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‘SHEARING THE RAMS’: THE PATH TO NATIONHOOD

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‘Shearing the Rams’: The Path to Nationhood

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Abstract

In this chapter I relate the iconic Australian painting *Shearing the Rams* – by British-born impressionist and figure painter Tom Roberts – to the growth of the all-important Australian wool industry. I also relate the painting to the development of trade union organization in an industry that was inherently hard to organize and that was to experience violent strikes just after the artwork was completed. *Shearing the Rams* was painted in the Brocklesbury Station shearing shed located on a property not far from the township of Corowa on the Murray River that formed part of the border between the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria. At this time there was unrest about the payment of duties on trade across colonial borders and a growing desire to cut loose from Britain’s apron strings. This unrest culminated in the Corowa Conference that was to set Australia on the path to federation. By 1901 the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was opened, and Tom Roberts was to paint a great artwork illustrating that event. This now hangs in the foyer of the Main Committee Room of Parliament House in Canberra.

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‘Shearing the Rams’: The Path to Nationhood

‘Shearing the Rams’ was painted in 1890 by the Australian impressionist Tom Roberts (1856-1931). The work was purchased in 1932 by the Felton Bequest and is exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). Measuring 122.4 × 183.3 cm, the painting was executed in oil on canvas on composition board. It depicts a vibrant scene of sheep shearing in the woolshed at Brocklesby Station, a property near Corowa. Based on preparatory studies that Roberts made from 1888, the painting ‘came to be considered as the definitive image of an emerging national identity’ (Topliss, 1988).

Tom Roberts was an English-born Australian artist with nationalist leanings and with considerable training in art and in anatomy. Born in Dorchester, the elder son of Richard Roberts, journalist, and his wife Matilda Agnes Cela, née Evans, Roberts was educated at Dorchester Grammar School. After her husband's death, Matilda and her three children migrated in 1869 to Melbourne where they settled in the suburb of Collingwood. The family was poor and their first years in Australia were difficult. Becoming interested in art, Roberts studied at the Collingwood and Carlton branch of the Mechanics’ School of Design where in 1873 he was awarded a landscape prize and in 1874 he joined the Melbourne National Gallery School where he was guided by prominent artists Thomas Clark and Louis Buvelot and met notable artists including Frederick McCubbin.

Early to recognize the special character of the Australian landscape, Roberts was awarded a bursary by the Victorian Academy of Arts to allow him to gain further experience in London. Keen to paint subject pictures, he had already attended anatomy classes at the University of Melbourne. Roberts was the first major Australian painter to be selected to study at the Royal Academy of Arts, which he attended full-time from 1881 to 1884, benefiting especially from tuition in anatomy and perspective and from exposure to European impressionism. To help make ends meet he contributed illustrations to the *Graphic*, a British weekly illustrated newspaper. Stimulated by new ideas and by travels in Continental Europe during his vacations, he returned to Melbourne in 1885. Here he shared his experiences of European Impressionism and

established, with other notable artists painting *en plein air*, the first of the innovative artists' camps at Box Hill. Following the success of these camps Roberts, assisted by Arthur Streeton, was later to establish another artists' camp at Sirius Cove at Sydney Harbour between 1891 and 1896.ⁱ The point of these camps was, of course, to facilitate painting *en plein air*.

Tom Roberts valued ordinary workers, heroic imagery and the development of a national Australian identity.ⁱⁱ To this end, on his return from London to Melbourne in 1885 he visited a few sheep stations looking for subject matter for his paintings. His sketches of Brocklesby Station, made over several years, became the basis for what was to become one of his most famous paintings, *Shearing the Rams*, completed in 1890. Illustrating the hard labour underpinning the all-important wool industry, this artwork – with its skilled use of light and shade and strong perspective – was to be regarded by the Australian viewing public as an iconic image of Australian national identity, although initially it was criticized by art critics as not meeting the expectations of the time of 'high art'.

