

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Storey, Sir John Stanley (1896–1955)

by John Lack

Sir John Stanley Storey (1896-1955), industrialist, was born on 1 November 1896 at Balmain, Sydney, third of six children of native-born parents **John Storey**, boiler-maker, and his wife Elizabeth Merton, née Turnbull. Young John attended Fort Street Model (Boys' High) School. His father, uncles and brothers—all of whom had trained or were to train as tradesmen—were unimpressed by his decision to accept a scholarship to the University of Sydney (B.Sc., 1917) and were shocked by his lack of elementary workshop knowledge when he graduated. John's disappointment with the quality of university teaching made him favour technical education, albeit within a strong humanities context.

On 8 June 1917 Storey enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force; he was then 5 ft 10 ins (178 cm) tall and weighed 9 st. 10 lb. (62 kg). He qualified for a commission at the Engineer Officers' Training School, Roseville, but his father advised: 'Go away as a Private and learn to take orders before you give them, and get to know the thinking and habits of the Privates and N.C.O.'s before you try to lead them'. Embarking as a sapper in March 1918, he underwent further training in England and served in France after the Armistice. He later attributed what he knew about handling men to his experience in the ranks. During seven months leave in 1919, he worked for the Keighley Gas & Oil Engine Co. Ltd, in London and Yorkshire. Returning to Sydney, he was discharged from the A.I.F. on 8 March 1920, just before the election which made his father premier. The father's example of public service strongly influenced the son: '[he] drilled into us . . . that we should devote 25% of our time . . . to some national service for which there was no compensation and only blame for the job that you tried to do'. John inherited from his family a respect for manual work and for workers' legitimate aspirations to fair pay and conditions; he also inherited a distrust of political extremism, especially doctrinaire socialism.

In 1921 John and his brother Tasman established Storey Bros Ltd to make automotive accessories, but they had an uphill struggle against cheap imports. John founded (1925) the Automotive Manufacturers' Association of New South Wales, which advocated protection for the motor industry and the eventual manufacture of an Australian-made motorcar. The indifference of the Bruce-Page government left him embittered. Returning from studying the motor industry in the United States of America in 1929, he established National Motor Springs Pty Ltd and Better Brakes Ltd. When the Scullin government revised tariffs in 1930, Storey wrote the automotive section of the schedule, which he described as 'probably the most definite step so far taken by any Government towards the ultimate manufacture of an all-Australian car'.

At St Philip's Church of England, Sydney, on 7 July 1923 Storey had married Alma Doretta Leddin. (Sir Edward Holden recruited him in 1932 as manager of the troubled body-service division of General Motors-Holden's Ltd, Sydney. Within two years the division was returning substantial profits. In 1934 Storey became director of manufacturing, based in Melbourne, and joined the board. He investigated the layout of

(Sir John Storey was Jeff Leddin's uncle)

Noel
Jeffrey
Philip

General Motors Corporation's plant at Detroit, U.S.A., in 1935, and supervised the erection of G.M.H. factories—on sites he selected at Fishermens Bend, Melbourne (completed 1936), and Pagewood, Sydney (1940)—and the refurbishment of plants in Brisbane and Perth. In 1936 G.M.H. joined the industrial syndicate formed by Essington Lewis to prepare Australia for war. When the consortium set up Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Pty Ltd, Storey was appointed alternate director to (Sir) Laurence Hartnett (managing director of G.M.H.) on the board of C.A.C.

In March 1940 the Menzies government established the Aircraft Production Commission under (Sir) Harold Clapp to produce the Bristol Aeroplane Co.'s Beaufort bomber for the British and Australian air forces. Hartnett, who had expected to lead the commission, churlishly refused to release Storey as Clapp's first assistant for the duration of the war. Storey resigned from G.M.H. Following the fall of France in June, the British government placed an embargo on the export of war materials and drastically reduced assistance to the Australian Beaufort programme. A decision was made to undertake complete local manufacture. Storey rose to the challenge of a lifetime: 'we decided to follow a good old Australian policy and give it a go'.

