

Playford's South Australia: Introduction

Judith Raftery

During the election campaign of 1965, South Australians keen to see the end of a long period of non-Labor government in their state used the slogan, 'Playford must go'. And in the election held in March of that year, the Playford government did go, though the man himself stayed on in Parliament until 1968.

Sir Thomas Playford, fourth generation South Australian and grandson of 'Honest Tom' Playford (premier of the state 1887-1889 and 1890-1892), was a legend in his own time. South Australia's longest-serving premier (1938-1965), he was hailed as the architect of its industrialisation and post-war progress, derided as a philistine responsible for its social and cultural narrowness and stodginess, honoured for his support of traditional values, vilified as an undemocratic supporter of government by privilege and minority, and, though the leader of the Liberal and Country League, claimed as the greatest *Labor* premier the state had ever had. This legend, with all its contradictory elements, has been further entrenched in the 30 years since the end of the Playford government. The myriad social, political, economic and cultural changes of these years have often been portrayed as an inevitable reaction to the constraints of the Playford period. It as though the Labor victory in 1965 was like a dam burst which allowed a flood of reform to course through all aspects of South Australian society, bringing new life and vigour. Such a view not only overstates the conservatism and simplifies the complexity of the Playford period; it also overstates the radicalism of the period of Labor government which followed, and accords too great a personal role to both Playford and his successor, Don Dunstan.

The essays in this volume, which are not primarily about Tom Playford but about South Australia during his period of political office, analyse and reassess some of the conventional wisdom about the period and about the Playford legend. Playford is a large part of some

chapters, and largely missing from others. This reflects the nature of his premiership: he expended enormous energy and a powerful influence in some areas, and ignored, neglected or gave merely passive support to others. It also underscores the argument, advanced in many of the chapters, that developments frequently attributed to Playford may be more accurately understood as the outcome of a complex web of events, ideas and trends, many of them quite outside his control or influence. Thus *Playford's South Australia*, while acknowledging the significance of Playford's personal contribution, challenges a simplistic 'big man' version of the history of the period.

The book is not a comprehensive history of South Australia in the years 1933 to 1968, and readers familiar with the period will readily identify some notable omissions. For instance, there are no chapters on industrial relations, on soldier settlement, on developments in education or social welfare, or on Aboriginal South Australians. Despite a strong emphasis on economic development, there is only brief mention of such important matters as the growth of Whyalla, the mining of iron ore in the Middleback Range, and farming and forestry developments in the South East. Overall, there is a much stronger focus on Adelaide than on the rest of the state. These omissions and imbalances arise from the process which has produced this book. It is a project of the Association of Professional Historians, and has been written by members of that association and several invited contributors. Thus it reflects the interests and expertise of those authors, and while it neglects some topics which readers might have expected it to cover, it tackles others which are less standard fare.

We anticipate that *Playford's South Australia* will be read for several different purposes. Readers who are seeking an overview of the major developments and characteristics of the period, or some new analysis which might confirm or challenge the Playford legend, or an evocation of time and place and of their own 'lived history', will all find this book of value. Three chapters of personal narrative and local description provide a beginning and an end to the book, and divide the first section which analyses some of the major political and economic issues of the period from the second section which deals with a range of more

specialised topics. We hope that this arrangement will convey to readers what state government policies, larger national trends and forces, and major world events meant to the everyday existence of ordinary South Australians.

Several different traditions of historical research and writing are represented in *Playford's South Australia*. Conventional scholarly argument, using a variety of primary and secondary sources, aiming at objective judgement, and validated by careful referencing, is the most strongly represented. It sits alongside a newer and quite different tradition, in which the raw data of personal reminiscences are presented with a minimum of contextualisation, without argument and without validation other than that bestowed by their status as recalled experience. In between is the now well-established tradition of oral history, which is built on formal and carefully recorded interviews which are used to illustrate and confirm what can be learnt from other conventional historical and archival sources. Throughout the book, photographs, brief biographies, vignettes and other special features highlight the subject matter and argument of the chapters. The use of these differing approaches to historical research and writing in *Playford's South Australia* adds to the complexity and interest of the picture which the volume produces.

