
Reviewed by Andrew Kelly

As its longest serving prime minister and founder of the current Australian Liberal Party, Robert Menzies has dominated Australia’s modern political landscape more than any other figure. From somewhat humble beginnings as a small boy from Jeparit, Victoria, who then worked as an attorney during the 1920s, Menzies entered federal politics in 1934 and in less than five years became Australia’s prime minister in April 1939. Upon taking the prime ministership Menzies faced two serious crises: the first, leading an unwilling nation towards a second global conflict, and the second, keeping control of the fractious domestic political opponents in both the Labor Party and his own United Australia Party that often questioned publicly his capacity to lead the country. Menzies, frustrated that he could not address both of these difficult issues, eventually resigned as prime minister in late 1941. His so-called failure and abrupt end to his first term as prime minister have since been criticised harshly by the Left, often to the point where Menzies’ achievements and challenges during this difficult period are unfairly overshadowed.

Anne Henderson’s *Menzies at War* is a timely addition to the literature that responds directly to historians that have found much to criticise during Menzies’ first term—such as David Day and a docudrama television series produced by 360 Degree Films called *Menzies and Churchill at War*—by arguing that Menzies in fact led Australia astutely through a difficult period. For instance, she explains convincingly that Menzies’ trip to London during the Second World War was to secure further British support for its
bases in Southeast Asia rather than to challenge Winston Churchill for the British prime ministership. Such an effort reflected Australian interests and not Menzies’ own personal ambitions. According to Henderson, Labor sympathisers do not detail this visit properly. These critics portray Menzies as an anglophile through a jaundiced account of his time in London, where he aimed to score a ‘plum British appointment’ or even the ‘prime ministership itself’ (p. 126).

Henderson provides instead a more balanced account of Menzies’ trip, which forms the crux of her book. She concedes that at times Menzies was at fault. Henderson demonstrates shrewdly that while attending the War Cabinet meetings in London, Menzies struggled to convince the eccentric and hard-headed Churchill that British bases in Southeast Asia must be reinforced in order to safeguard Australia and New Zealand from the Japanese. In these meetings, Henderson suggests that Menzies was ‘a visitor rather than an insider’, and had no substantial influence on British wartime policy (p. 131). Alongside these meetings, she also points out that Menzies’ public comments on Irish neutrality in the war were ill-timed and did little to improve Anglo-Irish relations. In Henderson’s words, these efforts ‘harmed [Menzies’] standing with Churchill’ (p. 125)

Outside of Menzies’ role in the Australian war effort during World War II, another major aspect of this book is its immaculate analysis of Australian domestic politics during wartime. Here Henderson examines the factions and competing personalities within the Labor, Country and United Australia parties and suggests Menzies was unable to deal with these political divisions while his attention was directed at more serious concerns abroad. Because Menzies was busy overseas, he was also unprepared to
respond effectively to public opinion on his prime ministership and views on Australian involvement in the war. As Henderson suggests, Menzies should not be blamed entirely because the country had ‘unsettled feelings’ about party leadership and its national goals before he took office (p. 45).

Moreover, she suggests that other major events that affected Australian domestic politics during the early 1940s—such as the August 1940 Canberra airplane disaster that killed Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Sir Brudenell White, an army staff liaison officer, the air minister’s private secretary and four members of the RAAF—were simply out of Menzies’ control. According to Henderson, this particular tragedy hit Menzies ‘like a knockout blow’. It harmed his first term as prime minister ‘more than anything else’, because these friends had been important allies against Menzies’ own enemies in the Australian parliament (p. 93). This portrayal of Menzies as an unfortunate victim of 1940s Australian domestic politics is perhaps too sympathetic, but is nonetheless worth considering.

Overall, Henderson’s Menzies at War is an intriguing book that offers a more balanced assessment of Robert Menzies’ political career during World War II and his later efforts to reclaim the prime ministership in 1949. The book’s most important contribution is through its argument that ‘the minority government of Menzies from 1940 to 1941 and his term as prime minister from April 1939 were not the policy failure many Labor-leaning critics have asserted’ (p. 167-168). For this reason, Henderson’s new interpretation of Menzies’ first term as prime minister, his resignation, and his subsequent path back into Australia’s top office provides an important contribution to the literature that should be applauded. It is a must-read for academics and general readers.
interested in Australian history, World War II, and the genesis of the Australian Liberal Party.