USE OF THESES

This copy is supplied for purposes of private study and research only. Passages from the thesis may not be copied or closely paraphrased without the written consent of the author.
THE IMPERIAL COMMITMENT

The Singapore Strategy in the Defence of Australia and New Zealand, 1939 - 1942.

by

Ian Hamill

September, 1974

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts of the Australian National University.
This thesis is the result of my own research and all sources have been acknowledged.
# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations. ..... v
List of Maps. ..... vi
Abbreviations ..... vii
Acknowledgements ..... viii

## INTRODUCTION.

1

## CHAPTER 1: THE SINGAPORE STRATEGY, 1919-1939.

- The Singapore Naval Base. ..... 9
- Singapore and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand. ..... 10
- The Defence Policies of Australia and New Zealand. ..... 14
- British Promises to Send a Fleet. ..... 19

## CHAPTER 2: FORWARD DEFENCE AND THE THREAT OF JAPAN,
April 1939 - May 1940.

- Regional Responsibilities. ..... 41
- The Threat of Japan ..... 42
- Singapore or the Middle East? ..... 60


- Italian Intervention and the Fall of France. ..... 99
- The Greater Threat of Japan. ..... 100
- The Defence of South-East Asia and the Pacific. ..... 116
- Mr. Menzies in London. ..... 130

## CHAPTER 4: THE UNITED STATES AND THE DEFENCE OF THE PACIFIC.

- The United States and the Singapore Strategy. ..... 180
- The Washington Staff Conversations. ..... 183
- 'Tightening the screw' against Japan. ..... 201

## CHAPTER 5: LABOUR IN POWER IN AUSTRALIA, October - 8 December, 1941.

- The Despatch of the Prince of Wales and Repulse. ..... 270
- The Impact of the Japanese Victories. ..... 282
CONCLUSION. 310

APPENDIX: Naval Strengths of the Major Powers, 1939. 316

BIBLIOGRAPHY. 317
List of Illustrations

"Pass, Friend!" (Cartoon) between pp. 90 and 91.

'Not Wounded - Winded!' (Cartoon)

Meeting of the Australian Advisory War Council, 19 November, 1940 (from the collection of the National Library of Australia).

'Neutrality First' (Cartoon)

'In Darkest America' (Cartoon)

'Not Understood' (Cartoon)

'Stealing Their Thunder' (Cartoon)

Mr. Curtin and Mr. Fraser at Parliament House, Canberra, soon after the declaration of war with Japan (from the collection of the National Library of Australia).

'Southerly Buster' (Cartoon)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Map 1</td>
<td>The Pacific Ocean: showing principal naval bases and distances in nautical miles.</td>
<td>between pp. 11 and 12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map 2</td>
<td>The South-West Pacific Ocean.</td>
<td>pp. 54 and 55.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map 3</td>
<td>South-East Asia and East Indies Archipelago.</td>
<td>pp. 94 and 95.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map 4</td>
<td>The Malay Peninsula.</td>
<td>pp. 235 and 236.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

A.I.F.  Australian Imperial Force.
A.L.P.  Australian Labour Party.
C.I.D.  Committee of Imperial Defence.
C.O.S.  Chiefs of Staff.
C.P.D.  Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates.
C.P.P.  Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers.
E.A.T.S.  Empire Air Training Scheme.
GGA  Governor-General of Australia.
GGNZ  Governor-General of New Zealand.
H. of C. Debs.  United Kingdom Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Fifth Series.
N.Z.E.F.  New Zealand Expeditionary Force.
PMA  Prime Minister of Australia.
PMNZ  Prime Minister of New Zealand.
R.A.A.F.  Royal Australian Air Force.
R.A.N.  Royal Australian Navy.
R.N.  Royal Navy.
SSC  Secretary of State for the Colonies.
SSDA  Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.
U.A.P.  United Australia Party.
U.S.N.  United States Navy.
Acknowledgements

I am pleased to be able to record at least some of the debts I have incurred in the preparation of this thesis. My two supervisors, Mr. D.W.A. Baker and Dr. J.M. McCarthy, have given me constant help and encouragement. The bulk of my research was conducted in the Commonwealth Archives Offices, Canberra and Melbourne, the National Library of Australia, the Library of the Australian War Memorial and in the Public Record Office, London; the staffs of all these institutions were generally helpful, although the employees of the Australian Commonwealth Archives are obliged to work within limits which often result in frustrations for the bona fide researcher. My understanding of the subject was increased by the discussions which followed seminar papers I delivered in the History Departments of the School of General Studies at the Australian National University and of the Royal Military College, Duntroon. I am particularly grateful for the comments on these, and other, occasions of Mr. L.F. Fitzhardinge, Mr. Humphrey McQueen and Mr. Neil Primrose. Sir Harry Batterbee, the British High Commissioner in New Zealand from 1939 to 1945, granted me a long interview in London in January 1973 which provided valuable information for my consideration of the role of the smaller dominion. Mr. D.C.S. Sissons agreed, at very short notice, to read sections of my draft dealing with Japanese policy and made helpful suggestions. My typist, Jan Oddy, tackled my draft in a most efficient and cheerful way.

