

'Faithful Representations': 100 years of the Historic Memorials Collection

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December 2011 marks the centenary of the first national art collection established by the Commonwealth of Australia – the Historic Memorials Collection (HMC). The establishment of this collection in 1911 also set in place the foundations for other important collecting institutions – such as the National Gallery of Australia, and the National Portrait Gallery.

Today I intend to outline a brief history of the establishment of the collection, and then examine a selection of portraits from the collection, including some that are rarely seen publicly, and are currently being exhibited here at Parliament House to celebrate this centenary.

The story of the HMC is also a story about the intersection of art and politics and the importance of this connection was never more evident than in the period leading up to the establishment of the collection in 1911. 100 years ago Australia was still very much a new nation, and to properly understand the origins of the HMC, we need to look back on the preceding decades, particularly the period leading up to Federation in 1901.

The Federation movement was marked by dissent and the competing priorities and interests of the separate colonies, but had arisen out of a growing sense of idealised national identity in the late 19th century. One of its key proponents, the future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, said that federation “must always appear to have been secured by a series of miracles”.ⁱ

Australian constitutional historian, Helen Irving, has written convincingly about how the people of the states first had to **imagine** the idea of a nation called Australia, before that nation could existⁱⁱ. That process of imagining the country into existence occurred at a number of levels.

The drafters of the Australian Constitution – lawyers and politicians - built support for their cause on a sense of common identity that was very much about promoting allegiance to a vision of a dominant, white, British culture; and convincing their constituents that in uniting the colonies, the freedom and economic security of the new nation would be assured. With the benefit of hindsight we can say they seem largely to have gotten it right - however, as we know, politicians promising a brighter future will not necessarily automatically win public support.

I want to quickly divert here to reflect on two names that keep recurring when examining the origins of the HMC – on the political side, Alfred Deakin – and on the artistic side, Tom Roberts. The possible points of connections between these two men, and to a lesser extent some of the other major players who were their colleagues in art and politics during this period are intriguing. On the surface, Roberts and Deakin appear to have quite a lot in common. Deakin was born in 1856 in

Collingwood, Melbourne. Roberts was also born in 1856, in Dorset England, and came to live in Collingwood, Melbourne at age 13. Both men liked to read and write, and moved in literary and artistic circles. Deakin also became engaged with spiritualism and philosophy. Both became leaders in their fields – acting as teachers and mentors to others in their circle, and worked hard to promote causes that they passionately believed in.

Deakin's biographer J.A. La Nauze suggests that Roberts and Deakin probably first met in 1901ⁱⁱⁱ, while Roberts was working on his Big Picture (I will talk more about that painting later) – but I find it tempting to speculate that they could have met earlier. Melbourne was certainly a much smaller place then that it is now. I haven't found any historical references suggesting that they met often, but they definitely corresponded regularly, over a period of more than 10 years. La Nauze notes that their letters indicate a friendly informality, and suggest that they each regarded the other as an intellectual peer. By far the most striking thing that they shared in common was an enthusiasm for documenting and reporting the characters and events of their time. Deakin wrote extensively throughout his life keeping diaries and notebooks, and his writings about the Federation movement, including character studies of many of the leading figures of that time, provide insight into the processes that were at work. Roberts, through his painting, also attempted to capture some of the history of the evolution of the nation, and his portrait character studies similarly attempted to capture a record of 'types'.^{iv} (e.g. his *Church, State and Law* triptych).

But returning again to Helen Irving's theme of imagining the nation – the efforts of the federationists in capturing the public imagination were substantially assisted by the creative and sporting elements of society. Irving writes about the flowering of distinctively nationalist literature, poetry and music, as well as a distinctive sporting culture. Visual arts also played a vital role – and none more so than the members of what we now know as the Heidelberg group of artists (also known as the Australian Impressionists).

Irving notes that:

“the movements for political and cultural nationalism were inevitably in advance of popular demand. They were led at the start by a small elite circle whose quest was to forge a distinctive Australian national character out of diffuse British references and leanings^v”

Irving doesn't name the members of this elite circle – but I am reasonably confident she might include Alfred Deakin and Tom Roberts as part of their number.

