

EDMUND BARTON: THE ONE MAN FOR THE JOB

by Geoffrey Bolton, Allen & Unwin, 2000, pp. 385, RRP \$39.95. ISBN 1 86508 409 3

BIG JOHN FORREST, 1847–1918: A FOUNDING FATHER OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

by Frank Crowley, UWA Press, 2000, pp.540, RRP. \$49.50.

Reviewer: Helen Irving*

Like claimants to an inheritance based on paternity, there are many Australian Fathers' around these days. Federation took place before DNA testing, so we can never be completely certain who gets the money, although some of the past claims have been particularly weak (the decision to entitle a posthumously-edited collection of portraits by L.F. Crisp, *Federation Fathers*¹ when this includes George Dibbs, ardent NSW anti-Federationist, must remain the most bizarre).

In Faulconbridge, outside Sydney, Henry Parkes's gravestone bears the title that he alone wore for half a century, 'Father of Federation'. But the American expression 'Founding Fathers', as J.A. La Nauze pointed out in 1968, was almost never heard in Australia before Crisp himself employed it in 1949.² The term's use has since multiplied, almost dizzyingly in recent years, although the American attitude of reverence it is meant to convey still seems to lag a good way behind. In La Nauze's words, 'those who can claim [the title] will have a place in Australian history'.³ But, marketing strategies aside, it is a trend that runs counter to the recent generation of Federation histories. These have painted Federation as a complex cultural and political process, one with many 'parents', including ordinary men outside the parliaments, artists, writers and even women.

It is refreshing then to find a new biography of one of the most obvious 'fathers' which avoids the temptation to employ the term. Geoffrey Bolton's *Edmund Barton* is subtitled simply, 'The one man for the job'. Even its blurb is restrained. It talks — accurately — of Barton as 'only one of the many who contributed to the federal cause', yet who came to be 'regarded as its actual and symbolic leader'. It has the virtues of old-style biography (of which the only other *Barton*, by John Reynolds,⁴ is a fine example) without being the traditional one-dimensional portrait of a public man. It tells us what we need to know about Barton in order to understand his significance in Australian history, but avoids the Michael Holroyd *Lytton Strachey*⁵ approach, in which (however elegantly) everything, including the metaphorical laundry list, is recorded.

Still we learn a satisfying amount about Barton's 'inner life' and much about his family circumstances. His wife, Jeannie, who is merely a shadow in Reynolds' book, is a living

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¹ Crisp, *Federation Fathers*, ed. John Hart, Melbourne University Press, 1990. Crisp's original sub-title for the Dibbs essay called him a 'Prophet of Unification'.

² La Nauze, 'Who are the Fathers?' [1968] reproduced in H. Irving and S. Macintyre (eds), *J. A. La Nauze. No Ordinary Act: Essays on Federation and the Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, 2001

³ *Ibid*, p. 87.

⁴ Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1948.

⁵ 1967; 1st Penguin edition 1971, pp. 1144.

character in Bolton's. Barton's unwavering devotion to his family and his single-minded dedication to the Federation cause, his taste for idle pleasures and his willingness to endure great physical deprivation when inspired (as he was by Federation), emerge as continuous parts of his character. Barton's highly unusual combination of simple, personable and conciliatory character with great intelligence and talent was, as Bolton shows, one of the key elements in Federation's success. Bringing together not only disputatious colonies, but also warring parties and factions within the colonies, and finding a form of compromise in which most felt they had gained something, represent a skill of almost breathtaking proportion. Parkes was too vain to have pulled it together. Deakin, despite his nickname, was not sufficiently affable to have made all those big men believe they could be mates. Reid was 'too NSW' and Kingston too explosive. Both were disliked by too many. Griffith was too technical and insufficiently nationalist. Forrest was a clever player, but only as a big fish in a very small pond.

