

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE: ELECTORAL POLITICS IN 20TH CENTURY NEW SOUTH WALES, Volume One, 1901 to 1927; Volume Two, 1930 to 1965; Volume Three, 1968 to 1999

Michael Hogan & David Clune (eds), Sydney: Parliament of New South Wales & University of Sydney, 2001. Vol. 1, ISBN 0909907 39 0, xiv + 391 (incl. index); Vol. 2, 0909907 40 4, xiv + 493 (incl. index); Vol. 3, 0909907 41 2, xiv + 446 (incl. index).

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The libraries of Australian parliaments are excellent institutions as many people (such as myself) can readily attest. Until very recently, however, I would have said that the parliamentary libraries of the Commonwealth and Victoria are the best. My reason for saying that, however, would be the excellence of their services in matters current. Now that I have studied these three volumes under review I would say that, in matters historical, the Parliamentary Library of New South Wales is pre-eminent. It also shows every sign of staying ahead in that game with further publications which will be of enormous historical value.

I became aware of the idea behind these volumes long before they were actually published in 2001. Beginning late in 1995 I bought, at the Library Shop of the State Library of NSW (and for a mere \$9–95) the 45-page booklet by David Clune dealing with the historic 1941 NSW state election, which began Labor's 24-year rule under Premier McKell. Very soon thereafter, early in 1996 and at the same place, I bought (also for a mere \$9–95) the 53-page booklet by Chris Puplick dealing with the historic 1965 election which ended the premiership of John Brophy Renshaw (Labor) and began that of Sir Robert Askin (Liberal).

Others followed in quick succession, the next being the 1922 election. The first advertising flyer is worth quoting. 'The Department of Government, University of Sydney and the New South Wales Parliamentary Library are proud to announce the first three publications in the election series, 1922 by Michael Hogan, 1941 by David Clune and 1965 by Chris Puplick.' There followed this description, under the crowned crest of the Parliament of New South Wales:

Each monograph provides a succinct yet comprehensive account of the campaign, the policy speeches, the events leading up to the election and the political and general background. Written by authors selected for their expertise in the area, these studies will be an invaluable resource for the scholar and will be of interest to the more general reader. Election result statistics and electoral maps are included in each volume.

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On the facing page under the crest of the University of Sydney ('Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato') there is this from the series editor, Associate Professor Michael Hogan:

In recent years there has been a strong academic and journalistic interest in Australian elections, especially at the Federal level. There are substantial books which chronicle every Federal election since at least 1972, and in some cases there are numerous books on the one contest. In contrast, State elections are written up in newspapers and in the occasionally more extended treatment, but in general are ignored. This Series is an attempt to redress the imbalance, at least for the State of New South Wales, by providing a cumulative record of State electoral contests since Federation. The Series will eventually provide an episodic political chronicle of twentieth century New South Wales. It will thus complement the pioneering work of Rydon and Spann's *New South Wales Politics, 1901–1910*. The hope is that the series will provide a useful research starting point for many scholars, and will also promote a wider interest in New South Wales politics and history.

Very soon after buying those three monographs (for which I would have paid \$27 in all if bought together) I noticed favourable reviews in historical and political academic journals, for example the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* in 1996 and *Australian Historical Studies* in 1997 but, for reasons I cannot define, I seemed to lose interest (purely temporarily, mind you) in the politics of New South Wales.

Then in 2001 I received these three volumes as a gift and it became clear what had been done. Each of the monographs was put together into volumes so that there is contained a chapter on every general election in New South Wales during the twentieth century — in chronological order. Yet in each case there has been a 'jazzing up' effect.

For example, the 1922 Michael Hogan monograph is a straight narrative of 44 pages with tables and maps. However, if one looks at pages 233 to 267 of Volume One it becomes clear how well set out it is. The pattern of maps is the same throughout the whole volume and, in addition, there are inserts with biographies and photographs for leading figures, page 236 for James Dooley (1877–1950), page 240 for Sir George Fuller (1861–1940), page 242 for Sir Daniel Levy (1872–1937) and page 256 for John Joseph Gregory McGirr (1879–1949). For every one of the essays, as for 1922, the cartoons are excellent.

Purely as a form of narcissism I looked up my own name in the index for Volume Three dealing with the elections from 1968 to 1999 and noticed that my own commentaries were recorded in respect of the 1968, 1971 and 1973 general elections. That, however, brought about another thought. Since all of those comments were about the electoral system I went through every chapter and noted the consistently high quality of analysis there was about the various changes to the NSW electoral system throughout the century.

Reference was made above to ‘authors selected for their expertise in the area’. Perhaps they should be listed here, taking all three volumes as one. They are Scott Bennett, Ian Campbell, Craig Clothier, David Clune, Kevin Cosgrove, Christopher Cunneen, Robert Dempsey, Frank Frost, Antony Green, Jim Hagan, Don Harwin, Michael Hogan, John McCarthy, Chris Puplick, Geoffrey Robinson, Rodney Smith, Tony Smith and Ken Turner.

Because these volumes were sent to me as a ‘freebie’ I have no idea what they would cost to buy. The inside cover of all three says: ‘This project has been supported by the National Council for the Centenary of Federation. Without that assistance it would have been impossible to produce a work of this quality.’ That suggests the cost may be less expensive than one might suppose. What would I have been prepared to pay? Let me express it in this way: recently I paid \$150 for *The Oxford Companion to the High Court of Australia*, being 804 pages edited by Tony Blackshield, Michael Coper and George Williams. Would I have paid \$150 for these NSW volumes? You bet, I would.

It was asserted above ‘that, in matters historical, the Parliamentary Library of New South Wales is pre-eminent. It also shows every sign of staying ahead of the game with further publications which will be of enormous historical value.’ By that remark I had in mind that recently the NSW Parliamentary Library wrote to me and I quote their opening paragraph:

In 2006 New South Wales will celebrate 150 years of responsible government. The Premier has appointed a committee to undertake and fund scholarly research to commemorate the Sesquicentenary. The project will obviously concern itself with works of relevance to the history of the political development of this State. One of the major projects will be a one-volume work of studies of the Premiers of NSW since Federation. The work is intended to be somewhat analogous to Michelle Grattan’s recent book on the Prime Ministers.

Anyway, the purpose of the letter was to invite me to write the chapter on Eric Willis. So I went straight to Volume Three of *The People’s Choice: Electoral Politics in 20th Century New South Wales*. There on page 118 one finds a brief biography of Sir Eric Archibald Willis (1922–1999). My researches have begun! ▲