He accompanied Menzies on a tour of Britain and North America in January-May 1941. Menzies thought he and Storey made 'a good team'. Their mutual respect ripened into a warm friendship. The prime minister particularly admired Storey's plain speaking with Lord Beaverbrook, minister of aircraft production, to secure guarantees for delivery of materials from Britain and increased British orders for Australian-built aircraft. Storey inspected 21 aircraft factories and contacted 59 officials in Britain, visited 7 factories in the United States, and spoke with 37 officials there and in Canada. The progress of the aircraft industry astonished him, as did the pivotal role played by motorcar manufacturers. He admired the extent and skill of female labour, and found the overall efficiency of British administration impressive.

Confirming his belief in the superiority of British aircraft, Storey recommended Australian manufacture of the Beaufighter and the Lancaster bomber. He decided that both Britain and Australia needed urgently to extend the training of factory foremen and managers. To him, foremen were the vital link between management and workers, and foremanship was a stepping stone to management. In 1937 he had been one of a group of industrialists who requested the Victorian Education Department to initiate a course for foremen at the Melbourne Technical College. He established a course at G.M.H. in 1938, and the college adopted his curriculum in 1940. On his return to Australia in June 1941, he played a key role in establishing (August) the Institute of Industrial Management of Australia (Australian Institute of Management from 1949), of which he was foundation president, and national president in 1947-51.

The first Australian-built Beaufort took to the air in August 1941, the first was delivered to the Royal Australian Air Force in September, and the first equipped with Australian-built engines was ready in November, confounding the experts who had declared the project impossible. After Japan entered the war, the Curtin government disbanded the A.P.C. and reorganized aircraft production under the director-generalship of Lewis. Confirmed as director of the Beaufort division, Storey faced a demanding production schedule.

On the basis of his knowledge of subcontracting in the automotive-parts industry, his acquaintance with car manufacturing in Britain and the U.S.A., his experience at G.M.H. and his conspectus of the aircraft industry in wartime Britain, and with the strong backing of Lewis, Storey sub-contracted to some six hundred firms across Australia the production of components which were fed into seven sub-assembly

workshops and, finally, the main assembly factories at Fishermens Bend and at Mascot, Sydney. Harold Breen remembered Storey in the war years as an inspirational leader, idolized by his co-workers: 'quick, smiling, bright-eyed . . . He talked well and a good deal . . . [and] was definite in his views'.

Storey's Beaufort division completed, on average, sixteen aircraft per month in 1942 and twenty-nine per month in 1943. A total of seven hundred were delivered, the last in August 1944. As the production of Beauforts tapered off, the division began constructing Beaufighters. In May 1944, surrounded by cheering workers, Storey handed over to the R.A.A.F. the first of an eventual 364 Australian-built Beaufighters, only six months after the start of production and fourteen months after receiving the drawings. He led a study team that visited Manchester, England, in 1944-45 to prepare for the manufacture of Lancasters in Australia. Redesignated as the Lincoln, the Australian aeroplane delivered to the R.A.A.F. in May 1946 was the first aircraft to be built in Australia while it was being developed in Britain. It remains the biggest aircraft ever built in Australia.

The Beaufort project had been Australia's largest and most complex wartime industrial task. It inspired a superb team effort from some 10,000 workers, four-fifths of them with no previous factory experience, and one-third of them women. By 1945 Australia's sophisticated aircraft-manufacturing industry had introduced hundreds of companies to the skills and methods of modern mass production. 'Beaufort' Storey and his project had a profound impact on Australian social and industrial confidence.

Storey retired as director of the Beaufort division in October 1945. Proud as he was of the organization's achievements, he understood at first hand the sacrifices made by Australian service personnel and civilians. A devoted father, he was disturbed to discover that he had become a stranger to his family. The subsequent decision to remain in Melbourne, rather than return to Sydney, was a family one, made essentially by his four children, with whom he attempted to build metaphorical bridges on summer camping holidays. In 1946 he declined, on family grounds, (Sir) John Jensen's request that he become Commonwealth coal commissioner. Personal tragedy struck when his adored elder son John was diagnosed with leukaemia. 'Why, oh why?', he asked, anguished by the young man's slow and agonizing decline and his death in 1947. Distraught, Storey threw himself into his work.

