

## **CHAPTER 9 - WAGING WAR ON THE ESTABLISHMENT? II: MARY ALICE EVATT, MODERN ART AND THE NATIONAL ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

The basic details concerning Mary Alice Evatt's patronage of modern art have been documented. While she was the first woman appointed as a member of the board of trustees of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, the rest of her story does not immediately suggest continuity between her cultural interests and those of women who displayed neither modernist nor radical inclinations; who, for example, manned charity-style committees in the name of music or the theatre. The wife of the prominent judge and Labor politician, Bert Evatt, Mary Alice studied at the modernist Sydney Crowley-Fizelle and Melbourne Bell-Shore schools during the 1930s. Later, she studied in Paris under Andre Lhote. Her husband shared her interest in art, particularly modern art, and opened the first exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society in Melbourne 1939, and an exhibition in Sydney in the same year. His brother, Clive Evatt, as the New South Wales Minister for Education, appointed Mary Alice to the Board of Trustees in 1943. As a trustee she played a role in the selection of Dobell's portrait of Joshua Smith for the 1943 Archibald Prize. Two stories thus merge to obscure further analysis of Mary Alice Evatt's contribution to the artistic life of the two cities: the artistic confrontation between modernist and anti-modernist forces; and the political career of her husband, particularly knowledge of his later role as leader of the Labor opposition to Robert Menzies' Liberal Party.

Art historiography concerning the 1930s and '40s has contributed significantly to the creation of the characterisation of Mary Alice Evatt as a peripheral figure in a male-dominated battle over artistic styles. This is inevitable as the late 1930s saw controversy erupt within the art circles of Melbourne and Sydney in a series of public confrontations between certain members of both modernist and reactionary camps. The confrontations centred on the foundation of the Australian Academy of Art, the subsequent formation of

the Contemporary Art Society, the exhibition of Modern French and British Art, and the award of the 1943 Archibald Prize to William Dobell. As a variety of modern art forms became accepted in the long run, and given that 'it is the victor who writes history',<sup>1</sup> the art historiography, through the pen of modernists and Marxists, retains much of the polemic of the original clashes. Chief among the art histories are *Place, Taste and Tradition* by Bernard Smith and his subsequent editions of *Australian Painting; Rebels and Precursors* by Richard Haese; and *The Innovators* by Geoffrey Dutton. Mary Eagle's *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*, alternately explains the series of confrontations in terms of the design orientation of modernist developments of the interwar period in Sydney and its links with modern consumerism. In each account Mary Alice Evatt receives either passing or no mention.

Biographies on 'the Doc' mention Mary Alice's artistic bent chiefly for its impact on H. V. Evatt's taste. His advocacy of modern art, however, was portrayed as both independent and integral to the clashes. His 'fascination [was] stimulated by Mary Alice, who was an enthusiastic painter and adult art student closely involved with the modern art milieu. Yet his independent response was clear', wrote Peter Crockett, in *Evatt: A Life*. Another biography moved directly to the fact that Bert Evatt had opened the first exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society. His action 'provoked a controversy in the art world, coming after the founding of the conservative Australian Academy of Art in 1937, which was sponsored by R.G. Menzies'.<sup>2</sup> Where Mary Alice Evatt has received recognition in the form of biographical entries, such as that in Joan Kerr's *Heritage*, and the Appendix to Mary Eagle and Jan Minchin's book, *The George Bell School: Students*

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Dixon, 'Arguing The Modern: The Australian Academy of Art versus The Contemporary Art Society', *Art Network*, winter-spring, 1986, pp.56-57. In the article, Dixon uses the plural: 'it is the victors who write history'.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Crockett, *Evatt: A Life*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.22-23; and Ken Buckley, Barbara Dale & Wayne Reynolds, *Doc Evatt: Patriot, Internationalist, Fighter and Scholar*,

*Friends, and Influences*, she nevertheless appears as a peripheral figure in the same cultural battle. 'It was the "Doc"', the *Heritage* entry claims, 'not Mary, who became closely involved with [George] Bell in a connection that suited them both politically'.<sup>3</sup> Only very recently has Bridget Griffen-Foley, in placing Herbert Vere Evatt in a liberal tradition and linking his political stance with his progressive views on art, acknowledged the separate actions of the politician's wife.<sup>4</sup>

In all except the last account, no attempt is made to analyse Mary Alice Evatt's actions and endeavours. The art histories and biographies are not about her. Yet they separate her from other women culturists by creating an artistic-political dichotomy in which she was automatically set in opposition to Society women and women painters of conservative genres. Ethel Anderson, herself an ideological conservative, cut across the divide by convincing the art establishment that the intellectual basis for modern art derived from the same traditions that they sought to preserve and uphold. Further consideration of the breadth of Mary Alice Evatt's artistic interest, her culturally supportive and encouraging tendencies, and her actions as a woman positioned within the artistic establishment reveals a similarity in cultural conviction that cuts across the artistic-political divide. The idea that Mary Alice Evatt participated in the same cultural process as Ethel Anderson, Lilian Frost, Emily Marks, and Lady Gordon and the committeewomen of the theatrical and orchestral campaigns will be explored in this chapter. But we must first understand Mary Alice Evatt's artistic allegiances, and turn now to her interest in artistic modernism.

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(Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1994), p.120.

<sup>3</sup> 'Mary Alice Evatt', in Mary Eagle & Jan Minchin, *The George Bell School: Students, Friends and Influences*, (Melbourne: Deutscher Art Publications, 1981), p.191; 'AC', 'Evatt, Mary Alice', Joan Kerr (ed.), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*, (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995), pp.347-48; and June Helmer, *George Bell: the Art of Influence*, (Melbourne: Greenhouse Publications, 1985), p.12.

<sup>4</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'The Evatts, liberalism and modernism', in D.B. Waterson, (ed.), *Studies in Twentieth Century Australian History*, no. 1, (Sydney: Australian History Museum, Macquarie University, 2001), pp.58-71.

## The Modernist

Born at Ottumwa, in Iowa, America, in 1898, Mary Alice Sheffer arrived with her parents in Australia in 1899, and spent her childhood in Mosman on Sydney's lower North Shore. During her school years, she and her friends avidly read the works of Thoreau, Veblen, and William Morris. A student at the University of Sydney from 1918, Mary Alice initially studied architecture but soon transferred to arts. During the same year she became acquainted with a St Andrew's College tutor, Herbert Vere Evatt. Both had felt sympathy for participants in the tram strikes of 1917, and shared mutual interests in Morris' writings, as well as literature and poetry in general. Mary Alice's schoolgirl interest in socialism and her relationship with Evatt apparently caused some parental consternation. Despite this, Mary Alice and Herbert Vere married at Mosman Congregational Church on 27 November 1920. The Evatts adopted two children, Peter and Rosalind, born 1922 and 1932 respectively. Herbert Vere Evatt, known to all as either 'Bert' or later, 'the Doc', rose rapidly in the legal profession. By the mid-1920s, however, the couple's political inclinations had found expression in Bert's involvement in the NSW Labor Party.<sup>5</sup>

On his admission to the High Court in the early 1930s, Bert Evatt began to make regular trips to Melbourne. Mary Alice found herself stranded, her life 'unexciting', and 'too much juvenile society exhausting'.<sup>6</sup> Mary Alice thus took up art classes at a studio in

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Dale, 'Evatt, Mary Alice', *ADB*, vol.14, pp.114-15; Hugh Curnow, 'Mary Evatt', *Age*, 16 Feb. 1968, p.13; Kylie Tennant, *Evatt: Politics and Justice*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970), pp.31-2; Kerr, *Heritage*, p.347; and Eagle and Minchin, *George Bell School*. Although reference to Herbert Vere Evatt as 'Bert' might appear informal, it is in keeping with accepted contemporary and historical practice to refer to him as such and therefore appropriate to use the name in this study when distinguishing between husband and wife.

<sup>6</sup> Correspondence, Mary Alice Evatt (MAE) (Leura) to Herbert Vere Evatt (HVE), 'Monday 4pm' [1933?], in Evatt Foundation Collection, Flinders Library (EFC), 'Evatt – Family Correspondence – MAS Evatt to Evatt' folder.



George Street. It proved a point of departure. The company of Grace Crowley, Rah Fizelle, Frank and Margel Hinder and later Ralph Balson, together with the inspiration shed through Anne Dangar's regular communications from the studio of Albert Gleizes in the south of France, greatly influenced many students, including Evatt. According to Evatt, Rah Fizelle turned to art on his return from the First World War. He possessed an 'awareness of the need for form and colour, observed and ordered', and eventually translated 'his creative life into measured stanzas of beauty and delicacy which filled us with happiness and peace and beauty and order'. Fizelle took inspiration from the geometric spirit of the teachings of Andre Lhote and Alfred Gleizes. Grace Crowley, having begun her studies at the Julian Ashton school, in fact worked for a time under Lhote in Paris. She apparently made a lasting impression. Together working at the George Street studio Fizelle and Crowley moved from the 'measured music of their landscape ... to a more and more abstract conception of composition'. Their 'aims of balanced dynamic symmetry and harmonious arrangement of colour' were imbued with 'a note of urgency and a passion for beauty'. Mary Alice Evatt evidently valued the studio's peaceful ambience and the encouragement offered by the artists, their guidance 'releasing our imagination and showing us the colours of the spectrum as riches that became our true heritage'. She recalled:

All who longed for design as the bones of their work, those who looked for pure colour as their birthright, those who found significant line more important than light and shade, turned to the group for help.<sup>7</sup>

Mary Alice frequently joined her husband when he attended high court sittings in Melbourne. One day she entered the art and furniture shop established by Cynthia Reed (later Nolan) and her elder brother, John Reed, in search of interesting decorations to

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Alice Evatt, 'The Crowley Fizelle Art School', *AGNSW Quarterly*, vol.8, no.1, Oct. 1966, pp.314-16. The correspondence between Anne Dangar and Grace Crowley, through which the school

brighten up their Melbourne flat. Among the curios in the Little Collins Street shop she discovered, with delight, some Van Gogh prints. Soon the Evatts became regulars at the shop and *Heide*, the Heidelberg home where John and Sunday Reed resided from 1934. A star of the National Gallery school, Sam Atyeo, who suddenly discarded academic for modern techniques in 1932, had also frequented the shop since Cynthia Reed dared to display his controversial work *Lot Admonishing his Daughters*, in the shop window. It was through Atyeo that Mary Alice learned of art classes run by George Bell, and subsequently enrolled for lessons in 1936 and '37.

George Bell and Arnold Shore, both of whom had developed an interest or at least a 'faith' in what they understood modern art to mean during the latter half of the 1920s, together opened an art school in Bourke Street, Melbourne, in February 1932. Bell, Shore and William Frater also founded the Melbourne Contemporary Group during the year. In 1934 Bell departed to take in modern developments abroad, studying under Iain McNab of London's Westminster School and visiting galleries in France and Spain. Having studied under McNab Bell became more interested in the simplification of natural shapes and in relationships between planes, that is, in the formal construction of paintings. He returned to Melbourne with ideas for teaching methods far beyond those employed at the Victorian Gallery school. Although the Bell-Shore partnership dissolved in 1936, a large number of students continued to attend Bell's classes over the next few years. Included in the group of 'unusually gifted and intelligent students' possessing 'a lively interest in all forms of contemporary art' were Russell Drysdale, Sali Herman, David Strachan, Peter Purves Smith, Maie Casey, and Mary Alice Evatt.<sup>8</sup> It is probable that the formal emphasis of

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obtained a great deal of constructive information and inspiration, is kept in the Grace Crowley papers, ML MSS 3252.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Smith with Terry Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, 3rd ed., (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.207.

George Bell's teaching, though less constructivist than the Sydney school, appealed to Mary Alice. Yet, according to Richard Haese, it proved a fairly conservative, even 'sterile', forum for modernist developments with Bell deflecting attention from Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse to other less rigorous followers of those 'aesthetic revolutionaries'.<sup>9</sup>

During 1938, the Evatts toured France, England and America. Following the example set by Crowley, Fizelle, Dangar and others, Mary Alice studied under Andre Lhote in Paris, while her husband browsed through the city's many museums and galleries. At Lhote's studio, Mary Alice learned 'useful techniques'.<sup>10</sup> Preferring to absorb as much as possible of the atmosphere of 'Lhote's Academie', she suspended most correspondence, shopping, and gallery viewing activities until the studio closed at the end of July. Working all day on her painting did not prove tedious. Instead, she enjoyed the enthusiasm and comradeship of the other students. Lhote gave two lectures a week, followed by very direct appraisals of their work. In the final week, Mary Alice attended a series of long lectures that dissected famous works of art from various periods, examined their construction and methods of paint application, and discussed their meaning. She found her time in Paris stimulating. It affected her physically, 'I feel full of energy and everyone says I look well'.<sup>11</sup> Before returning to Australia, Mary Alice also attended the studio of Professor Hans Hofmann, a prominent teacher of Expressionism in New York.