I am deeply grateful to two people who guided my first steps in historical research: Professor David Dilks and Norman Hillmer. My work in Australia was made possible by a scholarship under the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. Finally, I am happy to acknowledge my debt to those residents of University House who aided the progress of the work, either by direct help and encouragement or by arousing my determination with their doubts that the task would ever be completed. My friends David Carment, Philip Martin and Gary Brown undertook with patience and forbearance such mundane but necessary chores as checking the final draft and proof-reading. In other ways, too, their contribution - and that of my other friends - is greater than they realise.

I alone am responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.
INTRODUCTION

... whatever steps we may take to procure for this colony an adequate measure of external protection, let it never be forgotten that the first line of defence for every British colony in any part of the world ... is the narrow sea which divides Britain from Europe. That is our most important outwork, the key of our imperial position, in the defence of which all Englishmen have a primary interest, and for which we must reserve our best ships and our best men. And, if we continue to attach any value to the name and the birthright which we have brought to these distant shores, we shall not grudge any sacrifice which shall insure the safety of that beloved land, which is the citadel of our race and the centre of our power.¹

Such were the views of a leading Melbourne newspaper, the Argus, in 1859. The Australian colonies, having attained self-government and the removal of commercial disabilities, were faced with the imminent withdrawal of British troops and had to consider their own responsibilities for defence. Eighty years later, Victoria, the colony in question, was one of the constituent parts of the Commonwealth of Australia, a fully autonomous dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations. An enemy now most seriously threatened the key to the imperial position. On 10 May 1940 Nazi Germany launched its blitzkrieg against western Europe. In less than one month the Channel ports fell under German control. On 22 June an armistice provided for the occupation of a large area of France, including the northern and Atlantic coasts, by German troops. During the

¹ The Melbourne Argus, 10 October, 1859.
anxious and hectic days of the Battle of Britain which followed, an official in the Australian Department of External Affairs took the time and trouble to copy out in longhand the eighty-year old editorial from the Argus. He placed the copy on file among papers dealing with the problem of Australia's immediate defence. In New Zealand, too, the government and people were eager to match the United Kingdom's 'Dunkirk spirit' and would have found the extract an equally valuable guide to policy.

The attitude of Australia and New Zealand to the military disasters in Europe in 1940 can be understood only in terms of their commitment to the principles of imperial defence; any threat to the British Isles, it was believed, was a threat to the existence of the whole British Empire and therefore to the security of the Pacific dominions. It was for this reason that the governments of Australia and New Zealand had co-operated fully with the allied war effort from the outbreak of the second world war: their warships were placed under the control of the Admiralty, their troops sent to the Middle East and their air forces employed largely in training crews for operation with the Royal Air Force. In return for their co-operation in this imperial system the dominions had been promised the protection of the Royal Navy. Australia and New Zealand relied for their defence on the Singapore strategy: the notion that in the event of a threat to British interests in the Far East a British

2. CRS A981 item Defence 59, part 4.
3. See below, p. 105.
fleet would sail out from European waters and, basing itself on modern and efficient naval facilities at the 'impregnable fortress' of Singapore, would assume command of sea communications, thereby eliminating any danger to Anglo-Saxon civilization in the southern Pacific.

The Singapore strategy collapsed as soon as it was challenged by Japan; a British fleet failed to arrive from the West, the two British capital ships in the Pacific were sunk within three days of the opening of the Japanese campaign and Singapore island itself fell two months later, on 15 February, 1942. This thesis examines aspects of the defence policies of Australia and New Zealand in the thirty months from the outbreak of the second world war until this ignominious surrender. It deals with the defence relations between the Pacific dominions and the United Kingdom and concentrates on the place of Singapore in the imperial defence connection. No attempt has been made to treat other aspects of this connection, most notably the Empire Air Training Scheme which has already been the subject of a thorough and scholarly analysis. Even within the limits of the Singapore strategy, the amount of primary source material which has recently become available is vast and the survey of Australia's and New Zealand's policies which follows is necessarily highly selective. Nor will the study

---

attempt to deal with the military campaign in Malaya which preceded the fall of Singapore, a topic which has already been covered in great detail in many other works.  

By 1939 Australia and New Zealand had been basing their security upon Singapore for almost twenty years and the first chapter reviews briefly the development of that policy from 1919. Thereafter the study unfolds chronologically, except for the consideration, in Chapter Four, of the American role in the defence of the Pacific. The potential importance of the United States was a continuous theme in British, Australian and New Zealand policy but, perhaps because of the American refusal to enter into any binding obligations until the last moment, I have found it easier to deal with this topic separately.

