

# Canvassing Politics

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## ***Tom Roberts and the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament.***

When Tom Roberts was present with paints and easel at the opening of the Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne on 9 May 1901, his vantage point to view the grand occasion was optimal, the spot having been carefully selected and planned in advance by Roberts. Curiously though, Roberts was not present in an official capacity, as the artist commemorating the ceremony. It is a common misconception that Roberts' painting *The Opening of the Commonwealth Parliament* (also commonly known as 'The Big Picture'), commenced some months after the actual event, was done as an official commission.<sup>1</sup> Any 'official' role Roberts did have in commemorating the event — and this label is contentious, as will be seen below — only started some weeks after the ceremony. Roberts did, however, produce a painting of the actual occasion, at his own instigation. This painting is rather impressionistic relative to Roberts' *oeuvre*, but is in more remarkable contrast to the stilted, disjointed mass portraiture of the later *The Opening of the Commonwealth Parliament*. Though the earlier painting, with its undistinguished provenance,<sup>2</sup> is sometimes called 'Sketch for the Opening of the Commonwealth Parliament', it is by no means clear that Roberts painted it as merely a sketch.

The idea of the later painting, in composition quite similar to the 'Sketch' but stylistically utterly different, was only first raised on 29 May 1901 when Roberts received a commission from the Australian Art Association Pty Ltd. The Association was a Melbourne group of entrepreneurs, seemingly with firm patriotic leanings. The precise details of Roberts' commission were not finalised until September 1901,<sup>3</sup> when Roberts commenced two years' work on the enormous and intricate painting.

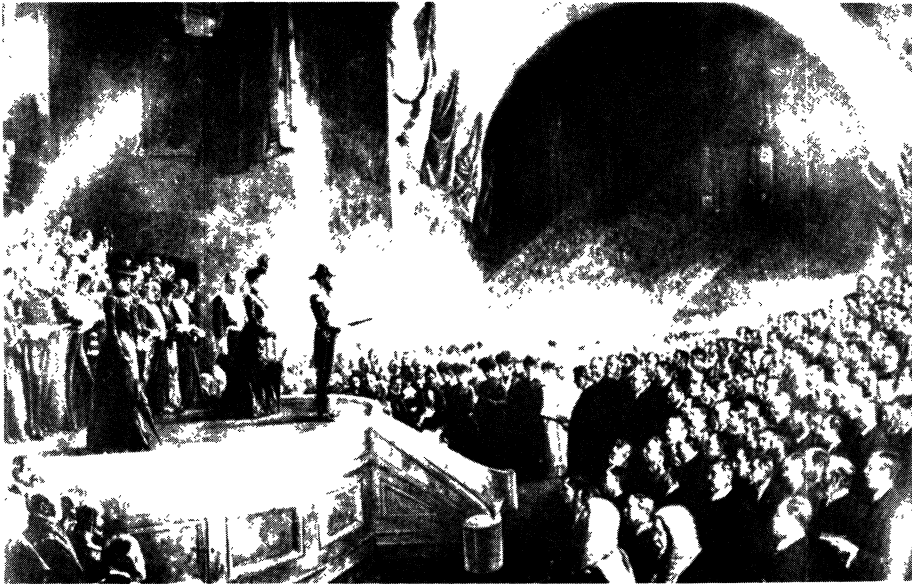
### **Did the work need Tom Roberts or did Tom Roberts need the work?**

In deciding to whom the commission would be offered, the Australian Art Association Pty Ltd was obviously looking for an artist of considerable standing. Although Roberts was not the Association's first choice, he would seem to have been an inspired choice. Roberts was in 1901 an established artist in mid-career, but more importantly he was, or at least was to become, well known and well liked by the public for his patriotic and quintessentially Australian bush scenes such as *Shearing the Rams* (1890).

However, there are some important unresolved doubts as to the hue (radical or conservative; pro- or anti-Federation) of Roberts' nationalism at the time. Haese suggests Roberts was an early social realist whose work had later (by the 1920s) been appropriated, so coming to signify a conservative 'sustaining imagery'.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there is evidence that Roberts in 1895 had eagerly anticipated Federation<sup>5</sup> and that he would have been seen in the 1890s as something of a snob.<sup>6</sup> The 1890s was a time of great social upheaval in Australia, but Roberts was apparently a fence sitter during this period. *Shearing the Rams* contains no hint of the impending Queensland shearers' strike the

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'Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia', 1901-3

following year (and the savage response by the State), when the strikers raised the Eureka flag and burnt an effigy of the Queensland Premier, former Marxist radical and founding father of Federation, Samuel Griffith. It is the latent ambiguity in Roberts' political make-up that was to finally, and disastrously, come to the surface in 'The Big Picture'.

