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FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND METHODISM

The Forging of Page's World View

Earle Page came from a remarkable family, one that instilled in him values that lastingly shaped his vision of a future Australia. Studies of political thinkers and players typically stress public careers, not private lives. 'None of us can enter into another person's mind', wrote Bernard Crick in his famed life of George Orwell.¹ But so driven a figure as Page invites resolving the question of why certain ideas took such firm root so as to better understand what fundamentally drove his public actions. Page's unwavering adherence to a rigidly prescriptive world view over decades points to indelible formative experiences. He remained resolutely undeterred by changes in the policy environment, the growing indifference of party colleagues and an increasingly mixed record of triumphs and failures. Despite picturing himself as a rationalist, Page's commitment was deeply emotional.

Page himself attested to powerful early personal influences: a family tradition of community service, particularly in education; a happy upbringing in Grafton that inspired his faith in small communities; rural isolation, which bred resentment of the big cities; and his exposure to exciting new technologies that promised social transformation. Page harnessed all of these drivers when in 1917 he seized upon his first venture onto the national stage to deliver a life-defining speech.

¹ Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982 (first published 1980), p. 30.

Alderman Page states his world view

Few senior Australian political figures have had the audacity to open their public career by proclaiming a comprehensive policy vision of the nation: even fewer remained largely faithful to it for decades. The occasion for Page was his speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Association at its conference held in the *Courier* newspaper building in central Brisbane on 13 August 1917. Page was present as the delegate of the Grafton-based *Daily Examiner*, of which he was part-owner. About 150 proprietors, editors and journalists reckoned to be representative of a total of 700 newspapers attended from Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Amid a conference otherwise more preoccupied with wartime paper shortages and post office charges, they were presented with the singular sight of an unknown small-town alderman demanding the radical recasting of the governance of the entire nation. Page was the conference's first invited speaker and seized his opportunity by going far beyond his allotted half-hour to keep his audience's attention for a full 90 minutes. Over 40 years later, in *Truant Surgeon*, he rightly recalled his oration as 'an embodiment of my thinking on national aspects of development, the basic concepts of which I have upheld to this day'.² It reflects both a deep attachment to place of origin and a thrusting impatience with barriers to realising Australia's potential.

Page's stated premise in 1917 was that 'there is no doubt that the present system of government in this land does not make for its development'.³ This arose from his foremost bugbear, the 'evil' of 'centralisation'. The concentration of government in state capital cities meant that 'public money is always expended in that corner where the seat of government is constituted'. Using infrastructure and social amenities to instead improve rural living standards would support the redistribution of population and industry into the countryside.

Underpinning this decentralisation was regional political control. This reflected Page's most fundamental belief, from which much of his wider thought derived – the inherent tendency of small-scale communities to foster civic cooperation and engagement that would lead social and economic development. Page was to become renowned as an advocate

2 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 45.

3 This and all following quotes from this speech are taken from the text published as Page, *A Plea for Unification*.

of new states, but these were but a move towards smaller entities that he later dubbed federal units – the dullish moniker for the basic building blocks of the more thorough decentralisation of political and economic control. These federal units were to be ‘big enough to attack national schemes in a large way, but small enough for every legislator to be thoroughly conversant with every portion of the area, and land settlement and proper development will naturally follow’.

The great paradox of Page in 1917 and later is that he simultaneously wanted a strong ‘Central National Government’ under which ‘men will begin to think in terms of the continent of Australia as a whole, rather than of their state’. State parliaments were beset by an intolerably ‘parochial outlook’. Page’s national government could set Australia-wide policies but devolve their implementation to his federal units. It would also be better able to meet international obligations as a properly functional component of the British Empire. Although this 1917 speech was entitled ‘A Plea for Unification’, Page recalled in his memoirs that at that time unification signified a true federal system with a national government strong only in ‘fields of common significance throughout Australia’ – land policy, taxation, education, immigration and transport – leaving more regional entities to carry out major works locally.⁴

Page called for a two-stage reform process to realise his mixed regional and national vision: unification of the nation under a central government, followed by the ‘consequent subdivision of the whole of this Commonwealth into small self-governing areas, with local legislatures of men who know well the needs and resources of their respective districts’. He linked this national regionalisation to the successful settlement of returned soldiers, a big selling point in 1917. The fired-up, still youngish Page was ready to strike a militant note in public. If the existing overlap between state and federal governments continued, ‘there must be ultimately civil war’.

Conveniently, Page had a model ready at hand for the nation to follow. This was the northern portion of New South Wales, including his beloved Clarence Valley, undoubtedly the finest yet most disregarded part of the country. Page told the assembled press that although this region was nearly the size of Victoria, with ‘millions of acres of fertile soil, power possibilities unsurpassed in Australia, and mineral wealth untold’, it was denied such basic services as adequate schools and hospitals. Yet in Victoria, ‘self-government has added everything that makes for physical,

4 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 45 n.

mental and moral development ... cities, universities, well-equipped hospitals, technical schools and 5,000 miles of railways'. Properly administered, the northern region 'could easily maintain the whole of the present population of Australia'. But it was not unique, for 'many other areas in Australia could do the same thing under favourable conditions of self-government'.

Decentralisation Page-style was enlivened by his vision of rural electrification using hydroelectricity. This had been a Page policy passion for several years prior to his 1917 speech and was linked to his admiration for the Clarence River. This was 'the noblest stream flowing to the east coast of Australia' but where 'unique power waiting for development has been allowed to run to waste'. Page was to conduct a lifelong campaign to dam the Clarence as the first of a series of regionally controlled hydropower schemes stretching across the nation. In this, he was in good company: internationally during the early twentieth century, dams came to be seen as the epitome of progress by promising 'a renewable resource, furnishing power and water indefinitely'.⁵

As of 1917, Page's technological vision also encompassed railways under 'federal control, [which] with intelligent provincial advice, will ensure the proper linking up of the various provincial railway systems, and promote the opening up of all classes of land now absolutely unused'. Page's hopes for better rural services included education to support decentralisation and civic awareness. He decried the dearth of educational facilities in the northern region, where 'there is scarcely a technical school in the whole area ... [and] scarcely a secondary school'. In future years, Page was to vastly expand this interest in education by advocating a national network of small-scale rural universities.

National economic planning became Page's main means of initiating decentralisation. He only implicitly suggested planning in his 1917 speech by calling for a national government with a comprehensive development agenda, but over coming years became the foremost advocate of a plan to guide the nation. He most certainly never advocated a command economy, but instead a gentler indicative approach involving the planning of infrastructure and provision of incentives for new industries. This would help trigger what he called a self-sustaining 'reproductive process' of development.

5 Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010, p. 119.

Finally, Page spoke of reforming federalism to enable the Commonwealth and the states to together lead national policies that would put his vision into practice. His ensuing career was to be peppered with proposals to have these two main levels of government work in unison, the next best thing to outright national planning. In 1917 he spoke bluntly of ‘a bastard Constitution ... which has left the National Government continually at the mercy of the states’. It imposed ‘such formidable cracks in the national edifice as to threaten its collapse’. Page attributed the Constitution’s weakness to having been drafted in a time of peace, whereas those of the United States and of Canada reflected fear of war. Hence in Canada ‘no doubt was left about the Federal Government alone being concerned with the ultimate power’. But the drafting of the Australian Constitution had been beset by ‘petty ambitions of the state politicians’. Clearly, ‘the only thing for Australia to do was to throw the whole Constitution into the melting-pot, and re-mould it in the light of the experience gained during the past 17 years’.

Page’s 1917 speech also contained early harbingers of the specific policies on federalism that he later pursued in government. He anticipated ‘the Federalising of State debts’ as a step towards a new federal system, a key feature of the 1927 Financial Agreement between the Commonwealth and the states that is often touted as Page’s finest achievement. In a series of press articles a few months after this 1917 speech, he opined that, unlike other Allied nations and Germany, in ‘Australia alone has no attempt been made at national industrial organisation’, due to ‘the present chaotic system of seven different, overlapping and conflicting sets of laws and industrial tribunals’ – foreshadowing the issue that felled the Bruce–Page Government 12 years later.⁶

Reactions to this speech would have readily given the ever-positive Page the impression of a receptive audience. The city press paid little attention, but his comments were reproduced across rural Australia in such publications as the *Singleton Argus*, the *Cairns Post* and the New South Wales-wide *Farmer and Settler*. A transcript was also helpfully distributed in booklet form by Page’s own *Daily Examiner*.⁷ The secretary of the Australasian Provincial Press Association and owner of the *Grafton*

6 *Daily Examiner*, 3 November 1917, p. 7.

7 Page, *A Plea for Unification*.

Argus, T.M. Shakespeare, was moved to advise Page to build a network of rural newspapers that would eventually 'have a far reaching effect upon future policies of the Commonwealth'.⁸

This speech stands as an early indicator that Page had a very distinct mind indeed, not at all constrained by the narrower agendas of the rural protest movements then emerging around him. Page's synthesis of ideas amounted to an ideology, an all-embracing doctrine that could draw on concepts of community, decentralisation and national leadership and that had sufficiently wide application to reach consistent conclusions on almost any political and social issue. This helps explain his persistence: Page was not advocating mere policies with conclusively achievable aims, but something that could be applied universally and endlessly. He judged most new ideas according to their compatibility with the basic principles of his 1917 speech. This far from unassuming small-town figure had produced a major variant on the theme of Australia as a social laboratory, 'in which the state was seen not as the enemy of individual freedom ... but as the enabler of freedom'.⁹ This concept is usually associated with Alfred Deakin and the early post-Federation era. Page had a vision just as Deakin had one that advocated arbitration, protectionism and White Australia, but his was based on the very different world view that he first presented to the nation in 1917.

