

IT'S A RIPPING GOOD YARN! POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION¹

ABSTRACT

In her reflections on ‘the limitations of history as a narrative form’, Cassandra Pybus presents an apparent literary divide between the creativity and narrative flair of fiction and the dreary, barren wasteland of history; contrasting the historical novelist, excitably working with ‘the rich possibilities of make-believe’, with the poor, impossibly constrained historian, forever weighed down by the burden of the record, ‘irrevocably tied to concrete evidence which is patchy at best and never allows access to the inner workings of the human psyche’.² Pybus states:

Not even a master of the popular history genre, ... can construct a past world as rich and satisfying as the parallel universe the novelist can imagine, nor create characters who are revealed to us in their most intimate moments and private thoughts.³

In this paper, Jenny Hocking refutes such an essentialist dichotomy between biography and creativity. Hocking argues that biography inhabits a world between history and literature: it is both a creative and a scholarly process, grounded in empiricism and brought to life through the same defining techniques of fiction — character and narrative — that Pybus identifies in the ‘seamless narrative arc’ of popular history. Biography is also one of the most creative forms – or at least it has the potential for creativity — through the construction of narrative, of compelling characters and universal themes from

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¹ This article was originally a speech delivered at ‘A Judicious Life? Judicial and Political Biography’, Australian Association of Constitutional Law Conference, The University of Adelaide, 4 December 2009.

² Cassandra Pybus, ‘Within Reasonable Doubt’, *The Australian* (online), 10 November 2009 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/within-reasonable-doubt/story-e6frg8nf-1225796194925>>.

³ Ibid.

the historical record — what E.H. Carr termed ‘imaginative understanding’.⁴

Writing about a living subject such as Gough Whitlam can bring great benefits of personal communication, private papers and interviews — and some unexpected dilemmas. The extensive research towards the Whitlam biography unearthed a remarkable find about the Whitlam family that even Gough Whitlam did not know — that his grandfather had spent four and a half years hard labour in Melbourne’s Pentridge prison for forgery. How do you tell Gough Whitlam that his grandfather was a criminal?

From his grandfather’s time in Pentridge prison to Gough Whitlam’s childhood in the fledging city of Canberra, his father’s work as Commonwealth Crown Solicitor and Whitlam’s own extensive war service, marriage to the champion swimmer Margaret Dovey, rise through the bitterly divided Australian Labor Party and eventual leadership of the party into government, the Whitlam biography draws on archival sources, interviews and previously unseen private letters. It is a story as ‘rich and satisfying’ as any fiction could allow.

INTRODUCTION

John Howard had scarcely found time to vacate the Lodge before moves to secure his memoirs began. Announcing that the former Prime Minister was indeed working on his memoirs, Howard’s publisher, Amruta Slee of HarperCollins, assured us that as a writer ‘Howard is good’; that ‘he has an amazing eye for detail and remembers everything’.⁵ So good in fact, that Howard was due to finish his first draft of 200 000 words within two years and, as in politics, Howard has delivered. John Howard’s *Lazarus Rising* is the latest in a string of political memoirs, biographies and autobiographical reminiscences from Malcolm Fraser to Mark Latham and even, rather bizarrely, to relative newcomer Paul Howes.⁶

None of Slee’s brazen confidence in both the politician as author, and the public interest in his story, is really much of a surprise — coming as it does from Howard’s own publisher. What is, however, rather perturbing is the broader assessment of political biography implicit in Slee’s comment that Howard’s autobiography is ‘much more interesting than a straight political biography. It tells

⁴ Edward Carr, *What is History?* (Vintage, 1967) 26.

⁵ Stephen Romei, ‘Howard Joins The Political Book Club’ *The Australian* (Sydney) 4 August 2009, 3, quoting Howard’s publisher Amruta Slee.

⁶ John Howard, *John Howard: Lazarus Rising — A Personal and Political Autobiography* (HarperCollins, 2010); Malcolm Fraser and Margaret Simons, *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* (The Miegunyah Press, 2010); Mark Latham, *The Latham Diaries* (Melbourne University Press, 2005); Paul Howes, *Confessions of a Faceless Man: Inside Campaign 2010* (Melbourne University Press, 2010).

us something about Australia at the time? What exactly is meant by a ‘straight political biography’ if — according to this conception at least — a political biography could *fail* to tell us something about Australia at the time? Clearly, characterised in this way, political biography is neither interesting, informative, nor creatively satisfying. It is this apparent dichotomy between political biography and the creative imagination that this article will explore and refute.

