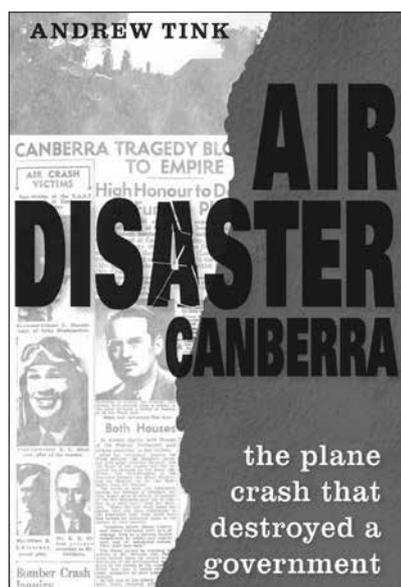


Air Disaster Canberra: The Plane Crash That Destroyed a Government

By Andrew Tink | New South | 2013



Andrew Tink had the highly original idea of recounting two events from Canberra in 1940 – an air crash followed by a number of inquiries and the fall of the UAP/ Country Party government shortly afterwards. The link between these two events was the presence on the doomed aircraft of three ministers in the government, all of them strong supporters of the then prime minister, Robert Menzies.

The crash occurred on 13 August 1940 when a Hudson bomber, converted for passenger travel, dived into a ridge near Canberra aerodrome. All on board were killed. In addition to the three ministers – Sir Henry Gullett, Geoffrey Street and James Fairbairn – there were the chief of the general staff, Sir Cyril White, another soldier, one of the minister's private secretaries and four crew members.

A UAP government had come to office in January 1932 with Joseph

Lyons as prime minister and became a coalition administration with the Country Party in 1934. Menzies was attorney-general during this period when the first law officer still had the right – and the time – to take private briefs. When he went to the Privy Council in 1936 on a s 92 case – *James v Commonwealth* – Menzies did not charge the Commonwealth a fee but sent a bill to the State of Victoria, for whom he also appeared, for two hundred guineas. When this was raised in the Commonwealth Parliament, Lyons wrote to Menzies, warning him that he was a likely future leader of the UAP and should be careful about giving his opponents an opportunity to 'dim the lustre of your reputation'.

Menzies spent most of the first half of 1941 in London where he attended meetings at the British war cabinet. He returned to Australia in mid-year but in August was forced to resign by his UAP colleagues. If three of his strongest supporters had not been lost a year earlier, this vote might have taken a different course.

The book sets out small biographies of all those who were killed in the crash. It is a striking illustration of a different social and political world that Street, Fairbairn and White were all graziers. All three ministers had fought in the Great War and the book underlines the long shadow that this conflict cast over almost every aspect of Australian life in the 1920s and 1930s. Menzies had not, of course, fought in the war and this was a source of suspicion

and sometimes hostility towards him by those who had.

On the day of the crash the sky was clear and there was little wind. The plane appeared to stall and burst into flames after hitting the ground. The crash was followed by three rapidly convened inquiries – an inquest by the ACT Coroner, a RAAF court of inquiry and then a judicial inquiry presided over by Mr Justice Lowe of the Victorian Supreme Court, with Arthur Dean as counsel assisting, who was later appointed to the same court. The judicial inquiry was held in the High Court's No 2 courtroom in its Melbourne premises in Little Bourke Street. Both inquiries, as opposed to the inquest which did not consider the question, essentially found the

cause of the crash to be pilot error. In one sense the author agrees, although he considers that James Fairbairn who was an experienced pilot himself, was probably at the controls and caused the plane to stall.

Menzies resigned from the Cabinet in early 1939 but, when Lyons died in Easter of that year, he was elected leader by his UAP colleagues and became prime minister, although in a government that no longer included the

Country Party. At the general election in September 1940 Labor and the UAP/Country Party tied with thirty six seats each. There were two independents who initially supported the government but the political landscape was highly unstable. On the UAP side the Country Party had refused to serve under Menzies and on the Labor side there were still two separate groups, the official ALP and Lang Labor from New South Wales. At a time when Europe had been overrun by the German armies and Britain was fighting for its life, Canberra remained as

detached from reality as it is in many ways today.

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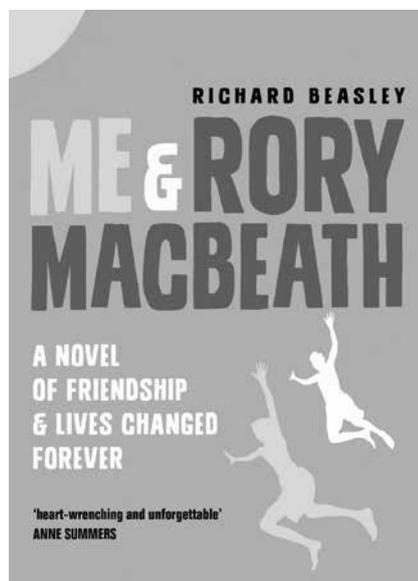
members withdrew their support from the government and John Curtin became prime minister in a Labor administration which was to survive, albeit without Curtin himself, until December 1949.

This book provides a fascinating interplay of law and politics and the author's extensive research has not inhibited his highly readable style. It is simply an excellent piece of work.

Review by Michael Sexton SC

Me and Rory Macbeath

By Richard Beasley | Hachette Australia | 2013



The seemingly endless summer holidays of our childhood: there are surely few periods in our lives that we remember with more nostalgia. Australian summer holidays, idled away with other

local children at the beach or in neighbours' pools, and fueled by sausage rolls and meat pies, calippos and paddlepops, seem particularly evocative in retrospect.

Richard Beasley's new novel, *Me & Rory Macbeath*, begins with a kind of homage to those summer holidays of our childhood, as its narrator, the now grown-up Jake Taylor, describes the summer of 1977 - 1978, when he was twelve years old and living on Rose Avenue in the suburbs of Adelaide. Jake's depiction of that summer is almost palpable, and is replete with games of front-yard cricket, terrifying encounters with ten-metre diving platforms, and molten roads that scold bare feet as his band of local boys walk home. It is a beautiful start to the story (which is part coming-of-age,

part courtroom drama), and also a clever one, as it lulls the reader into feeling that very sense of 'vague yet secure optimism' which Jake identifies as coming over him and his best mate, Robbie, around the time they turned twelve.

Rory Macbeath is the youngest child of the Macbeath family, who has recently arrived from Glasgow and moved into Number 1 Rose Avenue, described by Jake as the worst house in the street. It is the entry of Rory into Jake and Robbie's world which changes things for Jake, at first only subtly, with the unsettling shift in dynamic that takes place when a long-established duet becomes a trio, and then radically and irrevocably, as the Macbeath family takes centre stage on Rose Avenue. As Jake learns more about Rory and his family, the pace of the novel