



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/JVON5553>

Lyndon Megarry, *Robert Philp and the Politics of Development*

Karen Fox

To cite this book review: Lyndon Megarry, *Robert Philp and the Politics of Development* by Karen Fox, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 3 (September 2023): 189-190, <https://doi.org/10.52230/WNSL9905>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Lyndon Megarry, *Robert Philp and the Politics of Development* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2022), 335pp. Paperback. A\$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-9226-6986-5.

Lyndon Megarry begins his fine new biography of Sir Robert Philp (1851–1922) by noting that, a century after Philp's death, he is best remembered for his role in co-founding the successful trading and shipping company Burns, Philp & Co. Yet Philp, a Scottish-born businessman who left school at the age of eleven and migrated to Australia with his family in 1862, was also premier of Queensland on two occasions, as well as holding various cabinet portfolios including secretary for mines, secretary for railways, and treasurer. His life story is significant not only to the history of Queensland, but also to understanding an era of developmental politics that has continued to have echoes in Australia into the twenty-first century.

Megarry is an expert on Queensland politics and history, particularly on the history and politics of northern development. His first book, *Northern Dreams: The Politics of Northern Development in Australia* (2018), was a masterful examination of the waxing and waning of dreams of development in northern Australia; it won the Chief Minister's Northern Territory History Book Award in 2019.

In his new book, Megarry turns to biography, narrating the life and career of the Ministerialist politician Robert Philp. Philp, he suggests, makes for an absorbing biographical study because, despite his 'well-earned reputation for geniality' (p. 1), he was also the focus of controversy during his time in parliament and afterward. As the book details, there were various reasons for this, including his advocacy for private railways, his role in the conscription debates in World War I, and his attitudes to the use of Pacific Island labourers in the State's sugar industry. A supporter of Federation, he nevertheless turned to the language of secession after the goal had been achieved, in response to the new Federal government's stance on the Pacific Island labour trade.

Indeed, the most fascinating chapter of the book for this reader was Chapter 7, which focuses on Philp's 'fruitless campaign' (p. 151) against the decision of (Sir) Edmund Barton's government to ban the use of Pacific Island labour in the sugar industry, and his rapid switch to seeming to support suggestions that Queensland should secede from the new Commonwealth. His 'sugar-coated spectacles' (p. 151) — a delightful turn of phrase — and his dismay at the realities of a new federal government that was able to override the States in at least some arenas led him to adopt a position that would ultimately prove damaging to his own authority and standing. In the end, Megarry contends, Philp was not the man for the times: he became premier at a moment when his focus on the development of primary industry was out of step with new pressures for electoral and industrial reform, and '[h]is inability to manage this...phenomenon' led to both his own 'decline as a political force' and the 'collapse' of his party (p. 234).

This argument is part of what makes this an illuminating biography. Arguably, it is more usual for biographers to focus their interest on someone who was the man (or woman) for their time. In this sense, Megarry's study is one of failure as much as of success, and this proves an enlightening lens on a political career as well as offering important insights into a particular era in Queensland politics. Biographically speaking, the book takes a targeted approach, focusing not only on Philp as parliamentarian and premier, but honing in on his 'political passions' (p. 63) of mining, railways, and sugar. While Parts One and Three deal more generally with Philp's entry into public life and the end of his public career, Part Two consists of four

chapters dedicated to these three ‘passions.’ If this is in part a function of the sources — for Megarry has clearly been hampered by a lack of sources in relation to Philp’s private life, Philp having destroyed much personal correspondence relating to his younger years — it is also a choice that allows Megarry to consider him as a ‘representative’ of a group of ‘pro-development politicians’ who were significant in the ‘formative years’ of the State (p. 5).

Robert Philp and the Politics of Development is deeply researched and meticulously footnoted, and Megarry’s approach is careful and insightful. Well written and enjoyable, this is a book well worth reading for anyone interested in the history of Queensland politics, or indeed Australian political and commercial history generally. As Frank Bongiorno notes in his foreword, ‘[t]he speculative, commercial and developmental understanding that [Philp] brought to his politics lived on well beyond his own career’ (p. xii). The continuing echoes of this understanding contribute to making this book a valuable contribution both to our knowledge of Queensland life and politics around the period of Federation and to our thinking about issues of development today.

Karen Fox, Australian National University