***AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS***
edited by Michelle Grattan (Sydney; New Holland Publishers, 2000), 512pp. and *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

* Department of History, University of Sydney

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 uniting 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 'Ackowledgments' 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. ▲