

## EARLE PAGE: THE POLITICIAN AND THE MAN

*This is the text of the first lecture in the Earle Page College Thirtieth Anniversary Series. The lecture was delivered at the College by Associate Professor Carl Bridge at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 March 1993.*

First I must express my thanks to the Master of Earle Page College, Mr Philip Raymont, for the invitation to deliver this lecture. It is an honour and a joy. Page was the college I stayed in when I first arrived in Armidale ten years ago to take up a lectureship at the University of New England. The warm welcome I received at the college, I am sure, has had something to do with why I have been at this university ever since.

Sir Earle Page today is known for the monuments which bear his name: this college; a Canberra suburb; a federal electorate; a plaque at Sydney Boys High School; the Page Chest Clinic at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney; and a plaque, a park and a bridge in Grafton. But there are other much more important monuments which do not carry his name, and with which it is not always sufficiently associated in the popular imagination, among them: the Country Party, now the National Party; the Financial Agreement of 1927, one of the foundation stones of the Commonwealth; federal highways; and free medicine for all Australians. Page was, first and foremost, a doctor of medicine who turned his immense energy and skills to the service of the nation. He aimed to cure the ills of the body politic. Many of today's politicians could learn from his vision and his constructiveness. He was also an extraordinary character whose excessive zeal often landed him in trouble, as I shall relate.<sup>1</sup>

His life and work fall into four natural stages: 1880-1901, education and growing up; 1902-19, medicine; 1919-39, leader of the Country Party, federal Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister; and 1939-61, elder statesman.

### I

Earle Christmas Grafton Page was born in Grafton, NSW, on 8 August 1880, into a Methodist family well-known in the region. The name Christmas had nothing

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, material in this lecture comes from my entry on Page in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 118-22, or from Page's autobiography, *Truant Surgeon*, Sydney, 1963.

to do with what Page's parents thought of him, or the time of year. Like Earle it was simply the name of a relation. But the name Grafton carries a message. That town then, as now, was a thriving centre with great civic pride; a pride accentuated in Page's case by his father's and grandfather's civic service. Page's grandfather had been for many years town clerk, and before that had been the first teacher appointed to the Grafton public school. Page's father served as mayor and ran a thriving business as a blacksmith and coach-builder. His mother was of Scottish ancestry and very keen on the education of her children. Earle was the fifth of ten children. The fourth son, he was very much the child in the middle of the family who had to make himself heard as best he could. And this he did remarkably well.

Page topped Grafton Public School and won a scholarship to Sydney Boys High. Despite his father's bankruptcy in the 1893 bank crash, Page was still sent by his family to Sydney High where he also did extremely well. At the precocious age of 15, he won a bursary to medical school at the University of Sydney. Page wrote in his memoirs that he could not afford a pair of long trousers when he first went to the university and was the only student to attend lectures in knickerbockers. The Page family had something of a medical background, as Page's grandfather had been very interested in chemistry as a young man and had survived having his stomach pumped out on three occasions after experimenting on himself with various of medical concoctions.

Earle not only survived medical school but was ranked first in medicine in his final year in 1901. He soon acquired a reputation as a brilliant surgeon. A contemporary remembered that Page could "get in quick and get out quicker" than any surgeon of his generation; in other words, he operated very efficiently.<sup>2</sup> Page toyed with the idea of becoming a Methodist missionary in the Pacific islands, but eventually accepted a post as house surgeon at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. He had not been there long before he contracted a near fatal infection of the arm after conducting a post-mortem. Only a colleague's desperate measure of making forty incisions in Page's arm saved him from death. The painful cuts were bound and tended by a nurse named Ethel Blunt, who three years later was to become Page's wife. The infection persuaded Page to leave Sydney with its nasty diseases and to return home as a partner in a South Grafton medical practice.

Apart from the healthier climate, Page saw a big opportunity to bring modern medicine to the north coast. He had learnt his trade at the height of a major revolution in medicine. Nineteenth-century doctors were long on bedside manner but very short on clinical training. When Page went to medical school the microscope was uncovering for the first time many of the germs that caused major diseases; aseptic surgery—which enabled serious abdominal operations to be carried out in relative safety—was newly introduced; and X-rays had only

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<sup>2</sup> Dr W. F. Simmons, *Medical Journal of Australia*, 12 May 1962, p. 733.

just been discovered. Page saw it as his mission to introduce these techniques to the bush.