Within the space of five years, Mary Alice Evatt had thus immersed herself fully in the atmosphere of key modernist studios in Australia, and important academies in Paris and New York. She thus worked, experimented, and exhibited as an artist with other

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Haese, *Modern Australian Art*, first published by Penguin as *Rebels and Precursors*, 1981, (New York: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, 1982), pp.12-14. See also June Helmer, *George Bell: the Art of Influence*, (Melbourne: Greenhouse Publications, 1985), p.12.

<sup>10</sup> 'Mother [MAE]' (Paris) to Peter [son], 4 Aug. 19[38], in EFC, 'Evatt – Family, correspondence – Evatt to MAS Evatt' folder.

<sup>11</sup> MAE (Paris) to 'Mother', 31 July 19[38], in EFC, 'Evatt, Mary Alice – Correspondence, Folder 2'; and 'Colorful [sic] Glimpses of Life Among Art Students', *Australian Women's Weekly* (AWW), 28 Jan. 1939, p.24.

artists. Margaret North wrote from Melbourne with regrets that Evatt could not return to see a portrait painted by her and priced at ten guineas, on display at the Group Twelve exhibition. It 'caused a great deal of interest', North reported.<sup>12</sup> A Melbourne Contemporary Group exhibition opened by the Australian composer and musician Percy Grainger sold over four hundred catalogues and fourteen artworks including one by Mary Alice. According to Arnold Shore, her painting, "'Life Saver" excited some of the die-hards. The old gap about seeing a man "like that" – or "not seeing", rather'.<sup>13</sup>

Work by students of the Crowley-Fizelle school attracted positive, if brief and uninformative commentary when on view in a 1935 exhibition at Julian Ashton's studio. Evatt's work being described as 'typical', presumably of the whole exhibition, was on that occasion reproduced in *The Australian Women's Weekly*.<sup>14</sup> *Intermediate French*, the painting by Mary Alice Evatt on display at Ashton's studio, indeed seems typical of both the directions taken by the studio, and Evatt's own style. Simplified forms resolve into harmonious planes of vivid colour – predominantly red and green - representing the wall, a picture, a chair, and a woman, that both balance and create movement across the canvas. The planes remain whole compared to the semi-abstract figures produced by Crowley, Fizelle and Balson a few years later. Mary Alice applied the same concept repeatedly. Paintings and sketches extant today, evidently from the same period, also feature rhythmically arranged simple figurative forms that avoid abstraction.

Her style matured a little as a result of her Parisian studies. '[M]odern art, like modern music, now has "swing"', she proclaimed to a reporter on her return, explaining that the exaggeration of colours and shapes intensified rhythmic effect, and added to the

<sup>12</sup> Margaret North (Sec. Group Twelve) to MAE, 23 June 19[33-5?], in EFC, 'Evatt, Mary Alice – Correspondence, Folder 1' (MAE Corr).

<sup>13</sup> Arnold Shore (Bourke Street, Melb.) to MAE, n.d. [1935?], in EFC, MAE Corr, 2.

<sup>14</sup> R.J.H. Moses, 'Youth Challenges the Ancients', *AWW*, 7 Dec. 1935, pp.15, 25.

whole design. Illustrating this theory, she pointed to the 'elongated shoulder line' on her *Study of a Girl*, which mirrored the slanting line of curtains in the background.<sup>15</sup> Possibly the most effective example of her preoccupation with rhythmic construction may be seen in *Footballers*, held in her daughter's private collection, in which the leaping and tumbling bodies of four Australian Rules football players, and the distant curve of the oval's edge create great arcs across the picture plane.<sup>16</sup>

Mary Alice Evatt's interest in the figure also made her an effective sculptor. Attending lessons with Margel Hinder proved strenuous, as the subsequent inquisition by her husband often lasted well into the night. However, she produced a number of small figurines, mostly seated or prone female bodies, again with simple, rhythmic lines and reduced detail. Decades later, she attempted landscapes under the tutelage of Desiderius Orban. Her early artistic style, however, rarely crossed into other genres or modernist schools of painting.

Despite all her training and the many hours she passed working in art studios in Australia and Paris, it is Bert Evatt, not Mary Alice Evatt's, interest in modern art that is frequently noted in the art histories. The judge attracts this attention for his apparent opposition, in art as in politics, to Robert Menzies. In Melbourne, for example, an open rift emerged between artists (and art-lovers) leaning towards modernist techniques, and those preferring realism, romanticism and classicism. Mary Alice was a student at Bell's school, while her husband a vocal and intensely interested onlooker when controversy erupted. It was sparked by news of plans to establish an Australian Academy of Art with a charter from the Royal Academy in London. The Academy intended to 'speak with one authoritative voice on the many questions that concern the right development of the Fine

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<sup>15</sup> 'Colourful Glimpses of Life Among Art Students', *AWW*, 28 Jan. 1939, p.24.

<sup>16</sup> Much of Evatt's work from this period is held in the private collection of the Evatts' daughter, Rosalind Carrodus, Leura, hidden away from all but the prying historian's eye.

Arts in this country'.<sup>17</sup> The idea, previously mooted by Robert Menzies in 1932, was discussed and formally approved by Sydney's Society of Artists in 1935. With some difficulties it was officially formed on 19 June 1937, in Canberra.

According to the core art histories, the trouble arose partly because Melbourne modernists believed that the Academy would enforce one vision of Australian art – an anti-modernist one. Menzies' comments at the opening in April 1937 of the Victorian Artists' Society are commonly regarded as the catalyst to the ensuing controversy. On that occasion, he spoke of the proposal to form the Australian Academy of Art (AAA), of the need to set standards in Australian art, and the universality of the language spoken by 'great art'. Modernists, he asserted, indicating a wall of work contributed by Bell's Contemporary Group, 'talk a different language'.<sup>18</sup> His comments set off a heated debate in the press, primarily between George Bell, Adrian Lawlor, Norman MacGeorge, and Basil Burdett on the one side and Menzies, James MacDonald, Max Meldrum, and Harold Herbert on the other. Adrian Lawlor compiled the bulk of this valuable copy into a small publication entitled *Arquebus*.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, heated informal discussions took place at Gino Nibbi's Leonardo Bookshop throughout 1937, with the active participation of Arnold Shore, William Frater, John Reed, Peter Bellew, Adrian Lawlor and others. The net result was that, at the instigation of George Bell, these artists combined to found the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) on 13 July 1938.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the formation of the CAS cannot be blamed solely on the opening remarks made by Menzies at the Victorian Art Society exhibition. In a Society meeting held one

<sup>17</sup> Australian Academy of Art, First Exhibition, catalogue, Education Department Art Gallery, Loftus Street, Sydney, April 1938, p.4; see also, Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.40.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Menzies speech at opening of Victorian Art Society exhibition, 27 April 1937, quoted in B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.216.

<sup>19</sup> See Adrian Lawlor, *Arquebus*, (Melbourne: Ruskin Press, 1937). See also Haese, *Rebel and Precursors*, p.42; and B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, pp.216-17.

<sup>20</sup> Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.46; and B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.218.



month prior to the exhibition, Bell and Frater had urged a vote condemning the Academy. The subsequent staging of an exhibition that prominently displayed a body of modern work may be seen as a provocative move.<sup>21</sup> It thus appears that the modernist offensive had already been launched before the exhibition. Menzies simply played into modernist hands by denouncing their work in public.

Bert Evatt's opposition to Menzies' artistic outlook also became public knowledge in the context of the debate over the Academy and the founding of the Contemporary Art Society. Although Evatt had opened an exhibition of paintings by a friend, the Melbourne cubist and future wife of Sam Atyeo, Moya Dyring, in 1934 and made public statements in favour of modern art in 1936, it is was the opening of Dyring's second exhibition in June 1937 following the onset of the Academy debate that provoked a conservative response.<sup>22</sup> On that occasion Evatt made a plea for Australian galleries to show more modern paintings, and argued that 'ordinary people' determined to appreciate beauty often made better judges of art than artists.<sup>23</sup> The new director of the National Gallery of Victoria, and the art world's reigning cultural conservative, James MacDonald responded to Bert Evatt's comments in the *Sun* – Australian art galleries simply did not like modern art and it should not be hung in the gallery at all.<sup>24</sup> On making the opening speech for the Contemporary Art Society inaugural exhibition on 6 June 1939 Bert Evatt accused the Academy of Australian Art of the 'unwarranted assumption of pontifical authority'. Echoing George

<sup>21</sup> *SMH*, 6 March 1937, p.18.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators: the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986), p.68; and 'Mr Justice Evatt Criticises Art Academy Views On Modernism', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 3 June 1937, p.3. See also Juliet Peers, 'Dyring, Moya Claire', *ADB*, vol. 14, pp.67-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Herald*, 3 June.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in B Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.218. Richard Haese ascribed the 'highpoint' of 'conservatism in Australian culture' more to the appointment of MacDonald 'to the directorship of Australia's premier art institution' than to the 'formation of the 'Academy in 1937'. See Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.52.

Bell's words he concluded, 'God save the fine arts in this country'.<sup>25</sup> One newspaper correspondent, in reporting on the opening, drew similarities between the particularly contemporary issue of war, and art. There were 'paint-slinging and word-slinging battles' and 'cross-fire between Conservatives and Radicals'. 'Mr Justice Evatt' led the 'charge'.<sup>26</sup> In reality, the full text of Evatt's speech on that occasion shows that much more depth attended his reasoning than the sensationalist copy implies.<sup>27</sup> Two months after the CAS inaugural exhibition, Evatt opened Exhibition I featuring eight artists from the Crowley-Fizelle school at the David Jones Gallery in Sydney. He did so in a restrained and informative manner, his speech defending and explaining the modernists' attempt at expression through emphasis on formal elements, rather than photographic imitation.<sup>28</sup> Both Bernard Smith and Richard Haese accept Evatt's centrality to the controversy, recalling his intellectual and political opposition to Robert Menzies, ignoring his other more moderate speeches of the period, and the fact that he was abroad in 1938. None of the studies on the period mention Mary Alice.

The known political opposition of Bert Evatt and Menzies is repeatedly used to emphasise their artistic antipathy, and to contribute to the polemic of historical accounts of the battle between modernists and reactionaries during the period. In Sydney, the Evatts between them were linked to each of the key flash points in the confrontation of modern and conservative artistic forces. These included the exhibition of French and British contemporary art, the award of the 1943 Archibald prize to William Dobell, and the nomination of the radical Peter Bellew for a vacant position on the Board of Trustees of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales. The vitriolic pen of the etcher and art critic

<sup>25</sup> 'Academy of Art Criticised. Mr Justice Evatt's Views', *SMH*, 7 June 1939, p.15; and "'God Save Art": Gibe By Evatt', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 1939, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> 'Art and the Moderns. A Melbourne Storm. Academy Defends Itself', *SMH*, 3 July 1939, p.10.

<sup>27</sup> See draft in EFC, 'Contemporary Art Society' folder.

<sup>28</sup> 'Defence of Modern Art. Mr Justice Evatt's Views', *SMH*, 18 Aug. 1939, p.6.

Lionel Lindsay<sup>29</sup>, who regularly corresponded with Menzies concerning art matters, aided the art historiographical construction of a dichotomous relationship.

In Sydney, controversies over modern art had arisen intermittently since Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin held their 'Colour in Art' exhibition in 1919 and *The Sun's* art critic, Howard Ashton, reputedly swore to squash such 'elaborate and pretentious bosch'.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the 1920s, the 'Leviticus' as Bernard Smith called it, 'the old men of the tribe ... began to lay down the law for the guidance of the young'.<sup>31</sup> Enacted by art critics, art society committees, and NAGNSW trustees, the law did not allow for new developments. Yet by the 1930s, modern art had become sufficiently well known to attract sporadic public debate. In 1933, a travelling exhibition of British Contemporary Art arranged by the Australian-born London-based gallery manager, Alleyne Zander, proved contentious. The ensuing exchange in the press was labelled the 'Zandrian War'.<sup>32</sup> The next exhibition to attract the same level of public heat was the exhibition of British and French Modern Art, initially arranged by Basil Burdett on behalf of Keith Murdoch, general manager of the Melbourne *Herald*, and first shown at the Melbourne Town Hall from 16 October 1939. It did not include artwork on the radical extreme, but it represented a more comprehensive and provocative glimpse at key European artistic developments than the progressive art community and the general public had previously encountered in Australia.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Bernard Smith, 'Lindsay, Percival Charles, Sir Lionel Arthur, Norman Alfred Williams, Ruby and Sir Ernest Daryl', *ADB*, vol. 10, pp.106-15.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Wakelin, 'Recollections of a Post Impressionist', *Art in Australia*, vol.4, no.4, March 1967, p.291.

