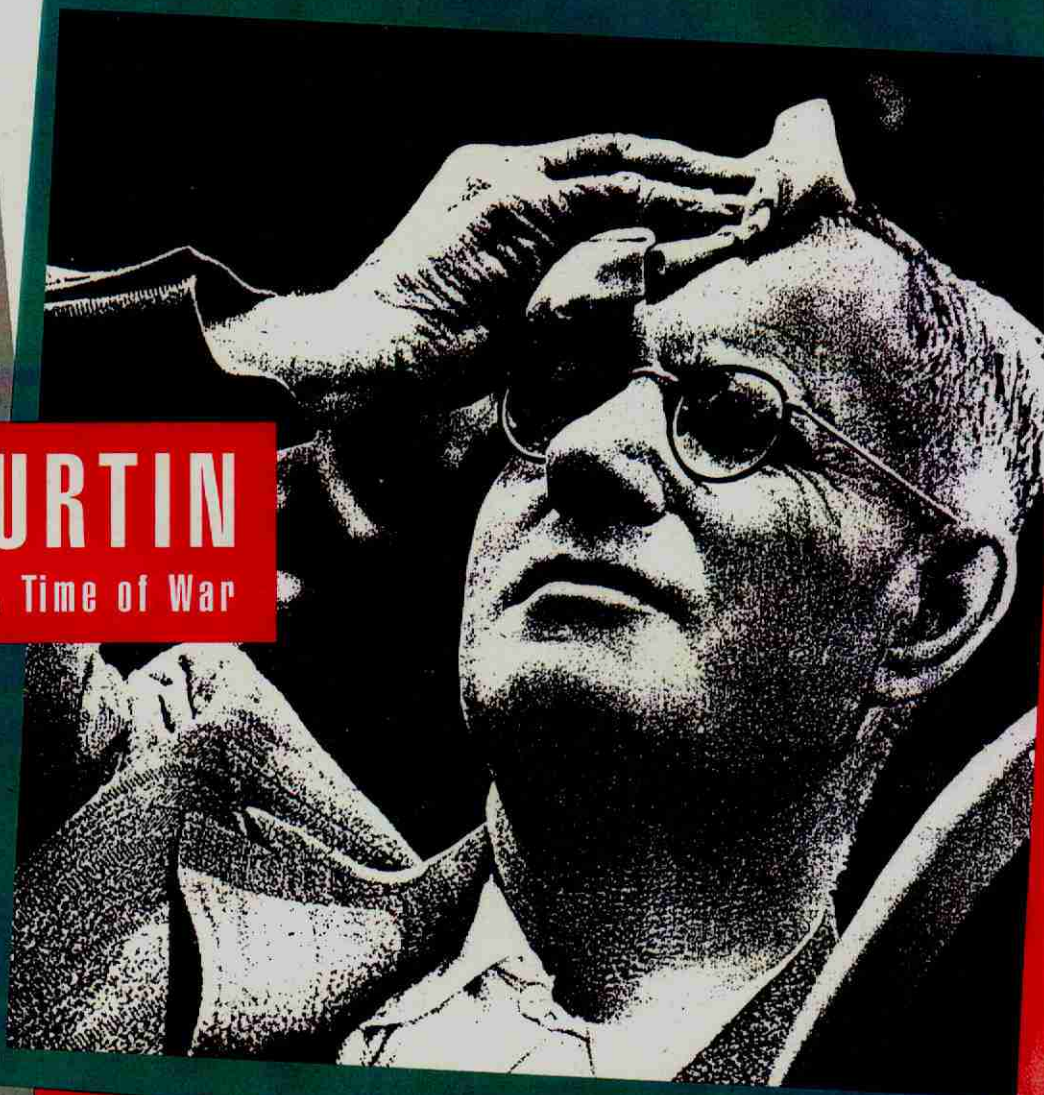


JOHN CURTIN

A Man of Peace, A Time of War

An Australian Archives Exhibition
developed in conjunction
with The John Curtin Centre,
Perth, Western Australia.



“I TELL THIS NATION THAT AS THINGS STAND TODAY IN AUSTRALIA, BRAINS AND BRAWN ARE BETTER THAN BETS OR BEER.”

John Curtin, 16 February 1942

JOHAN CURTIN was the Labor Prime Minister who led Australia through the darkest hours of World War II. He was the poor country boy who rose to be Prime Minister, the revolutionary young socialist turned political pragmatist, the pacifist called upon to lead Australia during wartime. *John Curtin: A Man of Peace, A Time of War* commemorates the 50th anniversary of Curtin's death and reflects on his status today.