In 1894, Roberts' colleague, the artist Arthur Streeton, wrote in a Federalist journal *Commonwealth* that it seemed “as though Federation were unconsciously begun by the artists and national galleries”^{vi}.

Certainly, he and his peers articulated a new representation of Australian landscape and people through some of their key works of the 1880s and 1890s. While undoubtedly influenced by European art trends in impressionism, theirs was a different kind of work. Through their conscious depiction of harsh, hot sunlight,

bleached colours, and uniquely sparse and spindly Australian vegetation, they purposefully set out to create a new, uniquely Australian style of art.

We can see this exemplified in paintings such as *Near Heidelberg*, painted by Arthur Streeton in 1890, and Charles Conder's *Summer Idyll* of 1889.

Likewise, they celebrated the value of a characteristically Australian form of human endeavour, and helped mythologise the notion of the Australian bush character, shaped by the hardships that faced those who settled in it - for example, *Down on his Luck* by McCubbin in 1889, and *A Break away* painted by Roberts in 1891.

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Eventually, the grand vision of the federal movement was realised, and the new nation of Australia came into existence on 1 January 1901 in Centennial Park, Sydney, amid great ceremony and celebration.

The enthusiasm of the January celebrations in Sydney, were echoed in Melbourne in May, when the first Parliament was opened by the Duke of Cornwall and York. Tom Roberts captured this moment in his epic history painting, colloquially known as the "Big Picture", which hangs just outside this room where I am speaking today. The *Big Picture* is **not** formally part of the HMC; however, I believe that this painting, and its creator Tom Roberts, are such critical components of the story of establishment of the HMC, that they deserve special mention.

The painting was commissioned by a group of Melbourne businessmen who intended it as a gift to the new king, Edward VII. Roberts was not the first artist commissioned – but when the first choice, J C Waites backed out, Roberts stepped in. Roberts had to undertake a minimum of 250 individual portraits (eventually it amounted to 269 named individuals). It took him over 2 years to complete the work, required extensive travel in Australia and England, and resulted in a monumental canvas - at just over 5 metres by 3 metres.

He completed the painting in 1904, whereupon it was presented to the King, and it remained in England, in St James Palace, until 1958. The painting was eventually returned to Australia following persistent lobbying from a number of parliamentary figures, and is now on permanent loan to the Australian Parliament from the Royal Collection.

The painting has received mixed reviews over time – it certainly lacks the vitality and liveliness that is so engaging in some of Roberts' individual portraits. It is also often cited as the catalyst for Roberts entering a dark period in his artistic career. Roberts himself wrote in letters to his friends about the effort it cost him to complete the work, however he equally regarded it as something of a personal mission to record what he saw as a momentous occasion. Personally, I think it has been unfairly judged. True, it is a darker and more sombre work than most of Roberts' other paintings, but he was accurately depicting the state of mourning of the guests attending the function. Its scale, and the volume of detail it contains, are such that it

requires close study to be properly appreciated. Certainly it demonstrates technical mastery in maintaining accurate proportion, scale and perspective across such a vast group of figures.

Interestingly, both Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin were invited guests at the opening event – possibly in recognition of their role in shaping the public imagination of the new nation – probably an indication of their continuing association with politics, and their prominence in Melbourne society as artists.

Moving forward – politicians got on with the business of governing, and the leading artists of the day attempted to consolidate their successes and pursue new artistic fields. Many of Australia's leading artists headed to Europe to try their fortune, with varying degrees of success.

In the decade from 1901 to 1911 Australia had five different Prime Ministers (with Alfred Deakin serving three separate terms of office and Andrew Fisher serving two terms). Parliament passed the Immigration Restriction Act, Australian troops were sent to the Boer War, the High Court was established, the world's first feature film *The Kelly Gang* was made, and the US Navy's 'Great White Fleet' visited Australia.

Throughout that decade, the topic of appropriate recognition of the people and events associated with formation of the Commonwealth was periodically discussed in the new Parliament.

