

**THE LIFE AND DEATH OF HAROLD HOLT. Tom Frame. Allen & Unwin, 2005. xx + 372 pp**

Harold Holt, Prime Minister from early 1966 to late 1967, does get rather overlooked, and one of the merits of this on the whole enjoyable biography is the author's judicious attempt to place him firmly in the context of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Australian politics. I am prepared to confess that I had credited John Gorton with some initiatives that rather belong to Harold Holt. I have in mind such firsts as setting up an Australian Council for the Arts and the first Commonwealth attempt to provide a source of advice on what to do about our indigenous people. He already had high status in my small pantheon for introducing decimal currency so professionally, for providing a referendum on whether or not Aboriginal people should be counted in the census, and for ending appeals to the Privy Council.

Whether or not he was a 'great' Prime Minister is a question that exercises his biographer at the end of the book, but it seems a cocktail-party issue to me. If the test of greatness is that what you did endures and becomes part of the fabric of the Australia we know, then arguably the greatest is also the shortest-serving — Dr Earle Page, PM for a few days in April 1939, but a fecund producer of apparently permanent institutions, like the Coalition, the Loan Council, the national health scheme, Commonwealth tied grants to the States, and formal meetings of Commonwealth and State Ministers for the same responsibility. Harold Holt has nothing to show of the same power. Nor, it is fair to say, has any other Prime Minister, including Deakin or Menzies.

But then Holt did not seem out to do so. As Dr Frame patiently shows, Harold Holt wanted to be a politician from the beginning, and once he was there, wanted to be Prime Minister one day. He was not an original thinker or someone with a coherent set of values and policies that he wanted to see set in place in Australian politics and society. Rather, he was careful, amiable, hard-working, loyal, sensible and healthy, and those attributes placed him in the right spot to become Menzies's Deputy Leader in 1956 and to succeed Menzies as Prime Minister ten years later. For the latter post he was the only candidate, a real indication of his status within his Party. He won a great election victory at the end of 1966, suffered a series of set-backs during the following year, and drowned in the surf ten days before Christmas in 1967. Nothing in his life was as dramatic as his leaving of it.

A Holt biography is therefore shaped by a long and slow movement towards the top job, followed by a short period there ended by a sudden and quite unexpected death. On the whole this is an unsatisfactory plot, and it is made much worse by the fact that Holt was uninterested in keeping records, and had no papers. I felt a lot of sympathy towards the biographer, the more so because I too once wrote a biography of a senior politician (Sir Michael Bruxner) who did not keep records. Try as you may, thousands of pages of Hansard and volumes of press cuttings will not bring somebody to life — especially as, in both cases,

the men were courteous, deeply respectful of Parliament and its procedures, and pleasant even to those whom they did not like.

The chief limitation of this biography, then, is that Harold Holt simply does not come to life very often. We learn that he was outgoing, cheerful, impulsive, pleasant to his staff (but then most Ministers are) and thoughtful. He formed friendships with trade union officials and even Arthur Calwell, a senior political foe. It seems that everyone liked him. But when we suddenly see him in action it is because somebody else relates a good story about him. The best of them in the biography come from Peter Howson, who was Government Whip when Holt was Leader of the House: Holt, fed up with McMahon's intriguing, picking him up by the shoulders and pinning him against the wall in a corridor and threatening him, or menacing Harry Turner, who was proposing to wander off to Sydney while he represented the Government's majority of one. Then you know why people thought he actually was leadership material.

My favourite story of Harold Holt is presumably known to Dr Frame, and I am puzzled that he didn't use it. Paul Hasluck once described Gough Whitlam in very personal and condemnatory terms. Whitlam, who was about to drink a glass of water, was so stung by what he heard that he threw the water at Hasluck instead. Pandemonium! Holt, horrified and concerned for both men, found Whitlam in the corridor and brought him into his own room to calm him down. 'You must learn to control yourself, whatever happens,' he advised. 'You are going to be the Prime Minister of this country one day.' Whitlam was to say, after Holt's death, that he owed Holt a 'personal debt', and that Holt was 'a true gentleman.' He had quality, personal quality, of a superior kind.

I remember being in a small group in King's Hall when Holt spoke to us, more or less in passing. His smile and self-confidence were engaging, and he was friendly in a pleasantly assured manner. It was easy to like him. Apparently he grew up without much affection, and that is a key to understanding both his political style and his interest in women. Much has been made about his private life and his long relationship with Zara, who had much to put up with but did so cheerfully. Dr Frame seems to have dealt with all of this in the right fashion, and since Holt carefully and discreetly separated his private and public lives, my sense is that we should do so too.

There are some problems with the book: the chronology shifts around too much for my taste, the war in Vietnam is almost too big a subject to fit into a biography, John McEwen could have been better understood, Ian Sinclair has not, to my knowledge, ever spelled his first name 'Iain', Hubert Opperman was never an Olympian (but a famous professional cyclist) and the writing sometimes lapses into the pedestrian. Nonetheless, I am glad that the book has been written, and I thought Dr Frame's account of the days surrounding Holt's death was well written indeed. Harold Holt was worth a serious biography, and this is it.

**Don Aitkin**

