constitutional recognition.

**Mundine’s approach to the Voice**

While opposed to a constitutionally entrenched Voice to Parliament, Mundine has not opposed to distinct Indigenous political institutions. Speaking to Sarah Maddison a decade earlier, he said: ‘We shouldn’t be going to government and saying, “Hey, give us a national body.” Why aren’t we forming our own national body. Why don’t we just do it?’ Mundine advocates the recognition of Indigenous nations. This means that he has engaged sympathetically with an issue raised by the Expert Panel in 2012: whether the Constitution’s use of the word ‘race’ should continue to be understood as referring to Indigenous Australians. Mundine argues that ‘race’ is ‘archaic and awkward’ terminology that has long obscured that Indigenous Australia consists of many ‘nations’. ‘Removing the race power is a legitimate option. But history tells us any attempt to replace it with bans on racial discrimination or a requirement that laws benefit indigenous people will fail—and fuel a divisive debate.’

He has said that he would support a constitutional change that acknowledges Australia’s ‘First Nations’, though he does not suggest a form of words that would do this. Yet constitutional change may not be necessary to enable what Mundine calls ‘treaties’: the recognition of Indigenous nations as units of government. Legislated agreements with Indigenous bodies are possible under Australia’s, the states’ and the territories’ existing constitutions. And, as Mundine acknowledges, the recognition of Indigenous nations will continue through the negotiation of land use agreements under the Native Title Act. ‘Once registered, those agreements bind all native title holders in the agreement area, even those who didn’t personally sign it [sic]. When signed with a government, they are, in a sense, a form of treaty’ (p. 454). Under their existing constitutional powers, governments—national, state and territory—are able to sign such agreements and to encode them in legislation, if they wish.

For promoting ‘treaties’ in these terms, Mundine drew criticism from conservative commentators such as Andrew Bolt and Keith Windschuttle. However, Mundine claims that Abbott ‘came round to my idea of treaties with Aboriginal first nations...
(although to keep the peace with his conservative caucus he suggested that, if pursued, we should come up with a different name)” (pp. 405–6). Some state and territory governments have begun to negotiate acts of recognition with Indigenous Australians; such agreements would be legislated, not written into constitutions, and some refer to these prospective agreements as ‘treaties’.

Treaties with local representative bodies (‘nations’) are Mundine’s alternative to the single national Voice to Parliament. What is wrong with the Voice to Parliament, says Mundine, is that only each First Nation can speak for the Indigenous Australians in its region; he does not see a single national ‘Voice’ as capable of representing all Nations. ‘[T]he “debate that needs to happen” is about whether “people want an Aboriginal nation” or whether Aboriginal people remain “a nation of nations”.’

He would like the federal parliament to legislate for the creation of local representative bodies. Mundine’s focus on the ‘local’ does not rule out the evolution of national Indigenous representation, however, for he concedes that:

Logic says that, once local bodies are created, they’ll affiliate in representative State and Federal bodies. But, unlike a constitutionally created national body, any State or Federal body will be accountable to community through its connection to constituent ‘peoples’ or ‘nations’.

Mundine’s thinking about multiple Indigenous nations illustrates that the relationship between two debates—advocating treaties and advocating constitutional recognition—has not been straightforward. The Expert Panel in 2012 had tried to distinguish constitutional recognition from treaty negotiation; its report put treaty talk to one side and urged Australians to focus on options for constitutional recognition. However, in June 2016, Opposition leader Shorten brought up the relationship between the two when he answered a question from the floor in an ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) TV Q&A program; he acknowledged that a treaty or treaties could follow constitutional recognition. The Turnbull Government immediately warned that this made it harder to agree with Labor about the form that constitutional recognition might take. For those focused on finding a bipartisan referendum question, including Western Australia’s Ken Wyatt—the first Aboriginal person to be elected to the House of Representatives, then the assistant minister for health and aged care—treaty talk was unwelcome. Langton

doubted that the ALP had formulated a clear policy on treaty and its relationship with constitutional recognition.\(^82\) The *Australian* editorialised that ‘treaty talk can only derail constitutional recognition’.\(^83\)

As Indigenous persons responded to Shorten’s intervention, the distinctive nature of Mundine’s treaty proposal—reported along with those of others, including Patrick Dodson, looking forward to treaty negotiations—was at risk of being obscured. In June 2016, Mundine was reported as presenting treaty negotiations as an *alternative* to constitutional recognition: if Indigenous Australians could look forward to each ‘nation’ negotiating a treaty then they would not need to place so many of their hopes on changing the Constitution. The promise of treaty talks, he hoped, would convert many Indigenous people to the constitutional ‘minimalist’ position that he had been advocating since December 2011.\(^84\) However, in his 2017 essay *Practical Recognition from the Mobs’ Perspective* he seems to be unsure whether the federal parliament has the power to legislate to recognise First Nations governments. He wonders whether a ‘modest revision’ of Section 51(xxvi) (by constitutional referendum) would be required to authorise the federal government to pass laws to establish First Nations governments.\(^85\)

Pressure to hold a referendum to give the Australian Government a constitutional obligation to legislate a Voice to Parliament, as urged by the Uluru Statement, has not abated; it has grown. However, how the Voice should represent multiple local/regional voices, and whether the Voice(s) should be ‘to the Parliament of Australia’ or ‘to government’ at all three levels are now issues for debate. In 2018, a Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (chaired by Julian Leeser, Liberal, Berowra, and senator Patrick Dodson, Labor, Western Australia) received many submissions arguing that constitutional change should take the form of special measures to ensure Indigenous contributions to policymaking. These submissions sketched a variety of designs for such a Voice. Mundine did not make a submission, but the committee’s final report in November 2018 took note of his May 2017 paper *Practical Recognition from the Mobs’ Perspective* and his proposal that ‘recognition’ should be about recognising First Nations as interlocutors of governments. For Mundine, ‘Only traditional owners can speak for their country. Specifically: Bundjalung speak for Bundjalung country. Yuin speak for Yuin country. Yolngu speak for Yolngu country.’ In his view,

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\(^85\) Mundine, *Practical Recognition from the Mobs’ Perspective*, 9.
'a national voice can't speak for any country'.\textsuperscript{86} Indeed, many submissions argued for the local and regional representation of all Indigenous nations. Mundine’s view that the Voices be regional and that they should address all levels of government and not just the national parliament seems to have wider currency among Indigenous Australians.

In 2015, as we have noted, Marcia Langton warned not to expect an Indigenous consensus on constitutional recognition, and indeed a variety of Indigenous positions about the design and status of the Indigenous Voice has emerged. Mundine’s regional approach to Indigenous representation is, more than ever, a part of the discussion of the Indigenous Voice. Throughout 2020, three committees appointed by the government began to ‘co-design’ the Voice; resulting in an Interim Report, co-authored by Langton and Tom Calma, and released by Minister for Indigenous Affairs Wyatt on 9 January 2021. Mundine’s \textit{Mobs’ Perspective} is not mentioned, but the report’s proposal that there be 25 to 35 Local and Regional Voices, recognised by all three levels of government, mediating ‘community’ (including traditional owners’) views to the National Voice and to all three levels of government, is broadly consistent with what Mundine has been advocating. Wyatt’s three committees are now considering submissions about how many Local and Regional Voices there should be. In line with the Morrison Government’s opposition to entrenching the Voice(s) in the Constitution, none of the committees will be able to present the Voice(s) as a form of constitutional recognition. From 2011 to 2014, Mundine opposed constitutional recognition that would have put certain Indigenous rights into the Constitution. Subsequently, he came to favour ‘recognising first Nations voices in the Constitution’, though after the Uluru Statement he is said to have ‘wavered’.\textsuperscript{87} Pearson’s and others’ skilful promotion of the Voice(s) option has brought attention to Mundine’s championing of the multiple Indigenous nations as the political expression of Indigenous agency. The constitutional recognition debate has evolved so that its permitted agenda and excluded options have come to resemble Mundine’s preferences.

\textsuperscript{87} Morris, \textit{Radical Heart}, 189.
BOOK REVIEWS


When Pilbara Aboriginal pastoral workers started coordinated strike action in May 1946, the Western Australian press did not know whether or not to take it seriously. ‘Nothing workem longa you’, a spokesman for the strikers, identified only as ‘Toby’, was quoted as saying by the *West Australian*; ‘We bin strike’. Displaying a common mixture of disdain and mockery, the report went on to blame visitors from other stations who induced the workers to stay up playing cards so they would ‘resent the necessity of early rising’,¹ and it was this, rather than the intolerable work conditions, that had brought on the strike. Not all contemporary reports were so flippant. Soon after the strike had started, the same newspaper acknowledged the dilemma the pastoralists and the state government faced. The ‘squatters’ could not work their stations ‘without the help of the natives’, who in turn could not live without ‘the help of the station owners and other employers’.² Both parties stood to lose from what was portrayed as a mutually beneficial relationship. Furthermore, most station owners, the argument went, provided well for their station workforces and, indeed, some said that they gained little return from their beneficence.

Anne Scrimgeour’s book *On Red Earth Walking* takes up the story of the strike from this point. But, while the *West Australian* and other state interests saw things very much from the viewpoint of the pastoralists, she is careful to set the scene from the perspective of the Aboriginal people of the region, *marrngu* to use the Nyangumarta term, the language that was (and is) spoken by many in the northeastern part of the region. Indeed, the station economy, to adopt a perhaps over-used euphemism, had dominated the region from the arrival of Europeans in the mid-1860s. Aboriginal people from the diverse language groups of the Ashburton to the De Grey rivers region had faced a stark choice to either adapt to the new system or face incarceration or obliteration. Bound by labour ‘contracts’, many found themselves tied for life to a station with the status of virtual chattels. They were not paid, and laboured under the sole authority of the ‘boss’. Their children were born into bondage, and if Aboriginal workers did risk leaving the station, they could be hunted down by police and sentenced to prison with hard labour, although

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¹ ‘Natives on Strike, Station Mustering Halted’, *West Australian* (Perth), 28 April 1949, 27.
² ‘Native Question, Problems in the Pilbara,’ *West Australian* (Perth), 27 June 1946, 11.
most were simply returned to the custody of their boss, regardless of their previous treatment. Furthermore, if the station changed hands, they were simply passed on as part of the station assets, chattels in every sense of the term.

On the face of it, the system had continued virtually unchanged since the 1860s. Over the course of the twentieth century the state government progressively tightened the operative legislation—the Aborigines Act 1905—to limit Aboriginal choices to two broad alternatives: unpaid station labour or segregation on a mission or reserve, the latter often meaning, in practice, removal from family and country and incarceration on Moore River Native Settlement or another institution in the south of the state. Yet, as Scrimgeour describes, choices remained for marrngu even in the context of such an oppressive legal regime. Many Aboriginal people, notably those from desert areas—Nyangumarta, Mangala, Juwaliny and other Western Desert peoples—sometimes chose to come into the stations, ‘pushed’ from their traditional lands by depopulation and progressive encroachment by Europeans, and ‘pulled’ by the desire to find lost relations, or by the desire for flour, tea, sugar and tobacco. They did not always intend to remain permanently but often did so in order to increase opportunities for their younger people, and because their homelands were becoming harder places in which to live, as more and more of their country men and women were drawn towards station country.

By the late 1940s, Scrimgeour identifies two concurrent societies in the Pilbara pastoral economy:

the settler social and economic realm, in which marrngu remained marginal and which they learned to negotiate with care and servility; and the social, cultural and religious world of the local Aboriginal community, into which the new arrivals were incorporated through existing family relationships and congruent kinship structures.

(pp. 6–7)

By World War II, many Aboriginal pastoral workers were becoming impatient at the inequality of their arrangements. ‘Denigration and social distance, together with coercion and intimidation exerted principally through the agency of the police, formed the weft of the fabric of labour relations’, Scrimgeour writes, ‘woven together with protection, benevolence, loyalty and attachment’ (p. 39). Apart from the lack of wages, certain aspects of the pastoral relationship became lightning rods for discontent. Mealtime segregation was one—non-Aboriginal workers had their food served on plates and ate at tables while their Aboriginal co-workers were given bread and meat in the hand and ate outside. So too was the quantity and variety of provisions in lieu of wages, with some workers only provided with ‘soap and tobacco, needle and cotton, that’s all’ (p. 40). In addition, shelter was often non-existent or rudimentary, with station workers often left to make their own camps and, in wet weather, to find dry places where they could.
Yet so vulnerable was their legal position that station workers had little choice but to ‘bend to these indignities’ (p. 41), or face police violence or incarceration. Furthermore, denied access to education, they were generally unaware of their legal rights and, as Scrimgeour comments, commonly resorted to the ‘weapons of the weak’: ‘stealing vegetables from station gardens … or “going bush” for a while when their labour was required’ (p. 41). World War II brought little direct improvement in their circumstances, although some have argued that greater employment opportunities, including wages, and contact with servicemen ‘with new ideas and new ways of relating to Aboriginal people’ (p. 44) set the scene for the strike action that began a year after the war’s end. The war though, did usher in changes that indirectly led to the strike. Firstly, demand for wool and the departure of most white workers on service tightened controls on Aboriginal pastoral workers, bringing measures to prevent their employment on military bases and interaction with armed services personnel, and keep them on the stations. Thus, it was a hardening, rather than a relaxation, of wartime labour regulations that brought increased dissatisfaction among Aboriginal station workers. Nonetheless, the war’s end also brought a broader attitudinal shift in the Australian population ‘towards more liberal ideas of human rights and equality’ (p. 45). Not only did this evolution in attitudes create a more generous public environment for the subsequent strike action, but it also influenced the thinking of some of the non-Aboriginal actors, notably the prospector and gold-miner Don McLeod, who came to play important roles in what was an extremely complicated operation.

The bulk of Scrimgeour’s narrative follows the progress of the strike from its first uncertain moves to its ultimate and broadly successful conclusion—in the sense that it achieved some of its goals of better conditions for Aboriginal workers on the stations and opened up the possibility of alternative occupations. It is a stirring story, made more so by the sheer complexity of coordinating action that required constant communications between a large number of pastoral properties over a very large area, all in the context of a legal regime designed to oppress the movements of Aboriginal people. The contributions of a number of Aboriginal men have long been recognised, to the extent that Dooley Binbin, Clancy McKenna and Jacob Oberdoo all have entries in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, but Scrimgeour widens the cast of characters to include many others, including women such as Maggie Ginger and Caroline Jula, who had worked as domestics in station homesteads. Their story encapsulates the complexity of station relationships, for not only were they constantly in and about the inner sanctums of the station environment, they also performed intimate tasks such as cooking and caring for the children of the pastoral families.

Scrimgeour handles the diversity of the characters appearing in the narrative with confidence and acumen. She includes well-known Europeans in addition to the central figure, Don McLeod, as well as policemen and pastoralists, politicians and
bureaucrats. Thus we also meet those who played supporting and advisory roles, such as the literary figure Dorothy Hewett and her then husband, the lawyer Lloyd Davies. Particularly impressive is the author’s use of Aboriginal evidence, much of it recorded in the storytellers’ language. In her preparedness to take on the complexities of utilising and interpreting Aboriginal testimony, Scrimgeour has followed the practice she adopted in her previous collaboration with another prominent strike leader, Monty Hale (Minyjurr), *Kurlumarniny: We Come from the Desert* (2012), which was awarded the Western Australian Premier’s Book Award in 2013. The oral history sources listed in the bibliography shows the extent of her research. She recorded much of the material herself, and made deft use of interviews recorded by the linguists Barbara Hale and Mark Clendon, as well as material held in the collections of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, and the State Library of Western Australia. Her skill in interpreting Aboriginal evidence and ability to weave it into the narrative is what really sets the book apart, even in the context of comprehensive archival and newspaper research. Through this we come to understand the Aboriginal actors as possessing agency and thus making choices, perhaps limited and threatened by the legal regime, but present nonetheless.

The use of biographical material is particularly impressive in its capacity to illuminate and complicate a story that has often been presented as a polemic. In contemporary accounts of the strike, narratives carried in newspapers tended to privilege the pastoralist and government viewpoint, but more recently, records such as Don McLeod’s *How the West Was Lost* (1984) and Jolly Read and Peter Coppin’s *Kangkushot* (1999) have documented Aboriginal perspectives, as well as placing the episode in the context of the rise of Aboriginal political action. One of the consequences of biographical evidence is its ability to add texture, so that we come to understand diverse viewpoints even in environments that are highly contested. So it is with Scrimgeour’s book; not only do we hear, in many places for the first time, about the doubts, risks, conflicts and controversies of the Aboriginal actors, so do we come to understand the world of those who opposed them.

This is indeed an impressive book, the culmination of a depth of research and writing by Scrimgeour, who died in the year of its publication. She writes fluently but without ornament, and the footnoting, referencing and bibliography are detailed and informative. This is a book that has a story to tell, but does not shy away from controversy and complexity, or confine itself within historico-political orthodoxies. It is a fitting testament to one who, over a number of books and articles, added considerably to historical knowledge of the Pilbara, particularly the region’s Aboriginal history. One must always hesitate in seeking to place a work such as this in the context of Australian historiography, but I would be surprised if this account of the Pilbara Aboriginal strike is ever surpassed in the quality of its research and narrative.
Michelle Arrow review of Iola Mathews, *Winning for Women: A Personal Story*


Memoir and autobiography have played a critical role in the memorialisation of Australian second-wave feminism since the 1970s. The emphasis on personal storytelling as an activist strategy within the movement meant that autobiographical narratives have always been ‘fundamental to the formation of a politicised feminist identity’.¹ Many women joined women’s liberation consciousness-raising groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s and found that they had life experiences in common, which became the basis for a shared political outlook. In the decades since, women who joined the women’s movement have shared their own life narratives: not just in memoirs and autobiographies, but in oral history interviews, films and novels, and through the compilation of archival collections. The work of building an archive of the second wave was an extension of earlier decades of activism for, as Margaret Henderson noted in *Marking Feminist Times*, the women’s movement does not have “‘official’ (or, at least, professionally maintained) archives, memorials, museums and group rituals”.²

Iola Mathews’s memoir *Winning for Women* is a welcome addition to the surprisingly small collection of autobiographical works by feminist activists of the second wave. These books include Anne Summers’s *Ducks on the Pond* (1999) and *Unfettered and Alive* (2018), Wendy McCarthy’s *Don’t Fence Me In* (2000), Susan Ryan’s *Catching the Waves* (1999), Zelda D’Aprano’s *Zelda* (1977) and, most recently, Merle Thornton’s *Bringing the Fight* (2020). These memoirs fall into two categories: high-profile feminists who remain in the public eye, and those who are less well known. Margaret Henderson has written extensively on the memorialisation of second-wave feminism and suggested in 2002 that second-wave feminist autobiography relied on ‘a narrative of individual success, frequently recounted by exceptional women in a complementary unproblematic linear rendering’.³ This is partly a product of the publishing marketplace: high-profile, successful feminists like Summers are more likely to gain book contracts than some of the activists who toiled to advance women’s rights in less visible, but still important, ways. Some of those activists have

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gone on to donate their personal papers to libraries or to compile archival collections (such as the First Ten Years of Sydney Women’s Liberation archive, which tell a more episodic and collective ‘autobiography’ of those involved in the movement).  

Henderson notes that the authors of published feminist memoirs shared three interrelated motivations: to justify their political actions, to offer a history lesson to the next generation of activists, and to ‘fix’ the activist era of the 1970s and 1980s in textual form. She rightly points out that feminist storytelling about this era is suffused with ‘anxiety and desire in relation to political memory’; as Mary Spongberg and others have noted, this was (and still is) often framed as an intergenerational conflict between mothers and their less than dutiful daughters, heirs to the world the feminists made. The tone was set by Summers’s provocative ‘Letter to the Next Generation’, in which she addressed the ‘daughters of the feminist revolution’, the women born after 1968:

as you have grown, so too have women’s expectations and opportunities … There have been few periods in the past when women’s prospects have expanded so dramatically in such a short time and even though they have fallen short of what we wanted, we could judge it as a good beginning.

Summers’s plea to young women to be better heirs and custodians of feminist memory reverberates throughout these memoirs and public discussions of second-wave activism. Having done their very best to remake the world as a place more hospitable and welcoming for women, those of the second wave wonder what the next generation of women plan to do with their freedom. How do they understand the struggles of the women who came before them?