One of the primary advocates for some form of commemoration was artist Tom Roberts. Self-interest may have been part of his motivation, but no doubt, his sincere belief in the importance of creating records for posterity, as demonstrated by his effort in completing the *Big Picture*, was also a factor.

Roberts wrote to Alfred Deakin in March 1910, "let me ask you to consider the importance of acting early... and let these records be painted... to give faithful representations of the first leaders of the Commonwealth... it disturbs me to think that most of you are likely to go on till the inevitable comes, and leave nothing that will give the future anything that will show what you all were as men to look at.." ^{vii}.

Deakin subsequently sent a copy of Roberts' letter to Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, who told the Parliament in October 1911 that "the government hopes to preserve... likenesses of the prominent statesmen of Australia." ^{viii} Two months later the Historic Memorials Committee was established as a "committee of consultation and advice in reference to the expenditure of votes for the Historic Memorials of Representative Men" ^{ix}, and the government allocated 500 pounds to commence this work.

I should comment here on the very specific gender reference – it is accurate, in that the HMC is very much a collection about men. Almost all the portrait subjects are male, and almost all the artists commissioned to complete portraits have been male.

The committee consisted of the Prime Minister (as chair) as well as the President of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Vice President of the Executive Council, Leader of the Opposition, and the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate. (The makeup of the committee is still the same in 2011). One of their early actions

was to agree on a list of eminent men whose portraits should be painted, with the first portrait to be that of Sir Henry Parkes, who had died before the Constitution took effect. They also recognised a need for specialist expertise, and quickly established the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (CAAB), to provide advice on the selection of suitable artists and to assess the quality of completed portraits.

The establishment of the committee and collection attracted considerable public attention and was not without controversy.

The Sydney Morning Herald, in September 1909 [Deakin was Prime Minister at that time, and Fisher was Leader of the Opposition] reported that:

“ Mr Deakin is to be congratulated on his decision ... to make some provision for a gallery of national portraits ... The form of words used by the Prime Minister in announcing this step, however, suggests a doubt as to whether he has in mind memorials to other than the political leaders of the Federal movement...”^x.

In August 1912, the Brisbane Courier took up a similar argument (by now it was Fisher’s turn again to be PM):

“ Some men are born to greatness; others have it thrust upon them, and others thrust it upon themselves. The Historic Memorials Committee of which the federal Prime Minister is chairman, has approved of a report of an art advisory board in connection with the perpetuation of the memories of Australia’s great men... Some of the names in the list are quite correctly included, but quite a number have no claim yet to be classed with the Immortals... Many of the great names are ignored. In vain one looks for something to suggest remembrance of great explorers, poets, or authors. They are ignored so that the politicians, big and little may be glorified.”^{xi} “

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At this point, I will shift from considering the general history of the HMC, to examine a selection of portraits from the collection.

First, we’ll look at the portrait of Alfred Deakin by Frederick McCubbin. Perhaps the most surprising thing about this portrait is that it was not painted by Tom Roberts, given their apparent friendship, and shared idealism. Roberts would seem to have been the obvious choice for the commission – but he was by then still living in England, and there had been some controversy about the HMC using artists based in England, rather than granting commissions to artists living in Australia.

The Australian Dictionary of Biography entry for Deakin describes him as a memoirist, barrister, federationist, irrigationist, journalist, newspaper editor, land speculator, politician, and spiritualist^{xii}. He was known as a skilled orator and is often credited for helping popularise the federation cause. Deakin took a great interest in promoting arts and literature. He became Australia’s second Prime Minister in 1903, and served again as PM twice more. However, his political career apparently took a heavy toll, and affected his health. By the time this portrait was painted, he was unwell, and possibly suffering the early stages of dementia. He died in 1919.

McCubbin was an Australian born artist (also of Melbourne origin) who worked closely with Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder in the 1880s and 1890s. In the early 1900s he was at the height of his artistic powers, and excelled as a landscape painter, but also painted figures. The portrait of Deakin is McCubbin's only inclusion in the HMC, and is currently on display at the National Portrait Gallery, in an exhibition celebrating the centenary, with three other early HMC portraits - including the portrait of Andrew Fisher by Emanuel Phillips Fox, Henry Parkes by Julian Ashton, and the remarkable portrait of King Edward VII by George Lambert. I would encourage you all to take time to look at these portraits while they are there.