<sup>31</sup> B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.195.

<sup>32</sup> Christine France, 'Zander, Alleyne Clarice', Kerr, *Heritage*, pp.479-80. See also Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, p.198; and Letters to the Editor, *SMH*, 21 April 1933, p.4; 24 April 1933, p.6; 26 April 1933, p.6; 28 April 1933, p.7; 1 May 1933, p.10; 3 May 1933, p.8; 'Modern Art. Need for Careful Study. Miss Gladys Owen's Lecture', *SMH*, 3 May 1933, p.10; and 'Contemporary Art. Craftsmen and Poseurs. Some Local Needs (by our own commissioner)', *SMH*, 22 May 1933, p.13.

<sup>33</sup> See 'Modern Art. Brilliant Exhibition. Works of British and French Painters', *SMH*, 20 Nov. 1939, p.4. Also Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.63; and The Melbourne *Herald*, 'Exhibition of French and British

Ostensibly, concern about expenses prevented the NAGNSW from holding the exhibition when the collection arrived in Sydney. Instead, the *Daily Telegraph* agreed to sponsor the Sydney showing and it opened at the David Jones George Street gallery in November 1939. Among the guide lecturers arranged to assist the many uncertain viewers was Bert Evatt.<sup>34</sup> The collection of French and British contemporary art did not attract controversy, however, until mid-way through 1940. Fears for the safe return of the paintings to their European owners, when put to the trustees, led to a 'loan' of approximately twenty paintings from the exhibition to the NAGNSW. The pictures were hung in various formations, with decreasing prominence over the ensuing six months. When the trustees assigned the collection to the basement in June 1940 the modernists reacted. Jean Bellette, Paul Haefliger, Thea Proctor, and John D. Moore, all artists engaged in the use of particular modern styles and techniques and proponents of modernist art in general, separately took the trustees to task for their decision.<sup>35</sup> Artists and art lovers of modernist inclinations also wrote directly to the gallery. A letter from Peter Bellew, an

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Contemporary Art', catalogue, Melbourne Town Hall, from 16/10/39, in Evatt Foundation Collection, Flinders University Library Special Collections, 'Evatt – Cultural Activities – Art (b)' folder. Significant painters featured in the exhibition included the profoundly influential post-impressionists Paul Cezanne, Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh. Other early post-impressionists included the 'neo-Impressionists' or 'Pointillists' as they called themselves, Georges Pierre Seurat and Paul Signac, as well as Maurice Utrillo and the symbolist Pierre Bonnard. The famous Fauve Henri Matisse was represented, as was Maurice de Vlaminck, and the Italian primitivist Amedeo Modigliani. Key cubists included Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Fernand Leger, while works by Giorgio de Chirico, Salvadore Dali, and Max Ernst meant that some surrealist works were seen. The exhibition also included a small number of works by French sculptors. From Britain, key modernists Duncan Grant, Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman, J.D. Innes, Augustus John, and Henry Lamb, almost all from the Slade School and New English Art Club, were included. Impressionists such as Richard Sickert and P. Wilson Steer, and fine draughtsmen like Henry Tonks also of the Slade School featured in the English collection. Tendencies to move beyond post-impressionism in the British section were displayed by Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Graham Sutherland and the expatriate Australian John William Power.

<sup>34</sup> The Trustees refused to pay over £100, while the *Daily Telegraph* reportedly paid £500 'for the right to exhibit'. See James Macdonald, untitled pencil draft, n.d., in Papers of James Macdonald, NLA MS 430, box 2, folder 3; and Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.57. Also Minutes of a Special Meeting (MSM-NAGNSW), 14 July 1939; Minutes of Monthly Meetings 28 July 1939 and 25 Aug. 1939, in Minutes of the Monthly Meetings of the Trustees of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (MMM-NAGNSW), 20 December 1929 – 1939, ML FM4 3118, pp.1966, 1981, 1992; and Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.57.

<sup>35</sup> Letters to the Editor, by Jean Bellette and Paul Haefliger, *SMH*, 14 June 1940, p.3; Thea Proctor, *SMH*, 15 June 1940, p.8; and John D. Moore, *SMH*, 18 June 1940, p.5. See also various MMM-NAGNSW,

original participant in the formation of the Victorian Contemporary Art Society, enclosed a petition signed by 265 artists and students.<sup>36</sup> Unconvinced by the modernist outcry, the board drafted a statement in defence of their policy, conveyed the details to Bellew, and forwarded a copy to the papers.<sup>37</sup>

The Evatts' link to the modernist protest came through their acquaintance with its chief protagonists and their involvement in the founding of the Sydney branch of the Contemporary Art Society. Late in 1939, Peter Bellew a young, and some believed culturally sophisticated journalist, closely associated with George Bell and John Reed in the formation of the original CAS in Melbourne, arrived in Sydney. He had taken over the organisation of the Melbourne *Herald* exhibition when Basil Burdett fell ill.<sup>38</sup> At Reed's suggestion, Bellew followed the exhibition to Sydney and tried to use the enthusiasm it generated to found a new branch of the CAS. Through Bert Evatt he obtained introductions to Frank and Margel Hinder and later met with a small group of contemporary artists at the Evatts' Balmoral home. Friction in Melbourne contributed to fears that Bellew sought to create a radical, even communist, art society in Sydney. Many friends of the moderate liberal, George Bell, such as Rah Fizelle, Frank Hinder and the Evatts thus entertained doubts over Bellew's intentions. Consequently, the official formation of the Sydney branch did not take place until 13 August 1940, after the trustees' removal of the *Herald* exhibition pictures created a temporary sense of unity.<sup>39</sup> Uncertainties about the direction of the Sydney branch of the Contemporary Art Society

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from 15 Dec. 1939, p.2044, through 1940 and 1941 for further details on the trustees' policies concerning the pictures.

<sup>36</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 22 July 1940, p.2128; 'Pictures Removed to Basement. Loan Exhibition. Protest to Gallery', *SMH*, 17 July 1940, p.12; and R.H. Jerrold-Nathan, Letter to the Ed., *SMH*, 24 June 1940, p.4.

<sup>37</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 22 July 1940, pp.2127-2128.

<sup>38</sup> B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.230; Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, pp.62, 69; and Dutton, *Innovators*, pp.69-70.

<sup>39</sup> Draft correspondence, Frank Hinder to Peter Crockett, n.d., in Frank Hinder, *Further Papers*, Part 2, ML MSS 5720 ADD-ON 2062/2. Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, pp.68-71; Crockett, *Evatt: A Life*, p.22; and Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.70.

surfaced with the opening of its first exhibition, which included the work of the now more radical Melbourne branch, at the David Jones gallery in September 1940. It included, at Bellew's insistence, Sidney Nolan's *Boy in the Moon*, which even some members of the society thought pushed artistic boundaries.<sup>40</sup> The public response to the exhibition consisted mostly of a search for understanding. It was Lionel Lindsay's late public commentary that added fuel to the fire. Proclaiming himself an authority, having spent some time in Europe, he judged the Australian work to be unoriginal in modernist terms. He blamed what he perceived as the imitation of 'German degenerates' on the apparently large majority of foreign artists that contributed to the CAS exhibition, and accused them of tainting 'Australian aesthetics'.<sup>41</sup> Replete with inaccuracies and anti-Semitic sentiment, Lindsay's letter instantly made him the target of modernists and pedantic readers alike. It worked well for Peter Bellew, the new *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic, who smugly slammed Lindsay's allegations.<sup>42</sup>

Art historical accounts thus found two new personalities to fuel the radical-conservative polarity of their polemic. To the Lindsay-Bellew contest, they could add Menzies, the trustee James McGregor, and James MacDonald, all of whom Lindsay regularly communicated with, on one side; and Warwick Fairfax of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Bert Evatt, on the other side. Lindsay's *Addled Art*, published in 1943, represented the continuance of the sentiment of the 1940 confrontation. The hostilities simmered until Bellew was considered for nomination to the board of trustees in 1944. By this time, Mary Alice had been appointed to the board by Bert's brother, Clive, then a Labour member of the state parliament, and minister for education. Bellew's nomination also coincided with the board's efforts to find a Director to replace Will Ashton, who had

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<sup>40</sup> Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, pp.69-71.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to the Ed., *SMH*, 16 Oct. 1940, p.7.

<sup>42</sup> *SMH*, 19 Oct. 1940, p.10; 17 Oct. 1940, p.3; 18 Oct. 1940, p.5; and 22 Oct. 1940, p.5.



recently resigned. Louis McCubbin, son of the pioneering Australian painter Frederick McCubbin and Director of the South Australian Gallery, was a favourite, but Lindsay warned him of the possibility that he would have to work with Bellew as a member of the board.<sup>43</sup>

It is easy to understand the art historical drawing up of battle-lines when examining the vitriol that accompanied the 'Bellew affair'.<sup>44</sup> Distrusting Bellew, the Fairfax newspapers, and the Evatts, Lionel Lindsay repeatedly alleged that they acted together in opposition to him and the board as a whole. In less than eloquent form he asserted that:

The Press have banded [sic] together for the last four years has taken the Contemporary Art Society to its [illegible] and not merely attacked the Trust but a Cabal consisting of certain members of the Soc of A. [sic] The Medworth Push at the Technological [sic] School and the Cont Art Soc. [sic] (powerfully supported by Fairfax and Bellew and Haefliger) has linked consistently against us.<sup>45</sup>

James Macdonald had earlier made clear that he included the Evatts in the modernist push as well as Keith Murdoch, owner of the Melbourne *Herald*, President of the National Gallery of Victoria, and sponsor of the original 1939 exhibition of British and French modern art:

So Hitler Murdoch has told Abetz Evatt what the trustees of the N.A.G. of NSW must do. Mussolini/Fairfax thinks he's in it too! ... Murdoch now has Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide in his pouch.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See Lionel Lindsay (LL) to G.K. Sutton, 9 March 1944 and 1 April 1944, in Lindsay Family Papers, SLV MS 8530, box 993/2 concerning Lindsay's concerns over Bellew's nomination; Louis McCubbin to J.B. McGregor, 25 March 1944, in J.B. McGregor Papers, ML MSS 2615, p.137, and LL to Menzies, 2 May 1944, in Lindsay Papers, Lionel, Sir Papers, 1909-61, NLA MS 5631 over Lindsay's warning to McCubbin about Bellew's nomination; Louis McCubbin to LL, 28 March 1944, in LFP, SLV MS 8530, box 993/2; LL to Sydney Ure Smith, 26 Dec. 1943, in Smith, Sydney Ure Papers, ML MSS 31, vol.2, p.119 about discussions concerning McCubbin and other nominees for the vacant directorship; and LL to Menzies, 3 April 1944, Lindsay Papers, NLA concerning the request for Menzies' intervention. See also various minutes, particularly MMM-NAGNSW, 24 Feb. 1944, p.2629; 10 March 1944, pp.2634-35; and 24 March 1944, p.2643.

<sup>44</sup> Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.253.

<sup>45</sup> LL to G.K. Sutton, 8 Feb. 1944, in LFP, SLV MS 8530, box 993/2.

<sup>46</sup> J.S. MacDonald to LL, 8 Nov. 1942, in LFP, SLV MS 9104, box 1999.

Writing to Robert Menzies, Lindsay made clear that he, too, included the Evatts in the anti-establishment scheme, 'I'm certain Clive Evatt, in conjunction with the Bellew-Fairfax-Cont. Art Group [sic] held up Louis McCubbin's appointment. Mrs E. [sic] nominated Bellew'.<sup>47</sup> Recalling her 'ardent support of Modernism in every shape', he counted her as part of the '*SM Herald* [sic], Evatt, Cont Art Soc [sic] junta'.<sup>48</sup> Convinced by such rhetoric, Richard Haese speaks in terms of an attempted radical 'infiltration' of the gallery when naming Mary Alice as the only trustee to support Bellew. Geoffrey Dutton inaccurately implies that 'Lionel Lindsay and the old guard of the Trustees' wanted McCubbin as a trustee rather than a director. More accurately he states that they 'loathed Bellew'. He continues on the quote Lindsay concerning Mary Alice's role in 'insisting on Bellew's name going up'.<sup>49</sup> In the end, neither Bellew, nor McCubbin took on their proposed roles at the NAGNSW.

