

INTRODUCTION

This book is a life story of one of Australia's most internationally-minded politicians; and a life story revealing new perspectives on the tensions between Australian 'Britishness' and the rise of the United States as a world power in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The book is innovative in adding the type of social, cultural and intellectual perspectives to broader understandings of Australia's changing orientation in world affairs that can best be appreciated in the context of a prominent life story. One of my main arguments is that Spender's attraction to the 'American Century' provided mixed blessings in public life: his independent thinking about Australia's future and the rise of the United States helped ensure political prominence, but through the 1930s to 50s, it also leant a maverick status that was hard to throw off.

The related aim is to reveal the full life story of a figure who is always invoked in studies of Australia in world affairs, but has never been subjected to biographical treatment. In brief, the course of Percy Spender's life fits the pattern of the self-made man. From humble origins he succeeded both scholastically and as a Sydney barrister, and then, as an independent candidate, was elected to federal parliament. He joined the anti-Labor United Australia Party (UAP) and soon won respect and ministerial positions in the Menzies government of 1939–41, and then re-emerged as one of Menzies's senior colleagues in the coalition government elected in December 1949. After sixteen highly successful months as Minister for External Affairs, during which time the ANZUS Security Treaty was negotiated and the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia launched, Spender became Australia's Ambassador to the United States, a post he held for almost seven years; and in 1958 he became a justice on the International Court of Justice, serving in the Hague until 1967, during the last three years of which he was President of the Court.

He was a very international Australian in both thought and deed. His early life story is strongly grounded in Australian, and more precisely, Sydney circumstances, but the same ambition and restlessness that took him towards politics also led him overseas as soon as possible. He and his wife Jean were part of a group of Australians that began cruising through Asia and the South Pacific on

round-trip packages from the late 1920s. Later, during the Second World War, he used aeroplanes to touch down at multiple destinations and to travel distances in times not known beyond the realm of aviators and statesmen. And, partly as a result of his travel and his sharp sense of geopolitics, he became attracted to the United States, both as a model for Australia and as a vital partner to Australia in the post-war world. During the war his interest in America developed and became multi-faceted, as he formed friendships and business interests there; and afterwards he championed the need for the closest possible security relationship between Australia and the United States, a quest he was able to bring to fruition as Minister for External Affairs in 1951, with the signing of the ANZUS Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

When Spender presented his ambassador's credentials to President Truman in June 1951 he announced that his aim was to foster between the two countries, 'Somewhat the same relationship as exists within the British Commonwealth'.¹ For an Australian politician-turned-diplomat born near the end of the nineteenth century, and whose public and private worlds had been deeply informed by 'Britishness' in Australian contexts, this was a grand aim. Five years later, in the middle of 1956, in one of his more frustrated dispatches from Washington, Spender warned Canberra of the 'emotional and intellectual anti-colonialism' that was deeply embedded in the historical traditions of the United States and that skewed American foreign policy.² This book is a study of the experiences, thoughts and hopes giving rise to Spender's grand aim, and what became of it. It suggests intersections between a seminal life story and grand narratives charting change in international relations, most particularly Australia's role in world affairs amidst twentieth century themes of war, empire, decolonization and the emergence of the 'American century'.

To date, there has been little of this. The most innovative recent studies, including work by Desley Deacon and Jill Julius Matthews, centre on figures from the world of theatre and film-making, and not on politicians.³ Australian biographers have explored the extent to which prominent politicians, Richard (later Lord) Casey and Sir Robert Menzies might be considered 'Anglo-Australians', but have not generally found 'American-Australians'.⁴ By holding up the life of Percy Spender for closer examination, I am testing how close we might go towards such a tag; and I am building up some life-story material to accompany new thinking about Australia, the British empire and the idea of the American century.⁵ Given Spender's attraction to American power and modernizing projects, his involvement with ANZUS and his long term as ambassador, his life bridges the two societies more effectively than the lives of most other Australian public figures.

Transnational historians and other scholars have challenged us to analyse cross-cultural exchanges in ways that continue the 'de-centring' of the state. Rather than concentrate on government-to-government relations or political economy they

suggest that we resist a single model for analysis of American influences in Australia. Cultural influence, argue Philip and Roger Bell, might be best understood if Australian culture and society is likened to a language which is not supplanted but infiltrated and changed by another language – this may be the most constructive way of thinking about so-called ‘Americanisation.’⁶ Other commentators have invoked different metaphors, for similar purpose.⁷ In short, we are encouraged to think that American influences in Australia may have been powerful, but they were seldom unmediated and could be part-resisted and part-embraced.