The commitment by Australia and New Zealand to an imperial scheme of defence which failed has been heavily criticised. One Australian commentator has recently referred to his country's decision to send troops to the Middle East in the following disparaging terms:

Australia was permitted to enjoy the honour of fighting another war away from home.... its battle-hardened veterans experiencing the dubious privilege of earning new laurels in foreign fields.... Europe-minded men had rushed Australian forces to the aid of beleaguered Britain and left Australia to stand naked before her enemies.  

5 For a list of some of these see below, p. 281, footnote 34.  
It is certainly true that traditional loyalties to Britain were an important guide for Australian policy; they were even more important for New Zealand, whose settlement in the nineteenth century had not been marked by that alienation from the 'mother country' which characterised some Australians. The attitudes of Australia and New Zealand would, no doubt, have been very different if they had never been part of the British Empire and had therefore been free from emotional ties to their 'birthright' and 'that beloved land, which is the citadel of our race ...'. But it will be contended that, given the imperial context within which the governments of the Pacific dominions had no choice but to work, their policies were determined at least as much by a self-interested and reasoned assessment of their own national needs as by imperialist sentiments or colonial instincts. A major reason for the opposition by Australia and New Zealand to the development of dominion status in the inter-war years had been a belief that their defence interests were identical with those of the British Empire. But this was not a complacent attitude and this thesis will aim to show that as their doubts about the Singapore strategy began to grow the governments in Australia and New Zealand acted both within and outside the confines of the imperial connection in an effort to find a supplement. In forming their policies, the two dominions

7. See above, p. 1.
8. On this question see below, pp. 29-34.
were always aware of their special regional position and responsibilities in the Pacific.

Although Australia and New Zealand shared basically the same defence problem their solutions were by no means always identical. There were major differences between their views on the Singapore strategy in the inter-war years. And the disparities, as well as the similarities, in the aims and viewpoints of the two governments in the wartime period will, it is hoped, provide useful points of comparison and contrast to illuminate the general themes.

There were, of course, also differences of attitude within each dominion. In New Zealand a Labour government remained in office throughout the war years and a large measure of continuity was therefore automatically achieved. The political situation in Australia was much more confused. During the first two years of war the country was governed by the most factious administrations in its history. Australia entered the war with a minority government drawn from the United Australia Party and led by R.G. Menzies; it relied for survival on the support of the Country Party. In March 1940 this arrangement gave way to a formal coalition between the U.A.P. and the Country Party with Menzies again Prime Minister. A general election in September 1940 gave an equal number of seats to the

---

10 In this thesis I refer to the Labour Parties and movements in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand; the official spelling of the name in Australia is, of course, 'Labor' but for the sake of uniformity the English version will be used throughout the work.
coalition and to the Labour Party, the balance of power
going to two independents. Menzies failed to persuade
Labour to enter a national government and continued to rule
with the support of the Country Party, 'a coalition',
according to the Official War Historian, 'of pieces rather
than parties' which 'rested on a mass of shifting discon-
tents'. Indeed, the events of the next twelve months
suggested that the United Australia Party was most inaptly
named and Menzies finally resigned on 29 August, 1941.
His successor, A.W. Fadden, the leader of the Country Party,
retained the same ministry. But the ramshackle coalition
was defeated in the House of Representatives only one month
later when the two independents changed their allegiance in
favour of the Labour Party. The Governor-General then
called upon John Curtin, leader of the Australian Labour
Party, to form a government and Labour retained office for
the remainder of the war. The A.L.P.'s defence policy in
the inter-war years had been opposed to the Singapore
strategy and antagonistic to the imperial connection. It
will be necessary, therefore, to consider the extent to
which this change of government led to changes in Australian
policy.

This study is based primarily on British and
Australian official government papers available in the
Public Record Office, London, and the Commonwealth Archives

11. P. Hasluck, The Government and the People, 1939-1945
(Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4, Civil,
Vols. 1 and 2, Canberra, 1952 and 1970), Vol. I. 1939-
1945, p. 280.
Offices, Canberra and Melbourne. As access to the Australian material has been granted to researchers only very recently many of my sources, which are described in a note at the beginning of the bibliography, have not been used before in a work of this kind. Constraints of money and time unfortunately precluded research on the archives in Wellington but this omission is partly offset by the excellent example shown to other governments by the authorities in New Zealand who have published three substantial volumes of their wartime documents. In view of the availability of this source, and the important differences, on occasions, between Australian and New Zealand's policy, I have felt justified in including New Zealand within the scope of this thesis although her policies are not examined in as great a degree of detail as those of Australia, or the United Kingdom.

13 See below, pp. 317 - 20.