

Well May We Say: The Speeches That Made Australia
 by Sally Warhaft, (ed.)
 Black Inc, Melbourne,
 2004, \$34.95
 ISBN 1 86395 277 2

Australian speeches appear to be the flavour of the month. This collection is but one of three currently on the market. This is odd given that the speech delivered to a public audience does not occupy a very significant place in the public life in this country. The last election in which a leader of a political party actually addressed a genuine public audience (as opposed to the stage managed audiences of a campaign launch) was in 1993. Television, the managed campaign and the need for an appropriate sound bite have all but destroyed the public speech. Hence it appeared somewhat quaint when Mark Latham, prior to the last election campaign, went around the country holding consultative sessions and delivering public speeches.

The contemporary 'speeches' in this collection have nearly all been delivered as radio talks or as specialist lectures to relatively small audiences.

With one possible exception, Pauline Hanson's maiden parliamentary speech, they have hardly been speeches that 'made' Australia. In fact many of the speeches, such as Whitlam's 'Well may we say' are little more than a few off the cuff remarks. What has come to occupy a place in Australian public life are less the speeches than a small number of phrases in these speeches such as 'black armband' or 'All the way with LBJ' or 'I did but see her passing by'.

The role of the speech in Australian public life remains somewhat of a paradox. In the ancient world it was quite common for speeches to be preserved, and much of the literature

that we have from the age of Athenian democracy are speeches including, of course, those delivered by Socrates and Demosthenes. Equally the speeches of Cicero from the late Roman Republic have been preserved. In the ancient world oratory was a central part of the education of upper class males and they needed models to emulate.

This does not mean that Cicero actually delivered every speech in his collection or that the speeches were delivered as written. Rather we have the polished final product that men could admire and emulate. Of course what is missing from any such final product is the performance, the drama that the circumstances accompanying the original delivery of the speech provided. One thinks of Cicero delivering his speech in the Senate against the Catiline conspiracy, wearing armour under his toga to accentuate that his life had been threatened.

Greece and Rome both had cultures that gave a primacy to the spoken word and in which people took enormous pleasure in listening to great oratory. This was also true in societies derived from an Anglo background until quite recently. In 19th century Australia the capacity to deliver good speeches was still important. Election campaigns, for example, were an opportunity for candidates to indulge their oratorical capabilities in front of audiences that may or may not have been friendly.

Judging from contemporary reports, the decade before Federation was the golden age of Australian oratory, both in parliament and without. No doubt the Federation campaign spurred on the art of making speeches. It is odd that this collection does not contain a specimen of George Reid's oratory. Despite a high-pitched voice, Reid was meant to have been a speaker who developed a genuine rapport with audience. One might have expected Reid's debate with William Holman on Socialism held in 1906 before a large audience to have been represented in such a collection.

As the twentieth century advanced, so oratory and the art of speech making became less important in Australia. First radio and later television transformed the way politics was conducted. Oratory thrives on personal contact between the speaker and his or her audience. This is exemplified by the well known example of Bob Menzies who seemed to need an interjector or two before he could warm up and move into full flight.

Menzies is also an excellent illustration of why collections of written speeches have only limited value. To appreciate a Menzies speech we really need to hear the man, to get a sense of his presence. Of course the same is true of actors: the text of Henry V tells us nothing of Lawrence Olivier's performance in the role of the same name.

We encounter an even bigger problem in the case of recent political speeches. Not only are we faced with mere words on the page but the reality that the person who spoke the words probably did not write them. This creates a puzzle: in such circumstances what is the relationship between the speaker and what he or she is saying?

We live in an age in which oratory does not thrive. Schoolchildren do not study speeches intensively in the hope of becoming great orators. Technology does not favour long and artfully constructed orations.

What then does this collection of speeches represent? To me it read a little like a collection of documents, some of which one might set as readings for a tutorial. There were too many fragments in the collection. Most certainly I would not go to it seeking models if I wished to indulge in a little speech making myself. And even worse, there are two other collections out there.

To me, it would make more sense to put together a CD of Australian speeches so that we could hear them. But I fear that this current collection comes not to praise the art of speech making in Australia but to bury it.

Reviewed by Greg Melleuish

