



---

Chapter Title: Political Biography: Its Contribution to Political Science

Chapter Author(s): Tracey Arklay

Book Title: Australian Political Lives

Book Subtitle: Chronicling political careers and administrative histories

Book Editor(s): Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna

Published by: ANU Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbjc9.6>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



ANU Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Australian Political Lives*

JSTOR

# Political Biography: Its Contribution to Political Science

Tracey Arklay

In Australia we rely on journalists to give the 'first draft' of history, chronicling people and events. Often immediate, spontaneous, exciting, seeking impact, what is reported is frequently the sexiest and occasionally the most sordid aspects of accounts and personalities. Such newspaper articles, for example, usually have a narrative structure; there is less analysis of 'why and how'. The research undertaken for media accounts is rarely 'triangulated'.<sup>1</sup> More reflective comment on why an event occurred or why a person acted in a particular way may well be lost in the ensuing debate. For journalists, a week is a long time in politics (in the words of the former British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson). This is in contrast to the time-line of biographers, who may take years and sometimes decades to complete their account of a subject's life. Journalists and biographers use different research methods and different sets of skills.

With the benefit of hindsight, journalistic reports, which are necessarily speedily written, may prove inaccurate and lack the balance that develops with the luxury of time. The price of the luxury of time is, however, usually loss of nuance. With controversial figures such as Gough Whitlam, for example, accounts of his brief and tumultuous time in office were either negative or positive. Whitlam was seen either as hero or villain (Walter 1997: 28). Malcolm Fraser, too, was accorded either a reluctant hero or departed demon status depending on which side of the political fence you sat (Weller 1989:xii). The political consequences of actions take longer to be felt, absorbed and filtered. Some journalists have become acclaimed historians/biographers in their own right. Paul Kelly, Michelle Grattan, Shaun Carney and David Marr are among those Australian journalists who continue to provide readers with an insight into how federal politics and its actors work through books as well as articles (see Weller 2005).

Biography is a very old form of political writing. Suetonius (1957) chronicled the lives of a selected number of 'great men', from Julius Caesar to Domitian, in his sensationalist *Twelve Caesars*. Plutarch's biographical studies, *Parallel Lives*, provided readers with an insight into the political events of classical Greece and Rome. His contrasting Greek and Roman personalities have long been heralded as a 'unique example of the genre of biography in the ancient world'.<sup>2</sup> Despite its long history, political biography as a genre remains under-appreciated and controversial – sometimes evoking palpable hostility among intellectuals who have argued that the form may be literary, but that it is not history (O'Brien, cited in Pimlott 1999). Critics of political biography note the marginal impact of

most individuals on big events. While political biography as part of mainstream political science is becoming better appreciated, there are still debates about the appropriateness of certain methodologies (see Brett 1997: vii).

This essay examines the genre of political biography. First, it defines what biography is or attempts to be. Second, it explores the different forms biography can take and the methodological approaches used in biography. It then reviews the contribution biographical study makes to political science and reviews the criticisms that have been made of the method. It concludes with an explanation of some of the problems encountered by writers attempting to re-create a life.

## What is biography?

A simple definition of biography is that it is 'an account of a person's life written, composed, or produced by another'.<sup>3</sup> Political biography is the form through which writers breathe life into archival documents such as letters and diaries, birth, death and marriage certificates, Hansard and official records, to assist in the re-creation of a life. To the criticism that biography is a means by which we get a chance to 'play God', biography, through utilising the rich information contained in yellowed relics of another era, can provide insights that are built upon by the writer. As Pimlott (1999:34) stated, 'the most exciting aspect of biography is that it links together human events in the way human beings actually experience them'. Biography should never be viewed as a tool by which to make universal sense of a subject. It is a subjective and highly interpretative method, one in which seeking the 'compassionate truth' should never be underplayed.

