The heightened sense of expectation makes this collection all the more disappointing. It is, with the exception of a few of the biographies, uninspiring. The dated nature of the book extends largely from the fact that this is the third edition of a collection of political biographies originally published in 1978, then published in revised form in 1990. Between the first and second editions, two of the principal authors, Denis Murphy and Roger Joyce, passed away, while Margaret Cribb died in 1993. Along the way, new chapters have been added on Bjelke-Petersen, Mike Ahern, Wayne Goss, Rob Borbidge and Peter Beattie, while the colonial premiers included in the first edition have been culled. Eerily, one of the original authors, Roger Joyce, who wrote some of the colonial biographies, survives in this latest incarnation of the collection only as the co-author of the introduction to the 1978 edition.

Twenty-five years on, as might be expected, the chapters from the 1978 edition have a dated air about them. Interesting though some of the political machinations are, and interesting characters though some of the premiers undoubtedly were, particularly Ryan and E.G. Theodore, their biographies have a flat and lifeless feel. If some of the stories are absorbing (such as Ryan, the anti-conscriptionist, being chaired through the streets in 1917 by returned soldiers, or Theodore, the economics expert, being embroiled in financial scandals), their telling is disappointing. The most interesting parts of the book are towards the end, in the more recently written chapters. To be fair, later writers had the colourful Bjelke-Petersen and his fraught successors to write about, but the interest is due to the narration as much as to the intrinsically compelling subject of Bjelke-Petersen’s Queensland and its rehabilitation.

The highlight is James Walter’s superb chapter on Bjelke-Petersen. Walter manages to be sensitive but scathing at the same time. He recounts Bjelke-Petersen’s long list of sins as premier: he was ruthless; he could not see differences of opinion as creative; he presided over widespread corruption; he had little understanding of the Westminster system and gave farcical replies to the Fitzgerald Inquiry when questioned on the separation of powers; he gerrymandered, and so on. But, at the same time, Walter evocatively and sensitively teases out Bjelke-Petersen’s world view and its origins. The son of poor immigrants, he worked extraordinarily hard and with considerable innovation and foresight to turn unpromising landholdings into considerable wealth before entering parliament. His faith, his upbringing and his experiences left him convinced of the virtues of hard work and of getting the job done, even if parliamentary processes, and laws, had to be trampled in the process. Bjelke-Petersen is easily maligned; Walter’s masterly chapter allows him to be understood. Walter’s work is, however, a bright light against a drab background.