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978-1-107-00950-9 - Anzac and Empire: George Foster Pearce and the Foundations of Australian Defence

John Connor

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

When George Foster Pearce died at the age of eighty-two on 24 June 1952, *The Times* of London printed his obituary under the simple headline ‘The Defence of Australia’.¹ A long-serving politician’s career can rarely be summed up in a subeditor’s four-word headline, but describing Pearce as the embodiment of Australian defence policy in the first third of the twentieth century is one of these exceptions. Pearce is Australia’s longest-serving Defence Minister. He held the position for thirteen years and nine months before, during and after the First World War, during his thirty-seven years in Federal Parliament as Senator for Western Australia.²

Pearce was Defence Minister when Australian soldiers landed at Gallipoli on the first Anzac Day. Before the First World War the carpenter who became a minister at the age of thirty-eight had played the central role in creating the defence institutions of the new Commonwealth. He established the Royal Australian Navy – describing the sight of the new HMAS *Melbourne* in Port Phillip Bay in March 1913 as ‘a concrete illustration of the National Awakening’³ – as well the Royal Military College, Duntroon, the Australian Flying Corps, and rifle and uniform factories. During the First World War he oversaw the creation of the Australian Imperial Force and its deployment to Gallipoli, Palestine and the Western Front. In 1932 Pearce returned to the portfolio, saw the rising military threat from Japan and began rearmament. This meant Australia was prepared to defend itself when the Second World War began and the nation came under Japanese attack in 1942.

This book is a study of Pearce’s part in a crucial period of Australian history, but it must also be seen as part of a wider history of what was then the British Empire. Pearce considered himself both British and Australian and saw no contradiction between the two. He wanted the army to wear uniforms that would embody an Australian identity but described the Gallipoli landing as a great episode in British military history. Since the 1970s Australian academic and popular historians have often portrayed the developing Australian identity in the Great War as

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 ANZAC AND EMPIRE

independent of, and always in conflict, with the British identity.⁴ For example, David Day argues in his 2008 biography of Australian First World War Prime Minister Andrew Fisher that Fisher's British loyalty 'prevented his nationalism from loosening Australia from the bonds of empire'.⁵ As we shall see, however, neither Fisher nor Pearce would have considered their Australian nationalism as leading them to leaving the Empire.

Ignoring the British Empire context in this period also leads to a narrow and therefore misleading understanding of Australia in the First World War. Most Australians know that the soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force were not conscripted and assume they were the only all-volunteer force in the British Empire's armies. While British and New Zealand conscripts fought in the Great War, all Irishmen serving in the British Army were volunteers, as were those from South Africa, India and all British colonies. It is true that Canada and Newfoundland introduced the draft, but this came so late in the war that only a few thousand Canadian and no Newfoundlander conscripts reached the front line before the end of hostilities.⁶

In the same way, Australians often see General John Monash's victories on the Western Front in 1918 as a unique achievement. Roland Perry describes Monash in his 2004 biography as the British Empire army's 'most successful corps commander', but this does not appear to be based on any analysis of the relative merits of the various generals in charge of corps on the Western Front.⁷ The Australian military successes of 1918 have to be seen as part of a wider offensive in which the British Empire's armies joined their French and American allies in a broad advance and comprehensive defeat of the German army. As British historian Gary Sheffield has pointed out, it was the British troops of the 46th (North Midland) Division who were the first to break through the German Hindenburg Line, not the much-vaunted Australians, Canadians or New Zealanders.⁸

As Australia was part of the British Empire, the issues that Pearce faced as Defence Minister were always similar to those faced by his fellow ministers in the other self-governing Dominions, especially his First World War counterparts Sam Hughes in Canada and James Allen in New Zealand. Pearce's beliefs, policies, successes and failures as Defence Minister cannot be fully understood unless they are placed in the wider context of the 'British world'.