In 1945, with Hartnett still in command, Storey had no prospect of returning to G.M.H. That year he became chairman and joint managing director of Repco Ltd, one of Australia's principal makers and distributors of automotive parts. The stockbrokers J. B. Were & Son had made his appointment—following the retirement of Repco's founder R. G. Russell—a condition of underwriting the sale of the Russell family shares. As chairman (and managing director until 1953), Storey transformed the enterprise. Cherubic and kindly in appearance, shy and yet sociable in manner, open-minded and tolerant in discussion, he was also razor sharp, given to robust debate and resolute in decision, qualities which he acknowledged had earned him a reputation for ruthlessness during the Beaufort years.

Anticipating a buoyant postwar economy, Storey shifted Repco's focus from replacement parts to manufacturing and supplying original equipment for the booming Australian-built motorcar industry. Change was effected only against opposition from some subordinates. Contracts with G.M.H., together with the development of markets in Asia and the Pacific, assured the company large, regular and standard orders that in turn guaranteed extended production runs. Storey reorganized management on the principles he had learned at G.M.H. and honed in the Beaufort division. He promoted from within, and often recruited

from outside, as when he engaged proven personnel from the Department of Aircraft Production. In 1949 Repco was reconstituted as a holding company: its many subsidiary and associated firms became self-contained units within this structure. By 1955 Repco was a highly profitable, medium-sized operation, employing over 3000 people in ten specialized manufacturing plants and distribution centres.

Storey spent his afternoons at Repco, after a morning's work at Overseas Corporation (Australia) Ltd, a venture he had begun in 1945 (registered in 1946) with William Wasserman, chief of the American Lend-Lease Mission in Australia. The enterprise was part of an international chain designed to spread among non-communist countries new industrial technology, patent rights, manufacturing licences and retail franchises. Storey was managing director from the outset, and chairman from 1950. Having attracted key investors, he employed a core of specialists (in marketing, production planning and control, and cost accounting) to service subsidiary companies headed by carefully recruited managers skilled at handling labour and regulating production flows. Overseas Corporation's manufacturing and merchandising came to include steel furniture, truck brakes, sheet leather, aircraft parts and foodstuffs, but the most famous product was the Namco pressure-cooker. In 1948 Prime Minister Ben Chifley sought one, thanked Storey for sending him this 'most desirable present for the wife', and insisted on being invoiced. Even the production of 25,000 cookers a month could not meet Australian demand.

Industrial relations in Storey's businesses remained amicable, even during industry-wide strikes. In his view, shop-floor unhappiness usually resulted from bad management. He blamed the industrial conflict of 1945-47 on poor government and weak management that had allowed communists to exploit the union movement's legitimate demands. Rejecting the notion of class war, he regarded society as being based on a harmony of interests. Unity of effort of managers and workers would produce what the Americans called synergism—'the dividends you get from teamwork'. Managers should eschew piece-work and incentive systems, accept the reality of Australia's high wage levels, shorter working week, and lower production runs and sales volumes, and remain competitive by becoming more efficient.

National and Imperial development and defence were Storey's major enthusiasms. Of English ancestry, he was by birth and upbringing a British Australian, and by experience between the wars an Australian industrial nationalist. His loyalties had blended as he contributed to Britain's and Australia's struggle against the might of Germany and Japan. He had marvelled at the morale of the English people under German bombing, and was thrilled with his fellow Australians' response in the great Pacific crisis. He saw postwar industrial development as producing a stronger and more self-reliant Australia that would in turn strengthen the Empire: 'This war has taught us that the preservation of the Empire is dependent on the strength of the individual units of which it is made up', he averred in an article in *Aircraft Production* (1945). Cultural and sentimental affinities with Britain would continue to be complemented by strong defence and technological links.

Storey believed that Australia had been imperilled by her unpreparedness, and that only an armed and self-reliant Australia would ensure her own security and win respect from Asian neighbours. Government and private enterprise must co-operate to preserve the nucleus of a defence industry that could rapidly expand aircraft and armament production in wartime. He saw Australian population increase as the key to industrial development, and industrial development as central to defence. There was safety, not so much in numbers, but in an expanding, skilled manufacturing workforce, notably for the motor vehicle industry which, he remained convinced, would again prove the backbone of defence production.