I CREATIVE NON-FICTION

In her recent reflections on ‘the limitations of history as a narrative form’, Cassandra Pybus — characteristically blunt and provocative — presents an apparent literary divide between the creativity and narrative flair of fiction and the dreary, barren wasteland of history.⁸ Pybus contrasts the historical novelist, excitably working with ‘the rich possibilities of make-believe’, and the poor, impossibly constrained historian, forever weighed down by the burden of the record, ‘irrevocably tied to concrete evidence’.⁹ In Pybus’s view:

Not even a master of the popular history genre ... can construct a past world as rich and satisfying as the parallel universe the novelist can imagine, nor create characters who are revealed to us in their most intimate moments and private thoughts.¹⁰

This is by no means an unheralded position. It can also be seen for instance, as Alex Miller has reflected, in Virginia Woolf’s admonition in *The Pargiters*:

If you object that fiction is not history, I reply that though it would be far easier for me to write history — “In the year 1842 Lord John Russell brought in the Second Reform Bill” and so on — that method of telling the truth seems to me so elementary, and so clumsy, that I prefer, where truth is important, to write fiction.¹¹

This is a crude, simple conservatism of form with which I absolutely disagree.

I have written three biographies. The first was of the late High Court Justice and former Attorney-General in Whitlam’s government, Lionel Murphy; the second of the Australian author and activist Frank Hardy; and the third and most recent was the first of a two-volume study of Gough Whitlam.¹² My relationship with

⁷ Romei, above n 5.

⁸ Pybus, above n 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ ABC Radio National, ‘Truth in Fiction and History’, *The Book Show*, 30 November 2006 (Alex Miller) <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2006/1800785.htm>>, citing Virginia Woolf, *The Pargiters* (Hogarth Press, 1978).

¹² Jenny Hocking, *Lionel Murphy: A Political Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jenny Hocking, *Frank Hardy: Politics Literature Life* (Lothian Books, 2005);

each of these biographical subjects differed — I had never met Lionel Murphy and although I had met Frank Hardy, he had died a decade before I wrote about him. Gough Whitlam, however, had known both these men well. In some ways, the very different relationships he had with these two iconoclastic characters pricked my interest in him. Yet despite the obvious differences between the biographical subjects, each of these three biographies reflects a larger commitment — to Australian political history, to developments in democratic practice, and to the interstices between politics and the law.

II HISTORY THROUGH BIOGRAPHY

Looked at in this way, the biographical subject becomes a means through which to explore a broad sweep of Australian political history. You can understand then, why I consider rather baffling the suggestion that ‘straight political biography’ does not tell us much about Australia. The very nature of political biography — ‘straight’ or otherwise — rejects the narrow construction of the subject as a decontextualised and isolated actor. It is this broad contextualisation of the subject, its embedding in political and cultural life, that is both definitional of political biography and a marker of the broader public interest in the genre — an interest as much in the subject as it is in what the subject enables us to explore. For me, the ideal subject is one who presents these possibilities for understanding our culture, our politics, and ultimately ourselves, through biographical study: one whose personal narrative enables an exploration beyond their singular story and engages us intellectually, conceptually, and politically.

Yet despite its attractiveness to publishers and readers alike, within the academy biography remains an unusual, at times even disparaged, form in several respects. For one thing, it is popular — the classic ‘cross over’ text — appealing to both academic and general audiences alike. It is interdisciplinary and, perhaps most significantly, its form is outside the conventional parameters of most academic writing — driven more by character and narrative than overt theorisation;

Political biography sometimes sits uncomfortably with the more conventional writing and scholarship on politics and political science. It is often regarded as ‘less academic’, overly subjective, and too partial. It does not appear ‘explanatory’ in orientation or theoretical in approach; it does not articulate a rigorous methodology shared by likeminded scholars ... its standing as proper scholarship may even be suspect. Some biographers are not regarded as part of the ‘academic club’ or belong only at the margins.¹³

Biography inhabits a world between history and literature. It is both a creative and a scholarly process, grounded in empiricism and brought to life through the same

Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (Miegunyah Press, 2008).