Page spent the next four decades trying to implement this vision. Changes in his views were more of strategy than of fundamentals as he adopted new arguments for old positions to match the shifting political environment. How did Page's upbringing provide the basis for his remarkable persistence?

Page's early life – the imprint of family and community

The Grafton of Page's birth was a rural town of about 2,250 inhabitants situated on the Clarence River. It provided services to local farmers, increasingly those running the dairy farms that emerged as the region's main industry during the 1880s and 1890s. The family from which he hailed was large, supportive and innately committed to civic engagement.

8 Shakespeare to Page, 21 August 1917, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 4.

9 Cathcart, *The Water Dreamers*, p. 214.

Page was the fifth of the 11 children of Charles Page and Mary Johanna (Annie) Page, née Cox. He frequently reflected on the strength of his family tradition, writing in 1924 to his wife of how 'we are lucky to have forebears like this' and of 'their fibre which is in us'.¹⁰

The family's sense of community service is vividly enshrined in the symbolism incorporated into the Page Memorial Window, installed in 1957 at what is now Wesley and St Aidan's Uniting Church in Canberra. This commemorates a century of good works, with the choice of Canberra over Grafton implying a sense of commitment primarily to the entire Australian nation. It depicts four scenes from the life of Christ, each marking a particular family member. One is dedicated to Earle himself, quite regardless of his still being very much alive in 1957. This shows Jesus healing the sick and includes the Rod of Asclepius, the classical symbol of medicine, and the coats of arms of the University of New England and of the Commonwealth of Australia. The second panel is dedicated to Page's parents and the third to his missionary brother Rodger. But it is the top panel that dominates. This commemorates Earle's paternal grandfather James, along with his wife Susannah. James was the founder of the family in Australia and a powerful unseen influence on his famous grandson.

James Page had a strong Methodist background and commitment to education. Like his future grandson, James was drawn to the practical uses of science. He is even said to have on at least three occasions been saved from the effects of self-experimentation with drugs by the prompt application of a stomach pump. James subsequently switched from applied chemistry to teaching, for which he studied at the then new University College, London, which, unlike Oxford and Cambridge at the time, accepted students of all denominations. He was head teacher at the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Day School in London for 11 years and then headmaster of Wesleyan Lambeth School, as well as being secretary of the United Association of Schoolmasters of Great Britain. His work in education brought him into contact with such luminaries of Victorian science as T.H. Huxley and Charles Darwin (who lived near him in Kent).

10 Earle Page to Ethel Page, 23 October 1924, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 9, folder 72.

Figure 2: 'He went about doing good': Earle Page panel, Page Memorial Window, Wesley and St Aidan's Uniting Church, Canberra.

At far left is the entire window, headed by the panel dedicated to James and Susannah Page.

Source: Courtesy of Wesley and St Aidan's Uniting Church, Canberra. Photographs by Jennifer Wilks.

The Board of National Education of the New South Wales colonial government invited several qualified teachers to help implement its adoption of the Irish National System of education so to broaden access to education through new multi-denominational primary schools. James was asked to start a National School at Grafton. As his oldest son suffered from tuberculosis, he gladly accepted. He arrived in Sydney in 1855 and soon shifted north to Grafton to open the first such school – which under James also offered adult evening classes – north of the Hunter.

James set a daunting precedent for involvement in civic causes. He campaigned to establish local government in Grafton and became Grafton's first town clerk in 1860. He was secretary of the Grafton Schools Board from 1866, started a School of Arts, wrote newspaper leaders and served with other local bodies as diverse as the area's first building societies and the Grafton Hospital. James upheld his commitment to Methodism by also serving as treasurer and senior trustee of the local Wesleyan church. He died in 1877, three years before the birth of Earle, but Susannah, a Huguenot, lived until Earle was 18 years of age. Three of James's sons were mayors: Thomas in Grafton for several terms in the 1870s to 1880s, Robert in Casino, and Earle's father Charles in Grafton in 1908–9.

Charles Page was born in 1851 and initially worked as an apprentice to a local blacksmith, coachmaker and saddler; he later took over the firm. Annie was his employer's daughter; her family having moved from Melbourne to Grafton shortly after her birth in 1853. Her status as eldest child and thus as a co-carer limited her educational opportunities, but Earle recalled his mother compensating by being an avid reader and determined to secure university educations for her own children. This played a crucial role in sparking the careers of Earle and several of his siblings.

When Charles and Annie married in 1870, they settled at Chatsworth Island, 'a small and primitive downstream settlement on the Clarence'. They at once endeavoured to bring 'the benefits of education and the comforts of religion' to fellow settlers. This included teaching English to Gaelic-speaking Scottish immigrants brought out by James's friend, the Presbyterian clergyman and indefatigable political activist John Dunmore Lang.¹¹ This commitment continued after their return to Grafton, including an important role in establishing a local secondary school. Charles and other members of the Page and Cox clans feature prominently in local press reports as lay volunteers in the Grafton District Synod. For nearly 40 years Charles was superintendent of the Grafton Methodist Sunday School. On his death in March 1919, the local press reported that he and Annie's names were 'known in every Methodist household in New South Wales'.¹² Family life provided young Earle with great personal security. In the decades to come, even amid the tumult of

11 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 4. The year of marriage is as advised by the Page family; Earle Page in *Truant Surgeon* gives the year variously as 1870 or 1871 and NSW government records state 1871.

12 *Daily Examiner*, 19 March 1919, p. 4.

politics, he bore few lasting grudges. As an elderly man he looked back fondly on 'a very happy boyhood and adolescence' amid his 'extraordinary clannish' family.¹³

Education owes more to family background than does any other component of Page's vision for Australia. High family expectations and three older brothers set him daunting examples to follow. His mother's determination resulted in five of her children studying at the University of Sydney, a remarkable outcome for the time. Page dwelt in his memoirs on the success of his siblings in professions that encompassed teaching, medicine, the public service, nursing and missionary work. Brother Reg held high appointments with the New South Wales Department of Education. Another brother, Will, turned from teaching to become a pioneering psychiatrist working with returned soldiers. Two of his sisters, Edith and Ella, married teachers. The Page family was also strongly engaged with technology: Earle's maternal grandfather and his brothers Cyril and Maund were engineers. Page's generation continued the family's involvement in local government, with two of his brothers serving as councillors.

Earle's older siblings were also his mentors. Page wrote of the particularly great influence of James, 'a born teacher' whose mathematics coaching helped him jump two forms at school.¹⁴ In March 1938, prior to heading to Britain for trade negotiations, Page wrote a touching farewell letter to the then seriously ill James assuring him that 'giving bright boys their opportunity to reach the highest professional and commercial eminence' was 'the divine afflatus'. He attested to James's 'good comradeship, advice and help' as having been vital to his own 'early precocious scholastic development'.¹⁵ James died late the next year.

Older sister Edith and her teacher husband crucially aided her siblings' studies by boarding them in Sydney when they were at secondary school. In adult life, Page was especially attached to his brother Harold, eight years his junior. One other member of the Page clan recalled that 'Earle thought more of Harold than himself'.¹⁶ Harold subsequently joined the Commonwealth Public Service and then the New Guinea administration based at Rabaul. He rose to be deputy administrator but died in 1942 as a prisoner of the Japanese.

13 Earle Page to James Page, 27 March 1938, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 3, folder 25.

14 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 5.

15 Earle Page to James Page, 27 March 1938.

16 Jim Page, *Great Uncle Harold: Harold Hillis Page 1888–1942*, privately published, no date, p. 1.

Page's awareness of 'the search for knowledge and the extension of educational facilities ... [as] part of my family inheritance' featured prominently in his later writings. In his memoirs he celebrated his appointment in 1955 as first chancellor of the University of New England as placing 'the coping-stone of tertiary education on the structure begun by my forebears'.¹⁷ Commitment to education and community service undoubtedly drew on his family's Methodism. Although Page's personal papers and public statements make only few references to religious belief, in 1902 he volunteered to become a Methodist medical missionary in the Solomon Islands before deciding to instead continue as a doctor at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. Page's brother Rodger won fame as a missionary and adviser to the Tongan royal family and was a central figure in the rise to prominence of the Australian Methodist Church in Tonga.

Methodism in the nineteenth-century Anglosphere had a reputation not only for commitment to education and commerce, but also for challenging established hierarchies. Australian accounts testify to the fervour of this 'high-voltage religion' in the second half of the century, and the influence on colonial families of its work ethic and social conscience.¹⁸ Political theorists have written of how Methodists and other dissenters encouraged Christian faith in earthly utopias and continuous progress, distinctly reminiscent of Page's ambitions for worldly improvement. Methodists have been strikingly well represented in Australian public life and include Garfield Barwick, Barry Jones, Brian Howe and John Howard.

None of this should be taken to imply that Page's family was especially wealthy. More impressive is its breadth of engagement with the Grafton community. In addition to serving in local government, Pages sat on the board of trustees of the public hospital, managed a canned meat works, ran a cinema and organised schools. Thomas Page and some of his brothers founded the *Grafton Argus*. Charles included Earle and his siblings in an active and welcoming social life, exposing them to an impressive array of future contacts. Earle recalled that through his church work his father welcomed strangers to Grafton, especially the young, and invited them to their home to partake at 'an elastic dining table round which I made many friends'.¹⁹

17 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 11.

18 Historian Graeme Davison provides a rousing account of this in *Lost Relations: Fortunes of My Family in Australia's Golden Age*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2015, pp. 165–6, 180–2.

19 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 4.

Figure 3: Charles and Annie Page with their family, c. 1890.

Back row – Edith (Cissie) and James; middle row – Rodger, Charles, Annie, Maund, Earle; front row – Reginald, Harold, William, Ella. Cyril and Daphne were yet to be born. Note the evident damage to one of Annie's eyes, treatment of which influenced Earle Page's later decision to study medicine.

