Nest of traitors
The Brisbane Line: A Reappraisal

Book Review by Rowan Cahill

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Late in December 1945 in Osaka, Melbourne Herald journalist Denis Warner interviewed Japanese journalist Kennosuke (Ken) Sato. Warner believed he was interviewing a soon to be apprehended war criminal.

Sato was more than a wordsmith. During recent hostilities he had been seconded by both the Japanese army and navy for special duties, including the interrogation of Australian POWs, and arranging for a willing few to engage in pro-Japanese radio propaganda broadcasts.

Prior to World War II Sato had toured Australia as part of a high level Japanese goodwill mission. During an eight-month stay the charming, English speaking, American trained journalist reconnoitered Australian commercial life and established contacts and friendships amongst politicians and business figures interested in establishing and extending trade links with Japan.

Sato told Warner that when Japan conquered Australia, he would have been Chief Civil Administrator, heading up a specially groomed team recruited from Japanese business personnel well known in pre-war Australia, supported by a good many highly placed, willing, Australian collaborators.

Unbeknown to either Warner or his employer, a large cache of documents in Australia suggested that Sato was not spinning a yarn. These documents were in the care of the Attorney General and Minister for External Affairs Dr H V Evatt; they had been seized by Australian authorities from the Japanese consulate in Sydney on the eve of war with Japan.

Japanese officials had tried to destroy the consular documents, but enough material remained to show the way Japan cultivated pro-Japanese sympathies in Australia prior to 1941, variously courting opinion and policy makers, disseminating propaganda, gathering intelligence; bulk loads of propaganda material were distributed through pro-Japanese cultural and business organisations; there were gifts to politicians, generous entertainment accorded to diplomats, politicians, business and media heavyweights, and cash payments to some journalists.

In 1946, anti-fascist Commonwealth Security Service operative Major R F B Wake (later, and briefly, deputy to the first Director General of ASIO, Mr. Justice Reed) examined the documents. In a preliminary report to Dr Evatt he hinted there maybe was substance to Sato’s claims, and strongly urged a long-term rigorous analysis of the material in conjunction with representatives from the Departments of External Affairs, Commerce, Trade and Customs; he wanted the decoding of coded material, and access to material ferreted out of Tokyo Archives by US Counter Intelligence.

The Melbourne Herald gave Warner's story prominence, but the notion of wartime collaborators slipped under the carpet of post-war Australia. Sato never faced war crime charges for what had been brutal interrogations of Australian POWs. And Cold War politics took care of the rest. The ALP was increasingly alarmed by the power of militant trade unions, and battled against itself.
The Country Party and the emerging new force of the Liberal Party successfully focused the nation on anti-communism, and in government placed Australia on a national security footing with scare mongering about the imminence of World War III. Ferreting out potential wartime quislings amongst Australia's conservative and business elites never had a snowball's chance in hell.

Until now. Historian Dr Drew Cottle (University of Western Sydney) examines Sato's collaboration claim in his recent book *The Brisbane Line: A Reappraisal* (Upfront Publishing, Leicestershire). He begins by revisiting the Brisbane Line controversy; were there plans during the early war years under the Governments of Menzies and Fadden to respond to a Japanese invasion of Australia by abandoning the area North of Brisbane, and then defending the rest, or, as some believed, coming to an administrative arrangement with Japan?

Conservative historians and politicians have tried to bury the controversy ever since its cover was blown in 1942 by Labor MHR Eddie Ward. Official documentary evidence for the strategic plan does not seem to exist, although Ward was adamant it once did. Nonetheless a rich diversity of non-official sources, memoirs, letters, private papers, physical evidence, military and civilian strategies, attest to the existence of the Brisbane Line, as a military, if not collaborationist, strategy.

So far as Cottle is concerned, the collaboration notion has legs. Logic suggests that if collaborators did exist, then they would have been amongst Japan's pre-war Australian friends. According to his research many Australians, the majority of them rich, powerful, and influential, developed deep relationships with Japan between the wars, steadfastly so at least until bombs rained down on Pearl Harbour.

Cottle trots out a who's who of people in business and industry, pastoral industries, politics, and opinion formation. Some were awed by the military power of Japan, hence the need to snuggle up close; others saw Japan as a civilising source of 'law and order' in an otherwise chaotic, turbulent Asia; others saw Japan as an economic opportunity and trade partner, Japanese imperialism suiting their class interests; for some it was all of these.

Whatever; Japan had to be accommodated, appeased, helped, joined, supported, even through its worst atrocities in China during the 1930s. And if the Australian Left or the Port Kembla wharfies got in the way of the relationship, then they had to be dealt with; Japanese money bankrolled some spoiling operations against the Australian Left. Overall it was a relationship akin to that John Howard and his mates have developed with the US.

An extensive Japanese intelligence network in Australia saw to it that pro-Japanese sentiment was cultivated and groomed; this provided opportunities for collecting data, particularly economic intelligence, influencing public opinion, and who knows what else; in 1939 the office bearers of the Japan-Australia Society included five members of Japanese military and naval intelligence rubbing shoulders with leaders of Sydney's legal and business worlds.

A leading pro-Japanese politician was Percival Spender (later Knighted for his services to the Australian nation), Minister for the Army in the Menzies Government; typical of his closeness to Japan is the two months of unrestricted access he gave Major Sie Hashida, a senior Japanese intelligence officer, to Australian strategic installations in early 1941, including east coast military installations, the Lithgow armaments factory,
and the Newcastle BHP steelworks.

A couple of months later Spender broadcast from Singapore, assuring listeners that Australia had no "quarrel with Japan" and that "Australia and Singapore are far removed from the theatre of war". Japan's plans for the conquest of South East Asia and Australia were well in hand.

Japan's activities in pre-war Australia did not escape the attention of Australian security services; nor did the activities of the pro-Japanese sympathisers. Naval intelligence in particular was increasingly concerned, and may have had a role in engineering the collapse of the Fadden Coalition Government in October 1941.

In the end, however, Cottle cannot prove that Sato's Australian collaborators existed. Japan did not invade Australia, and Japan's friends never had to decide where they stood once it came to the crunch. Nor do potential traitors tend to leave paper trails indicting themselves, and during his research Cottle turned up tantalisingly empty, and missing, files, as did Major Wake in 1946.

In the end we will probably never know whether or not Percy Spender was earmarked for a major role in a Vichy type Australia, as some believed; nor the truth about Japanese funds finding their way into the coffers of the United Australia Party, the forerunner of the Liberal Party, on the eve of war with Japan. These and other questions are canvassed by Cottle, and he is to be congratulated for bringing them out of the shadows of history and into the light of day.

Cottle's book is the result of patient historical detective work. Apart from drawing on a huge body of secondary material, he has deeply immersed himself in the murky world of Australian security and intelligence records, interviewed key players, trawled private papers where available, along with the records of business and private organisations; the documentation is detailed.

The political and economic tour of pre-World War II Australia that Cottle takes the reader on, casts light on some dark places in the national soul, and rattles skeletons in the closet of the ruling class; it is almost like taking a trip through a parallel universe.

Australian political and business heavyweights who were lauded and honoured as fine, upstanding citizens during the 1950s and 1960s, are revealed as players in a pre-war shadow world of economic imperatives, shifting allegiances, and possibly headed for collaboration and betrayal. Some of the leading pro-Japanese shifted their allegiance post-war to the US, and got in on the ground floor in that department.

The Brisbane Line: A Reappraisal is only available through http://www.amazon.co.uk, but it is well worth the effort in tracking down.