For Bernard Smith, the announcement that William Dobell had won the 1943 Archibald Prize for his portrait of Joshua Smith, constituted a more important clash in the 'battle between the ancients and moderns'<sup>50</sup> and for Humphrey McQueen, the 'final trial of strength'.<sup>51</sup> While both Mary Alice Evatt and Lionel Lindsay were on the board of trustees and present at the time that the decision was made, neither were involved directly in the ensuing court battle over the award. In fact, the entire incident mixed the apparent loyalties of the artists, critics, and trustees involved. Lindsay's *Addled Art* was advocated as an important guiding text by the artists leading the protest against the award, particularly Mary Edwards, a painter of miniatures, portraits and still-lives, and the

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<sup>47</sup> LL to Menzies, 19 April 1944, in Lindsay, NLA.

<sup>48</sup> LL to Menzies, 24 March 1943, in Lindsay, NLA; and Lindsay to Sutton, 1 April 1944, in LFP, SLV MS 8530, box 993/2.

<sup>49</sup> Dutton, *The Innovators*, pp.117, 18. See also Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.253.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.264.

<sup>51</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944*, (Sydney: Alternate Publishing Cooperative Limited, 1979), p.42.

portraitist Joseph Wolinski. Paul Haefliger, a modernist, having replaced Bellew as art critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, spoke in court for Dobell and the board of trustees in support of the award.<sup>52</sup> At the heart of the protest against the Dobell portrait lay unspoken and unanswered questions about the nature and purpose of art.

To consider the respective clashes over the academy, the modern European paintings and the Dobell prize, as many art histories do, solely in terms of the acceptance or rejection of modernism is misleading. Modernism is a tricky subject for many reasons. First, the word in its many variations is most often used in art histories as a blanket term for a range of separate artistic developments that took place in Australia between the wars. Geoffrey Dutton at least takes a broader approach, citing an 1830 definition meaning 'sympathy for what is modern'.<sup>53</sup> Yet sympathy may not be the right word. Studies of early to mid-twentieth century Anglo-American modernism point to its ambivalent response to the reality of twentieth century society and politics. In writing on the metaphysics of modernism, Michael Bell uses the subheading, 'The Collapse of Idealism'.<sup>54</sup> Bernard Bergonzi argues that the 'modern' refers to the pre-1914 'wave of innovation and transformation' across the arts in Europe, represented by Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Pound and Joyce, that was characterised by artistic alienation, subjectivity, and rejection of twentieth century modernity. Alternately the 'contemporary', as 'exemplified by Wells, Shaw and Bennett' (all English writers) was less likely to be alienated or metaphysical, more likely to be reformist and accepting of transformed existences.<sup>55</sup> The modernist obsession with the new, in Sara Blair's words, 'could

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.264.

<sup>53</sup> Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.xiii.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Bell, 'The Metaphysics of Modernism', in Michael Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.18. See also Marianne Dekoven, 'Modernism and gender', in Levenson, *Companion to Modernism*, p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *The Myth of Modernism and Twentieth Century Literature*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), pp. xi, xii.

simultaneously mean the open embrace of modernity's opportunities and the defensive rejection of its challenges'. Anxiety, anti-modern loathing, racial suprematism, and fascist inclinations on the one hand and the open embrace of urbanisation, mass production, and new aesthetic, scientific and social possibilities on the other, may both be regarded as aspects of modernism.<sup>56</sup>

A similar pattern may be observed in the Australian context. Notably many of the positive Australian responses of the interwar period came from the hand of long term expatriates such as Henry Handel Richardson and Christina Stead, while the Lindsay brothers, Menzies, newspaper critics, and representatives of state libraries and galleries led the attack on modern art and literary forms.<sup>57</sup> Yet acceptance and rejection mixed in personal engagements with modernism. Norman Lindsay, for example, in his idealism, his belief that art not religion 'would affirm' the values of 'Beauty, Life and Courage', his aesthetic elitism, his Nietzschean sympathies and his renewal of past traditions in *Vision's* 'Australian Renaissance' clearly evinced a modernism belied by his rejection of modern life and cultural forms.<sup>58</sup> In a way this constituted a naive modernism, and a misunderstanding of the self-conscious use of aesthetics by modernists. The controversies in Sydney and Melbourne must be considered as the inevitable clash of the hopeful and the anxious in artistic responses to modernity. To draw straight dividing lines and depict in black and white the division between the 'modern' and 'conservative' camps almost misses the point. In the same way, the personal opposition of Lionel Lindsay and Peter

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<sup>56</sup> Sara Blair, 'Modernism and the politics of culture', in Levenson, *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 166-7.

<sup>57</sup> Julian Croft, 'Responses to Modernism, 1915-1965', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, Oct. 1988, pp.412, 416-17.

<sup>58</sup> Ursula Prunster, 'Norman Lindsay and the Australian Renaissance', in A. Bradley and T. Smith (ed.s), *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.161-3.

Bellew, or Robert Menzies and Bert Evatt has diverted attention from their joint participation in the evolution of Western understandings of culture.

The emphasis on key figures, in reducing the launch of the Academy, and the Sydney debates, to a series of dichotomous relationships, also obscures the actions and intentions of other people. In particular, the focus in historical accounts on Bert Evatt's intellectual and later political opposition to Robert Menzies, the continuance of the polemic of this opposition in the clash between Lindsay and Bellew, and the imputation of a general radical opposition in the context of the Bellew and Dobell affairs masks historiographical understandings of Mary Alice Evatt's endeavours. It also removes her from the arena of agency. She appears almost puppet-like in the way that her interests are made to appear to be complementary to those of her husband and brother-in-law. One observer concluded that her interests were 'subsumed by her husband's career'.<sup>59</sup> Yet, by separating Mary Alice's actions from Bert's, and comparing her efforts to those of other women culturists, it becomes clear that she did exert influence as a cultural agent in an independent manner. Mary Alice's actions also reveal with greater clarity a concern with cultural definitions felt and expressed by diverse social groups throughout the western world, that accounts touching on the careers of Bert Evatt, Robert Menzies, and Lionel Lindsay have either misrepresented or obscured.

### **The Woman Culturist**

In many respects, Mary Alice Evatt's actions display the same approach to culture as the Society women who painted in Ethel Anderson's old stable in the late 1920s, or organised a Women's Auxiliary in support of the Exhibition of International Art held in

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<sup>59</sup> Kerr, *Heritage*, p.347.

1936. Although Mary Alice Evatt related to the art community as an artist, she also acted as an art-lover, well placed to exert influence on their behalf. She may not have used networks of committeewomen, or called on the prestige value of particular family names, but evidence suggests that, like them, she applied standards and drew distinctions in her personal judgements on art. She also encouraged artists, art-lovers, and art societies in an interested, helpful, sometimes nurturing manner reminiscent of the 'fellowing' women of the previous decade, and the feminists of the first decade of the century. This nurturance is clear in Mary Alice's relationship with her husband, and in her encouragement of his judicial, authorial and political aspirations. It also evident in the more subtle forms of patronage that Mary Alice individually offered modern artists.

During the 1930s, Bert Evatt's legal, publishing and political careers accelerated rapidly. In 1939 he published *The Rum Rebellion*, and in 1940, he chose to resign from his position as High Court Judge and enter federal politics. Mary Alice appears to have contributed to the decision to undertake both of these challenges. To some observers she did so by subordinating her own artistic interests to the emotional and day-to-day support that her husband's work made necessary. A headline printed shortly after the announcement that Bert Evatt planned to move into federal politics proclaimed that Mary Alice 'Shared in the Decision'. Yet, according to the article, she put her husband's interest first, as she had done before when she discontinued her studies in architecture to marry him.<sup>60</sup>

Mary Alice may have approved the move into federal politics, but she did so as an expression of her own commitment to radical politics. Both she and Bert had felt sympathy for the strikers in 1917, a year before they met. Later, moved by the impact of

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'She Shared In Decision. Mrs Evatt Knows Politics', *Melbourne Age*, 30 Aug. 1940, p.124.



the Depression on members of the working class, Mary Alice became involved in the organisation of a co-operative in which women made inexpensive clothing for families in need.<sup>61</sup> She was sympathetic to the loss of human dignity suffered by the unemployed and transients, and applauded reforms that aimed at reducing the humiliation associated with receiving the dole.

In an intelligent and considered manner, Mary Alice also contributed to her husband's various political, diplomatic and literary endeavours. In the 1920s, she acted as researcher and sounding board for Bert as he wrote a biography on the former state Labor premier, William Holman. Starting a rough journal when Bert decided to run for the Balmain Electorate in 1924 she devised a number of campaign plans. Along with other women supporters, she canvassed numerous districts, including the whole of Glebe. The work proved 'extraordinarily interesting'.<sup>62</sup> Later she carefully drew up long lists of advantages and disadvantages when Bert spoke of moving into Federal politics.<sup>63</sup> Years later she named her two chief concerns. A federal political career would prevent him from developing his abilities, which she felt to be considerable, as a writer. He had also earned a reputation as a judge, both in England and America, and made 'important judgements'. On their many long evening walks during which they discussed the issue, these and other questions were tackled, until, at last, Mary Alice was convinced.<sup>64</sup> Even at a personal level, Mary Alice also displayed a careful detachment in her response to Bert's moodiness; their love letters were as much full of gentle scolding as encouragement.

It is evident that, personally, Bert Evatt relied on the supportive agreement of his wife. Mary Alice accompanied him on his first mission to Washington in mid-1942 for

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<sup>61</sup> Dale, MAE, *ADB*, p.115.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Alice Evatt, Oral History Transcript, NLA, TRC 121/41, MAE1:2/12; and 'Commonplace Book', n.d., rough notes, n.p., in EFC, 'Evatt, Mary Alice – Miscellaneous, Folder a'.

<sup>63</sup> MAE, 'Commonplace Book', EFC.

<sup>64</sup> MAE, NLA oral history, 1:2/29-32.

this reason. To overcome Bert's initial reluctance, the Prime Minister John Curtin realised that he had to first persuade Mary Alice to join the mission. Curtin gave her a mission, albeit a very stereotyped one, of her own – to take care of her husband and the other members of the team.<sup>65</sup> Following the mission's success, Bert claimed that he could not have done it without the assistance of Mary Alice,<sup>66</sup> while an *Australian Women's Weekly* reporter attributed 'much of the behind-the-scenes credit for the success of Dr. Evatt's work abroad' on his 'charming, efficient, quiet-voiced' wife. She observed that:

[p]roud and competent, Mrs Evatt is the shining example of the wife who shares unobtrusively her husband's work, there when she is needed, self-effacing when she is not.<sup>67</sup>

Just as she contributed to the Labor cause by emotionally, domestically and philosophically supporting her husband, so it is likely that Mary Alice added her weight to the early struggles of the modernist communities through her encouragement of and contribution to Bert's role as spokesman. Bert's heavily annotated draft speech for the opening of the inaugural Contemporary Art Society exhibition suggests multiple corrective readings.<sup>68</sup> If Mary Alice did not physically edit and reword parts of the speech, the collaborative nature of their relationship would suggest that she at least contributed ideas and details to its content.

As it was, Mary Alice Evatt acquired cultural agency by personally assisting numerous artists and art societies. As a student attending schools of modern art in both Sydney and Melbourne, and travelling regularly between Sydney and Melbourne for Bert's High Court sittings during the mid-1930s, Mary Alice Evatt proved a valuable point

<sup>65</sup> Dorothy Drain, 'Mrs Evatt did her share of a big job well', *AWW*, 4 July 1942, p.13; and MAE, NLA Oral History, 2:1/2-3.

<sup>66</sup> 'Dr Evatt Home. Confident of Victory', *SMH*, 22 June 1942, p.5.

<sup>67</sup> *AWW*, 4 July.

<sup>68</sup> '[Bert Evatt and MAE?]', 'The Contemporary Art Society', typescript and pencil draft, in EFC, "Contemporary Art Society" folder.

of contact.<sup>69</sup> Having purchased a 'flower picture' by Arnold Shore in Melbourne, for example, she lent it for a Contemporary Group exhibition in Sydney. She was in Sydney when the Group Twelve show was held in Melbourne, so the secretary mailed a catalogue to her in Sydney. Arnold Shore also mailed a report on the success of a Bourke Street studio exhibition to her Sydney address and enclosed a catalogue. Forwarding the best wishes of everyone at the studio, he fished for early news on the sort of work that Sydney artists were likely to send for the Melbourne Contemporary Group exhibition. Later he confirmed that the 'Sydney quota in our show made a welcome difference', particularly the work of Crowley, Fizelle and Wakelin. Shore also informed Evatt that he intended to show his portrait of Bert Evatt in Melbourne before sending it up to Sydney.<sup>70</sup>

A consistency also attended the Evatts' joint approach to modern art that went beyond politics, personalities and rivalries. It was a mutual interest, a shared lifestyle, and the foundation for a collection of life-long friendships. Together, the Evatts were generous patrons and voracious collectors. Anyone entering the Evatt household could not miss the many paintings and sculptures they had accumulated. Hal Missingham, a future director of the art gallery, recalled:

They consistently bought paintings and drawings from young artists, from Drysdale and Nolan, and myself, and as gifts to their friends and relations, anybody that was getting married or engaged, or had a success in academic or school circles, any kind of celebration at all, they'd buy and give them a painting, and they gave a whole stack of paintings away to local councils and to one place and another and to art galleries.<sup>71</sup>

This patronage dated from the 1930s, or perhaps earlier. Arnold Shore wrote to Mary Alice about the 'flower picture' she had purchased in 1934.<sup>72</sup> Numerous other examples

<sup>69</sup> As suggested by Ken Buckley, Barbara Dale and Wayne Reynolds in *Doc Evatt: Patriot, Internationalist, Fighter and Scholar*, (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1994), p.120.