The painting can be seen as a response to the nationalistic sentiment developing in Australia during the late nineteenth century and as a reflection of emerging national white male identity defined through heroic rural activity. The painting also evokes the economic importance of the wool industry. In a letter to a major Melbourne daily newspaper, *The Argus* (4 July 1890), Roberts wrote that his wish was to express in this painting 'the meaning of spirit – of strong masculine labour... and the great human interest of the whole scene.' The work is supremely realistic and its details convincing; see for example 'the sunlit gold of the bottles of oil for the whetstones, a pair of shears propped against a wall, and a tobacco pipe stuck in a man's trousers, give the picture a real ring of truth' (<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/2920/>).

The figures in the painting have a nobility about them that was a far cry from the nascent unrest over shearers' wages and working conditions that was developing in this period, as we shall see later in this chapter. The composition of *Shearing the Rams* adopts a strong perspective that leads the eye forward along the length of the shearing

shed to the narrow window at the far end through which can be seen a glimpse of the landscape of Brocklesbury Station.ⁱⁱⁱ This dynamic structure can also be interpreted as symbolizing the vigorous nature of the wool industry in a country that was, according to the old adage, ‘riding on the back of the sheep.’ The shearers’ repetitive action as they work is suggested by the regular pattern of the shearers’ bent backs, all framed by the shed’s posts, the upright figures of the roustabouts, the huge ram that will be next under the shears, and the blue of the shirts of the tar boy on the left and the old man watching on the right. The painting is centred by the vibrant, pink-striped shirt of the principal shearer and the luminous cream of the partially shorn sheep he is holding. The depth of the scene is emphasized not only by sunlit landscape glimpsed through the back window but also by the luminosity of the forward faces caught by the light.

The shearing shed at Brocklesby Station was situated near the town of Corowa on the northern side of the Murray River, which marked the border between the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria. At that time intercolonial trade across the river involved the payment of duties.^{iv} That local duties were imposed by colonies on trade crossing the Murray River added an impetus towards the move to federation. The painting *Shearing the Rams* was conceived at a time when the Australian colonies were contemplating nationhood through federation, and Corowa was to play an important role in the transition to federation of Australia’s colonies and territories. The first conference on this issue was to be held at Corowa two years after the painting was finished.

The young ‘tar boy’ in the foreground of the painting was actually - according to the National Gallery of Victoria - a girl, the daughter of Brocklesby Station staff. On one of Roberts’ visits to the empty woolshed at Brocklesby Station, Roberts had paid her and her sister sixpence apiece to kick up the dust so he could recapture the atmosphere within the woolshed of shearing time. Other figures in the painting are also of interest including the enormous ram being held up in preparation for shearing. Astbury (2014) writes about the painting that ‘the young rouseabout’s (*sic*) enthusiastic involvement with his job complements the attitude of the “old cockatoo farmer”, who surveys the scene with a placid sense of enjoyment. It may be significant that Roberts

conceived and painted his shearing subject just as the newly formed, militant Amalgamated Shearers' Union reached the height of its power and influence. Astbury also points to Roberts' political sympathy to the emerging labour movement and suggests that this was 'probably formed early in the 1880s when he began his friendship with the future Labor politician, Dr William Maloney, and also came into contact with J. F. Archibald of the radical *Sydney Bulletin*.'

Shearing the Rams illustrates the importance of the merino sheep to the Australian wool industry. The first flock of merino sheep was brought to Australia in 1797 by Captain Henry Waterhouse and Lieutenant William Kent. Merino sheep originally came from Spain, where they were carefully bred for their fine, soft wool. After arriving in Australia, Captain Waterhouse grazed the surviving sheep at his property on the Parramatta River and sold or gave away sheep to other influential men in the early colony as the flock grew. One of these men was Captain John Macarthur.^v

Captain John Macarthur – as Paymaster of the New South Wales Corps and Inspector of Public Works – was an important and powerful person in the colony of New South Wales. In the 1790s he had been granted 200 acres of fertile land at Parramatta close to the river and about 23kms to the west of Sydney Cove. Macarthur controlled much of the colony's resources and could use as much convict labour as he wanted.

After receiving some merino sheep from Waterhouse, the Macarthur family worked together to expand their flock.^{vi} By 1803 they had bred 4000 merino sheep. Between 1801 and 1817, Macarthur was away from the colony and his farm for two long periods of time. His wife, Elizabeth, and nephew, Hannibal, improved the merino flock and wool production over the period he was away. In 1807 the Macarthurs sent the first bale of Australian wool to England for sale. In later years, the Macarthurs bred their flock with other merinos from around the world to maintain the health and genetic diversity of their sheep. They produced high-quality wool, which began to compete with wool in Europe. By the late 1800s wool was Australia's main export.