For their part, over the last decade, American historians, emboldened by the chance for end-of-the-century and new century reflections, have revisited the idea of the American Century. This is a similarly ambitious task, as it refers to the sweeping claims made by *Time* and *Life* magazine editor Henry Luce on behalf of the United States in February 1941. Taking the American attachment to a sense of destiny to a new level, Luce argued that the twentieth century would be the ‘American Century’. It would be shaped by American free enterprise, American skills and training, America’s capacity to help the needy, to be the good Samaritan of the world, and America’s acting as a ‘powerhouse’ from which the core ideals of freedom and justice would spread – if Americans accepted the challenge before them. Underpinning these four essential components of American leadership was a new sense of magnificent purpose, an American-forged internationalism that would inspire and maintain a new international order.⁸

Spender was attracted by this vision. He was a strikingly modern man, both in his embrace of the key features of modernization – rapid industrial growth accompanied by expanding population growth and economic output, and driven by ever-increasing efforts to harness natural resources and wield new technologies – and also in his expansive view of how Australia could throw off certain shackles and leap ahead. ‘Australia must not be regarded in the light of a hewer of wood, a drawer of water’, he said in 1939; that stage in Australia’s development was past, replaced by the prospect of exciting industrial growth and a new role in the Pacific.⁹

He was, as he would proudly boast, an independent spirit in non-Labor politics who courted trouble from his colleagues for his dedication to the cause of centralized powers for the Commonwealth Government, as a logical step on Australia’s path towards maturity. His philosophy seemed sometimes to approximate Hamiltonian democracy, siding with the state’s overriding powers in the interests of development and security, while trying to safeguard individual freedoms through vigilance and additional laws – but at the centre of Spender’s concept of power vested in the state was federal parliament, rather than any suggestions of a ruling aristocracy or overambitious executive. He lamented the thirst for money and materialism of the 1920s for their corrosive effect on national character;

‘Money received greater tribute than character and brains. The material things in life jostled out the spiritual things of the nation.’¹⁰

His humble origins and unsettled childhood made him a relentless advocate of youth and policies designed to enhance the prospects of children and young Australians. This cause was another source of his conviction that the state should be able to direct, if not own, the main sources of production. Private enterprise alone had not proven capable of safeguarding youth in the 1920s and especially the 1930s, and nor would international capitalism necessarily do so after the war. In terms that came more often from Labor benches, Spender greeted the Atlantic Charter’s suggestion that free trade should be a feature of the post-war world with the warning; ‘If the use and development of the raw materials of the world is to be left in any substantial measure to huge international and interlocking combines which necessarily seek profit only, there can be no safety for the future of our children.’¹¹ How did these views translate into policy prescription and actions in the wake of the Second World War, when Spender was at his most influential? What sustained Spender in his thinking and his work?

The following chapters attempt to answer these questions. The first chapter examines Spender’s first thirty-five years, up to 1932 when he first presented himself as a political candidate for the new United Australia Party. Spender’s own brief story about his childhood, education and formative influences, not intended as a comprehensive account, reads like a hasty plotting of points on a graph marking an upward trajectory. The record relating to his public life supports such a charting of success, with the highlights being his success at Sydney University, as a barrister at the New South Wales bar, and then as an independent candidate for Warringah in 1937. But there are notable silences and inaccuracies in Spender’s account, and little indication of how his private world, marked by familial discord and a need to reinvent his self, intersected with the public man.

Chapter 2 outlines how Spender, having made a successful transition to the NSW bar, was able to cruise the ‘South Seas’ to the north of Australia during the Summer vacation, thereby gaining a growing sensibility to the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region. During the late 1920s and early 1930s he was stirred to political activity through three sources: university reform at his alma mater, the University of Sydney; reaction to the radical measures of Jack Lang, Labor Premier of New South Wales; and a growing frustration with Australia’s lack of defence preparedness and lack of imaginative thinking in foreign and defence policies.

The third chapter centres on Spender’s ministerial roles, as Treasurer and then as Minister for the Army, in the early years of the Second World War. The war brought home to Spender some of the problems of relying overly on British strategic analyses and policy leadership; and saw him become increasingly radical in his readings of the impact of the war on world politics, and in his recommendations for Australia’s mobilization.

Chapter 4 covers the second half of the war, during which Spender was in opposition, and in a party that was fast disintegrating. His determined independence and persistent pronouncements on high policy sat poorly amongst factional groups jockeying for control amidst growing party chaos. But the war also brought new excitement and greater engagement by Spender with the Americans – both those in Australia and leaders of politics and industry in the US. Another highlight was Spender's extraordinary travel by air, covering distances at the same time, and almost at the same pace, as US Vice-President Wendell Willkie's famous round-the-world trip of 1942.

