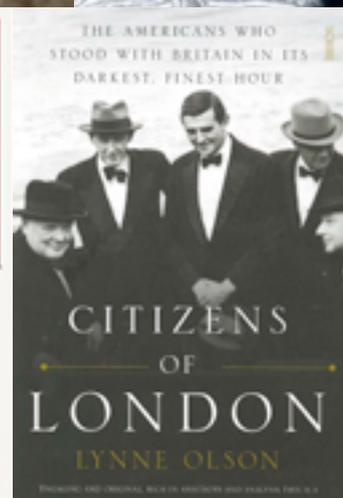
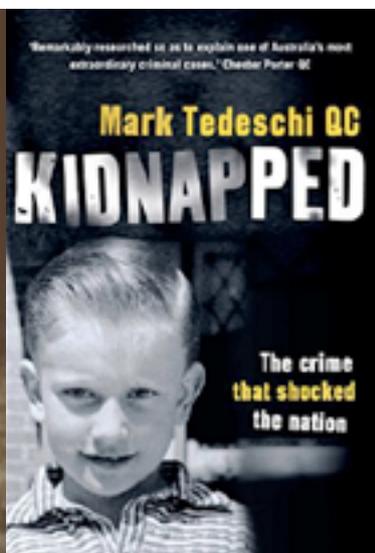
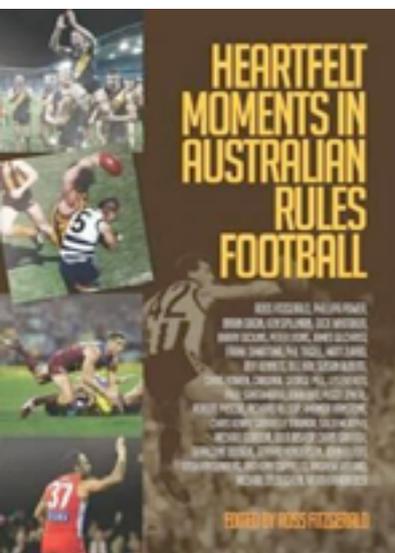




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CHURCHILL AND HIS LOYAL AMERICANS

Citizens of London – The Americans Who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour

By Lynne Olson

Scribe Publications 2015

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Reviewed by Anne Henderson

In the UK spring of 1941, the Luftwaffe rained down bombs on a number of the UK's industrial cities and ports, trying to sever Britain's supplies and damage production. In early April, Winston Churchill travelled from London to visit and boost morale among the devastated cities of Manchester, Portsmouth, Cardiff, Plymouth, Liverpool and Bristol.

On 12 April, Churchill entered the environs of the rubble covered city of Bristol, watching in dismay from his train, sheltering under a railway bridge, as the bombs lit up the sky laying waste the streets, from the docks to the central business district. As day dawned, Churchill's party drove through the damaged Bristol streets, a sight his secretary John Colville recorded as "devastation such as I had never thought possible".

The UK prime minister's visit raised spirits and he was cheered along the way by many bystanders. But he was also heading that day to Bristol University where, as Chancellor, he would confer honorary degrees on three dignitaries. Lynne Olson records in her recently released *Citizens of London*, how the university's faculty members had spent the night "fighting fires or performing rescue work" and "marched into the small hall where the ceremony was held, their eyes bloodshot, their haggard faces streaked with grime, and the muddy, wet clothing under their academic gowns and richly coloured hoods reeking of smoke".

The ceremony itself said much about the temerity and spirit of Britons and their leader, but more than that. Two of the dignitaries receiving honorary doctorates that day were not Britons. Travelling with the UK prime minister was the US Ambassador Gil Winant and US businessman and special envoy Averill Harriman. Churchill would confer an honorary degree at that ceremony on Gill Winant, along with Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia.

As Britain faced the might of the German onslaught, it had the support of its dominion Australia, albeit against criticism back home from the Australian Labor Party opposition that Australia's home defence was a more pressing priority. But Churchill's great preoccupation, at this time when Britain stood virtually alone, was in wooing military support from the US through such North American envoys as those accompanying him to Bristol.

The Anglo-American relationship has a long history and one barely recognised today involving serious divisions, even war. The US was reluctant to enter the First World War as an ally of Britain; in spite of a German U-Boat sinking its luxury liner the *Luisitania* in May 1915, it would not be until April 1917 that President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany. In the 1940 presidential election campaign, as Britain seemed destined to be invaded by Germany, President F D Roosevelt assured US citizens that no US soldier would be sent to fight in the war against Hitler.

That the US entered the Second World War in late 1941 has been seen as a direct result of the Japanese bombing of the US fleet at Pearl Harbor on 7 December. However, having declared war on Japan on 8 December, in the days immediately after this US actions provoked Germany to declare war on the US. By 11 December, Germany and the US were at war. This was an outcome Winston Churchill had been working tirelessly to achieve for more than a year – with support from London based Americans Gil Winant, US broadcaster Ed Murrow and Averill Harriman.

The story of those efforts, and the behind-the-scenes machinations on both sides of the Atlantic is now intrinsically recorded in a riveting telling by historian Lynne Olson as *Citizens of London* – with the sub title *The Americans Who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour*.

Gil Winant replaced the unsuitable and appeasement focussed Joe Kennedy as US Ambassador to Britain in March 1941, at a time when tens of thousands of British civilians had been killed by Luftwaffe bombings of UK cities. France had fallen to the Nazis in May 1940 and, with the Nazi-Soviet Pact still in play, many considered it only a matter of time before Britain would be unable to hold out.

Winant's mission from Roosevelt, as a liberal Republican with hands-on political experience, was to walk the line between Conservative and Labour figures sending back intelligence on Churchill, his manner of doing business and his government, while also easing relations between an isolationist US and a besieged British Empire world leader. Winant himself, however, was impatient about US unwillingness to show world leadership following its dominant role in the First World War.

In spite of President Woodrow Wilson's seminal part in the founding of the League of Nations, US voters refused to agree to US membership. Increasingly, Winant's role would be one of quiet advocate for the US to come to the aid of Britain and its suffering people. Alongside him in this quest were his good friend journalist Ed Murrow and US businessman Averill Harriman sent by Roosevelt (on the advice of close presidential adviser Harry Hopkins) to co-ordinate the Lend Lease agreement and aid. All three would become both personally and politically embedded in the Churchillian campaign to woo the US into the war.

Lynne Olsen has worked an engrossing tale of the intrigues and dramas at high levels around Whitehall and London's political and social networks in 1941, and beyond as American troops invaded England through

the years 1942-45. Churchill's daughter-in-law, Pamela, had affairs with both Harriman and Murrow and Sarah Churchill developed a serious relationship with Winant. London life was dangerous, promiscuous, exciting and socially incestuous. Murrow's wife Janet remarked on her lonely country life and absent husband at the time saying, "They didn't want to leave the excitement of London."

Olson's brief is not the battlefield but the command centres, the civilian landscape and the players around that. Strategies were often fraught with human error and divided personalities. Harriman and Winant had a problematic relationship – the unpretentious but charismatic personality of the generous Winant contrasting with the "go get" big man pushiness of the wealthy Harriman. British military command would also be shocked by the naivete and arrogance of initial US military proposals for what they were taking on, often unwilling to be advised on the vagaries and local pitfalls in the European/North African balance of forces. They underestimated, acutely, the force of the German military.

