

**John Curtin's War, Volume One: the coming of war in the Pacific and reinventing Australia by John Edwards. Penguin Viking, 2018, 538 pp, RRP \$50.00.**

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When lists of Australia's greatest Prime Ministers are compiled, John Curtin is invariably at or near the top. He is something of a sentimental favourite: the man who waged a continuous, painful struggle against his personal demons; the physically and temperamentally ill-equipped wartime leader who triumphed against expectations; the tragic hero who died on the eve of victory.

There have been two previous biographies of Curtin, neither completely satisfactory. Lloyd Ross' 1977 book was a welcome start, but no more than that - certainly not in the same class as LF Crisp's *Ben Chifley*. In 1999, David Day published a lengthy biography of Curtin. Day is a capable historian and indefatigable researcher who falls down in one area: readability. He compulsively and indiscriminately piles up every fact he uncovers, ultimately to stultifying effect.

On the evidence of John Edwards' first volume, Curtin may have at last received the biography he deserves. Certainly, Edwards wins in the good read stakes. He is an elegant stylist, adept at providing context and personal detail without letting it take control of the narrative. It is easy to become absorbed in this book, effortlessly turning page after page. The axis Edwards uses to tell Curtin's story is that of Australia's role in the Second World War and the dramatic changes to national security and identity that ensued. He skillfully interweaves an account of Australia's time of greatest peril with Curtin's finest hour.

Wisely, Edwards includes no more than the necessary minimum about Curtin's early life, knowing this has already been covered exhaustively. He does, however, deftly sketch in the character of the man: normal, pleasant and popular but an alcoholic who suffered from depression; someone given to frenetic bursts of energy alternating with nervous and physical collapses; a compelling orator who was often shy and reserved in person. Above all, a man of sincerity, intellect, determination and vision. It was this that drove Curtin to undertake challenges that he knew would take a punishing toll on his fragile constitution. Yet, as Edwards also reveals, Curtin was not lacking in ambition and political guile.

Curtin had an impoverished upbringing, his family's struggle to survive being all too typical of the decades after the depression of the 1890s. He showed no great academic promise, but in Melbourne's socialist movement discovered a cause that gave direction to his life. It provided him with contacts, confidence, community, and ultimately a wife.

In 1911, Curtin became Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers' Union. In the First World War he was a radical anti-conscriptionist and was briefly gaoled as a result. Curtin moved to Perth in 1917 to become editor of the *Westralian Worker*. It was a life-changing move: he temporarily dried out, married and started a family, and was elected Federal ALP Member for Fremantle in 1928.

As a backbencher, Curtin endured the harrowing Depression years when the Scullin Government tore itself apart. He lost his seat in the anti-Labor landslide of 1931 but regained

it three years later. In October 1935 an exhausted Jim Scullin resigned as Opposition Leader. Although Frank Forde was the front-runner to succeed him, Curtin was a respected veteran who had a serious claim. As Edwards notes, he was 'known as an occasional drunk, but also a powerful speaker, with a mind that could grapple with difficult questions of economics and public finance' (p. 61). After quiet background canvassing, Curtin defeated a complacent Forde by 11 votes to ten.

As Opposition Leader, Curtin showed tenacity in defeating Jack Lang and restoring unity to the fissiparous NSW Branch, for so long a liability. He showed personal courage in giving up alcohol. Curtin's attention turned increasingly to foreign affairs and defence as the international situation deteriorated. Presciently, he questioned whether Britain would be able to send a fleet to Singapore, the cornerstone of Australia's defence strategy, if it was fighting a two-front war.

Gradually rebuilding Labor's strength, Curtin won an equal number of seats to the Government at the 1940 election. The Coalition maintained a fragile hold on power with the support of two Independent MPs. On 7 October 1941, Curtin became Prime Minister when they transferred their allegiance to Labor. Two months later, war with Japan broke out. Within three months, the Japanese had rolled up resistance in the Pacific. Australia was virtually defenceless and in mortal danger.

Edwards points out that the Pacific war placed huge demands on Curtin: 'As the leader of a small, imperilled nation at war with a much larger power, as the leader of a dominion in the British Empire, he must exert utmost political skill, the most delicate and the most brutal of pressures, to exercise what little influence he could to protect his country and create for it the most congenial place in the post-war world' (p. 329). Nothing 'had or could have adequately prepared Curtin for leading Australia in time of peril'. Yet he 'accepted the vast responsibilities without bother or complaint'. In fact, he seemed to be 'rather more comfortable, easy and clear-headed in making big decisions than in making smaller ones' (p. 325).

The first volume of *John Curtin's War* concludes with Curtin's rightly lauded but much misunderstood 'Australia looks to America' statement which Edwards places in its true context, and the return of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division to Australia, 'the most memorable military choice Curtin made in the Pacific war' (p405). Edwards says of the situation in March 1942: 'The Americans were coming. So were the Japanese' (p. 452).

There are blemishes in Edwards' account; for example, in his version of events in the NSW Labor Party in 1939 (pp. 164-5). The Federal Executive did not set up a provisional NSW Executive in May 1939 as stated. Bill McKell and Bob Heffron were not allies, but rivals to succeed Lang. They were not supported by an 'anti-Lang and left-wing group of union officials'. The opposition to Lang consisted of two groups: the radical left and Communists, and an anti-Lang and anti-Communist group of union officials which supported McKell. When the former group took control of the NSW Branch, the increasingly obvious Communist influence was an embarrassment to Curtin. Edwards does not mention that, as a result, the Federal Party again intervened in NSW in August 1940 to put McKell's supporters in charge. This largely defused the issue in the September Federal election when Labor made vital gains in NSW.

Surprisingly, Edwards does not mention John Hirst's provocative, negative reassessment of Curtin, 'Was Curtin the best Prime Minister?' (*Looking for Australia*, Black Inc, 2010). Perhaps, however, this is to come in the final volume. All the more reason to look forward to it.