Source: Courtesy of the Page family.

Political discussion, in particular, was often 'the order of the day' for the Pages.²⁰ Charles was a close friend of John See, later Premier of New South Wales 1901–4, who as member for Grafton naturally took a strong interest in local development, especially transport infrastructure and harnessing the Clarence. Earle later recognised his remarkable family as a political asset. In his main campaign speech for this first run at parliament he spoke of how he had 'at his disposal the knowledge gained by his family in three generations of public service on the river', especially that of his grandfather, father and uncle. This drew applause from his audience of Graftonians, who clearly knew the Page family well.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

²¹ *Daily Examiner*, 23 October 1919, p. 3.

CLARENCE RIVER CATCHMENT AREAS

Figure 4: Page's beloved Clarence Valley region.

This depiction is from his 1944 booklet *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme* and shows proposed dam sites.

Source: Courtesy of Hardie Grant Travel.

Page's other great formative influence was his idealisation of the small community in which he spent his childhood. This was powerful enough for him to give up a burgeoning medical career in the big city to return home. In his memoirs he proclaimed that 'the main inspiration ... of my political life, and indeed, the predominant influence throughout my eighty-one years has been the Clarence Valley where I was born'.²² A visiting journalist described the Grafton district at the start of the twentieth century in strikingly similar terms to Page's August 1917 speech: 'one of the most fertile and interesting in the colony,' with 'marvellous and extensive resources'.²³ Yet the town was deprived of a proper water supply, a telephone service, railway links and even a bridge across the Clarence.

Page particularly recalled Grafton's inclusiveness. To this day, Grafton is a welcoming town, attractively set amid the greenery of the Clarence Valley. Page the parliamentarian would have noted the contrast with the plainer countryside around both Melbourne and Canberra. In his youth, Grafton was 'a small and friendly community lacking entirely in any sense of class or party' where 'the broad Clarence ... bound us in a fraternity'.²⁴ Even in the midst of the 1890s depression, he had 'never in my recollection seen people so happy or so cooperative in realms of mutual help'.²⁵ The 'loyalty and understanding' of school chums provided 'the continually renewed inspiration which enabled me to persevere in my quest for national balance and a place in the sun for the country dweller'.²⁶ Page's enthusiasm for the role of community overshadowed what little sense he had of social class: to him, social division was more a matter of the gap in living standards between town and country. There is some basis for his fond recollections, as Grafton indeed seems to have had a flatter social structure than many other country towns. Unlike Armidale in New England, also well known to Page, the Grafton hinterland was dominated by small selectors rather than large pastoralists.

22 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 36.

23 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 30 June 1900, pp. 30, 34. The author is described only as 'Beri'.

24 Untitled draft for Page's memoirs, Earle Page papers, National Library of Australia, MS 1633 (hereafter EPP), folder 1855, pp. 5–6.

25 Ibid.

26 'Chapter Two – Schools + Student Days', EPP, folder 1855, pp. 5–6.

Page's commitment to his community included an absolute faith in the potential of the Clarence River, the basis of his great hopes for hydroelectricity. The Clarence is the focus of a watershed that is mainland Australia's second-largest river system south of the Tropic of Capricorn. It is fed by high rainfall, and in Page's lifetime supported an unusually wide range of primary industries that stretched from dairy to also include beef, maize, sugar and subtropical fruits. But it is also prone to flooding. Page as a boy witnessed a series of major floods between 1887 and 1893, recalling his excitement as rescue boats plied the flooded town but later mourning the damage to local farming. Later, he saw the river as a personal inspiration: 'my own autobiography owes much to the river which had formed such a vivid backdrop to my stage of operations'.²⁷

The Clarence, family and community all nurtured Page's lifelong commitment to new states and regionalism. In a speech marking his retirement from the Menzies Ministry in 1956, he began his list of lifetime goals with 'to sub-divide the larger states of Australia in order to get government on the spot and to accelerate the development of our natural resources', and stressed that this idea had been firmly planted well before he ever entered parliament. He recalled not only the Grafton area's dearth of public amenities but also the artificiality of the New South Wales–Queensland border to his hometown's north. This 'imaginary line' had 'caused extraordinary discrimination', most obviously an 18-mile gap between state railway systems.²⁸ To Page, existing state boundaries were too arbitrary to deserve reverence.

Agitation for equality in regional entitlement, the realignment of colonial and state boundaries, and the creation of new states were all part of the Australian political landscape decades before the advent of Earle Page. Early in the development of the colonies it was clear that the uneven spread of population and production had fostered divergent interests and imbalances in the distribution of wealth and power. The only successful separation movements were three of the earliest: Van Diemen's Land in 1825, Victoria in 1851 and Queensland in 1859. Queensland was itself prone to demands to align political representation with regional identities. Most of what later became Queensland was included in the short-lived colony of North Australia created in 1847. During the 1850s there was

27 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 36.

28 See 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page, Sydney 22nd June 1956, Address by Sir Earle Page', EPP, folder 2358.

an expectation among settlers in northern and central areas of the future Queensland that they would eventually have their own colonies. This was encouraged by John Dunmore Lang, who had 'thought all government from a distance was bad government'.²⁹ To the south, Lang also called for the separation of New South Wales between the Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers as early as 1856 (at the same time coining the name Riverina for this area).

Other separation movements of varying degrees of longevity appeared across the Australia of Page's youth as far away as the Western Australian goldfields and Albany. There were also early British proposals in the 1830s and 1840s for the creation of local governments in the Australian colonies that would have been much stronger than the local councils that did eventually appear.³⁰ Most of these early campaigns were short-lived, but were harbingers of the more determined regionalism that Page so zealously supported. The northern New South Wales separation movement was the one that mattered most to him. Its history stretched back intermittently to the 1840s. This was partly a matter of distance from Sydney, but also reflected the tendency for new statism to arise in areas prosperous enough to spawn ambitions of fulfilling a great potential. New England, adjacent to Page's coastal north-east, is widely seen as having had a particularly 'strongly articulated perception of its "difference" and destiny'.³¹ By the 1880s the Glen Innes Separation League alone reportedly had 1,400 members.

Page was directly exposed to new statism from an early age. He frequently referred to it as being in his blood by virtue of campaigning by his grandfather James and two of his uncles. James variously agitated for the transfer of the Clarence Valley to Queensland or the creation of an entirely new colony, and once organised a petition to the British parliament. In 1948 Earle proudly told a conference on new statism that as a Page he stood at the head of 'almost a century of fighting for our political

29 D.W.A. Baker, 'Lang, John Dunmore (1799–1878)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lang-john-dunmore-2326/text2953, published first in hardcopy volume 2, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1967.

30 A.J. Brown, 'Regional governance and regionalism in Australia', in Robyn Eversole and John Martin (eds), *Participation and Governance in Regional Development: Global Trends in an Australian Context*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 6–8.

31 J.S. Ryan, 'Prelude – Uplands always attract', in Alan Atkinson, J.S. Ryan, Iain Davidson and Andrew Piper (eds), *High, Lean Country: Land, People and Memory in New England*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2006, p. 3.

freedom through self-government and our economic freedom through the fullest provision of modern invention and amenities for the outback people'.³² He remained impressed by his grandfather's association with Lang. Page was particularly drawn to Lang's belief that self-governing territories would provide the building blocks for a federated nation-state encompassing the entire continent. Lang had told the people of Port Phillip District in 1841 that separation from New South Wales would match the subdivision of the United States into the small democratic states that had driven that nation's development. There is evidence that early Australian colonial settlers expected separation to eventually lead to a federal nation and that such an outcome also influenced British policy towards the Australian colonies.³³

Young Earle and his family would have been very aware of incessant local appeals for the Sydney-based government to provide transformative infrastructure – hydroengineering, railway links and harbour works – which spawned such protest groups as the Clarence Railway and Harbour League. The *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* of his youth routinely editorialised on 'the feeling which widely prevails outside the Metropolitan area, that the interests of the country are made subservient to those of the great metropolis and its immediate surroundings'.³⁴ Page later bluntly told his wife in 1918 that as a city person, she did not know 'the absence of opportunity' that resulted in 'the degradation and atrophy from disuse of the finest material that goes on in the country that I had hoped it would have been my province to have helped remove'.³⁵

The press of Page's youth was also full of reportage on the campaign to federate the colonies, especially the closely associated free trade versus protection debate. (The state parliamentary seat of Grafton returned the

32 'History of Decentralisation: Speech by Sir Earle Page', in Decentralisation and New State Movement Convention, *Decentralisation and New State Movement: Armidale Convention, June 1948*, Armidale, NSW, 1948, pp. 25–6.

33 This has been explored by legal scholar A.J. Brown: 'Constitutional schizophrenia then and now: Exploring federalist, regionalist and unitary strands in the Australian political tradition', in K. Walsh (ed.), *The Distinctive Foundations of Australian Democracy: Lectures in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series 2003–2004*, Papers on Parliament No. 42, Department of the Senate, Parliament House, Canberra, 2004, especially pp. 41–9; also his 'The Constitution We Were Meant to Have: Re-examining the Origins and Strength of Australia's Unitary Political Traditions', *Democratic Experiments: Lectures in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series 2004–2005*, Papers on Parliament No. 44, Department of the Senate, Parliament House, Canberra, 2006, especially pp. 54–9.

34 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 22 April 1890, p. 2.

35 Earle Page to Ethel Page, 14 November 1918, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 71.

Protectionist See from 1880 until 1904; the adjoining seat of Clarence returned the same Protectionist and later Liberal member for 28 years from 1887, John McFarlane.) The adult Page frequently quoted the foremost New South Wales federationist of these times, Henry Parkes, as linking new states to national prosperity. The early drafters of the Australian Constitution readily accepted the need to provide for the creation of new states, but only after intense debate on the precise mechanism for doing so.