Iola Mathews began writing Winning for Women from a similar place of concern. She told Australian Policy and History’s Jacquelyn Baker that when she worked at the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) ‘we were very aware that we were making history, and I kept records of what we were doing’. She took these files home when she left the ACTU in 1994, where they sat in her garage for more than 20 years until she thought, ‘I’d better (write it all down) before I lose all my marbles … and show young women that a lot has changed, even though sometimes they

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Michelle Arrow review of Iola Mathews, Winning for Women

think it hasn’t’. Mathews has a great story to tell: the product of a happy middle-class childhood in Melbourne, made warm and comforting by her mother’s loving care and her father’s stable occupation. Her private school instilled expectations of marriage and children as her ‘primary source of fulfilment’ (p. 5), but she didn’t immediately choose this path. She left Australia for three years in Europe, returning in 1969 and taking up a position as a cadet journalist at the Age, working for respected editor Graham Perkin. She eventually became the paper’s education reporter.

Mathews’s conversion to feminism took place when she attended what turned out to be the founding meeting of the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL), in 1972. She has no story of feminist awakening through engagement with a great feminist book: The Second Sex ‘was long and complicated’, The Feminine Mystique passed her by, and she was put off by the ‘angry, in-your-face tone’ of The Female Eunuch (pp. xi–xii). It was Beatrice Faust’s invitation to be part of a survey of political candidates in the forthcoming federal election of 1972 that made Mathews a feminist. Throughout the book, Mathews emphasises that her feminism was of a pragmatic and problem-solving kind, focused on issues that could be ironed out by legislation. She expresses considerable impatience with the consensus decision-making of the women’s liberationists who were part of WEL, noting that she ‘just wanted to get on with the job’ and not be embroiled in ‘philosophical discussions’ (p. 28). She took part in the influential survey of political candidates that was published before the 1972 election. Every candidate in every electorate was surveyed on their views on policy relating to women: female voters were encouraged to ‘think WEL before you vote’.

One of those candidates, the Australian Labor Party’s Race Mathews, scored a very respectable 34 out of 40 on the survey, which was just as well, because he became Iola’s husband just months before the election in late 1972. Race was one of Whitlam’s staffers before he stood for election in 1972. He was a widower with three children who had previously worked as a teacher and had been active in the Fabian society in the 1960s. The sections of the memoir where Iola describes their courtship and early married life evoke the excitement of being part of the broad coalition of voters who elected the first Labor Government in a generation. Yet while the Whitlam Government ‘acted on practically everything in the WEL questionnaire’ (p. 44), for Iola, life as a political wife in the Whitlam Government was often lonely, even radicalising. She had to leave her job at the Age before having her first child, parent three stepchildren, and she was often alone, as Race was either in Canberra or active in his (marginal) electorate. Nonetheless, she is aware of her privileges: they were able to afford some housekeeping help, and she was able to return to work at the Age, first

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as a freelancer and then part time. Her rich discussions of her work as a journalist, bringing a feminist angle to coverage of a wide range of issues, is a reminder that social change was made in many sites, by radicals and reformers alike.

Mathews's work at the *Age* was curtailed by new editor Creighton Burns, who sidelined her into lifestyle writing and refused to allow her to continue to work part time. Her role was also made difficult by her husband's move to Victorian state politics, where he was elected to government in 1982. Feeling that her impartiality would be questioned, and not confident of her editor's support, she left the paper. Yet despite her interest and expertise in policy, she was unable to accept positions in the public service, because new premier John Cain would not permit her, a minister's wife, to be on the public payroll. It was difficult time for Mathews, caught between her husband's demanding job and her own desire to continue her career. In the short term, she resolved this dilemma by taking on voluntary positions on various working parties and committees. A member of a committee tasked with planning the Victorian Women's Information Service in the early 1980s, she had to try to build consensus with women across the political spectrum, ranging from conservative anti-feminist groups to women's liberation. The 'radicals', she felt, made things difficult with their insistence on 'consensus' rather than hierarchy. She says that the 'radical feminists were particularly focused on domestic violence ... that was the pointy end of feminism for them. The pointy end for me was the struggle to combine work and family' (p. 108).

Mathews found her chance to work on the 'pointy end' of feminism when Bill Kelty offered her a position at the ACTU in 1983, working with the federal government (as part of the Accord) to develop policies in areas including affirmative action, parental leave, part-time employment and working to improve the position of women in the union movement. Kelty sought to maximise the moment for reform, telling Mathews when she began that 'Labor might only be in for two or three more years ... we may never get this chance again. We must seize it with both hands' (p. 134). So begins a period of intense reform, as the ACTU sought to mainstream women's issues and enshrine a series of policy changes to enact feminist change. Mathews's detailed, thoughtful account of these policy shifts, and the work that produced them, is a welcome addition to our understandings of the Accord, feminist policy-making and the ways in which the union movement slowly became more receptive to women and their distinctive workplace needs. The book is a fond tribute to the 'clever, competent people' (p. 152) at the ACTU and within the broader labour movement; Mathews became part of a broad coalition of people working in the ACTU to advance workers' rights. Her time at the ACTU culminated with her successful presentation of the Parental Leave case to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in 1992. She later reflected that she had loved working at the ACTU because 'you could achieve things and ... we had a common bond, because we cared about the Labor Party and [we] wanted to make things happen' (p. 250).
The ACTU did their best to make the most of the opportunities presented by the federal Labor Government; Mathews ends her book with a lengthy list of policies still to be enacted as a reminder of what still needs to be done.

For the young women born after Anne Summers’s ‘letter to the next generation’ was published, the second wave of the women’s movement can feel very remote. The generation gap between the women of the second wave, their Generation X ‘daughters’ and today’s resurgent feminists often produces reductive readings of each group’s activism. Older women complain that younger women are not activist enough, while millennial women tend to criticise (even caricature) the second wave’s lack of intersectionality and narrow positions on questions of sexuality and gender identity. Each of these criticisms fails to take account of the very distinctive cultural and political contexts in which these activist positions were formed, and the kinds of work that was made possible. As British author Helen Lewis pointed out in her recent history of British feminism, *Difficult Women*, ‘the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 70s is often now derided as privileged and blinkered. But it swept away the legal framework which enshrined women’s second-class status’. Iola Mathews’s memoir reminds us of the very distinctive political and social framework within which she and many other women worked to reform Australia’s workplace laws, and the importance of these reforms to subsequent generations of women. She has written an invaluable record of the ways the Accord worked to advance women’s rights, an important reminder that the women’s movement was a struggle fought on many fronts.

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Jennifer Bird review of Cassandra Pybus, *Truganini: Journey through the Apocalypse*


My 18-year-old daughter, on seeing Cassandra Pybus’s *Truganini* lying on my bedside table, immediately picked it up and stroked its cover sighing, ‘what a beautiful book’. Indeed, it is. Inside and out. The cover photograph of Peter Dombrovskis’s ‘Giant kelp’ taken at Hasselborough Bay, Macquarie Island, Tasmania, gives an emotive, textural feeling to a beautifully written book.

The narrative is immediately set in time and place by its emphasis on Aboriginal sovereignty, an element that is sadly lacking in traditional colonial histories. Not only does this allow Pybus to more clearly depict the devasting displacement of the traditional owners during colonisation, but it also educates the reader to understand the complexity of the land and the colonised peoples.

Pybus declares her interest in Truganini at the outset.¹ She reveals she is the great-great-granddaughter of the recipient of the biggest free land grant on Bruny Island, Truganini’s traditional country of Lunawanna Alonnah. The dispossession and destruction of the original people, and its aftermath, Pybus explains, is the foundation narrative of her family (p. xvi). It is through this lens that she follows the life of Truganini.

The author’s ancestor Richard Pybus, with his wife and two children, arrived in the colony in 1829 and was granted a large portion of land in the north of Bruny Island, where Truganini and her family lived, and later another in the south of the island, totalling over 2,000 hectares of traditional country. She says Truganini and her people ‘were paid with anguish and exile’ (p. xvi). Fatefully, Richard’s neighbour and good friend George Augustus Robinson, ‘the self-styled missionary’, plays a pivotal part in Truganini’s life (p. xvii). His diaries, which Pybus has studied comprehensively, record his close relationship with Truganini over 13 years, making her the most documented First Nations person in colonial Australia, albeit from a missionary coloniser’s perspective.

¹ Truganini is also known as Trugernanner in Lyndall Ryan and Neil Smith, ‘Trugernanner (Truganini) (1812–1876)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/trugernanner-truganini-4752/text7895, published first in hardcopy 1976, accessed online 30 August 2020; and other variants such as Trugannini, Trugernena, Truganina, Trucanini and Trucaninny. Pybus also notes that she was known as Lydgugee and Lalla Rookh (p. 281).
Pybus’s research is extensive. Along with Robinson’s diaries, she draws on the oral history and eyewitness accounts from her great-grandfather and his brothers of Truganini’s life on ‘Pybus land’, which Ernest Westlake, geologist, prehistorian and spiritualist, collected in the early 1900s (pp. xvi–xvii). She consults other eyewitness accounts, diaries, journal letters, official correspondence, newspapers and court records. Interestingly, she avoids using a number of books written in the last years of Truganini’s life because they feed the mythologising of Truganini, which she deems to be untrustworthy. As with any history of an oppressed people, there is little documentary evidence from Truganini herself. Pybus, therefore, confines herself to first-person accounts, although they are limited and written from a male, paternalistic viewpoint that often disregarded the contribution of women. Pybus affirms Truganini was a full actor in these encounters. She points out that she has no way to know what Truganini thought or felt, nor any way to imagine her experiences, and rightly says it would be inappropriate to attempt to invent some understanding (p. xviii). Another quirk of this book is that there are no footnotes or index. Pybus deliberately presents a narrative nonfiction without ‘restrictive’ duplicative footnotes. This may frustrate the historian but she is deliberately writing for the general reader who does not care for such details. Pybus helpfully includes short biographies of the main Aboriginal characters in the back of the book. She also explains naming conventions and provides maps with place names both in English and traditional language. Even so, these are based on settler-colonial sources, the only ones documented.

There are four parts to the book. The first part, ‘Friendly Mission’, covers the period from 1829 to 1831. Opening with the disastrous impact of colonial invasion on the traditional life of the Nuenonne sets the scene for Truganini’s life: the influx of men for sealing and whaling; the subsequent loss of food sources and land; the violence; the abuse of their women; and the murder of Truganini’s mother and kidnap of her sisters. It is not surprising, therefore, that Truganini adopted strategies necessary to cope in this new, strange world. She first meets Robinson in April 1829, when she was aged about 16 or 17 and living with a group of convict woodcutters on the mainland of Van Dieman’s Land. Although it did not appear that she was there under duress, he decided to return her to Bruny Island and her father. It was years before she divulged the abuse she endured from the woodcutters to Robinson.

Robinson was intent on creating a Christian mission for the Nuenonne people on his property. He enticed the senior man, Manganerer, there through his daughter, Truganini, and coerced them to be reliant on his daily rations. Although he was ridiculed for living among the Nuenonne, Robinson decided to build a mission with a church, school house, houses and a farm, and approached the governor to

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fund it. Here began the ‘civilising’ of the Nuenonne, yet Robinson underestimated the passive resistance of the people. It was not that they openly retaliated, but they refused to give up their traditional practices. By the beginning of 1830, Truganini’s father was dead, and even though she had reluctantly married Wooredy, a warrior and cleverman, she turned to Robinson as a father figure.

Robinson and a party variously made up of Wooredy, Truganini, and other Aboriginal people to act as guides, and a small party of convicts to transport goods and hold base camp, set out to trek 600 miles to Launceston across the hostile country. What is clear is if it were not for Truganini and two other women, the party would have been unable to traverse the waterways, as most of the men could not swim. The men would sit upon a makeshift raft and the women would move them one at a time as they swam across the waterway. The party’s engagement with the original inhabitants, convicts and the Van Diemen’s Land Company saw them variously welcomed and invited to perform in ceremonies, being avoided at all costs, being ridiculed and being aggressively warned away. On reaching their destination, the exhausted and emaciated party arrived not to a welcoming reception, but to the governor’s decree of martial law against Aboriginal people. The formation of the so-called ‘Black Line’ sought to push all the First Peoples south into the Tasman Peninsula to be captured and removed from the colony. Robinson quickly set out northwards to find as many Aboriginal people as he could for the mission before the Black Line swept through.

The second part of the book covers the period from 1831 to 1838, aptly titled ‘Extirpation and Exile’. After finally reaching and convincing the Big River people to join the group, Robinson negotiated with the governor to be appointed as commandant of the Flinders Island establishment where he intended to relocate every one of the original people of the colony to live out their days. It was a self-serving ambition. Pybus quotes Robinson, who wrote in his journal: ‘By taking the whole I gain not only the reward but the celebrity’ (p. 127). Yet Robinson was still vulnerable. In meeting with a large group who intended to kill Robinson and any unrelated kin (except Truganini), it fell to Truganini to decide whether to save Robinson, by swimming him across a fast-flowing river upon a makeshift raft, or collaborate with the group in the hope of obtaining freedom. She chose Robinson. But this was not the only time she saved his life. On another occasion she leapt into a swollen river and fought the strong current to rescue him and a convict as their raft was swept towards the river’s mouth; ‘a testament to her unwavering loyalty’, Pybus explains (p. 157).

The third part of the book covers ‘Kulin Country’ between the years 1839 and 1841, when Robinson took Truganini, Wooredy and a few others to accompany him as one family to the site of his new role as Chief Protector of Aborigines of the Port Phillip District. More followed with Robinson’s wife. In total, 14 people were moved to Port Phillip. Met with a lukewarm reception from the local colonial
administration and newspapers, Robinson set about enticing the Kulin people to cooperate, ostensibly with the assistance of Truganini and the others. Upwards of 600 people were in a deplorable and desperate state. Soon Truganini led a transient lifestyle, living with various men and returning intermittently to Robinson’s house. The others from the party of 14 became similarly dispersed. In 1841 Robinson was instructed to deliver them to the Protectorate Station at Nerre Nerre Warren so that they could come under the responsibility of the Assistant Protector William Thomas. They could not be compelled, Robinson insisted. By now Truganini had abandoned Wooredy and was cohabitating with Maulboyheener of the Pipers River Pyemairenerpairnener people. Leaving Melbourne, they inadvertently came across Assistant Protector Thomas who insisted they return with him. They absconded and headed to live along the coastline. Later, implicated with three others in the murder of two whalers, they were apprehended. Maulboyheener and another Aboriginal man were hung in the first execution at Port Phillip. Truganini and two women were released into Robinson’s care. From this point Truganini was no longer endearing to Robinson.

The fourth and final part of the book, ‘The Way the World Ends’, covers the final decades of Truganini’s life from 1842 to 1876. Returning to Van Diemen’s Land and Flinders Island, Truganini remarried, resumed her traditional ways as much as she could, and visited her homelands. But the land was irrevocably changed by the presence of the colonisers and their alcohol. She, like many, struggled. In her later life, characterised as one of the last original inhabitants, she became a novelty and her image was exploited. Her death in 1876 merely exacerbated the expropriation of her life. She became mythologised and her remains desecrated as objects of curiosity.

What is noteworthy about this book is that Pybus has been able to reveal Aboriginal Tasmanians’ agency in their dealings with colonisers. It was their decision whether to participate with Robinson or not. They slide in and out of the narrative as silently as they slide in and out of the landscape. Her descriptions of traditional hunting lands, of practices and of culture illustrate the richness and magnificence of Aboriginal life. She expertly weaves the sources into a powerful narrative. Although relying heavily on Robinson’s accounts, she empathises with Truganini and the First Peoples. Robinson self-aggrandises and is duplicitous while Truganini is intelligent, strong and capable. Most significantly, Pybus brings light to the dreadful exploitation and violence against women, yet also indicates the nuanced nature of women’s transactional relationships when negotiating with men.

It is clear Pybus feels a responsibility to Truganini, to liberate her and her people’s stories. She says it is ‘a moral necessity—these are people whose lives were extinguished to make way for mine’ (p. xvii). We should contemplate that thought for a moment. All people living on unceded Aboriginal land carry that legacy.
Having grown up in Tasmania and being unaware of her family connection to Truganini until her adult years, Pybus sets out to dispel the myths and fabrications that have evolved since Truganini’s death in 1876. What she has achieved is a truly remarkable book. Truganini was an integral figure in Tasmania’s colonial occupation. She was a resister, a negotiator and a diplomat. As Pybus declares, Truganini ‘is a hugely significant figure in Australian history’ and her life ‘was much more than a regrettable tragedy’ (p. xvi). I think Pybus has achieved what she set out to do: she moves Truganini from the colonial imperative ‘as the last tragic victim of an inexorable historical process’ to a ‘living, breathing woman’ (p. xviii). In some way, the dispossessed has been returned home to country, at least by this Pybus descendant.

It is a privilege to read a biography in which one realises that the author’s own story will offer a very special appreciation of the life being studied. Desley Deacon’s energetic and detailed exploration of the life of Adelaide-born stage and film actor Judith Anderson (1897–1992) rewards its readers in just this way.

Deacon’s biography, beautifully presented by Kerr Publishing, extends the author’s already considerable contribution to Australian history. Determinedly interdisciplinary, it furthers scholarship in the fields of gender studies, particularly of Australian women and work in the early twentieth century; transnational networks of culture and industry, including the anglophone theatre and film networks of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries; and biography itself, as Deacon excavates a life’s narrative from the shadow of the celebrity persona that had come to define her subject.

The author’s interest in Anderson appears to have begun to firm in 2006 in a paper on the Australian theatrical manager J. C. Williamson and the world theatrical market, delivered at the Australian Modernities International Conference at the University of Queensland.¹ This was followed in 2007 by an article in which she recognised Anderson as an exemplar of the mobility that the study of elocution promised to young Australian women through the acquisition of ‘World English’.² Deacon invoked Anderson’s career again the following year in her presidential address to the Australian Historical Association when she spoke of ‘mind maps and theatrical circuits in Australian transnational history’.³ In 2009, at a symposium held on her retirement from The Australian National University (ANU), Deacon presented ‘a wonderful illustrated lecture … entitled “Judith Anderson in Forties Hollywood: From Rebecca to Pursued”’.⁴

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In addition to engaging Deacon’s core academic interests, Anderson’s life also reflects aspects of her biographer’s own transnational experience. As with Anderson’s theatrical career, Deacon’s academic career followed and strengthened cultural and professional pathways between Australia and North America. After completing undergraduate (literature) and postgraduate (sociology) studies in Australia, Deacon rose to work in senior roles at the University of Texas, returning to ANU in 1999. As head of the School of History in 2008 she oversaw the establishment of the National Centre for Biography, publisher of the *Australian Journal of Biography and History*.

Deacon draws on Anderson’s personal and family papers, including an unpublished memoir, correspondence, press commentary, and theatrical and film records, to describe the enterprise and reflect on the personal experience of her subject. Anderson is portrayed as a determined, creative and adaptable dramatic actor, whose deeply expressive voice and keenly focused physical and intellectual energy brought new dimensions to the stage and screen roles she played. Deacon writes with remarkable clarity and insight of Anderson’s indefatigable, lifelong dedication to joining the circles of actors, directors and theatre producers that would allow her to pursue her dramatic interests and career.

Anderson’s personal life was marked by the presence of her supportive and resourceful mother Jessie (née Saltmarsh) who was a trained nurse and, like her daughter, loved to perform for gatherings of family and friends. By the time of Judith’s birth in 1897, her father, James, had gambled away the sizeable fortune he had made from the sale of a silver mine at Broken Hill and had taken to drink. James’s ‘drunken rages’ (p. 6) came to terrify the family and Jessie sued for separation. James left the family when Judith, then Fanny (Frances) Anderson, was six years old, and she never saw him again.

Deacon recounts that Jessie was ‘for all intents and purposes a widow from 1903’ (p. 9). She leased a grocery store, which the family lived behind, in Adelaide’s well-to-do suburb of Rose Park. From here Fanny and her brother, Frank, delivered groceries in a ‘spring-cart with a beloved pony named Dolly’ (p. 11). Deacon paints Fanny as an enthusiastic and energetic child who, in her own words, recalled, ‘boys existed for only one purpose: to compete with, and to win from. I out-shouted, outran, outfought them all … I was a tom-boy. I was known – and gloried in the name – as Outlaw Fan from the Anderson Gang’ (p. 11).