Biography is not simple reportage of one life (Pimlott 1985: xi), nor is it merely a narrative. It certainly cannot hope and should not pretend to be the whole truth. The method is historical, interpretive and, like much social science research, the implicit motivations drawn out in biography are frequently hard to test and often difficult to quantify. It is therefore selective and open to critique. Frequently, as is the case with L.F. Crisp's 1961 life of Ben Chifley and, three and a half decades later, David Day's Chifley, biographical research builds upon what has been uncovered by another. They can, thus, be viewed as 'works in progress,' progressively enhancing what is known about a subject as an increasingly detailed portrait emerges. It is questionable as to whether there is any such thing as a definitive biography. Some biographies, however, are indispensable and some of such quality that it is unlikely they will be superseded subsequently.

A challenge in writing about a life is acknowledging and processing the changes made during that life — personally, professionally and spiritually. Studies that focus on a person within a time-frame (for example, as prime minister only), and ignore other periods, are in danger of over-simplification. A.W. Martin, in the

two volume life of Robert Menzies, had to weave the story of a prime minister who, when he returned for his second term in 1949, was a substantially more mature individual than he had been during his first term (1939–41). How events affect personalities is as important as reflecting on how personalities shape events.

The approaches taken by biographers are varied and include the historical-chronological method, the psycho-analytical method, the historical-novella and the journalistic account. Biography has been defined as a 'dangerous art' (Rickard 1987). It certainly becomes that if the biographer claims to know 'what the person feels' (Tridgell 2004). Historical methodology, the relentless digging up of data to validate the writing of a life, defined by one author as 'rigorous, forensic inquiry', is where the craft of political biography begins (Wheatley 2002). That is the bare minimum. And yet, if political science without biography is, indeed, 'a form of taxidermy' (Lasswell, cited in Walter 1980), why is the methodology of biography on the whole so ill-defined? Many social research method texts do not refer to this form of research explicitly (see, for example, Neuman 1997). Could its popularity be one reason biography, until recently at least, has not rated highly among some academics?<sup>4</sup> Robert Skildelsky, biographer of Oswald Mosely (1975) and John Maynard Keynes (1983–2000), stated the method had 'not yet fully won its intellectual spurs ... as a cogent intellectual enterprise' (cited in Walter (forthcoming)).

Often the method appears as 'art', with amateurs as keen to take up the pen and write the life story of a favourite father, uncle or ancestor. But more prevalent are the thoroughly researched, professionally written, historical accounts which are the focus of this essay. It is here that we find the true craft of writing biography. These works weld the art and the science together. The end result of such writing can provide students of politics with another perspective on how power is wielded and shared, how leaders are made as well as born, and how circumstances can catapult ordinary people into extraordinary situations. Out of the biographical method emerges a set of understandings and contexts that are different from other social science endeavours — of necessity less theoretical and more personal, empathetic and narrative. Narrative research methodology 'directs questions about what it means to interpret and experience the world (rather than explain or predict it)' (Spina and Dodge 2005: 144). It is gaining respect as an approach which can increase our understanding of 'specific phenomena' such as leadership and life experiences of the people under study.<sup>5</sup>

John Dollard wrote in the 1930s about the criteria needed for researching life history.<sup>6</sup> These criteria were established to articulate what he believed should go into the ideal biography. At the forefront was the need to place the individual under study as one member of a social group — which would exist even without our particular subject being born. That provides the context to underpin the notions of where a particular subject fits into history. He urged writers to take

account of family influences — where did he/she fit into that grouping of people — the expectations they had of him/her, where was he/she placed in the family as well as the political views held by parents and family and then plot how he/she adapted those views within the context of his own life experiences. Dollard urged writers not to take the subjects own words for this — but triangulate through supporting evidence. Through assessing his/her family's views on broader agendas, writers are then more able to understand the earliest influences on our subject. This provides rudimentary notions of how he/she viewed the world, his/her ideological stance on issues such as, for example, the White Australia policy, communism or sectarianism. For political biographies Dollard suggested two necessary points of reference — the subject's political outlook and his/her style of work in politics (see Davies, 1972).