Queenslanders such as John Murtagh Macrossan and Samuel Griffith were especially outspoken. Macrossan was the parliamentary leader of the Queensland northern separation movement. Griffith was initially hostile to separation but as premier proposed in 1892 to divide Queensland itself into a federal structure. Such ruminations indicate the conceptual strength of new statism at the time and how open an issue was the basic shape of the still putative Australian nation. The debate was to extend well into the twentieth century, generating receptive audiences that encouraged the young Earle Page. The drafters of the Constitution eventually included section 124 on new states, based on a provision in the United States Constitution. This enabled the Australian Commonwealth to admit new states formed out of an existing state or states, but 'only with the consent' of the parliaments of the mother states. This crucial requirement was to dog Page and his fellow new state campaigners for decades to come.

Young Earle sets out: School, university and the wider times

Formal education enabled Page's professional success and entry into public life. He attributed his youthful determination to 'become a doctor and give the country people a fair deal' to a family calamity during his childhood.³⁶ His mother had been using a cold chisel to remove an iron hoop from a barrel when a steel splinter flew up into her left eye. Treatment was unavailable in isolated Grafton, and as an adult Page bitterly recalled accompanying her on agonising, costly trips to distant Sydney in a vain attempt to save the eye. At a very young age he became aware of a Faculty of Medicine at Sydney University in which a fellow townsman – Grafton

36 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', EPP, folder 2358; 'Notes for Country Party Complimentary Dinner 22/6/56', EPP, folder 2358.

Elliot Smith, later an eminent anatomist – had enrolled after winning the only scholarship for medicine then available, the Struth Exhibition. Page organised his studies over the next several years around an ambitious plan to secure this lucrative scholarship, awarded only at five-year intervals on the basis of results in first-year Arts. Passing the first-year examination in Arts was then one of the standard means of entry into Medicine at Sydney University.³⁷

The Struth, some lesser academic prizes and the proceeds of coaching other students were critically important as Page's family had suffered major financial losses in the 1890s depression. As a boy visiting Sydney during the May 1893 bank smash, he saw panicked cable car passengers offer to swap pound notes for nominally less valuable gold or silver coins, soon to be followed by the banks foreclosing on properties. Page 'knew my father would be ruined'.³⁸ He realised he would have to depend on his own resources to secure an education – significantly, he appreciated this even as a 12-year-old. This unhappy episode also provided an emotional basis for his lasting commitment to establishing central banking in Australia. (That said, Page in his memoirs added more conventional motivations such as difficulties the early Commonwealth Bank had in coping with shortages of foreign exchange and the Genoa Economic and Financial Conference of 1922 that advocated that all countries have a central bank.)

At the age of 11, Page won a bursary to Sydney Boys High School, flagship of the colony's public education system. But as his parents considered him too young to leave home, he instead began his secondary studies at Grafton Public School. There he prospered under talented mathematics and languages masters and built friendships with future local leaders such as Alf Pollack, later a Grafton solicitor and state member for Clarence. In 1895 Page switched to Sydney Boys High for his final year of school. The school's then location in inner-urban Ultimo gave him his first taste of city living. The school principal was a fellow Methodist, Joseph Coates, another of the teachers that the adult Page paid grateful tribute to in his memoirs. He studied simultaneously for honours in matriculation and the first-year Sydney University Arts exam and, again with the support of gifted teachers, duly secured the Struth Exhibition. As his family

37 See John Atherton Young, Ann Jervie Sefton and Nina Webb (eds), *Centenary Book of the University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine*, Sydney University Press for the University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine, Sydney, 1984, p. 178.

38 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', EPP, folder 2358.

was unable to afford the fees required to sit for both the Senior and Matriculation examinations, he only formally passed the latter: Sydney University declined a decidedly hopeful offer of three tons of potatoes in lieu of the Senior Examination fee. Page commenced classes in medicine at Sydney University in early 1896 aged all of 15, an achievement he modestly recalled as the culmination of a 'series of events which savoured to me of the miraculous'.³⁹ It actually reflected magnificently precocious purposefulness and intelligence.

Page thus spent a highly unusual adolescence as a medical student. He described his first years of study as 'inspiring, absorbing and happy'.⁴⁰ It provided him with a small store of anecdotes he would happily draw on for years to come: picking for his fellow students the winners of four Melbourne Cups in a row, before unforgivably faltering in his last year of study; snakes brought in to be milked of their venom for research being let loose in the lab; and, as a raw young pathologist, being roasted by the Sunday papers when corpses he had examined were subsequently found in the wrong graves. His studies also owed much to the 1890s being a decade of great advances in medicine. The microbial causes of such deadly diseases as tuberculosis and plague were discovered, new surgical methods for compound fractures were developed, X-rays began to be taken and advances in aseptic surgery expanded scope for abdominal operations (later a Page speciality). No senior Australian politician, even Barry Jones, spent formative years so enlivened by direct exposure to the fruits of science.

But university also provided Page with a new and lasting focus for his anger. He recalled in his memoirs of how 'former ignorance and current prejudice' had to be overcome 'before the fruits of the medical and technical revolution could be obtained'. All too typical was the reluctance of 'the older professional men' to accept that antidiphtheritic vaccine could save thousands of children.⁴¹ This was an early and powerful manifestation of Page's lasting self-image as a courageous innovator battling the forces of reaction. Page the student was also excited by Federation-era political debate. He was impressed by such members of the University Senate as Edmund Barton and Andrew Garran (father of Robert), and

39 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 12.

40 Ibid., p. 17.

41 Ibid., p. 18.

by the University Chancellor Normand MacLaurin (another doctor, and a Federation opponent). Page participated in the Federation debates ‘to some extent myself’, probably his first political engagement.⁴²

Page’s final year of study was his most challenging. Although yet to graduate, he was appointed superintendent of the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children for a month to cover for absent medical residents, a clear sign of a burgeoning professional reputation. He was 21 when he received his degree in 1902, equal top of his class of 18 fellow students (albeit in a year when no firsts were awarded). Page attached significance to the fact that the two other honours students that year were also from the north coast. The eminent surgeon Alexander MacCormick offered him a position as his house surgeon at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Glowing references from professional colleagues confirm that he was a fine young surgeon indeed. Dr Joseph Foreman, lecturer in gynaecology, later described Page as ‘one of the best men the Sydney University has turned out – an exceptionally good surgeon and sound practitioner’.⁴³ Page never undertook any other formal studies, such as in economics or other social sciences relevant to his policy interests, perhaps unfortunately for him. But he later asserted that training as a surgeon was invaluable for politics. In wartime London nearly 40 years later he declared himself to be still at heart a ‘truant surgeon’, convinced that by applying the surgeon’s ‘combination of early diagnosis, quick decision and immediate action, half the political and international troubles would never arise’.⁴⁴

Page did not directly write about the impression of city life he gained as a young surgeon. But his unremitting sense of its many failings suggests that he never felt settled in Sydney and at its hospitals routinely witnessed some very ugly scenes indeed. His disdain was not salved by his later maintaining city residences, including at suburban Strathfield and Wollstonecraft, and was often expressed using medical analogies. As a first-term parliamentarian he diagnosed that ‘when a city becomes over a certain size it loses its manufacturing value, because workmen have to travel too far to work, and departs from its proper functions, involving degeneration and ill-health of its population’.⁴⁵ Medical metaphors were to enliven numerous other Page pronouncements, such as in March 1929

42 Ibid., p. 39.

43 Reference by Dr Joseph Foreman, 3 September 1915, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 11, folder 87.

44 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 372.

45 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 7 April 1921, p. 7282.

when he likened a parliamentary attack by Billy Hughes to 'the bursting of a long accumulating abscess of jaundice, spite and venom, with all the after effects of poison, that had turned into a running sore'.⁴⁶ This became one occasion when the instinctively combative Hughes appealed to Page for a truce.

The influence on Page of the wider context of his youth is also important but harder to chart. Social optimism was abundant in late colonial Australia. The 1880s and early 1890s spawned confidence in utopias of reason, 'where the destructive habits of human society are corrected by good design and clear thinking'.⁴⁷ There was an accompanying distinct sense in this young country of an 'absence of history and a corresponding freedom to invent the future'.⁴⁸ Optimistic developmentalist calls to arms pervaded Page's early years. The journalist and historian A.W. Jose in the 1909 edition of his widely read *History of Australasia* implored the nation to 'take seriously in hand the developing of the country's natural resources', for which 'young Australians cannot serve their country better than by preparing themselves with zealous study to take their share in the task directly they become men'.⁴⁹

Did much of this utopian and developmentalist thought percolate through to provincial Grafton to be directly imbibed by the young Earle Page? Or was it absorbed when he was studying in Sydney? Some certainly reached Grafton, for his family remained very aware of its legacy of contact with that aforementioned great optimist John Dunmore Lang. Although Page was widely read, his writings and speeches do not appear to mention utopian or like-minded writers active during his formative years. Page instead acknowledged his early attraction to ideas of an Imperial federation. In London in 1942 he told Lionel Curtis, leading theorist of Empire federalism and of world government, that his writings had drawn him to politics 25 years earlier – yet another account by Page of why he entered public life.⁵⁰

46 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 181.

47 Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia's Constitution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 38, 44.

48 Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1991, p. 12.

49 Quoted in Horne, *Money Made Us*, p. 133.

50 Page's wartime diary, entry for 15 January 1942, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3). Page wrote here of *The Empire on the Anvil* as being by Curtis, but it is actually by W. Basil Worsfold; he may have meant Curtis's 1916 *The Problem of the Commonwealth*.