Dwight Eisenhower, however, emerges as a gentle giant, internally strong in pushing for an Anglo-American coalition at all levels, a completely unified command with the US taking chief rank. Yet the first landings and invasion of north west Africa - known as "Torch" - would be a baptism of fire as the inexperienced and not yet war ready US military floundered in the face of bad tactics and the strength of their opposition. All of it proved Churchill's better judgement, that the US had a lot to learn.

Olson is also evocative in her recording of the spirit of Britons in the long and desperate months of 1941 when Churchill incessantly lobbied Winant and Harriman who in turn lobbied their president for US help for Britain. By May 1941, Churchill was cabling Roosevelt, *I am sure you will not misunderstand me if I speak to you exactly what is on my mind... The one decisive counterweight I can see ... would be if the United States were immediately to range herself with us as a belligerent power.*

Roosevelt waited a week and responded that he did not see the urgency from where he stood.

Olson conveys the ensuing sense of frustration and despair in Winant's words on life in the UK around this time: "The fatigue and the monotony ...the interrupted transportation ... the dust ...the shabby and worn out clothes ... the drabness that comes from want of things ... no glass for replacement of windows ...stumbling home in the blackout ... the shortage of light and fuel – all made a dreary picture for even the brave-hearted." The bravery of the Brits had captured these US envoys but there was no shaking their commander-in-chief, remote in the safety of his western Atlantic shores.

The US would emerge from WW II as the dominant world leader and even world policeman. Britain would lose its empire and fade as a significant world power absorbed into Europe and the US dominated alliance NATO. In the last year of the war, Roosevelt would gradually overtake Churchill as pre-eminent Western leader, seeming closer to and admiring of Stalin at the historic meetings to decide on the spoils of war and post war settlement. All this was a sharp irony, however, in the light of US ignorance of Britain and Europe

as its troops began arriving in England.

Olson deftly underlines the chasm between British and North American perceptions of each other. The Brits, at top level, dismissed Americans with a condescension more appropriate to Anglo-American relations a century or more earlier. The British ambassador to the US in the mid-1930s displayed this attitude in a poor use of metaphor when he wrote home to the Foreign Office that the US “resembles a young lady just launched into society and highly susceptible to a little deference from an older man.” By the end of the war, that “older man” Britain would have passed the global baton to a very much grown “young lady”.

On the US side, there was equal hubris. The Americans were far from ready for war, having emerged from a double dip depression under Franklin D Roosevelt’s New Deal so that British military leaders like Sir John Dill visiting Washington remarked on how little evidence of military preparedness could be found. Olson makes graphic the situation by illustrating such a significant dilemma in the spectacle of men reporting for their new military adventure at the Army and Navy Building in December 1941 after the US had declared war in “uniforms and parts of uniforms dating back to 1918”.

There were obvious tensions in this chasm of knowledge. A public opinion survey made as the US entered the war recorded that Britons had a sense of “malicious delight” that Americans would now get a taste of the horrors Brits had endured for so long. In March 1942, after four months back home, Ed Murrow told Harold Nicolson in Whitehall that he found the anti-British feeling in the US quite “intense”. Clearly there would be a long way to go before the unity of the D Day landings of June 1944.

Much of the gap in knowledge had come from distance and lack of mutual experience. Olson references a US historian who opined that, “the primary image of the British that Americans had taken away from their history lessons was one of murderous redcoats who tried to destroy the infant United States during the Revolutionary War”. On the other side of the Atlantic, British students learnt nothing whatsoever of American history. Olson writes: “Few Britons had even met an American, and fewer yet had crossed the Atlantic.” Their images of Americans, if they thought of them at all, was the clichéd figures of Hollywood – or as one Whitehall official put it, “a mixture of slaves in the South, gangsters in Chicago, and musicals with Fred Astaire”.

But the call to arms and the massive arrival and four years residence of US troops in the British Isles would revolutionise trans Atlantic awareness. Not always happily but, eventually, with mutual respect.

Olson crystallises the problem at one point with an anecdote passed on by a former US Military Policeman, on duty outside US Army headquarters in London. A pretty young woman in UK Auxiliary Territorial Service uniform approached the MP and his colleague for a chat and then asked them how they liked Britain. The MP who related the tale said he liked England “fine” but his companion blurted out, “Lady, they should

cut all those goddam [barrage] balloons loose and let this SOB place sink.” As the young lady scowled and walked away, a civilian guard hurried over to say, “That was Princess Elizabeth. She’s doing her time in the Army.” The MP would never forget his embarrassment.

For all the momentary break downs in communication, the disputed tactics at the top and the shock many, on both sides, registered at the gaps in understanding, the war years shifted plates in Anglo-US relations. Heroes like US fighter bomber Tommy Hitchcock gave their all for the Allies alongside those who had withstood the Luftwaffe without allied support. In fact, as Olson charts, owing to US military command taking a decision to aggressively bomb at high altitude and in daylight, “US Army Air Forces casualties, particularly in the Eighth, were astronomically greater than those in either of the two other military services”. Harrison Salisbury labelled it “a ticket to a funeral” to be called to the Eighth.

Gil Winant, Ed Murrow and Averill Harriman are the heroes of Olson’s study without doubt. Yet, in her meticulous research of the social fabric as much as the military circumstances, *Citizens of London* and Olson’s pacey prose style reads like a giant tapestry of the millions of citizens, in uniform and not, who stood together in this European inferno – the like of which should never happen again.

Anne Henderson is the author of *Menzies at War*

THE FALL OF TONY ABBOTT AS JACOBAN DRAMA

The Road to Ruin: How Tony Abbott and Peta Credlin Destroyed Their Own Government by Niki Savva

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Credlin and Co: How the Abbott government destroyed itself by Aaron Patrick

Black Inc 2106

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Reviewed by Dr Stephen Matchett

Gallery journalism is now less the first draft of Australian political history as the altar on which politicians are either deified or demolished. Whatever scholars write, it is rarely for an audience outside the academy. This means the West Wingeratti, who yearn for politics as theatre where policy is all that is prurient, get their take on political history from journalists who think a study of record is an ultra-long colour story with added op eds and footnotes.

There is nothing wrong with this; it is what journalists do and they are hardly crowding out political historians who are actually interested in writing about politics as it is practised, as distinct from the moral failures of politicians and the people who elect them. Australian political history is yet to be blessed with scholar storytellers like Ron Chernow on Alexander Hamilton and Robert Caro on Lyndon Baines Johnson, whose mastery of the archives is matched by a talent for insight and entertainment.

But journalism isn't history, if only because immediacy is inimical to the analysis that depends on the passage of time. With less than six months since Mr Abbott lost the support of his party it is way too early for the dust to settle and for the meaning of what happened to emerge.

The problem is it probably won't and the first takes on what happened will become the reports of record. Niki Savva's *The Road to Ruin: How Tony Abbott and Peta Credlin destroyed their own government*, Aaron Patrick's *Credlin and Co: How the Abbott government destroyed itself* and Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen's *Battleground* (Sydney Institute Review, February 2016) all argue Mr Abbott was brought down by listening too much to his chief of staff Peta Credlin and too little to anybody else.

In these three books, Tony Abbott's fall is presented as a Jacobean drama – a leader places all his trust in an

advisor who ruthlessly excludes all her rivals. When other courtiers, sorry colleagues, cannot bring her down they turn on him.

But this isn't *The White Devil*, it isn't even *House of Cards*. Nobody gets knocked off and the worse thing anybody accuses Mr Abbott of is weakness and a blind faith in his chief of staff. And, the worst Ms Credlin is accused of is a towering temper, a jealous disposition, a political judgement as strong as it is flawed and an avaricious appetite for power – which hardly makes her unique in politics from a P&C to the PMO.

