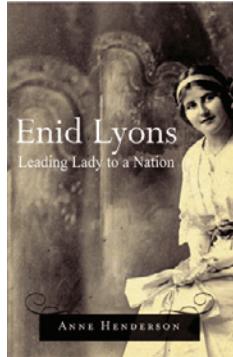


The best known woman in Australia

Richard Allsop reviews

Enid Lyons: Leading Lady to a Nation

by Anne Henderson
(Pluto Press, 2008, 356 pages)



This is the biography of a woman who ‘was for many years the best known woman in Australia’.

It says something for the fleetingness of fame that Enid Lyons is now best remembered, if at all, for having had lots of children. However, as Anne Henderson’s book reminds us, Lyons has an important part in the nation’s political history having been the first female member of both the House of Representatives and the Federal Cabinet, and also the wife of a Prime Minister.

Of necessity, any book about Enid Lyons is also a partial biography of her husband, Joe, and Anne Henderson skillfully balances the task of telling one and a half life stories.

Politically, for both Joe and Enid, the seminal event was the Depression and its dramatic impact on the Scullin Labor Government. When Joe entered Federal Parliament his experience as Premier of Tasmania guaranteed him a ministry with the Scullin Government when it was elected in October 1929. However it was the impact of the Depression which made him, and by extension Enid, significant national figures.

Joe became the leader of the group within the Federal Labor caucus struggling to keep a modicum of orthodoxy in the Government’s economic policies. The caucus was split three ways, between Joe’s moderates, the supporters of Treasurer ‘Red Ted’ Theodore’s more expansionary plan, and the even more extreme

wing, whose titular head was NSW Premier, Jack Lang. Joe particularly reviled Lang and Enid herself later wrote that Joe ‘would always remember with the greatest pride that he had the honour and pleasure of introducing the legislation that brought down John Thomas Lang’.

Joe Lyons achieved the power to stop Lang by leading his followers out of the Labor Party and joining forces with their Nationalist opponents in the new United Australia Party. A speaking tour across southern Australia in April 1931 was ‘the start of the Lyons personality cult at the Federal level’. A key element of which was Enid’s ability as a speaker to appeal, in particular, to women voters with down-to-earth anecdotes and examples. Henderson describes how ‘by year’s end Joe and Enid Lyons would coast into the Lodge on a wave of popular appeal born out of their combined talents at the podium and the unworkable divisions in Labor ranks.’

While ‘rattng’ earned Joe Lyons the lasting enmity of Labor, it made him something of a national hero to those who were not Labor partisans. He remains, with Bob Hawke, the only Prime Minister to have won three or more elections without ever suffering a defeat.

Henderson makes clear just how much of an asset Enid was to Joe. In public her speeches were very successful and she effectively utilised both print and the new medium of radio. And in

private as a solid rock of support, especially necessary when former long-term colleagues spurned him.

Being supportive should not be confused with being manipulative. Henderson several times reinforces the point that ‘Joe Lyons was always the politically ambitious one in the Lyons partnership.’ She is strongly critical of Robert Menzies’ biographer, Allan Martin’s assertion (‘with no evidence whatsoever’) that it was Enid who forced Joe not to go ahead with a January 1939 plan to invite Stanley Melbourne Bruce to return from his job as High Commission in London to take over as leader of the UAP.

While both Joe and Enid were keen for Joe to retire, the lack of a successor who would be able to unite the party and the need for Joe to find alternative remuneration to support his family precluded it happening before Joe’s death.

As the 1930s progressed the big issues kept coming. There was the abdication crisis of 1936, an issue on which Henderson endorses the position Enid took in her memoirs “‘demolishing” the opinion of the Archbishop of Canterbury about Lyons’ role’, and then the growing prospect of war. Joe and Enid were both strong supporters of Chamberlain and appeasement.

However, it is not only the coverage of big political events that make this book an engrossing read. Henderson presents a persuasive case that Enid was probably not her father’s daughter, instead having been the product of an affair between her mother Eliza Burrell and one Aloysius Joyce. Her evidence is based on overheard conversations, a striking physical resemblance between Enid and members of the Joyce family, and shared musical talents.

Then there is the matter of Joe Lyons courtship, which would be scandalous on several grounds today. When they married, Joe was 35 and Enid 17, but they had been an item for a couple of years prior to that. On top of the 18 year

Richard Allsop is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs.



age difference was the fact that during their courtship Joe was Minister for Education and Enid a trainee teacher, and at one stage he wrote to her on ministerial letterhead suggesting he might get the head of the department to station her at a location closer to him.

Fortunately for the biographer, much of the correspondence between the couple survives and it demonstrates how close, and how much in love, the couple were. This, together with interviews with the children, builds the picture of how it was the Catholic-convert, Enid, rather than the Catholic-born Joe, who refused to consider contraception; that Enid was something of a remote mother, while Joe, for the time and allowing for how much time he was away, was quite an involved father. These factors lead Henderson to conclude that ‘this was indeed a modern marriage, of sorts.’

Enid had regularly suffered from mental breakdowns, often necessitating hospitalisation, and naturally Joe’s death hit her hard. It was one of her daughters who pushed Enid to take up the opportunity provided by the retirement of the long-standing federal member and run for the House of Representatives

in 1943. While her gender and religion may have been negatives, her name recognition and energetic campaigning were sufficient advantages to carry her to victory in what otherwise was a shocking election result for the UAP. She shares with Dorothy Tangney the honour of first female in the Parliament, Tangney being elected as a Senator from Western Australia at the same election.

In Canberra, her friends were often other controversial figures from the past, such as Billy Hughes and Earl Page, and she always seemed to have something of a fraught relationship with Menzies. When the Coalition came to power in 1949, Enid became the first woman in Cabinet, but it was something of a nominal role as she was appointed as vice president of the Executive Council. Apparently, Menzies did not want her in Cabinet, but was pressured into giving her something. It all became a bit academic, because by 1951 ill-health forced Enid to quit both the ministry and then the Parliament. Her already high profile was boosted in this period by regular newspaper, magazine and radio appearances and subsequently by appointment as an ABC Board member.

She also wrote two volumes of memoirs, one aim of which was to defend Joe’s legacy. Henderson provides a persuasive explanation of why Joe Lyons has not been better remembered. To Labor he remained a ‘rat’, and one of the founding bases of the new Liberal Party in 1944 was that the UAP had been a failure. Interestingly, for those who try to paint Enid Lyons as the mother of modern conservatism, Henderson’s assessment is that her ‘political instincts had often been social democratic rather than conservative,’ and that when the Whitlam Government was elected ‘on many issues the new Labor mood attracted her’.

In an otherwise excellent work, there are two minor irritations—too many analogies with modern political events and a seeming necessity to mention the name of almost every ship that the Lyons family ever travelled on. However, these are small quibbles in what is overall a fascinating insight, not only into the biographical subject, but into Australian politics and society in the first half of the 20th century.

R