



## Law, politics and intelligence: a life of Robert Hope

by Peter Edwards, NewSouth, Sydney, NSW, 2020, 416pp., \$49.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781742235370

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Law, politics and intelligence: a life of Robert Hope**, by Peter Edwards,  
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As we enter what many are describing as a new Cold War, Australia does so with an intelligence community largely designed by Robert Marsden Hope at the height of the last one. It is an auspicious time, therefore, to highlight the man and reconsider his prescriptions with this new book by noted author and former official historian of the Australian War Memorial, Peter Edwards (*Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins*).

Edwards has expanded his 2011 monograph on the same topic into a highly-readable and thought-provoking work. It charts Hope's service in World War II, his career in property law as lecturer, barrister, and later justice of the NSW Supreme Court, as well as the loving family life he evidently enjoyed. He was not, suffice it to say, inclined to spend every waking hour on the law. His impressive roster of extra-curricular activities included: patron of theatre and the arts, long-time chancellor of University of Wollongong, pioneer of heritage conservation, and participant on the NSW Council for Civil Liberties, among many others.

Hope often seemed to find himself at the centre of things, whether by dint of luck or social connection. Returning from the Middle East by ship in 1942, he was among the troops which were the subject of the famous clash between Winston Churchill, who wanted them sent to Burma, and John Curtin, who wanted them for the defence of Australia; a watershed moment in Australia's foreign policy. In the late 1960s as a barrister, he was due to appear for the Commonwealth in a High Court case about just compensation for the traditional land-owners of Bougainville's Panguna mine, a dispute that later became a civil war. And his close friendships with the main players in the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975 – described by Edwards as a kind of civil war of the NSW legal fraternity – makes fascinating reading.

But it is the three inquiries and 16 key reports into Australia's intelligence services from the mid-70s to mid-80s where Hope made his greatest impact. Edwards argues that despite no relevant training or experience in intelligence, Hope's autodidacticism, his energetic pursuit of facts, and moreover, his instinct for moderation were the keys to producing such successful results. (Counterfactually, one might observe that there was arguably no independent scholarly field of intelligence studies at the time from which such an expert might be drawn; except American scholar Sherman Kent, whom Hope quoted in his reports.) Further, Hope looked gimlet-eyed at comparable intelligence services in the US and UK, taking the best ideas from each without being overawed by either. Quoting Allan Gyngell, Edwards describes the resulting Hope model: the wholistic consideration of the intelligence community, the centrality of intelligence assessment, and the need for across-the-board accountability. From the establishment of the Office of National Assessments (now the Office of National Intelligence), to the much-needed reform of ASIO, and the increased accountability of the whole system, Hope's recommendations have been implemented steadily over subsequent decades.



Edwards's book dwells on the consideration given to Hope for appointment to the High Court (a near miss), and later, Governor General. But rather than the greater heights that Hope's public career might have reached, readers may be prompted to wonder how differently things might have turned out for him had his youthful flirtations with joining the Communist Party detailed in the book resulted in ASIO's surveillance or in crueling his employment

prospects as reportedly happened to others. ASIO did not in fact keep a file on Hope; an interesting disclosure the book would have benefited from.

Edwards' fine work should be mandatory reading for those wishing to understand the intelligence community Australia has, the hard-fought balance between liberty and security we have enjoyed, and how fearless evidence-based reforms ought to be undertaken. Further, it is no small contribution to celebrate the example of a tireless, civic-minded yet totally unpretentious man, who left such an indelible mark on our most important institutions.

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