People not getting on is no inevitable impediment to governing – as Doris Kearns Goodwin demonstrated in *Team of Rivals*. Abraham Lincoln managed to win the Civil War with an executive made up of men who variously hated each other and thought he was a dill.

For people who work in or whose work is watching politics, it is easy to mistake office gossip for governing. What journalists who present themselves as insiders miss, in writing about politics as endless counting of numbers, shafting of opponents and shifting of positions is the real reason why prime ministers fail – they are just not up to the job. Not the ingratiating and intimidating, obfuscating and announcing that professionals who see every news cycle as what must be won to survive, but the real task of governing which is ensuring the needs of the people are met and their wishes obeyed.

Politicians, including some who even believe it, say that good policy is good politics. But this works both ways. Policy unimplemented is pointless. Those who focus on accumulating power and dispensing patronage and who work hard at keeping the trains on time are empty suits. So are ideas merchants who talk up a great policy proposal but cannot implement it. Nothing annoys the electorate more than a grand idea that is easily knocked off, less by those who oppose it than for want of detail on how it will work.

Kevin Rudd had guile by the gallon, Julia Gillard could count, give Tony Abbott a message and he would never tire of delivering it. They failed not for a lack of tradecraft, or even people skills. Ms Gillard and Mr Abbott at least could always command the allegiance of many of their colleagues. They failed because in the end they did not have what it takes to be a proper prime minister, an awareness of the country's problems, policies to address them, the ability to implement their plans and the maturity required to keep the confidence of the electorate.

The message from Nikki Savva and Aaron Patrick's books is that Tony Abbott could not make the transition from a competent minister and brilliant opposition leader to lead the country.

But it is a message, especially as told by Savva, which is lost in a record of personality failings and plain bad manners.

All three books on the end of Abbott make one fundamental error in explaining his failure; they fall for the excisionist fallacy, the idea that removing a troublemaker will solve an organisation's problems - and didn't that work well for the federal parliamentary Labor Party when they rolled Kevin Rudd.

In fact, both Savva and Patrick make it clear that the paramount problem for the Abbott Government was not Ms Credlin, assuming she was a hindrance. Rather, it was (in one part) what the prime minister either did not see or allowed her to get away with and (in another) the government's inability to stick to, and sell, the 2014 budget repair narrative. In a third, it was Tony Abbott's character.

For all the cruel delight her enemies took in Credlin's fall, there was much more to Abbott's demise than a rude chief of staff.

Savva's treatment of Credlin's personal qualities and political capacities was always going to generate media attention, an arsenal of anecdotes and examples of alleged mal-administration and mean-mindedness saw to that. Savva's case against Credlin is built on three foundations; her personality, her relationship with the prime minister and her work.

That Niki Savva does not like Peta Credlin is clear from the start. The book is awash with examples, some sourced, most not attributed, of cruel and controlling behaviour of pushing and punishing staff, of variously instructing and ignoring MPs and ministers, of obsessive assertions of authority. One source compares her to Wallis Simpson; another named staffer says she was more in the style of Lady Macbeth.

But while she may have got away with metaphoric murder in the way she dealt with people, Peta Credlin was not the first political COS to be rude and ruthless. Sad to relate, the Leo McGarrys are always part Malcolm Tucker.

And yet, while Savva acknowledges some people got along with Credlin, including Christopher Pyne, her failures as a manager and colleague are relentlessly recounted, with no explanation. There is even speculation as to how a woman so lacking in empathy and courtesy rose to such a powerful position. This leaves Credlin incomplete as presented. There are ample individuals everywhere who think others exist only to serve them but most such people either learn to hide their self-obsession or never rise from the ruck. Given Savva's thesis that Peta Credlin played a big role in Tony Abbott's fate, a bit about her background and what shaped her conduct would have helped.

The second criticism of Credlin is her relationship with Tony Abbott. This is what the media seized on. But for all the speculation about the nature of the relationship, Savva was careful in what she wrote, leaving readers to imagine the implications of some of the incidents she described. That Peta Credlin bought matching luggage for her and the then PM inscribed with their initials will strike some readers as unusual in

a working relationship. That she spoon-fed, food that is, Abbott in public will cause others to cringe. Many may find the way she excluded Margie Abbott from an event plain rude. And people with respect for the office of prime minister will view the way Savva describes her talking to and about Tony Abbott as outright impertinence.

But the question, which Savva does address, is why Tony Abbott permitted all of it –in that she presents the most scathing opinion in a brutal book: “Even if she had offered to resign, he would not have allowed it. He would have been completely lost, so low was his opinion of his own abilities.” (74)

Says who? Says no one attributed as talking on or off the record. As such, this stands as an unsupported assumption. Many people who have known Tony Abbott will assert that he did a very good job over many years of covering up any lack of confidence.

Credlin’s third failure, according to Savva, is that she wasn’t much good at the three elements of her job - people, politics and policy. The book is awash with anecdotes about her treatment of staff and the way she was rude to MPs and ministers. And there is no doubting that her behaviour, and the prime minister’s acceptance of it, cost him support. But if her policy acumen and political ability had been as strong as her people skills were weak, it would surely have been a case of two out of three not being bad. However, Savva makes it plain that none were any good in government. While she ran a disciplined opposition, this did not translate to the tougher task of governing: “The volatility, the questionable judgement, the unnecessary meddling at every level, not only made for a dysfunctional office, it filtered through every nook and cranny of the government.” (44)

Scathing stuff, typical of the many judgements in the book which are mostly based on what staffers and MPs told Niki Savva – which raises the question asked, and then answered by many in the media, should she have asked Abbott and Credlin to reply.

The answer depends on perceptions of the book’s purpose. If it is a super-long news feature, a form that presents balanced evidence for readers to make their own judgement Niki Savva should have. Even if her two subjects declined to speak, even if they demanded rights of reply and provided rebuttals that Savva found unconvincing, the record is not complete without their versions.

But if this is intended as history then Niki Savva can present the evidence as she sees it and make a judgement.

Which is what she has done – this is victor’s history, a chronicle of why what occurred was politically inevitable. The book’s greatest strength is the war diary of the Turnbull challenge. The narrative of Malcolm Turnbull’s “group of eight” building support, counting numbers, creating opportunities and finally deposing

Abbott is written mainly from their perspective. For people planning a coup in any organisation immensely entertaining it is too.

However, this partisan tone disguises Ms Savva's achievement in making her book more than a true-politics thriller, a story soon to be forgotten as the caravan of crises that is Australian politics in this unsettled era of leaders not lasting rolls on.

In fact, Savva has a point to make that all should heed - the Australian political system has not failed, individuals in politics have:

There had been a lot of tosh said and written about how the system was broken, that reform was now nigh-impossible, that the revolving door of prime ministers – with Abbott making it five in six years – was proof that something was profoundly wrong. Well, there was something profoundly wrong with the system: the quality of the people in it.

Between late 2007 and 2013, the “system” threw up three deeply flawed and deficient individuals who became prime minister, then the system rose up to reject. The fact that this could happen is proof that it works well, that it does the job that it was designed to. (293,295)

Rather than anecdotes of bad manners and worse judgement at the heart of Tony Abbott's government this is what is worth remembering in Niki Savva's book. The electorate's political sense and demand for good government are the automatic stabilisers of Australian democracy and leaders who cannot keep the ship of state steady are not missed when one way or another they go over the side to disappear beneath the boundless sea of politics.

But while there is no faulting Savva's faith in the political system, her victors' history is not the book that historians will turn to for a sense of how close observers viewed the fall of the Abbott Government. On the basis of what is published now, that will be Aaron Patrick's *Credlin and Co*.