Page also exploited some non-medical inventions. In 1904 he purchased the first Rover car to come to Australia and one of only about thirty cars of all makes in the whole Commonwealth. Photographs show that it looked more like a Cobb & Co. coach than a modern motor car; the upper-works of the car were certainly manufactured by a coach-builder—Page's own father. Page also had his surgery connected to the telephone. With his car, which was also an ambulance, his phone, and the battery-operated X-ray machine which he soon purchased, Page was able to service many people well into the Grafton hinterland, and made his practice a model of its kind.

Within a short time Page had bought out his partner. He now had his own hospital, and soon had three junior doctors in his employ, all of whom had been recommended to him by his old professors. Page kept in contact with Ethel in Sydney and visited her on his regular trips south. His first recorded political act was to do with her. On a picnic in 1904 at Como in the southern Sydney suburbs, Page rowed Ethel out into the middle of the George's River, and while out there, he proposed marriage and told her that he would not row her back to the shore until she agreed. As Ethel could not swim, she later related, she felt compelled to say "yes".<sup>3</sup>

The couple were married in 1906 in Ashfield, Sydney, the suburb in which Ethel's mother lived. By marrying Ethel, Page also managed to acquire a matron for his hospital and Ethel assisted in this capacity for some years. By the time of his marriage, Page's medical practice extended over 16 000 square kilometres and his reputation as a surgeon was such that patients were occasionally referred to him from Sydney. One of his daring operations entered local folklore. Page whipped out the local chemist's infected lung, and thereafter the man maintained that Page had saved his life. The operation, however, left the chemist with a permanent bluish tinge to his face, and he became known to all and sundry as "the blue man". Every time the blue man dispensed a prescription the recipient was reminded of Page's feat—the chemist was a walking advertisement for the doctor.<sup>4</sup>

In 1908 Page realised an ambition by buying a thousand acres of land near Kandanga in the Gympie-Nambour area of central Queensland. Page thus embarked on a second career as the owner of several dairy farms and a sawmill. In 1909 the Pages' first child, Mary, was born. Four sons followed. By 1912, when he was 32, Page's papers record that he had assets worth £10 000 (in today's money this would be something of the order of \$2 million). Page certainly had done very well for himself. About this time, Page and Ethel made

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mary Bailey-Tart (Page's daughter), 7 September 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Wilfred Bailey-Tart (Page's son-in-law), 7 September 1986.

a trip to a medical convention in New Zealand, and while there Page saw a hydro-electric scheme which prompted him to dream of the possibility of a similar development on his own river, the "Big River", the Clarence.

Following family tradition, Page had been elected to the South Grafton Council in 1913, but it was the impact of the early years of the First World War that really turn Page's mind to politics. A combination of drought and punitive wartime price-fixing led people in the bush to raise the cry that, as ever, the "Sydney octopus" was depriving them of their due. Those living on the Clarence added specifically local grievances there was no bridge across the river; they had no sealed roads; there was no rail link from the coast to the tableland; and the port at the river mouth had not been properly developed. Further, since Grafton was closer to Brisbane than it was to Sydney, the old grumble that northern NSW should be a separate state was again becoming persistent. In 1915, Page and some friends founded the Northern NSW Separation League and bought the local newspaper, the *Grafton Examiner*, in order to trumpet their cause. Within a year the League had twenty-two branches, including ones at Tamworth, Glen Innes and Tenterfield, but before Page could make any further political moves his patriotism had led him to enlist in the army.<sup>5</sup>

Page joined up in January 1916. The decision was a very difficult one for him. If he went to war he would be serving his nation but he would be deserting the many people in the region who depended on his doctoring. Page, therefore, compromised and decided to serve only for a limited period. He planned to be away for a year and then to swap places with one of the other doctors in his practice.

The army's inefficiency frustrated Page. First he was forced to cool his heels in Egypt for six months. There was not enough work in Cairo to absorb his boundless energy, and he spent his time reading voraciously and travelling up and down the Nile. Eventually he was moved to Britain and on to the Western Front in France where he was three months at a casualty clearing station on the Somme.