Less abstract forces transforming rural Australia during Page's youth might have more directly influenced his faith in technology and progress. In a prepublication synopsis of his autobiography he reflected how as a youth he had witnessed a transformation from the 'primitive position of the era in which I was born to improvement of the whole social order', with the result that 'my outlook, my character, my ways of thought and action are a palimpsest of all these changes'.⁵¹ Amongst these would have been the spread of exciting new household and consumer goods during the second half of the nineteenth century. These included kerosene lamps, electricity, bicycles, tap water, telegrams, new ways of weighing and packaging, paper money, matches and much else.⁵² Perhaps their visibility added to rural fears that industrial manufacturing was surpassing agriculture and that the benefits of new technology were not being equally shared out by the big cities. This contributed to a late nineteenth-century rural culture embittered by growing anti-urbanism, alienation and loss of status. Such stress was most obviously reflected in population and economic drift to the cities. The percentage of the Australian population living in metropolitan areas rose steadily from 32 per cent in 1881 to just over 38 per cent in 1911: that of primary industry workers out of total breadwinners plummeted from 44 per cent in 1871 to just 26 per cent in 1921.⁵³

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw a rapid rise of small-scale wheat and dairy farming in regions such as the Mallee, the Riverina and Page's north-eastern New South Wales. Simultaneously, the 1895–1902 Federation Drought, arguably the most notorious Australian drought of all, and a dwindling supply of new viable land constrained population growth and production more widely across rural Australia. Don Aitkin links the rise of rural political activity around this time to a growing shortage of unoccupied land, the impact of railways on small-town industry and the increasing difficulty of dividing farms so as to keep children on the land. The protectionism and industrial arbitration central to what became known as the Australian Settlement of the early Federation era seemed deliberately designed to favour the cities over the country. But new railways and the telegraph also connected rural

51 Earle Page to Ethel Page, 23 October 1924, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 5, folder 7.

52 See Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Penguin, Camberwell, Vic., 2003, pp. 424–5.

53 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, p. 133.

communities and helped spread awareness of their common interests.⁵⁴ Faith in farming as the backbone of the nation stayed strong, and new regional and sectoral associations aided the formation of the first political country parties during the early twentieth century.⁵⁵ Within an overall pattern of rural decline during the twentieth century there were sufficient variations between regions and periods to keep rural hopes and dreams very much alive.⁵⁶

These rural anxieties and reactions were so pervasive they must surely have made an impression on an alert young man like Earle Page. In his memoirs he wrote of how the recovery of the Clarence Valley from flood, drought and the financial insolvency of the 1890s was frustrated by decade-long low prices for farm products. He recalled farmers who were already struggling to meet transport and handling costs sometimes being forced to pay for the dumping of unsaleable produce at sea, and that 'practically everyone on the northern rivers lived more or less within a barter economy'.⁵⁷ Such bitter reflections raise the question of the extent to which Page's views were a manifestation of the celebrated ideology of countrymindedness that arose during this time of rural hardship.

'Countrymindedness', says Aitkin, is 'physiocratic, populist and decentralist'. It holds that rural traits such as community cooperation bring out the best in individuals, and that country life is the ennobling basis of the national economy. By contrast, urban life is parasitical and corrupt. But as power resides in the cities, there is a need for a political party for country people 'to articulate the true voice of the nation'.⁵⁸ Aitkin postulates that Page might have originated countrymindedness as a term, but this does not appear to be backed by clear documentation from a man who tended to repeat favoured words and phrases. The term dates back to at least the early 1930s, although it was often used in the narrower sense of sympathy for rural causes.

54 Don Aitkin, 'Countrymindedness – The spread of an idea', in S.L. Goldberg and F.B. Smith (eds), *Australian Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 52–4.

55 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, pp. 38–54.

56 Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (eds), *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, Monash University ePress, Clayton, 2005, p. xii.

57 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 9.

58 Aitkin, 'Countrymindedness', in Goldberg and Smith, *Australian Cultural History*, pp. 51, 52.

Countrymindedness added a stridently discordant note to the Australian Settlement by dwelling on its exclusion of an entire sector of the nation. This cut clean across the expectation that all citizens had the opportunity to fulfil their potential, an important feature of 'state developmentalism'.⁵⁹ It was also a very flexible predisposition that ranged from agrarian romanticism to progressive social and economic ideas such as decentralisation, and from praising farmers alone to casting the denizens of small towns as fellow upholders of rural values. Countrymindedness certainly overlapped with many of Page's early ideas. He agreed that the nation depended on primary producers, that rural pursuits brought out the best in people (though he would have stressed small communities more than farming) and that decentralisation was vital.

But Page went well beyond the defensiveness of countrymindedness to embrace assertive developmentalism for the entire nation. He did not advocate such strands of agrarian romanticism as common ownership of land or the perceived virtues of the peasant lifestyle. Page had seen enough of rural isolation to be more interested in alleviating poverty. He was more excited by the opportunities that modernity presented rural Australia and the wider nation, such as through electrification. Conventional countrymindedness provided only a partial foundation for his wider beliefs. Page may have bridged countrymindedness and developmentalism, but development was his priority.

Page probably also derived inspiration from American agrarian thought. Debate in late nineteenth-century Australia about rural education was heavily influenced by accounts of agricultural colleges in the United States.⁶⁰ Page had sufficient interest in American development to undertake a wartime trip there in 1917. The most prominent American rural improvers of these years were the scholars and journalists who led the famed Country Life Movement. Foremost was the renowned Cornell professor Liberty Hyde Bailey, who advocated environmental conservation, rural education, new technology (including electrification) and decentralisation. Although this movement had an intellectual base, it had much in common with more populist concerns held in Australia about rural decline. Like Page, Bailey thought that urbanisation sapped naturalness and spontaneity. John Wesley Powell, another outspoken

59 Stokes, 'The "Australian Settlement" and Australian Political Thought', pp. 13, 15.

60 Greg Logan, 'An urban revolution for rural Australia: The genesis of agricultural colleges in colonial Australia', in R.C. Petersen and G.W. Rodwell (eds), *Notes from Essays in the History of Rural Education in Australia and New Zealand*, William Michael Press, Casuarina, 1993, pp. 203–4.

American, proposed the regional control of watersheds. Although there appears to be no direct evidence of Page avowedly emulating Bailey or Powell, his travels and reading on the United States (such as the writings of James Bryce, then a famed British interpreter of the US) most likely exposed him to their thoughts and reinforced his own ideas.

Page returns to Grafton: Poverty and technology

Page's early experiences as a medical professional powerfully reinforced and refined his ideas about rural development. He did not last long as a city-based doctor. At the end of his first year as a house surgeon he accepted an invitation to stay on as a pathologist. This nearly ended his life. Post-mortems were conducted without rubber gloves, the pathologists instead simply smearing their arms with vaseline. When Page conducted a post-mortem on a patient who had died of peritonitis following perforation of the bowel after typhoid, the application of smelling salts failed to kill the infectious microbes. Page's arms became so severely infected that friends and colleagues solemnly 'bid me farewell from this life'.⁶¹ Unexpectedly, he recovered after a colleague made a series of incisions on both arms, administered without anaesthetic. He ended his hospital employment and, as soon as he was well, returned to Grafton, where early in 1903 he joined a local practice as junior partner to another general practitioner.

Page later reflected that this experience left him with a fatalism that removed his fear of death but also made him determined to use each day to the full. He moved quickly to establish himself as a local doctor. In April 1903 he purchased an existing practice in South Grafton. This was a somewhat marginalised community of about 1,300 inhabitants on the southern side of the Clarence, pointedly isolated by the lack of a bridge across the river. By September 1904 he had raised enough capital to open his own small private hospital, Clarence House, also in South Grafton. Page recalled in his memoirs how he was motivated by the need to extend modern medicine across the Clarence Valley region, an idea he had harboured since his student days.⁶² Working as a rural doctor added a very practical sharp edge to his appreciation of the city–country contrast:

61 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 24–5.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

A patient 70 or 80 miles away in the bush who was seriously ill had very little chance of recovery. It took 12 to 15 hours to ride for a Doctor and it took 12 to 15 hours for the Doctor to ride back – more often than not only to find that his patient had died hours before his arrival.⁶³

One constituent testified that a seriously injured person's chances of survival were a matter of how quickly Page could reach them.⁶⁴

Page added that the deciding factor in his decision to stay in his home town was the need to overcome hostility to new medical practices. In September 1903 local doctors denied him use of the Grafton Hospital to conduct a radical hysterectomy using the latest techniques, despite his being on the honorary staff. So Page instead proceeded to do so before their very eyes using a makeshift operating room in his mother's house 'as a contribution to their education'. He wrote with equal satisfaction of inviting members of the hospital board to inspect Clarence House, with the result that they installed 'similar indispensable facilities'.⁶⁵ Such triumphs consolidated Page's self-image as a visionary pitted against reaction, but who ultimately had history on his side. Open contempt for blinkered elements of his profession was to be carried over into his political career as a persistent disdain for sceptics of his plans for the nation. The intensity of young Dr Page led him into some righteous exchanges. In November 1905 he helped publicise a dispute over the employment of medical officers by local friendly societies by placing a long, angry letter in the press. He rambled through the minutiae of the case and ended by accusing the societies of making statements 'calculated to mislead both the medical profession and the public'.⁶⁶

Page's outwardly rationalist, almost deterministic, approach to public policy and technology owes much to his training in medicine and early successes in introducing innovations into his small-town practice. His X-ray machine was the first in New South Wales outside Sydney, but as the Grafton region still lacked an electricity supply it had to be modified to use bichromate batteries. He acquired what was said to be the first car on the north coast of New South Wales, a Rover that his

63 'Speech by Hon Earle Page MP, Acting Prime Minister, Motor Trades Show Sydney, 14–1–27', EPP, folder 1784.

64 'Earle Christmas Grafton Page', a profile written by Denning, c. 1947, Warren Denning papers, NLA, MS 5129, p. 3.