<sup>70</sup> Shore to MAE, 2 Aug. 1934 and Shore to MAE, n.d., in EFC, MAE corr 2; and Margaret North to MAE, 23 June 19[?] in EFC, MAE corr 1.

<sup>71</sup> Missingham, quoted in Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.69.

<sup>72</sup> Shore to MAE, 2 Aug. 1934, EFC, MAE corr 2.

confirm their prolific, sometimes extravagant buying habits: they purchased Margel Hinder's ironbark sculpture, *Mother and Child*, from Exhibition I held in the David Jones gallery in July 1939; a 1918 Modigliani portrait of the American abstract artist Morgan Russell from the *Herald* exhibition for £1000; the stone *Head of a Woman*, dating from the 1920s, by the important Russian sculptor Ossip Zadkine; and Grace Crowley's 1936 painting, *Woman*.<sup>73</sup> They also sent prints and magazines that would not have otherwise reached Australian shores, while travelling in Europe and America, and later loaned their own prints out for exhibitions.<sup>74</sup>

The Evatts' patronage in fact began with simple acts of friendship. They felt most comfortable in the company of artists as opposed to politicians or the circles surrounding the legal profession, and remained friends for life with many artists that they met in Melbourne during the 1930s.<sup>75</sup> Sam Atyeo, whom the Evatts had met through Cynthia Reed, proved a jovial acquaintance, playing the judge's 'jester', and making him 'laugh at stories that no one else would have dared tell him'.<sup>76</sup> The artist's future wife, Moya Dyring, who experimented with cubism much earlier than other Melbourne artists, also became a friend. Bert Evatt opened two of her exhibitions before she departed with Atyeo for Paris. The two couples met again when the Evatts travelled there in 1938. Together Mary Alice and Moya enjoyed all that Paris had to offer. They studied, shopped and laughed. Moya also threw a memorable party to celebrate Mary Alice's birthday. Afterwards Dyring wrote regularly to Mary Alice from Nice, sharing sometimes very

<sup>73</sup> Frank Hinder letter to Crockett, Hinder Further Papers; 'Contract Note [re purchase of Modigliani]', n.d., in EFC, 'Cultural Activities - Art a' folder: 'Evatt Gift to Gallery', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Aug. 1963, cutting in Cantwell, Ida Florence, Mrs Harry J. Papers, ML MSS 1919, Herbert Vere Evatt, 1894-1965, scrapbook of cuttings, photos etc, compiled 1965-69, n.p.; and B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.211.

<sup>74</sup> Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.69; and Malcolm Otton, 'Recollections of a friend', in Jean Campbell, *James Cant and Dora Chapman*, (Sydney: Beagle Press, 1995), p.145.

<sup>75</sup> Carrodus, interview; and Buckley, et. al., *Doc Evatt*, p.410.

<sup>76</sup> Tennant, *Evatt*, p.179.

private thoughts and feelings.<sup>77</sup> At the onset of war, in his capacity as foreign minister, Bert Evatt secured work for Atyeo in America, and eventually made him a member of the Australian Diplomatic Corps. Afterwards, when they all gathered in Paris in 1946 for the first United Nations conference, Atyeo introduced the Evatts to Picasso.<sup>78</sup> A committed artist, Dyring continued to paint and exhibit. Both of the Evatts opened exhibitions for her in Australia, and following her death, Mary Alice made the sentimental, impractical, but ultimately successful, recommendation to the AGNSW trustees, that a studio be purchased in 'the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, as a permanent memorial to the late Moya Dyring'.<sup>79</sup>

From the earliest days of their contact with artistic communities, Mary Alice Evatt also maintained firm friendships with the Reeds and Nolans. The Evatts' daughter, Rosalind Carrodus confirmed Mary Alice Evatt's closeness to Cynthia Nolan, nee Reed. Cynthia Reed in fact proved a point of contact for many artists, and as with many others, she had introduced the Evatts to her elder brother, a lawyer, John Reed, and his wife, Sunday. In 1934, John and Sunday moved to a small farmhouse that they named *Heide*, situated near the Yarra River. There, the library, the hospitality, and the stimulating intellectual camaraderie combined to create a natural 'focus' for those 'involved in Melbourne's radical cultural life'.<sup>80</sup> Sidney Nolan joined the circle in 1938, and when the Evatts visited *Heide*, they often saw him painting frantically in the dining room.<sup>81</sup> Nolan's later marriage to Cynthia Reed completed the circle of friendship.

<sup>77</sup> MAE to 'Mother', 31 July 19[38]; and 'Marjie' [Dr Marjorie Tunley] to MAE, 16 Nov. 1949, both in EFC, MAE corr 2; and selected correspondence in EFC 'Dyring, Moya' folder.

<sup>78</sup> Buckley, et.al, *Doc Evatt*, (from Dutton), p.120.

<sup>79</sup> Cuttings in EFC, 'Dyring, Moya' folder; and MMM-AGNSW, 22 May 1970, in EFC, 'Art Gallery of N.S.W.' folder.

<sup>80</sup> Janine Burke (ed.), *Dear Sun: the letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed*, (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1995), p.11.

<sup>81</sup> Brian Adams, *Sidney Nolan: Such is Life*, (Milton's Point: Random House, 1987), p.58.

Mary Alice Evatt's attraction to the studio life and communion with fellow artists and art students was particularly marked in Sydney. She evidently revelled in the creative ambience of the studio of Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle. In that setting, she shared ambitions with other students, 'Joan Tillam and I are doing ballet studies for a big composition'. To that end they had 'been painting each morning at the studio'. They regularly painted three times a week, and attended lectures on Monday evenings.<sup>82</sup> With Grace Crowley, Evatt shared her interest in the French studios and artist colonies. Through Crowley she sought information from Anne Dangar on the teachings of Albert Gleizes. In 1939, Dangar sent Mary Alice a large woven hanging, while she and Crowley waited anxiously for her approval.<sup>83</sup> The Evatts also kept Crowley informed as to Dangar's safety when mail services became erratic after the onset of the Second World War.<sup>84</sup>

While the Evatts acted together as patrons and friends of Australian contemporary artists, it is important to note that the mutuality of their interest neither implied a uniformity of taste, nor belittled the agency of either. Separating their patronage into 'his' and 'hers' is naturally difficult. However, we do know that Mary Alice possessed an independent mind, and a tendency to an encouraging, though considered, helpfulness. She had spent many hours in art studios with fellow artists, and shared news and information with correspondents in other cities and countries. She cared, shared and nurtured.

Although Peter Crockett insists that Bert Evatt's interest in modern art was also independent, the evidence suggests that Mary Alice possessed a more thorough grounding in the visual arts and culture. Kylie Tennant argued that 'Mary Alice was the shopper and buyer of the family. She had her way (Bert concurring) in providing a life pattern more

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<sup>82</sup> 'Mother' [MAE, at Mosman] to Peter, 'Wed. night' and 'Mother' [MAE] to Peter, 7 March 19[?], both in EFC, 'Evatt – Family, Correspondence – Evatt to MAS Evatt' folder.

<sup>83</sup> Anne Dangar to Grace Crowley, 15 April 1939; and [August] 1939, in Grace Crowley papers, ML MSS 3252, vol.3, pp.15, 77.

<sup>84</sup> Crowley to MAE, 16 March 1942, in EFC, MAE folder 2.



elegant than he alone would have chosen'.<sup>85</sup> Despite his interest in the arts, he was not known at university as a 'highbrow', and enjoyed playing rugby, cricket, tennis and other sports.<sup>86</sup> While Mary Alice developed a strong understanding of developments in the art of sculpture, her husband, in Frank Hinder's opinion, seemed to remain oblivious to them.<sup>87</sup> Idiosyncratically, he found 'a certain vermillion [sic] red' aesthetically appealing, and seemed more inclined to favour impressionists and the most well known of the modernist pioneers than his wife whose tastes tended towards a more subtle and comprehensive list of favourites. Avid art-lovers, the Evatts learned much about contemporary and historical art during their travels, but Mary Alice, in particular, absorbed and readily recalled a wealth of information about artists, and art movements. Hal Missingham, the NAGNSW Director with whom she worked for many years while on the board of trustees, testified to the breadth of her knowledge, as did the long-serving President of the board, B.J. Waterhouse.<sup>88</sup>

Art, Mary Alice and her husband believed, offered more than the decorative adornment of life. It expanded an individual's mind; 'art helps to clarify one's thinking, one's way of life and to make it fundamentally sounder'. Artists like Picasso, whom Mary Alice greatly admired, 'brought into the light a great many beautiful, fascinating and fruitful ideas ... He believed that what was important was to get at the truth'. Art education, was therefore important:

"Life is short, art is long," and what we should do is to try and use art and literature and education to make people realise how short life is, but how much you can do if

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<sup>85</sup> Tennant, *Evatt*, p.97.

<sup>86</sup> Curnow, 'Mary Evatt', and 'Dr H.V. Evatt. Family Man, Lawyer, Author, Sportsman', *Pix*, 21 Sept. 1940. cutting in Cantwell Papers. See also MAE, NLA oral history, 1:1/10, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Hinder to Crockett in Frank Hinder, Further Papers, Part 2.

<sup>88</sup> Hal Missingham, quoted in Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.69; and *SMH*, 18 March 1943, p.4. Also, Carrodus, interview.

you try hard enough, within that period, and, then it will have been worth while being alive.<sup>89</sup>

Clumsily, Mary Alice was trying to express the extra-visual function that she believed art should play in society. It should educate, uplift, inspire an active concern for the betterment of humankind and aspire to truth.

Conviction in the moral, almost spiritual, or at least potentially civilising power of the arts, moved not only the Evatts, but of course the women culturists discussed in previous chapters. It also drove members of the conservative art establishment. 'The big emotions and motives are the sources from which art derives its message', James Macdonald declared to himself in a rough book of notes sometime in the 1930s. In the early 1920s, a concerned Sydney-sider proclaimed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Art is eternal'. Art 'lives on ... unquestioned, over-topping knowledge'. At about the same time, Sydney Ure Smith reviewed exhibitions by Hans Heysen and Lionel Lindsay, and spoke of their desire to portray 'the transcendent beauty' of nature. The 'new school' instead set out 'to prove the innate ugliness of all that seems beautiful'. To Macdonald, modernists not only perverted beauty, but were 'unconcerned with and only affect[ed] infinitesimally man's search for truth'.<sup>90</sup> Certainly Lionel Lindsay objected to what he perceived as the modernist disdain for the old masters, drawing, and careful observation of nature. He spoke of modern art forms in terms of the second-rate, artificial, and sterile, and lamented the neglect of genius.<sup>91</sup> Compared to the ideals held by committeewomen, 'fellowing' women, and Mary Alice Evatt, the terms were more emotive, and the reasoning more

<sup>89</sup> All the above comments from MAE, NLA oral history, 3:1/5; 2:2/29; and 1:2/35 respectively.

<sup>90</sup> See James Macdonald, undated, untitled notes, J.S. Macdonald Papers, NLA MS 430, box 1, pp.15, 27; *SMH*, 29 July 1922, p.10; and Sydney Ure Smith, draft, 'Heysen and Lindsay', in Smith, Sydney Ure Papers, vol. 1, p.231.

<sup>91</sup> Lionel Lindsay, 'The Exhibition of One Hundred and Fifty Years of Australian Art', in *Art in Australia*, no. 70, 1 March 1938, p.25.

elaborate and misleading, but the implication was the same – art was about excellence, seriousness and integrity. Art equalled culture; art equalled civilised society.