Anderson recalled her childhood as a happy one. Although she avoided school work she revelled in dramatic performance, initially drawing energy from the praise she received from performing for family and family friends. Deacon cites Anderson’s own reflection on one of the powerful moments that inspired her to pursue performance as a career. On attending a performance given by Dame Nellie Melba in Adelaide in 1908, Anderson felt for the first time ‘that quite indescribable sense of miracle
that a great talent can produce. [And] … I knew that I, too, must do something in public; that I too must try in my own way to do to people, what she, standing by a piano, was doing to me and to everyone else in that theatre’ (p. 16)

Anderson’s engaging sonorous voice was a natural gift, which she enthusiastically learnt to master, from about the age of 12, under the instruction of elocution tutor Mabel Kerr (née Best). Deacon observes that Anderson’s embrace of this training and the awards that followed gave her transnational currency as an accomplished speaker of ‘World English’. This was a critical first step toward the later theatrical success she enjoyed across the anglophone world, initially in Australia and later in the theatres of New York and film studios of Hollywood.

It is touching to read that Anderson’s mother, Jessie, lived with her daughter for most of her life, supporting her emotionally, professionally and, when necessary, economically through taking on sewing work. The pair moved to Sydney in 1913 and Anderson eventually secured minor roles in travelling shows with the adored Julius Knight and, later, alongside American actors in Turn to the Right imported by J. & N. Tait. Anderson’s work in these productions gave her the skills and the transnational connections that would help her to survive when she arrived, accompanied and aided by her mother, to pursue a stage career in North America in 1918.

Deacon’s command of her material allows her to convey the complex migration and transition of these two determined, resourceful Australian women to a new country, and a not-immediately welcoming theatre culture, with deceptive ease. Anderson’s angular features did not match the doe-eyed adolescent faces that dominated the American stage and screen, but suitable dramatic stage roles did eventually present themselves. By 1923 Anderson’s performance in a supporting role, as an anguished daughter in the play Peter Weston, began to win her the critical acclaim she was seeking. Styles shift and Anderson’s slim, angular physique and features came into vogue. In 1924 she appeared in Cobra. She played a sophisticated vamp with ‘personality’, enhanced in the eyes of her American critics and public by her Australian background, and established her reputation on the American theatre circuit. Within months she had achieved her long-held dream of signing with theatre producer David Belasco.

Deacon makes it clear that it was the major dramatic stage roles that Anderson craved, both for their challenge and reward. In 1928 Anderson vowed that ‘after I have made much money I might give the public just one fine play’ (p. 129). While she had dreamed of delivering a production of Euripides’s Greek tragedy, Medea, since at least 1929, the production was not realised until 1947. As she had envisaged from the outset, the play was ultimately written by her poet-friend Robertson Jeffers—in a contracted form that privileged the major roles. Despite an unpromising preview
performance the play delivered the platform Anderson had hoped for; to showcase her singular, and by now feted, virtuosity in dramatic vocal and physical expression, and her emotional range. The production was a runaway success.

Deacon’s research is thorough and her expressive writing, like one of Anderson’s performances, is both lively and disciplined. In what is an undeniably rewarding and comprehensive biography, this reader occasionally yearned for just a little more from this eminent biographer about the emotional and sociological links between Anderson’s family dynamics and her professional life. This is not to say that Deacon is not sensitive to the psychology that led Anderson, again and again, to dramatically charged roles that challenged normative gender positions. The example that perhaps achieves the fullest expression of this attraction is the powerful, tragic figure of Medea. Where Deacon dutifully stops her analysis at the line of evidence, I suspect that other writers may have been tempted to go further. They might have pondered, for example, the impact that the drunken rages and eventual disappearance of Anderson’s father from the life of the family, and her childhood identification with the experience of her mother, may have had on Anderson’s later psychology. Anderson’s mother is a continual presence in the biography, and is shown to be influential in the actor’s success, yet Deacon does not venture into the nuances of this mutually rewarding, no doubt complex, relationship.

Anderson returned to Australia to tour in dramatic roles twice. While she was feted each time as the Australian girl who had made it big in America, the plays in which she performed poorly matched the mood of Australian theatregoers and critics. Deacon uses a fine discernment in exploring the cultural dynamics that were at play. In 1927, in an Australia that was increasingly alarmed by the cultural influence of the American-produced movies that swamped its cinemas, the ‘racy’ theatre productions in which Anderson appeared, directly played to the critics’ concerns who quickly and dismissively labelled them ‘sex plays’ (p. 113). In 1955 Anderson revived Medea for a tour supported by the newly minted Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Opening in Canberra’s Albert Hall in October, the play was experienced by critics and public alike as an anachronism, and an inappropriate choice for the Trust’s first touring production. The view was expressed that a play more like Ray Lawler’s Summer of the Seventeenth Doll that celebrated the Australian vernacular, and also opened late in 1955, would have been a more appropriate choice for the publicly supported Trust to be headlining.

Deacon is sensitive to the irony in the fact that Anderson exists most prominently in the public imagination today through her work in what was her least preferred theatrical medium, film. For many Anderson is synonymous with her portrayal of the creepy housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, in David Selznick and Alfred Hitchcock’s Rebecca (1940). It is perhaps in the biography’s final chapter, ‘Aftermath’, that Deacon is most expansive as a historian of gender and culture. Here she exposes
the popular and scholarly reassessment of Anderson as the ‘archetypal Hollywood lesbian’ (p. 457), as having derived, almost entirely, from the actor’s film portrayal of Mrs Danvers.

Over 500 pages, seven ‘Acts’ and 36 chapters, Deacon has created a richly illustrated and detailed investigation of the key relationships, networks and events through which Anderson forged a career. The author deftly intersperses reflections on the dynamics of Australia’s transnational identity and the gendered professions, with which Anderson engaged, with detailed accounts of her subject’s personal and professional life, illuminated by press commentary and the personal testimony of family, friends, critics, producers, directors and fellow actors.

In one of the numerous papers that Deacon produced as she circled around Anderson’s life, either consciously or unconsciously in preparation for writing her biography, she reflects on her future task:

> Familiar to us though advertising, gossip magazines, publicity releases, and from images from plays and movies, these [celebrities of stage and screen] are creatures of our imagination, irretrievably connected to our dreams and the characters they portray. Pity the poor biographer! Can we ever find that elusive ‘truth’ we seek when we take on this task?

No biographer, of course, will ever succeed in revealing the ‘elusive “truth”’ of their subject. It is what they reveal in their attempt to do so that ultimately matters. It is in what they reveal of their approach and sources, of their effort to provide a context for their subject’s motivation and actions, and of their ability to delineate the actor from the act that the biographer may be judged to succeed or fail. Deacon acknowledges this truth and deftly weaves it throughout her polished biography of Judith Anderson with a deceptive ease.

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Tansy Curtin review of Clem Gorman and Therese Gorman, *Intrépide: Australian Women Artists in Early Twentieth-Century France*


After their having been for so long sidelined and forgotten, there is now without doubt a major global push to reclaim the artistic stories and legacies of female artists. In recent years, many galleries and museums around the world have turned their attention to programs and exhibitions presenting works on, or by, women. In 2020 the National Gallery of Australia launched a two-year project titled *Know My Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now*, which seeks to bring the names of Australia’s female artists to the fore—living artists, as well as those who have been lost to history. While it is undoubtedly *de rigueur* to examine the work of female artists, that is not to say that political box-ticking explains the heightened interest in this cohort; rather, there is a general awakening to the inequities of the arts world (and wider world more generally) and the layers of privilege within it, particularly in relation to gender and race. Concomitantly with this reawakening comes the realisation that the work of these (women) artists should be exalted and elevated to a new status and that there is a palpable need to widen the scope of the Western tradition or canon of art to ensure these artists receive the acknowledgement due to them. It is into this new world, post the #MeToo movement, that Clem and Therese Gorman’s *Intrépide* has been launched. Arguably, the world in 2020 is a very different place from that of 2015, when the authors commenced their investigations, which of course does not negate the impact of their scholarship, but perhaps makes readers, both academic and lay readers, more critically aware of the subject matter constituting this publication.

As a curator and art historian, I, like Clem and Therese Gorman, have long been fascinated by expatriatism in the Australian art community from the late nineteenth century. I keep returning to the stories of the female expatriates, to understand and unpack their lives and legacies, and to gauge their courage and tenacity in the pursuit of their artistic aspirations. And, while texts have certainly been written about this period in Australian art history and the significant women who inhabited it, further scholarship and ongoing engagement with the topic are crucial. As the renowned feminist scholar, Janine Burke, notes: ‘the price of re-discovery, or so it seems, is eternal vigilance; if the flame is not attended it will go out and the
reputation of that artist will again sink into obscurity'.¹ It is simply not enough to rediscover these artists, but to assure their rightful position in the history of Australian art, their lives and works—like that of their male colleagues—must be the subject of ongoing research and reassessment, and since it is not possible for us to go back in time to (re)contextualise their work in their lifetimes, we must do so within a contemporary framework, undeniably the approach of this publication.

In the late nineteenth century, Australian art was generally viewed as conservative and parochial, and for aspiring young artists their ultimate objective was to escape Australian provincialism and ‘backwardness’ and venture to the artistic capitals of London and Paris. To have their work displayed in the august art institutions of these two cities—the Royal Academy of Arts and the Paris Salons—was the marker of success and proof that they had ‘made it’ at a national and international level.

An extended sojourn to Europe was viewed as a rite of passage for Australian artists and, as the authors note, the key Australian art schools at the time played an important role in encouraging students to travel. George Frederick Folingsby, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria and its associated National Gallery School (1882–91), established an important travelling scholarship in 1887 to support his students, and today we are familiar with many of the names of the recipients of this important prize, including John Longstaff and George Coates. Intrépide reminds us that George Coates and Dora Meeson jointly received the 1896 travelling scholarship, but that Meeson gave up the opportunity in favour of Coates, who would later become her husband (pp. 28–29). Notably, female enrolment in the National Gallery School and other primary art schools was substantial from the late nineteenth century, with the travelling scholarship awarded solely to women between 1908 and 1935. Nonetheless, the volume of female artists by comparison with their male counterparts was not necessarily reflected in contemporaneous exhibition programming and the acquisition strategies of the state galleries, a situation which to this day in Australia remains skewed to male artists. Elvis Richardson’s ‘The Countess Report’ notes the major discrepancy between graduation statistics and numbers being exhibited in state galleries—in 2014 almost three-quarters of visual arts graduates were female and yet they constituted only 34 per cent of state gallery exhibitions.²

A love of Paris has seemingly led the authors on this journey of discovery of Australia’s forgotten women artists, proving that, more than a century later, the city retains its allure. In our collective psyche, Paris continues to be the great romantic city of Europe; we too are enamoured of its cultural vibrancy and enticed by the grand boulevards and beaux-arts buildings. The legendary bohemian lifestyle of many of

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the artists draws us in and we cannot help but be intrigued by their connections to the exotic and unusual—albeit, at times, seedier—aspects of Parisian life. Through their own love of the French capital, the authors invite us to consider just what brought these Australian women across the vast oceans to a foreign country to paint and draw. Although many commentators may be tempted to highlight only the positive experiences of these artists, *Intrépide* presents a more authentic picture of the reality of life for these women: they undoubtedly revelled in the excitement and glamour of life in Paris, but their living and studio arrangements were often rudimentary and substandard. In dispelling the prevailing myth of an artistic life in romantic bohemian Paris being one of comfort and pleasure, Clem and Therese Gorman remind us that a career as an artist demanded commitment and determination, with Agnes Goodsr, one of the artists included in this book, herself noting: ‘in Paris … art is something more than a polite hobby … it is an absorbing life work’.3

The 28 artists selected for the book are an interesting and eclectic bunch; some, such as Margaret Preston, Ethel Carrick, Dorrit Black and Grace Crowley, are familiar names, while others are less well known, Madge Freeman, Marie Tuck and Anne Alison Greene, among them. The authors are unapologetic about the subjective nature of their selection: many of the artists they ‘happened’ across during their research and while discussing the topic of their book with friends and colleagues. But these choices are in themselves intriguing, revealing what it is about these intrepid women we still find fascinating.

The authors do not claim to be art historians; rather, they are biographers (with a background in theatre) of artists, but presenting, in addition to an engaging narrative of each artist’s journey, informative snippets of an art-historical nature designed to confirm and promote the artistic legacy of these women. By way of comparison, an art historian researching this period might adopt a different approach and select an altogether different cohort of artists, perhaps those who were engaging with the avant-garde artistic movements of early twentieth-century Paris. In *Intrépide*, each artist’s story is presented as a brief biographical vignette, one that offers a first glimpse into the lives of these women, with complementary information about their artistic endeavours. Given the wide-ranging nature of this publication, the vignettes are by no means exhaustive, which leads me to note that this is not a book to satisfy an art historian or scholarly researcher, nor is it intended as such, since much of the information presented is not new research but rather the collecting of multiple sources into a single volume in order to whet the appetite of the reader not familiar with the story of female expatriatism.

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Each artist has been allocated a short and catchy chapter heading; for example, ‘Dora Meeson: Progressive Feminist, Traditional Artist’ and ‘Stella Bowen: The Symbiosis of Art and Life’, a device that distils their lives into witty—and, arguably, illuminating—one-liners. While this clever approach undeniably makes engaging reading for an everyday public, these headings have a tendency to oversimplify the complex and layered lives of these incredible women. That these women were indeed ‘intrépide’ is undeniable: they uncompromisingly sought out opportunities to further their artistic careers through international travel. However, the sum effect of 28 stories compressed into a single volume is a diminution of the importance of each of these lives. Summarising the narratives into four or five pages means that some of the depth and nuance is lost, with the stories tending to become a collection of basic biographical facts. For their part, illustrations have the capacity to add depth and substance, and perhaps here more images would have served this purpose. Surprisingly, some of the works selected were far from typical of individual artists’ oeuvres, Gladys Reynell’s *Pensiveness*, which features on the cover, offering a good case in point. Heavily informed by the female impressionists, it is undoubtedly a fine painting, but it is certainly not illustrative of the work for which Reynell is celebrated today: now she is highly regarded for her unique studio pottery. Similarly, the works selected to represent Kathleen (Kate) O’Connor and Ethel Carrick are by no means characteristic examples of the skill of these highly talented artists. One thing is clear, however, when considered as a group an important connection between the artists becomes obvious; namely, their choice of subject matter. Their works are intimate and personal explorations of subjects close to the artists’ interests and lives. In the history of Australian art, representations of this country’s unique and majestic landscape are privileged above all other subject matter and are associated with the ideals of nation-building and identity. Sadly, the intimate and personal nature of the subject matter of these works by women mean that they automatically receive less critical attention.

With its engaging style and inherently interesting content, *Intrépide* is an enjoyable read and offers a gentle introduction to the lives and works of 28 courageous and talented women artists of the early twentieth century. Providing a well-researched foundation for those unfamiliar with the story of Australian expatriatism, the book will almost certainly encourage the reader to venture further and discover for themselves more about this important group of women, and their work. Each of the artists who appear in this book made unique contributions to art and society in Australia and France. Some, like Bessie Davidson, fully integrated themselves in Parisian life and culture, while others returned to Australia, bringing back with them a wealth of artistic and cultural knowledge and experience. These individual tales remind us of the need for rigorous ongoing scholarly study of these artists, specifically, that each of them—and their sisters not included in the selection—is deserving of their own publication and, indeed, exhibition.
Stephen Foster review of Bettina Bradbury, Caroline’s Dilemma: A Colonial Inheritance Saga


Sir William Blackstone, in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69), memorably described the legal power of a father over his children as ‘the empire of the father’—a phrase that might equally be applied to the husband’s power over his wife. A mother, as Blackstone explained in parentheses, was ‘entitled to no power, but only to reverence and respect’.¹

In *Caroline’s Dilemma: A Colonial Inheritance Saga*, Bettina Bradbury shows how the empire of the father, and his authority over his wife, remained powerful a century later; how it extended far beyond England; and how it could survive the death of a father through the administration of his will.

Bradbury has published widely on Canadian history, especially on issues relating to the family, gender and inheritance. She tells us that, while conducting research for a history of marriage property, especially inheritance, across four settler colonies, she chanced upon the Australian case of Caroline Kearney, whose husband’s attempts to control her life after his death was ‘one of the most draconian provisions I had encountered in 19th-century wills’ (p. 3). The case intrigued her; discovering sufficient sources, she decided to extend the story into a book.

The book is in two parts, divided at the point of Edward Kearney’s death from tuberculosis in 1865 and the revelation of his last will and testament. Part I tells a familiar story of migration and marriage. In 1851, at the age of 18, Caroline Bax sailed from England with her family for South Australia. Two years later she met and married Edward Kearney, 14 years her senior, who had arrived in the Australian colonies from Ireland a decade or so earlier. Together they lived on a sheep run in the remote far south-east of the colony, before moving to Lockhart, a larger station across the Victorian border, on the Wimmera. Here Edward achieved the fragile success so familiar in rural life, with 20,000 sheep and a large mortgage. Following a serious accident in 1863 or 1864, he visited Ireland, where he evidently fell under the influence of his devoutly Catholic relatives. He returned to Australia early in

1865, still with lung problems arising from the accident, and died the following spring. By this time, the couple had six children, five boys and one girl, aged between one and 11 years.

Caroline had every reason to expect that she and her children would be adequately provided for, and that her eldest son would inherit Lockhart. But Edward’s will, signed just three weeks before his death, required that the station be sold, and that part of the proceeds be used to send Caroline and the children to Ireland, where their future, including where they lived, was to be determined by his relatives. Various provisions ensured their dependency. The boys were to receive a portion of the estate once they each reached the age of 24. Caroline would likewise receive a share of the estate, so long as she did not remarry. Everything was contingent on their coming to Ireland.

This was Caroline’s dilemma. Should she and the family migrate to Ireland, a land completely unknown to her, and yield to her late husband’s family? Or should they remain in Australia, dependent on the good will and limited means of her own relatives? In truth, she had little choice; and while the book’s title suggests a dilemma, the story gives little evidence of her agonising over alternative options. What she did do was contest the will with determination and ingenuity, and resist the controlling efforts of her Irish in-laws. Part II of the book is chiefly comprised of her struggles in the courts, in Australia and Ireland, which do indeed, as the subtitle suggests, amount to something of a saga.

Caroline’s story is of a vastly unequal contest between the sexes, one widow against the power of her husband’s relatives and a judicial system heavily biased against her. The story is complicated, as Bradbury makes clear, by religion. Edward Kearney was an Irish Catholic, Caroline an English Protestant—and while Edward allowed Caroline to raise their children in the Church of England, after his trip to Ireland, perhaps he, and certainly his relatives, had other ideas. His brother William and other Catholic relatives and servants accompanied him on his voyage back to Australia and, when there, sought to impose their view that the children should embrace the Catholic faith. ‘In the microcosm of Lockhart Station,’ writes Bradbury, ‘the Kearneys’ suspicion and hatred of English Protestant colonisers and landlords in Ireland pitted them against Caroline and her English parents and siblings … Lockhart was a religious war zone’ (p. 114). Caroline’s daughter became a casualty: she was abducted by William and taken to a convent, where she was said, mysteriously, to have contracted measles and died. And the conflict continued once Caroline and her boys had arrived in Ireland. I found Bradbury’s discussion of religious sectarianism the most satisfying, and entertaining, part of the book.

A further complication is the character of the two leading protagonists. Edward Kearney is described as energetic, impetuous, easily angered and prone to violence. When a group of Aboriginal men allegedly killed some of his sheep, he pursued and
shot one of them through the arm. More remarkably, he is said to have whipped his eldest son and only daughter on the day he left for Ireland. Yet he does not seem to have been vindictive towards his wife—and vindictiveness does not appear to have shaped his draconian will.

While Bradbury is understandably sympathetic towards Caroline’s predicament, her assessment of her character is carefully measured. Caroline is portrayed as intelligent, litigious, tenacious, impetuous, sometimes devious and, like her husband, occasionally violent. As her desperation increased, she seems to have become increasingly reliant on alcohol. Far from being a helpless victim, she seized every opportunity the law allowed to defend her interests and delay the family’s departure for Ireland. She ‘showed a tendency to stretch the truth in court and to play the part of the starving widow if she thought it would help her cause’ (p. 170). Sadly, there is no surviving image of either Edward or Caroline, who is misrepresented on the cover by a silhouette from another era. But the book’s other images provide a good sense of time and place.

