Politics and painting: Prime Minister Bruce and First World War official war art

Margaret Hutchison

Introduction
Official war art has helped shape a memory of the First World War in Australia for almost a century. Indeed, the commission and display of a deliberately created visual record of the war under the official war art schemes was crucial in constructing and consolidating a dominant national narrative of the war. Taking, as a case study, the unusual circumstances of Charles Bryant’s painting of the HMAS ‘Australia’ on the way to her doom (1924) my research at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre focused on the involvement of the Bruce Government in the collection of official war art from 1923-29.

Project overview
I began my time at the Centre by researching the role of the Hughes Government in the collection of official war art. However, I soon discovered that there was little documentation relating to Hughes’ direct involvement in the war art scheme. Instead, I uncovered interesting material at the Australian War Memorial, National Archives of Australia and National Library of Australia relating to an incident involving Prime Minister Bruce and his government in the collection of official war art. This incident involved the rejection of Charles Bryant’s painting, the HMAS ‘Australia’ on the way to her doom, by the Australian War Memorial’s Art Committee in 1924 and the subsequent purchase and donation to the Memorial of this painting by Prime Minister Bruce four years later in 1928.

Australian Prime Ministers Centre
In line with the aims of the Prime Ministers Centre, which promotes an emphasis on the lives and achievements of Australia’s Prime Ministers, my research focused on the role of Prime Minister Bruce and his government in acquiring and donating Bryant’s HMAS ‘Australia’ to the Australian War Memorial. As such, my findings provide new insight into the role of the Bruce Government in the commemoration and celebration of the First World War. In particular, the incident highlights several issues relating to the construction of a dominant narrative of the war in Australia. Indeed, the circumstances surrounding Bryant’s painting are significant as they are indicative of the declining influence of the Bruce Government over the commemoration of the war during the interwar period; a decline matched by the increasing agency of the Memorial in the display of official war relics and records.

The most important issue for my research is the evident control over the selection and display of the official war art which the Memorial showed in its strong reaction against this gift from the Prime Minister. Indeed, the Memorial Art Committee’s conclusion that Bryant’s painting did not come within the Memorial’s scope and the Committee’s concern that the official war art collection would become politically influenced by artists gaining the Government’s support, suggests that the Memorial increasingly saw itself as the arbiter of the nation’s war memory during the interwar period.

Sources
The Australian Prime Ministers Centre aims to work with other research institutions to support and facilitate access to documents relevant to the study of Australia’s Prime Ministers. Subsequently, over the period of my research at the Centre I examined a range of documents held at the various research institutions in Canberra. This material provided important insights into the complexities of constructing a national memory through the official war art schemes and the individuals involved in shaping a dominant national narrative of Australia’s part in the First World War. In particular, drawing on such a wide range of records was invaluable for my
research and afforded me a deeper understanding of the interaction between the Bruce Government and the Memorial.

In the course of my research I used the Australian Prime Ministers Centre’s extensive collection of Hansard and Parliamentary Papers. I also consulted the Centre’s many political biographies on individuals in the Hughes and Bruce Governments which were crucial for my research into interwar governments in Australia. The archives of the Australian War Memorial held the majority of the primary material for my research, which included important letters and official documents relating to Bryant’s painting and the Memorial’s reaction to Prime Minister Bruce’s donation of it. I also consulted significant documents held at the National Archives of Australia, such as Cabinet records, official correspondence and personal papers relating to Bruce’s period in office. In addition, the Manuscript Room at the National Library of Australia had useful information on Hughes and Bruce and the Library’s collection of newspapers proved useful for an understanding of the individuals involved in the acquisition of official war art.

**Outcomes**
The research I conducted into the Bruce Government’s involvement in the acquisition of Bryant’s painting during the six weeks of the Australian Prime Ministers Centre Summer Scholarship will provide a case study for my thesis. Furthermore, this incident is fundamental for my wider research on the art scheme as it presents a unique example of the exchange between the Government and the Memorial regarding First World War official art. In addition, I intend to write an academic article based on my research during the six weeks at the Centre which I aim to publish in an Australian history journal.

**Biography**
Margaret Hutchison is a second year PhD student in the School of History at The Australian National University. She has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Adelaide in Classics and History as well as an Honours Degree in History for which she wrote a thesis on the Australian official war art scheme during the First World War. Her doctoral thesis explores the role of First World War official art schemes in the construction of national memory in Australia and Canada from 1914–1939.

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