The Chifley government appointed Storey chairman of the Joint War Production Committee (May 1949) and of the Immigration Planning Council (October). The *raison d'être* of the production committee, within the Department of Defence, was to ensure that industrial capacity existed to meet the likely requirements of the armed forces; that of the planning council was to mesh immigration with economic development. Storey chose to serve these bodies without remuneration. Menzies' approval in Opposition—and quick confirmation in government—of the appointments demonstrated the strong political continuities in the major parties' approach to postwar development and defence.

Between May and August 1950 Storey travelled to Britain, Europe and North America to pursue his private business interests, to study war-production planning and to investigate European sources of immigrant labour. He was knighted that year, at Buckingham Palace, London. Although immensely impressed by the state of the manufacturing plant, management and workforce in northern Italy, he did not share long-standing Australian prejudices against southern Italians, and advocated a general assisted-immigration programme for Italian families. His extensive visit facilitated the first migration agreement (1951) between the Italian and Australian governments. While the Immigration Planning Council for a time favoured bringing bachelors from Europe to fill gaps in the labour force and to clear bottlenecks in production, under Storey's chairmanship the council argued persuasively for a balanced intake in the interests of social development and long-term population building.

In September 1950 Menzies issued his 'Defence Call to the Nation', declaring that Australia should prepare for the possibility of another world war within three years, and inaugurating an intense effort to co-ordinate the civil and military sectors of the economy. Storey had proposed the creation of national defence and resources councils, but a plethora of initiatives, planning bodies and committees led to overlap, confusion and frustration. The authority of the Joint War Production Committee was reduced by the National Security Resources Board. There was some public speculation late in 1951 that Storey would be given a co-ordinating role similar to that played by Lewis during World War II, but high inflation led to severe restrictions on credit and imports and the scaling back of immigration in 1951-52. Privately, Storey was critical of government timidity and public service indifference.

Another extended overseas trip in mid-1953, again combining private and government business, further convinced him of the necessity to integrate the industrial and defence sectors, such as was occurring in the United States. Storey's argument for an Australian industrial defence college on American lines found scant support among defence chiefs. Privately, he discussed the formation of a national preparedness association, and a defence league for youth, to arouse Australians to the danger from the 'Near North'.

For Storey, Asia's teeming population and pressure on resources, rather than communism, constituted the main threat. Sceptical that Asians would be assimilated, he opposed all but token immigration from that region. Discussions with political and community leaders during a 1954 trip to Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Japan convinced him, however, that the term 'White Australia' should be replaced by 'selective immigration', that both rhetoric and practice could and should avoid any suggestion of European racial superiority, and that offensive incidents had to be avoided. Administrative amendments to the Commonwealth's immigration policy followed. He favoured high rates of European immigration to build a population of twenty million within twenty-five years, and he pressed the government, with some success, to maintain immigration targets.

In the early 1950s, in addition to his public responsibilities, Sir John had oversight of twenty-two factories and was chairman or a director of eight other companies. He still found time for golf and tennis, entertaining and reading. Family and friends warned him to slow down. He attempted to resign from the Joint War Production Committee in 1952, and did retire from several boards in 1954-55. But his resolution to decline speaking engagements was no sooner made than broken, and he took on additional responsibilities. In January 1955 he was appointed to the Australian Atomic Energy Commission's industry advisory committee. Driven by his love of work and his patriotism, he simply could not rest.

Storey died of a coronary occlusion on 3 July 1955 in the Mercy Hospital, East Melbourne. He was accorded a state funeral and was cremated. His wife, and their two daughters and younger son survived him. Menzies honoured his loyal friendship, strength of character, leadership in industry, and, above all, his devotion to Australia's wartime defence: 'This is sad news for our country. John Storey was much more than a successful industrialist: he was a great Australian patriot'. Breen admired his acuity, originality and broad humanity, and his relentless pursuit of 'the vision of a great nation under the Southern Cross'.

Of Storey's estate, sworn for probate at £366,336, he bequeathed £100,000 for public education in management and £100,000 for the advancement of technical education in Victoria. He also left £100 to each working director and employee who had given more than ten years service to his private companies, National Motor Springs and National Industries; the residue was left to his widow and children. The Australian Institute of Management established a memorial lecture and medal. The Royal Melbourne Technical College, of whose governing council Storey had been vice-president, set up a memorial fund to provide scholarships, and named Storey Hall to honour Storey and his son John. (Sir) William Dargie's portrait (1954) of Storey is held by the family.

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