

INTRODUCTION

'A Dreamer of Dreams'

The idealism and tireless activism of Earle Page sparked radically differing reactions. H.P. Moss, Commonwealth electricity supply controller, saw him as 'a dreamer of dreams with a firm hold on mother earth'.¹ Former prime minister Stanley Bruce recalled that Page as his treasurer was so 'bursting with energy' that he routinely had to be advised 'my dear Page, for God's sake go away and have your head read'. But Bruce added that 'if you had the patience to listen to Page, he'd come up with a helluva good idea now and then'.² Page's Country Party colleague Arthur Fadden was once heard to shout amid an evening group drinking session when Page briefly absented himself 'he's a dribbling, doddering old halfwit!'³ Much later, political scientist Don Aitkin judged Page to be 'almost without question the most inventive federal politician of the twentieth century', yet also 'the most under-regarded politician of the federal arena'.⁴

Earle Page was not merely one of Australia's longest serving senior politicians. His entire career was dedicated to remarkably consistent but pragmatically opportunistic efforts to shape the still formative Australian nation according to his very personal vision of its economic and social future. He influenced conventional policy, both directly through his membership of governments and indirectly through his impact on what ideas were foremost in public debate.

1 Quoted in foreword to Earle Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, *The Bulletin Newspaper*, Sydney, August 1944.

2 Quoted in Cecil Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne: Man of Two Worlds*, William Heinemann, London, 1965, p. 82.

3 Recalled by publisher Peter Ryan in *It Strikes Me: Collected Essays 1994–2010*, Quadrant Books, Sydney, 2011, p. 266.

4 Don Aitkin, 'Page, Earle Christmas Grafton', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 488–9.

This book is a biographically based examination of how Australian politics interacted with applied ideas about shaping the entire nation, from the early post-Federation years when the fundamentals of the new Commonwealth were an open issue, up to mid-century when Australian politics and policy seemed more settled. Page's determination to make Australia a decentralised, regionalised and rationally planned nation tapped into wider debate about the disposition of population and industry, economic development and the structures of government. For all his idiosyncrasies, assessing his most distinctive ideas and initiatives concerning national development helps chart what specific issues were important and the extent of their wider support during his many years in politics. This points to broader conclusions on the place in Australian history of great ambitions to invigorate the nation's economy and society – often described as nation-building, but to which I apply the term *developmentalism*.

Page was one of many important Australian leaders – figures as diverse as Prime Minister Ben Chifley, South Australian Premier Thomas Playford and Country Party leader John 'Black Jack' McEwen – who assumed that such a vast and formative nation was surely open to the aggressive exploitation of natural resources and the fostering of new industries. Although Page drew on ideas promoted by other public figures, he uniquely moulded them into a coherent vision that was very much his own. Yet Page has received little serious attention from historians. Aside from a focus on the drama of his 1939 assault on Menzies, he is often cast as merely reflective of the mainstream of the Country Party and hence solely intent on securing resources for rural interests. This is to greatly underestimate the originality and significance of his imagining of Australia.

Over decades, Page used the striking phrase 'now is the psychological moment'. This had fairly wide currency before him: prominent early users include Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain and Alexander Wheelock Thayer in his famed biography of Beethoven. These words, or slight variations, appeared in Page's public statements, private correspondence, official documents and memoirs to mark whenever he thought that the stars had at last aligned to provide the public and political support needed to achieve one of his treasured policy goals. He used this phrase in connection with issues as diverse as new states, hydroelectricity, economic planning and national insurance.



Figure 1: Earle Page strikes a pose in early Canberra. Mildenhall Collection, NAA, A3560, 6053, undated.

Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Australia.

This favoured phrase was much more than just a rhetorical device. It encapsulated Page's realisation that his vision of the nation was usually far ahead of what views were held by nearly all of his political peers and the wider public. It also suggested a sense that his ideas still had potential to appeal to the Australian public at a time when the future of their nation remained an open issue. The result was that Page pursued different issues at particular times according to what appeared politically feasible – his seizing of the psychological moment. He pursued regionalism, for example, in the mid-1920s when the new state movement peaked. In the late 1930s, he demanded economic planning as preparations for war and the illness of Lyons presented him with a rare opportunity. In the latter 1940s, he was determined to dam the Clarence River for hydroelectricity as a post-war reconstruction initiative.

Who was Earle Page – and why does he matter?

