

Solving a Mrs Thatcher mystery

A painting by Alfred Reginald Thomson RA (1894–1979)

Daniel Hadden and Alistair Lexden

At an antiques fair in November 2015, the art dealer Daniel Hadden bought an unfinished and unsigned picture of Margaret Thatcher addressing the House of Commons from the government despatch box (Pl 1). He asked Alistair Lexden, in his capacity as Conservative Party historian, to help him establish who painted this mysterious picture and when.

It is not unusual for members of the House of Commons to be painted seated (or in some cases lolling) on their famous green benches, often with one of their leading figures addressing them. Some artists have mocked them. Gerald Scarfe caricatured them in his inimitable style in a painting of 1965; the widely loved Banksy replaced them with chimpanzees in his well-known picture of 2009, which captured the popular contemporary taste for denigrating Members of Parliament. The picture made nearly £10 million when it was sold last year.

Most painters, however, have treated them with dignity and respect. These qualities are reflected in the first picture of the Commons in session painted in the 20th century, which continued the tradition of recording great parliamentary occasions that had become firmly established in the previous century. Leopold Braun, a French artist, caught the mood of mingled anxiety and resolution in the House in the days leading up to the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. A studio was set up for him near the Commons chamber. It is likely that the same privilege was extended to the great Sir John Lavery who, in 1924, depicted Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour Prime Minister, at the government despatch box in a packed House.

The arrival of Labour in power, which was to transform the party system, was a historic moment. It followed another five years earlier when Nancy Astor, the first woman MP to take her seat, arrived in the Commons on 1 December 1919. The event was recorded by two artists, Charles Sims and Frederick Shepherd, in pictures which included no more than a few members as background figures. The entire chamber was portrayed again, however, in a striking work by the war artist, John Worsley, painted in 1947, but showing the House during the famous Norway debates of 7/8 May 1940 which led to Neville Chamberlain's resignation and Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister.

Another successful war artist, who had been attached to the RAF, Alfred Reginald Thomson, was commissioned to paint the House in session during the debate on the Address following the Queen's Speech in 1960 (Pl 2), with the approval of the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art (known generally as the Works of Art Committee), an all-party body which had been established in 1954 to oversee the substantial Parliamentary Art Collection. It is the first Commons painting in which all the Members included in it – 184 of them – are recognisable. Thomson also painted the House of Lords in 1961–2 (Pl 3), becoming the only artist to produce pictures of both Houses in session. Completed in 1962, his painting of the Commons is a very dignified composition: Harold Macmillan, then at the height of his power, is the central figure with his son, Maurice, who has just moved the Address, behind him; Churchill in old age occupies his customary seat below the gangway; Hugh Gaitskell, on the Labour front bench, is about

to intervene. Macmillan referred to it in his diary as 'a picture of quite remarkable interest and importance'. It hangs today in the Churchill Dining Room at the Commons.

The painting of the House that tends to be recalled most enthusiastically by MPs themselves is the most recent of them: an outstanding work by the celebrated Australian artist, June Mendoza, which is on display in Portcullis House. It shows Margaret Thatcher in a packed House at Prime Minister's question time in June 1986 during the second term of her premiership when she had her largest Parliamentary majority. A name can be put to every single face in this picture. (Over 150 MPs, for whom there was no room in the portrait, clubbed together to commission what is known as 'The Other Picture' by Andrew Festing, who painted them in the libraries of the House. This work is regarded almost as highly in the Commons today as June Mendoza's.)

Most of these 20th-century pictures of the House in session, painted at irregular intervals for private sale or, more usually, with a view to being hung in the Commons, form part of the Parliamentary Art Collection. Its curator and staff keep a record of the rest, which are in public galleries or private possession. Images of them all can be found readily online. The picture bought in November 2015 was not among them. How had it come to elude the experts?

No useful information was provided by its seller who brought it to an antiques fair held at Kempton Park Racecourse on 11 November 2015 where it was purchased. All he would say was that it had been acquired at a London house clearance, having languished in a garage. It was of course the fame of the person at the despatch box which excited interest in acquiring the picture. It was natural to hope that her renown would prove the key to identifying it. Apart from Churchill, no 20th-century political leader has been studied in so much detail. Having written her life in three volumes, her official biographer, Charles Moore, has an encyclopaedic knowledge of everything that happened during her career, including the pictures made of her. In his work he drew heavily on the vast Thatcher Archive at Churchill College, Cambridge, and on a huge accumulation of material about her that is available on the website of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org>, the best online documentary archive of any political leader in the world. But Moore shook his head firmly when shown an image of the painting, and the relevant archivists were also completely unable to help.