Modernism, James Macdonald and Lionel Lindsay believed, had become established as a result of the devious machinations of the greedy, who sold work of no worth for tidy profits. Deploring ‘this synthetic but virulent, inartistic polio myelitis, the crippling and mis-shapen scourge imported by culpably unforeseeing ego-maniacs and their would-be “smart” patronesses’, Macdonald pointed to the role of fashionable and impressionable women returning from European travels with news that these novelties were now tasteful.<sup>92</sup> In his mind the newspapermen who arranged the 1939 exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art, exploited the fickle tastes of such women. Curiosity and fashion may, indeed, explain the appeal of the exhibition. Not all understood the work exhibited at the exhibition of British and French modern art, though record crowds attended. Lady Gordon discerned a child’s playground in the English abstractionist Edward Wadsworth’s *The English Channel*.<sup>93</sup> A young woman, ‘shattered before Picasso’s “Danaeuses,”’ was overheard remarking to her partner, ‘if they’re dancers I’m a pineapple’.<sup>94</sup>

Women advocates of modern art cannot, however, be regarded simply as slaves to fashion. As Mary Eagle has argued, the links between the new woman, modern art and fashion were pronounced during the interwar period. Indeed, they were inter-related: the new woman was a modern figure.<sup>95</sup> The committeewomen supporting a plethora of cultural campaigns during the 1930s were fashionable, and, to some degree, modern women. They followed the lead of women like Beatrice Swinson, Lady Gordon and Ethel

<sup>92</sup> James Macdonald, untitled pencil draft, in Macdonald Papers, NLA MS 430, box 2, folder 3.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Jottings of the week by Miss Midnight’, *AWW*, 2 Dec. 1939, p.11.

<sup>94</sup> *SMH*, 21 Nov. 1939, p.4.

<sup>95</sup> Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, p.115.

Anderson, who implemented emancipationist claims of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods as each assumed a public role as a cultural advocate. Like them, modern middle class women drew hierarchical distinctions between cultural forms and practices. Though she recognised newer forms of art, Mary Alice likewise differentiated between the mundane or mediocre and the artistic. Though not fond of parties and outings, though she did not mix regularly in 'smart' social circles, Mary Alice Evatt was clearly a modern woman.

Not alone in advocating modern art in the 1930s and early 1940s, Mary Alice represented just one of a handful of Sydney women of the same ilk to campaign for its acceptance by the public and art establishment alike. A Victorian-born artist and London gallery manager, Alleyne Zander, organised an 'Exhibition of British Contemporary Art' to tour Australia in 1933. It sparked public debate in Sydney. Returning to Sydney in 1940, she gave lectures for the British Council, but not directly on modern art. She gave many others for the National Art Gallery.<sup>96</sup> The German sculptor, Eleanore Lange, arrived in Sydney in 1930. She exhibited with the short-lived Modern Art Centre founded by Dorrit Black during the same period, and with the Society of Women Artists mid-decade. From 1936 she published articles on modern art, and suggested the idea of holding Exhibition I in 1939. She wrote the foreword to the catalogue of the resultant exhibition held at the David Jones Gallery. Like Zander, Lange organised exhibitions of modern art during the 1930s, and lectured repeatedly for the National Art Gallery and other art organisations over the ensuing decade.<sup>97</sup> Through her work at the Sydney Teacher's College May Marsden over many years 'encouraged an experimental attitude in her

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<sup>96</sup> Christine France, 'Zander, Alleyne Clarice', Kerr (ed.), *Heritage*, pp.479-80.

<sup>97</sup> See Geoffrey Batchen, 'Lange, Eleanore Henrietta', Kerr (ed.), *Heritage*; Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.60; and various MMM-NAGNSW. See also Jane Hylton, 'Dorrit Black', Radi, *200 women*, p.176.

students'.<sup>98</sup> She also sought to increase tolerance and understanding of contemporary art in the art education of this period. As Geoffrey Dutton pointed out, 'on the strength of her influence on [Bernard] Smith alone, she would be worth remembering'.<sup>99</sup>

The scale of Mary Alice's direct patronage grew in the 1940s. Bert's entrance into federal politics and her role in the success of his endeavours abroad and at home attracted a great deal of publicity. In March 1943, appointed by her brother-in-law, the Minister for Education, Clive Evatt, she became a member of the board of trustees of the National Art Gallery of NSW. On 26 March 1943 she attended her first meeting.<sup>100</sup> The members of the board of trustees collectively welcomed Evatt into their midst with little ceremony. The President did, however, observe that she possessed 'considerable culture' and 'a great knowledge of art'. He acknowledged that her appointment realised that long sought after hope of women artists for a representative on the board.<sup>101</sup> *The Bulletin* made more of the achievement:

Through the board room of the National Gallery last Saturday morning ran a thrill of anticipation. For the first time in its history a woman trustee was to enter its portals. Every male trustee who could manage it was there to greet Mrs H.V. Evatt.<sup>102</sup>

Mary Alice Evatt's dual interest in art and women made her an appropriate person to take on the role of the first woman trustee. Previously she had both deliberately and inadvertently contributed to appreciation of the position and needs of Australian women. Her flight under war conditions on board a United States' naval aircraft in 1943

<sup>98</sup> Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.231.

<sup>99</sup> Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.61.

<sup>100</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 26 March 1943, p.2504.

<sup>101</sup> The Society of Women Painters had first raised the idea when the passing of J.F. Archibald created a vacancy on the board in 1919. On that occasion, the trustees circumvented the proposal by electing not to recommend a replacement to the Department of Education. See Pam James, "'No thank you, but do you have any painted fan decorations?'" Modernist women artists and the gatekeepers of culture' in Maryanne Dever (ed.), *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia 1910-1945*, (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1994), p.66; and MMM-NAGNSW, 1919, p.220. See also 'Mrs Evatt on Art Board', *SMH*, 18 March 1943, p.4.

<sup>102</sup> *Bulletin*, 24 March 1943, p.25.

constituted a first for women.<sup>103</sup> Comparing American and Australian experiences under war conditions, she revealed an ongoing fascination with and sympathy for the welfare of housewives. In so doing, she also voluntarily ‘act[ed] as an excellent ambassador for Australian women in America’, and amassed information ‘neatly compiled in clippings and reports for Australian women’.<sup>104</sup> Not long after her appointment to the board Mary Alice returned with her husband to America. Despite an operation that saw her hospitalised for a few weeks, she spoke repeatedly on the comparative experiences of American and Australian women. Her intelligence also challenged perceptions of politicians’ wives. When the Evatts visited London in 1945, an *Evening News* reporter noted with surprise that she ‘talk[ed] about politics with the knowledgeable assurance of an expert’.<sup>105</sup>

Considering her intelligence, her proclivity to artistic discrimination, and willingness to share news and information, Mary Alice Evatt’s appointment to the board of trustees appears justified. That she represented the interests of women and modernists was fortunate on both counts. Her approach to the needs of each, as well as the needs of the gallery and the art community in general, remained undeviating. In her early endeavours as a trustee further evidence may be found to link her to the women culturists of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Those endeavours now require examination.

### The Trustee

One result of the heightened debate over modernism that took place against the backdrop of world war, was an increased interrogation of the function, membership, and

<sup>103</sup> Curnow, ‘Mary Evatt’.

<sup>104</sup> Drain, ‘Mrs Evatt did her share’.

<sup>105</sup> Selected articles in *SMH*, 16 April 1943, p.3; 17 May 1943, p.5; 4 Aug. 1943, p.5; 10 Aug. 1943,



purchasing policies of the board of trustees of the NAGNSW. Composed of thirteen members, the board in 1942 primarily consisted of aged men, predominantly from business or judicial backgrounds, few with formal art training. In 1940, it included Bertrand James Waterhouse, Eben Gowrie Waterhouse (no close relation), James Russell McGregor, J.W. Maund, W. Lister Lister (died 1943), Charles Lloyd Jones, Sydney Ure Smith, J.S. Watkins (died 1942), Howard Hinton, W. H. Ifould, Sydney Long, Sir Marcus Clark, and Lionel Lindsay. Less than half of the membership of the board - Long, Lister Lister, Lindsay, Jones, and Ure Smith had trained as an artist, and of those five, only Long and Lister Lister made a name for themselves purely on their artistic merit.<sup>106</sup> Lionel Lindsay (1874-1961) and Sydney Ure Smith (1887-1949) artistically made their names as etchers. For both, however, the education of the public on artistic matters proved as important, if not more so, than their artistic careers.<sup>107</sup> For Charles Lloyd Jones, the wealthy department store owner, painting did not represent his main occupation. He failed to attract a strong reputation as an artist. The rest of the members of the board comprised businessmen, an architect, a linguist, public librarians, and members of the legal profession.

As a result of the large proportion of lay trustees on the board sound recommendations often failed to find support and few inspired purchases for the gallery collection were made. Macdonald, referring to the 'fatuous, frustrating talk of art-ignorant trustees', on concluding his service as director of the gallery in 1936 explained that the laymen would outvote the artists on 'purely artistic matters inform[ing] the painters that

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p.7; 17 Aug. 1943, p.7; and 4 April 1945, p.4.

<sup>106</sup> Joanna Mendelssohn, 'Long, Sydney', *ADB*, vol.10, pp.136-37; and J. Fenton-Smith, 'Lister, William Lister', *ADB*, vol.10, p.117.

<sup>107</sup> Nancy D.H. Underhill, 'Smith, Sydney Ure' *ADB*, vol.11, p.662; and Serle, Lindsay, *ADB*.

they (the laymen) “do not agree with them (!)”.<sup>108</sup> In his opinion, Lister Lister, Watkins and Long could possibly offer some useful insight. Oddly, he felt that Ure Smith did not know enough, and that Lindsay tended to follow his lead. He singled B.J. Waterhouse, ‘who is knowledgable’, out from the remainder, who did not know ‘anything worth writing about’.<sup>109</sup> A later Director, Hal Missingham, echoed these complaints of ignorance. As the first meeting of one new trustee, a bureaucrat, coincided with the judging of the Wynne and Archibald Prizes, Missingham found himself giving lessons and advice to the self-confessed artistic novice.<sup>110</sup>

For many of the men on the board of trustees, both lay and artistic, a strong foundation in drawing skills, realist art, and generally romantic or plein-air mannerisms constituted proven artistic practices. Andrew Montana has recently argued that in Victoria these were founded on the ideals espoused by British design reformers of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Pam James has argued that the trustees of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales acted as ‘self-appointed custodians’, who drew an ‘image of culture derived in part from Ruskinian philosophy of culture as moral improver’. Though they cite successive generations of nineteenth century British thought, the common ingredient, the ‘civilising mission’, appeared to hold particular potency in settler societies.<sup>111</sup> Both influences preceded the professionalisation of the artistic discipline, and the increasing ideological and social separation between the artistic and custodial worlds that took place during the last decades of the nineteenth century in Britain. A cultural lag is thus evident in the composition, taste and function of the NAGNSW of the interwar years.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Director’ [J.S. Macdonald] to G. Ross Thomas (Under Secretary and Director of Education), unsigned draft, 20 Oct. 1936, in Macdonald Papers, NLA MS 430, box 2, folder 3, p.1.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* p.3.

<sup>110</sup> Missingham, *They Kill You in the End*, p.42.

<sup>111</sup> See Andrew Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875-1900*,

To many members of the art establishment of that period, Australian landscapes best exemplified the moral and civil principles that they aimed to uphold. Arthur Streeton's landscapes represented the last and best product of Australian painting beyond which its artists could not hope to progress.<sup>112</sup> Inevitably the Australian landscape tradition canonised in the 1920s, or as Bernard Smith dubbed the decade, 'the Leviticus', rejected the newer cultural products of interwar continental Europe. Their emphasis on health, sanity and 'safe, isolationist conservatism', socially and culturally, in the wake of the First World War, has also been described as a cultural 'quarantine'.<sup>113</sup>

Not all the trustees belonged to Smith's Leviticus, however. Charles Lloyd Jones and Sydney Ure Smith in particular, made efforts to embrace a wider range of artistic styles and forms. Ure Smith argued for tolerance of a greater diversity of artistic styles, both through his influential publications, and increasingly in the context of the meetings of the board of trustees. Some believed that he showed little discretion in his nominations of paintings for purchase from exhibitions of both contemporary and other art. Charles Lloyd Jones perhaps proved a more constructive friend of modernism, and Australian art in general. He provided substantial backing for the launch of Ure Smith's *Art in Australia*, bequeathed £10 000 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, offered financial support for a separate museum for contemporary art proposed in early 1941 and provided the David Jones Gallery for Exhibition I, the exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art, the inaugural CAS exhibition, and Dobell's first one-man show.<sup>114</sup> Yet, he did not align himself with the radical stance of the CAS as it emerged in Sydney and held the standard

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(Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), pp.2-3.

<sup>112</sup> Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p.41.

<sup>113</sup> B. Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.195; John F. Williams, *The Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism 1913-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p.140.

<sup>114</sup> Underhill, Smith, Sydney Ure, *ADB*; and Missingham, *They Kill You in the End*, p.26.

trustee view that the landscapes of Streeton, Elioth Gruner and Hans Heysen, represented the height of artistic achievement in the country.<sup>115</sup> Together, therefore, Jones and Ure Smith represented a moderate faction within the board, but certainly not a convincingly modernist one.

