

Secret History: State Surveillance in New Zealand, 1900–1956.

By Richard S. Hill and Steven Loveridge.

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Reviewed by Doug Munro.¹

The historiography of state surveillance of citizens in New Zealand is meagre by comparison with that of Australia and Great Britain. This is partly a function of relative size but also a consequence of far greater restrictions on access to sources in New Zealand. The historiography of state surveillance in New Zealand before 1956 has been impoverished, until now. With the publication of Richard Hill and Steven Loveridge's *Secret History*, that part of the equation has been rectified, despite the difficulties they encountered along the way. In the first of a projected two-volume study, they place New Zealand on the map of global state surveillance historiography.

New Zealand's surprisingly long history of state surveillance commenced soon after British colonisation with operations directed against Māori, far more so than the immigrant population. The agency at the time was the police, often working in tandem with the military, whose clandestine operations were aided and abetted by an entourage of snitches. With the suppression of armed Māori resistance by the 1870s, the focus of attention shifted to those Europeans, 'whose views and activities were seen as potentially insurrectionary or dangerous to the state and its prescribed socio-economic order' (p. 27). To that end, police intelligence was heavily implicated in strike-breaking, but it did not end there. Left-wing organisations, such as the New Zealand Socialist Party, and left-leaning dissenters were targeted – as, again, was the case in Britain and Australia. This perceived 'threatscape' was broadly defined. The Nazi Party during World War II and some far-right agitators attracted attention, but the thrust of surveillance was directed at left-wing radicals, progressives and would-be reformers (p. 252).

Hill and Loveridge take us through a succession of organisational and operational changes to the state surveillance apparatus and its personnel. This includes the risible situation during World War II when operations were handled by a disturbingly incompetent Security Intelligence Bureau, a unit within defence forces, before reverting back to police auspices. By 1956, when Hill and Loveridge's narrative ends, state surveillance was in the hands of the more bureaucratised New Zealand Security Service (renamed as the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service in 1969), which persists to this day.

A recurring theme in *Secret History* highlights the 'mythscape' of New Zealand life and affairs. By that the authors mean the disjunction between New Zealanders' self-image and their country and, on the other hand, what was actually happening on the ground. The dominant discourse of a 'free, fair and exceptionally open society' was at odds with 'secret surveillance over people who were neither breaking the law nor pos[ing] any threat to state security' (p. 277). As the authors repeatedly demonstrate, the conformist and intolerant make-up of the time was in tune with the methods and rationale of state surveillance, which many in the populace doubtless endorsed. Contrary to the prevailing (and very self-satisfied) mythscape, New Zealand was what historian James Belich has described as a 'tight society',² of which state surveillance was one manifestation.

There are numerous similarities with Britain and Australia, notably that '[t]he expansion of state surveillance and its operational follow-up inevitably led to the erosion of a number of

civil liberties' (p. 90). Another obvious similarity was the creation of dossiers on the public and private lives of individuals, but therein lies the rub. ASIO and MI5 files are increasingly available to researchers. Unlike Britain and Australia, New Zealand has not commissioned an official history of its security intelligence efforts. Despite some 370,000 MI5 files being destroyed and numerous ASIO files being restricted, the sizeable remainder has led to important studies of the surveillance of intellectuals and writers in Australia and Britain – such as Fiona Capp's *Writer's Defiled* on the Australian side and James Smith's *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance*.³ The availability of MI5 files has also been used to good effect by the biographers of radical historians Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill.⁴

The New Zealand files, by contrast, are very largely off limits to researchers. The NZSIS wants it both ways: they say that the layperson cannot possibly understand the nature of security surveillance and its necessity, yet they deprive researchers the very material that would provide such enlightenment. This paucity had the unintended advantage that Hill and Loveridge's have not had to worry about their narrative being overwhelmed by case studies to the detriment of analysis, as in the case of David Caute's recent study of MI5 and British intellectuals.⁵

Hill and Loveridge have gone beyond the meagre enough official record in tracking down other sources of information, notably protagonists on both sides of the fence. They have adopted a rigorously empirical approach of cross-checking, verification, allowing conclusions to flow from the evidence, and striving 'to be objective, however elusive a goal that may be' (p. xii), meaning that *Secret History* contains more outright discussion of the veracity or otherwise of sources than is normally the case in a typical work of history. One can only imagine the travesty of a postmodernist approach to security intelligence.

