

Kawai barely mentioned in Australian history. A story dormant for over six decades.

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Preface from *Saving Australia*:

The story of Tatsuo Kawai in Australia is like a deep family secret buried by the passing years where family elders consider it best left undisturbed lest it opens old wounds. While the survivors of John Curtin and Tatsuo Kawai have been anything but discouraging, research on Kawai largely has lain dormant for over six decades, almost as though Australia as a nation has not been ready to hear unacceptable or non-traditional accounts of the war years involving Japan. Acceptance of John Curtin having a close relationship with a senior Japanese official in the lead up to war with Japan clearly does not sit comfortably the traditional Australian image of Curtin as the war leader.

Kawai is barely mentioned in Australian history. He and Curtin were utterly dissimilar yet from the moment they first met, Kawai was intrigued and charmed by 'this politician of such distinctive character.' Curtin began meeting with Kawai privately 'baring their hearts to one another', as a friend of Kawai wrote, amid the growing turmoil as Japan began expanding southwards into Indo-China.

Kawai's writings reveal that he and Curtin in Opposition in early 1941 had found the key to prevent war between Japan and Australia in a highly controversial and private agreement on trade. According to Kawai, Curtin agreed that if Japan would guarantee Australia's safety from attack, he would work towards lifting a national export ban on iron ore. Just two months before war with Japan, John Curtin became Prime Minister of Australia. Curtin and his foreign minister Herbert 'Doc' Evatt met frequently with Kawai. Curtin had come to realise that Japan was intent on expansionism. Evatt though continued to favor appeasement of Japan and believed, almost up until the first Japanese bombs fell, that he could prevent war. Evatt feared that a rigid American attitude was rapidly driving Japan into a war of desperation. Curtin and Evatt attempted, tentatively and with great caution, to mediate in the deadlock between Japan and the US. It is now known that the fleeting Australian intervention was two pronged – through Kawai in Australia and Australian envoy Richard Casey speaking with the Japanese in Washington.

Eventually it fell to a shocked Evatt to hand Tatsuo Kawai a copy of Australia's declaration of war against Japan. Even after the outbreak of war, Evatt told Kawai that he was above suspicion. Evatt was incredibly naïve about the ability of the Japanese to spy on Australia.

Life inside the suburban Melbourne mansion, *Carn Brea*, where Kawai and his staff were under house arrest, reveals a different side to Tatsuo Kawai. While the guarded house had its sinister intrigues, Kawai is revealed as more than a fervent nationalist. His colleagues spoke of his softness and his encouragement of younger staff to disagree with him and to freely speak their mind. Among them was Tamaye

Tsutsumida, Kawai's chosen private secretary and hostess, whose life would be become a tragedy.

*You are such that
every once in a while you tell a joke
and gently untie my heart*

Tatsuo Kawai had not only admiration for John Curtin but also for the enemy country, Australia. As Kawai prepared to depart Port Melbourne for Japan in August 1942, he called the outbreak of war the greatest blow he had ever suffered: 'Australians who know how I struggled to avert war in the Pacific will understand when I say that my spirit has been broken.' Back in Japan Kawai was ostracised by the militarists and retreated to his little thatched house by the sea at Manazuru. Here Kawai the enigma would re-emerge; with a darker, bewildering, unfathomable, outrageous side to his character. Struggling with the complex puzzle of Kawai's character, the author works to decipher the relationships. In the process he reveals the man's duality of character; Kawai at one moment is the strident and brash proponent of war, then when war comes he is the pacifist working to bring Japan's conflict to an early end, and finally when the great swirling madness dissipates, Kawai is the friend of a man considered by some as one of the most evil and monstrous Japanese war criminals ever to go unpunished – the very personification of evil. Could this man Kawai then be the same man who called John Curtin one of his best friends? Troubled, the author wrestles with the Japanese psyche and chips away at it, seeing Kawai variously as an uncompromising friend of fascists and warmongers, but then an unheralded Australian hero. In the end, strangely, he sees both.

While the Kawai story has lain dormant, the evidence has not been hidden. Kawai's more extremist views are in most major Australian libraries in the English language version of his 1938 book, *The Goal of Japanese Expansion* and his many statements in English and Japanese while director of Information at the Foreign Ministry are readily available. Sources for analysis also include the previously unpublished and now translated private works of Kawai, including his writings and poems of great beauty and poignancy - verse about his life and loves, John Curtin and the country of his obsession; Australia. Odes written after Kawai's death by his Japanese friends, relatives and diplomatic associates cast more light on his role in Australia and his closeness to Curtin. To this were added interviews with Kawai's surviving friends and relatives, including the revelations of the last surviving Japanese diplomat who served with Kawai in Australia in 1941 and 1942.

A valuable tool in interpreting wartime Australian affairs was the unpublished diaries of Melbourne Herald political reporter Joe Alexander, who was a part of Curtin's 'travelling circus' of Pressmen who were entrusted with the most hair-raising secrets of the war. The diaries revealed Curtin's inner thinking at critical times. As Alexander said, 'The day's doings were recorded each evening while the events described were red hot in my mind.'

Out of the Kawai-Curtin friendship in 1941, the families of the two men subsequently became islands of tolerance in a sea of hatred. They exchanged letters, advice, family snapshots, gifts and even visits between Japan and Australia. The actions of the two families worked in subtle mockery of both the White Australia policy and Japan's

racist isolationism, which amounted to much the same thing.

This untold story is often intriguing and ironic and yet, at times, incomprehensible. It unlocks some well kept secrets and valuable lessons from the past, especially in terms of fighting foreign wars to the neglect of our own region, throwing new light on the relationship between two nations and two men of long ago. #