Within Mary Alice Evatt's first year of appointment to the board, another instance of public opposition by reactionary artists to contemporary painting styles implicated the trustees. It concerned the award of the 1943 Archibald Prize to William Dobell for his painting, *Mr Joshua Smith*. Placing emphasis on the thinness and angularity of Smith's head and body, the portrait displayed a moderate modern response to the subject. In judging the Prize, the trustees had narrowed the choice down to *Dame Mary Gilmore* by Joshua Smith, and *Joshua Smith* by William Dobell. It was Lionel Lindsay who had recently published the anti-Semitic tirade against modern artistic trends, *Addled Art*, that pointed first to the portrait by Dobell, saying that it 'greatly impressed' him. Evatt concurred reasoning that she did not like 'certain passages' in Smith's portrait of Gilmore.<sup>116</sup> No other trustees voiced an opinion and the ensuing protest and court battle did not directly involve either Mary Alice Evatt or Lionel Lindsay. The controversy thus began in a surprisingly mild and amicable manner.

Possibly Mary Alice did collaborate in connection with the staffing crisis of 1944 to increase the weighting of modernists on the board, but Lionel Lindsay's correspondence exaggerates the level of conspiracy, and the minutes of the trustees' meetings reveal little. To Lindsay she denied knowing Peter Bellew, the centre of the controversy, and for whose election Lindsay held her responsible. The Evatts, though acquainted with the journalist, tended to distrust him. Yet for Lindsay the fact that Mary Alice Evatt's brother-in-law

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<sup>115</sup> Sydney Ure Smith, 'Art in America and New Ideas for Australia: An interview with Charles Lloyd Jones', typed transcript, Feb. 1941, in David Jones Archives.

<sup>116</sup> MSM-NAGNSW, 21 Jan. 1944, p.2609.

insisted on pushing Bellew for the trusteeship was proof enough of her complicity.<sup>117</sup> Alternately, Lindsay occasionally asserted that Mary Alice had herself suggested Bellew, and that she was therefore responsible for his name being mentioned in the papers as a possible trustee. In fact, the reports referred to by Lindsay repeated a statement made by Clive Evatt on the previous evening that no appointment had been made. Ministerial, as opposed to trustee, action was thus responsible for the report on Bellew's recommendation. Lindsay's conclusion that Mary Alice Evatt recommended Bellew thus amounts to speculation on the nature of discussions between members of the Evatt family. The chief source, therefore, on Mary Alice Evatt's role in the crisis came from the same person who with wavering accuracy, richly expressed hostility, and dogged persistence had sought to undermine the claims of modern art and artists to legitimacy, and buyers of modern art to knowledge and taste. As a guide to Mary Alice's motives, his letters are hardly reliable. It cannot be accepted that her patronage of modern art hinged completely on her unlikely involvement in the conspiracies of Labor politicians, Australian newspapermen and Jewish art dealers.

In fact, Mary Alice Evatt, between trips abroad and even while travelling, remained one of the most active members of the board of trustees of the art gallery. At her very first meeting she vowed to foster contact between the art communities of Australia and America. In view of her travel plans, the board furnished her with letters of introduction to the Carnegie Trust and the London art personality Harold Wright.<sup>118</sup> When in Sydney, Evatt sat on judging panels for *The Sunday Telegraph* Children's Art Show held in mid-1944, and the Australian and New Zealand selection for an International Sculpture Competition held later in the decade.<sup>119</sup> She forwarded comments on a proposed

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<sup>117</sup> LL to Menzies, 19 April 1944; and 3 April 1944, in Lindsay, NLA Papers.

<sup>118</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 26 March 1944, p.2510.

<sup>119</sup> Maie Casey to MAE, 24 Oct. 19[?], in EFC, Correspondence – cultural activities folder.

bequest of a collection of Chinese Porcelain, and suggested the formation of committees to consider issues that had long plagued the board, such as its purchasing policy, and the need for building improvements.

The gallery's purchases of artworks exemplifying contemporary schools of painting increased after Evatt's appointment. A small representative committee, in which Sydney Ure Smith, Mary Alice Evatt, and William Dobell as the new trustee, formed a majority vote, agreed to purchase Noel Counihan's social realist painting *At the Start of the March, 1932*, from the 1944 Contemporary Art Society exhibition. The Marshall Bequest committee, formed to purchase works for the National Gallery of Victoria, included Howard Ashton, Sidney Long, and Lloyd Rees purchased no works from the same art show. When Evatt could not attend a special viewing of Sali Herman's *The Troops Look On*, she requested that the trustees record her vote in favour of its acquisition by the gallery. At one meeting Evatt seconded a motion in favour of the inclusion of examples of contemporary Australian works of art in the first travelling exhibition arranged by the gallery. The resultant collection included work by Sali Herman, Desiderius Orban and Elaine Haxton. She also supported a motion granting power to the Director to make decisions on purchases. On Evatt's suggestion concerning the sale of certain paintings in the gallery collection the trustees agreed. They also accepted most of the pictures she proposed for disposal.<sup>120</sup>

By the time Bert Evatt's foreign affairs commitments necessitated further travels abroad in 1945, Mary Alice had made a distinctive mark on the board's affairs. For some, it proved too much. Some questioned the validity of her request to make an absentee vote in favour of the acquisition of Herman's painting. Those present eventually ruled her

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<sup>120</sup>

Various MMM-NAGNSW, and MSM-NAGNSW, 1944-45.



request unacceptable.<sup>121</sup> Lindsay also protested against Evatt's negotiations with Harold Wright while visiting London in 1945, arguing that she had no authority to make any arrangements. Evidently it rankled, and, on her return, Evatt moved that James McGregor be granted the authority to make purchases on behalf of the gallery during his visit to London.<sup>122</sup>

A new art gallery project became an ongoing project for Mary Alice Evatt. It began when, in April 1944, Bernard Smith, on behalf of the War Art Council, requested her involvement in the arrangement of a Travelling Art Exhibition.<sup>123</sup> As Smith explained years later:

The number of collectors interested in contemporary art was minute. ... If artists were to have a reasonable chance of living professionally from their work, a massive education programme had to be undertaken in the schools, colleges, universities and public art galleries.<sup>124</sup>

According to Smith, the scheme had a political motive – it was part of the state Labor party platform and a personal favourite of the Premier, William McKell. For six months Smith worked under the art gallery roof to organise the first travelling art exhibition, which opened in Wagga Wagga on 10 October 1944. During that time, Smith recalled, he contended with a Lindsay-led faction of anti-education trustees that almost succeeded in removing him from his small work space in the print room. At the August 1944 trustee meeting, Lindsay's friend, James McGregor, rescinded a previously un-minuted motion to force Smith out of the gallery.<sup>125</sup> Probably it would have been uncharacteristic for Lindsay to let such democratic, Labor-backed, contemporary art related plans unfold within the

<sup>121</sup> MSM-NAGNSW, 31 Oct. 1944, pp.2716-17.

<sup>122</sup> MSM-NAGNSW, 21 Dec. 1945, p.2832; and 25 Jan. 1946, p.2839.

<sup>123</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 28 April 1944, p.2651.

<sup>124</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Taking Art to the Country: How it began', in Peter Timms and Robyn Christie (ed.s), *Cultivating the Country: Living with the arts in regional Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University press, 1988), p.36.

<sup>125</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 25 Aug. 1944, p.2696; and Smith in *Cultivating the Country*, p.38.

gallery without objection. It would have also been strange if Bernard Smith had not felt some resentment towards the conservative element within the trust, and retrospectively cited 'both art-political and party-political' motives for opposition to his scheme. It would be fair to assume that whatever the personal level of animosity, a political element accompanied the planning of the travelling art exhibition scheme.

It is instructive, then, that in Smith's first communication with the trustees on the matter, he specifically requested Mary Alice Evatt's presence at the War Art Council meeting planned to discuss the idea.<sup>126</sup> Along with Sydney Ure Smith, Charles Lloyd Jones, and Professor E.G. Waterhouse, she became one of its 'great supporter[s]'.<sup>127</sup> Although subsequently appointed a member of the sub-committee formed to co-operate with the Education Department in the organisation of the exhibition, travel plans prevented Evatt from participation in preparations for the first of its endeavours. Her absence apparently weakened the committee's powers, and prevented their earliest attempts, having won the approval of a grant of £650 in October 1944, to push through a proposal to buy contemporary art under the auspices of the gallery for the first series of exhibitions. Once Evatt returned, the committee's efforts proved more successful.<sup>128</sup>

Evidently, as demonstrated by the early difficulties experienced in the organisation of the travelling art exhibition scheme, Evatt's presence on the board did help to even out the balance of power. Yet Evatt's involvement was, for her, more than a game of numbers. Her commitment to the idea is clear in her ongoing, often exhaustive participation in the project, and in her promotion of the scheme.<sup>129</sup> Lecturing in America on its purpose and achievements she applauded McKell's role in securing additional funding for gallery

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<sup>126</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 28 April 1944, p.2651.

<sup>127</sup> B. Smith, in *Cultivating the Country*, p.40.

<sup>128</sup> MMM-NAGNSW, 27 Oct. 1944, p.2713; and B. Smith, in *Cultivating the Country*, p.44.

<sup>129</sup> See EFC, 'Art Gallery of N.S.W. – Travelling Art Exhibitions' folder; and untitled typescript speech, n.d., in EFC, 'Evatt, Mary Alice - cultural activities' folder.

purchases and building extensions, and for releasing Smith from his teaching obligations.

More importantly, she explained to her American audience:

This idea of taking art to the people was initiated by a Labor Government which realised that art is able to crystallize [sic] emotions, intellectual trends, moments in the past, moments in the future, for its people, thus clarifying their views on life, and in making critical or appreciative art viewers also people capable of a larger and more complete life as citizens of a modern state.<sup>130</sup>

It proved the beginning of Evatt's long association with travelling art exhibitions, one fuelled by her attraction to democratic art schemes.<sup>131</sup> It also, significantly, revealed a continuation of her perception that art should act as a moral and social improver. Despite the obvious Labor flavour of the scheme, Mary Alice Evatt applied cultural principles rooted in nineteenth century British liberalism, that matured in the mid-twentieth century in the concept of high culture. Further, she sought the dissemination of high cultural knowledge and expertise throughout the country. She did so in the belief that it would improve both individuals and the nation.

Two young men, Bernard Smith and the new gallery director, Hal Missingham, drew Mary Alice Evatt into another scheme that simultaneously enshrined high cultural as well as democratic principles. In 1945, as co-founders, they became involved in 'an energetic and interesting little studio in George St [sic] known as the Studio of Realist Art'. More often known as SORA, Smith confessed to Evatt that its members were actually open to 'all kinds of art'.<sup>132</sup> Centring on the studio of James Cant, and including artists moving from surrealism back to an adapted realism in artistic expression, it sought to 'stir up interest in the arts', contemporary and otherwise, through lectures, discussions, exhibitions, and classes. Affiliated with the New Theatre League and the People's Council for Culture, SORA also evidently echoed the democratic dream of broad-based cultural

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<sup>130</sup> untitled typescript speech, n.d., in EFC, 'Evatt, Mary Alice - cultural activities' folder.

<sup>131</sup> Carrodus, interview.

<sup>132</sup> Bernard Smith to MAE, n.d. [late 1945], in EFC, MAE, corr 2.

education implicit in the travelling art exhibition scheme. Post war communist paranoia led to speculation in the press that the organisation ‘harbour[ed] all the “Commos” in Sydney’.<sup>133</sup> Interested in Evatt’s experiences on her recent trip abroad, particularly her meeting with the newly converted communist and artistic pioneer, Picasso, Smith’s initial pretext for bringing SORA to her attention related to the group’s hopes that she would share her experiences with them.<sup>134</sup> Mary Alice accepted the invitation, but her connection with the society did not end with the speech. One of the society’s later shows included printed and original examples of work by Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse, Renoir and other artists, all loaned from the Evatt’s burgeoning collection.

By supporting SORA, the travelling exhibitions, and children’s art competitions Mary Alice Evatt clearly demonstrated her concern for the education of the public in all aspects of the arts. In tandem with her attraction to the plight of the poor and socially disadvantaged, her interest in women’s issues and commitment to the promotion of modern art in general and her Australian colleagues in particular, Evatt may thus be seen to have demonstrated independent radical leanings. While the tirades of Lionel Lindsay may have inaccurately recorded Evatt’s actions and implied a docile complicity to the plans of her husband and brother-in-law, they are correct in assuming her active promotion of radical interests within the gallery. Yet, together with the Melbourne socialite and music-lover, Alfred Deakin’s daughter, Ivy Brookes, as well as the art patron Maie Casey, her reign as a ‘high priestess of culture’ was soon secure.<sup>135</sup>

Mary Alice Evatt nurtured rather than networked, but they were both strategies born of Victorian femininity and anachronistically perpetuated in early to mid-twentieth century Australian society. She was also a modern woman, whose cultural and political

<sup>133</sup> Missingham, *They Kill You in the End*, p.10.