From roughly 1871 to the 1960s, wool was Australia's main export commodity and generated significant national wealth. Indeed, the growth of the wool industry in Australia from the first introduction of merino sheep was crucial to the increasing wealth of Australia. McLean (2012, p108) identifies likely sources of the productivity superiority of Australian wool growers up to the mid-nineteenth century as low land costs (almost free to 'squatters'); the use of areas of natural grassland; largely unfenced pastoral properties where boundary riders and shepherds were cheaper than fences; and the limited investment needed in fixed capital (such as dams, windmills, stockyards and farm buildings); the mild winters that meant it was unnecessary to keep stock indoors; and the fact that the short annual mustering and shearing season meant that labour requirements were lower than in European farming. McLean also points out that these sources of efficiency are conceptually distinct from the scale economies of the semi-arid outback regions where large flocks were grazed at very low stocking rates. In addition, Australian wool growers adopted an efficient system of financing and marketing of wool clips through 'stock and station' firms and their agent system. The second-half of the 19th century saw improvements in station management and in shearing techniques but sheep stations' permanent workforces remained relatively small, with the peak labour input remaining seasonal and undertaken by itinerant shearers.

The painting *Shearing the Rams* not only illustrates the heroism of physical labour but also nicely demonstrates the economic reliance of Australia on wool, a fact of which Tom Roberts would have been aware as he rode through the countryside in the late 1880s looking for subjects for his painting. Against this background of a booming wool industry, it is unsurprising that *Shearing the Rams* was to become an iconic painting, capturing as it does the heroism and mateship of the shearing shed as well as signposting the presence of a shearing shed on each sheep-grazing property. Viewers of this artwork would have been cognizant of the wandering nature of the shearing trade as shearers travel independently – and consecutively – from station to station for employment. These perceived characteristics of the heroism and mateship amongst shearers would have appealed to the Australian workers' psyche and sense of identity and kinship as well as independence.

According to Fells and Skeffington (2003), in the 1880s the value of wool exports far exceeded the value of all other exports. Moreover, 'shearing is close to the emotional heart of Australia with its images of self-reliance, mateship and overcoming the adversity of the outback'. However, the growing wealth of the Australian wool pastoralists was not reflected in better shearers' wages or working conditions. The first attempts at worker organisation in the shearing industry were in 1874 and were unsuccessful. In 1886, pastoralists combined to try to enforce a cut in the shearing rate,

For union organization to be successful, it is essential first that there is some surplus or profits available that might be shared between capital and labour, and second that the union should have the power to induce the employer to share some of this surplus with the workforce. Unless the union has control over available workers, the employer can hire an alternative workforce and pay them less than the union rate. Booth (1995) provides a discussion of the conditions under which unions can emerge in an industry and how they can achieve success in improving the welfare of their membership. She also elucidates types of bargaining models of rent-sharing between unions and management that emphasise the importance of the 'outside option', which refers to the bargain that might be reached with an alternative partner should bargaining break down altogether. This was particularly relevant for shearer-grazier bargaining at the start of the 1890s when the employers refused to negotiate with unions and substituted instead nonunion workers including cheap often migrant labour.

The shearing industry of the late nineteenth century illustrates the inherent problems that have confronted the labour force historically as workers struggled to organize themselves against the superior power of employers. A union does not arrive in an industry fully formed. It must persuade potential workers to take collective action. It must persuade potential workers to join the union. And joining involves a subscription cost, a cost that is necessary to fund the unions' organizing and to cope with what economists refer to as the 'free rider problem'. The 'free rider problem' arises where union membership is not compulsory and a worker can get the benefits of union wage rates and improved condition without paying the membership costs. If all potential members adopt this attitude the union will be unable to form as a viable organizing

body. Historically this has been a major problem with union formation unless all workers can be coerced into unionizing, either by force or by social pressure.