FROM POOR BOY TO PRIME MINISTER

Curtin was born in the Victorian mining town of Creswick on 8 January 1885, the eldest of the four children of Irish-born John Curtin and Kate Agnes Bourke. After leaving the police force due to ill health, John Sr struggled to make a living, moving from one hotel to another as manager. By 1899, the family had moved to the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick, where Curtin left school at the age of about fourteen. He worked in a variety of jobs, first as a copyboy, then as a labourer, a printer's devil, and an estimates clerk. He became actively involved in the labour movement, joining the Victorian Socialist Party in 1906 and the Political Labor Council (later to become the Australian Labor Party) in 1907, and working as Secretary of the Timber Workers' Union from 1911 to 1915. He then worked for the Australian Workers' Union, before becoming secretary of the Trades Hall Council anti-conscription campaign in 1916. In 1917 he moved to Perth as editor of the *Westralian Worker*,

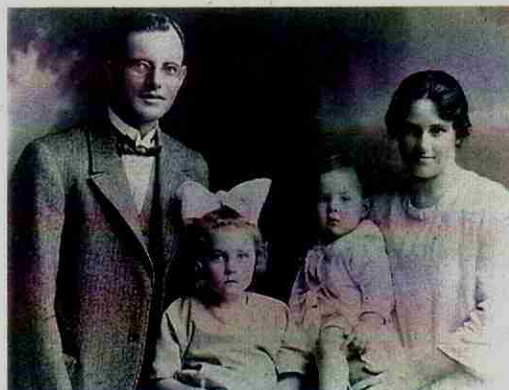
and there he married Elsie Needham on 21 April 1917. In 1928 he won the federal seat of Fremantle and served in the Labor Opposition, and then in Scullin's Labor Government from 1929 until its collapse in 1931. By 1934 he was back in Canberra, again in Opposition. In October 1935 he was elected by one vote to replace the retiring Scullin as leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party.

Curtin became Prime Minister in October 1941, following the collapse of the conservative Fadden Government. He led Australia until his death on 5 July 1945. He was a modest and reserved man, a reformed alcoholic who was sensitive to criticism and prone to bouts of black depression. Yet he emerged from the rough and tumble of federal politics to become one of Australia's most highly regarded leaders.

COLLEAGUES AND CRITICS

What was perhaps most remarkable about Curtin's prime ministership was the almost universal respect and affection with which he was regarded by those on both sides of politics. Curtin was always staunchly loyal to the Labor Party, so much so that he refused repeated requests from Robert Menzies to form an all-party government with the United Australia Party/Country Party coalition after the outbreak of war in 1939. Despite this, he had a close and largely harmonious working relationship with his political opponents throughout the war. Writing after Curtin's death, Country Party leader Arthur Fadden described him as 'one of the greatest Australians ever'. Certainly the crisis of war must have helped to establish a spirit of co-operation between political opponents, but Curtin's commitment to avoiding party political conflict and his ability to unite and

John and Elsie Curtin with daughter Elsie and son John, c.1922
(National Library of Australia, Lloyd Ross papers)





Left: An ALP advertisement for the 1943 federal election (National Library of Australia)

Below: Wartime government publicity urging support for the war effort (Australian Archives)



motivate the country behind the war effort also played a part.

Ironically, it was within his own party that Curtin encountered some of his harshest critics. After assuming leadership of the ALP in 1935, he immediately set about reuniting a party fractured by conflict in NSW. Despite his success in eventually bringing the opposing factions together, Curtin faced continual opposition during his period as Prime Minister from several members of his government, including Arthur Calwell and Eddie Ward.

Curtin's Labor critics were most vocal over the erosion of traditional Labor ideals in the extraordinary circumstances of wartime. Labor articles of faith, such as the right to strike and opposition to conscription, came under fire during the crisis of World War II. It was in his handling of these dilemmas that the sharpest contradictions in Curtin's life emerged.

Throughout his life Curtin had condemned militarism and abhorred war. As a young socialist and trade union leader in Melbourne he fought passionately against the Hughes Labor Government's attempts to introduce conscription during World War I. Yet as wartime leader, facing a range of complex political and strategic pressures, he was responsible for the introduction of conscription for overseas service in 1943. Writing in socialist journals during World War I, Curtin condemned the use of working men as cannon fodder, and advocated the workers' right to strike in times of war. During World War II, he was engaged in a running battle with unions over constant stoppages, urging them to set aside their demands and return to work for the good of the war effort. The young socialist revolutionary had turned political pragmatist. For Curtin, times had changed, circumstances had certainly changed and the man himself had changed since his youth in Melbourne's socialist circles.

'PLAIN JOHN CURTIN'

Curtin was admired not only by politicians of all parties, but by the

broader Australian community. Despite his austere and reserved manner, he is remembered as a man who was close to ordinary people. Staff of the Victoria Coffee Palace, the temperance hotel in which he stayed while in Melbourne, remembered his friendliness and generous tips. One of his closest companions in Canberra was his driver, Ray Tracey, with whom he often played billiards at the Lodge. Stories abound of Curtin's unassuming nature and quiet modesty.

