

The Right Honourable WILLIAM MORRIS “BILLY” HUGHES

By Pat Madson

BORN 25 September 1862 Pimlico, London
DIED 28 October 1952 Lindfield, N.S.W.

AWARDS KC – King’s Counsel
 CH – Order of the Companion of Honour

LANE COVE CONNECTION

In 1905 Billy Hughes purchased land and in 1906 built a house called “Osborne Park” on Osborne Road in the area of Lane Cove now called Osborne Park. His first wife Elizabeth died here in 1906. The house name was later changed to ‘Kermadec’

EARLY LIFE

Billy Hughes was the only child of his Welsh parents, born while they were living in London. Following his mother’s death when he was 7 years old, he lived with his father’s sister in Wales, spending holidays with his mother’s family. Aged 14 he returned to London and worked as a pupil-teacher at St Stephen’s School Westminster.

In October 1884 he migrated to Queensland Australia, where he worked as a labourer, shearer’s cook and bush worker. By 1886 he was in Sydney where he married his landlady’s daughter Elizabeth Cutts. In 1890 they moved to Balmain where he opened a small mixed shop and took on odd jobs.

POLITICAL CAREER - STATE

1892- He joined the Socialist League, became a street corner speaker and organiser for the Australian Workers’ Union.

1894- He spent 8 weeks in central NSW organising for the Amalgamated Shearers’ Union and then won the seat of Lang in the NSW Legislative Assembly.

1899- While in Parliament he organised and became secretary of the Wharf Labourer’s Union. During this time, he studied law and in 1903 he was admitted as a barrister.

POLITICAL CAREER – FEDERAL

1901- Hughes was **elected to the first Federal Parliament** as Labour MP for West Sydney, which included his state electorate. He held this

seat until 1916. He also organised and became President of the Waterside Workers' Federation.

He was Minister for External Affairs in the first Labor Government and Attorney-General in Andrew Fisher's 3 Labor Governments. In 1907 he returned to England as a delegate to a shipping conference, visiting his family in Wales while there.

1915- He succeeded Andrew Fisher as **Labor Prime Minister** and was a strong supporter of Australia's participation in World War 1. In 1916 he travelled to England, and as part of a British delegation went to Paris to an Allied Conference. He had won the right to speak independently on behalf of Australia and this was the **first participation by Australia at an International Conference**. He also visited the Australian troops at the front, deepening his devotion to them.

1916- After losing a plebiscite on conscription, which he had strongly supported, he was **expelled from the Labor Party**. He and his followers called themselves the **National Labor Party**, however, to stay in power Hughes had to supply agreement with the opposition Commonwealth Liberal Party.

A few months later this wartime coalition became a new party, the **Nationalist Party of Australia**, with Hughes as leader.

1917- At this Federal election Hughes changed his seat and was elected member for Bendigo in Victoria. Again, he held a plebiscite on conscription promising to resign if he lost. The plebiscite was defeated, and he did resign as Prime Minister, but as there were no alternative candidates the Governor General immediately re-commissioned him. So he remained as P.M.

1918/9- Participating in the Imperial War Conference and War Cabinet, and later the Versailles Peace Conference Hughes obtained reparation for Australia, kept possession of German New Guinea and demanded that Australia have independent representation in the new League of Nations. He returned home to a hero's welcome.

1922- At this Federal election Hughes returned to Sydney and switched seats from Bendigo to North Sydney, but the Nationalists lost their majority. The new Country Party held balance of power, but would not go into coalition with the Nationalists with Hughes as leader. He resigned.

1929- He crossed the floor to bring down the Government and was **expelled from the Nationalist Party**. Again, he formed his own new party, the **Australia Party**.

1931- With his own party in tatters he joined the new **United Australia Party** with Joseph Lyons as leader.

1932- As a delegate to the General Assembly of the League of Nations Hughes became aware of the international situation in Europe, and for the next 8 years fought a lone crusade for the need to prepare for war.

1941- He was made leader of the United Australia Party and Deputy Leader of the Opposition and remained a member of the War Advisory Council.

1944- Expelled from the United Australia Party because he stayed a member of the War Advisory council after the UAP under Menzies withdrew its members. Later that year Menzies formed a new party, the **Liberal Party**, and Hughes became a member.

1949- He became member for the new electorate of Bradfield and remained as such until his death in 1952.

POLITICAL and LEGAL OFFICES

1904	Minister for External Affairs
1908-1909	Attorney General of Australia
1910-1913	Attorney General of Australia
1914-1921	Attorney General of Australia
1915-1923	Prime Minister
1916	Minister for Trade and Customs
1921-1923	Minister for External Affairs
1934-1935	Minister for Health Minister for Repatriation Vice President of the Executive Council
1936-1937	Minister for Health Minister for Repatriation
1937-1938	Minister in Charge of Territories Vice President of the Executive Council
1937-1939	Minister for External Affairs
1938-1941	Attorney General of Australia
1939-1940	Minister for Industry
1940-1941	Minister for the Navy

FAMILY LIFE

He and Elizabeth had six children. Following her death in 1906 his 17-year-old daughter Ethel raised his other five children at Lane Cove. She also acted as his hostess when he was in Sydney.

In 1911 he married Mary Ethel Campbell in Melbourne. They had one daughter Mary who died aged 21. His wife Mary accompanied him on his overseas trips and was active in charity work. Overseas she had met Margaret Lloyd George, Clementine Churchill and Christabel Pankhurst leading to her advocacy for women's rights. In 1922 she was made a Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire for her charitable and war effort work.

On his death Hughes left an estate valued at £70,886 in NSW and £45,759 in Victoria.

HONOURS

- 7th Prime Minister of Australia, elections 1917, 1919, 1922
- Set a record of 58 years as a Member of Parliament.
- Called “the Little Digger” by WW1 troops
- Was the last member of the original 1901 Australian Parliament still in Parliament when he died.
- At 90 years and 1 month he was the oldest person to have been a serving Member of Parliament.
- Electoral division of Hughes named after him.
- Canberra suburb of Hughes named after him.