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'The Politician as Historian'

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Barry Jones has written a most appealing autobiography — indeed it is the best autobiography of a politician I have ever read. And it qualifies for that accolade because it is deeply, almost abjectly honest, it is abundantly the book of the man who wrote it, and it tells us a lot about the second half of the 20th century in Australia. Though Barry Jones is probably best known as a passionate advocate for science, his undergraduate years were in arts, and he taught history for ten years or so. His sense of history infuses the book, though it is an idiosyncratic sense of history. But then Barry Jones is an idiosyncratic man.

When the book came out I read it almost at once, and collected opinions about him from people who had worked to, for and in association with him, not a difficult mission to accomplish in Canberra. Without exception, everyone I talked to remembered him affectionately, if sometimes with a feeling of exasperation. As he says on the opening page, he lacked the killer instinct that is said to be essential in politics, and his public servants too often found that he did not win important moments in Cabinet. But as a man — oh, he is very hard to dislike. And no one I talked to could think of anyone else quite like him.

That makes him exceptional, and both the writer and the reader set off in the book to find out why. A lonely child of an apparently loveless and dysfunctional marriage, Jones grew up as a great reader with a knack for making lists that he could remember. In time that made him a Quiz Kid, and then an increasingly successful entrant in a radio game show called 'Pick a Box'. His breezy style and self-confident capacity to argue successfully made him a national celebrity, when that distinction was much harder to attain than it is now. He was drawn into politics through his passionate opposition to the death penalty, still in use in Victoria in the 1960s, and that made him an attractive candidate to at least some in the ALP. He was never in any faction, and nearly always a source of anxiety to party leaders, because he was not predictable in what he said, was greatly admired outside politics, and was not easy to discipline.

After several disappointments in pre-selections and election contests, he finally entered the Legislative Assembly in Victoria in 1972, though his preference was to be part of Gough Whitlam's team in Canberra, and when he finally made the transition, in 1977, it was Gough's last election as Leader. Jones served as a Minister in the Hawke Governments from 1983 to 1990, and remained a Federal MP until 1998. In looking back on his parliamentary career he could say, and justly, that his very many speeches and interventions were 'free of partisan bitterness and personal attack'. That too makes him remarkable. He then served as national president of the ALP from 1992 to 2000, and again, for a final term, in 2005. By any standards, he has been a notable member of his party, and a notable Australian.

His autobiography is a long book, but it is always interesting, and at the end I had my own stab at answering Barry's question: why is he the way he is? His early childhood made him something of a solitary person, and gave him, through his 'lonely and obsessive pursuit of knowledge', confidence in his own intellectual ability. He had the confidence, and the stamina, to write to any living celebrity he admired, and many of them responded; in due course he met them, and continued the correspondence. I can think of no one else in our country who could name such a list of eminent acquaintances. He has no gift for languages, however, and has been unable to learn a musical instrument, inadequacies at which he sighs. His childhood experiences may have given him a deep sympathy for others, and a horror at bad treatment. They may also have ingrained in him that the way to connect with others is to find a common ground in interest or knowledge, to know something about the subject, and to explore that. He admits, several times, that he is prone to convey his own interest well past the threshold of attention of his audience. The book is almost devoid of references to his personal life until the very end, when we learn, in a poignant paragraph, that his wife, Rosemary Hanbury, died as he was correcting the proofs.

Of course, we learn a great deal about the inner Barry, but it is almost completely about his political attitudes, and about the 'Life of My Mind' and his 'Beliefs', both chapters, equally absorbing and equally indicative of the man. He is and has been much affected by music, literature, theatre and the arts, and he provides us with ample chapter and verse. It turns out that his taste and mine are not very dissimilar, though I have never had the kind of emotional reaction, even to music, that Barry reports. About beliefs he is again humble and diffident: 'I feel shifty and inconclusive on the subject, because of a deep uncertainty about what I believe'. He then lists his uncertainties in a crisp passage:

That God exists? Probably. That Jesus was a uniquely powerful and charismatic teacher? Yes. That he had a special or even unique relationship with God? Possibly. That the Church is a divine institution? Well, yes and no. That the Bible is infallible? No. That there is a soul, linked to a collective consciousness? Possibly. That there is life, as we know it, after death? Unlikely.

Where does all this come from? A Methodist upbringing and a longish period as a lay preacher, which also helps to explain both his love of teaching (about anything that interests him) and his concentration on big questions. Again, I can think of few others who have bared their doubts in the way he does in this book.

For all his confidence he is an essentially humble man. The book is no proud catalogue of achievements. He is probably aware of the late J. K. Galbraith's warning to would-be autobiographers that it is all too easy to make oneself the centre of the events that one describes and to derive from doing so 'a pleasantly exaggerated sense of accomplishment'. I think he would escape Galbraith's criticism. His judgment of others is nearly always balanced. Hawke, who did not treat him well, is judged to have been electorally effective, to have led between 1983 and 1987 the best government of the 20th century, and to have been a masterful chairman and manager of government business. I would agree. Where

he feels badly used, he says so briefly and without rancour. In all this he is a model for those writing their own life histories.

These days he is usually referred to as a 'public intellectual' and it is plain that while he enjoys the ascription he is a little embarrassed by it too. The reason is clear to him and will be clear to anyone who reads his book. Barry almost thinks in lists, and his book finishes with an appendix that is entitled simply that — 'Lists' (of great men, favourite films and music, and so on). Many of his chapters exhibit the same pattern. It is a trick that is of great use to someone who edited and did the research for encyclopaedias, as Barry Jones has done. And his lists, always interesting, are full of the information he has gathered over the years. But they do not in themselves help him in what he describes on the first page as his 'searching for meaning'. He tells us that his book is 'an attempt to explain my life to myself', and I hope that he feels that he has succeeded, at least in part. Yet it is almost as though he has not found the meaningful structure that connects all his lists, and then relates them all to Barry Jones. Had he done so early in life he might well have been a much more powerful politician. But then he would not have been the Barry Jones who is so generally liked and admired.

The lack of a meaningful intellectual structure is evident in the book's design, as well. The obvious path to follow in a biography is the chronological one, but then you have the problem that various aspects of the life don't sit easily along a time thread. So constructing a biography that carries the reader on in time, but does not neglect developments that need a non-temporal treatment, is always a difficult one. In this book the chapters consider aspects of the life (capital punishment, getting into parliament, fifty years' hard Labor, and so on), but inevitably wander about in time. Given that the chapters themselves have a good deal of the list about them anyway, the general effect is one of confusion. But through it all comes the disarmingly candid self-appraisal of someone who has packed a great deal, and a great deal of public good, into a life that is by no means over. I am very glad that Barry wrote this book, and I would hope that it has a huge readership.

(Barry Jones, *A Thinking Reed*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2006, xiv +561 pp, h/b \$55.00)