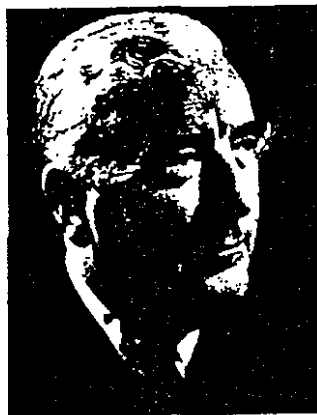


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ROBERT MENZIES COLLEGE

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, SATURDAY 10 OCTOBER 1992

In the Presence of Dame Pattie Menzies, GBE and
Members of her Family



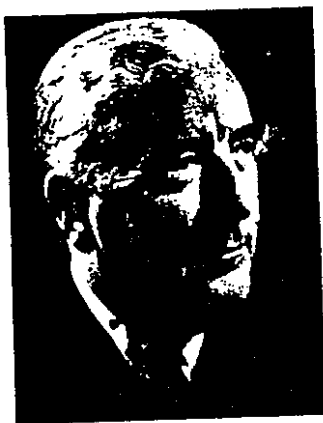
REMEMBERING SIR ROBERT MENZIES

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REMEMBERING SIR ROBERT MENZIES

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

COMPANION TO HISTORY

What a wonderful privilege it is for me to be here in the presence of Dame Pattie Menzies and members of her family to celebrate the unveiling of the portrait of Sir Robert Menzies after whom this College at Macquarie University is named.

The presence of Dame Pattie, the recollections kindled by the photograph and the happy circumstances of the evening cast my mind back to my youth and childhood when R G Menzies was the only Prime Minister of Australia I knew.

Dame Pattie is herself a living embodiment of the history of our Commonwealth. She has lived through the whole turmoil of this century. She has known many of the leaders of our country and of other countries. Faithful companion to Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, she won the admiration and affection of Australians quite above political differences.

Yesterday, by chance, I was telephoned by the Honourable Clyde Cameron, the former Minister in the Whitlam Labor Government. We got to talking about his admirable oral history project. In it, he has recorded tapes for the National Library with recollections of many of our country's leaders. Many of them were his political adversaries: Sir Garfield Barwick (the first Chancellor of this University), Sir Paul Hasluck, Sir John Gorton. Contemporaries, supporters and protégés of Menzies.

When I told Clyde Cameron about this evening, I asked him what the Labor men thought of Dame Pattie? "We all loved her. She was always truly lovely and kind to all of us. In fact, we rather preferred her to her husband!". He gave me permission to repeat this tonight.

Australia has been fortunate in the wives of its Prime Ministers and, I should say, in the spouses of other national, state and local leaders. They give up much for their part in public service. But none served so long as Dame Pattie. She has told me tonight of the publication of a new collection of essays by Diana Langmore on the wives of the Australian Prime Ministers. In such a history, inevitably, Dame Pattie would have to loom large. R G Menzies served as Prime Minister of Australia from 1939 to 1941 in dark days of the Second World War. He then served for a record term which is unlikely ever to be eclipsed, from 1949 to 1966. And Dame Pattie was always by his side. We are delighted and honoured to

have this remarkable Australia woman at Macquarie University and at the Robert Menzies College for such an important event. It comes at a special time for us in the Silver Jubilee Year of the University.

MY LIFE WITH RGM

The photograph of Sir Robert which Dame Pattie unveiled tonight was the election photo of 1949. I remember it well. It captures the confident, assertive, elegant and impressive man who was about to capture the Treasury Benches and lead our country for so long.

I was just 10 as the 1949 election loomed. It is difficult for today's generation to recapture the moment. Those who were alive to politics in 1972 will have experienced something of the same feeling. Perhaps those in Victoria last week felt the same. The same may well occur elsewhere in the future. It is the blessing of democracy to see peaceful change of political leadership. But 1949 swept aside the long period of the Curtin-Forde-Chifley governments which had led Australia during the most perilous days of war and the challenges of post-war reconstruction. The advent of Menzies beckoned us to a new era.

In the Summer Hill Opportunity School in Sydney, I decided to do my bit. I determined that at the school fete I would raise money for the election of Mr Menzies. How I planned to get the funds raised into the then ample coffers of the Liberal Party, I cannot recall. But I persuaded my mother to make a large batch of toffees in paper cups to sell to the unsuspecting schoolchildren. Unfortunately, I have to confess it now, I ate the vast majority of my wares. It was, in a sense, a sugar-coated culinary-led recovery. The change of government was dramatic and the interest of a young schoolboy was kindled in the national affairs of the country.

