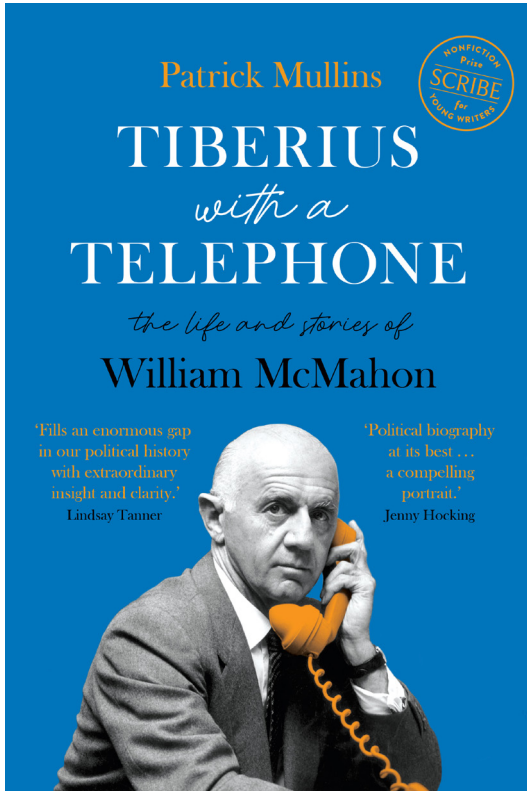


Tiberius with a Telephone

PATRICK MULLINS



BOOK DETAILS

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Mullins is a Canberra-based writer and academic who holds a PhD from the University of Canberra. He was the inaugural Donald Horne Fellow at the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, and was a research fellow at the Museum of Australian Democracy. His early, brief version of this book won the 2015 Scribe Nonfiction Prize for Young Writers.

The oddly compelling story of a man regarded as Australia's worst prime minister.

William McMahon was a significant, if widely derided and disliked, figure in Australian politics in the second half of the twentieth century. This biography tells the story of his life, his career, and his doomed attempts to recast views of his much-maligned time as Australia's prime minister.

After a long ministerial career under Menzies, McMahon became treasurer under Harold Holt, and fought a fierce, bitter war over protectionism with John McEwen. Following Holt's death in 1967, McEwen had his revenge by vetoing McMahon's candidature for the Liberal Party's leadership, and thus paved the way for John Gorton to become prime minister. But almost three years later, amid acrimony and division, McMahon would topple Gorton and fulfill his life's ambition to become Australia's prime minister.

In office, McMahon worked furiously to enact an agenda that grappled with the profound changes reshaping Australia. He withdrew combat forces from Vietnam, legislated for Commonwealth government involvement in childcare, established the National Urban and Regional Development Authority and the first Department of the Environment, began phasing out the means test on pensions, sought to control foreign investments, and accelerated the timetable for the independence of Papua New Guinea. But his failures would overshadow his successes, and by the time of the 1972 election McMahon would lead a divided, tired, and rancorous party to defeat.

Tiberius with a Telephone is a tour de force — an authoritative and colourful account of a unique politician and a vital period in Australia's history.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- I. William McMahon entered Parliament at the 1949 election, and despite the antipathy and derision of many colleagues and peers nonetheless managed to rise through the ranks, eventually becoming leader of the Liberal Party and Australia's prime minister. What do you believe were the crucial ingredients in that rise?

REVIEWS

“For God’s sake behave like a prime minister”, implored the journalist who had assisted William McMahon to attain that office. His faults were legion. Throughout his political career he boasted and intrigued, curried favour, and was habitually disloyal. He worked assiduously with little comprehension of his responsibilities, and was indecisive and prone to panic. Patrick Mullins’ engrossing, fine biography does much more than document all these liabilities: it explains how they enabled him to attain national leadership and left him unable to exercise it.’

— STUART MACINTYRE

‘Mullins fills an enormous gap in our political history with extraordinary insight and clarity. He casts new light on our post-war politics, and rescues one of its most dominant figures from the throes of partisan caricature.’

— LINDSAY TANNER, AUTHOR OF *SIDESHOW AND POLITICS WITH PURPOSE*

‘Mullins’ exemplary research, skilful use of an innovative structure, and engaging biographical narrative shows a complete picture of McMahon for the first time. This is everything a political biography should be.’

— EMERITUS PROFESSOR JENNY HOCKING, MONASH UNIVERSITY, AUTHOR OF *GOUGH WHITLAM: THE DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY*

2. In drafts of his autobiography, McMahon sought to argue that Robert Menzies’ success and longevity in office should be attributed to the weak Opposition leaders he had faced and the damage caused to Labor by the Split. Do you agree? Or was there more to Menzies’ success than this?
3. Why was there such instability and division among the Liberal–Country Party ranks after Menzies’ retirement? What role do you think McMahon played in this?
4. Was John McEwen right to veto McMahon’s candidacy for the Liberal Party leadership in the aftermath of Harold Holt’s disappearance and death? What were the effects of his doing so?
5. What factors do you think explain John Gorton’s initial success and then ouster as prime minister in March 1971?
6. Was McMahon’s time in office the failure that so many have described it as? What successes were there? What failings were there?
7. Did McMahon have any chance of winning the 1972 election?
8. During his time working on McMahon’s autobiography, David Bowman puzzled over how to reconcile McMahon’s versions of events with those from others. How accurate do you think it is possible to be about the past, and about ourselves?
9. Where, if at all, do you think McMahon’s significance in Australia’s political history lies?
10. What, to your mind, makes for a good prime minister? Election success? Policy changes? Economic prosperity? Peace and security?
11. Are there any parallels between the events recounted in *Tiberius with a Telephone* and events of recent years?