Near their post the doctors had laid out a badminton court and when he was not working flat out with the wounded Page would drag his exhausted colleagues onto the court for a hit. When Page arrived at the front his English orderly was rather perplexed about what to do with Page's billeting arrangements. Page's doctor's bag had "Earle Page" printed on its side. The concerned orderly hurried on ahead and asked the commanding officer what he was to do with Earl Page. He could not, he said, billet an earl with an ordinary

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<sup>5</sup> For the details of Page's pre-parliamentary political career, see J. O'Hara, "The entry into public life of Sir Earle Christmas Grafton Page, 1915-21", B. A. (Hons) thesis, University of New England, 1969.

captain! This elevation to the nobility amused Page and his colleagues considerably and Page was known to them as "the Earl" from then on.<sup>6</sup>

After serving his time in France, Page argued to the authorities that he had to return to Grafton to save his medical practice which was falling into disarray under the locum, and Page was given his discharge. Be this as it may, Page found time on the way home to take three months seeing hydro-electric schemes in the United States and Canada, thus educating himself for future developments in Australia. He arrived in Grafton in June 1917 at the height of the conscription controversy. As a conscriptionist in a country seat where the majority of people were against conscription, Page kept quiet on the issue so as not to harm his chances when he later came to run for office.

In 1918 he was elected Mayor of South Grafton, and he lost no time in initiating the electrification of the town by means of the Nymboida hydro-electricity scheme. In Page's mind, however, this was a pilot project for the ultimate damming of the "Big River" itself at the Clarence Gorge. A mighty hydro-electric scheme on the Clarence, Page envisaged, would supply electricity to the whole of northern NSW. The Nymboida scheme was very successful. The Clarence Gorge scheme, unfortunately, never came into being although Page was to fight for it for the whole of his political career.

## II

In the federal 1919 elections Page was a candidate for the seat of Cowper. His platform was simple. More money should be spent in the country. Government price controls on the primary product should be lifted. The government's compulsory wheat pool should be dismantled and the free market allowed to come back into operation. Tariffs should be cut so that farmers could acquire their machinery at competitive rates. Cronyism should be abolished and a "clean" government voted in.

Duly elected as an independent country member, in January 1920 Page helped form the federal Country Party, a party of eleven country MPs from the various states.<sup>7</sup> The Country Party held the balance of power in the new parliament and sat on the cross benches, being neither members of the government nor of the opposition, presenting themselves as honest brokers. The young Dr Page was elected party whip, with the job of ensuring party unity and of making sure that

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<sup>6</sup> Simmons, p. 733.

<sup>7</sup> The rise of the federal Country Party is discussed in B. D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, Canberra, 1966, and in Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, Melbourne, 1963.

the eleven MPs were on hand to vote in key divisions. The Prime Minister at the time was W. M. (universally known as "Billy") Hughes, who had recently formed the Nationalist Party, a combination of the old Liberal Party and former Labor members, like Hughes himself, who as pro-conscriptionists had crossed the floor after their party had split over that issue. Hughes's conservative coalition owed its major allegiance to city business interests, those very firms that required the protection that Page and the Country Party wanted lifted. A cartoon of the time shows the Country Party acting as policeman at an intersection with the Labor Party coming in one direction and the Nationalist Party with Hughes as the driver of the coach coming in the other.<sup>8</sup>

Page was quick to see that the government's dependence on Country Party votes could be used to maximum advantage. The Country Party wanted the government to abandon tariffs and stop protecting secondary industry, to encourage migration, and to spend federal money on regional development. They also wanted the government to abandon inefficient government enterprises, among them the Commonwealth Woollen Mills and the Commonwealth Shipping Line. These were major demands and Hughes, at first, was not prepared to listen.

In April 1921, Page, as the coming man, was elected leader of the Country Party, and he lost no time in criticising Hughes. Page said that the Country Party was there to "switch on the lights" when Hughes the burglar was about and to make him "drop the loot".<sup>9</sup> This was a reference to Hughes's cabinet's spending of money in the cities rather than giving the country its due. Hughes responded by branding Page and his followers "hayseeds"; and the *Macleay Argus*, responded with a description of Page as a David "collecting nice round smooth stones for his little sling", readying himself for battle with his Goliath, Hughes.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Ethel written from Canberra, Page described his fellow politicians as "primitive beasts—fighting with tooth and claw without any rules or anything else ... [I] fear [I] am just too soft for this work".<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, this fear proved to be unfounded.