This is much more an observer's than insider's book. While Aaron Patrick is clearly connected with Liberal Party people, obviously providing examples and ideas, he still relies on the clips and commentators for material. This is no bad thing - in writing about events with consequences still to unfold, distance can lend detachment. While Niki Savva's criticism of Abbott and Credlin is relentless, Patrick puts their performance in a broader context. There was more going on in the Abbott Government, he shows, than struggles for access to the prime minister.

Overall however, Patrick's thesis is similar to Savva's – “it is an incredible, unique story of a man and woman who tried so hard to hold onto power that they destroyed themselves.” (8) He writes the familiar

story of the desperately unwise attempt to control Julie Bishop. He suggests that making an enemy Arthur Sinodinos “was the stupidest thing (Credlin) ever did”. There is also an extraordinary and far less widely known description of the PMO getting involved in defence planning, including selecting the replacement of the Collins class submarines.

But the tone of Patrick’s examples is more measured and his case more nuanced. Peta Credlin is not painted as malicious but in many shades of grey. While she was hated for her veto over appointments to ministerial offices, if her boss had survived this may never have come up, or at least been seen as a prudent stop on nepotism.

There is also a bit about her background, hardly enough to understand but sufficient for readers to get a sense of what shaped her. And while she is not made out to be a monster neither is she assumed to be utterly inept. In fact, she is presented as running a good office, at least in part, and with the “confidence, humour and conversation” to get on with blokes, especially older ones.

Despite the title, *Credlin and Co* is really about Tony Abbott’s failures, which shaped his relationship with his chief of staff:

Credlin allowed Abbott to be who he wanted to be: the good bloke, the philosopher, the weekend fire-fighter, the surfer, the orator, the man of action. If Abbott was a natural leader, it could have worked. But he lacked the most important attribute of all: judgement. (19)

Credlin, Patrick argues, only became a target when her boss was in trouble.

Patrick’s examples of this absence of judgement include the Prince Philip knighthood, which was all Tony Abbott’s own making – there is no mention of Credlin being involved. His almost all male cabinet and making himself minister for women, was “one of the biggest jokes of his government”. And he did not treat ministers with respect. Above all, Patrick presents Abbott as a man out of touch with the country he failed to lead.

His failure was innate. Abbott was unable to lead modern Australia because, in outlook and values, he wasn’t a modern Australian. Even though he surfed, fought bushfires and walked like he had just got off a horse, Abbott’s political consciousness and personal values stemmed from 1950s England, the country and era of his birth. In effect, Australia was led by a foreigner: a man out of sync with the nation’s aspirations, values and sense of place in the world. ... He believed too much in an Australia that didn’t exist anymore: an Anglo-Saxon Australia of Sunday church, white wedding dresses and male bonding on the sporting field and at the bar.

This is less a stretch than nonsense on stilts; a view from the urbane world of journalism, written from behind what John Black calls the goat cheese curtain.

Certainly a bunyip knighthood for Prince Phillip was widely considered an Anglophile anachronism but otherwise there is nothing especially eccentric about Abbott's belief in family and community. As for religion, worship is strong in Australia; it's just that many of us go to mosque, temple or synagogue. In fact, Patrick knows why a slim majority of the parliamentary Liberal Party decided Abbott had failed as prime minister – it was not because he was a social conservative, it was because he could not convince the electorate that he was up to the challenges of change.

He wasn't interested in economics. He wasn't a great compromiser. He wasn't an effective communicator. Possibly worst of all, he didn't seem to believe in the case for overhauling the economy – a step taken by every successful prime minister in modern Australian history.

We will never know whether the voters would have judged Abbott that way – but if he had led the coalition to defeat in this year's election there is nothing in either of these two books that makes a completely convincing case that his chief of staff would have been *a* cause, let alone *the* cause.

NOT JUST A FUNNY LADY – REMEMBERING NORA EPHRON

Nora Ephron: The Last Interview and Other Conversations

Melville House 2016

ISBN: 9781612195247

RRP: \$30 pb

Reviewed by Anne Henderson

It's a slim volume – 84 pages and a Sunday morning's easy reading. Just four in-depth interviews with one of America's greats among journalistic and movie world achievers - Nora Ephron, the warm, witty lady with the withering eye and comic sense of life's limitations. Scriptwriter for *When Harry Met Sally*, *Silkwood*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, among many others, and director of *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Julie & Julia*, also among many others. Also nominated for and a winner of a number of awards for scriptwriting.

Ephron's lack of sentimentality was her trademark, as in her view of marriage that it took away small distractions, interruptions in her day – “[marriage] frees you from all that energy that you use to put into dating. You can put it into work. You don't have to worry who is going to take you to the dinner party tomorrow. It takes time to be single, it seems to me,” she told Michael S Lasky for *Writer's Digest* in 1974.

For all that, it would be the breakup of her second marriage in 1979 (*The Washington Post's* Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame) which would popularise her name globally when she turned the experience into the novel *Heartburn* – later made into the movie of the same name starring Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson.

Growing up with parents who were renowned Hollywood script writers – Henry and Phoebe Ephron – Nora had a pedigree to die for in taking on a journalistic career and later moving into films. Her surroundings in LA, however, were never to her liking as a child and, after graduating from Wellesley, she based herself in New York writing for newspapers and magazines on poor rates of pay – a start she would later thoroughly recommend rather than film school for would-be screen writers.

These four interviews in *Nora Ephron: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* - done in 1974, 2007, 2010 and 2012 - give a snapshot of a life of energy and artistic pioneering at the very heart of America's elite.

Ephron came to script writing in the early 1980s after cutting her teeth and extending her experience covering stories as a freelancer across the globe. “At thirty-two, Nora Ephron is everywhere and it didn't take her very long to get there,” starts Michael Lasky – and it's only 1974.

Already she had published a collection of her writings titled *Wallflower at the Orgy* – a title that would echo

years later after her marriage to Bernstein collapsed and she had worked out the identity of “Deep Throat” as being Mark Felt. No matter whom she told, they never believed she could know. Even though she had seen Bernstein’s notes and guessed correctly. Only the Bernstein sons ever realised their mother had it right. In the male environment of Washington politics, Ephron was indeed something of a wallflower, despite her brains and intellectual and creative talents.

Moving through male environments was Nora Ephron’s lifetime endurance course, but one from which she took away quite a few glittering prizes. Asked about this and the way women have had to hurdle higher barriers in the screen writer/director field, Ephron at no time plays the victim in her interviews. Her choice is firmly her own:

... it was so clear in my house that we [sisters] were all going to end up being writers. And that my extremely powerful, albeit eventually fairly wacky, parents would be disappointed in us if we weren't. And since our mother was a writer, you know, it all seemed like maybe this could be done, to me.”

While recognising the odds were stacked against women in journalism - “there was a tremendous amount of competition among the handful of us that were climbing the greasy pole ... There was never any sense that there was room for all of you” – Ephron wasn’t one to wait to be asked. As she explained it to Kathryn Borel for *The Believer* in “The Last Interview” in 2012:

... there's no question I really wanted to be a newspaper reporter. And I really wanted to get a movie made. And I really wanted to direct a movie. If you don't want something it's hard – in the movie business, especially. Sometimes I speak at film schools, and I speak to rooms of women. And they're very nice, but you can see that they don't understand that it takes this huge amount of will and energy for anything to happen.

