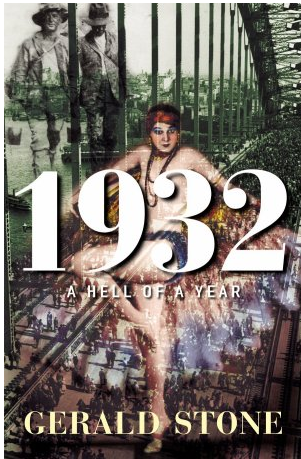


1932: A Hell of a Year by Gerald Stone. Pan Macmillan Australia: Melbourne, 2005. pp. xii + 429. AUD \$45 Hardback, ISBN 140 503677 X.



1932 was truly, as Gerald Stone tells us, ‘a helluva year’. Among other things, the New South Wales Premier and ‘People’s Champion’ Jack ‘the Big Fella’ Lang was dismissed from office by the British governor, Sir Philip Game; the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened; the home-grown fascists of the New Guard threatened the state; the Bodyline cricket tests commenced; and about a third of the workforce was unemployed. The author Gerald Stone is an American journalist who moved to Australia in 1962 and stayed on to make documentaries for ABCTV, produce the popular current affairs programme *60 Minutes* for Sydney’s Channel 9, and become editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin*. This book shows he has an unerring eye for a good newspaper story, even when it is over

seventy years old.

In Stone’s capable hands, the sepia tones of the 1930s get the *60 Minutes* treatment. Retouched into lurid technicolour and carefully edited, events and characters are brought to graphic tabloid life, with goodies and baddies, emotional highs and lows, conspiracies and scandals, titbits of all kinds, and heroism and human interest bursting out everywhere. Lang comes across as a misunderstood goody, struggling against the conservative Anglo-Australian ‘scrooges’ of the Lyons Federal government and Sydney’s Union Club and its inter-state clones in an heroic bid to protect his ‘children’, the mass of starving poor in New South Wales, from having to pay crippling interest to Shylockian British bondholders. Game is presented as a principled Englishman of the old school who, in Stone’s judgement, illegally removes Lang from office for himself issuing an apparently illegal decree. Stone says Game ought to have gone to the state’s chief justice for a ruling.

While the Lang-Lyons-Game confrontation is at the heart of the book, we are also told intriguing tales about *Field v. Field* Australia’s most expensive divorce case, two Sydney murders, the mysterious death of the super racehorse Phar Lap, the discrediting of the New Guard in a classic entrapment organised by Sydney’s burly Scottish police superintendent ‘Billy’ Mackay, the sensational disappearance of two German aviators in the Kimberleys and their remarkable rescue by local Aborigines, and the very shady American con-man ‘Judge’ Swindell (I kid you not!) who introduced tin hare coursing in Sydney. In addition, we ‘jump the rattler’ with the itinerant male unemployed, hear the first ABC radio broadcast, fly with Smithy, drink sly grog at the Fifty-Fifty Club in the Cross, ‘open’ the Sydney Harbour Bridge with Captain de Groot, and do much else besides. By the way, did you know that wags in pubs called the new Sydney bridge the Ned Kelly Bridge because of the tollbooths on either side?

As a scholar I have a few caveats. The occasional Americanism grates. To Australians in 1932, for example, robes were dressing gowns, veterans were returned soldiers, and the radio was the wireless. More important, Stone is clearly a present-day populist republican with little comprehension of the constitutional difficulties Game faced. The reserve powers Game possessed remain today and are not a mere colonial

relic, as Stone believes, but rather a permanent constitutional necessity. Any future state or federal president will need to be given them. As any successor might do now, all Game did was to read correctly the mood of the electorate and trigger an election. And in that election the people of New South Wales spoke unequivocally – and, mark you well, totally democratically – and turfed Lang and his government out with a massive 15 percent swing against them. Similarly, the Australian people democratically chose ‘Honest Joe’ Lyons to lead them federally. It was two men unfairly maligned by Stone, Lyons and the Australian representative in London S.M. Bruce, who brilliantly renegotiated the terms of the British loans and began Australia’s long haul out of Depression. Langite defaulting would have led to South American style economic chaos and very nearly did. As Stone’s narrative shows, but without drawing the obvious conclusion, in early- to mid- 1932, New South Wales was literally running out of cash and Lang was thinking of printing his own inevitably worthless currency. Finally, Stone recycles uncritically Lang’s highly emotive but spurious claim that he wished to default on repayments on war loans, which he inveighed had actually been paid in full in blood. In reality, these were expansive development loans, nearly all of them raised during the 1920s. The war debt for the First World War was incurred by the Federal Government and servicing it was Lyons’ responsibility not Lang’s.

Such awkward facts and angles should not be allowed to get too much in the way of a good story. Stone’s *1932* is a rip-roaring yarn well told and, as such, I commend it to you happily.

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