

REVIEW:

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The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO, 1949-1963 by David Horner, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014. Pp. xxvi + 710. (A\$59.99 cloth).

During the 1960s and 70s, I was amongst those anti-war activists and dissident Australians who became the subject of Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) files. ASIO is the organisation responsible for Australia's domestic security and counter-intelligence. As an historian and as a concerned citizen, I take the view that the existence of ASIO, created in 1949, is a matter of ongoing concern and needs significant and real independent civilian oversight, something that does not currently exist.

Supervision of ASIO is currently via a non-transparent secretive system of 'political supervision' by politicians, those involved unable to escape the allegations of either being overawed by the organisation, or of having been house-trained. The dramatic expansion of ASIO since the 1970s, and the extension of its powers during 2014 under the bipartisan politics of the Abbott government and the Labor opposition, including a range of coercive and detention powers, has variously alarmed legal experts, and digital and media advocates and practitioners.

The author of *The Spy Catchers*, Professor David Horner, is a high profile academic military historian, and co-author with Desmond Ball of the ground breaking work on espionage/intelligence matters and Australia, *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network, 1944-1950* (Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 1998). He is a former military officer and a former member of the Directing Staff of the Joint Services Staff College. Horner's background and scholarship give him familiarity and ease with his material. *Spy Catchers* deals with the period from the formation of ASIO in 1949 to 1963; it is Volume 1 of a three-volume 'official' history of ASIO.

The project has been bankrolled by ASIO with some \$1.7 million, relatively generous in terms of the research grants usually available to Australian scholars. ASIO also provided project management personnel, skills and assistance. We have to accept Horner's assurance that he and his research team, comprising himself, two fellow authors who will write the other two volumes, and a research assistant, had unrestricted access to ASIO archives, and that ASIO had no hand in the research and writing of this history.

Over the years ASIO has been the object/subject of a great deal of negative, and critical, speculation, research, analysis, and comment by writers, journalists, scholars. It has also been the object of a number of Royal Commissions, government reviews and inquiries, regarding

aspects of its operation and conduct. Interviewed on ABC Radio National in October 2014, Horner explained that “one of the reasons for getting this history out is to show how ASIO operated; to show that most of the people operating within ASIO are just normal Australians trying to do their best for the security of Australia, (and for the) citizens of Australia.” So the project was not only a legitimate exercise in historical research, but also a tool to assist in the cultivation of public acceptance of ASIO as part of the Australian way of life and of political normalcy, and the reassure Australians about the organisation.

For readers with little knowledge about ASIO, Horner has produced a readable, if at times dull, history. Researchers will appreciate the comprehensive Endnotes, and excellent Index. Apart from the extensive use of formerly classified documents, for scholars there is little new. Much of the gist of Horner’s account is already available in the lengthy list of books, chapters and articles comprising the Bibliography of *Spy Catchers*, particularly in previous works by Horner himself and co-author Ball, Frank Cain, Richard Hall, Les Louis, David McKnight, Robert Manne.

Parts of Horner’s account need to be read in conjunction with other histories. So, for example, Horner’s discussion of the close working relationship between Cold War ASIO and Nazi and fascist immigrants is brief, and readers seeking extensive details will need the work of Mark Aarons (1989, 2001). Horner sidesteps rigorous analysis of the surveillance of left-wing intellectuals during the Cold War, an ASIO imperative he dismisses as “a massive waste of time and resources”, one that had a “corrosive effect” on ASIO as officers devoted enormous resources and energies to hounding ‘disloyal’ ideas that eventually became mainstream; the works of Fiona Capp (1993), and Meredith Burgmann (2014) are relevant here.

Horner does add to our knowledge of ASIO, detailing the many ‘spoiling operations’ conducted against the Communist Party of Australia, including its penetration, with 301 active ASIO agents in the CPA by 1962. He also shows how ASIO went beyond its lawfully permitted remit and acted as a partisan political organisation, paranoidly regarding the Australian Labor Party as a suspect organisation, engaging in illegal covert activities, and leaking confidential materials to anti-communist politicians and journalists. In the event of a national emergency, ASIO had a list of some 6000 people to be interned. According to ASIO chief Charles Spry, there were some 60,000 potential ‘subversives’ in Australia as late as 1962.

Breaking rank with ASIO tradition, Horner names as many past agents he is able to, and tries to humanise them. An Appendix by ‘official history’ team member Rhys Crawley detailing the case of journalist Mercia Masson is poignant. Recruited as an agent in 1950 and assigned to work undercover in CPA circles, she informed on the people she met and worked with. In the process she became friends with her ‘targets’, while the circles in which she moved became the social part of her life. When her cover was blown in 1954-55 during the Royal Commission on Espionage, Masson was compelled to publicly confess/admit to informing on people she had come to regard as friends, and became socially isolated. Ill-health resulted,

from which she never really recovered. ASIO maintained a duty-of-care relationship with her until she died in 1975.

As an historian, Horner arguably had an easier job than those who will follow in completing this 'official history' project. His parcel of the past was relatively distant, and well furrowed by scholars. His fellow historians will have to deal with a more immediate and less traversed past, dealing with issues like the intensifying animosity between ASIO and the Labor Party through to the 1980s; a series of critical, contentious, even hostile, Royal Commissions, inquiries, reviews into the organisation; evidence that emerged post-1960s of Soviet penetration of ASIO. As to whether Horner has made me more sanguine about ASIO, the answer is no.

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