

Between Whirling Poles:
Profiling the Biography of the Contemporary Political Figure in Australia

Volume I
Exegesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines a form of biography that is regularly critically maligned: that of the contemporary political figure. Frequently described as banal, mediocre and often superficial (Blewett 2007, p. 8; Dickenson 2010, p. 114; Walter 2009, p. 104), the biography of the contemporary political figure is nonetheless a recurrent feature of the Australian electoral cycle, with leaders and prominent members of political parties often receiving biographical attention in the lead-up to federal elections.

This form of biography, however, is arguably far more complex than can be accounted for in this type of reductionist criticism. While not necessarily inaccurate, such critiques are insufficient to understand the imperatives and nature of a form in which practice has outstripped scholarship.

Through the application of practice-led research methodology, this thesis argues that the biography of contemporary political figure is significantly affected by the agendas of the multiple stakeholders involved in production and that upon publication such a biography present dangers and opportunities back to those stakeholders in ways not yet comprehensively understood. This thesis argues that the characteristics of the form and the opportunities and dangers it affords are indicative of the ability of this form of biography to mediate between the demands, opportunities and limitations of day-to-day journalism, and those of the more distant, ‘magisterial’ biography.

Using a case-study analysis of the extended biographical studies of Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott—contemporary examples that are emblematic of the form, diverse, and well-suited to a comparative examination—and interviews with their authors, and by dramatising the aforementioned arguments in a novel of political fiction, this thesis is intended to: firstly, broaden the critical discussion of the biography of the contemporary political figure; secondly, examine in detail the personal, political, commercial and critical forces that affect iterations of the form; and finally to then situate that form in a context that leads to a more informed and engaged understanding of it.

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