At the next federal elections in October 1922 the Country Party again secured the balance of power and Page forced home his advantage with ruthless precision. He demanded that Hughes resign as Prime Minister and that Stanley Melbourne Bruce, the dapper, Cambridge-educated businessman from Melbourne be made Prime Minister. As his business was an importing house

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<sup>8</sup> "Controlling the Traffic", *Bulletin*, 4 March 1920.

<sup>9</sup> *Age*, 22 September 1922. The interjection "Drop the loot!" became a parliamentary favourite for decades, see S. Murray-Smith, (ed.), *Dictionary of Australian Quotations*, Melbourne, 1984, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. VI, Melbourne, 1987, pp. 142-3; *Macleay Argus* 1 September 1922.

<sup>11</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 13 August 1922, Page Papers, A180/7, Dixson Library, University of New England.

Bruce was much more sympathetic to cutting tariffs and to the Country Party line generally. Page struck a deal with him—the government would not be the Bruce government but the Bruce-Page government. The Country Party would have five of the eleven cabinet posts. Page would become Deputy Prime Minister. There would be a joint Senate ticket and the Country Party would take portfolios of particular interest to its constituency. This was a hard bargain when one considers that the Country Party held only fourteen seats to the Nationalists thirty-one.<sup>12</sup>

Both Bruce, at 39, and Page, 43, were men of a new generation without a political past. Hughes, then aged 61, and his political colleagues of the war years were seen as corrupt old men who had not fought in the war. The Bruce-Page generation were younger leaders untainted by the so-called corruption of the earlier years. They had both served in the armed forces. They both had had successful professional careers outside politics. They were new men who represented themselves as coming into politics to do a practical job of work for the country. Bruce's only previous portfolio had been the Treasurership and he had only held that briefly. Page, of course, had never been in cabinet; and he reminded the House frequently of his medical background, often saying that he came into parliament solely to be a doctor for the nation. The Bruce-Page government began on a wave of post-war idealism.<sup>13</sup>

Bruce and Page set about developing Australia with their great slogans of "Australian Unlimited" and "Men Money, Markets". "Men" meant immigration, bringing large numbers of men and women of productive age into Australia to populate the country and to work in the cities and in the bush. "Money" was to come from development loans to pay for the immigration and for dams and roads and other infrastructural developments that would turn Australia into a great primary and secondary industrial powerhouse in the southern hemisphere. "Markets" were to come from negotiations with other countries, initially within the empire and later outside it, for the supply of raw materials and other products in exchange for those countries' secondary goods, such as machinery and motor vehicles.

For Page, politics, like medicine, became the art of the possible. He soon realised that he could not cut tariffs easily when the other half of the government in which he served was supported by urban business interests. Therefore, he decided, in the terms of the day, to "get into the vicious circle". Instead of trying to have tariffs reduced, he secured either subsidies or bounties for key exports like meat, sugar, dairy products and dried fruits; and a system of advances was instituted for wheat farmers. This was often at the cost of higher domestic prices

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<sup>12</sup> The best account is still B. D. Graham, "The Country Party and the Formation of the Bruce-Page Ministry", *Historical Studies*, vol. 10, no. 37 (1961), pp. 71-83.

<sup>13</sup> The mood of 'twenties Australia is described well in Robert Murray, *The Confident Years*, Melbourne, 1978.

for these products. The Labor Party called these measures "doses of socialism", but this did not deter the Country Party for they had found practical solutions to their immediate problems.

As federal Treasurer Page had many problems to solve. One of the first was the reform of the Commonwealth Bank. He gave it control over federal note issue and some of the characteristics of a true central bank. Another major issue was the very costly competition between the state and federal governments in the raising of international loans. In 1923 Page established the Australian Loans Council so that the states and the Commonwealth could meet to decide on a common policy in this area and thus get their loans at more desirable rates. By means of the Financial Agreement of 1927 Page made the Council statutory and the federal government assumed ultimate responsibility for the states' loans. This agreement marked a major shift in responsibilities and it has been a pillar of federal-state cooperation ever since.

An immediate priority was to find money for road and bridge building in country electorates and to finance the co-operative marketing ventures that were central to the Country Party's vision of the future. One of Page's difficulties was that these areas were traditionally state responsibilities. The only roads built by the federal government, for instance, were on federal territory. Page tried to find ways and means for federal intervention. He did this by section 96 grants: tied grants from the Commonwealth to the states for specific purposes. By stretching section 96 a long way beyond its original intent, Page was able to grant large sums for road building and for co-operative marketing. Some of the money for roads, interestingly, came from a petrol tax. Later, in the late 1940s and 50s, the section 96 mechanism was to be used for a myriad of purposes, most importantly for health and education. Perceiving the potential of section 96 shows Page's practical inventiveness at its best.