65 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 26, 27.

66 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 4 November 1905, p. 12.

brother Maund converted into a prototype ambulance, and also installed a hospital telephone. Both were important acquisitions for a rural practice that stretched 100 miles along the coast and 50 inland. Electricity was the technology that had by far the greatest impact on Page's ambitions for the nation. His hospital's pressing need for reliable power helped convince him of its wider importance:

The problem of securing good lights in our modern hospital to permit surgery to be performed at all hours of the day and night ultimately led me to one of my life's objectives. This was to make electricity available in ample quantities at a uniform price in country and city alike and especially to secure the harnessing of all our latent water power and the conservation of all our waters.⁶⁷

This was truly innovative thinking for the time – gas still predominated even in the big cities and electricity was first used in the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital only in 1912. Page was to retain a ready faith in the ability of technology to catalyse regional equality and liberate the individual.

In September 1906 Page married Ethel Blunt. They had met when she was a senior staff nurse at the Royal Prince Alfred. Five years older than Earle, she was the daughter of a Sydney building contractor. He recalled first encountering her rather abruptly during a medical procedure involving an archaic cupping process to draw inflammatory fluids from the patient. This necessitated setting alight pieces of paper saturated with methylated spirits so as to create vacuums within glass tumblers. Page became 'conscious that something unusual was happening behind me' and discovered that a discarded bit of burning paper had set Nurse Blunt's dress ablaze: 'I decided that she must be kept under observation'.⁶⁸ Perhaps Page was also attracted by Ethel having topped her training year. He later persuaded her to join Clarence House. They had five children: Mary, Earle junior, Donald, Iven and Douglas.

Although there is little indication that Ethel played a direct role in forming Page's policy ideas, their private correspondence affirms his description of her as his foremost political and personal confidante, who supported the family and his medical practice during his frequent absences.⁶⁹ (The next closest was David Drummond, the long-serving state and federal Country

67 Untitled draft for Page's memoirs, EPP, folder 1855.

68 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 27.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Party MP with whom Page shared northern New South Wales and Methodist origins.) Ethel joined him in public campaigning and was described by her husband as the better public speaker of the two: this is very plausible, given testimony by Ellis and audio recordings that suggest that Earle was only a competent orator. She was a founder of the Women's Country Party, and served with the Australian Red Cross Society, the Country Women's Association and the National Council of Women.

Over many years, Page sent Ethel a stream of affectionate and discursive letters, frequently writing of private goals and stresses. She appears to have been influential in Page's decision not to become a missionary and instead devote himself to more earthly pursuits. In May 1906 he wrote that she had helped in 'bringing back to me, altered and changed beyond recognition my loftier ambitions and desires; different they are from the old ones of four years ago; with more thought of my work in this life and my beneficial influence on men's welfare here than on my own salvation and other men's salvation hereafter'.⁷⁰ Soon after, he assured Ethel that he would 'long for your sympathy and communion and counsel at every critical time of my life'.⁷¹ Ethel maintained a discernibly separate persona from that of her husband. She often spoke in public on women's participation in politics, in which her husband showed little interest. After a 1925 trip to the United States and Europe, she observed that American women were 'far ahead of us with regard to the number of women taking part in public affairs'. By contrast, Australian women 'do not seem to be alive to the necessity of organisation and the benefit of the effect in political life'.⁷²

Following his marriage, Page began to display a distinct business bent that he retained for the rest of his life. In 1908 he invested £2,100 in land for dairy farms and a sawmill in southern Queensland near Kandanga, 'a property that is sure to grow in value and more than double in a few years', he told Ethel.⁷³ By 1912 his combined assets stood at £10,000. Page developed a wide portfolio of interests in farming, timber, the share market and newspapers, as well as a faith in the potency of the private sector. In policy pronouncements he invariably portrayed private investment in development projects as inherently preferable to public money.

70 Page to Ethel Page, 5 May 1906, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 11, folder 90.

71 Page to Ethel Page, 17 June 1906, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 11, folder 90.

72 *Sunday Times*, Sydney, 9 August 1925, Social and Magazine Section, p. 5.

73 Page to Ethel Page, 25 November 1909, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 71.

Page's first policy campaigns: 'The dull roar of the flooded stream'

In November 1952 Ulrich Ellis presented Page with a draft prologue for a projected book on water resources. Even allowing for the drafter's propensity for overwriting, this testifies to the early influence the Clarence River had on Page. Ellis wrote that for Page 'the dull roar of the flooded stream has always stirred his blood' and so he 'set himself the task of achieving the marriage of electrical power and water as a prime factor for the advancement of the Valley'.⁷⁴ For his entire life, Page was inspired by the Clarence as the defining physical feature of his home territory, and a source of sustenance, floods and potentially transformative electric power.

Page did not originate the idea of damming the Clarence, but he was primarily responsible for nurturing this goal. Page became convinced, early in his adult life, that the Clarence presented immense potential for hydroelectricity. It surely had all the necessary ingredients: reliable water supply, water flow over distance and potential dam sites. Page was particularly interested in a 10-kilometre segment known as The Gorge. This sits about 130 kilometres upriver from the mouth of the Clarence, just down from where the Mann River joins it. At The Gorge, the Clarence passes through a deep rocky gap bounded by mountains, providing a possible basis for a dam.

Page grew up in an era of much-publicised progress globally in the generation of electricity that made hydroelectricity commercially viable. This raised hopes for its ability to transform whole societies, including by easing rural poverty. A new electrical generator, the dynamo, was developed in the 1870s to produce continuous electrical current in commercial quantities. From 1891, the use of alternating current in the transmission of electricity from the point of generation to that of consumption mitigated hydroelectricity's drawback of usually being generated in locations remote from end users. (Alternating current involves transmitting electricity at high voltage from the point of generation to near the place of consumption, then using a transformer to reduce the voltage to a level safe for usage.) Dynamite and new air rock drills reduced the cost of building hydroelectric power stations, and there

74 'A Man and His Valley – Prologue', document by Ulrich Ellis, 17 November 1952, EPP, folder 2369.

were also improvements in turbines and penstocks (used to channel water to turbines). A modest hydroelectric scheme commenced at Godalming in England in 1881. The internationally publicised large-scale use of hydroelectricity turbines in 1895 at Niagara Falls is generally taken to mark the start of modern commercial hydroelectricity, along with other pioneering projects in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California and the Appalachians in the US south-east. Faith in electricity spread worldwide. In the United States, it was ‘invoked as the panacea for every social ill’, that ‘promised to lighten the toil of workers and housewives, to provide faster and cleaner forms of transport, and to revolutionise the farm’.⁷⁵

Early Australian advocates of hydroelectricity were conscious of greater progress being made overseas. This included the pioneers of Tasmanian hydroelectricity James Gillies, a metallurgist who proposed its application to zinc refining, and Alexander McAulay, a mathematician at the University of Tasmania. Page was probably very aware of early hydroelectric facilities in northern New South Wales – at Tamworth in 1888, the Gara River near Armidale in 1895 and at the Styx River in 1906 – part of a number of small, tinkering developments across the nation. Australia’s first sizeable facilities appeared in the 1910s in Tasmania, at the Mt Lyell copper mine and at Great Lake in the state’s central region. Power generation and supply in Australia was then mostly in the hands of private companies and local councils. Reports of new electrical technologies featured in the Grafton press of Page’s early adulthood, from one on how the new apparatus of the transformer could render powerful currents ‘harmless and agreeable’, to an account of steps towards installing electric street lighting, a sure sign that ‘Grafton is on the move of progress’.⁷⁶

Page was particularly aware of past proposals to harness the Clarence system. Early suggestions focused on port operations and flood control: in 1887–88 the engineer Sir John Coode reported to the New South Wales Government on unblocking the mouth of the Clarence, and in 1894 J.W. Archibald and D.W. Campbell proposed a dam at The Gorge for flood prevention. In 1908 the system’s impressively reliable flow attracted mainland Australia’s first major hydroelectricity proposal. William Corin, chief electrical engineer in the New South Wales Public Works Department, put to local councils a joint water supply and power scheme based on the Nymboida River,

75 David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, p. 143.

76 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 25 August 1903, p. 2, and 11 December 1913, p. 4.

which flows into the Mann River. Only the water supply component was taken up at the time. Family tradition again contributed to Page's interest: he recalled that his father as mayor of Grafton in 1908 was 'the driving force' in providing the town with a permanent water supply from the Nymboida.⁷⁷ The Nymboida River was later the temporary focus of Page's hydroelectric campaigning. Corin was to become hydroelectricity's most prominent supporter within the engineering profession and a pioneering proponent of a national electricity grid.

Page was sufficiently aware of international developments to use his first overseas trip, to attend the 1910 Australasian Medical Conference in New Zealand, as an opportunity to 'visit and study new water-power developments ... especially their progressive improvements in extending electricity to country homes and farms in the vicinity of the projects'. This 'stimulated my ambition to secure the installation of similar schemes in Australia, especially on the Clarence'.⁷⁸ It also marked the start of a lifelong penchant for seeking out overseas exemplars for his policy ideas that eventually stretched to Egypt, North America, Africa, Japan and the Indian subcontinent. Another notable early trip came in 1922, when during the parliamentary recess he visited Java, Singapore and Malaya with the entrepreneur and Nationalist MP H.E. Pratten, another fellow Methodist. Page was dismayed by the inept marketing of Australian goods overseas.

His medical practice well established, Page became increasingly involved in local civic movements and politics. He later credited a local mining engineer and surveyor called W.J. Mulligan with first proposing to dam the Clarence River itself for power. Page took the idea up as combining his attraction to regionalism and new technology, and claimed that this led to his being 'persuaded to enter South Grafton Council to sponsor proposals for such development for the Clarence River'.⁷⁹ His first experience of public office came in 1913 when he was elected to South Grafton Council.⁸⁰ Alderman Page made a name for himself by extolling ambitious civic improvements, ranging from conventional schemes for a secure town water supply and public electric lighting, to the more transformative damming of the Clarence. When he became mayor in 1918, his own *Daily*

77 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 3.