It is a reasonable inference that Roberts' commission from the Australian Art Association Pty Ltd was a one-sided bargain, if not a type of Faustian pact. While the widely held view is that Roberts gave the Association his considerable prowess and reputation as an artist in return for its patronage, it is arguable that the Association — unusually — saw itself as having a mission of guiding Roberts' career, and so implicitly as also guiding Roberts' painterly *oeuvre*. As one of the promoters of the Association wrote, assessing the Association's protégé:

Roberts has been brought closely into touch with the Royal Family and the whole of the representative men of Australia and foreign countries. Under these circumstances, it is doubtful that he will ever have to look back, and good luck to him.<sup>7</sup>

Thus it could be said that it was Roberts himself — in terms of his career direction — rather than the actual painting that was to be the ultimate handiwork of the Association's project. Supporting evidence for this, in terms of Roberts' susceptibility to becoming 'patronised' — as opposed to taking up a commission on a commercial, arms length, basis — comes from material detailing Roberts' poverty at the time of the commission.<sup>8</sup>

### The political and artistic motives of the Association

*'Whereas the people . . . have agreed to unite . . .'*

Opening words of the Australian Constitution (1900)

As one commentator on the draft Constitution noted in 1898, the document starts with a false statement.<sup>9</sup> Only franchised *electors* had had any say in the referenda held to approve Federation, and in fact the majority of those eligible to vote had declined to do so. The 'politically passive or absent citizenry'<sup>10</sup> of the period thus left a lacuna for their consent to Federation to be deemed. However, the bare deeming of the people's consent in the Constitution itself was obviously going to be insufficient to rewrite the historical facts to the contrary. The legitimacy of the state needed bolstering, preferably from the outside. Thus a conservative academic wrote in 1903, in the first major text on the Constitution that: '[t]he Federation of Australia was a popular act, an expression of

the free will of the people of every part of it'.<sup>11</sup> A similar bolstering role was arguably played out by the Australian Art Association, a private corporate body, whose role in the commissioning of 'The Big Picture' was far from being simply naively jingoistic. Specifically, the Association used its leverage over Roberts to rewrite Roberts' *oeuvre*, and so



'Sketch for the painting of Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1901'

made a formerly highly contentious, conservative type of nationalism an expression of the 'popular'. 'The Big Picture' was thus part of a much bigger picture: it unequivocally marked the conservative appropriation of Roberts as part of a 'sustaining imagery' and at the same time ensured that the naked political agenda of its commissioning was invisible.

Hence, these same forces programming a conservative history of Federation were able to rewrite the mini-history of 'The Big Picture' itself. The confusion as to whether the painting was done as an 'official' commission, noted above, can be directly sourced to the Association. After another artist Charles Nuttall, had drawn a similar 'Opening' panorama in 1903, the Association took out a newspaper adver-

tisement stating that Nuttall's work 'does not have official recognition', thus implying — falsely — that Roberts' work did have such official recognition. The provenance of Roberts' painting also illustrates the deliberate obfuscation of its role — private or official? — by the Association: after being exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in early 1904, the painting was presented, in a low-key handover in London, by the Association to the new Commonwealth. Soon afterwards (4 July 1904) the painting was presented by the Commonwealth to King Edward VII. Even in its choice of name and form, the Australian Art Association Pty Ltd was simultaneously proclaiming its public benevolence and populist credentials, yet doing so from behind the anonymity of a proprietary company.

'The Big Picture's' intended political message is clear enough; it is about the foundation of Australian democracy, it is a representation of representation. As a 'foundation' picture, it is part of an established Australian genre, which either glosses over the (usual) absence of the artist from the actual occasion or chooses the founding moment's centenary as the appropriate moment to commission an 'historical' style of painting. Roberts' *Opening* is thus unusual in that it is both firmly rooted in the 'historical' style and yet was painted by an eyewitness to the event. A rather comic point arises from the relatively short lag between the actual event and its being faithfully recorded for posterity: Roberts was apparently bribed by some sitters to be placed in the foreground of the painting.<sup>12</sup> Of more consequence, however, is the fact that the painting Roberts produced from the event — uncommissioned and impressionistic — was to be completely overshadowed by the later, commissioned work.

