



## Scots who made their mark on.....

### *The History of Australia 5: Catherine Spence*



## "Australia's Greatest Woman"

Shown on Australia  
1975 and on the  
Centenary of Federation  
\$A5 banknote of 2001



Aged 14 in Autumn 1839 Catherine Spence left Melrose with her parents and seven brothers and sisters as economic migrants—her father had been made bankrupt—in the hope of a better life in the Colonies but her first impressions of what she found when they arrived in South Australia almost broke her heart when she compared it with the beautiful Borders landscapes she had left behind. But having arrived there the Spences were in a no-going-back situation and grew wheat on a small farm before moving into the state capital of Adelaide, when the farm failed. Her father, David Spence who had been a lawyer and banker in Scotland, then became a Municipal Council official.

Spence was an avid reader and writer and throughout her teens persisted with offerings until some of her stories and poetry were published in *The South Australian*. Her first two-volume novel *Clara Morison* was eventually published anonymously in 1854 and two years later her second novel *Tender and True* was much more successful and profitable. Both were about the life of settlers during the gold rush and contained social commentary and the first indications of her interests in universal and female suffrage. Her third (three-volume) novel in 1865 *Mr Hogarth's Will* was the first to bear her name on the title page as did *The Author's Daughter* three years later. Some of her writing was regarded as polemical and rejected for publication, certainly under a woman's name. Her work was said to have gained respect rather than enthusiastic appreciation something which she recognised herself and when Miss Phin her old teacher back in Melrose heard about them she wished they had been more "more distinctly religious in tone"! She published two further novels in the 1880's but felt journalism was more her forte.

She was a socialist and humanist particularly interested in the welfare of children and promoted the idea of foster homes rather than having orphaned or destitute children put in workhouses or institutions. Her family eventually became rich enough to employ servants but she was embarrassed by how little they were paid for their work.

With the intention of eventually becoming a teacher she became a governess, at sixpence an hour, to some of the wealthiest families in Adelaide.

She was also attracted to journalism and by the late 1870's had won a reputation as a social commentator with a

regular column in the *South Australian Register* in which she presented her views on a wide spectrum of social issues including education and law. She wrote *The Laws We Live Under* (1880) a sort of Modern Studies textbook for school explaining how society was organised which was generations ahead of its time.

She also argued for electoral reform, treated briefly in her novel *Mr Hogarth's Will*. She sought a means of truly proportional representation for political parties and in addition to writing about her views began to speak in public about them, eventually making a name for herself as an accomplished orator, speaking to Australasian conferences on charity in the early 1890's and as a member of the Unitarian Christian Church often preaching in Adelaide and on occasions in the more challenging environment of churches in Melbourne and Sydney.

This confidence in public arenas allowed her to promote a new political idea—proportional representation, which was supported by a number of Opposition parties and in 1893 she spoke on a number of her pet political and social subjects at a major series of events at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. These led to a further series of international speaking engagements in the USA and Europe throughout the following year.

Two years later she founded the Effective Voting League of South Australia and became the first woman to stand of parliament in Australia, campaigning unsuccessfully for female suffrage alongside a change in the method of electing MPs at the turn of the century. Though not meeting with any real success she continued to campaign whilst she was well into her seventies and gained much enthusiastic sympathy for her personal stance, reminding people in many ways because of her stature, dignity if somewhat brusque manner of Queen Victoria.

She made two journeys back to Britain during one of which in 1865 she met the famous novelist George Eliot whom she felt rather patronised her. Her perspective on her home town and surrounding district viewed now by someone who had seen a bit of the world, led her to regard it as very parochial and stuck in its ways. In her *Autobiography*, unfinished when she died (aged 84) in 1910 she said that Melrose suffered from "aye-bin" syndrome and despite initially wishing she could cut her throat on landing in Australia she now valued the experience immensely!

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### *The History of Australia 6 : Reid & Fisher*



### Sir George Houston Reid (1845—1918) Prime Minister (1904-5)



Best known for his achievements as Premier of New South Wales for five years from 1894, G.H. Reid rose to the highest political office in the land, becoming Australia's fourth premier and was honoured GCB, GCMG and KC. Amusingly, although he was in favour of the creation of one federal nation out of the disparate states he rather sat on the fence during the plebiscite in 1898 which consulted the people on the issue, so gaining the soubriquet "Yes-No"!