78 Untitled draft text on Page's early medical career prepared for his memoirs, EPP, folder 1855; see also similar published text at Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 37, from which the latter quote comes.

79 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 37.

80 Grafton Council was created in 1859, but South Grafton split off in 1896. The two were reunited in 1957 and incorporated into Clarence Valley Council in 2004.

Examiner, in extolling his many virtues as an alderman, made particular mention of how the electrical lighting of South Grafton 'will always stand as a monument to his ability, thoroughness and progressiveness'.⁸¹ Page in 1913 also made early forays into parliamentary politics by chairing campaign meetings for the local candidate for state parliament endorsed by the New South Wales Farmers and Settlers' Association (FSA), the state's main representative body for primary producers.

In 1914 Page accompanied Corin to The Gorge, then accessible only on horseback. The following year Corin produced the first fully professional study of a dam at that location. This proposed a 2-mile tunnel to supply a power station sited below The Gorge, but Corin lacked Page's propensity for attracting the public and political eye. Alderman Page wrote articles in the *Grafton Argus* in August–September 1914 – not a good time to be trying to capture the public imagination – and included Mulligan in a delegation seeking the agreement of the Labor state Minister of Works to have the area properly surveyed. The idea was pigeonholed for the duration of World War One. When the engineer H.G. Carter assessed the Clarence in 1929 he credited Page as having first 'so ably sponsored' the hydroelectric harnessing of the Clarence to the wider public, not Mulligan or Corin.⁸² Corin, undeterred, produced in December 1918 a fuller proposal involving four distinct stages of construction, beginning with damming the Nymboida and culminating in a 200-foot-high dam at The Gorge.

Page's early campaigning to dam the Clarence, however heartfelt, gave him only a certain amount of publicity and little tangible success. It was the new state movement that contributed most to building his local profile. Early engagement with new statism was vital to the rise of Page and decisive in his lasting commitment to decentralisation and regionalisation.

Nationwide, new statism had died away for several years after Federation in 1901, attributed by Page to a ready assumption that the new Commonwealth would support local projects.⁸³ In 1908 a petition from north Queensland containing over 58,000 names was presented to the Commonwealth Parliament. Two years later, T.J. Ryan, a future Labor premier, secured the passage of a motion through the Lower

81 *Daily Examiner*, 14 February 1918, p. 4.

82 H.G. Carter, 'Report on the Hydro-Electric Development of the Clarence-Mitchell Rivers', 8 March 1929, EPP, folder 1046.

83 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 40.

House of state parliament to divide Queensland into three. In 1915 the issue re-emerged in the Riverina and northern New South Wales, including a proposal that the Riverina follow its economic ties by being incorporated into Victoria. The northern revival reflected a continuing sense of being ignored by Sydney, but there is disagreement over what exactly the precise grievances were. The failure of the state government's 1911 Decentralisation Commission to deliver observable outcomes seems to have been one factor, but Page and others have written also of drought; wartime legislation that fixed butter and wheat prices at artificially low levels; and demands for public projects as various as a bridge linking Grafton and South Grafton, rail links, ferry services across the Clarence and removal of a dangerous reef from the river mouth.

More importantly, all accounts agree that Page led this 1915 resurgence. On 7 January 1915, 250 locals, including the mayors of Grafton and South Grafton, gathered at Grafton Town Hall to discuss a dispute over the payment of costs for the Clarence ferry service. Alderman Page altered the meeting's direction by successfully raising a motion for northern separation, either to form a new state or to merge with Queensland. He proposed that an investigative committee confer with communities across the north of New South Wales and in southern Queensland in preparing a full report. Page sat on this eight-member 'Literary Committee', which included both mayors. In April it duly presented to a further public meeting a document articulating local grievances. The document bore characteristic Page references to The Gorge's hydroelectric potential and 'the psychological moment', possibly his first public use of this shorthand for a receptive political and public mood.⁸⁴ This and a second April meeting resulted in the formation of the Northern New South Wales Separation League, with Page prominent on its nine-member executive. Page also emerged as the movement's leading propagandist, including through articles in the *Daily Examiner* cast as a debate between Page and a supposed new state sceptic dubbed Rocky Mouth.⁸⁵

Page had no doubt that it was he who relaunched the movement, and in his memoirs detailed how he followed up the January 1915 meeting. He began by consulting with local lawyers and journalists to draft a case for separation

84 *A New State: Proposed Separation of Northern New South Wales: A Statement Compiled and Published by the Committee appointed at a Public Meeting Held in Grafton, in January 1915*, Grafton, 1915, no author given, copy at EPP, folder 1889 (part 2). The references to 'The Gorge' and 'the psychological moment' are at pp. 18 and 22.

85 See for example the *Daily Examiner*, 9 October 1915, p. 4, and 15 October 1915, p. 4.

and described the April forum as ‘one of the most representative meetings ever held in Grafton’. This was all well covered by the *Daily Examiner* (‘twelve and a half columns’ on the statement to the April meeting, he recalled). He travelled with local lawyer Fred McGuren to regional centres including Kyogle, Lismore, Casino and Ballina to address public meetings and form new branches of the Separation League. This is all an early instance of the *modus operandi* that Page was to employ for decades to come – approach selected influential figures for support, follow up with appeals to the wider public and, throughout, keep proselytising through the local press. Less successfully, Page led a party inland to Tamworth, where he was rebuffed by V.C. Thompson who thought that concerted campaigning should await the end of the war. (There was a distinct Tablelands–North Coast rivalry.) In December 1915 Page was one of ‘a band of keen local enthusiasts’ who bought the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* to recast it as the *Daily Examiner* and appointed McGuren as chairman of directors. This purchase was overtly strategic: Page told his wife in 1916 that the newspaper would be ‘the medium for having our views carried into effect’.⁸⁶ Four *Daily Examiner* board members sat on the Literary Committee: Page, McGuren, W.F. Blood and E.G. Elworthy.

Pushing for such a massive realignment of government was indeed hardly likely to gain momentum during a major war. The northern New South Wales movement faded as leaders like Page enlisted and the state government finally completed a highly visible local project, the Glenreagh to South Grafton railway. Despite this, new statism had secured the commitment of figures such as Page, and it gave him both wide exposure and a network of influential local contacts that was to be invaluable when he sought to enter national politics.

Page’s war: ‘Some distinctly military surgery’

In January 1916 Page joined the Australian Imperial Force’s (AIF) Army Medical Corps. The inquisitive, striving Page approached war service as a chance to broaden his skills. He wrote to his wife from Cairo looking forward to ‘some distinctly military surgery’ after which ‘I would be

⁸⁶ Page to Ethel Page, 13 September 1916, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 72; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 41.

content to go home'.⁸⁷ Captain Page was initially posted to the 3rd Australian General Hospital and remained on active service for just over a year in Egypt, England and France. During a frustratingly inactive period in Egypt, he took up the suggestion of his commanding officer Neville Howse, who Page had known since his student days, that he visit the new Aswan Low Dam. In France he spent five months at a casualty clearing station, where during heavy fighting over 1916–17 Page and eight surgeon colleagues together dealt with as many as 900 cases a day. Two of Page's brothers also served – Harold as an infantry officer and Will as a medical officer.

From November 1916, Page sought to return to Australia, if necessary by arranging a direct swap with Will, then still in Australia. In March 1917 he was finally permitted to return for family and financial reasons that he claimed threatened personal ruin, with the understanding that his remaining partner at Clarence House would enlist in his place.⁸⁸ Page's intention to return before war's end was quite open and not exceptional. In December 1916 he approached Howse, by then director of medical services for the AIF, and corresponded with the Defence Department accordingly. The official history of Australia in the Great War notes that out of a total of 1,242 AIF medical officers, some 300 returned to Australia in line with AIF practice of releasing those 'due for a rest and employment in Australia'. Howse himself had by 1916 a policy of releasing medical officers who wanted to return on urgent family or financial grounds.⁸⁹ Later, Howse became a rural Nationalist MP and Page's colleague in the Bruce–Page Cabinet.

Page's early return does not seem to have raised public opprobrium. Mention of his then former war service in his 1917 speech to the Australasian Provincial Press conference still elicited applause. In his memoirs Page fleetingly referred to returning due to illness.⁹⁰ Page arranged to travel back via North America, at his own expense, so as to study major hydroelectric developments. This, he told Ethel, would also fulfil an 'overpowering desire to see the American states and Canada', which he

87 Page to Ethel Page, 28 July 1916, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 72.

88 Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 9, folder 71 (part 1) and (part 2), including Earle Page to Ethel Page of 24 November 1916.

89 A.G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918, Volume II – The Western Front*, first edition, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940, pp. 830–3 (the foregoing quote is at p. 831).