Curtin's death on 5 July 1945 so stunned the nation that 50,000 people lined the streets of Perth to witness his funeral procession, and a further 20,000 packed the cemetery. The tragedy of his death at the age

of sixty, only six weeks before the end of the Pacific War, also contributed to the reverence with which he was regarded in his own time. He was mourned across Australia as a casualty of war, a man who worked himself to an early grave for the good of his country.

'THE CURTIN HALO'

Curtin's skilful use of the media must also have contributed to his widespread popularity. He was the first Australian political leader to have a full-time press secretary, Donald Rodgers, who began working for him during the 1937 election campaign. Following Labor's landslide victory in the 1943 election, United Australia Party leader Robert Menzies reflected on the reasons behind the massive UAP defeat. 'The Curtin halo, legend and personality as the public sees them have really been built up by the extraordinarily skilful and devoted services of Mr Curtin's Press Officer, Mr D. K. Rodgers.'

“LET US FORTIFY OURSELVES FOR THE GRIM DAYS OF STRUGGLE AHEAD.”

John Curtin, 11 November 1941

Curtin had himself worked as a journalist, editing the *Westralian Worker* in Perth for over ten years, and he developed a close relationship with the Canberra press gallery, then known as 'the circus'. During the early years of his prime ministership, he usually held two press conferences per day, and provided journalists with detailed off-the-record information about the progress of the war. Through the press, Curtin communicated constantly with the Australian public, urging them at every opportunity to give their all for the war effort.

Despite his reserved and modest personality, Curtin was a very visible and accessible Prime Minister. His fiery speaking style echoed that of the socialist orators of Melbourne's Yarra bank who inspired him during his youth. Responding to

Opposition taunts about his Yarra bank youth, Curtin replied 'It was my university and I met and heard there some of the finest men in the world. I remember them, and my early days on the Yarra bank, with pride and affection.'² Opinion seems to have been divided over the success of his speaking style. Menzies argued that 'John Curtin would have been a better speaker if he had used shorter words', but Donald Rodgers recalls him as 'the only man, in my time in politics, who could bring a lump to my throat when he made a speech.' To modern listeners his accent may seem

old fashioned and his rhetorical style unfamiliar, but the intensity and passion of his delivery still has a powerful impact.

CURTIN TODAY

Curtin's status today is ambiguous. For staunch Labor supporters, and many of those of all political persuasions who remember World War II, Curtin is one of Australia's greatest Prime Ministers. Yet younger generations of Australians know virtually nothing about him. Within the labour movement the 'Curtin halo and legend' still has a potency which has led modern Labor leaders such as Bob Hawke and Gough Whitlam to invoke his name. His rise from poor country boy to wartime Prime Minister has been compared to US President Lincoln's rise from 'log cabin to White House'. Yet in contrast to the veneration of Lincoln in the United States, Curtin remains largely unacknowledged in



Above: Curtin (centre) on the campaign trail in Adelaide with his personal secretary Eric Tonkin (left) and press secretary Donald Rodgers (right), c.1937 (National Library of Australia)

Left: Curtin as Leader of the Opposition in 1937 (Australian Archives)

Australia. Many Australians would probably recognise British Prime Minister Winston Churchill more readily than their own wartime leader. Several of the houses in which Curtin lived in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick still stand, but they bear no plaques to commemorate their most famous tenant.

What does this say about Australians, and the way we remember our political leaders? We are a nation with few political heroes. Rarely do politicians capture the national imagination like our greatest sporting heroes. Far from venerating our leaders in the American style, we seem reluctant to even commemorate them. But if we fail to commemorate our leaders, do we run the risk of forgetting part of our own history?

Efforts to commemorate Curtin have included the naming of a university, a secondary school, a Canberra suburb, and various buildings, including the ALP National Headquarters in Canberra. More recently, the development of The John Curtin Centre at Curtin University in Perth has been supported at the highest level across the political spectrum, both in Australia and the United States. This year, the 50th anniversary of both Curtin's death and of the end of World War II, provides further opportunity for us to commemorate Curtin's role and, through him, to remember a significant period in Australia's history.