In the post-war years, and in the vanguard of the new Liberal Party of Australia, Spender was a champion of what might be called 'new world liberalism', allowing for a strong role by the state in postwar rebuilding, but preserving individual freedoms. Chapter 5 charts his re-emergence as a central player in Australian politics, and one of the most outspoken on Australia's future in world affairs. As the lines of the Cold War hardened in the late 1940s, Spender's pursuit of a formal alliance with the United States became a feature of his agitation from Opposition benches.

Chapter 6 sees Spender at the height of his political career. He served, in the new Menzies Government, as Minister of External Affairs for only sixteen months, from December 1949 to May 1951, but in that time played key roles in the drafting of the ANZUS Treaty with the United States, the formation of the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia, and Australia's involvement in the Korean War. No other Australian foreign minister has achieved so much in so short a period. Leaving for the post of Ambassador to the United States in the middle of 1951, Spender was heading to where he felt the future of world politics would be decided.

Chapter 7 covers Spender's time in Washington in the 1950s. As Ambassador, he worked hard to, in his words, 'put flesh on the bones of the ANZUS Treaty'. He sought ever-increasing engagement with what became known as the 'military-industrial complex' or the US national security state of the 1950s, but enjoyed very partial success in encouraging the Americans to offer more resources and more information to the Australians. At the same time, Spender relished Washington's cocktail circuits and the material prosperity of US consumption. His status as a prominent Australian ensured popularity, but Australia's Dominion status also caused confusion among others and frustration for him as he struggled to make his expansive view of Australia's future overcome persistent counter-views in Washington, London and Canberra.

Chapter 8 covers Spender's membership on the International Court of Justice in the Hague, 1958–67, and his final years in retirement. Spender brought to the Court a conservative approach to international law, with precedence for treaty law and judicial procedure over political considerations. As President, he

cast the deciding vote in the now notorious Southwest African case, ruling that the Court did not have jurisdiction to hear the case, and thereby favouring South Africa at a time when world opinion was turning sharply against that country. Spender's last years were marked by emotional struggle during Jean's illness and then death, and by a sense of posterity: of confirming by way of publishing his story (and assisted by Jean's publications), and contrary to the impression left by the Southwest African case, that he had been a man ahead of his time.

I conclude with some brief reflections on Spender's life and work in the context of what drove him and in relation to two sources of tension in Australia's international history: imperial Australia and the American century; and interpreting the world according to wars, hot and cold, or according to the great post-war theme of decolonization.

Several aspects of the task conceived and methods used in preparing this study should be noted. First, I was too late to interview Percy Spender. I became interested in writing a biographical study of Spender in the mid-1990s, some ten years after his death. Yet, as I began researching in his private collection and reading his published works, I realized that he anticipated me. At the end of the preface to his memoir, *Politics and a Man*, there is an invitation for a budding biographer: 'This book, and a previous one *Exercises in Diplomacy* read together with my wife's book, *Ambassador's Wife* tells much of my life, but not all. The rest will have to be written by someone else, if it is to be written at all.'¹²

Yet the archival record supporting a study of Spender's life and work is rich. He and Jean attracted occasional attention in Sydney social columns prior to his entering politics; and his legal representation was recorded in court cases. Upon entering politics, he quickly gained Cabinet rank, thereby leaving a strong parliamentary and departmental record of his labours when in government; and when in Opposition he tried hard to make his voice heard in a number of ways. Overseas observers in capitals such as London and Washington rated him as an important player and kept an eye on his progress; and his time as Ambassador in Washington during the 1950s yielded an extraordinary number of official and unofficial correspondences and comments. Spender himself left a solid collection of personal papers in the National Library of Australia, incorporating also much of the record left by Jean, and accompanied by a thorough collection of news cuttings.¹³ Occasionally, when leafing through documents in his collection, I would come across marginal notes adding context for the general reader or indicating that a certain aspect of this memorandum was particularly prescient. 'How true', for example, in the margin of a speech on the war effort delivered in June 1940; and 'This record will show this policy was exclusively that of the Menzies Govt and that I was more than a little connected with its creation and development', on a 1941 speech relating to the opening of new hospital in the Sydney suburb of Concord.¹⁴ The notes were clearly added well after the date of the documents in

question, presumably during the process of organizing material for deposit with the National Library. Important documents, such as Spender's thoughts on the situation in Europe for Prime Minister Menzies at the beginning of 1939, were occasionally written out anew (i.e. I found two copies), again with a contextual note. There was sometimes a little editing – some omissions of social nature – but no detectable attempts to rewrite things with the benefit of hindsight. Recalling Richard Holmes's suggestion that biographers stalk their subjects in order both to chart their respective life journeys and form relationships with them, I felt that Percy Spender would occasionally tell me where to put my feet next.¹⁵