Page did not forget his own constituency. The Clarence was bridged in 1932 by a combined rail and road bridge funded from a section 96 grant. Grafton was linked to Brisbane by rail, and the road was sealed and widened too. Page was not known as the "King of the Clarence" for nothing.<sup>14</sup> Next, Page turned his attention literally to the health of the nation. In 1928 he planned to introduce a national insurance scheme, paid for by all Australians, which would finance their medical costs and their old age. Unfortunately this idea was halted in 1928 as the economy faltered. By 1929 Page had many solid achievements to his name. The CSIR (later the CSIRO) had been expanded to become the major scientific investigatory body for the nation. Roads and bridges had been improved and extended well into the interior. Marketing schemes had been initiated for virtually all primary products. Highways were financed by petrol taxes which made them to some extent self-financing. The Commonwealth Loans Council co-ordinated Loans access among the states. Taxes had been cut.

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<sup>14</sup> *Age*, 2 December 1959.



Industry and exports had expanded. Many of the political mechanisms Page put into place in the 1920s are with us still and these are his political legacy.

The Bruce-Page governments of the 1920s are often portrayed as recklessly visionary. It is said that they did not work out a proper economic agenda for the country, with over-borrowing and over-migration leading to unemployment and eventually to the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> This rather unkind description of their activities is based on selective evidence and on far too much hindsight. The Depression hit all of the countries of the West regardless of how their planning had proceeded. Had the Great Depression not come in 1929 (a result of a massive collapse in world commodity prices, an eventuality that Australia could not have avoided) then these loans would have been paid and the migrants would have kept their jobs. In any case, a survey of borrowing in the 1920s shows that state governments borrowed much more heavily than the Commonwealth. Page was a prudent Treasurer and he cannot be made scapegoat for the onset of Australia's Depression.

At the end of August 1929 the Bruce-Page government was brought down when Billy Hughes led a backbench revolt. Hughes crossed the floor to remove from office the two men who had brought him down six years earlier. Hughes had sneered at Page through all that time, calling him a "hayseed", and "the laughing Treasurer". "I'm sure I could see a woman through her hour of trouble a damned sight better than that damn fellow could run the country", Hughes said.<sup>16</sup> I doubt that there was a woman in the country apart perhaps from Mrs Hughes, who would have agreed with him.

Let us now turn to Page's private life in the 1920s. Before 1923, his medical practice had gone from strength to strength. In 1921 he built two houses in Strathfield, Sydney, so investing some of the money he had earned from medicine. In 1928 he built another Sydney house, this time in Wollstonecraft. In 1920 Ethel decided to leave Grafton and move back to Sydney. With her peripatetic politician husband living much of the time in Melbourne, it made sense to bring up her family in Sydney, close to schools and to her ailing mother. Page resolved that he would visit Sydney at least once every three weeks and this he did. In 1928 Page bought five-twelfths share in Heifer Station, a beef cattle property near Grafton for £10 000. He acquired the other seven-twelfths in 1932 and renamed the property Boolneringbar. The late twenties saw the apogee of Page's financial achievement. In 1927, according to his income tax returns and other records, he had assets worth £70 000. He was a member of the Australian Club in Sydney, he had a French governess for his children and he owned various properties, both urban and rural, in NSW and Queensland.

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<sup>15</sup> For a recent discussion, see W. H. Richmond, "S. M. Bruce and Australian Economic Policy, 1923-9", *Australian Economic History Review*, vol. xxiii, no. 2 (1983), pp. 238-56.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, pp. 142-3; *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 8 August, 1923; Murray, p. 115.

Page's entry into federal politics meant that he had to curtail his medical activities. He rented out his practice in Grafton and now only operated occasionally for family friends or close connections. He did not stop operating altogether, however, and in parliament became something of a house doctor. His last recorded operation was in 1940 in Canberra on the Labor MP Dr Moloney for a strangulated hernia. The Labor Prime Minister during the war, John Curtin, consulted Page on many occasions on his medical problems.