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Time does not allow a comprehensive review of the collection, so I will instead focus on some of the more significant portrait artists, and some of the 'stand-out' portraits in the collection.

Sir William Dargie (1912 – 2003) is an outstanding figure in Australian portraiture with a career that started in the 1930s and continued through most of the 20th century. Dargie is perhaps best known for his portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, painted in 1954. The painting was not commissioned by the Commonwealth, but was presented as a gift for the Historic Memorials Collection. Dargie won the Archibald Prize eight times between 1941 and 1956, and was an official war artist during World War II. Dargie painted in a style known as 'tonal realism' and was substantially influenced by Max Meldrum, and A.D Colquhoun (both artists also represented in the HMC). He also played an important role in art administration and education, serving on many boards and councils. Most notably, he served as a long term member (and eventually chair) of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (which advised the HMC) during the 1950s and 60s, when it played an important role in acquiring artworks for the national collection (most now held in the National Gallery collection).

In total, Dargie completed eleven portraits for the Historic Memorials Collection (a number that seems unlikely to ever be eclipsed). His HMC subjects include Prime Ministers Arthur Fadden and John McEwen, Dame Enid Lyons, and Governors-General Sir William Slim and Lord Casey, as well as the famous, and much loved painting of Queen Elizabeth II.

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Bryan Westwood (1930 – 2000) has eight portraits in the HMC, and was twice a winner of the Archibald Prize. He was largely self-taught, and did not start painting until he was well into his 30s. He travelled extensively, and spent periods living in Europe and America. His work is usually described as 'photo-realist' and he painted very finely detailed, meticulously realistic portraits. In teaching himself how to paint, he studied the work of 'old masters', particularly Velazquez. One of the things I find particularly engaging about Westwood's portraits, is that he was one of the first HMC portraitists to encompass a more personal dimension to the portraits – sometimes by including objects with specific personal associations, or by posing his subjects in more reflective and individual ways. See for example his beautifully painted portrait of Sir

Magnus Cormack - former President of the Senate, painted in 1973, and Sir Anthony Mason, former Chief Justice, painted in 1992.

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Robert Hannaford (born 1944) has completed nine commissions for the HMC, including a major work in 2001, depicting the centenary sitting of Parliament in the Melbourne Exhibition Building – an homage to Tom Roberts', and displayed alongside the *Big Picture*, here in Parliament House. Hannaford's HMC portraits include Prime Minister Paul Keating, painted in 1997, and Governor-General, Sir William Deane, painted in 2001. Unlike most other recent HMC portrait artists, Hannaford paints primarily from life, usually requiring his subjects to make themselves available for a week or more for portrait sittings – no easy feat if they are still in office.

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HMC portraits have occasionally been entered in the Archibald Prize, and at least three times have been winners. These three portraits, representing very different periods, and different styles of portraiture are: Max Meldrum's 1939 winning portrait of Speaker George Bell; Joshua Smith's 1944 winning portrait of Speaker John Rosevear, and Clifton Pugh's 1972 winning portrait of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. The Whitlam portrait was not commissioned for the HMC, but purchased at the suggestion of Mr Whitlam himself. Interestingly, it is probably one of the least realist portraits in the collection.

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As mentioned previously, women are very much in the minority in the HMC, both as subjects and artists. However, they do appear from time to time. The first two portraits depicting women were William Dargie's portrait of Dame Enid Lyons from 1951, and Archie Colquhoun's portrait of Dame Dorothy Tangney from 1946, commemorating their respective status as the first woman Member, and the first woman Senator in the Australian Parliament. Some of the significant women artists represented in the collection include Judy Cassab, who painted portraits of Speaker James Cope in 1973, and Chief Justice Sir Harry Gibbs in 1992. June Mendoza painted a distinctively informal portrait of Prime Minister John Gorton in 1971, and Speaker Billy Snedden in 1984. Mendoza also painted the first sitting of the House of Representatives in this building, in 1988 (completed in 1990).