It was never Ephron’s style to complain about the poor statistics on women filmmakers, directors or script writers. Her answer to those who came looking for comment was to avoid them and “write the next movie and try and get it made.” As she recollects her parents and their achievements, it is clear Ephron’s mother was her spur:

... if you have a mother who's as powerful as ours was – and as simultaneously withholding – or powerful on account of that ... part of your ambition comes from a desire to please her. Long after she's on the planet, by the way.

Ephron came to see her life in stages moving across her adult life. Each decade she moved to another level. But through all of that, the Ephron humour and take on life remained much the same. Her obsession with small details kept her touching both the big issues and the tiny ones in any ordinary life. In her interview with Kerry Lauerman for *Salon*, in November 2010, she shifts from considering the ultimate big question of God and death to advising on how to order her favourite Nate ‘n’ Al’s hot dogs – online and posted. This is Ephron classic and she never fails.

For the Nora Ephron fan, *Nora Ephron: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* is a delicious *petit fours* alongside a double espresso. For those who haven't followed Nora Ephron, the volume is a wonderful appetiser before a really good read of her best.

Anne Henderson is Deputy Director of The Sydney Institute and author of *Menzies at War*

MURDER MOST FOUL: IN MELBOURNE & SYDNEY

Certain Admissions: A Beach, A Body and a Lifetime of Secrets

By Gideon Haigh

Penguin Australia 2015

ISBN-13:9781743485958

ISBN-10:1743485956

RRP - \$32.99

Kidnapped: The Crime that Stopped the Nation

By Mark Tedeschi QC

Simon & Schuster Australia 2015

ISBN 9781925310221

RRP - \$32.99

Reviewed by Gerard Henderson

I was too young to remember the brutal murder of Elizabeth Maureen Williams near the Albert Park Life Saving Club on Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay. The date was the evening of 27 December 1949 or the early morning of the following day. The victim was 20 years old. But I well recall the controversy the case caused as her convicted murderer, John Bryan Kerr and his vocal supporters, proclaimed his innocence throughout the 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s. Some still believe that Kerr was wrongly convicted.

I well remember the murder of Graeme Thorne in Sydney on 7 July 1960. This crime horrified the nation. It was Australia's first kidnapping/murder and the 8 year old's body was not discovered until around six weeks after his death. It appears that only the public defendant, Frederick Vizard QC, believed that his client Stephen Leslie Bradley was innocent.

In *Certain Admissions: A Beach, a Body and a Lifetime of Secrets*, Melbourne-based journalist Gideon Haigh has written an essentially empirical account of the Williams murder. There were three trials. According to one of Haigh's sources, the jury in the first trial voted 10 to 2 that Kerr was guilty beyond reasonable doubt. In the second, the jury decided 8 for guilty and 4 for not guilty. At the time in Victoria, unanimous jury verdicts were required for convictions or acquittals. At the third trial in September 1950, the defendant was found guilty and sentenced to death. This was commuted to life imprisonment and Kerr served just over 12 years in Pentridge Prison. He was released on bail in May 1962.

The author located a jury note which suggests that the jury at the third trial agreed on a murder finding once it was established that a recommendation for mercy could be made. This was an indication that the jurors did not believe that the defendant should be executed and were reluctant to bring in a murder verdict without a

recommendation for mercy.

By the standards of his time, John Bryan Kerr was a celebrity defendant. At the time of the murder at Albert Park beach, he was aged 24; his victim was 20. Kerr did not come from a well-off family but he did attend Scotch College – which, these days, would be described as an elite private school. Kerr was a good looking man who dressed impeccably. After leaving school he became a radio announcer who found work in Hobart and parts of Victoria.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Victoria Police's homicide squad was known to manufacture confessions. The only evidence of Kerr's guilt turned on a brief confession which he signed in the early hours of 29 December 1949. The evidence suggests that Miss Williams was sexually assaulted but not raped. It appears Kerr flew into a fit of rage when his advances were rejected. Kerr's (alleged) words were transcribed by Detective Bluey Adam. Apart from this confession which Kerr denied giving to Adam, he always proclaimed his innocence – including in his evidence to the Supreme Court of Victoria. In the late 1940s, Victoria Police was not all that interested in forensic evidence – certainly there was none in this case. It was not until the early 1960s, in the Graeme Thorne murder case, that forensic evidence began to play an important part in police investigations.

Yet there was much circumstantial evidence – and circumstantial evidence can be compelling. Reading *Certain Admissions* you get the impression that Gideon Haigh believes that Kerr should have been acquitted since his guilt was not established beyond reasonable doubt. However, this view is tempered by a contemporary document, discovered by the author, where Maxwell Keetley – a one-time policeman and former school mate of Kerr – declared, some years after the trial, that Kerr had told him of his guilt. In a discussion which took place at Pentridge shortly after the murder, the defendant is alleged to have told Keetley: "They tell me that the nipple on her teat was bitten off...I know I knocked her around pretty badly but I don't remember doing that." One former girlfriend of Kerr testified to his rough behaviour during sexual intercourse with a fetish for biting.

The case against Kerr was compelling. He knew the Hobart-born Beth Williams vaguely when they met by chance under the clocks outside the Flinders Street Station – they had previously met at the Hobart radio station 7HO. He was with her in the vicinity of Albert Park Beach on the night/morning of the murder and he had a record of aggressive, sudden attacks on people he knew who happened to upset him. In short, Kerr was a thug. A well-educated and well-dressed thug, but a thug nevertheless.

Kerr became something of a star prisoner due to his role at Pentridge Prison in debating (which was encouraged by authorities). I knew several people who had debated against Kerr during his prison days or who had been recipients of vote-of-thanks following a talk at the jail. The list included the lawyer and later politician Alan Missen, Essendon football star John Coleman, film director Stanley Kramer, athlete Herb

Elliott and writer Alan Marshall.

Due to his level of education, Kerr dominated in intellectual pursuits while in prison.

But those who were closest to Kerr at Pentridge – wardens and prisoners alike – disliked him intensely.

There is evidence in *Certain Admissions* that Kerr could have been responsible for the murder of one other woman, his one-time young girlfriend Kerrie Williams whom he met after discharge from jail. She died in mysterious circumstances during the time when Kerr had changed his name to John Wallace.

Needless to say, Kerr received support from the usual soft-on-crime suspects. Melbourne University academic Pansey Wright organised a petition signed by academics and lawyers attesting to the convicted murderer's alleged innocence. It was dismissed by authorities. No member of the left intelligentsia seemed to care about the late Beth Williams. The left-wing newspaper *The Argus* also proclaimed Kerr's cause until its demise in 1957. Kerr died of natural causes in November 2001 at age 76.

In *Kidnapped: The Crime that Stopped the Nation*, NSW's senior crown prosecutor Mark Tedeschi QC covers the 1960 brutal kidnapping and murder of 8 year old Graeme Thorne. The author was born in the same year as the victim. Which serves as a reminder that, without murderer Stephen Bradley, Graeme Thorne would probably still be alive today – aged in his mid-60s. His younger sister Valerie lives in Australia. Which serves as a reminder that murder is a crime without end.

In *Certain Admissions*, Gideon Haigh sticks closely to the known facts. In *Kidnapped* Mark Tedeschi covers in detail all the evidence. But, as described in the book's preface, the author engages in what he terms "creative reconstruction". This enables him to present what he believes are the "thought processes, emotions and motivations that lay behind this egregious offence". By the use of this tactic, Tedeschi recreates what he believes that Stephen Bradley and his wife Magda were thinking and discussing around the time of the murder. Tedeschi also discusses what he believes were the thoughts of young Graeme and his parents Bazil and Freda Thorne.