The letters to Ethel tell a story of personal strain induced by the separation brought about by politics. In 1922 he wrote that "life must be service and sacrifice". Four years later, he gave her the news that another MP's wife had joined her husband in Canberra for the session: "I think I am about the only grass widower left now. I seem to like it less and less as the years roll by." In 1935, he wrote poignantly of how much he appreciated her "tolerance of the domestic toil that political life has brought".<sup>17</sup> Public life involved massive personal costs.

After the 1931 federal elections, the new United Australia Party, the "party of spare parts"<sup>18</sup> as some called it, rejected alliance with the Country Party and Joseph Lyons, the new Prime Minister, advocated high protection. Page was desperate. He even canvassed going into coalition with Labor in an effort to turn the government out, but the Country Party did not have sufficient numbers to do this and the offer was rejected. Throughout 1931 and 1932, as commodity prices collapsed further and rural Australia went deeper into debt, Page and his party thrashed about looking for a solution. They returned to the old call for a "new state" in northern NSW and for others elsewhere in the Commonwealth. In New England this call was given added urgency by the Premier Jack Lang and his NSW Labor government's repudiation of the state's London debts, a move which greatly offended the conservative farmers and graziers whose livelihoods depended on export income. Some members of the New Guard, a middle class paramilitary organisation which included a core of returned soldiers, collected guns and planned to overthrow the Lang government by force. This was averted when Lang was dismissed by the Governor of NSW, and a combined United Australia Party/Country Party alliance under Bertram Stevens and Michael Bruxner formed the new state government. As a result of the Country Party's coming to power in NSW, immediate interest in the "new state" waned, though it held on until 1967 when New England electors rejected the idea in a plebiscite.

The Pages were struck a tragic blow in January 1933 when their eldest son, Earle, was struck by lightning and killed while drafting cattle at Boolneringbar.

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<sup>17</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 18 June 1922, 13 February 1926, 10 February 1935, Page Papers, A180/7, Dixson Library, University of New England.

<sup>18</sup> Ulrich Ellis (Page's secretary) to Page, 26 December 1931, Page Collection, 1633/2559, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Page found it necessary to leave politics altogether for nine months while he and Ethel finished young Earle's work converting parts of Boolneringbar to dairy-farms and generally to put the family finances in order. Page soon returned to the political fray, however, and after better results in the 1934 elections the Country Party again forced its way into coalition government, this time with the UAP, but it only managed to secure four of the fourteen cabinet posts. Page was made Minister for Commerce and in the next four years negotiated higher British quotas for Australian sugar and beef and introduced a measure for stabilising the domestic price for wheat. In 1938 Page was knighted for his contribution to politics.

On Lyons' death in April 1939 Page became caretaker Prime Minister for nineteen days while the UAP elected a new leader. He now wished to recover the dream of the 1920s and, if possible, bring back the Bruce-Page political arrangements which made the Country Party an equal partner in federal government. To this end, he plotted with R. G. Casey, the federal Treasurer and a UAP man, to make Bruce Prime Minister again. They also planned to reintroduce the national insurance scheme that had been put on ice in 1928. But the other major contender in the succession for UAP leadership was Robert Gordon Menzies, the Attorney-General and, as leading member of the Melbourne business and financial community, perhaps a natural enemy to the Country Party. Menzies objected to Casey's and Page's plan for national insurance and resigned over the issue to contest the leadership of the party. Born in 1894, Menzies was fourteen years younger than Page and he represented the next generation in politics. Page disliked Menzies intensely. Menzies was against the Country Party, he had been against Lyons, he represented manufacturing interests rather than importing or rural interests, and some said he had fascist tendencies. Page determined that he would destroy Menzies in 1939 as he had Hughes in 1923.

In one of the most eviscerating speeches ever given in federal parliament, Page called Menzies a coward for not having enlisted in the First World War and insinuated that Menzies had driven Lyons to his death by his recent resignation from cabinet. He asked whether Menzies possessed the qualities to lead the country at a time when the world was on the brink of another war. Page fatally misjudged the feeling of the House and Menzies' position emerged strengthened. On this crucial occasion, Page's style of "getting in quick" told against him. Bruce decided to stay on as High Commissioner in London and not put his hat in the ring, thus leaving the field open for Menzies to win the party leadership and with it the Prime Ministership. Page's miscalculation led to his eventual loss of the Country Party leadership because the party had to have a leader who was acceptable to the new Prime Minister. Page did not know it, but he was destined never again to lead the party he had done so much to create. Nor did ever regain the degree of political influence he had exercised in the past.