As Lasswell (cited in Davies 1972: 115) stated, answers to particular questions tell a great deal about the character under study. For example, he suggested the following questions as a tool that would assist researchers in building up a general biographical portrait:

- How does the individual react as a subordinate when confronted by superiors of different kinds (strong and brutal, masterful but objective, weak)?
- How does he act as a superior confronted by subordinates of different kinds (strong, hostile, dangerous rivals; strong and objective; weak)?
- What is his style of expression?
- What is his characteristic mode of thought, and style of decision?
- Is he inventive/ uninventive; quick or slow to suggest policies and tactics; influenced by facts and arguments, appeals to sentiment, personal inducements, sense of public interest, or coercion?
- Does he behave in a traditional style or self-consciously? Does victory or defeat elate or depress him?

## Why write biography?

A cynical take on biography is that it serves one of three purposes. First as a hagiography — biography is the standard format used to pay homage to great persons. Political hagiographies are frequently written by partisan persons. For example, the 1997 authorised biography of John Howard, by David Barnett and his wife Pru Goward, was regarded by many as being 'not only a hagiography but a very bad one too' (Switzer 2004:38). Switzer was not alone in his judgment. Alan Ramsey, political columnist of the Sydney Morning Herald, claimed it was not 'only a propagandist's book but a lazy book, too, which could have been written almost entirely from the public record'. The second reason for writing biography, cynics suggest, is to 'set an example for future generations' — Plutarch's various lives are instances of this approach. A final motivation is simply to 'make money' (Gerraty cited in Theakston 2000: 1).

H.B. Higgins, politician and High Court judge, stated that biography was a means by which ‘the biographer becomes the disciple, and his temptation to play God, presiding over the subject’s life, deftly pulling the strings’ is great (Rickard 1987). I could also add biographies are occasionally used as a way of ‘getting even’; a method by which to ‘discredit a person,’ ‘expose their failings’ or serve as a warning to future generations of what not to do. There are few of these — especially among more recent biographies. Many political biographies in Australia are written by salaried academics. Subjects are selected because they are historically significant and because with biographical research, there always remains the tantalising prospect of what may be uncovered. Many political biographies are funded and written to commemorate significant events — the centenary of the Australian federation, for example. Despite these serious works, the criticisms that have been levelled at the methodology have resulted in political biography being regarded as the ‘disciplinary poor relation’ to the study of political science more generally (Pimlott 1990:224). As Walter (forthcoming) states:

The concerns of social scientists with large collectives, mass behaviour, empirical data and testable propositions create difficulties for what are, at best, attempts to link single cases with institutional and historical contexts, and so biography is viewed with scepticism.

Biography and conjecture are a dangerous duo — and raise the question: how much about the life of a person can we hope to know? If biography can tell a life history by ‘expos[ing] those intersecting patterns of experience, personality and circumstance which mould a man’s response to the contingent and hence lie under the existential surface’ (Martin cited in Clendinnen 2004:14), why is it that so many biographers follow the conventional route of chronology? Perhaps because the other is too difficult. The psychoanalytic approach is controversial. While not every biographer sets out to write a psychological style of memoir, Walter is right when he suggested we do need to be aware of patterns of behaviour, how a person reacts under stress — those tell-tale signs — that reveal so much about the subject.

If biography is, as Michael Holroyd, biographer of Lytton Strachey and George Bernard Shaw, stated, a ‘cousin to the novel’ (Britain 2002:5), then how do you extract meanings from historical facts, archival documents and birth, death and employment records? Biography and memoirs recreate a life. In that regard they use similar ‘character-creating techniques’ to those used by writers of novels. They are one person’s ‘take’ on another. Seasoned biographers have noted the moral and ethical difficulties inherent in the task. As David Day reflected, after writing a biography of John Curtin, ‘it struck me how presumptuous it was for me to be digging around in someone’s past life’ (Day 2002a). Wheatley (2002) expressed this dilemma another way: he observed that with any person under

investigation, the life does not belong to 'readers, or fans, or political supporters ... Most of all ... the life does not belong to the biographer'. A biography in the end is one person's interpretation only.

