

ON THE WALL MEETING MUNGO

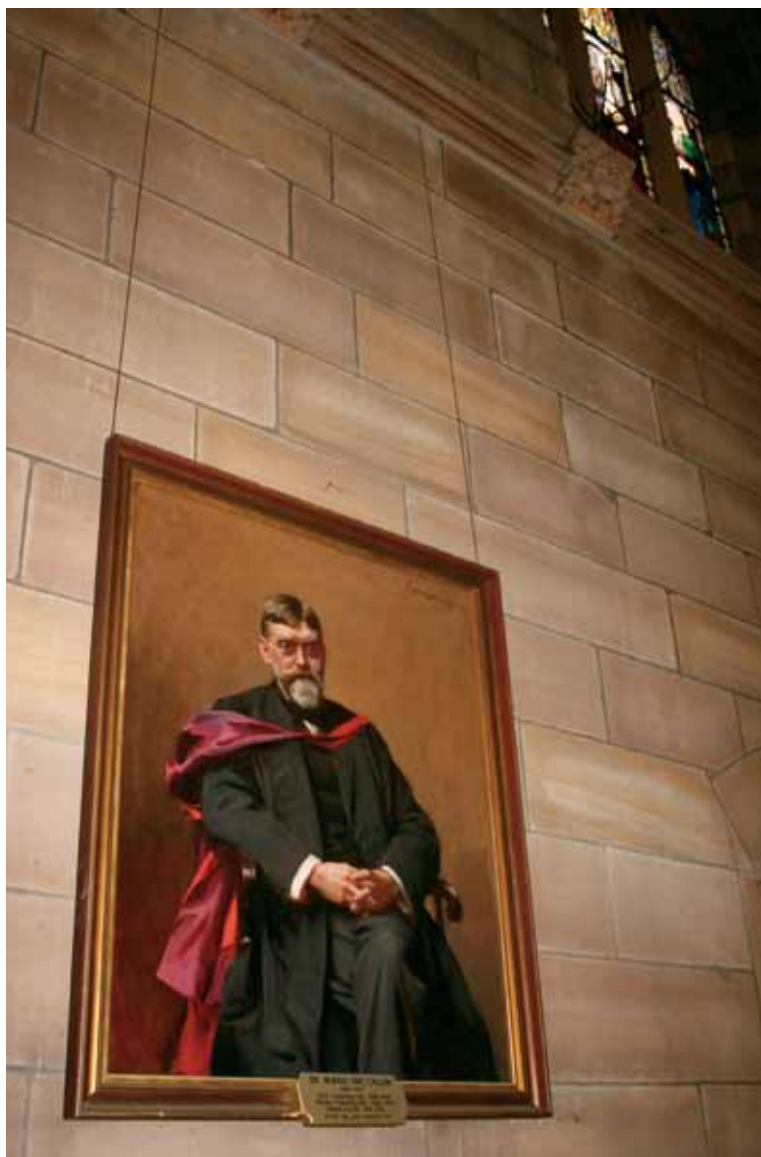
Alayne Alvis, Conservator Sydney University Museums

I'm often in the Great Hall moving, checking or assessing art works and nearly always stop in front of this portrait. Maybe it's just my imagination, but I feel there is an air of approachability about the man that really draws me to this work. I think it's the twinkle in his eyes ...

Imagine an official academic portrait – it doesn't matter who – and check off the standard features: a serious-faced subject, straight-backed and wearing the robes of office. Any artist creating an academic portrait has quite a few conventions to respect while still trying to say something about an individual person.

You can see many examples as you look around the Great Hall; lots of gorgeous robes and stern expressions. That is until you spot Sir Mungo MacCallum – Foundation Professor of Modern Languages and Literature in 1886, then the first salaried Vice-Chancellor in 1924, before becoming Deputy Chancellor in 1928 and then Chancellor in 1934. He retired from the University in 1936.

Perhaps there's something to be said about being painted a little earlier in your career. Painted when he was still Dean of Arts, he looks relaxed, leaning back in his chair with his robes tucked behind him; he has a wry or maybe slightly amused expression and a bit of a twinkle in his eyes.



MacCallum was a renowned debater, making up for his lack of stature with invective. But more than his words, it was his actions that demonstrated the strong sense of justice that was central to his character. Despite disagreeing bitterly with the political stance Professor George Wood had taken on the Boer War (views for which Wood was threatened with dismissal), MacCallum took on the Senate defending Wood's right to his opinion and threatening to resign himself if Wood was removed.

When looking up at this academic portrait, it makes a refreshing change to see the person and not necessarily the position they occupied. This is one of eight academic portraits in the collection by Sir John Campbell Longstaff. In each, the conventions of academic portraiture are respected but, and particularly in the portrait of Mungo MacCallum, the conventions are bent sufficiently to allow character and personality to shine through.

Mungo MacCallum, 1911, John Longstaff. oil on canvas
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