Earle Christmas Grafton Page was born on 8 August 1880 in Grafton in north-eastern New South Wales, about 630 kilometres north of Sydney. He was a rural surgeon who helped found the federal Country Party – today's National Party – and was its longest serving leader, from April 1921 until September 1939. His membership of the House of Representatives from 1919 until his death on 20 December 1961 makes Page Australia's third longest serving federal parliamentarian, after Billy Hughes and Philip Ruddock, but Page outstrips both by having held the same seat for the longest continuous period. He was a Cabinet minister for a total of 20 years, and de facto deputy prime minister under Stanley Bruce (1923–29) and Joseph Lyons (1934–39). (The deputy prime ministership was not a formal title at these times.) He held the portfolios of Treasury (1923–29), Commerce (1934–39, 1940–41) and Health (1937–38), but spent most of the 1940s on the political outer before resuming the Health portfolio (1949–56). In 1941–42 he was Australian minister resident in London, serving in Churchill's War Cabinet at the height of the crisis in Anglo-Australian relations in the wake of Japan's entry into the war.

Page's service as caretaker prime minister lasted for a mere 19 days from 7 to 26 April 1939. It nonetheless accords him recognition he would not otherwise have – such standard prime ministerial markers as the naming of a suburb in Canberra, his visage on a 1975 postage stamp and a display in the Museum of Australian Democracy. Only Frank Forde had a shorter prime ministerial career, one week during July 1945. Page is well known for his crucial roles in creating the urban–rural conservative coalition that has been a fundamental feature of Australian national politics since 1923, in resetting the financial relationship between the Commonwealth and states via the 1927 Financial Agreement, and in pioneering a program of publicly subsidised health insurance during the 1950s. Potted biographies usually also raise his less successful efforts to create a new state in northern New South Wales.

Impressive as these achievements are, they are just shards of Page's wider vision for the transformation of the nation, his ultimate aim throughout five decades in public life. Page's own listing of his specific policy ideals varied from time to time, but there were several that he held with near-total consistency. Population and industry were to be decentralised

to the countryside. The governance of the nation was to be radically recast into semi-autonomous regional authorities, thereby encouraging local engagement with social and economic development but still in accordance with policies set by a strong central government. National economic planning was needed to guide the location of infrastructure and new industries. The countryside must reap the many benefits of electrification, especially by harnessing rivers to generate hydroelectricity. Rural higher education would encourage decentralisation and civic awareness. And a radically reformed constitution would institutionalise the Commonwealth–state cooperation required to work towards all of these goals. Sometimes Page spoke also of his commitment to more conventional interests such as a secure banking system, tariff reform and free trade throughout the British Empire.

Page's grand goals were so intertwined they cannot be readily separated out. Planning was a means of developing rural infrastructure, including hydroelectric power schemes, which would provide a productive basis for regional governance and decentralisation; rural higher education could help build civic cultures supportive of development; and 'cooperative federalism' was a basis for implementing policies nationally, such as an Australia-wide transport system servicing decentralised industries. Many of the specific issues that he engaged with so tirelessly are still very much with us today – the state–Commonwealth power balance, tensions between countryside and city over the allocation of public resources, attempts to forge a coherent national economic policy, and an energy policy for the nation.

Page's Country Party has been said to be hard to classify using the conventional left–right political spectrum. Even for a regionally based party, it is *sui generis* as a conservative party that upholds public invention to aid its favoured industries. The man himself is every bit as puzzling. A cursory survey of his career could lead to political biographer David Marr's comments about 'knights on horseback' – 'attractive bit players' in politics who see the everyday world 'not quite as the rest of us do', while 'what drives them is always a little opaque'.⁵ Marr wrote with Tony Abbott foremost in mind, but his comments could also be directed at less central political players such as Frederic Eggleston, Bert Kelly, Barry Jones and others. Such figures were often thoughtful individuals who challenged

5 David Marr, *Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott*, Quarterly Essay no. 47, Black Inc., Collingwood, Vic., 2012, p. 110.

fundamentals and occasionally nurtured ideas that grew into mainstream policy, including private investment in public infrastructure (Eggleston), free trade (Kelly) and innovation (Jones). Even if they achieved less than they hoped to, their very mixed political fortunes helps define what was and was not politically possible at various times in Australia's past and suggests much about Australian history and the basis of current debates.