This is indeed a fascinating story, hinting at times at melodrama. The author is adamant at the outset that it is a work of non-fiction. She has drawn extensively on legal records, and newspaper court reports and commentary; she has trawled through genealogical finding aids and Trove; and she has digested an impressive array of secondary material—though with some odd omissions, including several well-known histories (starting with Marnie Bassett’s *The Hentys*, 1954) that together might have helped her avoid her conclusion that white settlers are underrepresented in Australian historiography. Bradbury acknowledges her debt to the digital revolution in historical research, without which works such as this could scarcely have been written. Yet the ready availability of digital resources can tempt historians to include information simply because it is there. Bradbury succumbs too often, telling us much that we do not need to know—for example, that well after Caroline had left the family home, her father purchased one of the first lots in Victoria Street in the subdivision of Syleham in the town of Robe; the names of the eight towns on the mail route from Melbourne to Lockhart Station; and that the Clarence Family Hotel in Melbourne was run by a Mrs Phair, followed by some unnecessary words about women running pubs. All this and more might be considered as lending ‘artistic verisimilitude’—but too many superfluous names and places can slow down the story, interrupt the argument and test the reader’s patience.

The story is also impeded by excessive speculation. Quite properly, the author seeks to take her readers with her, inviting them ‘to share my surprise and puzzlement about missing information and to use their own imaginations when concrete evidence is missing’ (p. 6). In practice, though, the author does all the imagining for them. Informed speculation is part of the historian’s and biographer’s stock in trade. But this book is weighed down with ‘perhaps’ and ‘presumably’ and ‘surely’ and ‘I suspect’ and ‘I wonder’, and questions that would have been better left unasked.
The subjunctive runs in overdrive. Bradbury wonders, for example, if the doctor who certified the cause of Caroline’s death had met her previously: ‘They may well have met at one of the drinking establishments that peppered the streets of Kentish Town. Or perhaps she sought his help soon after arriving from Ireland … Had they met in some context that allowed them to share their life histories, they would have found they shared much’, and so on, all of which is speculative and irrelevant (pp. 217–18).

More alarmingly, the author tells us that on the day before Caroline and her family sailed for Ireland, a Mr Brown, who was staying at the same hotel, attempted to commit suicide by mixing grains of morphine with his drink:

Given Caroline’s penchant for tippling, I wonder if their paths crossed in the hotel; whether they had shared a drink, or life stories, and what else might have occurred. In my imagination I write a romance melodrama or the story of a brief liaison that ends with his attempted suicide and her departure. For this I have no historical evidence. (p. 169)

This may be a work of non-fiction, but is the author a frustrated novelist?

But Bradbury makes no attempt at stylistic elegance. A firmer editorial hand might have expunged numerous clichés: ‘The Baxes [aboard ship] seem to have stood out like sore thumbs’ (p. 20); ‘the Bax family had been swept into this watershed moment’ (p. 22); ‘The state of the estate was a nightmare’ (p. 125); ‘William had long been itching to depart’ (p. 166); and so on. But her prose is clear where it most matters, in explaining the background to Caroline’s cases, and their progress through the courts in Victoria and Ireland.

*Caroline’s Dilemma* can be described as both forensic historical analysis and family history. At times the two fit together uncomfortably, one keeping the historian on a tight disciplinary leash, the other offering a licence to roam. Sometimes I thought that Bradbury was roaming too far from the main story. The final chapters, however, which relate the experiences of Caroline’s sons and constitute something of a denouement, reassert the benefits of family history research, continuing the story of religious sectarianism in sometimes surprising ways.
Emily Gallagher review of Cathy Perkins, *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*  


Cathy Perkins’s *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross* begins with a scene not unfamiliar to readers of Australian literary history: a ‘little schoolgirl’ scribbling away on the ‘splintery verandah’ of her family’s bush home. According to family lore, the nine-year-old had been destined for the inky way long before she gripped her first pencil. An ode was written soon after her birth foretelling her career as a writer, and when the poet Mary Hannay Foott met the two-year-old in 1892 she was impressed to discover the youngster could compose rhymes.

Mary Cross, unlike Foott, was not surprised by her daughter’s talents, believing the time she had spent reading during the pregnancy had endowed her child with literary gifts. She had not been short on reading material—the Cross’s finely furnished Victorian home at Eagle Farm on the fringes of Brisbane had a ‘magnificent collection of high-class literature’ (p. 7). Such luxuries would soon be a distant memory to Mary after her husband’s auctioneering business collapsed in 1892. In a cruel twist of fate, the young couple watched as the entire contents of their house, including their library, were sold at auction.

So it was that Zora Cross, too young to remember her parents’ fall from Queensland’s rising gentry, grew up in the shadow of destiny and misfortune. For Perkins, an editor and debut biographer, Cross’s ‘irrepressible hunger to write’ is one of the central threads she uses to weave together the story of her life. Misfortune is another. Cross was barely 12 years old when she experienced the loss of a home first hand. In a ‘chatty’ letter posted to Ethel Turner as the editor of the *Australian Town and Country Journal*’s ‘Children’s Corner’ in 1904, 13-year-old Cross—who, by this stage, was already showing the hallmarks of a talented storyteller—reported that the family home had been destroyed in a terrible fire almost two years earlier. The Crosses built their new home within a stone’s throw of the ‘black and charred stump’ that marked their old hardwood house.

Yet despite the misfortune and hardship that would continue to plague her family, the ‘Zora Cross’ of the children’s corner was a practical Australian girl. Jolly and inquisitive, she preferred apples to pineapples, was crafty with a little bit of wool and ribbon, learned in local and family history, and comfortable sipping at a bowl of tasty ‘kangaroo-tail soup’ (p. 15). She was also enticed by the prospect of adventure.
By the time Cross finally arrived at Ethel Turner’s leafy doorstep in Middle Harbour at Balmoral in 1908, the ‘little schoolgirl’ from ‘Pie Creek’ who had first written to her at the ‘Children’s Corner’ all those years ago was fading away. Vivacious and independent, Cross’s mind was bursting with stories and questions, her zest for life leaking seamlessly onto the page. As Turner astutely observed: ‘your stories and letters gallop away with you’ (p. 25). Cross’s first literary efforts beyond the children’s corner were ‘snatched in moments’ after a long day teaching or performing (p. 29). Though Cross initially trained as a primary school teacher, she quickly became disillusioned with the demands of modern education. Life as a touring actress, on the other hand, indulged her dramatic side and equipped her with a wealth of new experiences. (Much of Cross’s later work had an autobiographical dimension.) As Perkins observes, Cross’s time performing vaudeville was also essential to the development of a ‘stage speak’ and literary identity that she would later harness to woo publishers and editors. One journalist stumbling on Cross in the streets described her as ‘terrific with energy’ (p. 45). The Sydney editor and critic Bertram Stevens considered her a poet with a ‘highly emotional nature, enriched by a varied experience of life’ (p. 52) and the writer Dulcie Deamer pitied her for being ‘all heart’, and therefore a person without armour’ (p. 177). Deamer, a bohemian herself, must have admired Cross’s distain for convention.

Young, talented and impressionable, Cross was part of a new generation of women writers beginning to take shape in Sydney under the watchful eye of Mary Gilmore. Born in the later years of the nineteenth century, women such as Deamer, Vera Dwyer, Dorothea Mackellar, Nina Murdoch, Ruth Bedford, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Ella McFadyen were seen by some contemporaries as heirs to the decidedly more masculine literary fervour of the 1890s. Until now, none of these women have been dedicated a book-length study, not even Mackellar, whose patriotic poem ‘My Country’ has had an enduring place in popular culture for over a century. Cross, not unlike Mackellar and Prichard, has not been entirely ‘left out’ of Australian literary history, but she has—as Perkins demonstrates—been too quickly dismissed.

Cross’s neglect has surprised a good number of reviewers. It will not, however, surprise many Australian biographers. Cross belongs to a cohort of women writers—poets, playwrights, novelists, editors and journalists—who, in another time and place, might have had a statue built in their memory. Rather remarkably, in the mid-1980s it was a horserace that was given over to Cross’s memory. ‘It’s lucky Zora Cross can’t object,’ wrote Judith Wright, ‘and since nobody remembers the poor woman, the good name of Poetry can’t be involved’ (p. 87).

Serendipity and happenstance have so far played a significant role in uncovering the lives of Australia’s ‘lost’ women writers. Perkins’s first ‘encounter’ with Cross, in the basement of the Mitchell Library in Sydney where she was checking a reference relating to the Australian publisher George Robertson, is a fine example. It is
a meeting of chance, albeit one that propelled her on a decade-long journey to uncover the woman behind the name. ‘History will find me’, Cross once assured her daughter (p. 243). That historians have not ‘found’ Cross earlier—at least not with comparable depth—reflects the masculinist traditions of national history, as well as the priorities of an earlier generation of feminist historians. When historians first set out to recover the lives of Australian women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, they were often drawn to the extraordinary lives—or, at the very least, the extraordinary in the lives—of women such as Gilmore, Mary Fullerton and Miles Franklin. These women, who exuded the nineteenth century and could be celebrated as mothers of Australian literature, seemed to write themselves into history. The legacy of the so-called ‘minor poets’ was messier, more eclectic and very often haunted by the ordinary.

Perkins is sensitive to the way Cross’s identity as a woman, as well as a lover, wife and mother, shaped her personal and professional life. Although she resisted the demands of domestic life in her early 20s, she eventually surrendered to the ‘stability’ of the home. In telling Cross’s story, however, Perkins has sought to resist a narrative that envisages her as retreating into domesticity, instead shining a light on the grit and determination of a woman who never stopped scribbling. After giving birth to a son outside of wedlock, she left the baby with her parents in Gympie and travelled to Brisbane where she opened an elocution and theatre studio, edited a weekly arts newspaper and pursued her career as a writer. As the horror of World War II entered its deadliest year, Cross entertained on the vaudeville stage and compiled the first collection of love sonnets that would propel her into fame. And in 1918, plagued by rheumatism, chicken pox and eye infections, and living in the same house as her young son and dying father, she began the second volume.

By her own account, the effort almost killed her. When it didn’t, she kept on writing. She was ‘compelled’, observes Perkins, “by a bullying muse” to keep writing, to “just go on and on until it was finished”, ignoring hunger, tiredness, children and visitors’ (p. 48). In a letter to a friend in late 1916, Cross admitted: ‘I am determined to get on with my writing and push everything else aside’ (p. 57). Her youngest daughter remembered her mother ‘as a dedicated writer who worked all day and every day of her life’ (p. xii). Cross’s resolve was remarkable. For a moment, critics wondered if this really was the woman who would finally write the Great Australian Novel or an epic to stand alongside Longfellow’s Hiawatha.

Over 100 years on, it is Cross’s first collection of love sonnets, Songs of Love and Life (1917), that has endured. This was an astonishing collection by an Australian writer. Drawing on both classical and Shakespearean themes, the sonnets were works of serious lyrical power and poetic vision, portraying women as sexual beings with their own fantasies and desires. Most readers recognised Cross’s work as a tribute to a woman who had already ‘lived and loved’ (p. 69). Several reviewers even celebrated Cross as an ‘Australian Sappho’, admiring her candour. The writer and
critic Nettie Palmer echoed Turner when she wrote that Cross ‘had genuine artistic abandon’, but ‘not the corresponding restraint’ (p. 85). On the other hand, the artist Norman Lindsay, notorious for his conservative views, was repelled by the sonnets. He considered them ‘ludicrous’, and only reluctantly agreed to produce a single cover illustration after a lucrative commission (p. 61).

For Cross, *Songs of Love and Life* seemed a sign of greater things to come. Perkins, too, recognises the acclaimed love sonnets that carried Cross into the spotlight as part of a large and evolving literary oeuvre. Like many of her contemporaries, Cross was a versatile writer. Later works such as *An Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy* (1921) and *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (1924) received favourable reviews. Although neither had the same sensational success as her sonnets, they bore little evidence of a writer in decline. Elsewhere the name ‘Zora Cross’ was still appearing regularly in popular newspapers and literary magazines. In the *Australian Women’s Mirror*, a successful sister publication to the waning *Bulletin*, Cross used her skills as an interviewer and reporter to celebrate the lives of Australian women writers. Women, young and old, benefited from Cross’s advocacy. The work with the *Mirror* also allowed Cross to strengthen her connection with the Australian literary community. After she began her relationship with the *Bulletin*’s ‘Red Page’ editor and poet David McKee Wright in 1918—a man 20 years her senior and already married with four children—Cross had retreated from the wider community of women writers. Following Wright’s sudden death in 1928, the comradery and busyness of journalism gave her a sense of ‘solace’—and perhaps also a new purpose (p. 174).

Ever since Cross published her first collection of sonnets, her place in the Australian literary canon has been the subject of debate. Before their association soured in the mid-1920s, the enterprising bookseller and publisher George Robertson considered her the ‘greatest woman poet’ alive (p. 87). Though Robertson’s views would change in time, Cross was evidently not a run-of-the-mill girl poet. Her contemporaries and subsequent generations of feminist and literary historians all agree that her sonnets were daring, even subversive. Unfortunately, however, Cross never managed to write anything quite so daring again. Eventually, as the prospect of another sensation faded, even Cross’s most energetic supporters would consider their early faith in her a mere ‘lapse of taste’ (p. 86). It is perhaps not surprising that Perkins has largely avoided questions of legacy in her biography. The more explicit claims she explored in her master’s thesis have been tempered, enveloped in a narrative that is grounded in Cross’s lived experiences. The reception of Cross’s work by contemporaries is often discussed, but her place in Australian literary history is usually only hinted, suggested and alluded to. Perkins’s restraint is both admirable and frustrating. Strangely enough, what it seems to suggest is that the least interesting part of Cross’s life is her ‘shelf life’. Instead of reaching for the controversial or extraordinary, Perkins has chosen to linger over the ordinary, pulling away the curtain on tragedy, hardship and personal struggle.
In *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*, Perkins has set out to write a traditional, albeit brief, ‘cradle to grave’ biography, diverging only slightly to structure chapters around circles of correspondence. These circles, each of which adopts its own individual time-loop, are propelled by Perkins’s archival encounters, affording readers an occasional glimpse of the biographer’s craft. They also serve to position Cross within the wider literary world of her time, while simultaneously distinguishing her from other big personalities.

Although Cross’s story is arranged around relationships, the portrait that emerges is a lonely one. No other personality seriously competes for the reader’s attention. The continuity in this biography is Zora Cross, not Ethel Turner, Mary Gilmore, George Robertson or David McKee Wright. Cross’s loneliness is evoked elsewhere, particularly in Chapter 6 where Perkins charts the poet’s relationship with Rebecca Wiley, an assistant to Robertson. Though Cross’s writing remains front and centre, in the background the furniture begins to change: the writer settles into her relationship with Wright, moving to a 5-acre property at Glenbrook in the Lower Blue Mountains. Wright’s alcoholism, poverty, chores and children soon disrupt the couple’s idyll writing retreat, though they remain steadfast until Wright’s sudden death in 1928. There is an intensity to Cross’s bond with Wiley, free from the ‘stage speak’ that overshadows her other correspondence and heightened by her isolation at Glenbrook, that is both alluring and suffocating. It is this latter dimension of Cross’s character that Perkins struggles to negotiate. As a biographer, she is protective of her subject, and offers a sympathetic reading of the writer as she slips slowly into obscurity.

Writers, certainly the great ones, often seem to dally on the precipice between self-discipline and obsession. For many modern writers, Cross’s career is as a cautionary tale of the dangers of perfectionism, passion and isolation. Following Wright’s death, the feverish determination that had defined so much of Cross’s life slid into obsession as her long-standing passion for ancient ‘Rome became the primary exercise in mourning’ (p. 196). Relying on a meagre literary pension and freelance journalism to sustain her family, the ageing writer poured her energy into a multi-volume work of historical fiction. Like her work with the *Mirror*, the trilogy helped to give her a new sense of purpose. It also consumed the next three decades of her career. ‘I never leave Rome’, she wrote in a letter to a friend in 1930 (p. 204). Perkins is careful not to allow Rome to consume her work as it did Cross’s, quickening the narrative as she reaches the end. At the same time, the dark and dramatic intensity that readers glimpsed elsewhere in the biography seems to slip through Perkins’s fingers. At a moment when readers might have expected Perkins to turn inwards towards Cross and Glenbrook—perhaps even to her youngest daughter April—she turns outwards. The Zora Cross that emerges in the last chapter of this biography is positioned within the contemporary literary hierarchy, as an admirer and beneficiary of the benevolent Mary Gilmore.
The success of Gilmore’s later life jars with Cross’s. While Gilmore is arranging her papers for posterity, Cross is comforting her 22-year-old daughter as she dies painfully of tuberculosis. She supports her eldest son after he is injured at war, delays arranging her papers, suffers severe economic hardship and struggles to find a publisher for her Rome trilogy. Then, in 1957, on the back of these challenges, the 65-year-old courageously embarks on a two-year long trip to Europe to finish her books and secure a publisher in London.

It is here, on this rather heroic note, that Perkins chooses to draw the story to an end. Readers are given a fleeting glimpse of Cross in old age before they are told of her sudden death in 1964. As misguided as Cross might have been in her Rome project, those eight final years of her life deserved more attention. This was a woman who had, by her own account, lived a life filled with ‘lies and hopeless mistakes’ (p. 50). What mistakes, lies and regrets haunted her? How did the ‘specific loneliness of Zora Cross’ (p. 126)—as Perkins terms it—plague the writer at the end of her life? How did her relationship with her children and grandchildren evolve? Did she despair at the prospect of death?

Perkins leaves these questions largely unanswered, though she pauses momentarily to consider the question of legacy. In the epigraph, readers wander with Perkins to the ‘a simple unmarked rectangle of buffalo grass’ in Emu Plains cemetery (p. 241); they climb a steep path to Glenbrook to find a missing sculpture; and they drink tea with Cross’s youngest daughter April, now 94 years old, gazing out over the national park as Cross once did. It is a clever ending. With these final scenes, Perkins leaves readers to despair at the poet’s diminished place in national memory and rejoice at her rediscovery.

An eloquent, accessible and tender biography, *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross* is an important contribution to Australian literary history. Perkins brings a sensitive and sympathetic eye to her subject, uncovering a woman of captivating depth, strength and intensity whose life was shaped by an ‘irrepressible hunger to write and to be published’. It is a fitting tribute to Cross’s life and career, and one that she might very well have commended. ‘Life does not flow’, wrote Cross in a letter to her son Ted in 1944. ‘It moves in circles which time throws off like chapters in a book’ (p. 229).
Stephen Holt review of David Day, *Maurice Blackburn: Champion of the People*


Senior Labor politicians and trade unions in Australia have long needed to draw on a reliable supply of good legal advice.

With only isolated exceptions, the Australian labour movement’s early shapers never desired to operate in an alternative Marxist universe. They were immersed in an already existing, if evolving, set of public institutions and practices. They operated through a network of colonial and then state and federal parliaments, statutes, industrial tribunals, registered employee organisations and orderly political activity.

Labour men and women across Australia had to have the backing of sympathetic legal minds in prosecuting their case, given their neatly regulated environment. In Labor’s formative days, its people who were trained in the law included, from New South Wales, William Holman and—let us not forget—Holman’s fellow apostate Billy Hughes.

An ongoing line of Labor lawyers has continued to feature outstanding individuals whose accomplishments have attracted the attention of serious biographers. T. J. Ryan, Queensland’s first majority Labor premier, is the subject of a biography by activist and academic Denis Murphy, while Victorians Alf Foster and J. V. Barry, both of whom became judges, have inspired biographies by Constance Larmour and Mark Finnane.

In 1940 Justice H. V. Evatt of the High Court published a biography of William Holman just before standing down to get back into politics. In time his stormy career inspired other biographers—including Kylie Tennant—who tracked his connection with the law and politics. Evatt’s erstwhile acolyte John Kerr has likewise figured in an expanding body of personalised commentary. The coverage of Kerr in Justice (from 1980) Jim McClelland’s memoir *Stirring the Possum* is particularly readable.

And then we have Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke. The careers of both men have generated much biographical research conducted principally by Jenny Hocking and Blanche d’Alpuget respectively. Apart from Andrew Fisher, these two men are the only Labor leaders ever to win more than a single federal election. Both studied law in their formative years, albeit with a focus on arbitration law in Hawke’s case. The connection between legal tomes and serious Labor praxis is once more evident. As it is yet again in the case of the early and mid-twentieth-century Melbourne
socialist Maurice Blackburn, whose name and renown are kept before a wider lay public to this day by dint of the prominent and socially progressive Melbourne law firm Maurice Blackburn Lawyers.

