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# **Race Mathews: A Life in Politics by Iola Mathews, Monash University Publishing, 2024, pp 360 RRP \$39.99, ISBN: 9781922979810.**

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There are many good reasons to welcome this life of Race Mathews. It is mainly written by his wife Iola, an accomplished journalist, author, feminist, unionist and recent memoirist,<sup>1</sup> but with the first four chapters a moving account by Race himself on his early life. As the work of a spouse, *Race Mathews: A Life in Politics* has an intimacy that is impossible to achieve at a greater distance: it comes as no surprise to learn that one of the books Iola read for inspiration was Susan Crosland's biography of her husband, the British author and politician Anthony Crosland.<sup>2</sup> Iola Mathews' book captures otherwise obscured aspects of personal, family and emotional life but it also does an excellent job of telling the story of the public career of an impressive Australian politician and intellectual – and they don't often go together in this country.

There has indeed always been something a little donnish about Race Mathews, even before the two doctorates completed after he left parliament.<sup>3</sup> He is probably the closest we have had to a figure such as David Marquand of the British Labour Party (and later the Social Democrats). Mathews, a self-confessed Anglophile, might enjoy the comparison.

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<sup>1</sup> Iola Mathews, *Winning for Women: A Personal Story*, Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Crosland, Tony Crosland, London: Cape, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Race Mathews, 'Subsidiarity and Agency: the British Distributism, Antigonish and Mondragon Experiences', PhD Thesis, Monash University, 1998; Race Mathews, 'Manning's Children: Responses to *Rerum Novarum* in Victoria 1891 to 1966', Doctor of Theology Thesis, University of Divinity, Melbourne, 2014.

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As the book reveals, Mathews made his political mark in four significant ways.

First, he was an inveterate organiser who revived the Fabian Society at the beginning of the 1960s, turning it into both a forum for discussion of innovative policy and ideas, and a training ground for some who would contribute in diverse ways to the Labor Party from the 1970s through to the 1990s. The Society would continue to play its part in the political and intellectual life of the nation, and Mathews had a leading role at times, but it has never been as important as it was for a few years under Mathews' leadership in the 1960s.

Then there was the Whitlam era, when Race was Principal Private Secretary to Gough Whitlam for five critical years leading up to December 1972. The election that month brought Race into the federal parliament as the member for Casey but, as the biography shows, it was somewhat anti-climactic – 'the biggest mistake of his political life',<sup>4</sup> he is recorded as having later thought. Once you have been at the heart of policymaking, working alongside a man such as Whitlam, being 'Midwife to Medibank', three years on the backbench of a turbulent and sometimes disorganised government could be unrewarding and frustrating. And the dismissal of the government was followed by an election that saw Mathews lose his own seat, as so many else did in the 1975 bloodbath.

That brings us to the third of Mathews' contributions: as a cabinet minister in the Cain Labor government in Victoria during the 1980s. The states have been especially poorly served in terms of biographies of major politicians – becoming premier for an extended period has usually been the threshold unless you've generated a scandal or two. But Race Mathews was not an accident-prone politician. The closest his career can approach to 'scandal' is the theft of Pablo Picasso's *Weeping Woman* from the National Gallery of Victoria.

Mathews' combination of portfolios – police and the arts – always seemed rather odd. But for a couple of weeks there in August 1986, they came together in perfect alignment. Poor Race was described as a 'tiresome old bag of swamp gas'<sup>5</sup> in one of the ransom letters sent by the thieves, who called themselves Australian Cultural Terrorists and wanted more funding for the arts. In the end, their threat to destroy the

<sup>4</sup> Iola Mathews, *Race Mathews: A Life in Politics*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2024, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Mathews, *Race Mathews*, p. 217.

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painting was not implemented, and the painting would be picked up in a railway station locker. It is nonetheless one of the ironies of public life – in Mathews’ case, a long and productive one – that it is probably this incident more than any other that has found its way into collective memory.

The fourth of Race Mathews’ contributions is as historian and political thinker. He wrote a thesis and published a book on the early history of Fabianism in Australia, which he followed by further postgraduate study and publications on cooperatives, the distributist tradition, and Catholic social thought.<sup>6</sup> He has also remained an advocate of Labor Party reform – a cause to which he devoted many a waking hour in the 1960s when the Victorian Labor Party, under its post-split hard left leadership, was unelected and unelectable, as well as a drain on the ALP nationally.

The subtitle of this book – *A Life in Politics* – is apposite. It is indeed a book about a life – or, rather, about lives – and they had more than their fair share of tragedy. Mathews married young and his first wife, Jill, who had like Race trained as a teacher, died of cancer at the age of 34, leaving Race a widower with young children.

We learn from Lola, his second wife, of some of the burdens that political careers impose on families. She writes with insight, candour and love: we are allowed to see just enough to understand a little better what serious, generous and enduring political commitment means for those who live it to the full, rather than just treating politics as a stepping stone to greater glory or – more commonly these days – greater earnings.

It may be, then, that this book is also a kind of political elegy.

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<sup>6</sup> Race Mathews, ‘Victoria’s First Fabians, 1890-1910’, MA Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1989; Race Mathews, *Australia’s First Fabians: Middle-class Radicals, Labour activists and the Early labour Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Race Mathews, *Jobs of Our Own: Building a Stake-holder Society: Alternatives to the Market and the State*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1999; Race Mathews, *Of Labour and Liberty: Distributism in Victoria, 1891-1966*, Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2017.