This is the first full biography of George Foster Pearce. He completed an autobiography soon after he lost his Senate seat in 1938, but it did not

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

find a publisher until 1951.⁹ Despite its clever title, *Carpenter to Cabinet* is a disappointment. Instead of insights into the great historical events he helped to shape, Pearce offers only disconnected anecdotes. He makes no mention at all of his term as Defence Minister from 1932 to 1934 and his decision to rearm against the threat of Japan because, when he wrote the manuscript in the late 1930s, he did not want to cause controversy for the Australian Government (unlike former Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who was forced to resign from cabinet in 1935 after he made anti-Japanese statements in a book).¹⁰ Peter Heydon's *Quiet Decision*, published in 1965, is, as Heydon admitted to a prospective publisher, a memoir of impressions rather than a detailed biography.¹¹ *Quiet Decision*'s lack of depth was inevitable given that Heydon was a senior public servant in the Department of External Affairs and then Secretary of the Immigration Department, and wrote the book in his spare time. Heydon, who described Pearce as 'the most effective Minister I have worked for',¹² had served as his private secretary while he was Minister for External Affairs in 1936–37, and he was able to talk to several of the senator's family and contemporaries.

This biography will use the senator's papers – which he brought with him in four large trunks from Parliament House when he left politics and are now in the Australian War Memorial and the National Library¹³ – to construct a portrait of Pearce in his public life. The papers' lack of intimate detail, due to Pearce's natural reticence and his realisation after 1914 that his papers would become historical documents, prevents an in-depth analysis of his interior life.¹⁴

Pearce was no genius, and brought no great original ideas to his portfolio. Nonetheless he was a hardworking and careful administrator who was able to turn defence policy into reality as a loyal member of each government of which he was a member. This loyalty was clearly the most important characteristic of Pearce's personality. Loyalty to family, his wife Eliza and his children Marjorie, Dorothy, Phillip and Lloyd George – even his political foes conceded that his private life was beyond reproach – and to Australia and the British Empire. In politics, Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce described Pearce as the 'soul of loyalty',¹⁵ and during his career, he would have to make difficult choices between conflicting loyalties. In 1916 his loyalty to the Labor Party was outweighed by his loyalty to Empire and the war effort and he broke from the party he had helped create. In 1923 his loyalty to Cabinet overcame his personal loyalty to his long-time comrade Prime Minister Hughes, and he switched his support to make Bruce prime minister.

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John Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 ANZAC AND EMPIRE

The senator's Western Australian background encouraged his interest in defence issues. It is no coincidence that the most isolated and underpopulated Australian state has provided the most important Australian defence ministers: Pearce, John Curtin (who served as Defence Minister while Prime Minister in 1941–45) and Kim Beazley (1984–90).

In 1944 long-serving public servant John Jensen told Pearce: 'Nobody has had more influence upon the Defence policy of Australia than yourself, and perhaps some day that fact will be properly recorded.'¹⁶ This book will attempt to provide this record by examining and assessing Pearce's role as Defence Minister in this momentous period of Australian history.

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[More information](#)

CHAPTER |

‘WE, TOO, HAVE HOPES AND AMBITIONS’, 1870–1909

Friday the thirteenth was an inauspicious day to start a ministerial career but, on 13 November 1908, 38-year-old Senator George Pearce walked up the steps of the Treasury Building in Spring Street, Melbourne, to become Defence Minister in the new Federal Labor Government. Around noon, Earl Dudley, the Governor-General, swore in the nine members of Andrew Fisher’s Cabinet. The ceremonies concluded, the new government went straight to work. The outgoing Protectionist Defence Minister, Thomas Ewing, took his successor across the Yarra River to the Department of Defence offices at Victoria Barracks to introduce him formally to the department’s senior staff and, in accordance with custom, presented a memorandum commending the work of departmental Secretary Samuel Pethebridge and his assistant Thomas Trumble. In the afternoon, Pearce rejoined his colleagues for a short Cabinet meeting, after which Andrew Fisher met reporters to outline his government’s agenda. As part of this press conference, the Prime Minister stated the two policies he expected his new Defence Minister to implement: the organisation of a compulsory military training scheme and the creation of an Australian navy. The next day, Saturday, Pearce went to his new office in Victoria Barracks and started work with the thoroughness and diligence that would typify his entire ministerial career.¹ This first term as Defence Minister would be too brief to accomplish much. Nonetheless, Pearce’s rapid rise from tradesman to minister of state was the fulfilment of his hopes and ambitions.

