



## Who are these men?

A fellowship at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre in the Museum of Australian Democracy helped Alison Alder find out

The imprint of ink on paper in newspapers, journals, magazines, posters and ephemera was, until the introduction of Movietone newsreels in 1929, the primary source of visual information describing Australian Prime Ministers available to the Australian public. A fellowship at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre allowed me to investigate images and read descriptions of the first eight prime ministers: Barton, Deakin, Watson, Reid, Fisher, Cook, Hughes and Bruce with the aim of reinterpreting their images into a series of contemporary screen printed posters.

Some of the PMs I investigated had a great sense of their role in history and consequently left behind large photographic records, diaries, notes, books and other ephemera. Deakin is a case in point, his image and that of Hughes, are probably the best known faces of the first eight. On the other hand, Watson, for example, left behind scant visual records of his short time in office as PM and parliamentarian. I relied on written material to get a sense of his personality, like this description written by Billy Hughes:

*The new Prime Minister (Watson) entered the room ... he was worth going miles to see. He had dressed for the part; his Vandyke beard was exquisitely groomed, his abundant brown hair*

*smoothly brushed ... he was a perfect picture of a statesman, the leader.*

Other prime ministers were known to the public by their caricatures. Reid, for example was lampooned for the size of his girth, his walrus moustache and habit of wearing a monocle. He rejected his first official portrait, painted by George Lambert, as being a caricature. Hughes, known as 'The Little Digger' had a huge number of images and cartoons drawn of him which showed the divisiveness and showbiz nature of his tenure as PM, and as the longest serving Australian parliamentarian.

In these portraits I refer to some of the PMs legislative legacies but I also wanted to capture some aspect of their personalities. Bruce, for example would not now be described as a 'retail' politician as he was much more comfortable in the boardroom rather than the chamber. He was the first prime minister to sit in the provisional parliament house, the first to form a coalition with the country party, and the first to lose his seat whilst PM (a claim to fame that he shares with John Howard).

Deakin on the other hand was a retail politician with a messianic view of himself. I placed Deakin in front of a starburst image sourced from the cover of a composition commissioned by the Australian Natives Association, champions of the White Australia Policy.

The eight portraits will be exhibited at the Australian Museum of Democracy in 2017 as part of the 90th birthday celebrations of Old Parliament House. Sadly the Australian Prime Ministers Centre no longer offers fellowships and the wonderful library has been packed up and stored in boxes. The Museum, like some other national cultural institutions, suffered funding cuts this year with the result that the opportunity to uncover our cultural heritage will be limited until future legislators see the benefit of Australians understanding and accessing our rich, and sadly often unknown, history.