The Association's motives in commissioning the work were not only programmatic and political, they were also aesthetically interventionist. The bare terms of the formal commission make this clear: Roberts was to paint 'correct representations' of the assembled VIP's 'to the number of not less than 250'.<sup>13</sup> It is thus obvious that Roberts was placed under considerable artistic restraint. Although perhaps the degree of this restraint was no more than that which would usually apply to a commissioned artist, its specific context makes the terms of the commission seem unusually harsh. While it is not directly provable that the Association had the so-called 'Sketch' in mind when it was drawing up the details of Roberts' commission, the aesthetic outcome of the commission's limitations tends towards such knowledge being present.

'The Big Picture' is, simply and supremely, Bad Art. Other epithets that have been applied to it include: 'the big machine', 'a pot boiler', 'unrecognisably banal', 'unfortunate aberration' and 'a monstrous failure'. Did the Association consciously intend to present an atrocious painting to commemorate the grand occasion? The question is not flip-pant; the drafters of the commission must be taken to have had a fair premonition of the actual picture Roberts — inevitably — was to produce. It would seem, then, that the Association could only have had its mind on other matters when it gave Roberts the commission. Looming large here must have been Roberts' known general propensity to impressionism. It is thus a reasonable speculation that the Association had motivations broadly similar to R.G. Menzies in the latter's abortive proposal for an ultra-conservative Academy of Australian Art. The difference is that the Association was successful; by focusing its efforts on a single vulnerable

protégé. The Association's success here was far from being a local victory, however.

It is not surprising, but nor is it particularly significant that Roberts stopped painting entirely for several years immediately after completing 'The Big Picture'. Nor is it important that Roberts' later work shows that his early forays into impressionism were not permanently stamped out of him by the experience. Rather, the success of the Association's agenda was more diffuse and wide ranging. Had the so-called 'Sketch', or a studio reworking of it that was still impressionistic, come to be the popular, or even an 'official' image commemorating the event, then the course of the Australian political consciousness would have changed. The motif would have been of the rebel empowered, entering the mainstream but not selling out. The impressionistic brush strokes could have captured the birth of a forward-looking and innovative nation. But, as it stands, whenever ordinary Australians wander through the public sections of their nation's Parliament House — a Disneyland of Democracy — they cannot avoid seeing 'The Big Picture'. Its ugliness, its crowding with now long-dead and forgotten important persons whose identification is thoughtfully assisted by the provision of a 'key', operates as an uncomfortable reminder of the public's exclusion from meaningful political representation. This exclusion has been brought about by a process of subversion that is buried within the physical origins of the very painting that the viewers are looking at. This is the overwrought facade of democracy. [Bad] art does indeed equal [bad] life, just as the average Australian is a hidden cog in The Big Machine.

## References

1. McCulloch, A., *The Golden Age of Australian Painting*, Landsdowne Press, Melbourne, 1969, p.193, n.44.
2. 'It was purchased by the Commonwealth for 30 guineas in 1920, on the recommendation of Mr Kenneth Binns [then Commonwealth Librarian] from the Athenaeum Exhibition (although it was not listed in the catalogue)': Topliss, H., *Tom Roberts 1865-1931: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p.170.
3. Topliss, above, p.169. Another artist, J.C. Waite, had been offered the commission (although on a smaller scale) but had abandoned it. Roberts did some preliminary work of making individual portraits for later insertion into the main canvas between 29 May and September 1901: in June 1901 Roberts was in Sydney and Brisbane to paint the portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and Lord and Lady Lamington.
4. Haese, R., *Rebels and Precursors*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1981, pp.20, 41.
5. See Roberts' speech to the Society of Artists, 1895, extracted Topliss, above, p.19.
6. Smith, B., *Australian Painting*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2nd edn, 1971.
7. N.G.B. Jefferson, quoted Smith, above, p.123.
8. McCulloch, above, p.68.
9. Anderson, H., (ed.), *Tocsin: Radical Arguments Against Federation 1897-1900*, Drummond, Melbourne, 1977, p.104.
10. Davidson, A., *The Invisible State*, Cambridge University Press, Hong Kong, 1991, p.237.
11. Professor Harrison Moore, quoted in Davidson, above, p.234.
12. Letter from Kenneth Binns, quoted Topliss, above, p.169.
13. Topliss, above, p.169.