### III

Page now moved into the period of his elder statesmanship. In June 1940 he returned to Menzies' cabinet as Minister for Commerce but wartime conditions meant that he was to achieve little. Menzies fell from office in mid 1941 and his replacement as Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden, appointed Page Australian representative on the British war cabinet. A month later Fadden was toppled by Curtin, but the new Labor government chose to keep Page in the London post.

Page arrived in London at the end of 1941, just in time for the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and Singapore which put Australia under threat of invasion. Early in 1942, the Curtin government was adamant that two of Australia's divisions fighting in the Middle East come home. While the troops were on the high seas, Page was asked by Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, to agree to the diversion of a division to Burma. In the heat of the moment, and without consulting his Prime Minister, Page agreed. Furious, Curtin overruled him, insisting that all of the men in question return as quickly as possible so they could defend Australia. In a letter of explanation to Curtin, Page intimated that at this time he "went through ... the worst period of acute mental distress of my whole life".<sup>19</sup> Soon afterwards he contracted double pneumonia and returned to Australia later in 1942 the ghost of his former self.

Page languished on the opposition benches until 1949. In that year, when Menzies returned triumphantly to office as Prime Minister and leader of a new Liberal Party/Country Party coalition government, he made Page Minister for Health. Enthusiastic as ever, Page set about establishing some of the elements of his old national insurance scheme: free milk for school children designed not only to put more calcium in the bones of the nation's children but also to put more pounds in the pockets of the dairy farmers; a free drugs list of essential drugs for pensioners and then for all Australians; subsidised beds in hospitals; and tax concessions for voluntary contributions to health funds.

As a doctor-politician, Page was well equipped to negotiate with the doctors over the partial nationalisation of health. The previous Labor government had tried to nationalise health and the doctors' associations had successfully resisted this attempt. Page's legislation retained some of the key provisions of the Labor plan while at the same time keeping the medical profession happy. This could only have been done by a minister who had the confidence of both parties in the dispute. Only a politician of Page's calibre could introduce the elements of free

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<sup>19</sup> Page to Curtin, 24 April 1942, Shedden Papers, MP 1217, Box 475, Australian Archives, Canberra.

medicine while still claiming that his scheme was "an effective bulwark against the socialisation of medicine".<sup>20</sup>

In 1956, aged 76, Page stepped down from federal cabinet to become a backbencher once more, but the pace of his public life hardly slowed. He was still Chancellor of the University of New England, a foundation which he had helped to achieve in 1938; he continued to encourage the New State Movement; he campaigned again for the Clarence Gorge Scheme; and he set about writing his memoirs of forty years in politics, *Truant Surgeon*.

In 1958 Ethel died and a year later Page married his secretary of fifteen years, Jean Thomas. The ceremony took place in St Paul's Cathedral in London and Bruce was Page's best man. In December 1961 Page was too ill to campaign for his seat in the federal election. He was, nevertheless, candidate for Cowper while he was in hospital dying from cancer of the bowel. Page lost the election. His daughter Mary, standing at his deathbed, knew the result, but when he asked she refrained from telling him; so he died without knowing that he had lost the seat he had held for over forty years.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV

What of Page the man? Page was a little over 5 feet 8 inches, or 174 centimetres, tall. He had blue eyes, a shock of wavy brown hair, the small delicate hands of a surgeon, and the brawny arms of a blacksmith. He was a man of infinite energy. He could ride a horse all day and he played a daily game of tennis on the parliamentary courts until he was 80. Billy Hughes, Page's senior, and an even longer serving MP, once saw a no-longer-young Page win a set six-to-love. Always Hughes's rival, Page swung around and said, "What about that, Billy?" Quick as a flash, Hughes replied, "I don't know whether you're a good player or not, but you're certainly a good scorer!" Page apparently only saw the balls that went in!<sup>22</sup>

Page had a reputation for having immense energy, for being impatient and even hyperactive. The torrents of high-pitched words and the unfinished sentences that streamed from him were legendary. He was famous for chortling, "You see, you see, you see" on all occasions, and some said he used the words as

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<sup>20</sup> Page, Address to World Medical Association's Annual Conference, The Hague, 1953, in F. Crowley (ed.), *A Documentary History of Australia*, vol. 5, Melbourne, 1973, p. 275.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Bailey-Tart interview.