Applying Marr's very generic label to Page only partially captures the man and his significance. Far from being opaque, he made very clear what he wanted and why. As a career politician he certainly had a grasp of reality, strained as this was at times. Above all, he was not a bit player. Self-perceived visionaries are hardly rare but Page was different – a long-term holder of high office in a position to actually do something about shaping Australia. The man was not just seeking more resources for the countryside, keen on this as he was. This rare combination of the earthly and the dreamer saw himself as a statesman leading a grand cause that sat far above mere party politics.

A biographically based approach can be vital to understanding the past by providing a means to relate the particular to the general. In Page's case, seniority, tenacious advocacy and breadth of vision made for a life that enlivened many major public issues. He saw the nation as a tractable land of possibilities that a visionary like himself, dedicated to a very personal conception of the greater good, had a public duty to try to realise. His rich policy career and the reactions of those around him thus help map how the Australian political imagination was at least occasionally capable of stretching beyond conventional politics to consider how the nation could realise its potential. As has frequently been noted, visionaries often inadvertently tell us more about what they represent in their own present than the future they foresee.⁶

That Page's various policy triumphs and failures extended across six different decades makes him even more important. Such rare political longevity illuminates important changes in the wider policy environment around him. There were, for example, major changes in how policy was formulated within government, notably a post-Depression dominance of economic precepts with which Page struggled. Over time, even his own Country Party gravitated towards very different ideas of national

6 Such as noted by Ian Turner (ed.) in *The Australian Dream: A Collection of Anticipations about Australia from Captain Cook to the Present Day*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968, p. ix.

development. Although Page saw himself as a dedicated party man, this was not in the tribal sense of unthinking loyalty. He was more consistently faithful to issues that he implored the Country Party to uphold. It is significant that at times he tried to work with the Australian Labor Party leadership, such as on national planning.

Exploring Page's policy initiatives also illuminates important social and political movements that he hoped would galvanise this campaigning. Such contexts as the early Country Party, new state movements and attempts to harness the business world and the engineering profession delineate what wider support or opposition his various causes elicited. Indeed, Page's career embodies an important ongoing tension in Australia's national history. On the one hand, he was broadly in company with ardent developmentalists who thought that direct action could readily realise the nation's potential. On the other, he confronted realists in government and business who stressed the limitations of the Australian natural environment and of government action. Competition between hopeful and more sober conceptions of national development was one of the great debates of twentieth-century Australia, with Page playing the role of an especially incorrigible optimist.

The distinctiveness of Page's policy vision further enhances his value as a basis for wider historical assessment. It has often been said that Australian politics has derived many of its animating ideas from European and American sources. Although Page made enthusiastic use of international exemplars, this was highly selective. Fundamentally, he synthesised home-grown and overseas-sourced ideas into his own distinctively broad yet prescriptive developmentalist vision of the nation, making him a major example of a thinker functioning in a very practical political context. Recent studies have sought to broaden conceptions of the importance of ideas in Australian public life. This includes work by James Walter and Tod Moore that touches on Country Party figures, notably Page himself, his energetic admirer Ulrich Ellis, and Page's confidant David Drummond. They call Page an 'inventive political strategist' and an 'intellectual' of the Country Party, and argue that other scholars have placed too much emphasis on the local absence of canonical figures of the stature of Edmund Burke or John Stuart Mill.⁷ Australia has instead been rich in more applied thinkers such as the economist L.F. Giblin, the pioneering

7 Tod Moore in James Walter with Tod Moore, *What Were They Thinking?: The Politics of Ideas in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010, pp. 155–6.

management theorist Elton Mayo and the public servant, economist and banker H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs (all of whom, incidentally, Page knew). Such figures can be ideologically ambiguous, including Page the anti-socialist who simultaneously advocated strong national government.