<sup>134</sup> Dora Cant to MAE, 11 Jan. 1946, in EFC, MAE corr 2.

<sup>135</sup> Dutton, *The Innovators*, p.118.

endeavours expressed a conscientious approach to citizenship, an awareness of the needs of women, and a receptiveness that occasionally bordered on courageous to artistic, social and mechanical change. She spoke in terms of 'the arts', and saw the arts in terms of personal and social improvement; she assumed the cultural distinctions that designated the arts as high culture, and in drawing those distinctions, she saw modern art on the high cultural side of the divide. Her understanding of a cultural hierarchy made education and the concomitant consolidation of high cultural tastes imperative, for the sake of both the individual and the state. In belief and action Mary Alice Evatt, though her radicalism might imprison her in art-political debate, thus demonstrated a continuity that united her with other women culturists of the period. She belonged to a larger movement in which they all participated, that aimed at securing the high cultural life of the state of New South Wales.





"STUDY OF A GIRL." This painting by Mrs. Evatt illustrates her theory of "Swing." Note the elongated shoulder line to exaggerate proportions rhythmically



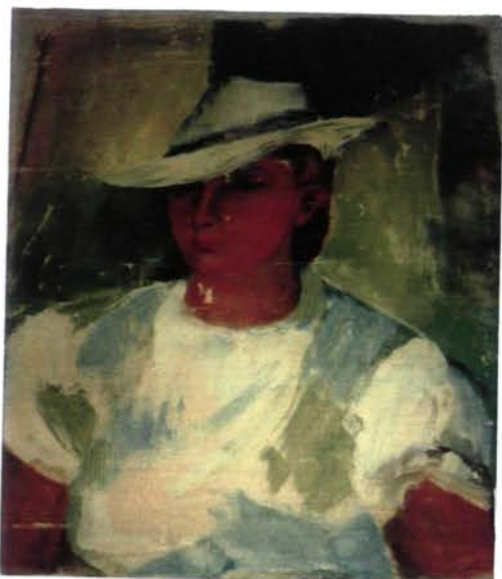
MRS. EVATT, wife of Mr. Justice Evatt.

Top: 'Study of a Girl', and Mary Alice Evatt, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 28 Jan. 1939, p.24.

Right: 'AT HOME. Dr and Mrs Evatt photographed soon after their arrival. Dr Evatt led an important Government mission to America and England'. *The Australia Women's Weekly*, 21 Aug. 1943, p.9.







This page: paintings and sculpture by Mary Alice Evatt, in private collection of the Evatts' daughter, Rosalind Carrodus, Leura, NSW.

## CONCLUSION

We now return to the story of Dorothy Helmrich. The agency of four women had enabled Helmrich to launch into a long career as an established lieder singer. The Australian protégé spent most of the interwar years in Britain and Europe, won international fame, and was widely celebrated on her tours of Australia. Finally she returned to live in Australia in 1940<sup>1</sup>, bringing with her a wealth of experience, her world-class training, and a commitment to the ideals enshrined in the British Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. Inevitably, the respected singer received an endless flood of invitations to speak on her experiences, and on CEMA, as the Council became known. At one such speech, in 1943, a member of the audience asked when she would establish CEMA in Australia. The inquirer was Jessie Street. Street offered to assist Helmrich in such an endeavour. Mrs Mary Matheson, of the Children's Library Movement offered her rooms for meetings. Soon they and a number of men in influential positions had gathered together and devised a plan to obtain government funding. Helmrich first petitioned the Labor State Premier, W. J. McKell, without success. Members of the committee also approached the Directors of both the federal and state Post War Reconstruction organisations with similar results.<sup>2</sup> No doubt the war seemed a more pressing consideration at both levels of government.

Without having acquired government funding CEMA held its first production, the 'Three Arts Festival' at East Sydney in December 1944.<sup>3</sup> Helmrich also spoke at an

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Carell and Beth Dean, *On Wings of Song: Dorothy Helmrich and the Arts Council*, (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Cooperative, 1982), p.65, assert that Helmrich returned in 1940. However, another source mentions her return in 1942. Perhaps she travelled Australia in the interim, and thus 'returned' to Sydney twice. See The Arts Council of Australia - NSW Division, *A Five Years Record, 1943-47*, (Sydney, 1947), p.26.

<sup>2</sup> 'Dorothy Helmrich', Mackenzie, B. (ed.), *Singers of Australia from Melba to Sutherland*, (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1967), pp.136-40.

<sup>3</sup> Arts Council, *Five Years Record*, p.26.

agricultural conference at Richmond. Her speech directly inspired the subsequent formation of a number of country branches of CEMA.<sup>4</sup> In 1945, CEMA was renamed the Arts Council of Australia, and Helmrich was appointed to represent the Council on the New South Wales Department of Education Advisory Board of Adult Education. Through this position she succeeded in securing the first of the Council's government grants.

The new Council emphasised the need to take all forms of the Arts to country centres. Speaking at the fifth anniversary of the foundation of CEMA, Sir Robert Garran outlined its central purpose:

to bring art, in all its forms to the people; to encourage them, not only to cultivate an appreciation of all that is beautiful in music, painting, sculpture, drama, ballet, and so forth, but also to express themselves in some one or other of the arts or crafts. ... CEMA is based on the belief that art, in the widest sense of the word, is not a luxury for the few, but a necessity for all.<sup>5</sup>

The parallels between the motives behind the formation of CEMA and the various cultural movements of the interwar period are striking. Advocating sentiments similar to those propounded by Mary Alice Evatt and other women culturists, Helmrich reputedly believed that 'the more mechanised life becomes, the more vital is the need for establishing live theatre and the allied arts on a firm progressive basis in both city and country. ... Only thus can a national culture worthy of the name be nurtured'.<sup>6</sup> In this statement, she neatly captured the key ideals of the woman culturist of early to mid twentieth century Sydney. A 'worthy' national culture seemed a necessary balance to 'mechanised life'. She perceived the arts as the answer to a human need, one that did not discriminate according to geography, gender or class.

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Helmrich, *The First Twenty Five Years: A Study of the Arts Council of Australia*, (Sydney, 1968), p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Arts Council, *Five Years Record*, p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Mackenzie, *Singers*, p.139.

While Helmrich's actions directly assisted many individuals and organisations, they also brought patronage of the Council under the wing of that over-arching organisation which increasingly assumed cultural authority in the wake of the war - the state. At the turn of the century the state may have represented one of a number of agents in society, but in Australia an entrenched predilection for self-help over state-aid meant that state governments were slow to extend the range of their social policy and federal reforms were ahead of their time.<sup>7</sup> Except for the paltry assistance offered to writers from 1908 through the Commonwealth Literary Fund, and the wavering New South Wales government sponsorship of the Conservatorium and its activities, cultural matters generally did not fall under the auspices of the state in the first quarter of the century. The advent of the machinery of mass culture, though it promised to aid the dissemination of what was thought of as the highbrow, also opened the door on the lowbrow. Failure in Sydney to realise a substantial increase in personal patronage, and mounting concern over the city's cultural weakness, appear to have contributed to the perception that permanent solutions were desperately needed. Culturists attempted to fill the need themselves by launching large-scale campaigns with a focus on education and participation. Increasingly, as war came and went, campaigners looked for ultimate solutions in the agency of both the state and federal governments.

Australian historians write of the 'construction of high culture' in the period from 1850 to 1914, and the challenge that modernism posed to high culture from the beginning of the Great War to the mid twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps because the tenor of the argument is that high culture constituted a class-based construction, one built by bourgeois men

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<sup>7</sup> See Jill Roe, Introduction, in Jill Roe (ed.), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975*, (Stanmore, NSW: Cassell Australia, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures. Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788*, (South Melbourne: Longman Australia, 1995). See chapter 5, 'The Construction of High Culture'.

laying tentative claim to cultural custodianship, it fails to recognise the continuity interwar, when women and practitioners sought to found permanent organisations that enshrined high cultural principles. Likewise class-based discussions have deflected attention from the process whereby culturists transmuted and disseminated the principles defining high culture, turning it into a democratic, progressive creature. While in suburban cul de sacs, their efforts might have turned stale and middlebrow, their intention was to draw the mediocre upward through education and inspiration. While they drew inspiration from European models and British ideals, they increasingly looked to a thriving local culture. While they expressed divergent responses to the rise of modernity, they looked to high cultural preservation under the auspices of the modern democratic state.

Dorothy Helmrich was not alone in calling on the state. The Fellowship of Australian Writers having formed in the congregational spirit of the fellowing women of the 1920s, broke from its cultural nationalist roots during the 1930s, and ideologically shifted noticeably to the left. Flora Eldershaw stands out as an active figure in the FAW of the late 1930s and 1940s. Her efforts were also central to the restructuring of the Commonwealth Literary Fund.<sup>9</sup> It was through the actions of Flora Eldershaw, Marjorie Barnard and Frank Dalby Davidson that Prime Minister Joseph Lyons was persuaded to expand the CLF budget, and subsequently the range of grants offered by the government to writers. Eldershaw retained links to the CLF for some years (she was on the Advisory Board in 1952). As with CEMA and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, women culturists had sought permanent assistance for Australian authors through the agency of the state.

Women culturists may have increasingly joined with their male counterparts in the task of institutionalising high cultural practices, but the movement clearly joined femininity with culture. A large body of women, as mothers, wives, and friends, as charity

workers, committeewomen, practitioners, or influential patrons endeavoured to make significant contributions to the cultural development of their city. Their agency for a time acquired real potency. Ironically, although the women culturists' chief strategies for agency seem impermanent and informal, yet the urge was always in the direction of permanence. Naturally, the culturists who sought the preservation of high cultural practices through the patronage of the state saw it as the best means for the permanence of incomes and institutions. It did however, spell the end of an era in cultural patronage.

Some women, like Helmrich and Mary Alice Evatt, retained positions with direct influence under the auspices of the Department of Education. On the cultural sidelines once more, many women, following the Second World War, re-used the techniques that characterised their cultural patronage during the interwar period. Rene Gibson, Ann Williams Clark and others, for example, formed a Members' Committee to promote *Musica Viva*, this time at the behest of its founder, Charles Berg - the success of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra committee had been noted. But in the official history of *Musica Viva*, Rene Gibson and the women's committee disappears from sight. Furthermore, the greater cultural agency of state and federal governments suggests that the organic cultural pluralism linked by Gregory Melleuish with the development of modern states may have diminished slightly following the war, allowing room for the exercise of a state-oriented, German-style *kultur*.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of what followed the war, it was during the first half of the twentieth century that the feminine approach to cultural patronage seemed most vital and influential. During the interwar period in particular women tumbled over each other in their rush to

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<sup>9</sup> Maryanne Dever (ed.), *M. Barnard Eldershaw: Plaque with Laurel, Essays, Reviews, and Correspondence*. (Brisbane, 1995), p.xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Melleuish, 'The case for civilisation: an Australian perspective', in *Thesis Eleven*, no. 34, 1993, 156-64.



embrace the stage, modern art, the writing of Australian fiction, and the founding of theatres or organisation of pageants, plays, and music clubs. Chronologically, the 1930s in particular must be noted for the energy with which women advocated the various aspects of the arts. They became integrally involved in the consolidation of the cultural life of the city of Sydney just as concern over the cultural mediocrity of the masses mounted. They thus took part in the modern project of cultural definition. Women culturists of the first half of the twentieth century, whether as practitioners or consumers, or from leisured or working backgrounds contributed to this broader cultural process of bifurcation. It was a process that emerged in the context of mid-Victorian bourgeois lifestyle changes and became modern in the face of twentieth century materialism. Increasingly, the common enemy in the pursuit of artistic excellence, where art enshrined the immaterial, the inspirational, was mass culture. Yet culturists were not intentionally elitist; they sought instead to raise the average, to offer the chance of higher cultural appreciation to a larger number of people, to future generations as a whole. It was thus a process that for women cut across class and political allegiances, expressed concern for the culturally needy, and an Edwardian belief in their duty as women to find ways to meet those needs: a duty to cultivate the arts.

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Some of the interviewees allowed me to have access to their private papers. The papers of Anne Lloyd (Wiltshire, England) were of particular benefit, while Rosalind Carrodus permitted me to examine and photograph the contents of her mother, Mary Alice Evatt's, art portfolio.

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