The relevant *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry, by Susan Blackburn Abeyasekere, reminds us that Maurice Blackburn (her grandfather) was a ‘lawyer and politician’. An old boy of Melbourne Grammar, his studies were disrupted by his father’s death but he went on to graduate in arts and law from the University of Melbourne. He served as a Labor member in the Victorian Legislative Assembly from 1914 until defeated in 1917 and again from 1925 to 1934 when he switched to the House of Representatives in Canberra where he served until he was again unseated in 1943.

Blackburn’s years of legislative service encompassed two world wars and the Depression. All through this daunting period he was quick to stand up for equitable dealing, both within and between nations, and for individual liberty whenever the prevailing sense of anxiety worked to imperil fairness. Though never being bumped up to serve as a minister in a state or federal Labor Government, Blackburn was recognised as a figure of substance and note because of his firm and principled involvement in the great public controversies of his time.

Blackburn’s enduring presence was evident in 2019 when not one but two impressive books covering his life and times were published by major Melbourne publishing houses.

First off the blocks was *The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambition* (Melbourne University Press). Its author, Melbourne historian Carolyn Rasmussen, focused on the fruitful relationship between Blackburn and the woman, Doris Hordern, whom he married in 1914.

Doris, when she married Maurice, was independently drawing on the same progressive social and political principles that activated her husband. A person of ‘great conscience and personal integrity’, she was a fellow member of the Free Religious Fellowship and was Vida Goldstein’s closest colleague in the Women’s Political Association. Doris’s sense of commitment continued all through her marriage and well after Maurice’s death in 1944. She represented Bourke (his old federal seat) as an independent Labor person from 1946 to 1949. In the two decades that followed her stint in Canberra she was associated with various organisations, notably the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement.

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1  Susan Blackburn Abeyasekere, ‘Blackburn, Maurice McCrae (1880–1944)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 310.
2  Blackburn, ‘Blackburn, Maurice McCrae’, 312.
Hard on the heels of Rasmussen’s book in 2019 came David Day’s *Maurice Blackburn: Champion of the People* (Scribe Publications) in which Doris figures as his wife but does not share equal billing. Maurice Blackburn Lawyers, in a welcome initiative, commissioned the work and provided the support without which it would not have been completed.

David Day, like Carolyn Rasmussen, is a highly productive biographer and historian. He has to date published over a score of books including biographies of four Australian Labor Party prime ministers (Andrew Fisher, John Curtin, Ben Chifley, and Paul Keating). He is now engaged in completing a life of a fifth one (Bob Hawke).

Blackburn, as a reading of Day indicates, foreshadowed Hawke in his determination to devote the skills and knowledge acquired through higher education to the service of organised Australian workers. Unlike Hawke though, he made no effort to come across as a man of the people. Both he and Doris sprang from solid late colonial stock. He dressed and spoke like a man from the professional classes. There was no attempt at blokeyness. During his time as a federal member his was one of the largest private houses in his pre-gentrified electorate. It housed a magnificent library.

On being admitted to the Bar in 1910, Blackburn quickly evolved into Melbourne’s premier labour lawyer. He worked on numerous fronts. He took pains, for example, to boil down the complexities of industrial law into lucid lectures and pamphlets. When he got to Spring Street, he could be counted on to fully brief his Australian Labor Party (ALP) colleagues on the legal implications of proposals coming before the Victorian lower house.

Blackburn, Day notes, remained a late nineteenth-century idealist whose first political home was the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP). He maintained a link with left-wing intellectuality after the VSP faded away by supporting the Victorian Labor College.

Joining the ALP, in contrast, was a more mundane step. Day’s account, as with other writers who have dealt with Blackburn, does not indicate precisely when he signed up, so low key an event was it. Joining the party though, and subjecting his honed conscience to factional and caucus control, was a necessary step on his way to winning his first parliamentary seat (Essendon) in 1914. The supreme challenge was now upon him. Blackburn played a leading role in inspiring and organising the mass campaign to defeat conscription for overseas military service in 1916–17. He became a Labor hero. After the war he consolidated his efforts by founding his eponymous labour law firm.

His resolve did not weaken with the passage of time. As a federal politician after 1934, Blackburn’s zeal and determination was as pronounced as ever. He advised and represented the Council for Civil Liberties after it was established in 1935
and also became president of the Victorian branch of the Movement against War and Fascism. He did not shy away from united front activities once the Spanish Civil War era kicked in. Such involvement fuelled the established misperception that held him to be, in the words of my dear Brunswick grandmother (one of his constituents), a ‘red ragger’.

Amid the obloquy there were private consolations. Mighty spirits have to unbend and such moments are picked up by good biographers. The personal data that is marshalled by Day—and by Rasmussen as well—is shot through with the lovely juxtaposition between the portentous (the Russian Revolution, Catholic Action, federal Labor’s socialisation objective of 1921) and the homely, as represented by Maurice allegedly having a soft spot for popular Hollywood movies and Doris’s joy in getting a hefty American automobile after a friend gave her driving lessons.

The big picture was never forgotten though. In the late 1930s, and with another world war looming, Blackburn yearned for a return to something similar to the glory days of 1916–17 when several incongruous elements—ranging from Archbishop Daniel Mannix to the Industrial Workers of the World—had banded together to defeat conscription.

Fascinating anti-war archival material in the James Normington Rawling Collection at The Australian National University indicates what happened next.

At the end of 1936 we see Blackburn reminding a Melbourne audience that the Catholic Church had supported justice in Parnell’s Ireland and, pertinently, there was no reason also why it should not follow the same course again during the civil war in Spain. But Blackburn had to say such things because he knew that the ground under his feet was shifting and not in a good way.

For crucial reasons whose detailed exposition lies outside the remit of a good discriminating biographer—but which is of interest to any deep historian of the period—the coalition of 1916–17 was fated not to get back together again.

By the 1930s, anti-conscription sentiment in the Victorian branch of the ALP had, in the wake of the godless 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and with the blessing of Archbishop Mannix, morphed effortlessly into pervasive anti-communism. The state executive, now controlled by right-wing elements, felt free to move against Blackburn because of his united front activities. They branded him as a Communist stooge. Starry-eyed disciples of the young Bob Santamaria were called on to roll back the red menace in Blackburn’s inner Melbourne electorate.

The timing of Blackburn’s final ostracism in the spring of 1941 was exquisite. The Victorian state executive expelled him because he supported the Australia–Soviet Friendship League even though Australia and the Union of Soviet Socialist
Republics had just become wartime allies. His expulsion meant that he was excluded from federal caucus just days before it met to choose the personnel of the first federal Labor Government in almost a decade.

Maurice—and Doris as well—was now out on a limb. There was no collective ideological community on which they could rely. Far from being a dopey fellow traveller, Maurice’s opposition to conscription in 1942–43 made him persona non grata to the now ultra-patriotic Communist Party.

From the odd surviving fragment it is possible to gain an insight into the emotional side of what was going on. At Labor’s state Easter Conference in 1943, Blackburn’s fellow lawyer J. V. Barry experienced the two hostile camps firsthand. He felt, he says in a letter quoted by Mark Finnane, ‘silent, lonely and unappreciated’ by Labor’s number crunchers.3

The marginalisation of the Blackburns in the 1940s was part of a bigger process. The couple’s serial removal from federal parliament was the first great project of Bob Santamaria’s secretive Movement. Its success on this front emboldened his disciples. The resulting heightened atmosphere meant that the dispute that broke out when Evatt denounced Santamaria in 1954 was bound to be all the more destructive.

The bitterness following on from the split in 1954 was hard to exorcise. It was a factor at the time of the Dismissal in 1975 and was not finally healed until the Hawke era got going in the 1980s. The animosity that arose in the united front era years took a long time to die. Maurice Blackburn was being truly prophetic in 1936 when he began to sense that his appeal to old binding loyalties was gaining only limited traction.

Blackburn’s readiness to engage with the deep forces shaping surface events makes him a highly suitable subject for any serious biographer. Clearly thought out and well written and reflecting patient research, David Day’s biography represents an impressive addition to the existing body of literature concerned with Maurice Blackburn’s life, milieu and durable legacy.

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Barry Jones review of Anne Pender, Seven Big Australians: Adventures with Comic Actors


Seven Big Australians was supported by a Future Fellowship awarded by the Australian Research Council, and the author/researcher Anne Pender is Professor of English and Theatre Studies at the University of New England. Her seven subjects, all interviewed at length, are Carol Raye (37 pages), Barry Humphries (34), Noeline Brown (29), Max Gillies (53), John Clarke (38), Tony Sheldon (46) and Denise Scott (35).

The chapter on Max Gillies is the longest, and probably the best, but the book is dedicated to John Clarke. I should declare an interest: Max Gillies and John Clarke are/were close friends. John, born in New Zealand in 1948, died suddenly while bird watching in the Grampians in April 2017.

Barry Humphries was a university contemporary of mine, a creator and performer of exceptional power. Many Barrys were born in the early 1930s but the name is now long out of fashion, having been replaced by Jason, Jayden, Tyler and Jack. It would be presumptuous to claim that I know him well, and he is both geographically and ideologically remote. But I recognise his genius. Humphries and Gillies, both born in Melbourne, were active in the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC; later Australian Broadcasting Corporation) radio program The Argonauts Club, a name that will be unfamiliar to anyone under 60.

I remember Carol Raye from the ABC’s The Mavis Bramston Show and Channel Ten’s Number 96, with Graham Kennedy, and in cameos in SeaChange. Born in England in 1923, originally a dancer, in Australia from 1964, she is the oldest of the seven. She was—and is—a very striking figure, with excellent timing and delivery. She took part in satires attacking the Vietnam War, Robert Menzies and Henry Bolte’s hanging of Ronald Ryan. I doubt if she would consider herself as a comic actor. I was surprised to read of her close involvement with the Liberal Party and attempts to enter parliament.

Noeline Brown was a familiar figure from television—another Bramston star, and collaborator with Graham Kennedy—but also admired for her roles in plays by Alex Buzo and David Williamson, and in Double Act by Barry Creyton. She worked in the New Theatre in Sydney, starred in The Naked Vicar Show, first on radio, then adapted for television, and played the role of Florence Foster Jenkins, the eccentric
American singer. A Labor activist, she twice stood for parliament, was appointed as the first Ambassador for Ageing by Kevin Rudd in 2008 and commemorated on a postage stamp.

Tony Sheldon was unfamiliar because, unlike his parents Frank Sheldon and Toni Lamond, he eschewed television and film. I saw him only once on stage, as Bernadette in *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*.

Denise Scott, I am ashamed to admit, was just a name to me, but is apparently an extraordinary performer, working in a variety of forms, most with a dark edge.

I learned a good deal from Professor Pender’s interviews and the book is a useful resource. Nevertheless, I found it extremely puzzling. She writes of her subjects that their lives are ‘awe-inspiring, momentous and magical’. Really? That sets a very high bar. Her Introduction is preoccupied with the terms ‘comic actors’, ‘comic forms’ and ‘comedy’, but her profiles make no attempt to explain what was/is ‘comic’ about her subjects.

The chapter on Tony Sheldon was of particular interest because of its unfamiliarity. But his life story is full of trauma: exposed as a child to domestic violence, with a father who killed himself and a mother who tried, sexual traumas, alcohol and drugs. But the link between trauma and comedy is not explained. He achieved his first success as the tortured Arnold in *Torch Song*. He created the transgender role of Bernadette and performed it throughout the world more than 1,900 times (but not in the film). Is it really a comic role? Is Sheldon an awe-inspiring comic actor? I am open to persuasion, but Pender does not make the attempt.

Denise Scott’s story is also dramatic, traumatic, powerful—but comic? She grew up in Greensborough, Victoria, suffered from anxiety, asthma, eczema and insomnia, was an unhappy teacher, then appeared in ABC television’s *The Big Gig*. Her appearances as a stand-up performer were marked by her outbursts of rage and deeply hostile audiences. She worked with Judith Lucy in the show *Comedy is Not Pretty*, and the material was raw and painful rather than comic. Then she found her métier in one-woman shows *Number 26*, *Mother Bare*, *Regrets* and (with Judith Lucy again) *Disappointments*. All very dark and Scott attracted much hate mail on social media.

Max Gillies was born in 1941 and brought up in Caulfield. He abandoned religious instruction at the age of five. His father deserted when Max was eight and his mother developed paranoia, a subject that Pender handles deftly. His childhood heroes were Charlie Chaplin, Danny Kaye and Alec Guinness. He developed acting skills at Melbourne High School, then studied at Monash University, and became a specialist teacher. He had a hyperactive involvement with the Melbourne Theatre Company, Pram Factory, Melbourne Youth Theatre, La Mama and the Australian...
Performing Group. He worked with Betty Burstall, Bill and Helen Garner, and Graeme Blundell. He first performed Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* under Elijah Moshinsky’s direction in 1968 and last reprised it in 2018.

The *Gillies Report* began on ABC television in 1983 and among its writers were Don Watson, Peter Cook and John Clarke. ‘Il Dismissale’, a seven-minute segment in *The Gillies Report* was shown in September 1983, almost eight years after the event, and in the soap opera Gillies plays Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, John Kerr and the Queen. It is a tour de force and should be watched, immediately.¹

Oddly, Pender does not mention the most notorious episode: Gillies’s impersonation of Kerry Packer as ‘The Goanna’ in 1985. I don’t find it amusing—it is terrifying. The sheer pressure of work led to an estrangement between Gillies and Clarke, but they had a mutual admiration.

Gillies’s extraordinary impersonation of Bob Hawke was too close to the bone for the subject, although he claimed to take it in good part. Hawke good-naturedly (he thought) punched Gillies on the nose—but it hurt. Pender describes Gillies’s contribution as ‘magical and marvellous’. She scores a bull’s-eye there.

Gillies, Clarke and Humphries shared a fascination for Beckett. Was Beckett a comic writer? Not to be evasive, but the answer is ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. There can be explosions of embarrassed laughter from audiences in *Waiting for Godot, The Unnamable, Endgame* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, but I doubt that Beckett can be treated as an Irish P. G. Wodehouse with a chuckle in every paragraph.

Clarke had a special affinity for three more Irish writers—Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne and Flann O’Brien—and also for the music of Schubert, largely because of the pauses: the notes that were *not* written. Both Gillies and Clarke were influenced by Alan Bennett and Peter Cook, brilliant writers and performers, but not essentially comics, and, in Bennett’s case, remarkable for his empathy.

John Clarke’s ABC television series *The Games* (1998, 2000) is described by Pender as ‘comic drama’. I see them as social realism. His extraordinary series of short interviews for television, *Clarke and Dawe*, with his collaborator Bryan Dawe, were remarkable for their lack of theatrical artefacts: no make-up, masks, wigs, impersonations or funny voices, no jokes, no comic business. It was pure content and the viewer had to concentrate on every word. The series began on Channel 9 in 1989, then transferred to the ABC.

He was an actor, writer and film producer, a generous spirit, constantly self-questioning, ardent birdwatcher, photographer and conservationist, devoted husband and father. He touched our lives and pricked our consciences, combining a genius for analysis and a mastery of language, puncturing political absurdity and pomposity through understatement, not exaggeration.

Both Gillies and Clarke were satirists rather than humorists but the distinction between humour and satire is never explored by Pender.

Barry Humphries was best known as the creator of Dame Edna Everage, Sir Les Patterson, Sandy Stone and Lance Boyle—all performed by himself—and for Barry McKenzie. But he is also a significant author and autobiographer who wrote or edited 23 books and collaborated in—or appeared in—many films, sometimes in character roles, often as narrator. He has worked with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Meow-Meow on the music of Weimar Germany, on which he is an authority.

Pender writes: ‘Occasionally Humphries’ satire takes on the less forgiving, cruel and venomous satirical characteristics associated with Juvenalian satire. Like the Roman satirists, Humphries is a master of invective and uses denunciation, mockery, distortion, exaggeration, sarcasm and wit in order to arouse contempt, fear and mirth in his audience’ (pp. 55–56).

She concludes that ‘buried in his psyche was a sense of self-loathing’ (p. 38), a charge that Humphries rejects. I agree with him.

She sees Dame Edna’s gladdie waving as a ‘forgiving ritual’ (p. 56), a curious characterisation. I always saw a distinctly menacing element in the gladdie waving, demonstrating Humphries’s dark power over audiences. He was successful on stage in London, San Francisco and New York, won the James Joyce Award in 2009, received an AO and CBE, Fellowships and honorary degrees. Awe-inspiring? Well, yes. But comical? I am not so sure. Demonic, perhaps.

There are some odd slips—‘phased’ for ‘fazed’ (p. 169) and a comment that Bill Shorten changed his support from Julia Gillard to Kevin Rudd ‘less than a year later’ (p. 186). (The years were 2010 and 2013.) René, repeated, has a misplaced accent, and Laurence Olivier’s name is misspelled. An index would have been helpful.
Elizabeth Kwan review of Peter Browne and Seumas Spark, eds, ‘I Wonder’: The Life and Work of Ken Inglis


This memoir honours the life and work of Ken Inglis (1929–2017), adjunct professor at Monash University, emeritus professor at The Australian National University, and one of Australia’s most admired and warmly regarded historians. Colleagues, family and friends presented 18 wide-ranging papers at the Laconic Colloquium held at Monash University on two cool days in November 2016. A hundred or so people happily gathered from around Australia and overseas to honour Ken and his work. Three of his former PhD students from the early 1990s were there: two from Canberra, and I came from Darwin. Inglis, despite being wheelchair-bound for two long days, entered into the spirit of the occasion, ‘drawing on his remarkable memory to offer new glimpses of his methods, experiences and work’ (p. xvi).

Editors Peter Browne and Seumas Spark drew most of the papers together in ‘roughly chronological order’ (p. xvii), using as its title a phrase so typical of Ken’s approach to life and his work, ‘I Wonder’. Three papers—by Graeme Davison, Ian Maddocks and Bruce Scates—had been published as a retrospective for Inglis and his scholarship in History Australia in 2017. Davison and Maddocks wrote new chapters for the book and Raelene Frances joined Scates in writing about Inglis’s secondary schooling. Four new chapters were commissioned ‘to present a fuller picture of Ken’s scholarly life: his pilgrimage to Gallipoli in 1965; and his publications, The Australian Colonists: An Exploration of Social History 1788–1870; Australians: A Historical Library; and Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape. Authors made good use of extensive archives Inglis placed in the National Library of Australia and the Australian War Memorial, as well as his written works (listed in 17 pages at the end of the book). The richness authors revealed in this memoir will interest both academics and the general readers Ken so valued.

Many of the authors identified a symbiotic relationship between Inglis and his work. Through these chapters, we see autobiography playing a significant role as Ken’s observations prompted questions and a search for evidence as a basis for wondering and pursuing answers. More than one author referred to Inglis’s boyhood memories of the Armistice Day ceremony in the schoolyard or his sense of mystery in the design of Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance. We see this relationship played out in his three major works: Sacred Places, The Australian Colonists and Dunera Lives.
Inglis cared deeply about Australia and its people. He worked for some 40 years to understand and explain to others the significance Anzac Day, war memorials and the ceremonies surrounding them had, and still have, in Australia. Peter Stanley traced ‘the evolution of spirituality’ (p. 307) in Inglis’s work, from his religious social history studies in England to papers he presented and published. The outcome, according to Bill Gammage (a colleague and close friend of Ken) was that, through Inglis, Australians came to know ‘something which we thought we had always known’, and that ‘academics ignored Anzac not because it was unimportant, but because they took it for granted’. His books, Bill added, ‘have changed our understanding of Australian minds and hearts’ (p. 318).

Other authors added significant developments in Inglis’s understanding of the evolution of spirituality. Stuart Macintyre noted evidence of Ken’s Protestantism ‘that affirmed the personal conscience of the believer, “the voice of God” finding expression through the individual bearing witness in public endeavours’ (p. 50), which can be seen in much of Ken’s historical and journalistic work. Robert Dare made a strong case for developments while Ken was in Adelaide: his notice in 1956 of the significant shift in Australia ‘from organized religion to what he called “civic religion”’ (p. 83), involving the gradual secularisation of religious festivals and ‘the sacralisation of secular practices’ (p. 85) as formal religion declined. From that time Ken dated his interest in war in Australian society, and thus Anzac, and became ‘puzzled then frustrated, by the neglect in university history courses of the history of war’ (p. 85). Ken’s ‘Anzac: The Substitute Religion’ in *Nation* was published in April 1960. Dare argued that ‘Ken’s discovery of what he called civic religion while he was in Adelaide yielded some of the richest and most rewarding scholarship we have’ (p. 87). Listening to Ken’s ‘distinctive authorial voice’, Dare believed, meant understanding ‘that for Ken writing history was not a passionless pursuit of truths that stand outside him, but an outgrowth of his universe of values and experience’ (p. 86)—a reminder of the role of autobiography.