¹³ Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna, ‘Preface’ in Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna (eds), *Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Careers and Administrative Histories* (Australian National University E Press, 2006) xi <<http://epress.anu.edu.au/ansog/auspol/pdf/auspol-whole.pdf>>.

defining techniques of fiction — character and narrative — which Pybus identified in the ‘seamless narrative arc’ of popular history¹⁴ and which, as Michael Holroyd described, make biography ‘a cousin to the novel’.¹⁵ Biography is a narrative construction of a life that can itself never be replicated and in which intellectual empathy is vital. Biography is also one of the most creative forms of non-fiction writing through the creation of narrative, compelling emblematic characters, and universal themes, through what E H Carr termed ‘imaginative understanding’.¹⁶

As with all non-fiction writing — large or small, and in any form — the capacity to move beyond the immediate circumstance of the individual subject underpins the strongest, most clearly framed, and ultimately the most readable biographies. The compelling subject reaches out to us not only (or even) in themselves, but because they and the trajectory of their life illuminate something critical — politically or intellectually revealing — beyond their own experience. This is what the Australian social realist writer Frank Hardy called ‘finding the universal in the particular’.¹⁷

It is this ‘universal’ which in turn becomes the key organising principle in structuring the biography, and it does so by providing the unifying rationale for those critical elements of themes, character, and narrative construction. The themes developed, the characters drawn, and the incidents chosen to illustrate them, will all be part of the exploration of the universal through the particular. There is an essential aspect of authorial choice in all biographies that so often goes unrecognised. The view that a ‘good biography’ leaves nothing out and conversely simply puts everything in, is remarkable only for its persistence. In reality, of course, and by a simple matter of logistical and structural necessity, the art in biography lies in precisely this — in the choices made and the picture painted. This is the difference between documenting a life, and writing a biography about it.

III LIFE AND MYTH

All public figures are suspended in myth — this is how we understand them, how we recognise them, and indeed how we define them as public figures. Of all public lives, political lives are the most hotly contested. They are recreated in literature, in media, and in daily commentary through a process of repetition and reiteration, constructing a public life that at times bears little resemblance to either the life as lived, or the person who lived it. In turn, the public myth creates its own protectors — and the more contested the life, the more determined these protectors are. As James Walter describes:

The question ‘who owns the life?’ seems self-evident initially. It does not really strike you until you start trying to unravel the story, but the difficulty

¹⁴ Pybus, above n 2.

¹⁵ Tracey Arklay, ‘Political Biography: Its Contribution to Political Science’ in Arklay, Nethercote and Wanna, above n 13, 17, citing Michael Holroyd, *Works on Paper: The Craft of Biography and Autobiography* (Counterpoint, 2002) 5.

¹⁶ Carr, above n 4, 26.

¹⁷ Hocking, *Frank Hardy*, above n 12, 40.

with any biography, particularly of a prominent politician is the need to reconcile the subject's own investment in their 'life myth'. People who are somehow engaged in power and power relations to effect forms of social change are of course concerned with their image, they are concerned with posterity and they are concerned with public perceptions.¹⁸

All of this is certainly true and no biographer could afford to ignore its obvious implications. However, this sense of 'ownership' of the life stems from more than just the subject themselves. What of those who *think* they own the life, who have their own intellectual (and in Whitlam's case often emotional) stake in the representation of the man and the politics? Those who were there at the time, those who first wrote about it, and those who remain passionate about it, all continue to claim ownership of the record, the legend, and how the history about it *ought* to be written. These contestations are at the core of the great challenges in writing about any public life — how to move beyond such firmly held positions. This is particularly so for one as widely recognised as Whitlam and whose political life remains so deeply polarising. Yet it would be well to acknowledge that for whole generations Gough Whitlam is now known more for the band 'The Whitlams' — 'my family band' as he calls them — or as 'the guy in the Leggo ad', than for his reforming style of government.¹⁹