The author is one of Australia's best known, and most accomplished, crown prosecutors. Consequently, Tedeschi takes particular note of what Bradley's prosecutor, Bill Knight QC, thought about the accused since he "had the benefit of hearing all the witnesses' first-hand and had direct access to the investigating police". Knight's thought can be found in Tedeschi's creative reconstruction.

Graeme Thorne died within hours of his kidnapping on his way to Scots College in Sydney. The Thornes were not wealthy but had spent much of their income on the education of their two children. Then, on 1 June 1960, they won the NSW Opera House Lottery. The £100,000 prize would be worth about \$4 million in today's money. Stephen Bradley wanted £25,000 of Bazil Thorne's winnings. The Thorne family was prepared to pay the ransom but, tragically, their son, unbeknown to them, was already dead.

Like many murderers (including John Bryan Kerr), Stephen Bradley was a narcissistic liar. Upon arrest in Sri Lanka (then called Colombo) when attempting to flee to Britain, Bradley made a confession. But he soon repudiated it and never made any other admissions of any kind.

Like Kerr, Bradley was a thug. Before the Thorne murder, he almost certainly burnt a hotel he owned in the Blue Mountains in order to get the insurance. And it is likely that he murdered his second wife Eva Laslzo, gaining an inheritance in the process. Tedeschi believes that Magda Bradley, Stephen's third wife, was not involved in the kidnap/murder.

Graeme Thorne was kidnapped in July 1960. Initially NSW Police bungled the investigating by making what turned out to be false assumptions and by overlooking the testimony of persons who were acquaintances of Bradley. However, once Graeme's body was found, the forensic investigations were path-breaking and linked Bradley to the scene of the murder. Bradley hit Graeme on the head with a metal instrument and placed the victim in the boot of his car. Graeme died of asphyxiation. He was buried at Macquarie Park Cemetery following a service at St Mark's Church of England in Darling Point.

The jury took little time to find Bradley guilty of murder beyond reasonable doubt after a trial that lasted six weeks – remarkably short by today's standards. Bradley received a life sentence but died of a heart attack in Goulburn Jail in October 1968, aged 42, during a game of tennis. Unlike Kerr, Bradley was a popular figure among his wardens and fellow prisoners. Bradley went to his maker maintaining his innocence and without disclosing any details about Graeme's death.

Bradley was convicted on circumstantial evidence plus forensic evidence relating to material found on Graeme's body, at the scene of the crime and inside Bradley's car. A decade earlier, at the time of Beth Williams' death, access to such scientific evidence was not available to police.

Bradley was, and remains, a hated figure in Australian society for those who remember the Thorne case. However, there are still some commentators who burn a candle to Kerr and maintain his innocence. In fact, both cases demonstrate the value of the jury system. The jurors got it right about Bradley. And 30 out of 36 got it right about Kerr – even though it took three trials to get to a 12-0 decision. And the jury got it right in finding Bradley guilty of murder rather than the alternative finding of manslaughter.

Discussion of Bradley's conviction invariably, and understandably, focuses on Graeme Thorne. However, discussion on Kerr's conviction invariably focuses on the murderer. Gideon Haigh refers to Beth Williams as "small, plump [and] brown-eyed". Yet the only extant photo of Kerr's victim suggests that she was a normal looking girl for her generation – she was described by *The Argus* at the time of her murder as "pretty". Beth Williams was buried in Werribee Cemetery following a requiem mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Middle Park.

Gideon Haigh and Mark Tedeschi have written compelling and highly readable accounts of two of the worst

crimes in twentieth century Australia. *Certain Admissions* and *Kidnapped* remind us that murderers are evil people without the slightest concern for their victims or their families. Both books contain an excellent series of photographs.

Gerard Henderson is executive director of The Sydney Institute and author, most recently, of *Santamaria – A Most Unusual Man* (MUP 2015)

THE BIG BOYS FLY UP

Heartfelt Moments in Australian Rules Football

Ross Fitzgerald (ed)

Connor Court Publishing P/L, 2016

ISBN: 9781925138948

RRP – \$29.99 pb

Reviewed by Paul Henderson

Ross Fitzgerald's book consists of his introduction, followed by 37 short accounts or essays about aspects of Australian Rules Football and an epilogue which considers the effects that weather has had on the game.

The 37 authors come from many walks of life including former players, administrators and coaches, past and present politicians, business leaders, academics, journalists, a cardinal, a publisher, authors and diehard supporters. Fitzgerald describes a diehard, true supporter as someone "never giving up or relinquishing one's team". While this may be true of supporters, some of the players and coaches who made contributions to this book certainly jumped around from club to club.

The book is of high quality. The essays are easy to read and are full of information. Most of them are punchy and to the point. They certainly reflect the highs such as new clubs being admitted into the VFL/AFL, as well as the lows such as the demise of Fitzroy and the transfer of South Melbourne. The enthusiasm of authors is notable but sometimes is not always justified. For example, St Kilda got into the 1965 Grand Final against Essendon by winning the second semi by only one point, whereas Essendon won both their finals by nine goals. St Kilda did not, as the author suggests, go into the Grand Final as "warm favourites".

One of the nicest features of the book was the number of authors who discussed what football meant to their own relationships or to the relationships of others. So people wrote about how football bound families together as they experienced the ups and downs of football clubs. Footy brought parents closer to their children; two authors remembered fondly the influence of their school coaches in Melbourne and Ballarat. The relations between fathers and sons were important, such as that between Bob Rose (Collingwood) and his quadriplegic son, Robert. Star players such as Peter Moore, Chris Langford, Tim Watson and Gary Ablett gave much support to their sons.

The book provides details about the introduction of new clubs from WA (West Coast and Fremantle), SA (Adelaide Crows and Port Adelaide), NSW (Sydney Swans and Greater Western Sydney) and Queensland (Brisbane Lions and Gold Coast Suns). Although some of these clubs took a while to gain success, nevertheless their supporters remained fiercely loyal. Many authors discuss the showdowns between their

own club and the great rivalry with another, a rivalry which was always present.

On the other hand, Phillipa Power (Ch.3) describes the pain of seeing the Swans transfer to Sydney while Les Everitt (Ch.18) writes about the pain of the last game Fitzroy played which was on the other side of the continent (The only team before Fitzroy to leave the competition was University in 1914). These changes must have been painful, especially as the AFL has given financial assistance to so many clubs in recent times.

Some authors wrote about violence in football ranks. Incidents which are discussed include Leigh Matthew and his “hits” on Barry Cable and Neville Bruns, Jim O’Dea’s assault on John Greening and Harry Caspar’s punch on John Coleman, which undoubtedly cost Essendon the 1951 Premiership. The 1945 “blood-bath” Grand Final and a particularly brutal game between Fitzroy and Collingwood in the 1950s are also mentioned.

While there are many highlights and great moments, which are discussed in detail, there are sadder or tragic moments which some authors also recall. These include the death of Darren Millane in a car accident in 1991, only a year after he was a member of the Collingwood 1990 Premiership team. The premature death of Peter Crimmins (Hawthorn) in 1976, shortly after Hawthorn had won the Premiership, and, more recently, the sudden death in 2015 of Phil Walsh, the coach of the Adelaide Crows, are also covered.

Another important issue is covered in Dick Whitaker’s chapter entitled “Black Magic”. He highlights the question of racism, which has, intermittently, marred Australian Rules football from time to time. He goes back to the 1930s when Doug Nicholls, playing for Fitzroy, copped abuse from opponents. Nichols went on to have a distinguished public career and, as the author points out, is the only VFL/AFL player to be knighted. Whitaker also discusses more recent issues when Nicky Winmar (St Kilda), Michael Long (Essendon) and Adam Goodes (Sydney Swans) also felt they suffered from racial abuse.