Aged only seven, Reid had left Johnstone in Renfrewshire when his Presbyterian dergyman father moved the family to Melbourne in 1852. He was no great scholar at Scotch College school and by the age of 13 was working as a clerk in a Sydney office. However, one of his interests was public speaking and this improved his confidence, evidence by a series of promotions with the Attorney-General's Office.

Reid was a strong proponent of Free Trade, publishing a group of essays on the topic in 1875 and the European distribution of his second publication, *New South Wales, the Mother Colony of the Australias* was promoted by the government. Seeing law as his metier, he eventually qualified as a barrister in 1879. His easy confidence in this role, supported by a rapier mind and a ready wit, saw him declared by some as one of the best public speakers "in the Empire". He excelled at rebuffing hecklers, one of whom once made fun of his characteristic large paunch suggesting he was with child and enquiring after the likely name: Reid replied along the lines that the "baby" was probably just "piss and wind" and if that proved to be the case he would name the child after the heckler!

As such he simply had to go into the state parliament, which he managed in 1880, at a time whilst he was building up his own legal practice but within three years he was able to accept the position of Minister of Public Instruction in which role he oversaw the formation of the first state high schools in several NSW cities and the start of night time education in local colleges. Losing his seat in 1884, he returned to parliament the following year but rebuffed offers of government posts from Premier Englishman Sir Henry Parkes, the "Father of Federation" whom he personally disliked, concentrating more on his legal practice and becoming the top barrister in Sydney, finally taking silk in 1898.

When Parkes was removed from office, Reid took over as Opposition Leader and successfully stood as Premier in the following election on a Free Trade ticket. His administration was a reforming one, passing legislation on public health, factories and mining. He went on to support the federation of the Australian colonies, though in a somewhat equivocal fashion.

When the first federal parliament was formed, Reid became Leader of the Opposition but resigned in 1903 on a major policy difference only to win his own seat back at a by-election. The following year he became Prime Minister of Australia, but without a majority he could not last for long and left office the following year with good grace. He resigned his seat in 1909 and the following year he became Australia's High Commissioner in London, where he became a very popular figure and eventually became a Conservative M.P. He died very suddenly at the age of 73.

### Andrew Fisher (1862—1928) Thrice Prime Minister (1908....1915)



Hailing from Crosshouse in Ayrshire, Andrew Fisher found his first work as a teenage miner in a coal mine and when aged 17 became secretary of the local branch of the miner's union. He was already highly politicised, leading strikes for better wages which twice cost him his job and gained him notoriety. This reaction was one of the reasons for his emigration to Queensland aged 23. His first work there was as an engine driver at the local gold mine and in due course he took charge of the local (Gympie) miner's Association.

In 1891 he became president of the local Labour Party and joined the state Legislative Assembly two years later. Here he continued to express controversial views, for example with regard to military spending and the employment of native workers in the sugar industry, being regarded by some as a revolutionary. When one Gympie newspaper criticised him and led to him losing his seat in 1896 he responded by helping to set up a rival (Labour supporting) newspaper and was back in parliament before the turn of the century.



Campaigning in favour of federation in 1899 plebiscite, he joined the new federal parliament, when G.H.Reid became Opposition Leader in 1901. He held the post of Minister for Trade and Communications in the first Labour government three years later and then became Labour leader in 1907 and Prime Minister for the first time the following year when the Protectionist government led by Alfred Deakin collapsed. By now Fisher had established himself as a radical very much at home with the ideas of the new Labour party in Great Britain.

However he was not in office long before a Conservative led coalition took over for a year but he became Premier for a second time in 1910, this time for three years. He led his country into the war in 1914 famously pledging Australia's commitment to Great Britain's cause "to the last man and the last shilling".

However in 1915 Fisher was forced to resign over the topic of conscription and he became Australia's second High Commissioner in London, but was not permitted by a second term by the Australian Premier Billy Hughes, whom he had previously failed to support over conscription. After a brief return to Australia he retired to London but suffered very badly from dementia before dying from the repercussions of influenza in the Autumn of 1928.

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