

**Paul Strangio & Brian Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*,
Federation Press, Annandale, 2006.
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In the forecourt of 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne, stand the statues of Albert Dunstan (1835-1945), Henry Bolte (1955-1972), Rupert Hamer (1972-1981) and John Cain Jnr (1982-1990). A pet project of former Liberal Premier Jeffrey Kennett (1992-1999), these statues were for many years the only collective public memorial dedicated to Victoria's parliamentary leaders. With the publication of *The Victorian Premiers*, that situation has changed. And while the bronze likenesses in Treasury Place commemorate only the longest-serving of the select group of men (and, to date, only one woman), who have run the colony and state, thanks to Paul Strangio, Brian Costar and their team of contributors, Victorians now have an all-inclusive reference work which addresses this surprising oversight.

The Victorian Premiers is – amazingly – the first work of its kind relating to Australia's second most populous state. As the editors point out in their introduction, New South Wales and Queensland already possess such studies, and while there are numerous works relating to politics in Victoria, this is the first to relate exclusively to the lives and careers of the premiers.

The structure of some of the early chapters reflects one of the key difficulties faced by any study of Victorian (and here, I refer equally to the eponymous monarch as to the colony) politicians. Before the development (largely organic) of the modern party system, ministries often lasted for the briefest of periods, making it difficult to justify devoting entire chapters to individual premiers. Nevertheless, John Waugh handles his task well, and with a clear sense of what is important. Though owing to the often petty concerns of early colonial politics, the contents of the first chapters are sometimes difficult to sustain interest, readers should nevertheless press on, as they will be rewarded by close attention. Waugh shows that the issues which dominated the formative decade of responsible government were to return time and again over the succeeding century and a half, most notably the in-built

conservatism of the Legislative Council, the ‘problem’ of which was not solved until the first Bracks ministry at the very end of the twentieth century. Waugh’s treatment of the career of the ‘Inevitable McCulloch’ (1863-1868, 1868-1869, 1870-1871, 1875-1877) and those of his contemporaries likewise sheds fascinating light on a forgotten period. It also reinforces a question posed by the editors in their introduction (and by Geoffrey Blainey in his recently revised *History of Victoria*): why is there no statue of James McCulloch in Treasury Place? Not only was this man Premier for over the requisite 3000 days (his tenure coming in at 3230 days, over four separate terms), but in many ways his career is emblematic of his age. The overbearing attitude of the Legislative Council helped to make the McCulloch period one of the most tempestuous in Victoria’s history, successive governments being afflicted by the same intransigence over supply which later brought down the Whitlam government. As Waugh and his editors point out, those who have agonised over the Dismissal for the past three decades would do well to explore Victoria’s political history before pontificating over the injustice (or otherwise) of Kerr’s actions.

Co-editor Strangio’s chapter on the first titan of Victorian politics – Graham Berry (1875, 1877-1880, 1880-1881) – is also impressive (aside from a few small errors, such as confusingly referring to British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli and his title Earl of Beaconsfield as two separate individuals). Strangio’s prose lends a reality to his ‘rendering in sepia’ of Berry and his times, seldom possible for even the most renowned of historians so removed in time from their subject. John Lack’s and John Rickard’s chapters are similarly well-written, and well-focused on the intricacies of both interpersonal and political relations throughout the period of ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ and the economic depression which followed.

Among the most interesting and enjoyable chapters in the volume, Weston Bate successfully replicates in more concentrated form the portrait of Tommy Bent (1904-1909) which suffused his classic *History of Brighton*. The fairness of Bate’s portrait of ‘a Man’ who both greatly enhanced (in the long term) and defrauded the people of the colony is an admirable example of the

biographer's art. Bate avoids the easy route of demonising the arrogant, conniving (and corpulent) man whose imposing bronze statue on the Nepean Highway corner of Bay Street is the only other example of the kind of memorialisation found in Treasury Place. Despite Bent being one of his few fellow-premiers to have warranted a full-length biographical study, this chapter adds a new dimension to a complex life and period.

Of the ten chapters which deal with the premiers from 1909 to 1952, John Chesterman's on Alexander Peacock (1901-1902, 1914-1917, 1924) and those dealing with the Labor premiers are perhaps the most interesting (though all are equally impressive in scope and execution). Peacock's character and good-humour make him a sympathetic figure: one of the few true liberals to survive into the twentieth century. In the post-Peacock period, the difficulties faced by Labor and Liberal leaders alike when dealing with the ascendancy of the Country Party from its emergence in the inter-war period, are similarly evocative of sympathy. The struggle of the ALP's Victorian division first to form government, and then the virtual impossibility of implementing its program, serve as an abject lesson in the dangers of institutionalised conservatism. When readers reach the study of John Cain senior (1943, 1945-1947, 1952-1955), the brief triumph of the first majority Labor government is made all the more tragic for Strangio's excellent exposition of the Santamaria-inspired Split, and the author's avoidance throughout of any partisan mudslinging.

The marathon term of Bolte is then handled well by David Dunstan, who shows a consciousness of the societal and institutional transformations which the indomitable Liberal Premier successfully negotiated to become the longest-serving holder of the office. In the post-Bolte era studies, the still-lingering legacies of the Hamer-Thompson and Cain-Kirner governments are treated with the thoroughness they deserve, without lingering too much on either the successes or failings of each.

Since the resignation of Steve Bracks (1999-2007) in favour of John Brumby in July of this year, *The Victorian Premiers* is now in need of updating. This is

something which would be of value in the future, as David Hayward's treatment of the Bracks ministries (though by no means lacking in any quality) would benefit from some historical perspective. The degree to which the 'Kennett Revolution' of the 1990s has been undone or built upon is still unclear. This, one suspects, will form one of the great themes of future studies of this kind, just as the struggles between Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly, the rural/metropolitan divide, and the ideological battles between socialism and conservative paternalism have shaped past eras in Victoria's history. *The Victorian Premiers* will be an invaluable guide to the students of Victorian politics in the coming century, as well as informing and educating contemporary citizens of the rich and varied history of their state.

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