

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

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for the governance of the country. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Robert supported 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. ▲