### **What does biography add?**

Despite the recognition that biography is an incomplete science, biographical research is an 'important way of writing about the past and inspecting the human condition' (Pimlott 1999: 33). Through biographical research, individual experiences and identities can be explored. Biography provides an alternative point of analysis to the workings of social groups, situations and events, which is the normal frame of reference for historical research (see Lieblich et al. 1998: 8). As such it can broaden, rather than reduce, an understanding of who got 'what, when and how' (Lasswell 1970). Academics, critical of biography, argue that traditional historical research reaches a degree of truth and logical explanation for events better than any individual version could hope to do (Carr, cited Pimlott 1999: 32). Yet because biography looks in detail at one of the most micro levels of politics — the individual, the personality and the viewing of events through the lens of one set of eyes — supporters counter that biography could be viewed as a 'neglected' political science methodology that has 'enormous potential for the study of leadership' (Theakston 1997:661). In Australia, most political biographical studies have been on leaders of parties, or of governments (Porter 1993: 1).

Biography contextualises a life but can illuminate much more than just that. Not only is it informative about the person under investigation, it can also tell us much about the person writing the story. Well-written, thoroughly researched studies provide an opportunity to explore issues such as ideology, class struggles and the political machinations within a particular and personal timeframe. It can illustrate the deals, negotiations, horse trading and other compromises that are such an important part of politics. For the personal details, I note Day's recommendation that 'biographers mimic the genealogists and go to the basic sources, such as death certificates, birth certificates, marriage certificates, wills, probate, and employment records' (Day 2002b:36) to lay aside the myths and hyperbole and uncovering the 'fertile facts' that surround public figures — both good and bad (Pimlott 1999).

Author involvement varies depending upon the biographical style selected. Biographies that aim to be objectively written tend to stick close to verifiable facts and demonstrable truths, while the style of the narrative biography comes close to fiction where author interpretation and accounts of imagined conversations based on letters and diaries result in a work that reads more like a historical novel. In fact, all biographical styles use, to a greater or lesser extent, a mixture of these approaches as the author constructs a picture of a person's

life from fact and interpretation. One difficulty we are all confronted with is that line that crosses over from writing about what is known to what is unknown.

Questions about why we write biography have several possible answers. The first reason is media and monetarily driven. Biographies about politicians sell well. The second is that biographies provide useful overviews — allowing authors and readers to make connections with people and their history — that might otherwise have been left undiscovered. Finally, political biography can open unexpected doors, allowing researchers to gain new appreciations of past events (Pimlott 1999: 34-5).

### **What are the problems of writing biography?**

Practical problems of biographical research include issues of access and information; length and depth — do we focus, for example, only on a subject's public life? Is it possible to understand this life adequately without taking account of other facets that shape the motives, drives and contexts which make up a human being? If the subject has been previously under-researched, is part of the job of a biographer to make that life interesting or, at least, to find out why the life is interesting? Theakston (2000: 131) noted that biography risks exaggerating a subject's importance. Is it enough to document a public figure because they were there? Readability, reason and relevance — the three R's of writing — are challenges that should not be overlooked. As Wear has argued: 'the task of biography is difficult because it involves sorting through numerous accounts of the subject's career and settling on a final version that imposes order and structure' (Courier-Mail May 17, 2003). Rose (2000: 51) considered that biographers often under-conceptualise their subjects, treating the career of a prime minister as a 'unique set of events, with little or no attempt to plot changes over a period of time longer than the subject's term of office'. I would suggest that biographical writing, after intensive research, can shed light on why events occurred, the reactions of those closest to them, and provide readers with an impression of what life was like within a particular time frame. One example of this is Patrick Weller's *Malcolm Fraser PM*. While the author never claimed this work was a biography, it does nevertheless shed extensive light into Fraser's personality — someone who needed to be in control — and therefore illuminates the character perhaps more than originally intended. The book gives readers an insight into how a leader wielded power through the management and working of executive government.

