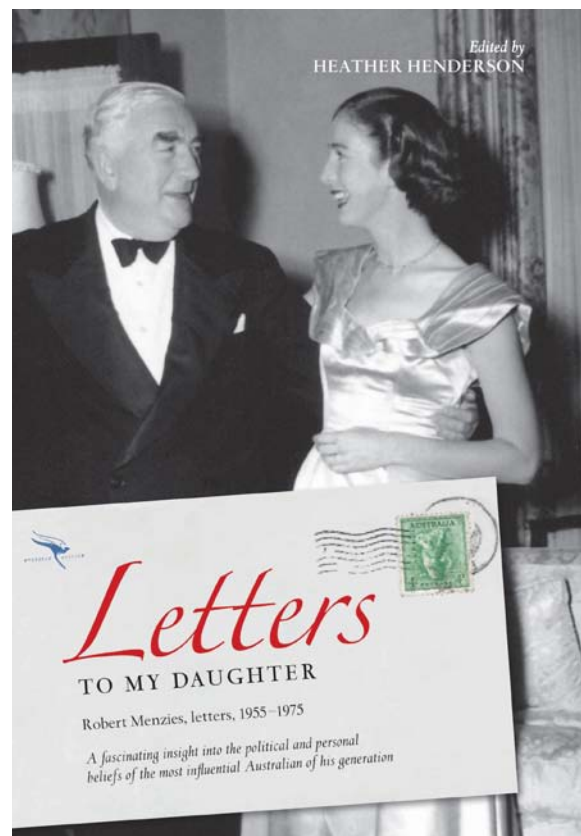


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# *Letters to My Daughter,*

*Robert Menzies, letters, 1955-1975*

Edited by HEATHER HENDERSON



Book Launch by

The Hon Sir Guy Green,  
AC, KBE, CVO

at the Menzies Foundation

3 August 2011



## Mrs Heather Henderson

It is nearly three years since I decided to publish my father's letters to me. It is most heartening for me, and for all those who encouraged me to go ahead, that the letters have turned into such a substantial and good-looking book - interesting and easily readable. A friend of mine has written "Your father always had a way with words and it is wonderful to hear him speaking again."

The launching of "Letters to My Daughter" at the Menzies Foundation headquarters has been the icing on the cake - my birthday "cake" on 3rd August. Everything was organised to perfection by John Mathews, Sandra Mackenzie and Pam Shearman. The gathering of the Menzies clan and friends could not have been happier.

As the "launcher" Sir Guy Green gave a magnificent speech. It was clear he had put a huge amount of time and work into writing it. Everyone who was there kept talking about it, and many rang me afterwards to say "What a wonderful speech."

I am enormously grateful to Sir Guy: now everyone can read what he said.



## The Hon Sir Guy Green, AC, KBE, CVO

Born in Tasmania, Sir Guy Green graduated from the University of Tasmania and practiced as a barrister and solicitor.

Offices he has held include Chancellor of the University of Tasmania, Chief Justice of Tasmania, Governor of Tasmania and Administrator of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Current appointments include: Chairman of the Menzies Foundation, Chairman of Trustees of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Chairman of the International Antarctic Institute, Chairman of Ten Days on the Island, member of the Board of the Menzies Research Institute and Honorary Antarctic Ambassador for Tasmania.

He has a wide range of interests and has given orations and addresses and published in a variety of fields including philosophy, law, criminology, the office of Governor, judicial independence, professionalism, Tasmania, Antarctica, history and science and technology. He is the author of entries in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, the Companion to Tasmanian History and the Oxford English Dictionary.

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# *Letters to My Daughter,* *Robert Menzies, letters, 1955-1975*

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Book Launch by Sir Guy Green  
on 3 August 2011

Sir Robert Menzies was Prime Minister of Australia from 1939 to 1941 and from 1949 to 1966. This book comprises the letters he sent to his only daughter Heather between 1955 and 1975 when she was overseas with her husband Peter Henderson on diplomatic postings. It also includes letters written when Sir Robert was overseas himself and some letters to other people.

Encouraged and assisted by Peter, without whom, the dedication of this work records, this book would not exist, Heather Henderson has not only edited the work but has also written a general introduction, introductions to different sections, an epilogue and footnotes. Heather's contributions, which are as thoughtful and elegantly written as are her father's letters themselves, significantly enhance the value and interest of this work.