In this way, Whitlam himself has passed into popular culture. From his earlier cinema appearance in the 1970s classic *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*,²⁰ to his bit part in the 1937 melodrama *The Broken Melody*²¹ — chosen, along with other Sydney University students, because he could supply his own dinner jacket. In fact, Whitlam's first appearance as Prime Minister was in 1940 playing Neville Chamberlain in Sydney University's St Paul's College Revue. In a top hat, tails, and striped pants, Whitlam 'smoked the pipe of peace' for the League of Nations until, in between the dress rehearsal and the opening night, Neville Chamberlain was ousted from office. Undeterred by what might now be seen as a portentous event, Whitlam considered his first Prime Ministerial role a great success, albeit too brief — it had left his audience wanting more. He wrote to his parents in Canberra; 'I was really a big success as Chamberlain, although he was out of office after the first dress rehearsal ... I was fairly brief ... and many people said they thought I should have had more to do'.²²

¹⁸ James Walter, 'The 'Life Myth', 'Short Lives' and Dealing with Live Subjects in Political Biography' in Arklay, Nethercote and Wanna, above n 13.

¹⁹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Gough Whitlam Announcing Winner of Triple J Hottest One Hundred 1997* (23 November 2010) <http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/30years/audio/hot100_1997.mp3>.

²⁰ *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (Directed by Bruce Beresford, Reg Grundy Productions, 1974).

²¹ *The Broken Melody* (Directed by Ken Hall, Cinesound Productions, 1937).

²² Letter from Gough Whitlam to his parents, Martha and Fred Whitlam, 23 May 1940 in *Whitlam Letters*, National Library of Australia MS 7653.

In some respects Whitlam appears a daunting subject — well-known, widely assessed, and still intensely polarising. What I found most daunting however, was not his iconic political (and physical) stature, not the legendary temper nor the inability to suffer fools, not the flashes of arrogance nor the impatience — although I have to say they are all still apparent — but his prodigious knowledge. Even now, well into his nineties, Whitlam's general knowledge is quite extraordinary in its breadth and detail, and he delights in showing it. After all, he was a two-time National Radio Quiz champion. He won the 1948 championship with his answer to the following question:

Now Mr Whitlam, who was the King who reigned from about 115-63 BC, who fortified himself so strongly against poison by the use of antidotes that he could not kill himself and had to get a Gallic mercenary soldier to stab him, as he preferred death to captivity?

Whitlam, barely hesitating, replied: Mithridates!²³

Whitlam won the National Radio Quiz championship again the following year, although in 1950 he had to accept second place.²⁴ 'I lost out to a Sydney solicitor', he told me rather ruefully — still despondent at the memory nearly 60 years later.²⁵

But what do we really know of Gough Whitlam? To my generation and older he is both the Labor Prime Minister who ended 23 years of conservative rule, and the only Australian Prime Minister ever dismissed by a Governor-General. It is these two totemic events that bookend the three year span of so much of the writings about Whitlam. What we know of Whitlam on a personal level is less substantial, but no less telling — the volcanic temper, the biting wit, his 'crash through or crash' approach, and the self-deprecating humour strangely coexisting with an undisguised healthy ego.

Perhaps surprisingly, Whitlam can also be socially awkward, shy and diffident. He is an extremely private man, reluctant to impart personal information, and hesitant to reveal his own emotional response to situations in both his family and professional life. Original interviews can help fill out some of these personal aspects, and their extensive reflections make them an important part of the research for the Whitlam biography — providing a colour and a passion the dry texts so often miss. Gough Whitlam,²⁶ Margaret Whitlam and all four Whitlam

²³ National Archives of Australia, *Australia's Prime Ministers* (23 November 2010) <<http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/primeministers/whitlam/before-office.aspx>>.