90 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 44.

expected to be unlike 'staid and too stiff' Europe where 'conditions are bitterly unequal'.⁹¹ Indeed, an officer's batman is said to have assumed Page's first name to be a title.⁹²

Page had a proverbial good war – relatively short and personally rewarding, without direct involvement in combat. He would surely have been deeply affected by his exposure as a surgeon to the immediate results of battle: perhaps memories of this influenced his later attack on Menzies. But he said little about the human cost of war in letters to Ethel or in the short account in his memoirs, possibly reflecting a mixture of tact and wartime censorship. His letters are more focused on the professional benefits of wartime doctoring. Even when still in France he wrote of 'an experience that one would not have missed'. Page concluded that 'the best thing of all is the meeting men from every school of medicine in the world finding them with similar ideas and measuring oneself by their standards and getting a true comparative estimate of his ability + capacity'.⁹³

Foreshortened as it was, Page remained proud of his war service. In the speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Association he did not hesitate to use wartime anecdotes, declaring for instance that 'unification' so possessed him that 'during the long nights in France he had thought of little else'.⁹⁴ Looking back on his public life much later, he reflected on how wartime collaboration 'firmly inspired my belief in the ideals and benefits of Commonwealth co-operation, which later I was able to carry forward in my political career'.⁹⁵ During his service and trip back to Australia, Page noticed that in 'the small states of the United States of America and of Europe ... railways are built to encourage, and not discourage, trade'. This, he said, was when he 'realised that no true nation could be welded together until there were more partners with small enough states to realise their inter-dependence and give complete interstate free trade that was the real reason for our federal union'.⁹⁶

91 Page to Ethel Page, undated but probably late 1916, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 9, folder 71.

92 George Bell, Henry Newland, W.F. Simmons and D.A. Cameron, obituary of Sir Earle Page, *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 12 May 1962, p. 733.

93 Page to Ethel Page, undated but probably late 1916.

94 Earle Page, *A Plea for Unification*, p. 5.

95 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 64.

96 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', EPP, folder 2358.

Page the person: Ideas, cunning and singleness of purpose

Page's early life imparts a strong sense of a remarkably purposeful and energetic individual. Considering what sort of person emerged from the formative experiences that shaped his approach to policy is essential to understanding how he conducted his political career.

Ulrich Ellis, a highly skilled journalist, first met Page as a member of the press gallery when federal parliament sat in Melbourne. He subsequently worked with him between 1928 and 1961 variously as a personal secretary, Country Party scribe and tireless new state campaigner. Ellis wrote extensively on Page, most tellingly in his history of the Country Party. He portrayed Page as conducting politics 'with reckless energy, native cunning and a certain contempt for the orthodox rules of the game'.⁹⁷ Above all, 'his main driving force was ideas, and they were legion', such that 'singleness of purpose – or purposes – was perhaps his predominant characteristic'.⁹⁸

Page himself reflected to his wife that politics 'was a battle of ideas and ideals' and that the winners were those who were able to 'lay down the principles that will endure'.⁹⁹ Though Page was rarely ill, Ellis recalled that 'his longest spells in bed were the results of occasional accidents precipitated by absent-minded driving while haranguing his passengers'.¹⁰⁰ This may explain such incidents as in late 1917 when Page was thrown from the car in which he and two others were travelling: Page was knocked unconscious and the others pinned under the overturned vehicle.¹⁰¹ A Country Party MP from Queensland, Charles Russell, perceived also a 'ruthlessness' behind Page's 'generally gay and debonair personality', which he thought typical of Country Party leaders.¹⁰² Such comments, the 1917 speech and many other public and private statements suggest that Page thought of himself as being on a very special mission, far more important than anything he could achieve as a mere surgeon.

97 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 324.

98 Ibid., pp. 322, 323.

99 Earle Page to Ethel Page, 2 May 1927, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 71.

100 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 322, 323.

101 *Brisbane Courier*, 29 December 1917, p. 6.

102 Charles W. Russell, *Country Crisis*, W.R. Smith & Paterson, Brisbane, 1976, p. 83.

Figure 5: Ulrich Ellis.

Source: Courtesy of John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, neg: 195159.

Although Page spoke clearly enough before large audiences, some of his listeners had difficulty with his often gushingly enthusiastic style of conversation. Even as staunch an admirer as Ellis reported that Page's recollections for the preparation of *Truant Surgeon* 'rarely contained verbs and often no subjects and predicates, and ... he seldom finished a sentence or a thought'.¹⁰³ But Page could moderate this when required. The parliamentary officer Frank Green, no great admirer of Page, wrote that this 'tough individualist' had such a facility with words that 'the only way to conduct an argument with Page with any hope of success was in writing'.¹⁰⁴ Ellis added that Page sometimes used his verbosity with deliberate tactical intent to confuse.¹⁰⁵ Innumerable formal speeches and writings show that he was very capable indeed of well-ordered argument. He became an indefatigable user of mass communications – radio, film, self-published booklets and particularly the rural press.

Ellis also dwelt upon Page's self-centeredness. That 'the very universe revolved around him and his plans' tended to determine his personal interactions. Page 'had no reluctance in impressing the services of any person from a Prime Minister to a journalist or a humble messenger'. Ellis generously added that 'if he seemed selfish or unduly demanding, he could feel that he was obeying the dictates of his destiny which impelled him to push forward regardless'.¹⁰⁶ It is telling that Page did not respond to humour of which he was the object.¹⁰⁷ The long-serving press gallery journalist Warren Denning found Page to be 'fidgety, impatient, sometimes almost incoherent', but with 'more "going power" than any other person I had seen in parliamentary life'.¹⁰⁸ Arthur Fadden recalled Page as 'sometimes an irritating and exasperating colleague', leading to such outbursts as that mentioned in the introduction. But he also remembered Page as being 'like a father to me from the time I entered the House', and producing 'a veritable flood of ideas on every conceivable subject'.¹⁰⁹

103 Account provided to journalist Cecil Edwards and reported in Edwards's *The Editor Regrets*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1972, p. 182.

104 Frank C. Green, *Servant of the House*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 35, 103.

105 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 324.

106 *Ibid.*, pp. 323, 326, 327.

107 Ellis quoted in J.B. O'Hara, 'The Entry into Public Life of Sir Earle Christmas Grafton Page (1915–1921)', BA (Hons) thesis, Department of History, University of New England, 1969, p. 6.

108 'Earle Christmas Grafton Page', profile by Denning, Warren Denning papers, NLA, MS 5129, pp. 3, 19.

109 A.W. Fadden, *They Called Me Arty: The Memoirs of Sir Arthur Fadden*, The Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1969, pp. 81–2.

Page's intense approach to policy issues greatly coloured how he worked as a party leader and minister. He felt compelled to leave a lasting legacy, reflecting powerful emotions derived from a mixture of family tradition, replication of the harmonious community of his childhood and the Methodist commitment to earthly progress. Ellis touched on Page's fundamentally emotive approach to issues – and inadvertently identified his foremost weaknesses – by adding that 'he rarely worked from premise to conclusion but proceeded from the original idea to its justification, arguing the case in reverse before he allowed it to burst upon the public'.¹¹⁰

That Page saw himself as working towards a higher purpose was also reflected in his being undeterred by failure, to which he typically responded with a long, patient wait before trying again. When another opportunity finally arose, he simply announced his specific goal and proceeded to push ahead regardless, especially when not constrained by a strong prime minister. He invariably applied his trademark energy and inventiveness but also his tendency to perceive ready solutions to complex problems. At some crucial moments he imprudently dismissed his critics as sadly misguided, such as on the inevitability of new states.

Unlike many other self-styled visionaries, Page was a cultural conservative who admired the British Empire as a force for international stability. But his reading, education and sojourns in Sydney and overseas gave him a broader perspective than the typical rural activist. Page read very widely. In July 1935 the parliamentary librarian recorded him as having borrowed a work on economic planning by the English socialist G.D.H. Cole, a biography of Czech President Edvard Beneš, studies of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and of Japan's role in the Pacific, as well as some unspecified 'mystery stories'.¹¹¹ That part of his personal library which survives at his former residence at Heifer Station includes very serious tomes on current affairs, ancient and modern history, and economics that range from Plutarch's *Lives* to the observations of the American foreign correspondent John Gunther. Yet Page's interpretation was frequently narrow, aided by creative use of selected statistics. He habitually seized upon whatever seemed to justify his existing views, such as taking writings by the historian and philosopher of urban life Lewis Mumford to be confirmation of the inherent evil of big cities.

110 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 325.

111 Parliamentary Librarian to Page, 19 July 1935, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 1, folder 3.

Page's policy forays invariably reflected faith in the power of political action. He continued to believe, with only minor qualifications, in the ready ability of government to create conditions that would develop both economy and society along the proper decentralised and regionalised lines. This faith exceeded his confidence in politicians and public servants as individuals, hence a consistent preference for utilising outsiders from private industry to help implement his policies. In this, he conspicuously lacked the early Country Party's distrust of banks and other big business.

Page had some self-appreciation of his unconventionality in democratic politics. Although a highly respected local member, he was not a populist who looked to the masses for guidance or sought to use their supposed will as backing for his actions. Contrary to the early Country Party's egalitarian mores, Page was convinced of the prime role of the leader. As something of a historicist, he spoke of natural laws having driven all societies, notably the decisive role of bold leaders and the superiority of compact, homogenous states. In personal notes, Page reflected on how the historian Arnold Toynbee 'points out fundamental basis of successive civilisations been saved and transmitted to posterity by virile minority', no doubt a reflection of how he saw himself.¹¹²

Page often felt it necessary to package a rarefied goal with something more publicly acceptable, such as linking economic planning to defence preparedness. In private he bemoaned the reluctance of the citizenry to see at once the merits of his appeals to action. In 1921 he told the editor of the *Coffs Harbour Advocate* that the closure of local public works by the state government was due to 'the supineness and apathy of the North, in not unanimously and enthusiastically getting behind the separation movement', as he had 'urged them to do for many years'.¹¹³ But as will be seen in following chapters, he nonetheless foresaw public opinion as eventually catching up, particularly if the public was gradually acclimatised to be ready for a well-timed initiative and a visionary leader who seized the psychological moment.

112 Notes for a speech, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 4, folder 41 (part 1). Page's own underlining; undated, but from late in his career.

113 Page to editor of the *Coffs Harbour Advocate*, 25 January 1921, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 1, folder 1.

This text is taken from *'Now is the Psychological Moment': Earle Page and the Imagining of Australia*, by Stephen Wilks, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/NPM.2020.01