The book begins with Peter Strawhan's vivid personal account of life in suburban Adelaide during the Playford period, which coincided neatly with his infancy, childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. His keen observation of his own and his parents' lives – the struggle to find work and decent housing during the depression, the role of the South Australian Housing Trust in building family security and new suburbs, the limited opportunities for education, the socialisation provided by the ubiquitous Sunday School, the dread of serious illness, the centrality of the local picture theatre and the radio to entertainment, the clearly defined roles of men, women and children, and the impact of war on family and community – is both an intimate personal story and a chronicle of many of the circumstances and developments which are analysed in a more objective way in other chapters.

The focus expands from the individual and the family to the suburb and the district in Pauline Payne's chapter on Prospect. Payne reconstructs a world in which place of residence was closely linked to places of work, worship and recreation, and in which strong loyalties to a locality might extend over several generations and build a genuine sense of local identity. While this chapter is specifically about Prospect, readers who can recall other suburbs and districts during the Playford period will find much that they recognise and with which they identify. Genia and Nigel Hart's chapter, through which members of four families speak of their experience of life in Playford's South Australia, will also produce strong reader identification. Two of the families are locals' and two are immigrants. Their memories record a plethora of trivial and not so trivial details of material and social existence and hard-won economic progress. In addition, they document the cultural and emotional journeys travelled not only by immigrants to South Australia, but also by established members of a community which was in the process of being transformed by industrialisation and by an influx of settlers from many different places.

In the first section of the book, several chapters of demographic, political and economic analysis provide the macro context for these personal accounts. Graeme Hugo analyses the demography of the Playford period. He demonstrates how the substantial population increase rested on the transformation of the fundamental demographic processes of fertility, mortality and migration, and explains the radical changes in the composition of the population and in significant shifts in its spatial distribution. He argues that these changes both influenced and were influenced by the policies and priorities of Playford and his government. His conclusion, that many of the profound demographic changes which resulted from Playford's initiatives contributed eventually to the forces which brought about his defeat, is echoed in other chapters.

Two chapters of political analysis follow. By making use of Playford's often-ignored official correspondence, and by employing comparisons with other states and other premiers in order to debunk some local myths, Peter Howell sheds new light on Playford the parliamentarian.

He combs the parliamentary record to uncover the nature of Playford's relationship with colleagues and opponents, and of his changing political style over his lengthy career. He concludes that Playford, though never unprincipled, became more of a pragmatist after he became premier, and was less interested in ideology than in pursuing what he believed to be in the best interests of South Australia. Jenny Tilby Stock tackles what was perhaps the most controversial aspect of Playford's longevity as premier, and certainly the most deplored as far as Labor supporters were concerned: his reliance on and support of unequal electorates, and his rejection of the principle of 'one vote, one value'. Through meticulous dissection of electoral and census records, she goes beyond rhetoric and speculation to reveal the actual impact of the 'Playmander' on election results.

Industrialisation was Playford's fundamental economic goal and drove policy and priorities in many areas. David Rich explores the origins and nature of the government's industrialisation strategy and its impact on manufacturing growth. He concludes that the conventional wisdom which attributes economic growth almost entirely to Playford's initiatives ignores the complexities of a situation in which Playford's influence was one among many, and varied, according to the issue, from irrelevant to decisive. One area in which Playford's influence undoubtedly counted for much was in the establishment and development of the South Australian Housing Trust. Susan Marsden sees the Housing Trust as a tool in the state government's plan for industrialisation and Playford as a strong supporter of its evolution into a planning and development authority which attracted investment and immigrants to the state, and, by integrating factories, housing and social amenities on its own estates, strongly influenced the shape of the city and suburbs. Far from painting Playford as the sole hero of this story, she emphasises the vital role of some key public servants, the fruitful cooperation which existed between them and the premier, and theirs and the Trust's continuing influence after Playford's political demise.

This section concludes with two chapters on mining and energy production. Nic Klaassen tells the story of Leigh Creek, which is the story of Playford's dogged personal battle, against

resistance from several quarters, including his own party, to develop the coal field at Leigh Creek, in order to make South Australia independent of overseas and interstate coal supplies. This was vital to the state's industrial progress and also to the securing of a decent life for the growing population needed to support that progress. In the course of getting his way over Leigh Creek, Playford cemented his reputation as a pragmatist and a good 'Labor' leader by nationalising the Adelaide Electric Supply Company.

