
BOOKS, ARTS & LIFE

Labor at Its Best

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Arthur Calwell: Transforming Australia Through Immigration

by James Franklin & Gerry O Nolan
Connor Court, 2023, 98 pages, \$19.95

Arthur Calwell's reputation fell afoul of the brutal mathematics of democracy. The penalty for falling two votes short of a majority is to be branded in the history books as a loser.

James Franklin and Gerry O Nolan's monograph is the first biography of Calwell for half a century. It reminds us how close the Labor leader came to curtailing Robert Menzies's post-war prime ministership at the 1961 election when Labor easily won the popular vote and reduced the Coalition to a two-seat majority in Parliament. Six years later, he was again on the losing side, this time to Gough Whitlam, in the battle for the soul the modern Labor Party, and was to finish his career as Father of House with thirty-two years in Parliament under his belt, of which twenty-four were in opposition.

Calwell survived a would-be assassin's bullet fired at point-blank range in June 1966, robbing him of the opportunity to be immortalised as our John

F. Kennedy. Yet he could not survive the second assassination attempt, this time on his character. He is guilty of racism in the Court of Wikipedia which cites the sole evidence of a single lame pun delivered on the floor of Parliament. Calwell's deeply ingrained racial prejudice deserves a much fuller examination, a task Franklin and Nolan begin to undertake in this monograph by placing Calwell's attitude in context.

We learn that despite spending the first six years of his life under the reign of Queen Victoria, Calwell was ahead of his time in his thinking on race. Like the adherents of critical race theory, Calwell believed in biological determinism, imagining that everything boiled down to skin colour. In the absence of sufficient migrants from Britain, Ireland or the United States, Calwell embraced displaced citizens from the Baltic nations as the next best option in his mission to populate Australia or perish.

Hence Australia's first immigration minister can lay a strong claim to being the father of modern multiculturalism while also opposing Australian citizenship for Japanese war brides and defending the White Australia policy long after it had fallen

out of fashion even in his own party.

Calwell grabbed the newly created portfolio of immigration with both hands when Ben Chifley assigned it to him in July 1945. Paradoxically it was his fear of invasion by the “yellow peril” to our north that drove him to seek migrants from Northern Europe and to lobby the British and Americans for the ships to bring them to Australia at a time when the tonnage of the Atlantic merchant fleet was badly depleted.

Franklin and Nolan detail Calwell’s effort to ensure the new migrants’ assimilation into the stubbornly Anglo-Celtic nation. A popular backlash would have stopped the project in its tracks.

The portrait of Calwell as a minister exemplifies Labor at its best: a government driven by the perceived national interest, barely responsive to the pull of the union movement, the country’s largest and most powerful special interest group. It shows a minister determined to get across policy details, remain alert for unintended consequences, and content himself with trade-offs rather than solutions.

To this extent, Calwell would be a worthy exemplar for the Labor government in power today. Yet since he remains excluded from the Labor pantheon of great leaders, the Albanese government is lumbered with the dubious role model of Whitlam, the instigator of the 1967 coup, which put the Labor Party in the hands of the intelligentsia.

Whitlam’s middle-class, university-educated background and lack of a solid connection to the union movement was viewed as an impediment to his leadership ambitions. Yet, in the leadership ballot of February 8, 1967, he was one of three Queen’s Counsels elected to the four most senior positions in the parliamentary party, with Lionel Murphy as his deputy and Sam Cohen as leader in the Senate. The fourth member of this tertiary-educated Gang of Four was Lance Barnard, a schoolteacher.

Calwell surrendered the battle but refused to concede the war. He noted in his 1973 memoirs that the party had passed “for the time being from the traditional control by the working class ... to quasi trade union-cum white-collar-professional control”. Despite his rough and ready characterisation of the party’s intellectual wing, after fifty years of hindsight, the accuracy of Calwell’s observation is clear. It is clear, too, that the party will never return to anything resembling its former self. Its aims and purpose have become steadily more

abstracted in the era of woke. It is a party of the middle ground only in the sense that it occupies the ground between the Coalition and the third-largest political force in the country, the Greens, supported in the lower house of Parliament by their fellow travellers, the Teals. Yet Labor’s ideological centre of gravity is far from the popular consensus, as the Voice referendum demonstrates.

I’ve left a critical strand of Franklin and Nolan’s book until last, probably because I feel less qualified to join the discussion. Calwell’s devotion to Catholicism, which he inherited through his Irish ancestry, is a key to understanding his political leanings and actions, which the authors are supremely qualified to explain. Franklin is the editor of the *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* and the author of *Catholic Thought and Catholic Action*. He and Nolan co-authored *The Real Archbishop Mannix*.

