

BIOGRAPHY OF COLONEL THE HONOURABLE R.A. CROUCH

Colonel the Honourable Richard Armstrong Crouch, solicitor, parliamentarian, soldier, public benefactor and patron of the arts was the sixth child of prosperous migrant parents. Born in Ballarat, Crouch did so well at the then new Mt. Pleasant State School that he gained a place at Melbourne University where he graduated in law in 1891 having won two academic prizes.

By 1900 a growing social awareness in Crouch was channelled into politics and the army which he saw as closely linked with each other. A commission in the Victorian militia was followed, after Federation, by one in the new Australian army. In 1901 Crouch won the seat of Corio in the first Federal parliament where he was the youngest member at 32. He was a protectionist and much influenced by Alfred Deakin's Australian nationalism. Crouch lost Corio in 1909. By then he had been promoted to major in the militia. He enthusiastically supported compulsory military training for young men, even suggesting that they should be able to shoot straight before being allowed to vote¹. Subsequent military missions by Crouch to Britain, Germany and Switzerland confirmed his support for conscription.

In 1915 Crouch was given command as Lieutenant Colonel of the 22nd Battalion, A.I.F., which landed at Gallipoli in September, 1915. Crouch was now 47 and one of a number of more senior officers who, it was soon realised, "were unfitted by age, physique, or temperament for service at Anzac ... were unable to endure the physical conditions ... and were quickly superseded by younger men ..."². Crouch was evacuated as unfit due to "mild laryngitis and mild debility"³. He was returned to Australia and discharged in April, 1916 as being "unable to be absorbed"⁴ by an army that had found him of no further use.

1916 marks a crisis in Crouch's life. He became Victorian president of the Returned Soldiers' No-Conscription League which helped to defeat the Hughes government's conscription referendum; and Crouch again successfully worked against the second referendum in 1917. This social action again led Crouch to party politics, but this time to Labor under the leadership of James Scullin, another Ballarat man, who seems to have been of some influence with Crouch and whose nationalism was successful in lessening British control over Australia.

Crouch won the conservative Federal seat of Corangamite for Labor in 1929 but lost it when the Scullin government was defeated in 1931. Now aged 63 Crouch abandoned politics and became a European traveller, art collector, historian and philanthropist. He wrote papers for the Royal Victorian Historical Society and was on its executive, he gave money in Ballarat to the Congregational Church of his childhood, to his old State School, to Novar Hospital and the local rowing clubs. In the Botanical Gardens, Crouch began the avenue with busts of Prime Ministers, and his munificence to the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery included his presentation in 1944 of his valuable collection of medieval and renaissance manuscripts.

Couch's complex character is hard to define. The letters⁵ that he wrote almost daily to his mother during 1915 tell us nothing of significance about his attitude to war and what may have so altered his views on conscription. Neither is it yet clear why Crouch's political convictions changed from right to left - itself almost unique in Australia. Crouch never married and he spent his last years with one of his sisters living in the Pt. Lonsdale house that his father had built in 1882.

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1. Barrett, J. Falling In: Australians and 'Boy Conscription' 1911-1915, (Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979) p.81
 2. Bean, C.E.W. Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol.II (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935) p.810
 3. A.I.F. Personnel Records, Australian Archives, Canberra
 4. A.I.F. Personnel Records, Australian Archives, Canberra
 5. La Trobe Library MS Box 3760/4 and others, at the State Library of Victoria