

# Ruxton: A Biography

Anne Blair

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

Anne Blair's account and assessment of Bruce Ruxton is a more critical and insightful book than her earlier study of Ted Serong. A difficult and enigmatic personality, Serong was deliberately more difficult to capture than Ruxton.

In this very readable book, Blair notes four major stages in Ruxton's career, encompassing life as a soldier, businessman, advocate for servicemen and women, and finally social and political gadfly. In each period Ruxton projected his particular personality, values and attitudes onto the people and problems involved. Although he became more experienced and adept in working with people of considerable sophistication and power, Ruxton's successes and failures in life were built on a limited education, use of the moral high ground of the deserving underdog, networking skills, and the basic egalitarian attitudes of the Australian private soldier. Blair, however, shows that these qualities had to make room for Ruxton's growing authoritarianism, snobbery and taste for the purple. So what evolved and what remained?

Blair shows that Ruxton developed a range of manly sporting activities as a teenager and adopted his father's interest as a collector and trader in memorabilia. He had the good fortune to attend Melbourne High School, a school that has produced outstanding professional and civic leaders.

The Ruxton persona was largely formed by his eighteenth birthday, soon after which he joined the Second AIF. From February 1944 until December 1948, Private Ruxton served in the 2/25th Battalion, 25th Brigade of the Seventh Division. This included training in Victoria and Queensland, fifty days as a rifleman in Borneo, and as cook in Japan with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force.

Military life provided a number of shocks to his comfort, social life, and his opportunities to do things his way. He suffered military discipline on several occasions and was demoted from lance corporal. His personal accounts of service as a private soldier were reworked later to enable him to claim he knew the real needs and attitudes of the ordinary digger.

As a soldier he used every opportunity to collect memorabilia, and to collect bits of military wisdom, with which he reinforced his basic views on life and people. The most dramatic event in his service, in Borneo, was the discovery of a massacre of some 128 local men,

women and children murdered by the Japanese. The massacre was a brutal experience of war that he never forgot. The war over, Ruxton was able to spend some time running a lighthouse, which enabled him to readjust to civil life.

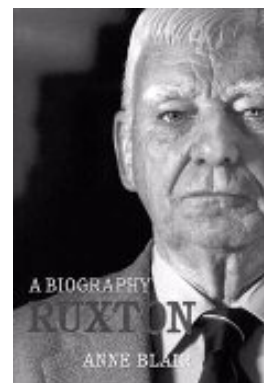
While 'doing the world trip' he became fascinated with the details of his Irish forebears' achievements. Returning to Melbourne, he was soon married and a partner in his father's stationery business. He was a principal in General Stationers for many years, where he used networking and sales skills to bring in new business but never took up the challenge of building the business.

The businessman stage faded as Ruxton threw himself into membership of sporting clubs and the RSL. He joined the Beaumaris RSL sub-branch in 1956, was president four years later and gradually shifted the focus of his activities to unpaid work for the RSL. Blair shows that his interest in collecting brought Ruxton his initial recognition as a national figure. In a campaign, to purchase the Victoria Cross and other medals of Leonard Keysor, he displayed skill in wheeling and dealing with many groups and authority figures to raise money. The campaign was a success, however, it revealed Ruxton's impatient nature; his enthusiasm was inclined to sweep him beyond his mandate.

Ruxton's career in the RSL began with unpaid work on behalf of members experiencing difficulties with government departments and with those who had difficulty with the paperwork required. Since the end of World War I, Australian veterans have received considerable protection and benefits in a long sequence of legislation and court rulings.

The most important court ruling was that it was the Repatriation Department's responsibility to show why someone was not entitled to a pension or benefit, rather than the onus being on the applicant to prove they were entitled. Many argue there were thousands of cases that needed support, however, the legal basis for benefits, including for medical conditions that developed long after actual military service, was set in law. This powerful boon was not restricted until 1986.