The significance of Australian developmentalism

Developmentalism helps us understand Page, but just as importantly his career casts light on the place in twentieth-century Australia of this major but little-studied concept. Although the term developmentalism is not original to this book, it has only occasionally been widely used in the assertive, encompassing sense meant here.⁸

The sentiments it encompasses pre-date Page. The economic historian S.J. Butlin observed that 'development has, as it were, always been part of Australian religion since Arthur Phillip' and was identified with growth via 'geographical spread and quantitative increase'.⁹ The political scientist J.D.B. Miller wrote in 1954 that 'Australian propaganda has traditionally represented it as a land of boundless resources, only waiting for people and capital to release its energies'.¹⁰ John Gascoigne in his study of Australian exceptionalism wrote of how Australia came under European domination in 'an age energised by the possibilities of "improvement" of the land, industry and of human nature itself. Australia was seen as 'a piece of waste land writ large requiring to be brought into productive use'.¹¹ Page himself in his first speech on a national stage indicated his central goal to be 'the

8 A partial exception is in Jillian Koshin's biography of Tasmanian Premier and hydroelectricity enthusiast Eric Reece. She defines developmentalism as 'The set of ideas which, in the name of progress, believes in, and promotes the establishment or growth of industry – particularly manufacturing and processing plants, power plants, and resource extraction'; *Electric Eric: The Life and Times of Eric Reece*, Bokprint, Launceston, Tas., 2009, p. 4. Quite differently, the term is also applied to economic theory advocating growth in developing economies through fostering strong internal markets and imposing high import tariffs.

9 S.J. Butlin, 'The role of planning in Australian economic development', *Economic Papers*, no. 15 – *Planned and Unplanned Development*, The Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand, Sydney, 1962, p. 12.

10 J.D.B. Miller, *Australian Government and Politics: An Introductory Survey*, Duckworth, London, 1954, p. 11.

11 John Gascoigne (with the assistance of Patricia Curthoys), *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 70.

Development of Australia'.¹² National development was accordingly the foremost stated objective of the first government in which he held office. Prime Minister Bruce proclaimed himself 'managing director of the greatest company in Australia, the Commonwealth Government, and its duty is to develop Australia'.¹³

Developmentalism also has an important cultural dimension as an expression of national identity. Donald Horne described development as Australia's 'secular faith', amounting to 'a kind of patriotism'.¹⁴ The historian John Hirst, in his riposte to Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*, saw Australian nationalism as having a base in a pioneer legend that celebrates national development achieved through harnessing the land.¹⁵ Faith in development stretched across the party political divide. Shortly after Page's death, Arthur Calwell wrote of development as 'a unique nationalism' and of the 'unanimity that exists on the *need* for national development'.¹⁶ All twentieth-century Australian governments extolled development, albeit with significant differences of strategy between individual states. Tasmanian governments pursued industrialisation through hydroelectricity, Playford diversified the South Australian economy by offering financial incentives to attract manufacturing and post-war Western Australia beckoned private investment for the exploitation of mineral resources.

In Page's time there was little sense of a choice between material development and quality of life issues. There was also a general assumption for most of the twentieth century that government leadership was the way to incite development. Developmentalist sentiment extended into the business world and civic movements that Page tried to harness to his policy goals, attracting such varied contacts as industrialist and planner Herbert Gepp and the Tamworth-based journalist and new state devotee Victor (V.C.) Thompson. Developmentalism was especially strong in Page's milieu of rural-based politics as it was seen as favouring public investment in rural infrastructure and services that promoted equality

12 Earle Page, *A Plea for Unification: The Development of Australia*, *Daily Examiner*, Grafton, NSW, 1917, the published text of his speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Association conference of 13 August 1917.

13 Bruce speaking in 1928, quoted in Donald Horne, *Money Made Us*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic., 1976, p. 134.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 134.

15 John Hirst, 'The pioneer legend', in John Carroll (ed.), *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982, pp. 14–37.

16 A.A. Calwell, *Labor's Role in Modern Society*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 16, 134. Calwell's italics, used to draw a contrast with disagreement on *methods* for promoting development.

between city and bush. In the early twenty-first century, the eminent journalist Paul Kelly could still write of nation-building as 'a brand that resonates with Australia's political culture, where everybody thinks nation building equates with motherhood'.¹⁷

