

BOOK REVIEW

Federation's Man of Letters – Patrick McMahon Glynn

Author: Anne Henderson

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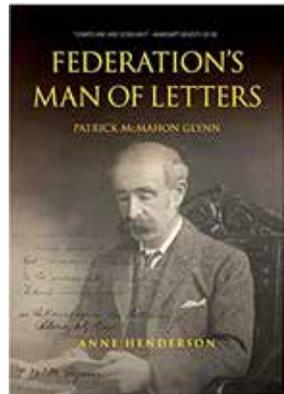
Reviewed by: Tony Abbott*

Biographies are worth writing and reading because they open a window into the lives of our distinguished forebears; remembering how they grappled with their problems helps us to better handle our own. The best teacher, after all, is experience; and biography is a way of turning other people's experience to our own benefit and bringing the wisdom of the ages to bear on our own time.

So what's there to learn from the life of Patrick McMahon Glynn, a South Australian state MP prior to federation, a delegate to the federation conventions, a member of our first parliament, and a minister in Australian governments on and off until 1919? Quite a lot, as it turns out, in Anne Henderson's lively essay; in particular, how much stays the same, even while almost everything seems to have changed. So much from 100 years ago is almost unrecognisable – except human nature and how it plays out in the rarely-fair world of politics.

Glynn was one of those MPs of high ability, strong character, and great industry who never made it past middling rank; in part because he didn't revel in the rough and tumble aspect to public life. Unsuccessful as a barrister in his native Ireland, he arrived in Australia in 1880 to make his fortune in a land where connections meant less; yet he still hoped to make the most of the connections he had. Here too, he struggled initially, despite letters of introduction to a judge and a colonial premier. Eventually, thanks to a

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Catholic connection that did pay-off, he secured a position as a solicitor in Kapunda, about 80 kilometres north of Adelaide.

Fired up, as many were back then, by Henry George's dream of better government with lesser burdens on the common man, via replacing existing taxes with a tax on land, he narrowly won a state seat in 1887. Despite much-more-than-average diligence in attending to his constituents, he narrowly lost at the next election; in part because his opponent misrepresented his ideas. He tried several times to get back; eventually-but-briefly succeeding for a different seat. In his time, as in ours it seems, for a democratic electorate, a candidate's intrinsic merit was but one consideration only: alongside "is he one of us", and "for whom and for what will he fight?"

Still, Glynn became a regular and well-regarded contributor to public debates, was chosen as a delegate to the 1897 constitutional convention, and when South Australia elected members for the first federal parliament (initially on a list basis), came in third and eventually sat as the Member for Angas. But he retained his aversion to "them and us" politicking which meant he was respected by most but embraced by few. In that more politically fluid era, he was apparently considered for attorney-general in the first federal Labor government, despite never being a party member. He did become attorney-general in the fusion Liberal government of Alfred Deakin, and then Minister for Home and Territories in Billy Hughes Nationalist government after the Labor split over conscription.

Glynn was essentially a "small government conservative", telling the parliament in 1904 that the "true province" of the state was to "destroy monopoly, to afford to all equal opportunity, and to leave to private enterprise, to individual intelligence and guidance, the task of perfecting and sustaining what is best". His one-time account of Edmund Burke, his political hero, as "above" the House of Commons "forgetful of idle clamours of party and of the little views of little men" in order to appeal "to his country and the enlightened judgment of mankind" was probably how he also saw himself.

A cause célèbre from those days was the case of Father Charles Jerger, a German born Catholic priest who reportedly deprecated the war effort from the pulpit and was detained as an enemy alien before being finally deported in 1920. It's telling that Glynn argued the case for leniency within the government, unsuccessfully, perhaps because his colleagues sensed that

he'd only go so far to make his point. Then, as now, if you don't fight, you rarely win.

Pre-federation, Glynn stood out on two issues. At first, his move to acknowledge God in the constitution failed, as too “preachy” – even though Glynn sometimes seems to have struggled with his faith. But after numerous church leaders demurred, and some 150,000 people petitioned the convention, his fellow delegates changed their minds and “humbly relying on the blessing of almighty God” became enshrined in the preamble. And he was an early advocate for federal control of Murray-Darling water, culminating in the first federal water act of 1915. The moral from these is that persistence pays off and that there are some issues worth losing for. A believer in Crown and Empire, Glynn was also responsible for the lapidary description of Australia, under the constitution, as “a crowned republic”.

Glynn was not the first prominent Catholic in Australia's public life but he was perhaps Australian Catholicism's first public intellectual, hence is justly commemorated in the Australian Catholic University's PM Glynn Institute.

Henderson's essay, in the style of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, is nicely pitched to the contemporary reader, who's unlikely to be interested in all the minutiae of earlier times. Another fine touch is the brief closing reflections from other authorities: such as constitutional lawyer Anne Twomey's thoughts on Glynn's place as an early “liberal conservative” and the late former NSW Premier John Fahey's comparison of the role of religion in politics, then versus now. This Glynn essay is a cousin to Connor Court Publishing's series of biographical monographs (so far covering Neville Wran, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, and Lindsay Thompson, as well as Robert Menzies, Harold Holt and Joe Lyons). They don't substitute for full length biography (such as the celebrated Jesuit theologian Gerald Glynn O'Collins' 1965 life of his kinsman, or indeed Henderson's own fine treatment of Lyons) but are a very accessible way of bringing the past to life. May there be many more of them!