### **Choosing a subject**

How do biographers choose their subjects? Why do they make the choices they do? David Marr (1980), for example, chose Barwick as a case study, because he did not like or admire him. It seems that his was not an isolated case; Edmund White has noted that 'biography is a form by which little people take revenge



on big people' (cited in Britain 2003). Yet Marr admitted that through his examination of Barwick, he ended up having more sympathy for his subject than he expected. Other biographers choose subjects because they knew them intimately — and liked them. Bob Hawke's biographer, Blanche d'Alpuget (1982), is a conspicuous example of this, in that she later became his wife. An earlier instance of a different type is L.F. Crisp's Ben Chifley (1961 — see Day 2002: 39). Tim Rowse (2002) was acquainted with his subject, Nugget Coombs. This led to a work that has been called 'a fine intellectual biography' but one that sheds very little light on the personal side of the subject under study, because of the author's personal promise to the subject under investigation, another reviewer was led to comment, 'a fascinating book, but is it a biography of Coombs?' (Kirby 2002:102; and Nethercote 2002: 104). In the acknowledgments Rowse explains why his biography is very much about the public life of Nugget Coombs:

Coombs' deposited papers do not include items that reveal what he considered to be his private life ... my consent to Coombs' public/private boundary restrained me from exploring that theme very far. The resulting book is more impersonal than most readers of biographies would wish (Rowse 2002: viii).

Subjectivity, bias and motivations for writing a biography are important considerations when choosing a subject.

Most biographies begin by placing the subject in context. In biographies of politicians this includes an explanation as to why the subject is worthy of further study. For example, one of Geoffrey Bolton's tasks when writing the biography on Edmund Barton was to explain or justify Barton as an important historical figure. Through this sort of engagement, the biographer can find him or herself breaking down the established myths that exist about politicians. In Barton's case this added more substance to the character than was commonly known, for he had earned the reputation of someone who largely enjoyed good food, good wine and convivial company. Bolton's book, by contrast, portrayed Barton as 'the man for the job' — right for his time.

I face a similar challenge in writing a life of Arthur Fadden. Part of the research aims to explore why this individual, Fadden, described as a humorist and as a 'hail fellow well met' type of person, and often largely unnoticed or at best regarded as a bit player in history, is worthy of deeper political analysis. In the case of Arthur Fadden questions about how he maintained a key leadership role for 18 years, some of which were difficult for a still rocky coalition, have so far gone unanswered. He is mentioned in indexes of other books written on the era — once again parodied as a friendly, avuncular figure but with little substance added. Arthur Fadden was elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly in 1932. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1936 where he remained

for twenty-two years until retirement in 1958. After only four years he was appointed to the coalition ministry and was soon Treasurer. In 1940 Fadden was the compromise candidate who won the leadership of the Country Party, a position he retained for the next eighteen years notwithstanding the presence of such heavyweights as Jack McEwen. In 1941 he became prime minister in his own right following the resignation of Robert Menzies — a position he held for a brief and stormy period until his budget was rejected on the floor of the House of Representatives, the only government to be defeated on its budget. As Leader of the Opposition, 1941-1943, he worked closely with Prime Minister John Curtin and his own successor as Treasurer, Ben Chifley.

In the 1940s Fadden and Menzies forged a working relationship that enabled the coalition parties to emerge as a viable alternative to the Labor Party. In 1949, by way of vigorous campaigning on petrol rationing, and his strident politicking against communism, Fadden was instrumental in securing an electoral victory. He regained the Treasury — the second (and last) Country Party member to head that department.<sup>7</sup> His record as Australia's longest serving Treasurer (around 3620 days) was exceeded for the first time by Treasurer Peter Costello in February 2006.

Political biography provides one set of tools by which to explore history and events from within the temporal and historical context of one life. It allows exploration of the events of history — from a micro perspective — looking at them through the eyes of someone who lived, breathed and was part of that history. No approach is all-embracing. There are difficulties in this methodology. What biographers have — unless they are lucky enough to be working with a live and cooperative subject — are the official records, speeches made, occasional letters deposited in the archives, and personal accounts, mostly written by others. Having a cooperative subject, however, may introduce another set of problems those concerned with hagiography: bias, subjectivity and sometimes even honour. Recent biographies which have been seen to experience these problems are d'Alpuget on Hawke and Barnett & Goward on Howard. Promises made to the live subject are hard to break even in the later event of their death, as Tim Rowse's work on Nugget Coombs exemplifies.