²⁴ Gough Whitlam personal communication 6 April 2006.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interviews with Gough Whitlam (Melbourne, 16-17 March 2006; Sydney, 24-25 July 2006; Sydney, 14-15 August 2006; Sydney, 18-19 December 2006; Sydney, 27 November 2007; Sydney, 27 February 2008; Sydney, 3 June 2008).

children,²⁷ Whitlam's sister Freda,²⁸ office staff, political staffers — Graham Freudenberg,²⁹ Race Mathews,³⁰ John Menadue³¹ — and politicians from both sides of politics — Malcolm Fraser,³² Bob Ellicott,³³ Bill Hayden,³⁴ Moss Cass,³⁵ and Clyde Cameron³⁶ — all agreed to be interviewed for this biography. I spoke to Clyde Cameron, who was by then seriously ill, in what would turn out to be his final interview. As I left Cameron that day he made it abundantly clear to me that his legendary hatred for Whitlam remained undiminished, pausing in the hallway to proudly show me a personally inscribed photograph of Whitlam which he had turned to face the wall. However, without a doubt, the most disconcerting interviewee had to be Paul Keating, who greeted me with the words: 'If you repeat any of this, I'll cut off both your legs!'³⁷

IV POLITICS AND PERSONALITY

Now you might think — and this has been said to me more than once — that everything that can be written about Whitlam has surely already been written. It is true, there is simply no contemporary Australian political figure on whom more has been written than Whitlam, and certainly few governments have stimulated such controversy, commentary, and critique as that led by him. Even thirty years after the election of the first Whitlam government in December 1972, the extensive, fevered media debate and commentary marking that anniversary was nothing short of extraordinary. I noted at the time: 'It is difficult to imagine any other government or any other Prime Minister whose tenure [has] continued to attract such intense debate'.³⁸ Yet for all the words written about him, few have strayed from this unremitting focus on the brief but eventful period of governmental rise and fall — Whitlam's three years as Prime Minister, his truncated second government, and its unprecedented dismissal.

This unusual focus on such a narrow slice of Whitlam's life has simply eclipsed so much of what came before, and to a lesser extent, after that period in government. Unlike almost all former Prime Ministers — with the interesting exception of

²⁷ Interview with Margaret Whitlam (Sydney, 16 April 2007); Interview with Tony Whitlam (Sydney, 4 March 2008); Interview with Nicholas Whitlam (Sydney, 11 March 2008); Interview with Stephen Whitlam (Sydney, 27 February 2008); Interview with Catherine Dovey (Sydney, 18 April 2006).

²⁸ Interview with Freda Whitlam (Sydney, 3 March 2007).

²⁹ Interview with Graham Freudenberg (Melbourne, 12 July 2007).

³⁰ Interview with Race Mathews (Melbourne, 10 December 2007).

³¹ Interview with John Menadue (Sydney, 17 July 2008).

³² Interview with Malcolm Fraser (Melbourne, 19 June 2007).

³³ Interview with Bob Ellicott (Sydney, 21 September 2007).

³⁴ Interview with Bill Hayden (Brisbane, 8 June 2007).

³⁵ Interview with Moss Cass (Melbourne, 18 May 2007).

³⁶ Interview with Clyde Cameron (Adelaide, 3 September 2007).

³⁷ Interview with Paul Keating (Sydney, 22 May 2007).

³⁸ Jenny Hocking and Colleen Lewis in Jenny Hocking and Colleen Lewis (eds) *It's Time Again: Whitlam and Modern Labor* (Circa Books, 2003), 1.

Whitlam's great adversary Malcolm Fraser — Whitlam has perhaps increased in stature with the passing years as a national and international statesman of some note. More importantly, the urge to consider both Whitlam and the period which bears his name — through the prism of the events of November 1975 — of crisis and of turmoil, has left us always looking back to prior events through the Dismissal. Ultimately this prism has become a distorting one.

In focusing on the irresistible drama of these few years in office, crucial formative aspects in Whitlam's life have been too readily overlooked. The literature on Whitlam and the Whitlam government, extensive though it is, has failed to show us the richness of the years that came before — the Baptist family background, the childhood in Canberra, the schoolboy debater, the quiz champion, the air-force navigator with four years active war-service in the Pacific, the legendary temper — water thrown over Paul Hasluck in Parliament, telephones hurled through windows, chairs flying through the office door — the biting tongue and cruel wit, the hopelessly torn and riven Australian Labor Party of the post-Split years, the fiercely loyal office staff, the parliamentary decades in opposition, the modernisation of both an ailing, divided party and its policies, and the determined path to party leadership and government. It is 'deeply contested history in which grand themes, a compelling narrative, arrant characters and circumstance collide'.³⁹