This much is clear from Crowley's biography of 'Big John Forrest'. The work is a combination of an abridged first volume of Forrest's life, first published in 1971, and the hitherto-unpublished manuscript of volume two. It fills one of the remaining serious gaps in Federation literature and completes the biographical line around the continent. It evokes some of the most elusive and fascinating questions for Federation historians: what interest did the distant colony of Western Australia really have in joining with the other colonies? What did the people of Western Australia believe they were doing in federating (with a high proportion voting Yes in the Constitution Bill referendum of 1900)? Why, then, did they seek to leave soon after 1901, and why have they gone on talking about secession ever since? These questions are not just historical curiosities. They go to the very heart of Australia's federal compact. They test the rival claims that the Constitution's authority derives from an Imperial Act and that it derives from the assent of the Australian people. They are questions about the foundations of the legitimacy of the modern nation state. This book does not directly explore such questions, but it is genuinely 'essential reading' for anyone who seeks to understand both the detail and the bigger picture of Federation.

John Forrest, a West Australian 'native' (born in Bunbury, in 1847), spent his early years as an explorer and surveyor, traversing the uncharted territories of the Crown Colony for many years, searching, among other things, for the lost Leichhardt expedition party, and forming an unusual appreciation of aboriginal skills and culture. In 1883 he was appointed Surveyor-General and, in the same year, sworn in as a permanent member of the first Executive Council of Western Australia. When his colony gained responsible government at the close of 1890, he became its first Premier and there he stayed until he entered the Commonwealth Ministry in 1901, outlasting all the other colonial premiers in a decade marked by an unusually high degree of political stability. He engaged in all the official Federation processes, despite much discouraging ambivalence in the west and the many days travelling which were necessary to reach even Adelaide, let alone the eastern cities. He reluctantly took part in the critical Premiers' Conference of early 1895, and although he disliked its Plan for an elected Convention and Constitution Bill referendums, in the end went along with much of it, where Queensland (also reluctant) only completed half the plan.

The Forrest who emerges is a 'Founding Father' because he finally brought his colony into Federation. But this was not the result of an ardent commitment to the goal. Forrest was moderately committed all along, but he waxed and waned with the fortunes of his

colony and as his own political stability demanded. His was the response of a practical, pragmatic politician, and he appears almost completely unmoved by the vision of greater, higher things that stirred his eastern counterparts. His idea of the future Commonwealth was Western Australia writ large. Forrest supported Commonwealth powers over postal and telegraphic services, for example, because without these powers he thought the Commonwealth would have little to do, with no land, or mines, or railways to administer. He had no anticipation of the Commonwealth's carving out a new, national realm, or of growth in the nature and scope of politics over the coming new century. And yet, his government was sufficiently progressive, for example, to adopt an advanced system of industrial arbitration in 1894, and to enfranchise its women before the turn of the century.

The women's vote in Western Australia has been a subject of much interest among feminist historians in the last two decades, and the opportunity to gain the Western Australian government's perspective from the inside is exciting. As in a number of places in the biography, however, Crowley does not appear to recognise the heightened level of interest in particular questions and does not anticipate his readers. However, while there are no new clues as to how women got the vote in Western Australia, it does happily put to rest the illogical claim that it had something to do with Federation.

It is in many respects a rather old-fashioned biography, heavy and plain like its subject, stuck in the era in which it first appeared. It includes too much detail about the young Forrest's expeditions and not enough about the Federal Conventions, telling us both more and less than we want to know. The bigger questions are only answered in between the lines and the important secondary characters in Forrest's life remain distant and wooden. The contrast between Bolton's Jeannie Barton and Crowley's Margaret Forrest is striking. It lacks the elegance and sparkle Bolton brings to his subject, and this is not simply a matter of differences in character. Barton was also a simple man, with none of the comical attributes of Reid, or the mystical intensity of Deakin, or the fiery passion of Kingston. He is difficult to make into a page-turner. His greatest weakness was food and drink. The greatest mystery that surrounds him was how a good natured but frequently indolent man could be so aroused by a hugely demanding political goal and how he could keep going despite many set-backs. We have much more of an appreciation of the answer now than we did before. Both books are historically invaluable. But Bolton's *Barton* is a pleasure to read. Which man would you choose as the 'Father'? Surely the one man for the job. ▲

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS

edited by Michelle Grattan, Sydney; New Holland Publishers, 2000, 512pp

THE AUSTRALIAN CENTURY: POLITICAL STRUGGLES IN THE BUILDING OF A NATION

edited by Robert Manne, Melbourne, Text Publishers, 1999, 333pp.