The imbalance in power relations between capital and labour in the wool industry in Australia led in the late 1880s to the formation of shearers' unions to fight the might of employers. By 1890, the Amalgamated Shearers' Union decided at its annual conference that its members were to refuse to work with nonunion labour, thereby setting the stage for major conflict in the wool industry. The refusal of union shearers to work alongside nonunion shearers - an attempt to set up a form of closed shop where the union workers rather than the employer controls labour supply - was effectively what brought on the shearers' strikes of the 1890s, together with the refusal by the pastoralists to make concessions to shearers' demands. Employers' insistence on hiring nonunion labour led to clashes between organized labour and organized capital. The unrest amongst shearers and the resistance by employers culminated in the shearers' strike of 1891 - beginning in Barcaldine Queensland - that was one of Australia's earliest and most important industrial disputes. There was intense violence on both sides. Semmler (1969) provides an important account of both the 1891 and 1894 strikes, illustrating also how emotions ran so high that the 1891 strike in particular was seized upon by creative writers as well as by journalists' records as a flagrant miscarriage of justice and written up extensively in literature as well as journalism.

In 1894, there was a second violent shearers' strike over freedom of contract that occurred principally in the north-west of NSW in 1894.^{vii} These strikes and their aftermath - together with the depression of the early 1890s - are held to be an important contributor to the formation of the Australian Labor Party.^{viii} For the defeats led activists to realise that political action was the route to lasting change and campaigning began for the system of compulsory arbitration that was to come about after Federation in 1901.

The growing unrest of workers from the 1880s onwards was accompanied by an expanding number of Australians calling for independence from the mother country, Britain, and for the formation of a united commonwealth governed by a local federal government. As an increasing majority of Australians were native-born, fewer persisted

in considering themselves ethnically British and Australian identity was increasingly celebrated. By 1891 the town of Corowa, near Brocklesbury Station where *Shearing the Rams* was painted, was 'a hotbed for nationalism and support for federalism' with growing resentment within the colonies over the duties on cross-border trade. The small federation organisations that had formed earlier eventually consolidated into the Border Federation League which, supported by Victorian politician John Quick and New South Wales parliamentarian Edmund Barton, organised the Corowa Conference held in late 1893. Stimulated by the conference, Quick drafted a bill forming the basis for a new federal constitution while Barton traveled throughout New South Wales, giving speeches in support of Federation.^{ix} A second constitutional convention was held between 1897 and 1898, resulting in a new draft constitution that passed in the following year and in 1901 brought into being the new Commonwealth of Australia, with Edmund Barton as a Commonwealth's first Prime Minister.

In May 1901 Tom Roberts attended the opening of Australia's Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne. When he was invited to record this event in an artwork, it was to become his biggest commission. The painting was entitled 'Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by H.R.H. The Duke of Cornwall and York (Later King George V), May 9, 1901 (detail), 1903, oil on canvas. The opening was held in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, the temporary seat of the new government.^x Now on permanent loan from the British Royal Collection and on public display in the Parliament of Australia in Canberra, the work contains 269 figures. The painting was to take Roberts over two and a half years to complete, damaging his eyesight and health. To paint all these portraits, Roberts travelled to Sydney and London to make individual sketches of the key figures, noting each person's height, weight, and hat size. The artist was paid 1,000 guineas to complete the work, While the contract initially was for 650 guineas, this was increased to 1000 guineas when the full scope of the work was realised. Roberts was also paid one guinea for each subject's sketch plus expenses; in all he received over 2000 guineas for the work, the equivalent of some AUS\$334,000 in 2024 (based on the Consumer Price Index). The *First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia* is now on permanent display to the

public in a specially constructed space in the Foyer of the Main Committee Room of the Parliament House in Canberra.

While federation was important to Tom Roberts' career, his painting of the opening of the first parliament did not lead to as many commissions as he had hoped for when he first accepted the assignment. However, it did lead to profound changes to the Australian industrial relations system and to the welfare of shearers in the wool industry *inter alia*. One advantage of federation was that provisions were made in the new Constitution for a third-party role in resolving industrial disputes and in 1904, a Court of Conciliation and Arbitration was established (Macarthy, 1969). As Fells and Skeffington (2003) note in an article in the journal *Industrial Relations*,

The shearing industry was central to the role conceived for the Court because the industry encompassed more than one state and had a migratory workforce. Justice HB Higgins, one of the principal architects of the industrial relation system in Australia, believed that the importance of the shearers as an economic force necessitated a court which could give a uniform national response to industrial disputes. In fact, the Pastoralists Award, established in 1907, was one of the earliest to be determined, and was handed down before the famous Harvester decision which is typically held to have provided the foundation for wage determination in Australia.