That so much of this background to Whitlam's political career is only sketchily known has been a boon to me as biographer — providing not only a rich vein of inquiry but dynamic characters and incidents no novelist could surpass. What fiction could ever dream up Labor firebrand Eddie Ward chasing Whitlam through the corridors of Old Parliament House desperately swinging punches at his retreating frame? Eddie Ward later said: 'I knew my health was failing when I took a swing at Gough Whitlam and missed!'⁴⁰ What gift of imagination could send us the great, ageing Labor stalwart Arthur Calwell, who had come to loathe the man he called 'that elongated bastard',⁴¹ and who, burning with his hatred of Whitlam, would buttonhole anyone who would listen to him — Labor or Liberal — just to denigrate Whitlam.⁴² When Tom Uren chided him, 'Arthur you worry me. I thought you were a Christian', Calwell snapped, 'I'm not a Christian Tom, I'm a Catholic'!⁴³

Labor history is full of these marvellous, diverting, but ultimately poignant moments, stories which at base are less about personal animosities and more about the deeply held political positions they represent. Take for example, the White Australia Policy, state aid to non-government schools, the party's position

³⁹ Jenny Hocking, 'History by Numbers' in Sybil Nolan (ed) *The Dismissal: Where Were You on November 11, 1975?* (Melbourne University Press, 2005), 1.

⁴⁰ Ross McMullin, *Ward, Edward John (Eddie) (1899-1963)* (23 November 2010) Australian <Dictionary of Biography, <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A160579b.htm>>.

⁴¹ Hocking, *Gough Whitlam*, above n 12, 236.

⁴² *Ibid* 286–8

⁴³ *Ibid* 287.

on the Vietnam War and conscription. It is, certainly in the Australian instance, a peculiarly Labor party coincidence of politics and personality which partly explains the great popularity of political biography and personal memoir on that side of politics — it offers a brilliant canvas perfectly suited for biography.

These characters present not only great portraits in themselves. The identification and replication of central characters, and core themes serve as a means of creating order, consistency, and thematic coherence from the vast array of material political biographies entail. The interplay of characters and themes is critical in structuring a biography in such a way Pybus' 'seamless narrative arc', while engaging and compelling, remains true to the historical demands of accuracy and documentation. With Whitlam, several characters make significant appearances — his father Harry Frederick Ernest Whitlam, Commonwealth Crown Solicitor and 'one of God's most tolerant creatures',⁴⁴ H V 'Doc' Evatt, Margaret Whitlam (nee Dovey), her father Justice Wilfred Dovey, Eddie Ward, Arthur Calwell, Robert Menzies, and Garfield Barwick. These characters recur throughout in brief but important moments, both as significant players and as thematic articulators, to create a conceptual and narrative continuity through such a great range of material.

It is in the nature of political biography for it to be highly contextualised on several levels — political and historical of course, but also, depending on the subject, judicial, literary, social, economic, and across the subject's personal and family circumstance. This scope creates an immense amount of material to work through, not only the immediate biographical material on the subject, their family, and their background, but on Australian political development, party political developments, and international debates. Examining Whitlam's life took me from the nineteenth century Victorian goldfields around Castlemaine, to the history of the Baptist church in Australia; from Australia's early secular public education system to federation; from Fred Whitlam's membership of the Australian delegation to the Paris Peace conference in 1946, to his later role as Australia's delegate to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in New York; from the establishment of the national capital in Canberra and its urban construction, to Whitlam's extensive active service in the Pacific, his studies in law, and finally his twenty years in opposition — all before he even got into government!

The stock-in-trade of academic research is not only the research itself, but also the weighting, sifting and evaluating of evidence from all its sources: archival, personal papers, manuscripts, libraries, newspapers, oral histories, and original interviews. Far from the wide archival searches proving a deadening narrative hand, they will invariably provide some unexpected means of illustrating the core thematic concerns. Take the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) for instance. Nothing could give such a moving testament to the power of that singular piece of legislative reform (without which *Mabo v State of Queensland (No 2)*⁴⁵ could not have

⁴⁴ Cameron Hazlehurst, *Whitlam, Harry Frederick Ernest (Fred) (1884-1961)*, (23 November 2010) Australian Dictionary of Biography <<http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A160643b.htm>>.