Graeme Davison was present at the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Congress in 1964 and heard Inglis deliver his paper ‘The Anzac Tradition’. In it Ken questioned Professor J. M. Ward’s neglect of the work of Dr Charles Bean, official historian of Australia in the Great War, in his survey of historical writing in Australia and New Zealand that had been recently published in the United States. Ken’s plea to historians, to consider what meaning the rites of Anzac might have, ended with his declaration that ‘A study of the ceremonies of life and death performed on Anzac Day should tell much about our society; and a national history which does not explore the meaning of these ceremonies is too thin’ (p. 146).

Frances and Scates reminded us of the power of Ken’s memories of his primary school years, his feelings of shame as he stood in silence in the playground on Armistice Day, without the medals on his chest some other boys and girls were wearing from
their fathers, to comment: ‘Involved but detached … with young eyes ever alert to the meaning and power of symbol and ritual, none would prove better qualified to reveal the meanings of Anzac’ (p. 29). We see how Ken invested so much of his life—from a young child to an ageing grandfather—in his search for meaning, and for justice for Australian men, women and children traumatised by war.

By the 1990s, when Inglis presented his work in Europe, the French scholar Professor Annette Becker spoke highly of his contribution to the field of history and memory in an international context. ‘He wore his learning lightly, but this comparative element gave his writing great depth’ (p. 330). Becker explained how:

[h]is grasp of the significance of these memorials was unique—transnational while deeply Australian, anthropological in spirit and empirical in form. They constitute ‘holy ground’ but he looked at them with the eyes of a non-believer, or rather the eyes of someone who was intrigued by the beliefs and sentiments of those who came to them. (pp. 323–24)

Emeritus Professor Jay Winter, a military historian and editor of the three-volume Cambridge History of the First World War published in 2014, became a close friend and colleague of Ken in the growing field of history, memory and war in the 1990s. For him, Sacred Places is ‘a profound book of the self-fashioning of the Australian nation in the shadow of the First World War’ (p. 351).

In The Australian Colonists, Frank Bongiorno found Inglis’s effective use of social history to integrate various themes in exploring subjects specialist historians had neglected. The book’s four sections—The People, Holidays Old and New, War and Peace, and The Stuff of History—made Australian history much more accessible to readers. ‘[B]eautifully written’ and illustrated and ‘deeply biographical’ (p. 224), the book was ‘an important breakthrough in the presentation of Australian history’ (p. 225). Bongiorno recognised the autobiographical element in Ken’s treatment of warfare in the book—a reminder of Malcolm Allbrook and Melanie Nolan’s view of Australian historians using autobiography in works that ‘question major rungs of the Australian national story’ and that ‘have come to be regarded as “major contributions to the national literature”’.¹ For Ken, as for many Australian colonists, ‘war was a troubling absence’, yet also ‘powerfully real, a presence tangible in the monuments built during Inglis’s childhood’. For him ‘[t]his strange yet culturally potent mixture of absence and presence would become the puzzle that most engaged his intellect, imagination and passion’ (p. 235).

Inglis’s last books, *Dunera Lives*, Volumes 1 and 2—coauthored with Seumas Spark, Bill Gammage, Jay Winter and Carol Bunyan—were a tribute to his history tutor, Franz Philipp, a Dunera man at the University of Melbourne, who inspired Ken to become an academic. The books were a memoir of the Dunera men, but at the same time of Ken himself. Spark, who worked so closely with Ken on both volumes concluded that ‘Dunera Lives is not about Ken—he saw to that—but the two volumes do answer some questions about his life’ (p. 346). Ken wanted his grandchildren to know the story of the Dunera boys, a story that ‘mattered morally, and was worth elaborating as a tale of collective injustice and survival’.

As a journalist, the connection between Inglis’s life and the books *The Stuart Case* (1961) and the two volumes on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission; later Corporation) of 1983 and 2006, was close. Ken was drawn into the Stuart Case while at the University of Adelaide, after his wife, Judy Inglis, became involved in a group seeking a fair trial for the initiated Arrernte man Rupert Max Stuart. Through Ken’s survey of Australian daily papers, and his article in the *Nation* in 1959 questioning the police handling of the case and the legality of the sentence of hanging for the accused, he drafted the pamphlet that led the South Australian premier to set up a royal commission. Bob Wallace and Sue Wallace of Adelaide carefully related the complex legal-political story, arguing that ‘there is no question that Ken’s direct involvement was a significant factor in averting Stuart’s hanging, and that his writing contributed to improvements in police practices and legal procedures’ (p. 123). In 1961 Ken’s articles became *The Stuart Case*, an important source in training journalists.

Peter Browne’s ‘Sydney Calling: Ken Inglis and the Press’ highlights Ken’s joy in writing for the *Nation* in the context of the wider press scene, later reporting on media studies and media history, and publishing a book about the *Nation* and its creators. Glyn Davis’s chapter about Ken’s books on the ABC shows his ‘enormous fun’ (p. 265) in researching the vital role played by the broadcaster in Australia, but also his concern at governments’ ongoing attempts to control or limit the ABC. Ken readily admitted, in introducing *This is the ABC*, that it was ‘concealed autobiography’ (p. 260). With research assistance and editorial independence, he enjoyed observing the huge institution at work. Later, as an independent scholar, Ken completed the second volume, *Whose ABC? The Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1983–2006*. Despite some criticism of his approach, Ken insisted on being a storyteller, seeking to balance narrative and analysis in his histories. Finding the ABC in reasonable shape in 2006, he expected Australians would become even more dependent on the ABC ‘[f]or only the ABC … can “address their audiences

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as citizens, not consumers”’ (p. 273). Davis applauds Ken’s triumph in meeting the challenge of writing an engaging history of what Margaret Simons termed ‘our most important cultural institution’ (p. 273).

Two of the commissioned chapters reveal creative challenges that Inglis and others were unable to address. Martin Crotty outlined Ken’s complicated dilemma of being unable as a historian to publish a book from reports he filed as a journalist to the Canberra Times when accompanying Australian and New Zealand veteran pilgrims to Gallipoli in April 1965. Ken was unwilling to expose the difficulties veteran pilgrims suffered from poor RSL planning. After drafting and re-drafting, he decided not to publish the book.

Marian Quartly explored Australian historians’ reluctance to develop Inglis’s innovative suggestion of a slice approach for the history of Australia, centred on the years 1788, 1838, 1888 and 1938. To mark the Bicentenary in 1988, historians meeting at The Australian National University in 1976 agreed to begin work on a multi-volume, multi-authored history of Australia, including Inglis’s slice approach. It was a way of exploring ordinary peoples’ lives at 50-year intervals across the 200 years. When Ken visited most other universities the following year to promote the project, he found little support for the slice approach. That was the year Ken presented at the 1977 ANZAAS conference his paper ‘Monuments and Ceremonies as Evidence for Historians’, on understanding Nazi society through its symbols and rituals, rather than policies—the need for the historian ‘to look at a modern society with the eye of an anthropologist’ (p. 283). In the west Quartly and Alan Atkinson were interested in using an anthropological approach. A series of seminars on cultural theory in practice for history staff and postgraduate students from the University of Western Australia and Murdoch University led them to offer to take on the 1838 volume. They came to see how anthropology enabled social historians to explore other times more effectively. Across Australia, however, many historians were not ready for the ‘collaborative scholarship’ Ken had in mind, which he thought would ‘come off if enough scholars think it worth attempting and if they have the wits and the stamina to see it through’ (p. 279). There was some interest in finding out more about ordinary peoples’ lives in those years, but ‘reviewers were mostly not convinced that slicing was “real history”’ (p. 287).

Joy Damousi, a vacation scholar and then a postgraduate student, found her time during the 1980s in the history program of the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU ‘a great privilege’ (p. 296). Ken’s ‘warm, congenial and generous spirit’ (p. 294) was very welcoming to students. The ‘enduring qualities Ken imparted’, were ones Damousi later tried to convey to her students: ‘that scholarship mattered’ and that writing history was ‘a calling, demanding of commitment’ (pp. 295–96). For Damousi, Ken was ‘the exemplar of an exceptional colleague and mentor’ (p. 299). Above all, she found him to be ‘a great listener’ (p. 301), showing ‘great
respect’ for students’ work, and then offering ‘succinct, clear guidance and direction’, always inviting ‘conversation and a dialogue’. With that came an ‘utter respect for the English language’ in both writing and speaking (p. 302).

The qualities evident in Inglis’s books, journalism and teaching permeate his many other roles as head of history departments in Australia, and in Papua New Guinea (PNG), as well as vice-chancellor. In the latter role Ken relied heavily on Amirah Inglis for its social side, where her support was ‘invaluable’ (p. 211). A published historian in her own right, with a master’s degree on an aspect of PNG’s colonial history, Amirah loved the adventure of their years in the country, as did their blended family of six children, who had many indigenous friends. Amirah and Ken had married almost three years after Judy Inglis died in a car crash in 1962. They shared many interests. Their ‘long and successful partnership … so clearly nourished their emotional and intellectual lives’ (p. 241), as Judith Keene found. Ken’s dedication of *Dunera Lives, Volume I: A Visual History* ‘To the memory of Amirah Inglis’ reflected that partnership, but also Amirah’s Jewish ancestry, which she shared with many of the *Dunera* boys.³

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³ Inglis et al., *Dunera Lives, Volume I*, xviii, 513–14. Around 80 per cent of the *Dunera* men were Jewish.


On 25 January 1988, Archie Roach broke silences and unsettled history. Standing on a makeshift stage in La Perouse, Sydney—and armed with a guitar—Roach strummed one chord. And then he sang:

This story's right, this story's true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep.
Said to us come take our hand
Sent us off to mission land.
Taught us to read, to write and pray
Then they took the children away,
Took the children away,
The children away.
Snatched from their mother's breast
Said this is for the best
Took them away.¹

Some people were crying. Others bowed their heads. But everyone was connected. Aboriginal mob from across the country were assembled as one people, unified by ‘a collective sense of injustice’ (p. 200). Ready to march tomorrow. Ready to proudly shout that ‘white Australia has a black history, and that we have survived’ (p. 202).

Through song, a personal story became a shared story, forging common emotional bonds that welded people together. In his deeply intimate and immensely moving memoir, *Tell Me Why*, Archie Roach explores this unique power of music and unmask its role in uniting, healing, contesting, redeeming and saving. Revealing the potential for sonic biography to profoundly alter how we see each other, and ourselves. And yet, Roach considers it a miracle that we ever heard his music, let alone his story.

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Born in 1956 at Framlingham Mission near Warrnambool, Victoria, Roach at age two was stolen from his family, with two sisters. Flung through institutions and abusive families, his third and final foster parents, Alex and Dulcie Cox, brought him into their Melbourne home after seeing him advertised by the government in a newspaper. Roach truly loved his Dad Alex and Mum Dulcie despite their complex relationship, remembering them as ‘two people who showed me love and kindness when I needed it most’ (pp. 138–39).

One way this family expressed that love was through music. Mary, one of his foster sisters, soothed the household with her organ playing. Roach revelled in singing gospels at church. And every evening, Dad Alex and Roach would blast Scottish ballads. Roach ‘took great joy in sharing those songs with Dad Alex’ because he ‘wanted to be close with him’ and ‘understand the power that the songs had over him’ (p. 11). At school, Roach not only loved art and poetry, but also knew how to stand up for himself and friends. Something that would continue. When Roach was inspired by the music of Hank Williams played at his Pentecostal church, Dad Alex bought him his first guitar. Roach played that instrument religiously by the record player, trying to follow the songs.

But one day, a letter arrived, and everything changed. His long-lost sister Myrtle had written. His mum, Nellie Austin, had just passed, the letter read. His dad, also named Archie Roach, was already dead. Johnny, Alma, Lawrence, Gladys and Diana were his brothers and sisters. Addressed to Archibald William Roach, the letter revealed, for the first time, his real name.

All else was now insignificant. Roach saw his foster family differently, his trust in government was eroded, and he ‘had problems seeing the need for deference’ (p. 28). At 15, Roach left school. Before long, he left home, never seeing Dad Alex or Mum Dulcie again. He went searching for family, and himself.


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2 Drinking alcohol.
Ruby was stolen too. Through her, Roach learnt more about Aboriginal history. His history. Travelling together, Roach went back to the mission, forming a bond with Uncle Banjo, who remembered him being taken away. But Roach was still on the grog, unable to quit. Seizures started capturing him, and a cyclone of self-destruction and self-loathing began. He tried to take his own life, spent time in a sanatorium, and was passed out when both his sons were born. Eventually, Ruby took the kids and left. Roach had left home to find family but seemed to only have found pain.

Worse was coming. A grand mal seizure almost killed him. He was in hospital, fighting for his life. It was time to quit grog, for good. Roach entered a community-controlled rehabilitation centre called Galiamble. There, he started finding himself. He realised he had an illness called alcoholism, and ‘started to wonder if it wasn’t our blackness that got us drinking, but our trauma’ (p. 177). He reconciled his Aboriginal culture and Christian spirituality, recognising that ‘both could be access points for one truth, one spirituality’ (p. 178). He reunited with Ruby. And he learnt ‘the importance of affirmations and mantras’ (p. 179). With affirmations and mantras in mind, he started to hear his culture again, and songs came quickly.

Roach started performing for his peers in rehab, and his music started taking on a life of its own. He signed up for the Victorian Aboriginal Country Music Festival, recorded his songs on cassettes, played radio gigs and performed on Blackout. Paul Kelly discovered him on the television and got him to open for his band at Melbourne Concert Hall. So impressed, Kelly secured him a recording contract, and produced his debut album, Charcoal Lane, to roaring success.

Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) Awards followed, and relentless touring began. More albums followed. He jammed with Paul Simon and opened for Tracy Chapman. He toured North America with Joan Armstrong, receiving praise and flowers from Alice Walker. Alongside Ruby, he visited remote Aboriginal communities, blending music with social work. He produced documentaries, scored film soundtracks and joined theatre and dance productions. He loved his family. Roach and Ruby performed together at the 2008 National Apology, their stories and suffering recognised at last. This was his life.

But not long after, Ruby died—and he lost part of himself. Along the way, much of his family had died too. Roach soon suffered a stroke, and doctors discovered lung cancer. He almost let go. But he chose life. So he got the surgery and started slowly practising guitar again. A comeback album came. And to this day, Archie Roach still tells stories.
Documenting a search for family and culture, *Tell Me Why* navigates intricate questions of identity. Especially, the interplay between personal and collective identities. Sociologist Chris Rojek locates an identity split between the veridical self (I) and the public self (me) as undergirding celebrity culture, with the former grammatically denoting a subject and the latter an object. Celebrities are public constructions, their identities objects of creation, depending upon the I vanishing beneath the me.

*Tell Me Why* reveals how Roach helped transform celebrity culture by performing new identities. Untypically, Roach located his veridical self as time passed, beginning to shed one publicly constructed identity from the moment he first heard his real name. While homeless, and particularly in Fitzroy, Roach heard stories about Aboriginal lives and history. That was ’undiscovered country for most us, with any morsel of information becoming a new coordinate, a new place name—new terrain on the stark, empty map of ourselves’ (pp. 85–86). Music became a compass for Roach to chart his map.

And not just for himself. Through music, Roach instructed identities. By uniquely honouring the veridical self—amplifying his identity—he shared a new avatar to be collectively thronged. When returning to Framlingham Mission after releasing *Charcoal Lane*, Roach discovered that, by honouring his identity, the songs were profoundly ’impactful for Aboriginal people’ (p. 236). Roach’s public identity resisted erasure. After nearly every gig at the height of his fame, Roach was hammered with questions from journalists. ‘Are you a voice for your people, Archie’, they would often ask. To this day, Roach says ’if you really want to know me, listen to my songs’ (p. 228).

Societal selves exist too. People demand more than knowing ’me’ or ’I’, but also require a sense of ’us’. Like songs, lives have rhythms. A shared choreography is therefore essential. In *Tell Me Why*, Roach reveals the power of music to emotionally amplify this shared script. After performing at La Perouse on 25 January during the 1988 Bicentennial protests, people ’from all across this Aboriginal nation came up to me at the front of the stage to tell me that my story, my family’s story, was also their story’ (p. 205). Banding the protest contingent together, his music helped make Aboriginal people ’visible’ and ’audible’ to ’the three million people’ attending the Bicentennial celebration. Music enabled empathy. celebrities, and their sonic creations, become common cultural denominators, a shared moral compass, a communal soundtrack. But one wonders whether they also become the fault-lines on which our shared selves are contested.

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Perhaps eternal spirits exist beyond the ephemeral self. Romanticism, growing alongside nationalism in the late eighteenth century, celebrated and understood national character in spiritual terms, through the soul or spirit of the people, often expressed through song. Roach, too, believes music captures a ‘divine spirit’ (p. 214). Growing older, and searching for his veridical self, he ventured to Framlingham more often, listening for ‘the spirits that Uncle Banjo used to talk about’ (p. 235). Roach vehemently believes music enlivens those spirits, allowing ‘the story of those absent … impatient spirits’ to be heard (p. 83). Through song, Roach let spirits free, quietly contesting a homogeneous national identity that depended upon erasure. Especially when performing in Murundak, an Australian Art Orchestra production that catalogued popular Aboriginal protest songs, which expressed ‘the collective power of our songs and our indomitable spirit to survive’ (p. 301). When travelling to Broome in 2007, Roach wrote a song, inspired by Pat Dodson, called ‘Liyarn Ngarn’ in Yawuru, translating into ‘the coming together of spirits’, which spoke ‘about reconciliation’ (p. 293). Tell Me Why shows how music can unearth and renew spirits of all kinds, often for the first time, and reimagine national character.

The memoir deals with the unconscious, those memories submerged just beneath the surface. Perhaps a hidden self intimately connected to the spirits Roach speaks of. Reading the letter that changed his life, Roach felt ‘something deep’ that ‘whispered in his ear’ and tried ‘to tell me about another world and another life’ (p. 2). Looking at the name Archibald William Roach on the envelope, he knew it was his: ‘I had it in my head. It sounded familiar’ (p. 24).

Initially, Roach drank grog to silence memories. He found alcohol ‘flattened everything—loss and fear, sound and light, time and space’ (p. 47). But slowly, through searching, the unconscious was roused. When sober, Roach visited Framlingham ‘with different eyes’ and ‘saw visions on the mission and heard voices’ of ‘Mum and Dad, and my brothers and sisters, and my uncles and aunties and cousins’ (p. 193). When Uncle Banjo found out Roach was writing songs, he recommended writing ‘a song about how they took the children away from here’, since things had gone ‘quiet’ after they were stolen (pp. 192–94). Roach wanted to break that Australian silence.

Sounds expose and reveal truth, those unconscious and disremembered memories lurking and protruding from the surface. But they also heal. For Roach, ‘Took the Children Away’ is his ‘healing song’. Every time he sings it, he lets ‘a little bit of the hurt and trauma go’ (p. 357). That is why Roach performed that same song at the National Apology in 2008. ‘It wasn’t final justice and it didn’t bring ultimate comfort, but it was a small step towards both’ (p. 298). Storytelling mended. Recovering from lung cancer surgery, Roach enlisted the help of Associate Professor Louis Irving, a leading respiratory physician at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre,
who considers ‘a person’s spirit when it comes to healing’ (p. 328). This is not coincidence. *Tell Me Why* shows, too, how songs have power to heal, personally and collectively. A person, and perhaps national spirits too.

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Historians and biographers have only recently begun paying close attention to the soundscapes that echo through the past and into the present. Yet *Tell Me Why* shows how our sonic world offers insights into the most potent historical questions of our time. How are our collective identities constructed and negotiated? In what ways does colonialism permeate the present? What are the mechanisms of Aboriginal survival? Where can we locate historical memory not captured in ink? In the present world, Roach believes, we have lost our ‘sense of interconnectedness’ by retreating from our senses—‘sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch, spirit, everything’ (p. 275). Returning to the senses may just be the most powerful thing biographers and historians can do.

