

Book Review

Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen. Political Gladiator*, Melbourne, MUP, 1996, xxii + 374 pp, price not given, ISBN 0 522 84718 8

Sir John McEwen was a powerful force in Australian politics for a long time, and had his share of luck, good and ill. He was a Minister continuously from 1949 until his retirement in 1971, but he might have been the leader of his party in the 1930s, and thereafter played an even more dominant role. In my judgment he was the most successful Federal Minister, all things considered, in the second half of this century. He did daring and important things, especially securing a trade treaty with Japan in the 1950s, which shaped Australia thereafter, for its good. He moved his thinking from free trade towards protection, again for the country's good (a provocative judgment, I accept), and thus attracted strong criticism not only from within his party but from across politics and government. In many respects he was the force in Australian economic policy throughout the long years of coalition government after 1949.

And he remains to some degree enigmatic. He kept his own counsel, rarely apologised and rarely explained. He would not accept Willim McMahon as a possible Prime Minister after Harold Holt's death, and told him so and why. But he would say nothing to anyone else. It was the end of his veto, after Gorton's close shave in 1969, that allowed McMahon to aim for the top position again. McEwen did not say why he had relented. When he retired he tried his hand at a small autobiography. I read the draft, at Sir John Crawford's request. It was very like the man, spare, unrevealing, unemotional, dour; it answered no questions. I couldn't see any publisher wanting to publish it.

Peter Golding's likeable and readable biography doesn't take us much further. He does provide us with marvellous stories by other people. Golding has interviewed practically everyone who had the opportunity to work closely with McEwen, and they tell us what we all knew, but with added and memorable detail. Yet they do not and cannot tell us why he was like that. He was, surely, a man driven by the privation of his childhood to try to build a better and more secure society for the kids of the future. He interpreted that mission in his own way, he led by example, he communed with himself rather than with others. He was a loner.

When I knew him I was a young, green man and he was an old and tough one. He was a great political leader, and he had the wit and wisdom to find good young men and groom them as his successors, a rare trait in Australian political leaders. But as he got old the gap between him and his young men grew wider, and he did not explain himself to them. At the end of his long political career he walked off the stage and kept silent.

Peter Golding has done his best to fill that silence and to give us a sense of a past giant. It is essentially a chronological narrative, enlivened by the recall of others. Golding's political judgments seem sensible to me, and the account of McEwen is plausible and balanced. The book is well produced, with few errors (Golding's

crediting Ian Sinclair with Victorian, rather than NSW, parliamentary experience is the only one of substance). The book will be mined to effect by people looking for other things — Gorton's style as chief minister, for example. A final thought: I never saw Jack McEwen as a 'political gladiator'. He was, above all, pushed by ideas and values, and as Golding shows very well, he remained true to them. That is not, to me, what gladiators are about.

Don Aitkin
25 February 1997