⁴⁵ (1992) 175 CLR 1.

succeeded), than an exchange between Whitlam's Attorney-General Lionel Murphy and Dr Fred Hollows, whose work on a trachoma eradication programme through the Bourke District Hospital in outback New South Wales was being severely compromised by the continuing discrimination shown towards its Indigenous team members. An outraged Hollows detailed to Murphy the local hotel's refusal to serve and accommodate his Indigenous colleagues, who were told they would only be served through a hatchery outside the pub, and who had nowhere to stay. Murphy replied:

When the Racial Discrimination Bill becomes law, it will be possible to commence legal proceedings under the legislation to obtain remedies for acts of racial discrimination ... and to seek an assurance against a repetition of the act of discrimination ... You will note that clause 8 of the Bill provides that everyone is entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law.⁴⁶

Despite the frequent refrain that 'truth' in biography demands the simple representation of everything that the biographer uncovers in their meandering trails of research, nothing could be further from the reality of the biographical endeavour. At the heart of the biographer's task is judgement – judgements about sources, about information and about the subject. Through a process of weighting and evaluating from a mass of information from a range of vastly different sources, a life is constructed and their story told. Authorial discretion in making these judgments is neither partial nor evidence of crude bias, but a structural imperative, described by Janet Frame as 'an inviolate place where the choices and decisions, however imperfect, are the writer's own'.⁴⁷ As I have noted elsewhere:

[on one level] the entire nature of biographical endeavour is trickery: the compression of years into pages, the subtle elision of one summer into another years later, the gentle omission of years for which no material could be found, this is at once the creation of a fiction and yet the recreation of a life. This is the basis for what Janet Malcolm terms the 'epistemological insecurity' in which all non-fiction readers are suspended. ... Ultimately this is where we stand and fall as biographers.⁴⁸

V A FAMILY SECRET

No biographer chooses their subject out of thin air without some critical notion of the possibilities the subject can bring to them as a writer and to broader understanding. As with all inchoate biographies, I began this one believing I knew a reasonable amount about Whitlam — perhaps, I thought, I knew even quite a bit about Whitlam. It quickly became clear, however, that whatever I thought I knew,

⁴⁶ Hocking, *Lionel Murphy*, above n 12, 188.

⁴⁷ Janet Frame, *An Autobiography The Envoy from Mirror City* (George Brasiller, 1985) vol 3: *The Envoy from Mirror City*, 124.

⁴⁸ Jenny Hocking 'Marketing Frank Hardy: The Revival of Biography as Scandal' (2001) 68 *Journal of Australian Studies* 146, 148–9.

an unimagined amount — more fascinating and more surprising than I could ever have imagined — lay ahead of me. This is where the focus on the three years of the Whitlam government has left a wonderful void for a biographer to explore and, in doing so, to uncover a series of events, circumstances and characters which would not only do justice to the truism ‘truth is stranger than fiction’, but which are almost uncanny in their numerous intersections between the broader Whitlam family and key moments in our political history. The former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd noted the historical occlusion, that whilst the Whitlam family has served Australia for most of the nation’s history since federation,⁴⁹ this aspect of a shared family biography has remained almost entirely unknown.

Biography is, at its research-led best, a forensic exercise in which — we hope — our slightly eccentric and certainly passionate labours over dusty archives will one day lead to great exhilaration of the unexpected archival find — uncovering long forgotten private letters, personal diaries, or (we hope) some hidden family secrets. With Whitlam’s biography, I found all three.

In the voluminous files of the Victorian Public Records Office there is one marked ‘Henry Hugh Gough Whitlam. Prisoner’. This was Whitlam’s grandfather, a man he knew and whose name he carries, but about whom he did not know everything. In this long forgotten, poignant story, a young man of nineteen is left financially responsible for a family of five children and his mother in Melbourne as his father disappears into Victoria ostensibly looking for work. This was a literate family despite their lack of circumstance and Henry Whitlam could read and write while his employer, George Robbins of Robbins Stevedoring in Sandridge (Port Melbourne), could not. This social inversion, not uncommon in the decades after the gold rush, was the opportunity through which Henry Whitlam could forge his employer’s signature on three cheques and try to tide the family over until the money could be repaid. An anguished Henry Whitlam wrote to his peripatetic father, pleading with him to come home: ‘you are always talking of going here and there’, he wrote in an unmet cry for help:

I have been laid up for more than a week and confined to my bed most of the time. My Liver, Kidneys and whole system are out of order and it makes it pretty hard on me, the children are continually wanting something ... I begin to feel a dizziness in the head. I will conclude with love in which all join me.⁵⁰

Henry Whitlam put the letter in his pocket, intending to post it to his father. It was in his pocket when he was arrested and charged with forgery, and now lies in the Victorian Public Records Office in Melbourne.

⁴⁹ Kevin Rudd, Speech delivered at the Launch of *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* by Jenny Hocking. (New South Wales Parliament House, 6 November 2008).

⁵⁰ Letter from Henry ‘Harry’ Whitlam to Henry Whitlam (January 1877) cited in Hocking, *Gough Whitlam*, above n 12, 12–3.

The episode was one of those wonderful moments you hope for as a biographer — full of the narrative drive and character Pybus sees as the preserve of historical fiction — unknown yet firmly embedded in ‘concrete evidence’.⁵¹ The discovery of Henry Whitlam’s youthful crimes was also fundamental to understanding a critical aspect of Whitlam’s background. It had an important corollary as soon after his release from Pentridge Prison Henry Whitlam became a determined, pious Baptist, marrying into a respected Melbourne Baptist family for whom education and self-advancement were central. Henry Whitlam’s prison sentence and his spiritual conversion set in train a defining context for Whitlam’s own upbringing, in which religion, self-improvement, books, and politics were to be recurring themes.

I must admit it had never occurred to me that I would ever tell Gough Whitlam something he did not already know. It certainly had never occurred to me this might be something like a family secret of adolescent criminality and imprisonment in Pentridge Prison for five years hard labour. With the discovery of grandfatherly criminality, of ‘grandfather the felon’ as he is now fondly referred to in the Whitlam family, I was faced with a most interesting question: did Whitlam know of his grandfather’s youthful crime? I rehearsed for weeks each of what seemed to me to be the only two possible answers to this quandary: either Whitlam knew and he had not told me, or he did not know and now I was going to have to tell him!

This was without a doubt the most remarkable find in the vast research undertaken for this biography, and it illuminated our understanding of Whitlam in a way only the evidentiary record can do. As I travelled somewhat nervously to Sydney to tell Whitlam this unanticipated family news, I did so armed with his own words: ‘unpalatable truths will not diminish, but rather enrich, our common commitment to the research, the writing, the reading and the understanding of Australian history’.⁵²

In short, Whitlam did not know of his grandfather’s crimes. He was stunned and, for a brief time, uncharacteristically silent. His eventual response was, in many ways, vintage Whitlam — a socio-legal reflection: ‘Isn’t it interesting that in a single generation my family went from one side of the law to the other!’ After the critique came a more personal reflection, this time on his grandparents: ‘they must have been so proud of my father.’⁵³

⁵¹ Pybus, above n 2.

⁵² Gough Whitlam, ‘Go to the Documents’ (Speech delivered at the National Bi-annual Postgraduate History Conference, The University of Melbourne, 20 July 2001). For a transcript of the speech, see: Whitlam Institute, ‘Go to the Documents’, *National Bi-annual Postgraduate History Conference*, 20 July 2001 (Gough Whitlam) <<http://egwpmc.uws.edu.au/R?RN=>>.

⁵³ Interview with Gough Whitlam (Sydney, 27 February 2008).

CONCLUSION

In Pybus' essentialist view of the inevitable failure of the historical narrative, the non-fiction writer is always impossibly weighed down by the evidentiary burden: 'irrevocably tied to concrete evidence which is patchy at best and never allows access to the inner workings of the human psyche'.⁵⁴ Yet it is difficult to imagine how an exploration of such a cast of passionate, fallible and intensely committed individuals could do anything other than give us 'access to the inner workings of the human psyche'.⁵⁵ The human element in political history is everywhere and inescapable. The problem is not that concrete evidence renders it invisible, but that too few writers can find it.

⁵⁴ Pybus, above n 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.