Even though the Parliamentary Art Collection had no record of the work, it seemed impossible to believe that no memory of it survived in, or around, the House of Commons. In the days before the televising of Parliament, access to one of the boxes provided for officials and political advisers inside the chamber itself was widely regarded to have been essential to gauge its proportions correctly, gain a full appreciation of its decoration, and above all to record the individual faces of members. Seats are arranged for artists approved by the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art. June Mendoza told us that such vantage points were essential to 'paint 400 plus bodies and gain a sense of the visual veracity



1 *Mrs Thatcher at the Despatch Box*, here attributed to Alfred Reginald Thomson RA (1894–1979) and dated to 1979. Oil on canvas, 92 x 122 cm. Collection of Daniel Hadden

of the Chamber'. She must surely have been preceded in these Commons boxes by the artist we were seeking to track down. John (now Lord) Cope, an MP at the time, detected 'some similarities with the Mendoza picture. It is from the same vantage point. That means it had some parliamentary backing'. Could such backing be established?

Throughout Margaret Thatcher's eleven-and-a-half years as prime minister, Sir Murdo Maclean, in conjunction with the Serjeant at Arms, authorised admission to the boxes in his capacity as Private Secretary to the Government Chief Whip (the person quoted anonymously in the media as 'the usual channels'). He recollected vividly making arrangements for June Mendoza, but was certain that she had had no predecessor. The Government Chief Whip in the early years of Mrs Thatcher's government when the picture must have been painted, Michael (now Lord) Jopling, was equally clear that Mendoza alone was given access to the boxes. He was 'puzzled' as to how without access the painting could have executed. He felt, 'The quality of the faces that appear to be complete were much inferior to June Mendoza's. I doubt if the artist him/herself painted the chamber's background. Perhaps it was done on top of an engraving?'

Philip Mould, the art expert made famous by the BBC's *Fake or Fortune* television programme, later suggested a similar explanation. 'My hunch', he said, 'is that it is taken from a photograph. If that is the case, there would of course be no formal sittings recorded.' No-one at all from among the surviving MPs who were in the Commons during the first years of the Thatcher government could shed any definite light on the mystery, strengthening the view that the work was done by someone who either did not set foot in Parliament or had to be content with a seat in the Commons' visitors' gallery to assist a venture that otherwise must have relied on readily available pictures of the chamber and, presumably, photographs of MPs in a publication such as *The Times Guide to*

The House of Commons. If that were the case, the identity of the artist would probably be impossible to establish.

Fortunately, that depressing view was not shared by Lord (Patrick) Cormack, a leading authority on the Parliamentary Art Collection who, as an MP, had been a member of the Commons Works of Art Committee throughout the Thatcher years. He provided the vital clues that led eventually to the solution of the mystery. When he looked at an image of the picture, it immediately struck him as being 'very much in the style of Alfred Reginald Thomson' who had painted the Commons so successfully in 1960 with Macmillan at the despatch box. He added: 'Certainly the Works of Art Committee did not commission Thomson in the Thatcher period, and I would suspect that he used his knowledge of the chamber to do this sketch, changing the figures in the Macmillan painting to bring it up to date.'

This hunch that Thomson could have been our man was endorsed by Malcolm Hay, then the Curator of the Parliamentary Art Collection, when he examined the picture in 2016. It bore all Thomson's hallmarks, he declared. It emerged that Hay knew exactly how the 1960 picture had been painted. Contrary to what was widely assumed, access to the boxes in the chamber had not been required. Hay told us, 'Thomson was given permission to sketch from the public gallery in the chamber. As he could use only a small note pad, he had to rely heavily on his visual memory. For the next six months Members visited his house daily for portrait sittings; and the Clerk of Works lent him a plan of the chamber so that he could scale up the internal architecture and bench lay-out correctly.'

Thomson was now firmly in the frame, as it were. Malcolm Hay had given us a most promising line of inquiry. But would it be possible to prove beyond any serious doubt that Thomson was the artist of the unsigned picture?