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[More information](#)

George Foster Pearce, the fifth of eleven children, was born on 14 January 1870 at Mount Barker in the Adelaide Hills of the colony of South Australia. Both Pearce's parents were English immigrants. His father, James, a blacksmith, had been born on a farm near the village of Alternun in Cornwall. His mother Jane, née Foster, was from what were then the slums of Islington in north London. During Pearce's childhood the family shifted from place to place in rural South Australia. Jane recognised young George's intellectual abilities and hoped he might go to high school in Adelaide, but she died when he was ten, and Pearce left school the following year when they were at Redhill near Port Pirie. Then, after a brief and unsuccessful attempt at wheat farming on the Eyre Peninsula, his father moved to Kilkerran on the Yorke Peninsula and returned to blacksmithing. The twelve-year-old Pearce began work on a nearby farm at Maitland.²

Teenage labourers on pre-mechanised farms led a harsh life: the hours were long, the work backbreaking and the adult male workers, often alcoholic and violent, viewed the boys as fair game for harassment. Pearce's time as a farm labourer affected his adult life in three ways. First, his constant contact with alcohol abuse and its consequences led him to become a teetotaler. Second, his advocacy of compulsory military training came partly out of a realisation that working teenagers needed some recreational outlet. As he told the Senate in 1907: 'I would have looked upon it as a God-send, if, for one Saturday in the month, I could have been taken away from the eternal cow or the plough handle, and given a chance on the parade ground.' Third, the drudgery and isolation of farm labour steeled his determination to leave it behind. In 1885 he was apprenticed to a carpenter in Maitland. Here, the local school headmaster gave him free evening lessons to augment his minimal education. On the completion of his apprenticeship, Pearce moved to Adelaide. When he lost his job in the 1890s depression, Pearce decided to seek work in Western Australia, disembarking at Fremantle on 26 March 1892.³

When the 22-year-old Pearce arrived in the colony of Western Australia, it was still one of the frontiers of the British Empire. Covering a third of the Australian continent, the colony had a population of only about fifty thousand people, had achieved self-government only two years previously, and was still fighting a frontier war with several Aboriginal nations for control of the Kimberley region in the colony's north.⁴ Pearce quickly found work as a carpenter in Perth, but around March 1894 he abandoned his mundane job to try his luck looking for alluvial gold

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[More information](#)

around Coolgardie. Pearce became involved in the sporadic frontier violence caused by thousands of prospectors trespassing on the land of the Wangkathaa people. One night at Kurnalpi, about 130 kilometres north-east of Kalgoorlie, Pearce and his two companions, armed with a shotgun and three pistols, had a spear thrown into their campsite by a group of Wangkathaa warriors hoping to draw them out of their tent and into an ambush. Pearce was on watch and suspected an attack. Remaining inside the tent for cover, he lifted the canvas and fired his revolver three times, forcing the men to retreat. Like most prospectors, Pearce found little gold and returned to Perth in early 1895.⁵

Pearce's political career began in the union movement. In 1892 he joined the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners as soon as he arrived in Perth. By the end of the year he was instrumental in the re-establishment of a Trades and Labour Council in Perth and Fremantle. The Western Australian union movement in the 1890s was based on small craft unions of skilled tradesmen – including carpenters like Pearce – rather than large industrial unions of unskilled miners, seamen or agricultural workers. Pearce's political ideas developed in this specifically Western Australian union culture of 'respectable' tradesmen, which was less militant and socialist than the union movements of the more industrialised colonies in eastern Australia.⁶

On 23 April 1897 Pearce, now twenty-seven, married 26-year-old Eliza Maud Barrett at Trinity Congregationalist Church in St George's Terrace, Perth. Noted for her physical beauty, Eliza had been born in Western Australia and was a domestic servant. George and Eliza would share almost fifty years of marriage, and Pearce would later describe his wife as the 'wise and sympathetic counsellor' with whom he 'shared life, rough and smooth'.⁷

The happy couple moved into their own home in Subiaco, then a new working-class suburb, and Pearce worked at the nearby Whittaker Brothers timber mill. It was in Subiaco that Pearce began his political career with his election in 1898 to the local municipal council. The Trades and Labour Council made several attempts to create a political labour organisation in the colony, but Western Australia lacked a parliamentary labour party before Federation. Tasmania was the same, but labour parties were established in the four larger eastern colonies. The Queensland party made world history in 1899 by briefly forming a government; the New South Wales party inaugurated two important Australian labour political traditions in 1891 by establishing caucus solidarity, followed immediately

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John Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 ANZAC AND EMPIRE