Given that it is now 45 years since Sir Robert retired as Prime Minister and over 30 years since he died, one would have thought that most of the written material which was going to be publicly available about him would have already been published. So this work comes as an unexpected treasure trove of interesting new material about the life and times of Sir Robert Menzies.

The fact that this book comprises letters makes it an especially valuable resource. Because letters are written for the purpose of communicating with someone, they are more coherent and better written than diaries, and unlike memoirs, letters have the great virtue of contemporaneity and of not having been through the processes of selective memory and ex post facto rationalisation to which memoirs are often subject.

"This book" Heather observes in the Introduction "is not a political or family history. It is not a biography. It is not a collection of my observations or comments. It is simply a collection of my father's letters to me." Well, that may be literally correct but in fact this valuable work partakes of the characteristics of all four of those genres.

As one would expect, the letters are replete with political comment of all kinds.

Predictably these include dismissive remarks about the opposition, especially Dr Evatt whom he always referred to as Brother Bert. Sir Robert was speaking at least partly seriously when he wrote in 1955:

"if Brother Bert were not such a warm supporter by sheer inadvertence, we could run into a great deal of trouble. If he became politically astute for even a couple of weeks, we could be under genuine attack. I have been explaining to my colleagues that Bert's antics give us a great opportunity for doing sound and unpopular things ..."

But Sir Robert's strongest critical comments are about some of his own party colleagues.

He was contemptuous of those whom he regarded as disloyal to the party or his Government. Explaining why he was reluctant to lend his support to one NSW liberal candidate he described him as

"an outstanding example of the fellow who is trying to push his own somewhat wobbly electoral barrow by seizing every opportunity of attacking us. I have made it clear to the Organisation, in my worst possible manner that I refuse to pay a premium on disloyalty."

In the Introduction Heather records how irritated and depressed he became about the Liberal party following his retirement as Prime Minister. This was not, as some might think, merely the reaction of a person seeing his successors doing things differently from the way he would have done them himself. "I try to avoid being the typical retired politician" Sir Robert observed in a 1967 letter, "but some of the things that the Government has done completely puzzle me" and a little later he remarked "The contest for the leadership was incredibly vulgar, and marked by the grossest immodesty. Hasluck, who was dragged reluctantly to the television table, shone 'like a good deed in a naughty world'"; that last phrase being taken from Shakespeare.

Many of his political comments are not so much party political as expressions of exasperation about Commonwealth State relations; he speaks about Playford the Premier of SA "trying to blackmail" the Commonwealth into continuing a subsidy for the coal industry. "It was" he said "difficult to believe that a Liberal Premier could, in effect, threaten to defeat his own Party in the South Australian Senate election unless it accedes to his, as usual, extravagant demands."

He speaks too, in connection with the 1961 election, of Liberal party members in Queensland who "have conducted a pernicious campaign against the Commonwealth Government for the last three years, accusing us, quite falsely, of neglecting Queensland."

And he also notes the way State Premiers "are so parochial about their own rights that in their own areas they almost deny the existence of any Federal Ministers."

I don't think that Sir Robert would have been alone in holding these views. I suspect that every Prime Minister of Australia since Federation, whatever his or her political persuasion, has been irritated or frustrated by tensions of that kind which are inherent in a federal system.

The public service is not immune from comment either. He speaks of the limited communication skills of the Treasury which he says by "instinct and practice regard(s) 'high finance' as a species of witchcraft, the secrets of which are not to be exposed to the vulgar". He cites the failure by the

Treasury to inform the public that the surplus of £70 million in the 1955 budget had been prudently spent on works programmes and debt redemption with the result, he went on to say "that all the newspapers ... are busy spending this illusory £70 million a second time on tax reductions, bigger and better pensions and handouts generally".

Sometimes Sir Robert aims at multiple targets: In 1962 he wrote:

"The de facto marriage between Calwell and Fairfax and Henderson (of the SMH), a sort of ménage à trois, attracts me very much. There is no more fascinating spectacle than that of those who – like Fairfax and Henderson – have grown richer under the Liberals, now feel that they can personally afford the Socialists!"

When reading Sir Robert's political comments it is important to appreciate a fundamentally significant aspect of his character and philosophy: for Sir Robert, what he described as the "business of politics" did not have the opprobrious connotations it has for many people today; for him it was not a game or some self serving endeavour but in his words both an "art and a science of ... supreme importance ..." which is "... the most important and responsible civil activity to which a man may devote his character, his talents, and his energy. We must," he went on "in our own interests, elevate politics into statesmanship and statecraft. We must aim at a condition of affairs in which we shall no longer reserve the dignified name of statesman for a Churchill or a Roosevelt, but extend it to lesser men who give honourable and patriotic service in public affairs."