## Dead or live subjects?

Paul Hasluck's personal view on biography was that it 'should wait until the subject is dead' (Porter 1993: 4). Judith Brett (1997: 1) refers to the 'task of political biography' which involves telling the story of a life in an intelligible way. When writing a biography of someone who is dead, as in the case of Arthur Fadden, where does the biographer begin to travel down the path of a life and hope to understand it, especially when few contemporaries of the study are still alive? How do we begin to feel like we know, even remotely, someone who leaves few personal records, nor kept any diaries? Dealing with live subjects

also poses risks. Walter (1980: xv) refers to image maintenance which is one of the important pieces of political armoury. Studies of live subjects must not be hampered by the subject's natural desire to appear in a favourable light. Even after death, family sensibilities may need to be considered. Sometimes a difficult balancing act ensues between the need to write a truthful account, while at the same time doing the minimum of harm to family reputations. Decisions to include information gleaned about the private lives of public figures will always be controversial.

## How to read between the lines?

When writing a biography of a political figure there are often archival trails to follow. Hansard records official speeches. In the case of Treasurer Fadden, rumours that he was once, as Treasurer, too affected by alcohol to complete a speech remain unproven. The official record, Hansard, shows no such speech unfinished. Were such rumours true or simply malicious? — we are left to speculate. Likewise, his deliberations and prompting of Menzies to ban the Communist Party remain only third person accounts — because as yet I have not interviewed anyone who can give a definitive account as to what was the feeling at the time. Did Fadden have concerns about individual freedoms? Was his fear of the communists so encompassing — or was it regarded as a shrewd but cynical political strategy to reduce the appeal of the Labor Party? What were Fadden's motivations — politically strategic or borne out of a genuine loathing of the communist doctrine? Why did he even enter politics in the first place? And what about his personal life? Did he miss his family in the loneliness of Canberra? Did that loneliness contribute to his drinking? Or was time away from Townsville and later Brisbane a welcome relief? Are these questions even important for a study largely concerned with Fadden's contribution to the Coalition? And if they are — where are the answers to be found?

Political biography is an established sub-set of political science. The stories of individuals have added and will continue to add to our understanding of political institutions and history. Due to publishing constraints, biographies commissioned today are increasingly about 'known' recent public figures. Yet there is abundant material out there for would-be biographers keen to research other lives who have walked the corridors of power. Each successive biography written enhances our knowledge of power within the Australian context and contributes to our cultural capital. It is timely to remember that 'politics is politicians; there is no way to understand it without understanding them' (Barber cited in Walter 1980: xviii).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term 'triangulation' is used in Social Science research to define different data collection techniques that are employed when examining the same variable. When observing a particular event through different lenses (use of interviews, primary sources and secondary sources, personal papers, diaries for example), the researcher develops a more complete and informed picture (Neuman, 1997:151).

<sup>2</sup> (see <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1995/95.09.22.html>).

<sup>3</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Academics have tended to view the 'indeterminate s nature of political biography' as problematic (Walter (forthcoming); see also, Pimlott, 1990: 224).

<sup>5</sup> Narratives have essential characteristics which include being 'chronological accounts of characters and selective events occurring over time, with a beginning, a middle and an end. They are retrospective interpretations of sequential events from a certain point of view; They focus on human intention and action – including those of the narrator and others' which result in a reconstruction of the life under study (Spina & Dodge, 2005:145).

<sup>6</sup> John Dollard's work was titled 'Criteria for Life History' and was published in the early 1930s.

<sup>7</sup> Fadden's successor was Jack McEwen who, it is argued, did not want the Treasury portfolio and opted to retain the Trade Ministry.