Alfred Reginald Thomson RA (1894–1979), one of the few to bear the title of Royal Painter, was an exceptionally talent-



2 *House of Commons 1960 debate on the address of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan*. Colour offset photolithograph of oil painting by Alfred Reginald Thomson. © The Artist's Estate, Parliamentary Art Collection WOA 4146



3 *House of Lords 1961–2 Portrait of Peers* by Alfred Reginald Thomson RA (1894–1979). Oil on canvas. © The Artist's Estate, Parliamentary Art Collection WOA 1704

told Thomson's story to show how a fine artist overcame a disability they both shared.

Dimmock writes that in 1979, the year of Thomson's death, 'He averaged 15 small pictures a week.' For many of them, he drew on his remarkable memory to recapture scenes or people from the past. It would have been wholly unsurprising if, in his last months, the House of Commons had stirred his interest once again nearly 20 years after his acclaimed portrait of it in session. On 4 May 1979, a historic event occurred: Britain's first woman Prime Minister took office. Though he was housebound, a picture of Mrs Thatcher at the government despatch box in the Commons would not have been beyond him. Dimmock makes clear that canvases of all kinds which had accumulated over the years were stacked in Thomson's studio. A preliminary, unused version of the Commons from 1960 is likely to have been among them. He had time to add Margaret Thatcher and a number of others before his death on 27 October 1979, but not to populate the green benches fully. Was this how the painting came to be conceived, and why it was incomplete?

Such speculations could only be given weight with the help of Thomson's family and surviving friends, if any remained over 35 years after his death. His will and probate records yielded no useful information. But a letter delivered to all the homes in Fernshaw Road, Chelsea, where he had lived for nearly 40 years up until his death, brought a reply from a former neighbour, Gavin Hooper. Though 'pretty frail', Thomson had painted a portrait of his wife in 1979, which provided proof that he was still at work until the very end of his life. Mr Hooper also knew that a grandson of Thomson, his daughter's child, was living in Edinburgh. He was traced through the Artists' Collecting Society, a body set up in 2006 to help painters and their descendants to get payments to which they are entitled under the Artist's Retail Right introduced through EU legislation. Paul Mannings in Edinburgh was able to supply a number of detailed, preliminary sketches of the Commons that his grandfather had made for the 1960 picture. He also detected in the unfinished portrait unmistakable signs of his grandfather's style. (It could have been with the aid of these carefully annotated sketches that the 1979 picture was created rather than through work on an existing canvas.)

All the results of these researches were reviewed by Malcolm Hay, Curator of Parliamentary Art, in July 2017. The 1979 picture was compared closely with the sketches from Paul Mannings and the painting of 1960. Hay said that they all had so much in common – lines, angles, the positioning of MPs, colour and general technique – that they must have been done by the same hand. The canvases and the wood on which they had been mounted were also very similar. Indeed, those used in the unfinished portrait and another of Thomson's portraits featuring children were absolutely identical. Malcolm Hay brought the long quest for authentication to an end by declaring that he had no doubt that the unfinished picture, painted in 1979, was by Alfred Reginald Thomson.

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ed, versatile and prolific artist, specialising after the Second World War in portraits of both single individuals and groups. He was noted in particular for the skill with which he represented accurately all the faces of a mass of men and women gathered together in one place. Post-war success, which came after years of hardship, was reflected in the fees he was able to command. His reputation was crowned by the award of a gold medal, the last ever presented, at the 1948 Olympic Games in London for a portrait of a boxer arrayed in the England colours. His Chelsea studio was visited by the cream of British society, headed by the Queen, who brought a fake tiara with her in 1958 when he painted her for the RAF on its fortieth anniversary; the Thomson cat which brushed against the royal legs was promptly renamed Adam Regis.

Everyone who was painted by Thomson remembered him for one thing above all, apart from the excellence of his work: he was stone deaf. In his shoulder he had a bullet fired by a soldier on sentry duty who asked him his name at an army camp on a dark evening during the war (it was not removed to avoid paralysing the arm). As is so often the case where one faculty is absent, another becomes particularly strong; in Thomson's case, it was the memory which was to serve him so well when he came to paint the House of Commons.

He had immense *joie de vivre*. A lifetime of heavy drinking in the company of Augustus John and others eventually undermined his health. From the mid-Sixties onwards he was often seriously ill. His painting was often interrupted, but it was never abandoned. His perseverance in the face of grave difficulty is brought out in a moving and affectionate memoir, *Tommy* (1991), written by Arthur Dimmock, who helped found the National Union of the Deaf in 1976 and