Reviewer: Neville Meaney*

Who are Australia's political heroes? Why are Australians, unlike the Americans, not familiar with the leaders who made the nation and guided it through the great crises of the 19th and 20th centuries? Why do they not have any sense of their political history? The onset of the debate over republicanism and the centenary of federation seems to have caused publicists and pundits to become quite concerned about this widespread ignorance. No doubt, looking back from this contemporary vantage point at the piecemeal severing of ties with Britain over the last thirty years, they are aware that Australia has come to the end of an era and as a result they now search around for an indigenous tradition which will have its own legitimacy. And, in one sense, this is what these two complementary books are about.

But such a *search*, like the criticism of Australian ignorance which prompts it—at least in the form in which it presents itself — is misplaced. It was the intimate ties with the 'Mother Country' which gave authority to Australia's political culture, its political ideas and institutions, its constitutional conventions and customs. Since, unlike the Americans — and it is always the Americans who are the touchstone for this critique — Australians had no reason to rebel against Britain or Europe, they could, even as they pragmatically mutated their colonial inheritance for their own purposes, take it for granted as the validating principle of political life. They had no need of a national myth of liberation from old world oppression and, therefore, no need of distinctive political heroes and martyrs.

Moreover, this disquiet with Australians' failure to remember and revere their prime ministers when compared with Americans' veneration of their presidents lacks a proper sense of the differences between the two political systems. Indeed, it is true that Americans have a national holiday on Presidents Day, appropriately enough George Washington's birthday. Yet it is inconceivable that there should be, in either Australia or Britain, a national holiday in honour of prime ministers. In Australia we do have the Queen's Birthday holiday but for a variety of reasons, national and constitutional, it does not have the same connotations as Presidents Day. The president is both the formal head of state as well as the effective head of government. The president is the symbol of the nation as well as its chief executive officer. Under the parliamentary system which Australians have inherited, these roles are divided, the monarch being head of state and the prime minister, as the first minister of the crown, responsible for politics and policy. Thus it is perfectly understandable why Australians have not had the same impulse to see the prime minister as the personal embodiment of the nation and its values.

Michelle Grattan in her introduction sets *Australian Prime Ministers* in this context. She writes that 'Australians are largely ignorant about their early prime ministers, and frequently cynical about their contemporary leaders' and reminds us that two-thirds of the people have not heard of 'the founding prime minister, Edmund Barton, who

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putatively might be considered Australia's equivalent of George Washington'. The book, however, is not hagiography. The authors treat the twenty-five prime ministers, generally speaking, with a sympathetic detachment. The approaches vary from a rather simple chronicle to a more serious and coherent attempt to explain and evaluate: Paul Kelly's Fraser and Neal Blewett's Hawke are particularly good. Overall, as one might expect from such a work, there is no unifying theme. That the task has been to provide a political biography of all the prime ministers regardless of the time they served, including even the seat-warmers, Page, Forde and McEwen, has meant that the emphasis is on the office as such and not the political achievement. As for content, given the character of the work, it might be useful to compare the entries in the *Dictionary of Australian Biography* with these essays. It should also be noted that there are a number of factual errors in the accounts. The most egregious is the statement in the Fisher chapter that he won an August 1914 election and 'As prime minister Fisher inherited the Great War then thirteen days old.' (p.82) Other examples of carelessness can be found in the assertion that in 1919 Enid Lyons was troubled by the prospect that if her husband entered Federal politics in that year, she and her family would have to remove to Canberra (p. 161), and in making Billie Hughes External Affairs Minister from February 1936 instead of November 1937. According to the 'Acknowledgments' many people read drafts and checked texts. It is surprising that so many obvious mistakes escaped these eagle eyes.