One interesting observation is that most past players, administrators and coaches usually wrote with a degree of humility, often underplaying their true contributions. On the other hand Brian Dixon (a Melbourne player) and Jeff Kennett (Hawthorn president) were at pains to point out the very important roles they played in their respective roles and their contributions to the teams successes. John Birt (an Essendon player), in his account of the Grand Finals in which he played, mentions frequently how many goals he kicked and how well he played. John Elliott (Carlton president) wrote, not surprisingly, the longest chapter. Elliott stresses his success at Carlton and his influence over the VFL/AFL in general, but doesn’t mention the state in which he left the club in the late 1990s.

Some authors wrote with passion about only one game or a few particular games, going into considerable detail describing the 1970 Grand Final (Ch 19) or the 1977 drawn Grand Final (Ch 36). Whereas other chapters covered many games, in some cases spanning a decade or more. Both approaches were handled

well. This is a fine book, made for enjoyable reading, whether you are a diehard supporter or not.

There is one criticism I would make and a couple of suggestions if a reprint or a second edition were to follow. There are 37 chapters in the book, which roughly should work out at about two chapters per club. While this ratio is impossible to achieve, there is very little about North Melbourne, a club which has won four premierships since 1975. There is a chapter on the 1977 Grand Final draw, but it was written by a Collingwood player, and, naturally, with a Magpie emphasis. Barry Cable's very brief stay at North receives little coverage.

The chapter on Windy Hill (Ch 14), the former Essendon home ground, was written with lovely prose and minute detail. You felt as though you were there with the author. In many ways I enjoyed reading this chapter the most. The chapter on the effect on weather on football games was also very informative. While some examples were given, the author may also have referred to Round 11 in 1963 when, due to dreadful weather, the whole round was postponed until the following week and the Round 21 game in 1971 at the Junction Oval between Fitzroy and Carlton which was so affected by fog that it was impossible to see half the length of the ground.

Maybe chapters could have been written about the now obsolete grounds, and more general themes, such as the detailed effect of the weather and events such as the power blackout, which meant the night pre-season game at Waverley Park between St Kilda and Essendon was postponed. Also, it would have been interesting to read the heartfelt moments of a former umpire or a former or current AFL administrator.

However, these are small observations and suggestions for additions, which must be balanced against what is overall a very enjoyable book.

Paul Henderson is an author and lifetime Essendon supporter

DYSTOPIAN LEAPS WITH ALGORITHMS

Golem

Sydney Theatre Company, in partnership with 1927.
Rosalyn Packer Theatre
16-26 March 2016

Reviewed by Nathan Lentern

There is a somewhat unmissable irony that a play which warns us of the sinister reach of the digital world, tells its story so effectively thanks to the faultless use of digital animations to compliment the live acting. This is *Golem*, the story of the depressingly boring Robert who spends his life “backing up the binary” until he buys the prototype “Golem”.

Golems are creatures from Jewish folklore. Fashioned out of clay, brought to life and used as slave like figures until the Golem happens upon some independence at which point chaos invariably ensues. In *Golem*, Robert’s prize purchase follows the trajectory of Google and Facebook algorithms, guzzling up data about his ostensible owner’s preferences and behavioural patterns, subtly manoeuvring him into purchasing that which he would otherwise never had considered.

Slowly but surely the influence of his Golem becomes more and more omnipresent. Golems are manufactured en masse and quickly make the jump from a luxury to a necessity. Eventually we are left with a population that has been completely hollowed out. Their individuality is completely cannibalised by their “servants” as they do exactly what the Golem tells them to do, simultaneously believing that they are still in control. It’s the sort of plot that makes you want to hurl your smart phone out the window on the journey home.

In *Golem* the cutting edge, avant garde theatre group 1927 joins forces with the Sydney Theatre Company to bring us a production that is both ambitious yet deftly executed. With an animated projection for a set with immaculately timed music and choreography to compliment it, *Golem* exudes a chillingly dystopic vibe. Enormous credit here must go to composer Lillian Henley whose haunting scores are what bridges the gap between bleak and genuinely upsetting. The characters (sans Golem) are essentially different facets of the same entity. A dull, unexcited and unimpressive group. They are all severely lacking in imagination or ambition and instead lead lives of unthreatening yet stifling monotony – making them vulnerable prey for Golem.

As such the cast members: Will Close, Esme Appleton, Henley, Rose Robinson and Shamira Turner all act and speak with similarly dry and bland mannerisms and a uniform deadpan tone. Their dialogue on the other hand is wickedly sardonic – perfect for a depressing tale of dystopia like *Golem*.

It isn’t particularly hard to anticipate the plot trajectory of *Golem*. From a very early moment, director Suzanne Andrade tips her hand and reveals where we’re going, yet somehow this is okay. We despair for our protagonists fairly early on, but we don’t know how bad it will get. This is enough to keep us in a degree of suspense and we are rewarded, or perhaps punished, with a suitably imaginative way to plunge a new depth of despair in the closing salvo.

Dystopic tales of the algorithms telling a tragically depressed population that they have everything they want are hardly new, but with well-honed dialogue, convincing acting and positively frightening aesthetics the final product can still send chills down the audience’s spines.

Nathan Lentern is a writer and performer.

A WISTFUL SENSE OF WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

Parramatta Riverside Theatre

7 February -18 March 2016

Reviewed by Nathan Lentern

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* ranks among literature's finest. Outside of the Shakespearean canon, it is reproduced more often than any other stage play and its popularity continues to grow. When it opened back in 1895, Wilde was at his most successful. The immediate success of *Earnest* propelled him to a hitherto unrealised stature within dramatic circles. Three short months later he was convicted of gross indecency, carted off to Reading Gaol and productions of *Earnest* were brought to an abrupt halt.

Wilde's incarceration and demonisation would later transform him into an icon for homosexual martyrdom. Under cross examination, Wilde spoke defiantly of the "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name", inspiring his supporters and securing his conviction. Years later *Earnest* would be revived as the most iconic work of the most iconic of homosexuals. It is therefore something of a paradox that the play itself is the most meaningless thing that Wilde ever wrote. Wilde's great supporter, rival and friend George Bernard Shaw, was unimpressed by Wilde's final comedy. Scorning its triviality, Shaw told his readers that he was "amused but not moved" by *Earnest*.

Yet the enduring popularity of the *Earnest* in spite of this absence of any real content speaks to the calibre of wit and repartee contained within the plays dialogue. "Inspirational Quote" listicles are crammed with excerpts from this fabulous farce. The script is a true and comprehensive triumph of style over substance, reflecting Wilde's aestheticist background.

With every character armed with such cutting and imaginative dialogue it falls to the director to select which roles will star and which will assume straighter, more supporting roles. The two most common choices for the show stealers are the imperious Lady Bracknell and the loveable scamp Algernon Moncrieff, but virtually all the characters are capable of dominating proceedings. Once I even saw the kindly Dr Chazubel manoeuvred into comedic lead with some very clever directing, although it did seem like a bit of waste of the other characters.

This particular incarnation of *Earnest* serves up a satisfying blend of the traditional and the ambitious. David Suchet's Lady Bracknell was the dominant character as has been the case in all but one production of *Earnest* that I have seen. It was a safe decision, executed with enormous skill and yielded strong results.