The authors pull together data from the census to show that of 60 per cent of the 182,000 displaced Europeans who settled in Australia under Calwell were Catholic. Whether this was intentional or not, it was ground for his critics to be suspicious of his motives. From the start, Calwell’s attachment to the Church and the politics of Catholic social justice marked him out as an outsider, and possibly a dangerous one. In 1918, he was arrested and interrogated by security forces for

his role in the Young Ireland Society, which was suspected of sympathising with Sinn Féin.

Franklin and Nolan note dryly that this attachment gave him “a lower degree of enthusiasm than most for the British Empire”. Yet Calwell’s patriotism and commitment to the national cause are beyond doubt. They contrast favourably with the nagging undertones of national self-loathing that bubble away in the party today.

Like everything about Calwell, however, his Catholicism and its relationship to his other abiding faith, socialism, is complex and frequently appears paradoxical. Understanding where to fit his instinctive rejection of communism, his strong objection to conscription and Australia’s post-Tet Offensive involvement in the Vietnam War, and why he landed where he did in the great upheaval of the Labor split, qualify in my mind as mysteries of faith that are hard to deal with in less than 20,000 words.

Franklin and Nolan make an admirable attempt,

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however, in this long-overdue monograph. Like the nineteen previous works in Connor Court's Australian Biographical Monographs series, it interrogates a life and legacy that should be better understood by those who aspire to a rounded view of Australia's past.

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GEOFF PAGE

The Essential Things

The Light Café

by Diane Fahey
Liquid Amber, 2023, 97 pages, \$29.99

The China Shelf: New Poems

by Jennifer Maiden
Quemar Press, 2023, 63 pages, \$20

Ways to Say Goodbye

by Anne Kellas
Liquid Amber, 2023, 86 pages, \$26.99

Meaty Bones

by K.A. Nelson
Recent Work Press, 2023, 99 pages, \$19.95

Under-funded and under-read, the demise of Australian poetry is often predicted. Older names are disappearing through death and under-production. Younger names may, or may not, give hope for the future—or a future that still bears some connection with the past.

Strangely, however, as successive small Australian poetry publishers (has there ever been any other kind?) go out of business, new ones, eternally optimistic, spring up to replace them. None of the publishers of these collections was around ten years ago, but they are clearly part of a tradition.

The Light Café by Diane Fahey is one of two new books from Liquid Amber Press in Melbourne. It's her fifteenth collection since *Voices from the Honeycomb* in 1986 and well maintains a standard she has long since set herself.

Fahey's work has varied somewhat in emphasis and manner over time, but she still clearly has the ability to set a project for herself and confidently carry it out. Some earlier books, such as *Metamorphosis*, were *livres composées*. Others typically fall into sections, with a single, separate idea

for each. *The Light Café* is one of these.

It starts with a section on the moon, always a popular (and perilous) subject for poets. In "Her Perfect Face" Fahey produces nine, low-key, highly observant and imaginative poems, none of which is spoiled by cliché. The ending of "Blood Moon Eclipse" is indicative of Fahey's prevailing tone and lyrical skill:

For a space of minutes
the Earth has become
the moon's own moon,
and its sun—the moon itself
a koan, configuring
light devoured by darkness,
darkness devoured by light.

Part 2 is a sequence of thirteen poems, each of them about rain (another well-examined topic). Again her tone is lightly etched and convincing in its detail:

Rain is its own season, keeping its counsel,
withholding or giving
as if by whim—
months of nothing
then a dramatic plenitude
of damp and cold, of life ...

Section 3, "An Answering Light", is probably the book's most typical, containing several of its key poems, including a number of ekphrastic ones based on well-known paintings. There's also a seven-page tribute to the Melbourne painter Clarice Beckett, with whom the poet clearly has a considerable artistic affinity.

Other memorable examples of Fahey's skills are the title poem, "The Light Café", a tribute to a unique kind of coffee bar (possibly only of the imagination) and "Goldfinch" which has the poignant wit that featured often in Fahey's early work:

Yes, I'd like to see this bird
living up to its name. But
musical, clever and beautiful,
it serves at the pleasure of
humans with a desire for
company, tricks and songs.
In return, it has received
the Order of the Brass Chain.

Although Jennifer Maiden is (within a few years) a coeval of Diane Fahey, she is a very different poet. For over two decades now Maiden has been giving us an almost annual update on international politics, via the peregrinations of human rights