*Beautiful Lies: Australia from Menzies to Howard* (Wakefield Press).


*Contemporary Australia* was the pedestrian title of a 1977 book by historian Tony Griffiths. For later editions he spiced it up with a quote from Mark Twain: Australian history ‘is almost always picturesque … it does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies’. The third edition, just out, with a new, up-to-date subtitle, is *Beautiful Lies: Australia from Menzies to Howard*.

It is appropriate that the names of the two longest-serving prime ministers feature on the cover, because this is very much an election-to-election political history focussing on the leaders – personalities, peccadilloes and power-plays. *Beautiful Lies* is brief, at 266 pages, and racy at times. Griffiths is witty and forthright in his opinions, but he couldn’t be accused of partisanship. True, he seems to admire the blue-ribbon Menzies in many ways, and respects Fraser’s achievements, and he has little time for Whitlam or Keating. However, Curtin would perhaps be his choice as runner-up to Menzies in the greatest PM stakes, while the present incumbent arouses unrelieved scorn despite his admitted political wiliness.

*Beautiful Lies* shows a country lurching from one crisis to the next, so that it’s a matter of some puzzlement that the nation has survived the sixty years since World War II. As if the war itself wasn’t bad enough, there was the hopeless post-Menzies Liberal wasteland of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the spectacular crash and burn of the Whitlam years, and the cynical economic opportunism of the 1980s. And now, according to Griffiths, we are confronted with ‘the most retrogressive political perspective in the
developed world’, rhetorically bracketed with Australia’s possession of ‘the world’s most dangerous collection of spiders, sharks and fish’.

Griffiths has a mordant wit and a gift for a vivid phrase. With fine cynicism, he describes Lyndon Johnson’s visit as ‘almost as good as an assassination’ for selling newspapers. He compares US and Australian consumption of confectionery ‘per tooth’, and memorably explains a certain inertia in our democracy by saying, ‘The Australian political pendulum is a very heavy instrument.’ Sometimes brevity and perhaps even haste work against clarity. Chronology of events is often vague when it needs to be precise: a week is a long time in politics, and it often takes more than the year or even the month we are given to place an event in sequence. Some references are obscure, or becoming that way: I may be among the last generation to understand the significance of ‘the Blue Hills of Australian politics’: many current readers would have no idea. And clangers like placing 9/11 in 2002, and misspelling the name of the UK prime minister, should have been avoided.

All in all, Beautiful Lies maps the shape of Australian federal politics over the past 65 years. Twain’s quote on Australian history is amusing, but is it apt? These days the lies are obvious; but where is the beauty?