Peter Loveday and Lenore Layman have written perceptive articles on development as an ideology in Australia.¹⁸ Yet most histories of modern Australia only fleetingly address the many and varied developmentalist goals dear to Page and many others. N.G. Butlin, Barnard and Pincus produced a strong survey of the twentieth-century economy, but stressed the interaction of the private and public sectors rather than ideas about national development.¹⁹ Histories of Australian economic thought dwell on the policy revolution arising from Keynesian demand management theory, not such overtly applied concepts of national development as the regionalism, electrification and planning that so enlivened Page.²⁰ (One exception is Geoffrey Stokes, who sees standard portrayals of the Deakinite Australian Settlement – White Australia, industry protection, wage arbitration, state paternalism and imperial benevolence – as tending 'to overlook or reduce the significance of contesting traditions and political alternatives', and so argues for the addition of components including 'state developmentalism' in which the state has a central role in economic development.)²¹ Ian Turner pointed out in a 1968 anthology that visions of a future Australia had been decidedly worldly ones but focused his selection on political radicals and nationalists, not developmentalists.²² Geoffrey Serle surveyed Australian nationalism and nation-building in terms of high culture, such as Bernard O'Dowd's 1912 poem 'The Bush'. With lines such as 'She is the scroll on which we are to write / Mythologies our own and epics new', it promulgated a prophetic spiritual nationalism that is a far cry from the applied developmentalism of Page and others.²³

17 Paul Kelly, 'Building from the base', *The Australian*, 28 October 2009.

18 Peter Loveday, 'Liberals and the idea of development', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 23, no. 2, August 1977, pp. 219–26; Lenore Layman, 'Development Ideology in Western Australia 1933–1965', *Historical Studies*, vol. 20, no. 79, October 1982, pp. 234–60.

19 N.G. Butlin, A. Barnard and J.J. Pincus, *Government and Capitalism: Public and Private Choice in Twentieth Century Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982.

20 Such as Alex Millmow's otherwise highly informative *The Power of Economic Ideas: The Origins of Keynesian Macroeconomic Management in Interwar Australia 1929–39*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2010.

21 Geoffrey Stokes, 'The "Australian Settlement" and Australian political thought', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2004, pp. 6, 14–15.

22 Turner, *The Australian Dream*, pp. ix–x.

23 Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788–1972*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 69–71.

Broad as developmentalism is, it nearly always incorporates an assumption that government will play the decisive role in realising a truly remarkable national potential. Bruce, for example, said that Australia's natural resources 'if brought to full development would probably solve most of the economic problems that face the world today'.²⁴ Despite developmentalism's ideological nature, its advocates invariably disdained impractical abstraction and did not try to build theoretical constructs. Development was often also seen as a means of sustaining a bigger population more capable of defending such a large nation: 'unless we peopled Australia rapidly and developed our resources we should expose ourselves to physical assault' agreed Page.²⁵ At times this was linked to imperialist sentiments by being cast as improving capacity to absorb population overflow from the Mother Country, notably during the Bruce–Page era of the 1920s. How exactly all this would be successfully planned was often very unclear. Commenting just a year after Page's death, S.J. Butlin saw planning in Australia as merely 'the general acceptance of a rather vaguely defined line of advance ... with the "planning" only acquiring definite objectives and real content at the level of specific plans, commonly plans of limited scope and with limited time horizons'.²⁶

Charting reactions over time to Page's developmentalist campaigning helps show how developmentalist thought changed. Early in his public career, the dominant form was centred on rural development and assumed that a nation as vast as Australia could surely exploit hitherto underutilised land. This encouraged assistance for migrants to settle on the land and related efforts to harness rivers for irrigation. Page drew from this practice of seeing water resources as a key to national development, but differed from most other 'water dreamers' by stressing ultimate goals of decentralisation, regionalisation and hydroelectricity rather than irrigation.²⁷ Reactions to Page also test the validity of assumptions that the Australian people and their governments long had a resolute – not to say heroic – commitment

24 W.A. Sinclair, 'Capital formation', in C. Forster (ed.), *Australian Economic Development in the Twentieth Century*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, and Australasian Publishing Company, Sydney, 1970, p. 24.

25 Earle Page, *Truant Surgeon: The Inside Story of Forty Years of Australian Political Life*, edited by Ann Mozley [Moyal], Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. 156.

26 S.J. Butlin, 'The role of planning in Australian economic development', p. 9.

27 The term is used by Michael Cathcart in his *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2009.

to nation-building. This supposedly took practical form through vast, visionary projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme, but somehow petered out during the late twentieth century.

Exploring Page's developmentalist campaigning during the peak years of his political career when he was part of the Bruce–Page Government also helps test an emerging perception that this was a period of policy innovation. Until recently, historians thought otherwise. Serle referred to a 'miserable decade' culturally, part of a wider 1900–30 period during which social experimentation stalled. Stuart Macintyre wrote of the Bruce–Page Government as having 'made little use of the new broom' as 'the lines of national policy were too firmly established'.²⁸ More recently, historians such as Frank Bongiorno have begun to identify major innovations during this period.²⁹ Intellectual debate on Australian development reached a high point in the interwar years, spurred on by concern that the nation was underperforming.