Music is biography, *Tell Me Why* reveals. Each chapter opens with a song from Roach’s catalogue, unveiling how music powerfully captures life stories in their emotional complexity, orienting us in space and time. Roach shows, too, how songs, by nature of their biographical function, can divide. Playing at the Annandale Hotel after releasing *Charcoal Lane*, Roach was confronted by a patron. ‘Am I supposed to sit here and feel bad?’, she asked (p. 229). Still, one wonders whether *Tell Me Why* fully explored the extent to which songs function as sites of biographical contestation—especially with their immense power to uphold or reject certain life stories. After all, crowds mobilised by song can be as diverse as human emotion itself.

Song exposes the history of ourselves: personal and shared, conscious and unconscious, luminous and sinister. Its dazzling and dangerous emotive dimensions express the contradictions of human experience, memory and transformation. In *Tell Me Why*, Roach shows how this power can be harnessed for truth-telling and redemption; how songs are a vessel to express our rights and wrongs, our joy and pain. Since millennia ago, Aboriginal people have gathered around fire to commune and share stories. We have the chance, Roach believes, to come back to that place of fire, and ‘discover there’s far more that connects us than separates us’ (p. 353). Sonic biographies may be that fire. Our opportunity to listen. And heal.
Ruth A. Morgan review of Russell McGregor, *Idling in Green Places: A Life of Alec Chisholm*


Amid the grave reports of devastation from areas of Australia ravaged by bushfires over the summer came a glimmer of hope in late January 2020. Some 20 lyrebirds were photographed taking refuge around a dam on a property near Wollombi, New South Wales, on the edge of the Yengo National Park. By this time, almost all the park had been burned by fires that had raged for over a month, and BirdLife Australia estimated that more than half of the known habitat of the lyrebird had been burnt. Soon after, scientists estimated that at least a billion animals had perished in the bushfires of the ‘Savage Summer’. The lyrebirds photographed at Wollombi were among the survivors.

The ‘Great Bird Man’ himself, Alec Chisholm, would not have been surprised by their tenacity. In his 1957 article ‘Romance of the Lyrebird’, he cheerfully concluded, ‘it is likely to persist along the years, charming one generation after another with its brilliant voice and beautiful display’ (p. 30). The lyrebird was not only a species of great interest to the ornithologist and historian, the subject of numerous works, but moreover, Chisholm remained adamant throughout his life that ‘no species of mainland Australian bird was known definitely to have become extinct since the advent of European colonisation’ (p. 67). He was stubborn on this point, for he maintained a positive outlook on species survival as a strategic means to encourage a nationalistic spirit of conservation.

Chisholm’s lifelong commitment to birdwatching and to his project of fostering nationalism through nature is the subject of Russell McGregor’s *Idling in Green Places*. Drawing on Chisholm’s papers at the Mitchell Library, as well as collections in the National Library of Australia and the University of Sydney Library, McGregor has crafted the first full biography of the ‘nationalist naturalist’, journalist and historian from his birth in Maryborough, Victoria, in 1890 to his death at Cremorne Point, New South Wales, in 1977. A fastidious correspondent, Chisholm’s life story offers detailed insights into his journey from self-educated bird enthusiast to newspaper editor; the changing nature of natural history and ornithology; and the wider social, environmental and political transformation of Australia from nationhood to the aftermath of the Dismissal.
With Chisholm having cast aside the more personal of his papers in his final years, McGregor is left to speculate as to the nature of his marriage, fatherhood and domestic life more generally. His marriage to Olive Haseler appears to have been companionable, while his relationship with daughter Deirdre seems to have only improved late in his life. Rather it is his correspondence with the likes of fellow birder Keith Hindwood, the poet Mary Gilmore and English friend Grace Edelsten that provide a clearer picture of Chisholm’s inner world and reveal an ‘increasing irascibility’ (p. 5) arising from poor health and an enduring insecurity.

His letters reveal a tendency for vanity, a proclivity for pedantry and, what McGregor describes as, ‘a propensity to put himself at the centre of events’ (p. 103). In Chisholm’s defence, his journalism career ensured he was remarkably well-connected: on his 1907 Corona typewriter, he corresponded with the likes of Norman Lindsay, Zora Cross, Ion Idriess and E. J. Brady, among others. He dined with Prime Minister Robert Menzies and former prime minister Billy Hughes; briefly served as the press liaison officer to the governor-general, the Duke of Gloucester; and enjoyed the patronage of Sir Keith Murdoch and George Ferguson of Angus & Robertson. Mixing with such ‘men in high places’, as McGregor puts it, ‘boosted his own prestige’ (p. 73).

His real mates, it seems, were birds. Disillusioned with formal education, young Chisholm found wonder in nature, apparently ‘under the influence of the birds themselves and a spiritual heritage from the Scottish highlands’, as he recalled creatively in his 1969 memoir (p. 13). He kept a nature diary and, inspired by nature writers such as Donald Macdonald and Charles Barrett, began to contribute to the _Emu_, the quarterly journal of the (Royal) Australasian Ornithologists’ Union (RAOU), which he had joined aged 17. He later became the journal’s editor (1926–28) and RAOU president (1939–40), while also serving as an active member of the Queensland Gould League of Bird Lovers, the Queensland Naturalists’ Club, the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, the Victorian Bird Observers’ Club, and the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria. ‘Idling in green places’ may have been more wishful thinking than reality for Chisholm.

In his nature writing, Chisholm sought to enchant his audiences, young and old, with his chatty and informal tone. His style was emotional and passionate, not cerebral, and he railed against the scientific tone of the environmental literature that emerged during the 1960s. For all Chisholm’s fairy imagery, the likes of which delighted readers of his _Bird Wonders of Australia_ (1934), he was not, what McGregor describes as, ‘anti-science’. Rather, Chisholm ‘deplored what he saw as scientist’s failure to complement analysis with imagination’ (p. 107).

Encouraging an appreciative attitude towards nature among his readers would not only foster nature conservation, but also their sense of nationhood. In his first book, _Mateship with Birds_ (1922), for instance, Chisholm called for more appealing bird
names, believing that ‘euphonious bird names and lyrical nature poetry belonged together as vehicles through which Australians would come to love the land in which they lived’ (p. 56). He used anthropomorphism to this end too, understanding that drawing out the human-like qualities of bird behaviour could elicit empathy in his readers and draw them closer to nature. In the avian world, joy, intelligence and artistry were the makings of a mate, and mateship with birds was necessary, Chisholm argued, ‘if we as a nation are to develop any real measure of alliance with our native earth’ (pp. 147–48).

Although his ‘lavish’ style appealed to an avid readership, some of his friends were not convinced. Zoologist A. J. ‘Jock’ Marshall, for instance, derided such ‘anthropomorphic nonsense’ and told him so (pp. 178–79). Still, as a ‘moulder of public opinion’ (p. 51), Chisholm had significant clout that he applied to all manner of endeavours, such as lobbying for more stringent fauna protection laws in Queensland in the early 1920s, the reservation of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, an end to private collecting of specimens, and conservation in urban areas. He was especially critical of the use of pesticides and their impact on birdlife, prompted by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962).

Chisholm’s trip to Britain and Europe on the eve of World War II marked the beginning of his turn to biography and historical research. Travelling in an official capacity to promote Australia as a tourist destination, he used the opportunity to seek out large collections of Gouldiana and the diary of naturalist John Gilbert that would later form the basis of *Strange New World* (1941) and *The Story of Elizabeth Gould* (1944). In these works, particularly the former, Chisholm was transforming himself into an expert on early Australian ornithology, and he departed from the lyrical style that had characterised his nature writing. In this new ‘harsh and sometimes petulant’ tone (p. 129), Chisholm celebrated Gilbert in the great man tradition of history writing, and demolished the more well-known Ludwig Leichhardt, who had led the ill-fated expedition to Port Essington in 1844. Chisholm would continue to jealously guard Gilbert’s diary and reputation, with a second issue in 1955 and a new edition published in 1973 as *Strange Journey*.

With a biography of his mate, the poet C. J. Dennis, under his belt (*The Making of a Sentimental Bloke*, 1947) as well as an edition of *Who’s Who in Australia* (1947), Chisholm embarked on his most ambitious project—as editor-in-chief of the new 10-volume *Australian Encyclopedia* (1958). Longer and more difficult than Chisholm or his publishers Angus & Robertson ever expected, the collection was to be ‘an encyclopedia for a nation’, accessible and Australian in both ‘spirit and style’ (p. 154). The largest single entry at 80,000 words was headed ‘Aborigines’, in addition to biographical entries for notable Aboriginal people, reflecting the growing public interest in Aboriginal affairs. Although the process earned him an OBE on
publication, Chisholm's correspondence suggests the honour was hard won, with his troubles ranging from finding a home in Sydney to that familiar editorial problem of 'contributoritis' (p. 161).

During his editorship of the *Encyclopedia*, Chisholm had become a member of the Royal Australian Historical Society, then the most prestigious body for the study of history in Australia. Elected to its council in 1954, he served as vice president (1956–58) and president (1959–60), and sat almost continuously until his death in 1977. A keen biographer, Chisholm's *Encyclopedia* had included over 2,000 biographical entries and he was a major contributor to the early volumes of the recently established *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Among his 18 entries were familiar faces: Elizabeth and John Gould, and John Gilbert, as well as Louisa Atkinson and 'wild white man' John Wilson.

In his 1969 memoir *The Joy of the Earth* Chisholm turned to his final subject. By this time, Chisholm was 'beginning to feel a man out of his time' (p. 201) as he observed changes in the direction of the conservation movement of which he had once been at the centre. He was, after all, a 'conservative conservationist' (p. 238) who did not oppose development, but simply the 'needless desecration of nature' (p. 182). McGregor suspects the social and political changes of 1960s and 1970s Australia only intensified his egoism, and Chisholm became increasingly embittered as his health deteriorated. His recollections of his youth, however, brought fresh praise from readers and buoyed him to attempt a second volume, the unfinished *Spice of Life*.

Although Chisholm felt the heavy hand of Father Time in the last decade of his life, his message of hope and of making kin with other species continues to enchant readers, with Scribe reissuing *Mateship with Birds* in 2013. Thoughtful, sensitive and nuanced, *Idling in Green Places* is an elegant work of environmental history that will be a valuable companion to Libby Robin's history of Australian ornithology, *The Flight of the Emu* (2001), as well as her 2007 history of Australian nature and nationhood, *How a Continent Created a Nation*. 
Writing the lives of Indigenous people has been an enduring interest in colonial and post-colonial contexts around the world. Some Indigenous people are well known, their life stories told, retold and refashioned for—or by—each new generation. They are often presented as moral tales, and rather than representing the particularity and singularity of the individual come to stand for a collective experience or a larger cultural and historical phenomenon in the contact zones created by imperial travels and traders and within early colonial settlements. Over time, influenced by historiographical developments and methodological innovations as much as shifts in social and cultural expectations, the ways in which the lives of prominent Indigenous people are told undergo continual revision, sometimes quite considerably as questions of agency, desire, contingency and opportunity come into play.

The two Indigenous men at the heart of Fullagar’s book—the Cherokee Ostenaco and the Ra’iatean Mai—travelled to England with an eye to leveraging what Britain potentially offered for shoring up his own and his countrymen’s and women’s local futures. They each departed from and returned to a precarious, unstable and fast-moving situation. In her treatment of Ostenaco and Mai, Fullagar places their travels to Britain within a much broader context than has hitherto been the case, and a much wider historical and political context both within and outside Britain, and crucially also more proportionately situated within the scope of their own individual lives.

Their respective arrival and presence in the heart of empire is not the subject of the story, in the way that Fullagar had explored for other eighteenth-century Indigenous travellers in her previous book, The Savage Visit, and which Coll Thrush has expertly done in Indigenous London. Rather, Fullagar seeks to loosen the pull of the imperial centre in the ways in which she has conceived and structured this study. Certainly, it is their travels to London that provide the hook for them both to appear within the same book because it is there that they both have their portrait painted by the artist of the book’s title, Joshua Reynolds. Ostenaco’s portrait is painted in 1762; Mai’s in 1774. One is created at the start of Reynolds’s celebrated career; the other at a turning point in it. One of the paintings is kept private and falls into obscurity; the other is a cause celebre the moment it is exhibited. The book therefore is based on this contingency, but Fullagar puts that accident to good analytical use. The stories
of Ostenaco’s and Mai’s quite disparate lives, as Fullagar narrates them, do not cohere around nor culminate in their imperial visit. As formative or as memorable as their fleeting meetings with Reynolds might have been for the two Indigenous visitors to London, Fullagar is careful not to mobilise all of her material for that illuminating moment as though it is only when Indigenous people explicitly or directly engage with imperial Britain that anything of importance happens.

Fullagar rejects that assumption. Indeed, one of the most powerful aspects of the book is the way in which it queries our understandings of empire—or imperialism. Contributing to what is sometimes referred to as ‘new imperial history’, she reveals a series of overlapping empires that are radically reshaped through their encounters and, especially, through war and conquest. As she makes clear in her citations and acknowledgements, this ambitious project to bring various imperial formations and struggles into a single frame is made possible by the close-grained, ethnographically rich studies of Indigenous politics that are recorded in the margins of the history of British imperial wars and other interventions in North America and the Pacific during the eighteenth century. One of the major insights of cross-cultural scholarship on James Cook’s three Pacific voyages is that the British mariners sometimes entered delicate intra-island political situations, and the outsiders were mobilised, sometimes unwittingly, for local interests. This is vital to understanding a man like Mai, and his motivations to travel to Britain on Cook’s second voyage and remain there for two years until he could cadge a ride home on Cook’s third voyage. His homeland had been invaded by the Bora Borsans, and he was in search of an advantage that would enable him to overthrow them. In particular, he had his eye on British weaponry, believing that returning with an artillery would be a means to do away with the colonising islanders who threatened his ancestral estate.

Ostenaco by contrast went with a small delegation to England with the express purpose of having an audience with the British king. This was a tradition that was already well developed by the mid-1700s. The delegation’s experience in Britain conformed to the itinerary that had been established, and that would continue well into the nineteenth century during Queen Victoria’s reign. But in some ways the chapters on Ostenaco and Mai in England, while fascinating, are less revealing than the chapters that precede and follow them—or to put that another way, it is the chapters that come before and after that illuminate those imperial sojourns in new ways; the reader already knows the experiences, contexts and inheritances that the two men bring with them as they encounter imperial Britain and the still-changing worlds to which they return and where they will die, their hopes yet to be realised.

The first four chapters are devoted to Ostenaco’s life and times. The reader is introduced to him through the world, family and town into which he is born and his development as a warrior and leader. Drawing selectively and intelligently on mainly ethnographic sources, Fullagar reveals the structures and dynamics of Cherokee society and politics and its reshaping through the protracted wars on
American frontiers involving the British, French and Americans. Through Ostenaco, new perspectives are offered on those conflicts—the sustained and sincere efforts at diplomacy, the ineptitude of some key British officials, the vagaries of inter-town relations, and the bone-deadening labour of fighting battles on many fronts, sometimes through hand-to-hand combat and sometimes through the gentle arts of persuasion for the hearts and minds of compatriots.

The second half of the book, composed of another four chapters, is devoted to Mai. Compared to Ostenaco, Mai is a much younger man, operating more independently, but motivated as much by a desire to win back his ancestral country—not from European and American colonists as for Ostenaco, but from the invading Bora Borans. He sees Britain as a source of resources and assistance, although he will learn a cruel lesson in the pragmatics of voyaging diplomacy when goods and gifts he believed destined for him are distributed by Cook to people he deemed undeserving.

In ways that seem entirely appropriate, Reynolds is not given his own section in the book. Cleverly, his story is wedged between the life stories of the Cherokee warrior and the Ra‘iatean voyager—and in that way his life story becomes subordinate to theirs. It becomes entangled within the historical themes that Ostenaco’s and Mai’s life stories engender. In one chapter devoted to him, inserted between three on Ostenaco, the reader learns of Reynolds’s early life and influences and his fledgling artistic career as he seeks to establish himself. In the second chapter on Reynolds, which appears in Mai’s section, the emphasis shifts both to his status in British art circles as well as to larger debates about empire and race. Fullagar makes excellent historical use of Reynolds’s biography, particularly as she uses him as a vehicle for showing just how contested views about British imperialism were. Reynolds lends himself to that historiographical task because he cultivated a certain ambivalence about anything controversial, an orientation that Fullagar shows was well suited to an ambitious artist making his way. His closest friends and wider social circle represented different positions on Britain’s overseas interventions. For instance, his friend Edmund Burke was pro-American settlement while his other intimate, Samuel Johnson, ‘thought territorial colonists were mostly thieves and slavers’ (p. 67). It is unclear where Reynolds himself actually stood on any of the arguments, but his artistic output provides a rich source for exploring the possibilities and limits of engaging with and understanding cultural difference and race. Fullagar pursues this by arguing that Reynolds’s portrait of Ostenaco failed whereas his portrait of Mai ‘worked’. The difference, she suggests, lies not only in the maturing skills of the painter, or the inherent interest of the ‘subject’. Rather, she shows that British imperial culture was transformed particularly by the voyages of James Cook, and thus by the influence of Indigenous people. With that came an experiment in developing a visual language for expressing and representing other cultures and, importantly, other polities. In tracing these cultural projects and productions, Fullagar combines
skill in art history to analyse Reynolds’s oeuvre and the skills of cultural history to interpret his and others’ writings and speeches, including Reynolds’s annual speech to the Royal Academy.

The book’s triangular structure, in which Reynolds is the hinge that brings the other two lives into the same frame, works extremely well because they are all mobilised for the larger historical project of illuminating ‘an age of empire’ (as the book’s subtitle puts it). Rather than working from the British imperial centre outwards, the book reverses that direction. Its two distinct parts begin in other imperial contexts where struggles for authority, sovereignty and territory are a feature of local Indigenous politics and which are being made even more complicated by the incursion of British imperial travellers and settlers. In the reconstruction of each man’s life, Fullagar keeps the problem of empire and how we understand it at the forefront, persuasively making the reader question the assumptions of British imperialism and empire history that circulate in both academic and popular spheres. In this regard, Fullagar provides a model for how life stories of Indigenous people can be brought to bear on larger historical issues, so that the project of Indigenous biography goes beyond only retrieving lost lives and accumulating yet more stories about certain individuals. This book pushes beyond those limits, showing the value of the biographical method for historical analysis and understanding.

Writing Indigenous lives is undergoing a renaissance. A series of projects, such as the Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography at The Australian National University, and publications, such as a recent special issue of Biography edited by Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice, are revisiting some of the challenges involved—from the patchy quality of archival sources to more philosophical questions about subjectivity and vitae. These are issues that have been around for a long time, and Fullagar is alert to them. Without overdoing it, she reflects on subjectivity as an Enlightenment obsession, and the problems of sources for reconstructing Indigenous lives. About the challenge of piecing together Ostenaco’s origins, she writes: ‘So often when aspects of Ostenaco do emerge through the mesh of overlain sources they show up the inadequacies of biography’s conventions. In the absence of an assumption about a life’s beginning, ending, or motivation start to come undone. Did Ostenaco even have a cradle?’ (p. 12). She also makes it clear where her analysis necessarily becomes more speculative than surefooted.

And all of this is done in an engaging narrative style, so engaging that it can sometimes be easy (perhaps too easy) to miss the import of what is being said. That is always a struggle, particularly in narrative history of this kind. The joy here is that book can be read for the interest in the interlocking lives, but its real satisfactions rest on the rich seams of scholarship on which it builds to re-present imperial history with biographic intensity. It serves to realise the latent potential of that incredibly rich ethnographic and historical research to transform easy or lazy ideas about imperial pasts and legacies far more nuanced and complex. It eschews the idea that there
is imperial history and Indigenous history, and we choose to do one or the other. It pursues the historical project of entanglement, and works hard not to privilege the British or European side of the equation. This is harder to do than this book suggests, wearing its erudition lightly and making its analysis accessible. Here then is an intelligent and innovative book that is sure to become a classic.
From 1962, Dr Claire Weekes’s self-help publications and recordings helped hundreds of thousands of people suffering from anxiety disorders. For many years, her ability to reach out to lay people in readable non-technical terms initially met with dismissal by the psychiatric profession in Australia but found more recognition by professionals in Britain, the United States and Canada. Yet her approach to cognitive behavioural therapy has slowly, if perhaps grudgingly, become accepted here and internationally, and indeed incorporated into some bibliotherapy programs recommended by medical professionals. Judith Hoare’s biography has rescued Weekes from an undeserved near oblivion by reminding us of her achievements. Hoare, a former senior editor at the *Australian Financial Review*, found that Weekes’s advice gave her relief from her own anxiety in her early career. She has given us an insight into Weekes’s many achievements, not only in the field of self-help, but also in biological science and music, and as a physician, presenting a warts-and-all account of her often-troubled domestic life. But the loyalty of her family and friends supported Weekes in her extraordinary dedication to the welfare of her worldwide ‘patients’, continuing well into her 80s, through letters, meetings and telephone calls at any time of the day or night.