Photo 1 Husband and wife: Pearce and Mrs Pearce (in front of stone stairs) in Cape Town, South Africa, April 1919. (State Library of South Australia)

by the first party split. In Victoria and South Australia, labour parliamentarians formed alliances with liberal politicians.⁸

On 31 July 1900 Western Australia voted for Federation in a referendum and became the last of the six colonies to agree to join the projected Commonwealth of Australia. Pearce, who had recently become President of the Trades and Labour Council, campaigned for the 'Yes' case as a member of the executive of the Western Australian Federal League.⁹ With Federation about to become a reality, attention now turned to preparing for the first national election. Delegates from the Queensland, New South Wales, Victorian and South Australian labour parties had met in Sydney in January 1900 and agreed to the formation of a Federal Labor Party and to a policy platform.¹⁰ Western Australia followed with a Trades and Labour Conference held in Perth in August, which agreed to a pre-selection process for House of Representatives candidates and that the two-man Labor team for the Senate should consist of one representative from coastal labour and one representative from the goldfields. Pearce, as President of the Perth and Fremantle-based Trades and Labour Council, took the coastal spot on the ticket while Hugh de Largie from Kalgoorlie

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

'WE, TOO, HAVE HOPES AND AMBITIONS', 1870–1909 9



Photo 2 The young senator: Pearce (back row, second from left) and the Labor MPs and Senators of the first federal parliament, 1901. (National Archives of Australia)

took the goldfields position. Not only was the 31-year-old Pearce elected as one of the six senators representing Western Australia in the poll on 29 March 1901 but also, as one of the three candidates receiving the highest number of votes, he was elected to a six-year term.¹¹

What was the political philosophy of the new senator? At its core was the belief that the election of labour representatives would improve the conditions and increase the opportunities of working people. As Pearce asserted with uncharacteristic eloquence and passion in 1894 in a letter to the *West Australian*:

With regard to the law of supply and demand I say that while such a law may be right enough, when applied to inanimate things – such as wheat, &c. – it is grossly inhuman and unjust when applied to human beings, and I maintain that the duty of government should be to so alter society that such a law should not apply to human beings.

Speaking as a member of the working class, he added, ‘we, too, have hopes and ambitions, aye, and even feelings; that if the external man is

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sometimes rough, his exterior hides a good heart, and the head contains sound commonsense and love of justice'.¹²

Pearce's political ideas developed out of his personal experience, the evolving ideology of the Australian labour movement and, most importantly, his voracious reading, which made up for his lack of formal education. He would read at Perth Public Library after work until closing time, and later spoke of libraries as 'the vast storehouses of the human mind', which made it possible to imagine 'a better and juster social order'.¹³ He showed the breadth of his reading in history, politics and economics in 1906 when the *Worker* newspaper in Sydney asked the senator to list his twelve best books for explaining to an interested reader 'the aims and principles of the Australia labour movement'. Pearce's recommendations ranged from Karl Marx's *Capital* and classic British texts like the *Fabian Essays* and Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, to the socialist utopia novel *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* by American writer Edward Bellamy.¹⁴

Pearce wasted no opportunity to extend his knowledge. When travelling in from the Melbourne suburb of Camberwell for parliamentary sittings in the early part of his career, the young senator would leave the train at Richmond so that his path would coincide with Alfred Deakin's. The two would then walk together through Richmond Park to Parliament House while Pearce questioned Deakin about literature. The fruits of his study can be seen in a 1903 incident in which Pearce, the man who had left school at eleven, called for the correction of a Senate Standing Order stating senators should not use the monarch's name 'irreverently' on the grounds that this term referred only to God, and that the correct word to use in this context was 'disrespectfully'.¹⁵

Pearce was first and foremost a trade unionist. He believed that the expansion of the union movement, backed up by government legislation, was the key to improving the living standards of working people.¹⁶ But, as his political ideas came out of the Western Australian craft union tradition, Pearce was never strongly socialist. His race-based argument that 'socialist theory more nearly accord[ed] with Christianity than Mahommedanism or Confucianism' was a long way from Marx and Engels' call for the workers of the world to unite.¹⁷ What Pearce called socialism, as in his 1904 comment 'we are all more or less Socialists nowadays', was that government should take an increased role in the economy and not the extinction of private ownership. Even in his maiden speech, the senator eschewed class conflict and looked for common ground where 'the representatives of labour and capital could join hands to the