Rowena MacDonald

Exhibitions Curator – Australian Archives

Notes:

- 1 National Library of Australia, Manuscripts collection, MS8119, series 6, folder 1
- 2 August 21, 1942, Australian Archives (ACT), A461/7, R4/1/12

Further reading:

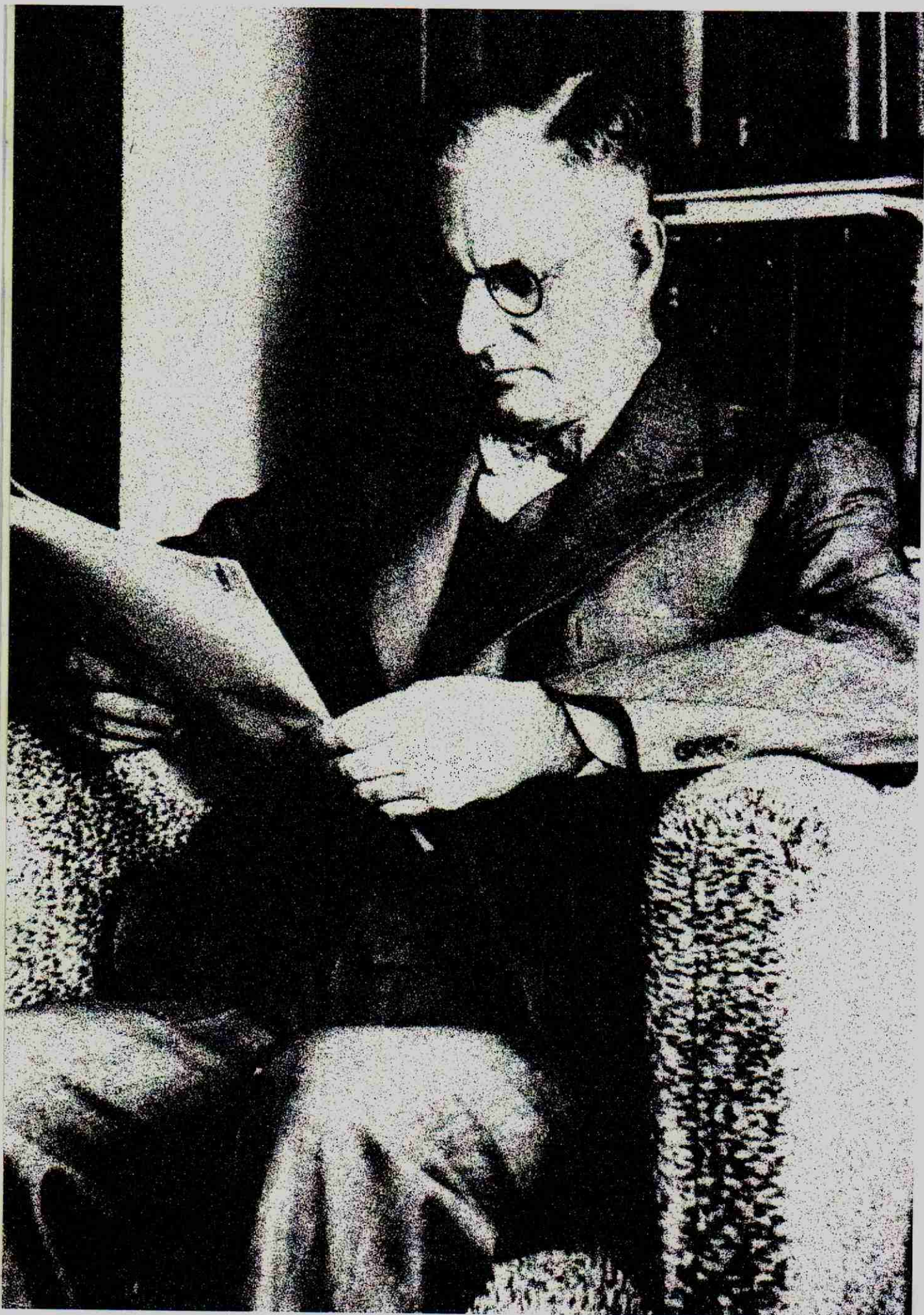
Black, David: *The Speeches and Writings of John Curtin*, Curtin University, Perth, forthcoming.

Hirst, J.B.: 'Australian Defence and conscription: a Re-assessment Part II' *Australian Historical Studies* No 102 April 1994.

McMullin, Ross: *The Light on the Hill: The ALP 1891-1991* Oxford, 5th Melbourne, 1991.

Ross, Lloyd: *John Curtin: a biography* MacMillan, 5th Melbourne, 1977.





Curtin in Perth, 1919 (Courtesy: The West Australian)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXHIBITION TEAM

Curator:

Rowena MacDonald,
Australian Archives

Curatorial adviser:

Associate Professor David Black,
Curtin University

Exhibition designer:

Rosemary Simons Design

Audio-visual producer:

Millennium

Graphic designer:

Stephen Goddard

With thanks to:

Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Australian War Memorial
Aviation Historical Society
of the Northern Territory
Battye Library Oral History Unit
Film Australia
Film World
Herald Sun
La Trobe Library
Library and Information Service
of Western Australia
Ross McMullin
National Film and Sound Archive
National Library of Australia
Bob Piper
State Library of Victoria
Sydney Morning Herald
Trans Media
The West Australian



to
James Greethip 1919
mother of his.