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After the early flush of activity in the period between 1912 and 1920, two world wars and the Great Depression intervened and limited the capacity of the Historic Memorials Committee to meet regularly. Constrained finances also affected the rate at which new portraits were commissioned. Despite this, the Collection continued to grow, with the primary focus remaining largely on political figures. Portraits of all Governors-General, Chief Justices of the High Court, Prime Ministers, and Presiding Officers of the Parliament have been acquired. In addition to this core group, portraits of other important figures have occasionally been added, such as monarchs, early explorers, and literary figures, and paintings depicting special events, such as the

opening of Parliament in Canberra in 1927, and the opening of the new Parliament House in 1988.

Portraits have also been commissioned or purchased of individuals who in some manner represent a parliamentary "first" such as the first women (already mentioned - Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney), as well as first Indigenous Australian elected to Parliament, Neville Bonner, whose portrait was painted in 1979 by Wes Walters.

Today, the Historic Memorials Collection includes almost 250 artworks. The majority are portraits, by eminent Australian artists – in addition to names I have already listed, the HMC includes works by Julian Ashton, George Lambert, John Longstaff, William McInnes, and Ivor Hele.. Other significant artists commissioned more recently include Albert Tucker, Sam Fullbrook, Bill Leak, Peter Churcher, Paul Newton, Jiawei Shen, and Rick Amor. Male artists and male subjects are still dominant but with a female Prime Minister and a female Governor-General currently in office, the numbers of women represented in the collection will soon be boosted.

As well as recording Australia's political history, the Collection also reveals changes in the history of portraiture in Australia. As we have seen, the earlier portraits were often sombre in tone and reflected the dignity of the office held by the sitter, borrowing heavily from formal European portraiture. Over time, portraits have tended to become less formal and capture more of the personality of the sitter, sometimes including objects with personal associations, as well as the regalia of office.

The Historic Memorials Collection is a valuable and continuing record of the history of politics and portraiture in Australia. Its centenary provides an opportunity to reflect on the way individual political leaders are portrayed, and how they are viewed by the broader community that the Parliament represents. I hope you can all find time to view some of the portraits in the collection – a large number can be seen here at Parliament House, as well as at Old Parliament House, the High Court, and the National Portrait Gallery.

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- Katrina Rumley – the first curator of the Parliament House Art Collection, for her unpublished notes on the history of Tom Roberts' Big Picture.

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Alfred Deakin writing on 14 September 1900 in *The Federal Story* (1900). Cited in *Makers of Miracles*, edited by David Headon and John Williams: Melbourne University Press, 2000.
- ⁱⁱ Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia's Constitution*. Cambridge University Press, 1997 – see particularly Chapter 2.
- ⁱⁱⁱ J.A La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, 1979.
- ^{iv} Further analysis of Roberts' portrait series of Australian types can be found in: Humphrey McQueen, *Tom Roberts – Panel Portraits*, an undated article online at http://home.alphalink.com.au/~loge27/roberts/roberts_panels.htm
- ^v Irving, p.35
- ^{vi} Arthur Streeton, quoted by Helen Irving, p.34
- ^{vii} Tom Roberts letter to Alfred Deakin, National Archives of Australia (NAA) file: A2, 1912/2035
- ^{viii} Fisher – addressing the Parliament, 5 October 1911, Parliamentary Papers: 1911
- ^{ix} Federal Executive Council minute paper – NAA file: A1573/1, 1911 AG's vol 1 (PT)
- ^x Sydney Morning Herald, 4 September 1909 – retrieved from the National Library of Australia "Trove" website: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>
- ^{xi} Brisbane Courier, 20 August 1912 - retrieved from National Library of Australia "Trove" website: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>
- ^{xii} R Norris, entry for *Alfred Deakin* in Australian Dictionary of Biography online, Australian National University - <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/deakin-alfred-5927/text10099>.

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Various contributors; Parliament House Art Collection and Historic Memorials Collection catalogue records.