Then, I should say, as one who took advantage of the

Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, that my life was profoundly influenced by R G Menzies' concern about education in Australia. The scheme, conceived by the Chifley government, was brought to full flower by the Menzies Fadden government. In earlier decades education at university in Australia had substantially been reserved to the children of wealthy parents. My parents were no more wealthy than the parents of John Howard, whom I am delighted to see here tonight. It was the scholarship given by the Federal Government which allowed me, and my brothers, to participate in university education. A whole new wave of students came upon the universities of Australia. They created the demand for new universities out of which Macquarie University sprang.

Putting back something of what I had received, I took part in student affairs. I was elected President of the Sydney University Union. In that capacity I had to welcome Sir Robert Menzies during his last days as Prime Minister. He visited the University of Sydney to honour its Chancellor, Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn who was also retiring. I remember the surprise I felt on seeing Menzies - how large, robust, healthy and poised he was as he was introduced to the young students. And how amused he was when protesters outside the Refectory burned him (and, I should say, the Chancellor) in effigy in a bonfire as the dinner progressed. The clinking of crystal wine glasses and the pouring of wine by liveried staff to the music of a small orchestra was illuminated by the flames outside. I confess, as I looked at Menzies, I thought this must be what revolutions look like. Certainly, I did not expect to see his like again.

MENZIES' VOICE

Then there was Menzies' voice. It was a mellow, rich, even fruity voice. Lilted and highly dramatic, it was the voice of the actor-barrister. What a shame we do not have his voice with us to remind us, who lived through the Menzies era. Even when we disagreed with his views (as is our privilege in a democracy) we were never embarrassed or ashamed of his performance. Like Mr Whitlam, but unlike few political leaders before or since, he could deliver an impromptu address apt to the occasion with elegance, wit and high intelligence. We have lost that quality in public life. Perhaps the media of television has killed it. Perhaps it will return.

However that may be, we do have Sir Robert's words in *Afternoon Light*, the book written upon his retirement about the people and events he had known. I want to extract four events because they involve our guest-of-honour and show her sterling qualities and the great bond she forged over a lifetime with Sir Robert.

First, 1935. Mr Menzies and Mrs Menzies (as they then were) were weekending in Surrey with Maurice Hankey, described as the "Prince of cabinet secretaries" of the United Kingdom. At lunch, Hankey suggested a walk across to Chartwell, the home of Winston Churchill, then isolated in dejected Opposition. Menzies describes the event as he and Dame Pattie arrived. I am sure our guest-of-honour could not have forgotten:

"Mrs Churchill, as she then was, received us very pleasantly, and explained at once that 'Winston' was in the swimming pool, and that we should go out to see him. It was a splendid sight. The pool was large and of irregular shape and had, we were told, been built by Churchill himself. It was, as I later learned, heated. In the middle of the pool was a jutting form rather reminiscent of the Rock of Gibraltar. 'Clemmie', as I was later to know her, called out across the pool - 'Winston, you have visitors.' Nothing happened. She called again. The rock moved. It produced two hands,

which plucked two lumps of cotton-wool from two ears as the rock stood up. The message was repeated, and the rock came ashore, glowering at us as severely as Gibraltar ever did at La Linea. I felt that though I had come, and had seen, I had not conquered."¹

In 1940 Mr Menzies was Prime Minister of Australia for the first time. The position in the Middle East, where Australian troops were fighting was perilous. He made a critical decision which was to contribute to his downfall and the apparent demise of his entire political career:

"Late in 1940 I decided to pay a visit to the Middle East and to England. Seeing that I had been reduced to a majority consisting of two Independents, this was no doubt a risky venture. Indeed my wife, with feminine realism, said to me, 'If you feel you must go, you will go. But you will be out of office within six weeks of your return.' In the event, she was not a mile out."²

Sir Robert's affection for the Crown, and the four Sovereigns of Australia whom he served, is well known. In his chapter "The Crown in the Commonwealth" he gives a passionate and convincing explanation of why he favoured constitutional monarchy over a republic. We should heed his words on this subject as the debate is once again revived. But in 1948, Menzies was still in Opposition. The election that was to sweep the Coalition Parties back to power for twenty-three years was on the horizon. Mr and Mrs Menzies were in London at the very time in November 1948 when the new heir to the throne, Prince Charles was born at Buckingham Palace. With engaging simplicity and touching humility he described what he and Mrs Menzies did that day:

... We had a flat in Berkeley Street. The air was full of expectation. There were crowds outside the Palace, waiting for the news. As the day wore on the crowds grew. We were among them. They represented a broad cross-section of the people, from Privy Councillors to small boys. We had hardly returned to our flat for some sustaining refreshment when the announcement of the birth

came over the wireless. At once we set down our glasses and our knives and forks and literally galloped across Green Park to the Palace. There was the physician's bulletin, posted at the gates. The excitement was intense. We were all friends, and slapped the backs of perfect strangers with complete abandon. For sound reasons we could not call out for the Princess, but we did, most lustily and senselessly, all out for the Duke. By the end of another hour we, thousands of us, changed our quarry, and roared for the King. No result. The balconies of the Palace were untenanted. We then put it on a family basis. We, and nobody more vociferously than the ex-and future Prime Minister of Australia, cried in union 'we want grandfather!' Wearing by unsuccessful well-doing, we then went home."³

My final quote refers to an event in 1955 as Winston Churchill was coming to the end of his second term as Prime Minister. Distinguished vultures were descending upon him to relieve him of the paintings, most of which he had done during his period in Opposition. After the butler had brought him what Menzies described as "a medicinal draught" a "miracle occurred". Menzies was just about to take his leave when Churchill said as described:

"By the way, you must have one of my pictures.' I spun around more nimbly than I had done for years. 'You should select three of which I will give you one!'

Menzies invoked the aid of Churchill's daughter Mary. Naturally she and her husband, Christopher Soames chose one of Churchill's best, a picture of Antibes. Menzies then describes what happened:

"He pointed to the Antibes picture and I at once expressed warm approval. Soames (to a gangling youth brought down by the PRA for packing and dispatch), 'Take that one down, wrap it up, and put it in Mr Menzies's car at the front door.' Winston (grumblingly): 'But this is one of my best. Kelly says it is my best.' Soames: 'Well, you wouldn't like your old friend to have your worst, would you? Boy, pack it up and take it down to the car!'

This helpful observation, though open to question as an exercise in pure logic, won the day. I quickly embraced the family, and departed with remarkable speed! When I got into the car, I said to the driver, 'Drive as fast as you decently can for half an hour!' There were no signs of pursuit. I had the picture. I still have it, and am

living with it most happily.

Years later, my wife and I were lunching at Chartwell. She was in the first flush of ownership of a new and good camera. Now Pat (that's my wife's name), though Winston always treated her with affection, was nervous about asking him for permission to 'take his picture'. He was not very mobile at that time, and was seated deep in an armchair, after lunch.

She said, 'May I take your picture?' To her and my astonishment, he replied - 'That's all right. Clemmie has it ready!'

Pat explained that she wanted to take a photograph. Winston, who had become rather deaf, repeated his, to us, cryptic answer. In the result, she took the photograph, and walked out with one of Winston's paintings, already crated up for delivery.

That is the simple tale of how it took me years of manoeuvre to get my Churchill, while my wife got hers without effort, indeed without trying. And yet they say that women represent the weaker sex!"⁴

These passages give us an insight into the lively, energetic, witty world of R G Menzies. They give us a glimpse of his life with Dame Pattie Menzies. The greatest legacy a political leader in a democracy can leave is the enrichment of the spirit and intellect of his people. Menzies did many good things for Australia. Being human, he doubtless made many mistakes, as all of us do. But perhaps his most lasting contribution will be seen by history to have been his federal initiatives for higher education. He laid the foundation by which the opportunities of education could be spread to be shared by many more Australians with gifts and talents. In this Silver Jubilee of Macquarie University, therefore, at the College which bears Sir Robert Menzies' name, standing on the campus of Macquarie University which is part of his legacy, I would say of Sir Robert Menzies in the words they carved into St Paul's Cathedral as the memorial to Christopher Wren:

"Si monumentum requeris, circumspice."

If you want to see his monument, look around!

ENDNOTES

1. R G Menzies, *Afternoon Light - Some Memories of Men and Events*, Cassell, Australia, 1967, 62.
2. *Ibid*, 19.
3. *Ibid*, 237-8.
4. *Id*, 83.