In *The Australian Century*, the authors by looking at the great political issues and conflicts of the Commonwealth years show how these prime ministers, at least the most notable among them, responded to these crises. This is another multi-authored volume: indeed, two of the contributors, Paul Kelly and Ian Hancock, appear in both works. This book covers, in chronological order, Federation, the First World War, the Great Depression, the making of the Liberal party, the split in the post-second World War Labor party, the so-called 'Whitiam Revolution' and Globalisation under the Hawke and Keating administrations. It reveals a broader intent in its two final chapters which deal with 'Aboriginal Rights' and the movement 'Towards the Republic'. That is, there would seem to be some kind of search for an Australian political tradition implicit in the enterprise, possibly a hint of a teleological national story. But, even if it can be discerned, this purpose lacks any clear definition or integrated direction.

It is good that these books are attempting a revival of interest in Australia's political history. There is, however, a need to redress the poverty of scholarship dealing with Australia's intellectual history in a much more self-conscious, wide-ranging and rigorous manner. Australia's political culture cannot be understood by examining it only from within its own parameters. While a too easy reliance on a British heritage may have led to the lack of curiosity about the ideas which shaped our political institutions, moved our political leaders, gave authority to their actions and morally justified their policies, an ignoring of that heritage will not help us to appreciate better the way in which Australians have adapted that past to their peculiar federal system and to their own choices and values. The only worthwhile freedom which a republic can achieve is one which in absorbing that past makes it over so that it no longer stands above us or is separate from us but simply serves us. Let us in every sense make more of our Commonwealth. ▲

A WITNESS TO HISTORY: The Life and Times of Robert Arthur Broinowski

by Richard Broinowski, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, Vic., 2000

Reviewer: Derek Drinkwater*

The biographer and historian, Philip Guedalla, defined biography as 'a region bounded on the north by history, on the south by fiction, on the east by obituary, and on the west by tedium'. Richard Broinowski's well-written life of his grandfather remains securely in the sphere of biography, the author having prevented it from overbalancing into history, fiction or obituary. This book is devoid also of any literary tedium. It tells the private and public story of an unusual individual who was, as the present Clerk of the Senate writes in his Foreword, an exemplar of the self-educated and public-spirited Edwardian (and, for that matter, Georgian) middle-class, that contributed so much to the life of post-colonial Australia in the early decades of last century.

Robert ('Bruno') Broinowski was born in Melbourne in 1877, one of seven surviving children of the artist and ornithologist, Gracius Broinowski, who produced several enduring works on Australian wildlife. Like those of his friend, Edmund Barton, Gracius' finances fluctuated, but he managed to send his son to Sydney's St Aloysius' College. After working briefly in Barton's Sydney law office, Robert became a clerk in the Department of Defence in 1902, and served as private secretary to three ministers of defence between 1907 and 1911. He then transferred to the Department of the Senate as Clerk and Shorthand-Writer, and went on to serve as Clerk of the Papers (1915–20), Usher of the Black Rod, Clerk of Committees and Accountant of the Senate (1920–30), and Clerk-Assistant and Secretary of the Joint House Department (1930–38). Robert retired, after three years as Clerk of the Senate, in 1942. He spent an active retirement in Sydney, where he died in 1959. His grandson states in his Introduction that Robert was usually 'an observer and facilitator more than a participant'. Yet, as he rightly adds, in this role Robert generally occupied the box seat. What makes Robert such an interesting biographical subject, however, is not only his achievement as a servant of the Parliament, but also his pro-active presence in the society around him — in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. He was, in Richard Broinowski's words, 'a poet, a supporter of Australian writers, an early and prolific radio broadcaster, a naturalist, a bush-walker and an amateur anthropologist'. His Melbourne interests included repertory, literary and walking clubs, and poetry magazines, one of which (*The Spinner*) he edited from 1924. To him Canberra is indebted for the rose gardens at what is now the Old Parliament House. He was active, too, in several of the capital's artistic and literary bodies, and in its tennis, bowling and hockey organisations. In retirement Robert was a wartime propagandist; reviewed and wrote articles for the *Sydney Morning Herald*; produced Australian Broadcasting Commission scripts; and became a regular radio broadcaster.