Bernard O'Neil, in a chapter which focuses on the Radium Hill Project, outlines South Australia's entry into the atomic age. Playford was enthusiastic about uranium, for military purposes and as an energy source, and he strongly endorsed the search for deposits. The uranium industry was a substantial employer of post-war migrants, and an important aspect of Playford's program of industrialisation. O'Neil argues that, in the context of the Cold War, those involved in the uranium industry were heroes, not villains, and the Radium Hill Project gave Playford and South Australia some standing in world affairs.

The second main section of *Playford's South Australia* begins with Peter Donovan's chapter on the motor car. The place of the car industry in South Australia's industrial growth is dealt with earlier in Rich's chapter. Here Donovan documents the growth of car ownership, and the changes which the availability of private motor transport brought to the city and suburbs, and to the working lives and leisure of South Australians. He notes Playford's assertiveness in removing obstacles in the path of the car, including properties blocking the route of the south-east freeway. Finally, he reflects on the general lack of consideration of the negative consequences of the rise of the motor car, including its impact on metropolitan planning and spatial distribution of the population.

Carol Fort argues that war, rather than Premier Playford's policies, was the real engine of South Australia's industrialisation. She uses the history of munitions manufacture at Salisbury to question another myth of the period: that Australians, called to 'equality of sacrifice' in the pursuit of a national goal, laid aside their differences and worked as one. She concludes that

the reality was quite different, and that war work was characterised by competition, conflict and inequality. This is an original argument which opens up some territory usually regarded as sacred.

Noris Ioannou provides a specialist's insight into the history of the decorative and applied arts in South Australia and links their decline and subsequent revival during the Playford era to social, cultural and economic changes. Within this story, he analyses the roles of prominent practitioners and teachers, art schools and the Country Women's Association. He notes Playford's lack of personal interest in the arts and crafts, and shows that he paid attention to them only when industrial expansion after the Second World War suggested the potential of the commercial potteries as employers and as producers of building materials.

The Playford years have often been seen as years in which South Australia's religious institutions enjoyed a high level of government and popular support, and wielded considerable influence with a premier who was sympathetic to the values of Protestant Christianity. David Hilliard suggests that this is only part of the story. He examines the religious dimension of Playford's South Australia, and finds that the influence of religious institutions in fact diminished over the 26 years of Playford's premiership, and that the trend towards a more secular society, which became more marked during the subsequent 'Dunstan decade', was well-established during Playford's time. He argues that while this secularisation had nothing to do with Playford personally, it reflected many of the social and economic changes set in train by Playford's political agenda.

Judith Raftery evaluates the work of the Mothers' and Babies' Health Association, an influential infant welfare agency which enjoyed strong government and community support before, during and beyond the Playford period. She argues that, its considerable achievements notwithstanding, it was naive about the major determinants of the health of the public, was slow to adjust its program to the challenges thrown up by economic and demographic change, and claimed for itself credit that was more properly due to rising living standards which

resulted in part from Playford's program of industrialisation.

Alison Painter looks at what entertained the people of South Australia during Playford's premiership. Playford had scant interest in the arts and entertainment, believing them to be 'frills not fundamentals', and so provided little government support. What flourished therefore depended on what meant profitability for commercial entrepreneurs and survival for amateur groups. Such a context favoured the familiar and the popular over the innovative and the elite, and the dominance of the cinema, the radio and well-known plays and musical productions over more esoteric offerings. Nevertheless, by the end of the period, the Adelaide Festival of Arts had been established, enlivened by a vigorous and ongoing debate as to what constituted 'culture' and what elements of it were worthy of public and government support.

Exploring an area which has received little scholarly attention to date, Kerrie Round asks why South Australia was slower than other states to preserve and celebrate its past. She shows that when interest in historical commemoration was stimulated by the state's centenary in 1936, the situation was complicated by two powerful forces: ambivalence or open hostility about the contribution to the state's heritage of people of German descent; and a narrow and excessively British view of history which glorified a select group of pioneers and explorers, and delayed the development of a broader and more genuinely South Australian view. Playford, who did not see it as productive, did little to support the cause of conservation and historic celebration.

This then is a view, from many angles, of South Australia during the Playford years. We believe that it makes a valuable contribution to South Australian historiography, and hope that it will encourage others to add to and refine the picture.

Copies of the essays by Jenny Tilby Stock, Susan Marsden, Bernard O'Neil, Pauline Payne, Peter Donovan, Alison Painter, Kerrie Round as well as this 'Introduction' appear on this website of work by members of the PHA (SA). Other essays in the original collection may be

consulted in printed copies of the book.