I have taken those passages from an article he wrote which was published in the New York Times magazine in 1948 the year before he became Prime Minister for the second time. Sir Robert's lifetime commitment to that perception of politics is movingly illustrated by a speech included in this book which he made 26 years later at the age of 79 when he accepted the conferral upon him of the Freedom of the City of Kew in 1974. "You know" he said "that we had, in my day, great political principles. I don't know whether they are now out of date. I am told that I am an old square, but an old square I shall remain in my political convictions and principles, because principles are not things that you change overnight as you might from one suit

of clothes into another. They are something within yourself, something that lives with you and that you live with ... You don't go into politics in order to play a game on behalf of this group or that group, and with no idealism in you."

Incidentally Sir Robert started that speech in characteristic style by gently chiding the mayor for not also making Dame Pattie Menzies a freewoman of Kew for the service that she too had given to the nation.

As you will have gathered from the passages I have quoted already, the letters in this book are a delight to read. They sparkle with humour and irony, some times gentle and sometimes not so gentle and often self deprecating. They are written in fine, often poetic prose which is full of aphorisms, wonderfully felicitous phrases and many references to Shakespeare, classic novels and the bible including even the Apocrypha; but the references are always apt and never forced or paraded for the purposes of displaying erudition.

There are superb cameos like this impression Sir Robert had of Winston Churchill when he had lunch with him in 1959:

"He is living a mellow old age, enjoying the company of a few friends, interested to be told about the current discussions in the world, but without ambition or grievance."

The choice of words and the simple elegance of that sentence make it a perfect thumbnail sketch.

There are delightful vignettes. In one letter he describes a dinner with the new Presbyterian Minister at Brighton.

"He (is) an Irishman called McRae. The dinner was quite hilarious. McRae is a youngish man with a light Irish brogue and a keen sense of fun. He is a good storyteller and accepted with relish a martini before dinner and some wine with it. There is hope for the Presbyterian Church yet."

In another passage, with all the flair of a professional novelist he describes a long weekend they had with three houseguests:

"I wish you could have been with us. If I had time, I could write a piece about it which could rival De Quincey's 'Murder Considered as a Fine Art'. I could call it 'Snobbery Considered as a Fine Art'. Hannah and Elsie sat, devoid

of all humour, looking at each other with the fierce eyes of rivalry, dredging up out of their memories all titled people they have ever met and, wherever possible, referring to them as 'Tom' or 'Mary'. It was a magnificent encounter – never a laugh but never a dull moment!"

That could have been a passage straight out of Anthony Trollope's Barchester Towers.

The letters are a source of fascinating and well informed descriptions and comments about international affairs and international figures especially in the UK and the United States.

A private letter from President John F Kennedy written in August 1962 shows the friendship and trust that must have developed between them. Referring to the America's Cup Kennedy starts by generously acknowledging that

"we are already in Australia's debt for the lift her challenge has given to one of the best of sports. I am to be Ambassador Beale's guest at dinner during the series, and it should be a great occasion. I only wish you were going to be with us, and I fully share your suggestion that the next time we meet we should talk about things which will never turn up in our departmental briefing papers.

With warmest regards,

Sincerely,  
John Kennedy"

Even with all Sir Robert's confidence and abilities, occasionally signs of the pressure of being Prime Minister for a long time become evident. In 1961 he wrote about the coming election:

"Throughout the campaign, I will be sustained by the enlivening reflection that, if I ever fight another election, the family ought to have me examined."

He goes on later in the letter with the rather sadder reflection:

"After polling day I would then like to take a holiday. But quite frankly, I have almost entirely lost my capacity for taking one, which is a bad thing. I realise more and more what a change was brought about by Gordon Rolph's death. I could always go across there for ten days and go out on the river and forget about politics."

Sir Gordon Rolph was a long-time friend with whom he stayed at his West Tamar home in Tasmania.

In that connection if I may interpolate a personal reference, that passage evoked a memory for me; it was on Sir Gordon Rolph's twin engined diesel launch *Truant* anchored on the very river to which he was referring, that as a boy I had my only meeting with Sir Robert Menzies. I must confess that I was a little surprised to find that this event was not referred to in any of his letters.

Understandably the letters contain many comments upon the press; I use the word deliberately: I suspect that even today Sir Robert would not use the word media.