The writings of both Percy Spender and his wife, Jean, make important contributions to this book. In the case of Percy, his detailed memoir, *Politics and a Man*, is a particularly rich source of information for the period from Spender's election to parliament in 1937 to the end of the Second World War. In several places, Spender refers to or quotes from the diary he kept in these years – tantalizing glimpses at an extraordinarily valuable resource that has since disappeared or has possibly been destroyed. He draws on his diary especially in relation to the drama of his resignation from the UAP in 1943 after his apparent consent, then sudden refusal to support the Labor government's legislation restricting the geographic realm in which conscripted soldiers were to serve. He deploys its blend of staccato narrative and personal reflection to great effect:

[10 February] Party meeting at 1.45. I announce immediately my position. Menzies followed, but did not specifically commit himself. Debate pretty poisonous. Holt led the attack – “base betrayal” was his pet phrase...

11 February. ...It has been an unhappy day, but I am glad I acted as I did. I believe we were wrong before. We were too casual and, I regret to say, political. Whatever the consequences I am certain I did right. Anyway, I could not compromise with my conscience.

12 February. A quiet day. Been threatened with expulsion from the War Council. I doubt whether they will be so foolish. But the intriguers are at work already. I will wait upon events...¹⁶

Percy's other book, *Exercises in Diplomacy*, is invaluable to students of Australian foreign policy.¹⁷ Clearly written with files of pertinent government documents by his side, in this book Spender provided very detailed accounts of his involvement in the formation of the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia, 1950–1, and the ANZUS Treaty struck in 1951. The tone of posterity throughout the book is even stronger than in *Politics and a Man*, but Spender's claims to be progenitor of some of the major landmarks, and articulator of some the strongest guiding principles, in post-war Australian foreign policy are convincingly put.

Jean's writings are more varied. They consist firstly of seven works of crime fiction, published between 1931 and 1960. An analyst of this genre, Stephen

Knight, describes their form as ‘the society clue-puzzle’, formal mystery in high urban society, and suggests that they bear traces of nineteenth-century Australian bush romances.¹⁸ They were grounded in Jean’s physical and social environments. Their settings were Sydney-based until the 1950s, when they shifted to the United States with Jean and Percy. And, as is discussed in the following chapters, the leading characters often bore resemblances to people close to her, including Percy, and occasionally enjoyed or endured experiences similar to those of Jean and/or Percy. Her thrillers are therefore tempting sources of pen-portraits and suggestions of experiential and other influences, and they also provide a contemporary voice that is otherwise missing or manufactured in a biography of someone now deceased. That they are fictional, mostly Agatha-Christie-like murder-mysteries, is also attractive for their capacity to act as gentle, subversive reminders of the limitations of assiduous gatherings of facts when trying to illuminate a life story.

Two other pieces of writing by Jean are valuable in the more orthodox manner of providing detailed glimpses of marital, family and social life in America in the 1950s. One is Jean’s memoir, *Ambassador’s Wife*¹⁹ (and a longer manuscript from which it emerged), written largely from social diaries she kept in Washington, and the other is an unpublished collection of letters she wrote home to her mother, May, from the Washington embassy. It appears that, after Jean’s death in 1970, Percy tried to have these published as a collection, but for whatever reasons, abandoned this plan, and the letters remain with his papers in the National Library of Australia.²⁰

I have also been keen to make effective use of one of the most public forms of written records, Spender’s speeches as politician, ambassador, international jurist and retired statesman. In this I am welcoming a recent trend in the study of politicians’ lives, and hoping to carry it further.²¹ While seldom illuminating the origins of particular policies, speeches are central to the very public nature of political life; they seek to persuade listeners, they shape the public self of a politician/statesman, and their form and language sometimes suggest specific intellectual or cultural roots that remain obscure in official memoranda. I have not indulged in a study of language unhinged from a sense of agency. Lofty visions and high-blown bursts of rhetoric might, on their own, be easily dismissed; but so too might be a tale of human actions explained only according to a vague sense of expediency and responsiveness. My study of Spender’s life therefore draws on speeches, parliamentary and otherwise, not as a substitute for a strong narrative journey containing episodes with causes and effects, but as a necessary extra layer – *contextual* in the full meaning of this word i.e. deriving from the Latin verb to weave together and referring to surrounding text or circumstances that determine the meaning of an event. In this case, of course, the event is the eighty-seven-year one of Spender’s life.