For students of Parliament Broinowski, as a former Clerk of the Senate, and parliamentary officer of thirty years standing, has special interest. As a close observer of World War I, the Great Depression, half of World War II, and the end of the old Australia, he was well placed to observe and reflect on the implications of these events for the governance of the country. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Robert supported

* Derek Drinkwater, an officer of the Department of the Senate, was Assistant Editor, *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate: Volume 1: 1901–1929*, Melbourne University Press, 2000.

the creation of a national capital at Canberra and, as Usher of the Black Rod, played a central role in its establishment. He also fought hard, under successive Senate Presidents, to protect Senate powers from Executive incursions, especially during wartime. Robert's written comments on a 28 July 1942 letter from Prime Minister John Curtin complaining about proposed Senate Estimates indicate how firmly he was prepared to defend the Senate, while remaining convinced that after World War II, 'Parliament would re-emerge . . . as the proper legislative arm of government'. The book contains some of Robert's excellent judgments on the political *dramatis personae* of the period, taken from his unpublished works such as 'The Precursors'. On William Morris Hughes, for example: 'The place Mr Hughes occupies in Australian history will rest on the fact that he was the first to state Australia's case to the world on the high level of world politics'.

Robert's zealotry in the performance of his duties prompted both amusing and acerbic responses. As Usher, he banned parliamentary staff from playing ping-pong within Parliament House, an action that annoyed members of the Parliamentary Staffs Sports Association, of which Robert was President. The ban drew this response from C. J. Dennis:

*Oh, his brows were wreathed with thunder, as he gazed in stupid wonder,
As he heard the sinful ping-pong and the sacrilegious pong.
And he said, 'Henceforth I ban it. If I knew who 'twas began it
I would have him drawn and quartered, for 'tis obviously wrong.'
Then back adown the corridors, unbending as a god,
Went the adamantine Usher of the Big Black Rod.*

The journalist Richard Hughes' criticism of a Senate decision acknowledged Robert's influence as Clerk in a backhanded way: 'the real ruler of the Senate is a thin querulous fellow, with a beaky nose, light, angry eyebrows, and a small wig. He hisses acid instructions and advice to the timid senators like a bad-tempered stage prompter'.

Richard Broinowski has avoided hagiography and produced a sound biographical study (what Sir Harold Nicolson would have called a 'pure' biography) and a revealing historical portrait of a nation in transition. The Epilogue, in which the author describes a meeting between himself and Robert in the Canberra of today, is a moving and well-crafted conclusion to the book. There are occasional slips, however: the senior public servant, Atlee Hunt, spelt his name with one t, not two; to open the Commonwealth Parliament in May 1927, King George V did not send the second of his *two* sons, but the second of his *four* surviving sons (his fifth son had died in 1919); and in Chapter 12 Robert's radio broadcasting career is said to have begun in both 1925 and 1926. The C. J. Dennis ping-pong verses (there were five), appeared in the Melbourne *Herald* on 17 July 1929 and not, as Richard Broinowski states, in the *Bulletin* 'sometime in 1930'. The author also sometimes lapses into contemporary cliché with expressions such as 'mutually supportive'. Nevertheless, readers will find depicted here an admirable, flawed man, many of whose public and private hopes were disappointed, but who never ceased to find solace in new plans and endeavours. Those with an interest in one of Australia's more illuminating marginal commentators, whose contribution to Commonwealth parliamentary practice and early twentieth century Australian cultural life has been largely overlooked, would do well to read this engaging book. ▲