
In Search of John Christian Watson: Labor's First Prime Minister by Michael Easson, 2024, Connor Court Publishing, pp 193 RRP \$29.95, ISBN 9781923224155

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Michel Easson, in his monograph *In Search of John Christian Watson: Labor's first Prime Minister*, explains his aim was to explore a comment from noted Labor movement historian Bede Nairn that John Christian Watson 'was the great figure produced by NSW Labor, who shaped the movement more than anyone else'.¹ Given that he only served as Prime Minister for only 113 days 120 years ago and in legislative terms only six Bills were passed could clearly form only part of his 'significance'.

Easson's approach is to widen his assessment and to explore not just Watson's Labor Party career, but to add a broader second lens of his later adventurous, successful and influential business life. In this respect Easson's book presents a different perspective to the earlier works of Al Grassby, Silvia Ordonez² or Ross McMullen.³

Easson is particularly qualified to explore this dual perspective, as Watson resembles his own career as a long-term Labor member and successful business leader. His insight makes a compelling case that Watson's most powerful influence on his Party was his ability to deliver pragmatic and decisive leadership qualities. Qualities that because of the brevity of his Prime Ministership, were demonstrated in most in his abilities to

¹ Michael Easson, *In Search of John Christian Watson: Labor's First Prime Minister* by Michael Easson. 2024, Connor Court Publishing: Brisbane.

² Al Grassby and Silvia Ordonez, *The Man Time Forgot: The Life and Times of John Christian Watson*. 2001, Pluto Press: London.

³ Ross McMullen, *So Monstrous a Travesty: Chris Watson and the World's First National Labour Government*. 2004, Scribe Publications: Melbourne.

navigate the ‘three elevens’ characteristic of the early Parliaments,⁴ where the balances of power were in a cycle of flux between the Protectionists, Free Traders and Labor.

Whilst Easson does not dwell particularly on Watson’s career in NSW politics, he does show in greater detail the machinations of Labor Party itself in these early times and Watson’s ability to bring members together or reconcile internal tensions. More precisely he presents a case for judging Watson’s skills in his Commonwealth era as managing the bigger, bolder political figures of his time such as Alfred Deakin, George Reid, King O’Malley, Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes. In doing so, he argues Watson showed to the emerging nation that the Labor movement was a legitimately broad Party capable of sound Government. Indeed, as Judith Brett in *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* notes, Deakin himself was full of praise for Watson as ‘an honourable, capable, open minded and amiable public man’.⁵

Watson, before leaving parliament, in 1909-10 spent time absent in South Africa managing mining operations which appear to have excited a broader interest for him. During this time of his absence the non-Labor parties coalesced under Deakin, and Labor was led by Andrew Fisher. Watson finally left Parliament in 1910.

Easson has traced in detail, Watson’s influence, involvement and ultimate demise from the issue of conscription that dominated Labor and then national political battlegrounds throughout the early 1900’s and especially leading up to and during the First World War. Watson, though a strong singular voice in the issues, aligned with Billy Hughes’ advocacy and was ultimately expelled from the Party following the split in 1916-17.⁶ Easson’s chapters on these issues are enlightening of the Watson character, and the commentary provides a close understanding of the battles that raged in those times. Watson’s position from these chapters is perhaps better understood than in many other commentaries of these times from other sources.

Where Easson is most able to bring a new appreciation of the Watson character, and his not insignificant skills, is in the brief but well-argued chapter on his life as a business

⁴ Easson, *In Search of John Christian Watson*, p. 56.

⁵ Judith Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin*. 2017, Text Publishing: Melbourne.

⁶ Easson, *In Search of John Christian Watson*, p. 4.

person.⁷ Particularly as the inaugural President of the National Roads Association in 1920 and subsequently the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA) until his death in 1941. He was clearly a major strategic figure in business and public policy during these times. Indeed, Watson is described as ‘sort of the unofficial PM of Auto-Australia’⁸ and Easson notes him as exuding ‘the image of the quintessential, reasonable man’.⁹ There is, in this short part, an insight of Watson that reflects Easson’s own business career.

In the end perhaps it remains equivocal as to whether Watson was *the* great or *a* great figure of the early Labor Party. Certainly though, Easson has shown that John Christian Watson was at least as enigmatic a political figure of his times as contemporaries Deakin, O’Malley, Fisher or Hughes.

⁷ Easson, *In Search of John Christian Watson*, pp. 117-132.

⁸ Easson, *In Search of John Christian Watson*, p. 123.

⁹ Easson, *In Search of John Christian Watson*, p. 178.