Much of this debate revolved around tariffs and dispute over limits to land exploitation. The most widely known developmentalist tract, Edwin Brady's 1918 *Australia Unlimited*, eponymously saw no such limits.³⁰ The controversial geographer Thomas Griffith Taylor responded by pointing to environmental constraints in central and northern Australia, while foresters such as Charles Lane Poole warned of continued deforestation. Daisy Bates saw Taylor as slandering British pioneers: 'Surely the spirit of the British adventurer is not dead; it is only doped in these times with the pabulum administered by faddists, jazzists, and other "futilities"'.³¹ Intense policy and intellectual debates on land use, regionalism, electrification, planning and federalism continued right through the interwar period and beyond, with Page a leading participant.

Page's political status makes him also of inherent interest. Why, among would-be nation-shapers, did he constitute a rare exception by holding high office for decades as a party leader and minister? And how was it that he nonetheless failed to keep his own Country Party enthused for

28 Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, pp. 90–1, 102; Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 167.

29 Frank Bongiorno, 'Search for a solution, 1923–39', in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Cambridge History of Australia*, volume 2, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2013, pp. 65–8.

30 Edwin J. Brady, *Australia Unlimited*, G. Robertson, Melbourne, c. 1918.

31 In J.M. Powell, *Griffith Taylor and 'Australia Unlimited'*, the John Murtagh Macrossan lecture 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1993, p. 26.

his ideas, especially in the post–World War Two era? Page was involved in many initiatives that cast light on these questions and his *modus operandi*. This book examines in detail two that were toweringly ambitious even by Earle Page standards: the 1931–32 campaign to separate northern New South Wales unilaterally from the rest of the state and his 1938–39 attempt to establish powerful machinery for national economic planning. The latter, in particular, is only fleetingly mentioned in histories of the period. Page effectively took over the government from a stricken Prime Minister Lyons and briefly held the attention of the entire nation. It is the foremost example of his self-belief as a nation-shaper: its failure helps mark the start of his decline.

Page's legacy

Aitkin's description of Page as the most under-regarded federal politician remains a decidedly minority view amongst historians. There has been no previous full-length book on Page other than his own memoir, *Truant Surgeon*. Chris Bowen, himself a former treasurer, considered the lack of such a study of Page to be 'a gap in the written historical record of Australia'.³² Most assessments – or assumptions, in some cases – are at odds with Page's powerfully idiosyncratic persona and significance. Ross Fitzgerald wrote of Page's 'intellectual weaknesses' being exploited when in 1927 he found himself confronted on economic policy by the new federal Labor parliamentarian E.G. Theodore.³³ A.W. Martin described Page as having 'personified the limitations of a country surgeon and businessman', and as being 'a plodder at best'.³⁴

Page's fleeting tenure as prime minister also influences assessments, usually to his detriment. Political scientist Malcolm Mackerras marked Page down in prime ministerial ranking on the grounds that unlike another Country Party caretaker in the office, John McEwen, he failed to successfully dictate to the majority party about his successor.³⁵ He is often summed

32 Chris Bowen, *The Money Men: Australia's 12 Most Notable Treasurers*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2015, p. 81.

33 Ross Fitzgerald, *"Red Ted": The Life of E.G. Theodore*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994, p. 200.

34 A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 1, 1894–1943*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1993, pp. 123, 279.

35 Malcolm Mackerras, 'Menzies the Top Bob amid the greats', *The Australian*, 16 August 2008. In 2010 Mackerras rated Page as "low average"; see Malcolm Mackerras, 'Ranking Australia's prime ministers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 June 2010.

up as canny – a 'born intriguer' wrote Barry Jones.³⁶ Historian Fred Alexander saw Hughes and Bruce rather than Page as leading promoters of applied science, despite Page's strong interest and his almost certainly being the first senior Commonwealth Cabinet minister with scientific training.³⁷ Even other prominent developmentalists have ignored him. The manufacturing industrialist Barton Pope in 1982 called for a national planning council, evidently without realising that Page tried to create such a body in 1938–39. Pope listed Australia's great developmental visionaries as including Alfred Deakin, John Forrest, Playford, John Curtin and Chifley – but not the less conventional Page.³⁸