In 1903 Roberts embarked with his wife Lillie Williamson for England but he did not receive there the patronage he had hoped for despite the contacts he had formed. At this stage he was uncertain about what direction his art should follow. Although portraits were an income source and one was hung at the Royal Academy in 1910, he was very short of income during his years in London. During the First World War he served as an orderly at the Third London Hospital, Wandsworth, and afterwards in 1919 he and his wife returned to Australia.

Roberts did not receive the recognition he deserved in his lifetime though he did after his death. Topliss (1988) notes in her entry on Tom Roberts in the Australian Dictionary of Biography:

‘In the first third of the [twentieth] century, his reputation, such as it was, slumped. The contrast with Sir Arthur Streeton is striking; Roberts was offered no honour. In his earlier Melbourne days he had been outspoken and suffered many “nasty knocks” from critics and art-officialdom. The trustees of the National Gallery did not purchase one of his works until 1920—a portrait painted in London. RH Croll’s *Tom Roberts: Father of Australian Landscape Painting* (1935), which included many reminiscences by associates, began his return to fame. In more recent years it has been recognized that Roberts was at least as distinguished a painter as Streeton, in the wider sense a much more significant figure, and heroic in his claims for art and as a patriot.

Over three quarters of a century after his death in 1931, Tom Roberts was included – with Arthur Streeton, Charles Condor and John Russell - in the exhibition ‘Australian Impressionists’ that was held at the National Gallery in London from December 2016 to March 2017. At last Roberts had received the recognition his work deserved.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The interested reader can view examples of Tom Roberts’ Impressionist works at this link: <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/artsets/w58lpb> and also here: https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/school_resource/australian-impressionism/. See also Lane (2007) for more illustrations of Roberts’ Impressionism. Note that *Shearing the Rams* is one of Roberts’ more realistic works, as is the ‘Big Picture’, as it came to be known, that we refer to at the end of this chapter.

ⁱⁱ To read more about the life of Tom Roberts see Topliss (1988). <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/roberts-thomas-william-tom-8229>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leigh Astbury (2014) in an article in *Art Journal* lists likely photographic influences on Roberts’ composition of *Shearing the Rams* and suggests specific pictorial influences

of European art on Roberts' painting, which is perhaps unsurprising given the artist's experiences and training.

^v See the National Museum of Australia's account in its online entry 'Australia's Defining Moments, viewable at https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/merino-sheep-introduced?_gl=1*rrglro*_gcl_au*Mjc1NTY2ODc0LjE3NjA1OTA1MDc.*_ga*MTA2Njc4MjA4OS4xNzYwNTkwNTA3*_ga_0S2D2GXTZP*czE3NjgyNjIwMzUkbzIkZzAkdDE3NjgyNjIwMzUkajYwJGwwJGgw

^{vi} For a history of the collaboration between Elizabeth and John Macarthur, see Atkinson (2022).

^{vii} For an account, see Clement Semmler (1969).

^{viii} In 1895 a year after the second Shearers' Strike, AB 'Banjo' Paterson wrote *Waltzing Mathilda* when visiting Dagworth Station on the Diamantina River in Queensland. This ballad, based on the shearing industry during the strikes, was to become Australia's *de facto* national anthem. For an account see Semmler (1969).

^{ix} See Alexander and Hatton (2025) for a brief account of the rocky road to federation and for novel quantitative analysis linking referendum voting patterns in NSW to observed characteristics. They find that voters close to borders and further from Sydney strongly favoured federation, but this support was undermined by low turnout.

^{xx} Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by H.R.H. The Duke of Cornwall and York (Later King George V), May 9, 1901 (detail), 1903, oil on canvas. On permanent loan to the Parliament of Australia from the British Royal Collection. Image courtesy of the Parliament House Art Collections, Canberra, ACT and the Royal Collection Trust. © His Majesty King Charles III 2023.