

## REVIEW

D. B. WATERSON. *A Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1860-1929*. Canberra, A.N.U., 1972 (xvii, 205 p.)  
(*Australian Parliaments: Biographical Notes 3*)

KATHLEEN THOMSON and GEOFFREY SERLE. *A Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1859-1900*. Canberra, A.N.U., 1972.  
(xxiv, 238 p.)  
(*Australian Parliaments: Biographical Notes 4*)

When, in 1892, *The Dictionary of Australasian Biography comprising notices of eminent colonists from the inauguration of responsible government down to the present time* (London, Hutchinson and Co., 1892) was published, comprising nearly 2,000 biographies, its author, Philip Menzell, announced that it included "notices of all politicians, with a few unavoidable exceptions, who have held Ministerial Office in the Australian Colonies, New Zealand and Tasmania since the year 1855."

Apart from *Johns's Notable Australians* (Adelaide, Geo. Robertson and Co., 1906), and the same author's posthumous work *An Australian Biographical Dictionary* (Melbourne, Macmillan and Co., 1934), the only other noteworthy contribution to the biographical record of Australian politicians was Percival Serle's *Dictionary of Australian Biography* (Sydney, A. and R., 1949), containing 1,030 biographies of notable Australians who died before the end of 1942, of which the largest number of any single group comprised 174 politicians. Serle had collected materials (largely clipped from various books of reference and newspapers) for this work over a period of twenty years with the object of gathering together "information likely to be useful to the compilers of the future *Australian Dictionary of National Biography*."

However, as Kathleen Thomson and Geoffrey Serle point out in the Introduction to *A Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1859-1900*, "the chief sources — biographical dictionaries . . . and newspaper obituaries — team with errors which were often copied from one account to another several times."

Experienced historians and other researchers who have traditionally consulted the standard Australian biographical dictionaries like Heaton (1879), Blair (1881), Menzell (1892) and Serle (1949) with extreme caution for biographical information about prominent parliamentarians have now been adequately provided with such scholarly and authoritative sources of such information as one could hope for in two series of biographical reference works at present issuing from The Australian National University.

The better known one is the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, but an equally valuable and more specialised source in the field of biographical dictionaries are the volumes of Biographical Notes of members of the Australian Parliaments, the third and fourth in the series being the subject of the present review. The first in this series was A. W. Martin and P. Wardle's *Members of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, 1856-1901, Biographical Notes*, (Canberra, A.N.U., 1959), issued as number 16 in the series of A.N.U. Social Science Monographs, as part of a project, conceived in the Department of History at the A.N.U. under the direction of L. F. Fitzhardinge, "for the collection and recording of Australian biographical material". This work contains biographical notes of 690 members of the New South Wales Lower House prior to Federation.

Like the first, the second volume grew out of a research project conducted within the Department of History at the A.N.U. and subsequently extended using supplementary material from within that department and libraries and

archive institutions. This was G. C. Bolton and Ann Mozley's *The Western Australian Legislature 1870-1930* (Canberra, The A.N.U., 1961), which, in its preface, announced that it was the second in "a continuing series of such surveys, covering the legislatures of each State and the Federal House, and entitled *Australian Parliaments: Biographical Notes*." This work contains biographical entries for 400 members of the Western Australian legislature between 1870 and 1930.

The present works are probably best viewed in relation to the more encompassing project of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* with which the series appears to have a close relation. Since all of the 635 entries in the Queensland volume and the 691 entries in the Victorian one are unlikely to appear in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, the Biographical Registers are clearly to be seen as complementary to the *Dictionary*. Where entries are duplicated in both the *ADB* and the *Registers* the cryptic and often quite selective texts of entries in the latter probably make them less authoritative and less informative than the former.

The *Biographical Registers* will be especially appreciated by historians for the details they supply about electoral representation of members of the Queensland and Victorian parliaments, not otherwise as easily obtained as similar information contained in the indispensable, but now out-of-print editions of the *New South Wales Parliamentary Record*, an observation wholly confirmed by the authors of the Victorian *Biographical Register*, who, in their Introduction, have commented that the "task of tracking down basic information about the majority of members has hence been unusually arduous."

Entries are necessarily concise in both *Biographical Registers*, especially so in relation to the dates of events or activities associated with the non-political careers of the subjects, although it must be acknowledged that adequate provision is made for pursuing more detailed information about subjects in the brief bibliographies at the conclusion of each entry, often containing references to obituaries and other notices in otherwise relatively inaccessible but fruitful sources such as local newspapers. Waterson, in his preface, asserts that the "claim that this is the first colonial work of its kind to explore such a wide range of newspapers and periodical sources has much substance."

The relative weight given to subjects is unpredictable. The relatively brief entry in the Queensland *Biographical Register* for Andrew Fisher, former Prime Minister and Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia, is slight in comparison with entries for Sir Hugh Nelson, Sir Robert Philp or Sir Samuel Griffith, while less conspicuous subjects like William Henry Groom (1833-1901) or Oscar John De Satge (1836-1906), both of whom appear in volume 4 of the *ADB*, receive comparatively full entries. Entries for John Robinson Benson (1836?-1885), George Edmonstone (1809-1883) and Gilbert Elliott (1796-1871), all of which appear in *ADB* are, on the other hand, noticeably brief. The same observation is equally applicable to the Victorian *Biographical Register*.

Both volumes contain useful bibliographic references to other sources besides those quoted at the end of each entry.

The differences in the concluding dates of each of the four volumes in the series so far issued may be cause for some curiosity, although it must be appreciated that the series has suffered somewhat from an overall lack of co-ordination and foresight, and, presumably, limited means to enable the whole project to be extended to 1930.

The Victorian *Biographical Register* would have been greatly enhanced by the inclusion of lists of the officers of the Victorian Parliament and of the Ministries during the period not covered by C. A. Hughes and B. D. Graham in *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964* (Canberra, 1968), together with the dates of tenure of office, as is incorporated in the Queensland *Register*. On the other hand, the Queensland volume might have been enhanced by the inclusion of a list of the Parliaments showing dates of elections for the Legislative Assembly, and a brief but valuable historical note on the statutory

basis of the numbers of members elected or appointed to both Houses, the distribution of electorates, conditions of the franchise and electoral procedures, as is contained in the Appendices to the Victorian *Register*. Future revisions might also usefully incorporate diagrammatic representations of the structure of political parties, and maps showing electoral districts at specified periods as is contained in the volume by Bolton and Mosley on *The Western Australian Legislature 1870-1930*.

However much these or other omissions might be considered to be inadequacies in the present volumes, there is no doubt that they will become established as standard works of reference on the shelves of all practitioners in the field of Australian history.

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