<sup>22</sup> I owe this story to Professor Barry Smith of the Australian National University.

a smokescreen to get out of tight situations.<sup>23</sup> It was remarked that the Hansard reporters "descended into the depths of stenographic despair" in their efforts to record Page's unfinished sentences.<sup>24</sup> Page's thinking was always well ahead of his speaking and he would jump from one subject to another without finishing what he was saying. He always had five ideas in his head at once. Bruce was once asked about his relationship with Page and he explained that Page was a fountain of ideas and suggestions, and Bruce's job was to winnow them, to work out which ones were worth following up and which ones were not.<sup>25</sup>

Page's impatience and energy often got him into scrapes. He drove his cars recklessly and quickly. Throughout his life he had twenty-one recorded car accidents and after the first few Ethel refused to drive in the car with him.<sup>26</sup> Page was always interested in newfangled devices. During the First World War, on seeing a dirigible in France, Page hit upon the idea of using a balloon to visit his patients on the tablelands at Tenterfield and Glen Innes in more comfort than driving up the dreadful winding roads of those days.<sup>27</sup> It is perhaps fortunate that he never got his balloon! He once flew up to the Clarence from Sydney in a seaplane but was so anxious to meet his constituents waiting on the bank that he jumped out of the door before the plane could be secured and jumped straight into the river.<sup>28</sup> On another occasion, in wartime London, he remembered it was his secretary's birthday. So impatient was he to give her flowers that, rather than send to a florist, he ordered his ADC to pull up some gladioli bulbs-and-all from outside the door of his offices, wrap them and give them to her immediately.<sup>29</sup>

Page was, in another description, a "controlled tornado".<sup>30</sup> People said that he handled his files in parliament "like a demented hen scratching for grubs".<sup>31</sup> He would jump from one point to another hunting for solutions to his problems. When he was writing his autobiography he had a scratch pad and pencil next to his bed. Anxious to record his thoughts in the night, he often started writing on the pad before he turned the light on. Several of these pads, cross-written and over-written to such an extent that the words are almost illegible, are preserved in his papers. In some cases the pencil was totally blunt, but Page scratched on regardless, using the stub! Clearly, Page had to get the ideas out, and he was so obsessed with doing so that he did not always stop to consider more immediate matters. Page always did things at the double. He was always first to sit down on his seat in parliament. The man was a doer not a hater. He never intended

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<sup>23</sup> Alan Reid, *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 12 October 1955.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis, *Country Party*, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Cecil Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, Melbourne, 1965, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 17 December 1955; Mary Bailey-Tart interview.

<sup>27</sup> Page to Ethel, no date [1916], Page Papers, A180/7, Dixson Library, University of New England.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Douglas Page (Page's son), 9 September 1986.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Wilfred Bailey-Tart (Page's son-in-law), 7 September 1986.

<sup>30</sup> "Ek Dum" (M. H. Ellis), *Bulletin*, 21 December 1955.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Edwards, p. 82.

his infamous attack on Menzies to be principally an assault on Menzies personally, although it came across that way, but a bid by Page to regain power for his party. It was simply a means to an end. "Life was too short", Page said, "for bearing grudges."<sup>32</sup>

## V

David Drummond, the long-serving Country Party politician, said "Page fertilized the political thought of Australia". Even Page's enemy, Jack Lang, thought Page had an admirably "constructive" cast of mind. There can be no doubt that among Australian federal politicians in the first half of this century Page made some of the most constructive contributions to Australian life. Above the door of St Paul's Cathedral in London is a memorial to Sir Christopher Wren, the cathedral's designer, and on it are words written by Wren's son, *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. (If you would see his monument, look around). To see Page's monuments all we have to do is to look around us. The Loans Council is still in existence. The bridge is still over the Clarence. Medicare is the descendant of Page's National Health Scheme. The highways, hospitals, schools and a host of other public utilities are still being built using section 96 grants. The National Party is still the main representative body for country electorates and it still strives to hold the balance of power. This university is partly a Page creation; and it is very fitting that this college is built in Page's memory. Would that politicians today could achieve half as much as Page did. Would that we could see his like again.

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas Page interview.

**The Lecturer**

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