Ruxton's contribution via the RSL was twofold. He was, as Blair relates in a most enjoyable way, the champion of RSL members. Ruxton 'the personality' was always prepared to travel to any RSL club that might invite him. His message was as simple as it was effective. The RSL was there for fellowship and enjoyment. The RSL stood for the local community, urban or rural, large or small. The RSL was an important and respected organisation, of which it was a privilege to be a member. In modern parlance, Ruxton established and maintained the brand name of the RSL.



The second role of the RSL, that Ruxton increasingly personified, was that of being the 'Mr Fix It'. As Ruxton accumulated power, observers noted, he exhibited a more domineering and autocratic style. He justified this as necessary in the endless battle in trying to cut the best deal with government departments. Ruxton poured vast amounts of time and energy into fighting the fights that his own military service might not have offered. He and RSL members, however, were faithfully served by a large number of staff who developed great expertise in perusing every possible type of claim. Blair notes that while the 'Boss' gave a vast energy sixteen to eighteen hours a day to the cause, he could be brutal whenever displeased.

The gadfly Ruxton excites the most powerful public responses. He was too easily tempted to supply the media with his views on a huge range of social, political and defence-related issues. Ruxton claimed that he was an unchanged authentic voice of the ordinary Australian. In part, this was always true, but he failed to understand

that the media's 'Mr dial-me-a-quote' gadfly character too often did little good for the interests of ex-servicemen and women.

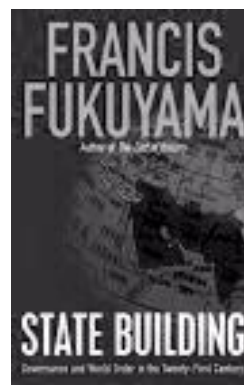
He deluded himself into believing that what he thought on any issue was the mandated voice of the members of the RSL. His comments on broader defence matters rarely, if ever, promoted the real needs of the ADF. Ruxton too often provided only a little comic relief in debates on serious matters, such as the size of the armed forces, the role of women in the defence force and Australia's relations with countries across the region. A more thoughtful and better-informed RSL leader might have given powerful support to the critique of defence policy. As an advocate for benefits, Ruxton was as Kennett noted 'a little man with a very big heart and a very big mouth ... he has used both very effectively'. Blair's account provides a detailed, warts and all account of Bruce Ruxton. ♦

*Anne Blair, 'Ruxton: A Biography', Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2004, paperback, 208pp., RRP \$29.95.*

## State-Building Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century

**Francis Fukuyama**

**Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy**



Francis Fukuyama is one of the United States' original and creative thinkers. The excellence of his thought, in part, is attested by the fact that his work provokes storms of criticism from both the political left and right.

State-building involves, Fukuyama stresses, 'the creation of new government institutions and the strengthening of existing ones'. This activity is the most important challenge facing the world, '... because weak or failed states are the source of many of the world's most serious problems, from poverty to AIDS, to drugs to terrorism'.

The seriousness of these issues is highlighted every day by the media. Television dramatically reveals the horror of war, poverty, terror and crime. Even the media's deliberate use of the shocking to win ratings cannot hide the division of the world into a zone of wealth, civil, peaceful and well-governed states, and a zone in which people do not enjoy decent standards of living, freedom or government.

*State Building* is, in my view, a very important book, which has crucial messages for the complex problems

we face across the globe. Some will not see Fukuyama's ideas, as adequate solutions; however, he has given focus to a set of critical issues and any answers that work more effectively need to be tried as a matter of urgency.

The book is divided into a framework of the complexity of 'stateness'; a discussion of the causes of state weakness and the difficulties of solving this problem; and a discussion of the international dimensions of state weakness. In each part, Fukuyama highlights things that can be done to solve the problem of state weakness and failure.

Fukuyama notes the World Bank's assessment that over half the world's nations are in crisis. Their social, political and economic systems range from critically failed to faltering and problem-wracked. The failed states are unable, or deliberately fail, to provide an acceptable standard of existence for their people. By contrast, the countries to which the poor and the persecuted seek to flee are those based on liberal democratic governments with largely free and open capitalist economic systems.

Australia and New Zealand benefited enormously