While even a politician as principled as Sir Robert would not find it easy to be objective about criticisms of him in the press, some of his observations well justify what could fairly be described as his lack of wholehearted admiration for it.

There are several references to what Sir Robert describes as the sustained and vicious campaigns against him and his Governments by the Sydney Morning Herald and its satellites.

He rightly characterises the way the press behaved about the relationship between Princess Margaret and Peter Townsend as "their usual rather nasty hypocrisy. After all," he went on, "they started the publicity. They keep their hosts of photographers and reporters hanging around gates and fences. And then when they have whipped up immense public curiosity, they criticise the Palace for not satisfying the curiosity. This is a typical twentieth-century press manoeuvre." I hardly dare imagine what his reaction would have been to the press manoeuvres which have become typical of the 21st century.

In another example he refers to reports in the press in Western Australia claiming that while speaking with Harold Holt from Philadelphia he made some offensive remarks about the Western Australia results in the 1967 election. But as Sir Robert points out he knew nothing about the West Australian results for more than two days after his conversation with Holt and he had never been in Philadelphia in his life. Given how outrageous that report was, some would regard his concluding comment as admirably restrained: "however I suppose that this kind of exuberant misrepresentation is still going strong," he said.

Even someone with his resilience and strength could not fail to be hurt by press attacks but he valiantly rises above them. And indeed in a sense rising above press campaigns was really a matter of principle for him: writing from London in November 1967 he points out how "cultivating the friendship of the newspaper reporters and writers" can turn out "to be ... disastrous. The moment a Government sets out to try to please the press instead of pleasing its own judgment, it makes itself dependent upon its favour, and when that favour is withdrawn the results are very bad."

In her Introduction Heather emphasises how important family was to her father and that is manifest throughout the book.

The very fact that in an extraordinarily busy life he managed to maintain this warm, detailed and thoughtful correspondence with her and the family speaks for itself.

The letters are full of expressions showing his love and affection for his daughter and his caring concern and interest in the family and how much he misses them.

Referring to his five year old granddaughter he wrote: "Edwina's question 'Was God born?' has filled me with delight. This, in my opinion, is the most profound theological question ever put. It suggests to me that this girl should end up either as the first female president of the Rationalists' Association or as the first female Primate of Australia."

The letters often enclose a gift accompanied by a typical comment:

"I am enclosing from both of us with our love a little cheque on my London account which I am optimistic enough to believe will be met."

He often expressed concern if he felt that he had not written often enough:

"This will be my last family letter before my return. I seem to have averaged about one a month, which is rather a poor performance. Yet ... my average may still be a little better than that of the apostle Paul, though the quality of the epistles should not be compared";

and in a later letter:

"It seems a long time since I wrote you a letter. You must put on my tombstone: 'He

was a neglectful but loving father.' In this way, you will at any rate have the last word."

So in the end what comes from these letters?

In her Introduction Heather reflects that perhaps the most remarkable outcome of her re-reading the letters

"has been a kind of re-acquaintance with my father: with his character, his personality, his achievements and his outlook on the world. I feel I know him much better than before. If this has been my experience, as someone who knew him as well as anyone did, I wonder how these letters will affect readers, whatever their political persuasion, who knew him only slightly or not at all. It is my hope that they will discover what he was really like, and will come away feeling that they have enjoyed doing so."

I know that that hope will be realised. Reading these letters has for me been an immensely interesting and enjoyable voyage of discovery about Sir Robert and I am confident that everyone who reads this book will feel the same.

But although this work is a valuable source of fascinating material about the life and times of Sir Robert Menzies, in the end we see that Heather

was right in her Introduction: above all these are letters to his daughter by Robert Menzies the man rather than the politician or historic figure. That is epitomised in the brief, poignant final letter in the book. It is dated 30 July 1975 and was written to Heather when she and Peter were in Manila:

"Darling Heather,

It is your birthday on Sunday, and I am sending, on behalf of your mother and myself, a little token gift.

It is only token because I made the great mistake in my life of not being a 'Pop Star' or a television personality. In either of those capacities I might have been able to do you proud.

However, you know that many hundreds of times more than currency, you have our enduring love.

Yours ever,  
Dad"

I regard it as a privilege to launch "Letters to My Daughter" by Robert Menzies and Heather Henderson.

*The Hon Sir Guy Green, AC, KBE, CVO*

"Letters to My Daughter"

Sir Robert Menzies and Heather Henderson

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