

The Spiralling Threat: E. L. Piesse and the Australia-Japan Relations

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In the inter-War period, a major problem in the Australia-Japan relations was how to defend the White Australian policy against Japan who had been building up an important status in international relationship. In particular, after World War I, Australia came to regard Japan as a threat to its safety. Japan's occupation of the South-Sea Islands (Nanyo Gunto) and her racial equality proposal at the Paris Peace Conference intensified such perception.

Mr. E. L. Piesse was the Director of the Pacific Branch of the Prime Minister's Department from 1919 to 1923. As such he exerted considerable influence on Australian foreign policy. This essay examines Piesse's view on Japan and the Japanese reaction to his view.

Piesse suggested the adoption of pragmatic policy towards Japan, but his proposal was rejected because most Australians increasingly considered Japan as a threat. Their judgment was made on the basis of partial and incorrect information.

In this period, the basic structure of Australia-Japan relations was that the more strenuously Japan attempted to preserve her dignity as an empire, the more serious the threat Australia felt from Japan. Piesse thought that it was important to preserve White Australia without hurting Japan's sense of national pride. But his view was not supported, and he resigned his post after Japan's threat had become felt less keenly due to the Washington Conference which replaced the Anglo-Japanese Alliance with the Four-Power Treaty. In this way this structure continued to remain as a fundamental problem in Australia-Japan relations.