However, joining Bracknell at centre stage is the criminally underutilised Cecily Cardew. Cecily is young, mischievous and fun loving. She is gifted with a caustic wit which she camouflages with her saccharine sweetness. She skips around lampooning her interlocutors to their face and leaves most of them none the wiser. She is also a vehicle for some of Wilde's most brutal social commentary. Wilde uses Cecily to call out society's infatuation with the depraved yet makes it palatable by couching it in her eccentric girliness through dialogue such as "I have never met any really wicked person before, I am so frightened. I'm terrified he will look just like everyone else. Oh, he does."

Cecily is one of Wilde's most underrated characters so it was a source of excitement to realise that director Adrian Noble selected her as one of his stars. Such initial excitement was swiftly replaced by crushing disappointment at the realisation that Cecily's eccentricities were to be accounted for with stupidity not guile. For the most part Cecily works adequately as an unintelligent character and many directors choose to go that route with her but she has so much more potential that more ambitious directors have on occasions drawn from to create something truly special.

The Importance of Being Earnest has two formidable witty female characters and it's to his credit that Noble decided to structure the production around them, but he then casts one as a man in dress and reduces the other to a fatuous bimbo. While Suchet is masterful as Bracknell and a stupid Cecily still gets the laughs, I was left with a wistful sense of what might have been.

Imogen Doel's portrayal of Cecily as excitable and stupid, while entertaining enough in itself, has the consequence of capping the comedic potential of others. Scenes that could have been two clever and irreverent equals trading sublime banter were instead an educated womaniser making patronising barbs about his love interest's lack of intelligence.

On a romantic level this changes the dynamic of the relationship significantly. Algernon's visible lack of respect or admiration for Cecily's mind renders his affection for her a purely aesthetic, and slightly lecherous one. In fact, Phillip Cumbus as Algernon is atypically uncouth. The narcissism of Wilde's dandies, be them Algernon Moncrieff, Lord Goring from *An Ideal Husband*, Cecil Graham in *Lady Windermere's Fan* or Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, is made endurable by the faultless grace and suavity of the man in question. They are charming in every way which in turn makes the conceitedness somehow endearing.

Naturally every actor and director must bring his or her own interpretations to a character rather than merely attempt to imitate their predecessors. But in Cumbus' case his representation of Algernon isn't so much creative as just plain wrong. In this more rugged portrayal of Algernon, much of the charm is diminished and his arrogance made much less forgivable. In its defence, it facilitates a few laughs from the audience at Algernon's lack of dignity. The audience chuckled at Algernon wiping his nose on his sleeve, eating a muffin

right out of Jack's hand and placing his feet up upon the table, but they were relatively minor laughs and opportunities for much greater laughs were traded away for them.

The acrimonious relationship between Gwendolyn Bracknell as Cecily also takes on a strange and less satisfying form due to the dumbing down of the latter. The famous "morning tea" scene in which the two young girls become steadily more vicious in their sardonic quips about the other is at its finest - a meeting of two supremely arrogant prejudices. A well to do city girl sneering at what she perceives to be a country yokel and a highly educated member of the landed gentry scorning what she perceives to be a stuffy and close minded philistine. Instead, Cecily is robbed of all her stature and prejudices and we merely get a smart girl taking swipes at a dumb girl. When Cecily gets her chance to deliver her eviscerating retorts such as:

GWENDOLYN: Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

CECILY: Oh! yes! a great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

GWENDOLYN: Five counties! I don't think I should like that; I hate crowds.

CECILY: [Sweetly.] I suppose that is why you live in town?

They seem jarring and out of place. As it does with Algernon, this also robs Gwendolyn of much of her comic flair. Though Emily Barber's portrayal is that of the classical lofty, pretentious heiress, and executed with aplomb, she is not so convincing without a sassy Cecily or the traditionally incorrigible Algernon provoking her. Her smouldering fury at Cecily's impudence doesn't quite ring true when Cecily herself appears to lack the guile to deliberately cause any real offence.

Michael Benz is the show's highlight. A relatively conservative portrayal of the bossy and serious respectable gentleman. This is the ideal way in which to portray Jack. He serves more as a straight man to the comic foils of Lady Bracknell and Algernon so is best portrayed as a genial and sensible man. For good measure, Benz has thrown in a few hints of neurosis which add an extra comic bite to some of his dialogue, especially in his flirty exchanges with Gwendolyn who is a somewhat subdued character when contrasted to Lady Bracknell, Algernon and Cecily.

Michelle Dotrice and Richard O'Callaghan execute the supporting roles of Dr Chazubel and Mrs Prism without difficulty. The stupid and gullible members of Jack's staff can be relied upon to drop an inane utterance at precisely the most frustrating time for their employer.

The true hero of the performance is David Suchet as Lady Bracknell. Call it the "x-factor" or "je ne sais quoi", his complete immersion in the character was both hilarious and mesmerising. His ability to illicit barrels of laughter with as little as a cocked eyebrow or a slight stiffening of posture was the work of a truly great artist and has the audience spellbound. And yet, one can't help but wonder how much funnier still her interactions with her disgraceful nephew might have been if only he had the infuriating charisma of other Algernons.

All in all this was a disappointing version of *Earnest*. It was entertaining, but then it is the most popular comic script in the world. Two central characters were interpreted poorly and they rippled unhelpfully into almost every other character's dialogue. The rousing effort from Suchet alone saves this production from being a failure.

Nathan Lentern is a writer and performer.

The Witch: A New England Folktale

Director: Robert Eggers

Writer: Robert Eggers

Stars: Anya Taylor-Joy, Ralph Ineson, Kate Dickie

Released: 2016

In Cinemas Now

Reviewed by Paige Hally

Robert Eggers film *The Witch* took the festival circuit by storm last year, earning the first-time feature director the Best Director award at Sundance. While it is a horrifying film, *The Witch* is far from a conventional horror film. It's a slow moving, tense, 1600's arthouse period piece that explores fundamentalism and religious hysteria as we follow a close-knit, devout family's descent into madness.

The film is set in 1630's New England (pre-dating the Salem witch trials by over 50 years) where a small family is banished from their colonial plantation due to the father, William (Ralph Ineson), speaking out against the colony becoming too lax with their religious principles.

The rest of the family - consisting of William's wife Katherine (Kate Dickie), teenage daughter Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), pre-teen son Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), and two young twins Jonas (Lucas Dawson) and Mercy (Ellie Grainger) - are dragged along to start a new home in a clearing on the edges of an ominous forest.

As the family establishes their new home, a series of mysterious events start befalling them. First, their newborn child vanishes into the woods under mysterious circumstances, sparking suspicion and paranoia within the family. As their crops begin to fail and eldest son Caleb disappears into the forest, the suspicion is turned on teen daughter Thomasin, whose unconventional coming-of-age story is the heart of the film.

The film's ambiguity is one of its strengths. It's unclear whether the supernatural events are reality or the product of isolation and religious fervour and, although as viewers we know Thomasin is innocent, it's hard not to think her family might be onto something when they accuse her of witchcraft.

Production designer turned Director Robert Eggers based *The Witch* on real court papers, diaries and reports on possession and witchcraft from the time, which along with the costume design and 17th century dialogue lends it a real sense of authenticity.

The film is beautifully shot by cinematographer Jarin Blaschke, who's stark, colour drained visual style adds to the sense of dread permeating the film.

The Witch is far from being a conventional horror film. There are no cheap scares, and minimal gore. Rather,

the art-house thriller works to create an intense sense of unease and encroaching dread. While the pacing of the film feels like it drags at times, in the end the slow burn pays off in a devastating and terrifying fashion. *The Witch* is a tense and unique horror film that will leave you with a sense of unease long after you leave the cinema.