The book frames Weekes’s earlier history as a long preamble, with many twists and turnings, to the main purpose of her life, her psychiatric vocation, which did not begin until her late 50s. Weekes’s intellectual gifts were recognised from her childhood. At the young age of 25, Weekes became the first woman to receive a doctorate of science at the University of Sydney. It was awarded for her original work on lizards that give live birth, rather than laying eggs. In a 1935 paper for the proceedings of the Zoological Society of London, Weekes showed that this viviparity was associated with high altitudes and suggested that it was caused by ‘cold interfering with development of the eggs in the nest’. This article demonstrated a clarity of style and reasoning that would later attract many readers. Weekes’s studies had been interrupted for a time by a wrongful diagnosis of tuberculosis. Confined to a sanatorium, she began to suffer distressing symptoms of rapid
heartbeat (tachycardia) that she was much later to identify as a ‘permanent state’ of anxiety. Hoare identifies these misfortunes as the inspiration for Weekes’s late-in-life psychiatric work. Weekes recovered, returning to the university to submit her thesis, and won a scholarship for further research in zoology at the University College, London (UCL).

Arriving in Britain in 1929, Weekes soon experienced a relapse of her anxiety symptoms. Reaching out in great distress to a war-veteran friend at UCL, fellow Australian Marcel Aurousseau, to whom she later became engaged, Weekes experienced an epiphany when her friend explained that all soldiers had ‘nerves’ in the trenches. She realised that it was the mind’s fear of fear that fed a vicious and self-reinforcing cycle of anxiety. Her breakthrough was realising that the cycle could be broken by accepting and understanding the fear so as to ‘float’ past it. Weekes was soon able to manage her panic attacks and continue her studies. Switching after her first year to the study of neurology under an expert on shell shock, Grafton Elliot Smith, Weekes gained further insight into the neurological basis of the fight-or-flight syndrome. From Hoare’s account, it seems that Weekes had closely studied Elliot Smith and T. H. Pear’s 1917 publication *Shell Shock and Its Lessons*.

Breaking off her engagement to Aurousseau, Weekes returned to Sydney in 1931 and resumed her old research position at the university. By 1933 she began vocal training at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music. Her accompanist was a teacher at the ‘Con’, Bessie Coleman, who would become her lifelong close friend and constant companion. Abandoning her academic work in 1936, Weekes along with Coleman sought a musical career in Europe, combined with music tourism. Weekes was a fine singer, but soon realised that her voice was not up to professional standard. It was Coleman who had some success accompanying the famous soprano Elisabeth Schumann at a London recording session.

Returning to Australia in early 1937, Weekes had yet another career change. Drawing on her extensive travel experience, she established a travel bureau, advertising her services in various newspapers and via a regular weekly column on destinations in the Sydney *Sunday Sun and Guardian* from January 1938 to August 1939. She pitched her services towards the budget traveller. Ignoring the Nazi takeover of Austria in 1938, Weekes’s last four articles recommended Vienna as a suitable destination for sightseeing. War in Europe put an end to her business. In 1941 she enrolled in medicine at the University of Sydney and graduated as a medical doctor four years later at the age of 42. She began work as an intern at the university’s teaching hospital. By the late 1940s, Weekes established her own general practice in the beach suburb of Bondi.

According to Hoare, Weekes was unusually empathetic among doctors of the period to complaints of ‘nerves’. She had a gift for communicating with anxious patients in non-technical language. She gave them time and attention well beyond the
conventions of the period, even inviting them into her home to the consternation of her family. Her work did not enrich her financially, as she never charged more than her fixed consultation fee. In another change of direction, Weekes qualified as a physician in 1955 and took up rooms in Macquarie Street, then the centre for specialist treatment in Sydney. There she soon acquired a reputation among patients and fellow doctors as the ‘go to’ person for ‘nervous complaints’ and psychosomatic illnesses. Weekes also learned from her patients, understanding that repetition and reinforcement were effective tools in breaking a cycle of fear.

Apparently, the idea for a self-help book on ‘nerves’ came from a patient who suggested that it would save the effort of going over the same ground with each person. Based on Weekes’s 20 years of assistance to ‘anxiety’ patients, *Self Help for Your Nerves*, published in 1962, revealed her six-word remedy: Facing, Accepting, Floating, and Let Time Pass. ‘Floating’ would break the cycle of the body’s fight-or-flight response to fear. By not responding to the anxiety attack and not struggling against it, conscious reinforcement of the body’s automatic response to stress—rapid heartbeat and other painful sensations of fear—could be minimised or avoided and the cycle broken. The role of the nervous system was explained in clear and simple language. The reader was helped and not judged. There was a huge unmet demand for books of this kind. The book was a sales sensation in Australia and by 1964 there was a British edition.

But Weekes found few friends at first among psychiatrists or psychologists, who attacked her lack of professional qualifications in either field. She rejected Freudian psychoanalysis and resisted the medical profession’s enthusiastic embrace of psychoactive drugs and sedatives. Yet Weekes found supporters among the early adopters of what would later be called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Weekes went on to actively promote her book in Britain and the United States with television interviews and magazine articles. Her British publishers struggled to meet demand and by 1966 the US edition also attracted a huge readership. A further four self-help books followed.

But there were other reasons for the success of the books that Hoare could have mentioned. In an era well before patient communication was an integral part of medical training, doctors and psychiatrists were often judgemental and dismissive of patients with anxiety disorders. This attitude was perhaps exemplified by an event from Weekes’s student days when a doctor (her friend’s husband) refused to attend Weekes during an attack of panic-induced tachycardia. Before the establishment of universal health insurance, private medical or psychiatric help was well beyond the means of working-class people. State-run mental health clinics were often overloaded and were reluctant to treat patients who were not at risk to others or themselves. Another serious impediment to getting professional help was the social and economic stigma associated with mental disorders or ‘weakness’ of any kind. Weekes’s books (and later audio recordings) were a relatively cheap and private way
for distressed people to get assistance. For those who had had unpleasant, confusing or judgemental experiences with medical professionals, the friendly and accessible style displayed in her magazine advice columns and book promotions provided a welcome and encouraging contrast.

Despite the public acclaim, professional recognition was slow to come. Some psychiatrists and psychologists recognised the effectiveness of Weekes’s techniques in the early 1960s, or had used similar methods themselves, but her books, and her avoidance of technical language, often met with patronising disapproval. While Professor Nick Haslam’s 2019 review of Hoare’s biography for Inside Story is on the whole sympathetic, he canvasses these criticisms. One charge was that Weekes’s books were viewed as ‘illegitimate’ because of her lack of formal psychiatric qualifications and her populist style. Haslam also claims that she refused to engage with the profession via scientific or professional publications. Moreover, he argues that the evidence that Weekes presented for the effectiveness of her bibliotherapy was scientifically ‘worthless’ because the abundance of favourable testimony was entirely self-selected. Finally, and perhaps contemptuously, Haslam argues that Weekes’s nomination for a Nobel Prize had an element of ‘pathos’ because she had published no scientific work on her treatments.

These charges are not entirely accurate or fair. As Hoare explains at length, Weekes did engage with psychiatric professionals in the US and Britain privately, in television talk shows and at conferences. Haslam implicitly holds Weekes to the ‘gold standard’ of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to establish effectiveness, but it is difficult to imagine how a sole practitioner without research resources or university backing could have run such expensive and time-consuming trials. It is also difficult to see how Weekes could have found suitable control subjects or placebo manuals, since she regarded non-treatment as unethical. Following up people who had bought her books, but had not presented for evaluation, was also problematic. A 2000 survey of self-help books for panic disorder by Per Carlbring and his associates, which included an examination of Self Help for Your Nerves, found that very few such books had been tested in RCTs. Despite this lack of testing, there had been a significant increase in the use of these books by psychiatrists in CBT therapy, both self-directed and therapist-directed. Clearly these therapists did not regard the treatments as ‘worthless’. As for Weekes’s alleged lack of professional publications on panic disorders, I would point to her articles on her treatments for agoraphobia in the British Medical Journal (1973) and the American Journal of Psychotherapy (1978). Her work has also been discussed by other specialists in

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a number of scientific papers. While Weekes did not have an extensive academic oeuvre, Haslam’s claim that she had published no scientific work at all at the time of her Nobel nomination is not correct.

Hoare does not explain why Weekes has been largely forgotten since her death in 1990. Nevertheless, Weekes’s books are still in print, available in electronic form and are recommended by some anxiety support groups. According to Wikipedia, about half of customer reviews say that the books have ‘saved lives’. The explanation for Weekes fading from public memory is straightforward. When she broke new ground in 1962, there were very few other players in the field. The hugely popular advice columns of the time addressed problems of phobias and anxieties, but they did not specialise in them. The success of Weekes’s works attracted competition and many other self-help books, of varying quality, appeared on the market. The use of these books were often integrated into professional treatments. At the same time, financial constraints on seeking professional help were eased to some extent with the advent of universal medical insurance. The stigma of anxiety disorders was gradually reduced as their true extent became recognised. Increasingly, better patient communication has become an integral component of medical training. These social and economic changes mean that present-day sufferers from anxiety have a far greater range of options than was available in 1962, and increasingly so since Weekes’s last book, The Latest Help for Your Nerves (1989). Her style is now thought to be outdated and Weekes has become lost in the crowd.

Hoare’s well-written and engaging biography has deservedly attracted much interest in Australia and internationally, and has rescued Weekes from unmerited obscurity.

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Notes on contributors

Malcolm Allbrook is managing editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB) and a research fellow in the National Centre of Biography at The Australian National University (ANU). He has authored and co-authored four books: *Never Stand Still* (with Darraga Watson, 2013), *Henry Prinsep’s Empire* (2014), *Carlotta’s Perth* (with Mary Anne Jebb, 2017) and *Barddabardda Wodjenangorddee: We’re Telling All of You: The Creation, History and People of Dambeemangaddee Country* (with Valda Blundell, et al., 2017). His most recent book is an edited collection: *Family History and Historians in Australia and New Zealand: Related Histories* (with Sophie Scott-Brown, 2021).

Michelle Arrow is professor in Modern History at Macquarie University. She is the author of three books, including *Friday on Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia Since 1945* (2009) and *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia* (2019), which was awarded the 2020 Ernest Scott Prize for history and was shortlisted for the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction in the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards. Michelle won the 2014 Multimedia History Prize in the NSW Premier’s History Awards for her radio documentary ‘Public Intimacies: the 1974 Royal Commission on Human Relationships’. Together with Kate Fullagar and Leigh Boucher, Michelle is currently editor of the Australian Historical Association’s journal *History Australia*.

Jennifer Bird is a PhD candidate with the National Centre of Biography at ANU. She completed her BA (Hons) in Australian History and Writing at the University of New England. She has a strong interest in Australian convict history, colonial history, Indigenous history, oral history and biography. Her PhD thesis is titled ‘Robert Edward Knox – The “Flash Fighting Man”: One infamous convict’s journey through the New South Wales colonial penal system, 1829–1869’.

Joshua Black is a postgraduate student in political history at the National Centre for Biography at The Australian National University (ANU). He completed his BA (Hons) at the University of Wollongong in 2018. His thesis, entitled ‘For What Purpose?: The Political Memoirs and Diaries of the Rudd–Gillard Labor Cabinet’, examined the authorial intent and historiographical construction of the previous Labor Cabinet’s political memoir output. He continues to expand this field of research in his doctoral thesis, ‘The Political Memoir Phenomenon: Federal Political Life Writing, 1994–2020’. In 2019 he was awarded the RSSS (Research School of Social Sciences) Director’s Award for Higher Degree Research at ANU.
Shane Breynard is a PhD candidate at The Australian National University, School of History. His research focuses on the depiction of Canberra in the moving image and is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. Shane’s wider research interests embrace the use of photography and film in discourses of national and regional identity, and in museum display. He is a member of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee and a national councillor with the Australian Museums and Galleries Association.


Sarah Engledow was appointed historian at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra (NPG Canberra), in 1999. Recipient of the University Medal in English from ANU in 1995, she obtained her doctorate in literature in 2003. She has written more than 70 articles on portraiture and curated numerous significant exhibitions. In the NPG Canberra’s first decade, she wrote most of the proposals for the acquisition of works for the collection, and many hundreds of biographical captions to portraits in the collection and temporary exhibitions. She has spoken frequently about portraiture in a very wide range of situations and forums.

Stephen Foster’s books include A Private Empire (2010), and Zoffany’s Daughter: Love and treachery on a small island (2017), which explores a child custody case on the island of Guernsey in 1825. He is currently an Editorial Fellow with the Australian Dictionary of Biography at ANU.

Emily Gallagher is a PhD candidate of the ANU’s School of History. Her research focuses on the history of children’s imaginations in Australia during the early decades of the twentieth century. She was the founding editor of the ANU Historical Journal II (2017–19) and has reviewed with a number of literary magazines. Her most recent article on the history of children’s war play in interwar Australia was published with History Australia.

Murray Goot is emeritus professor at Macquarie University. He has written widely on public opinion and voting behaviour, elections, political parties and the politics of the media. With Tim Rowse, he is currently writing a book on the politics of constitutional recognition, public opinion and the Uluru Statement from the Heart, a sequel to their Divided Nation? Indigenous Affairs and the Imagined Public.
Stephen Holt, a graduate of The Australian National University, is a freelance Canberra researcher and writer. He has published biographies of the historian Manning Clark, the trade unionist Lloyd Ross and (with Professor Ross Fitzgerald) the journalist Alan Reid.

Barry Jones’s biography can be found on the back cover of his *Dictionary of World Biography* (ANU Press, seventh edition 2020). A former teacher, lawyer and academic, he was a Labor MP in the Victorian and Commonwealth Parliaments 1972–77, 1977–98; and Minister for Science 1983–90. He helped revive, even exhume, the Australian feature film industry and is a ‘Living National Treasure’. He represented Australia at UNESCO 1991–95. His books include *Sleepers, Wake!* (1982), *A Thinking Reed* (autobiography, 2006), *Shock of Recognition* (about music and literature, 2016) and *What Is To Be Done* (a revolutionary manifesto, 2020). While not completely disgruntled about contemporary Australian life he is, as P. G. Wodehouse would have written, far from gruntled.

Elizabeth Kwan has longstanding interests in Australian identity and in biography. Her publications include *Flag and Nation: Australians and Their National Flags Since 1901* (UNSW Press, 2006), and ‘Flag’ in Melissa Harper and Richard White eds, *Symbols of Australia: Uncovering the Stories Behind the Myths* (UNSW Press and NMA Press, 2010). She has also written seven entries on prominent South Australians for the ADB and an account of Lim Lee See (Granny Lum Loy), matriarch of Darwin’s Chinese community, in *Recovered Lives: Twenty-eight Australian Women who Disappeared from History*, a collaboration between the ADB and *Inside Story* in 2019.

Anthony Merlino works at Menzies School of Health Research, supporting and coordinating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and education projects. He graduated from The Australian National University (ANU) with a BA in 2019 and is currently an Associate Editor with the *ANU Historical Journal II*.


Patrick Mullins is a Canberra-based academic and writer who has a PhD from the University of Canberra. He is adjunct assistant professor at the University of Canberra, and the author of *Tiberius with a Telephone: The Life and Stories of William McMahon* (2018), along with *The Trials of Portnoy: How Penguin Brought Down Australia’s Censorship System* (2020). *Tiberius with a Telephone* won the 2020 New South Wales (NSW) Premier’s Non-Fiction Award and the 2020 National
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Maria Nugent is Co-Director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at ANU and Chair of the Board of Aboriginal History Inc. She publishes on Indigenous and settler colonial history, memory and material culture. Recent publications include *Mistress of Everything: Queen Victoria in Indigenous Worlds* (with Sarah Carter) and *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* (with Gaye Sculthorpe and Howard Morphy).


David Roth is a PhD candidate researching the history of mental health care in the School of History at ANU after training in chemistry and a long career in the IT industry. His thesis topic is ‘Life, Death and Deliverance at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane 1877 to 1923’. He has particular interests in the mortality of the mentally ill and the history of medications. His publications include ‘Chemical Restraints at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane before 1900’ in *Health and History*. David has contributed to the Civil Liberties Association’s submission to the Royal Commission on Aged Care. He is a member of the Australian Historical Association and the Australian and New Zealand Society for the History of Medicine.

Tim Rowse (Western Sydney University and ANU) is a historian who lived and conducted fieldwork in Central Australia in the period 1986–94, resulting in his book *White Flour White Power* (1998). In retirement he continues his research on the history of Australia’s settler colonial relationships; he is currently working on a history of the recent debate about the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Robert Tickner grew up a country boy on the New South Wales mid-north coast and became an Aboriginal Legal Service lawyer and an alderman of the Sydney City Council. In 1984 he won the federal seat of Hughes, and in 1990 he became the federal minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. He is Australia’s longest-serving minister in that role, and served in a period of great reform during the Hawke and Keating governments. He then became the chief executive officer of Australian Red Cross and led the organisation for a decade from 2005 to 2015.
**Chris Wallace** is associate professor at the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation, Faculty of Business Government & Law, University of Canberra, and a visiting fellow at the School of History, ANU. She is the official historian, National Archives of Australia, for the 2000 and 2001 Cabinet Papers release.

**Kate White** is an adjunct associate professor in the School of Education at Federation University and director of the 14-country Women in Higher Education Management Network. She has published 17 books. The most recent are *Gendered Success in Higher Education: Global Perspectives* (co-edited with P. O’Connor, 2017) and *Keeping Women in Science* (2014). *Gender, Power and Higher Education in a Globalised World*, co-edited with Pat O’Connor, will be published in 2021.

**Stephen Wilks** studied economic history at Monash University before embarking on a mixed career in government based in Canberra and overseas. This was leavened by a shadow career writing reviews and articles on Australian history and much else, prior to returning to study in the School of History at ANU. He now works in the National Centre of Biography and is author of ‘*Now is the Psychological Moment*: Earle Page and the Imagining of Australia’ (2020). He is completing a project funded by the Department of the House of Representatives, concerning speakers, deputy speakers and clerks of the house since Federation.

**Blair Williams** is a research fellow/lecturer with the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership at ANU. She is a regular federal political correspondent for Radio Adelaide and a monthly contributor to the *Canberra Times*. She is currently working on an analysis of gendered media coverage of women leaders’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and examining the gendered double standards of Murdoch press coverage of political women. Her research has been published in *Feminist Media Studies, Parliamentary Affairs, Politics & Gender* and the *Australian Journal of Political Science*, and she has multiple entries in the *International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media, and Communication* (2020).
About the Journal

The *Australian Journal of Biography and History* is an initiative of the National Centre of Biography (NCB) in the Research School of Social Sciences at The Australian National University. The NCB was established in 2008 to extend the work of the Australian Dictionary of Biography and to serve as a focus for the study of life writing in Australia, supporting innovative research and writing to the highest standards in the field, nationally and internationally. The *Australian Journal of Biography and History* seeks to promote the study of biography in Australia. Articles that appear in the journal are lively, engaging and provocative, and are intended to appeal to the current popular and scholarly interest in biography, memoir and autobiography. They recount interesting and telling life stories and engage critically with issues and problems in historiography and life writing. The journal publishes peer-reviewed articles on Australian historical biography, including biographical studies, studies relating to theory and methodology, and the associated genres of autobiography, life writing, memoir, collective biography and prosopography. We are especially interested in articles that explore the way in which biography and its associated genres can illuminate themes in Australian history, including women in Australian society, family history, transnational networks and mobilities, and Indigenous history.

Submission Details

Please send article submissions or abstracts to the Editor, Dr Malcolm Allbrook, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University. Email: Malcolm.Allbrook@anu.edu.au.

Articles should be in the range of 5,000 to 8,000 words (excluding footnotes), although longer submissions may be considered after consultation with the Editor.

**Style and referencing:** please use footnotes in Chicago style, and follow Australian spelling.