The Spy Catchers. 
Vol. 1 of The Official History of ASIO. 

With the publication of the three-volume Official History of ASIO, edited by two-time official historian David Horner, citizens can effectively access a wealth of primary source material about the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. This is no small contribution. Debates surrounding the role of ASIO in the political fortunes of the Australian Labor Party, the labour movement and radical groups have often occurred with participants in an intoxicated haze of uncertainty. It is possible my grandfather, George Phillips, was targeted; he was mysteriously sent packing after only six months as a scientific instrument maker at the Long Range Weapons Establishment in Salisbury, Adelaide. But what is now known, in large part because of the Royal Commission on Intelligence and Security, was that ASIO was consumed by an irrational anti-communism. It is also clear that Labor was targeted because its brand of anti-communism was less aggressive than desired. The first volume, the Spy Catchers, is an attempt at vindication. Written by Horner, it takes the reader from predecessor organisations through the organisation’s creation in 1949, then ends with the 1963 Skripal affair.

Despite having been commissioned by the subject, a confidential contract existing between it and the Australian National University, for the historic sum of $1.76m, the reader is assured as to the objectivity of the final product. Indeed, ASIO originally sought ‘suitably qualified individuals or organisations who will be able to write a balanced, independent history using information sourced from ASIO’s archives’. The tender was awarded after two days. Horner assures readers that his total access to the ASIO archives, the decision to write the work at the university and the refusal to accept direction from ASIO (on all but sensitive material) guaranteed its objectivity. But this was merely precautionary since Horner’s view is that ‘an official history of an organisation is not the organisation’s view of its history and its assessment of its own achievements’.

Perhaps it is unofficial? No thoughts are offered as to any inspirational alignment that is likely to exist between a subject and the portraitist of its commission.

Over a sixth of the tome broaches the history of predecessor organisations. The picture painted of this period, 1916 to 1949, is that of well-intentioned, ex-military, bureaucrats struggling to overcome administrative and political difficulties. We see Major Harold Jones dominate the Executive government’s intelligence apparatus for some thirty years; a similar achievement later made by ASIO’s Brigadier Charles Spry. These organisations, like the Commonwealth Investment Branch (CIB) and Military Intelligence, were preoccupied with the rise of radical groups that actively, or seemingly, undermined the political and economic status quo in Australia. Again, something ASIO would inherit.

Horner utilises the history written by Jacqueline Templeton as part of the aforementioned Royal Commission. This from page 18:

The historian consulted… found little to suggest that the CIB was an effective counterspy organisation, and claimed that Military Intelligence "ultimately gained the ascendancy in the counter-espionage field". She concluded that "Australia entered World War II ill-equipped for security and intelligence work".

Horner is rather selective here. Templeton revealed that CIB had an entrenched practise of suppressing the opinions of communists, socialists and anarchists while allowing fascist proponents of Benito Mussolini to publish propaganda they knew to be subversive. This occurred past the declaration of war with Nazi Germany and up to the declaration of war with the Italian Empire. In the case of Nazi propaganda Templeton was unsure if publication approval ceased after the war started. What is more is Templeton’s argument that the actions of the agency typically reflected the views of the government of the day. As for Military Intelligence, it had contravened orders by actively seeking to undermine CIB to become the dominant intelligence agency. By excluding this context Templeton’s work is sapped of controversy. Spry was in charge of Military Intelligence from 1946 while two other future senior ASIO officials were also in the organisation. Horner’s treatment of Thomas Blamey, the only Australian field marshal, and his clandestine leadership of large, fascist, paramilitary groups before and after the Second World War is also given the lightest of touches.

Spy Catchers lists myriad reasons for ASIO’s creation in 1949: combating wartime espionage, distrust of Australia in the eyes of foreign intelligence agencies, the determination of military intelligence, the ineptitude of the pre-ASIO intelligence apparatus, the departmental heads of Defence and Attorney-General’s, advice from MI5, Soviet espionage, as well as the Chifley government’s efforts to counter negative perceptions in an election year. The royal commissioner, Justice Robert Hope, saw ASIO as the birthchild of the United States and United Kingdom. To its credit Spy Catchers demonstrates that there was considerable pressure placed on a reluctant government by both. It is a quirk in his logic that enables him to not think this foreign interference; these states were far more effective at shaping Australian policy making than the Soviet Union ever was. But far and above the reasons listed, we are told, was what George Orwell termed the ‘Cold War’.

Horner’s perspective of the Cold War owes more to Hollywood cutting rooms than the intellectual fortress at the base of Black Mountain. And so we are told Australia was a homogeneous mass, exhausted by the war, huddled, awaiting imminent invasion or worse. The extent to which this was true is not considered. Nor is the extent to which angst was manufactured; a surprising absence, especially in light of National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68). This top secret report of 1950, accepted by President Harry Truman, established that the Soviet threat was a mostly geopolitical problem isolated to Europe that could have been countered by the forces already existing there. The
ideological contest between communism and capitalism, as advanced by the report, would provide an agreeable context for global economic colonisation over the succeeding decades. No doubt the Soviet Union had spies in Australia and had in the leadership of the Communist Party of Australia a willing servant. But the suppression of a political party, the labour movement and proponents of the ideology of communism was blatantly anti-democratic, albeit historically consistent. ASIO’s Cold War fanaticism, mirroring the personality traits of Spry, had profound consequences. It must have understood that its actions would help the Coalition at the polls. To attest, as Horner does, to its innocence in the events of 1954-55, which left the Labor ship listing, is to declare it utterly incompetent.

Spy Catchers cannot be viewed as benign history. Conveying a subject’s perspective is very different from embracing with the occasional slight criticism. This is a successful panegyric that nettled some $45,000 in prize money. It was not until Horner wrote the Australian Dictionary of Biography entry on Spry that we learn of his alcoholism in the 1960s. It is nevertheless important for understanding ASIO in the time of Menzies. ‘Reading against the grain’ one can almost fashion gallows from its pages. Certainly, an expanded edition would include its thirteen steps. But the political ramifications of Spy Catchers are not lost on Horner: ‘ASIO’s officers were, and are, normal, dedicated Australians’. The book attracted positive reviews from former Labor leader Kim Beazley and former prime minister John Howard. We are told by George Brandis, the former Attorney-General, that Spry was ‘a very great Australian… who did more than Kim Beazley and former prime minister John Howard. We are told by George Brandis, the former Attorney-General, that Spry was ‘a very great Australian… who did more than

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