With the onset of the Cold War, state surveillance in New Zealand was ramped up, as it was elsewhere, becoming ever more pervasive and intrusive, and in many cases inept. An example of the damaging effects this could have on individuals is demonstrated by the action taken in 1955 against the three organisers of a news sheet called *Newsquote*, a roneoed publication that reproduced articles from mainstream American newspapers. It attracted the attention of Special Branch, resulting in two of those involved having their public service careers ruined and a third's employment prospects jeopardised. That third person was Hugh Price, who later became the editor of Sydney University Press. In the 2000s, Price vigorously sought an explanation and an apology but received neither, although the then head of NZSIS did say that 'I am of the view that hindsight shows "Newsquote" to have been misjudged, and I hope this statement will give you the closure you desire' (p. 276).

More can be said about access to official records. When researching the history of suicide in New Zealand, 1950–2000, the stars aligned for John Weaver and myself.⁶ Not only were the coronial files available to the year 2000 at that point (they have since been restricted for 70 years from date of registration), but the Coroner's Court ensured that we had access to restricted material, the idea being that the results of our research would assist its own understanding of suicides – especially at a time when the idea was to bring suicide out of the closet and more into the realm of informed public discussion. This enlightened attitude contrasts marked with the endless difficulties and frustrations Barbara Brookes endured in trying to access mental health records. It was not simply that two competing narratives – privacy versus freedom of information – were having an abrasive effect on each other. It was even more a matter of inconsistent responses as she was shuffled from one government official to another and given different reasons for denial as a matter of course.⁷

In her history of mental depression in New Zealand, Jacqueline Leckie had the double misfortune of having to deal with officials in both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice, and she rightly points out that her reduced access to coronial files and the restrictions placed on their use was ‘very different’ to that experienced by John Weaver and myself.⁸ In cases of mental depression, one would think that families have every right to know about an institutionalised forebear, but as Leckie reveals, ‘repeated requests’ from one such family, have been denied by the Southern District Health Board.⁹ It is unconscionable.

A related issue is government departments’ long-established readiness to proscribe what can and cannot be said, and this includes vetting a researcher’s finished manuscript on grounds of expediency. In the early 1980s, Leckie’s PhD thesis was ‘withheld from public scrutiny because the Department of Labour objected to certain references which were obtained from immigration records’. It took a year of haggling to reach an agreement as to what should be deleted (the names of Dr R.A. Lochore and Sir Guy Powles) and how the relevant sentences be reworded.¹⁰ This willingness to interfere goes unabated, as Leckie more recently discovered with the Ministry of Justice.

To put it politely and rationally – in other words, to state the obvious – serious research into the social history of mental health and suicide (and surveillance of citizens for that matter) cannot feed into public policy if such research continues to be inhibited in the arbitrary way it presently is – seemingly dependant on the whim of individuals who instinct is to be over-cautious. Government departments should loosen up and develop consistent procedures for access to sources under their oversight, especially as it is in their own interests to do.

In sum, *Secret History* is a substantial, subtle and erudite contribution to the historiography of state surveillance of citizens. It deserves a wide readership in Australia and abroad, as well as in New Zealand.

¹ This review is an expansion of one published in *Recorder: Newsletter of the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, no. 308 (2024), 10–11. Reproduced with the kind permission of Phillip Deery and Julie Kimber.

² James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2001).

³ Fiona Capp, *Writers Defiled: Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals, 1920–1960* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1993); James Smith, *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴ Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (London: Little, Brown, 2019); Michael Braddick, *Christopher Hill: The Life of a Radical Historian* (London: Verso, 2025).

⁵ David Caute, *Red List: MI5 and British Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (London/New York: Verso, 2022).

⁶ John C. Weaver, *Sorrows of a Century: Interpreting Suicide in New Zealand, 1900–2000* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2014), 343–344.

⁷ Barbara Brookes, “Mental Health Record: Who Controls the Past?,” *Archifacts: Journal of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand* (April 2015): 8–16.

⁸ Jacqueline Leckie, *Old Black Cloud: A Cultural History of Mental Depression in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2024), 17.

⁹ Leckie, *Old Black Cloud*, 16.

¹⁰ Chairman of History Department to Academic Registrar, University of Otago, 27 August 1982, inserted in Leckie, “They Sleep Standing Up: Gujaratis in New Zealand to 1945” (PhD Thesis, University of Otago, 1981).