Another conspicuous gap is that histories of the Country Party do not address Page's full national vision or what his career implies for Australian history. Foremost of these is B.D. Graham's 1966 *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*. This exhaustive account of the labyrinthine steps leading to the party's emergence is one of the great works of Australian political history. It addresses the role of rural ideology, but limits discussion of associated policy to accounts of new state movements and orderly marketing schemes for primary produce. Graham wrongly cast Page as one of a crop of Country Party leaders 'who prided themselves on being good administrators and conventional politicians'.³⁹ Ulrich Ellis's *A History of the Australian Country Party* is an important outline of events but is more descriptive than interpretative. His chapter-long profile of Page is a perceptive character study yet bears signs of Ellis having been his foremost follower, especially in its treatment of new states.⁴⁰ Ellis is nonetheless an important and underestimated source on twentieth-century Australian politics. Paul Davey's later Country Party histories provide invaluable clear overviews of party organisation and political events but are less comprehensive on the ideas held by party members, including Page.⁴¹

36 Barry Jones, 'Leadership: Ranking our prime ministers', *The Weekend Australian*, 12–13 June 1996, p. 25.

37 Fred Alexander, *Australia since Federation: A Narrative and Critical Analysis*, third edition, Thomas Nelson, West Melbourne, 1976 (first published 1967), pp. 65–7, 269.

38 Barton Pope, 'Planning for the next one hundred years', in Barton Pope, Macfarlane Burnet and Mark Oliphant, *Challenge to Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1982, p. 10.

39 B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, p. 290.

40 Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1963.

41 Paul Davey, *The Nationals: The Progressive Party, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006*, The Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2006; Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920–2010*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010.

That Page has been largely ignored by historians is not of his own making. He wanted to leave a legacy of policy ideas, such as through *Truant Surgeon*. This book appeared posthumously in 1963, and it remains the most vibrant and purposeful of Australian prime ministerial memoirs (admittedly not a strong field). Its many messages are presented amid a cavalcade of anecdotes and other reminiscences. It is strongest as a source on his formative experiences, including as a young doctor and pioneering Country Party MP. Page relates his political career as a series of struggles to implement his ideas on hydroelectricity, new states and federalism, with other passages addressing health policy, central banking and wartime service. The title alludes to Page's patently misleading portrayal of himself as an apolitical figure who wandered into national politics by little more than chance. Historians have made only fleeting use of *Truant Surgeon*, most often for its account of Page's early years. Page also left voluminous bodies of largely untapped personal papers with the National Library of Australia and the University of New England.

This book presents a political life, but does cover all aspects of Page's long career equally. A biographical study should not impose such a mass of material as to obscure the significance of its subject. My focus is on Page's prescription for the nation and his distinctive role in national development debates – hence the emphasis on regionalism and decentralisation, electrification, cooperative federalism, planning and rural education. There is less detail on Page's more conventional contributions to health policy, national insurance, central banking and international trade negotiations. All were fields in which he played a prominent but less individually original role. National insurance schemes, for example, had wide support within coalition governments in which Page served. Coverage of Page as treasurer focuses on his contribution to shifting the balance of Commonwealth–state financial relations. Health policy is dealt with mainly to the extent that it reflected his ideas on cooperative federalism and establishes his place in the second Menzies Government.

This book also does not dwell on those few aspects of his career that are already well documented. Early steps towards central banking, with which Page had a significant involvement, have been addressed by L.F. Giblin and Robin Gollan.⁴² Page's major role in establishing subsidised

42 L.F. Giblin, *The Growth of a Central Bank: The Development of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia 1924–1945*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1951; Robin Gollan, *The Commonwealth Bank of Australia: Origins and Early History*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968.

private health insurance in the 1950s has been critically analysed by James A. Gillespie.⁴³ Page's 1941–42 service in London was a dramatic career interlude that is best known for Page's involvement in Churchill's attempt to divert the Australian 7th Division to Burma. This unhappy episode for Page colours impressions of him today almost as much as his attack on Menzies of a few years earlier. Less well known is his wartime proposal for a new international trading regime and his hopes of guiding post-war reconstruction policies. Like so much else about Page, this has barely been written about and yet says a lot about the man.

43 James A. Gillespie, *The Price of Health: Australian Governments and Medical Politics 1910–1960*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1991; see Chapter 11, 'Private practice, publicly funded: The Page health scheme'.

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.