Australian History Prize

2018 - Shortlisted

Shortlisted
Judges' comments

Judith Brett’s masterful portrait of Australia’s second prime minister is a landmark in the writing of Australian political biography and political history. It has been more than 50 years since a historian tackled the biography of the man who was not only a father of Federation but who also established some of the foundations of his country’s political culture. Based on prodigious research, Brett writes with both clarity and discipline about this key architect of the Commonwealth, employing a distinctive voice and never failing to draw out the implications of the past for the present.

For the first time, Brett synthesises in a single frame the main threads of Deakin’s public and private life. The result is an intriguing portrait of a figure whose public triumphs often went hand in hand with inner turmoil. Indeed, the book’s success comes largely from Brett’s deft and supple interweaving of political events with Deakin’s private anxieties. While sympathetic to her subject, this work never strays into hagiography. Brett has breathed new life not only into the history of the early Commonwealth but also the atmosphere of turn-of-the-century Melbourne. It is an impressive achievement.