THE PATRIOT

A landmark biography of John Curtin shows his strengths and weaknesses as a politician, wartime leader and ordinary man, writes James Curran
John Curtin’s War
Volume 1: The Coming of War in the Pacific, and Reinventing Australia
By John Edwards
Viking, 538pp, $49.95 (HB)

John Curtin remains a venerated figure in Australian life. His role as the country’s wartime supremo is etched deeply into the political and popular culture: the leader who put Australia first, locked horns with Winston Churchill, turned to the US and saved the nation in its darkest hour.

Just as many previous biographers have tended that flame of memory, so have Labor prime ministers genuflected to the Curtin legend, albeit in different ways.

Gough Whitlam lamented Curtin’s lost opportunity to continue the enlarged wartime powers of the federal government into the peace; Bob Hawke eulogised his ability to unite the nation in a time of existential crisis; Paul Keating elevated Curtin’s resistance to British duplicity; Kevin Rudd became dewy-eyed at the very sight of the former PM’s signature; Julia Gillard discovered his legacy could help assuage those who doubted her commitment to the US alliance.

Where some chroniclers have depicted Curtin as the resolute commander-in-chief, others have cast him as the worried, wavering leader, nervously pacing the moonlit grounds of the Lodge, fearing for the safety of Australian troops returning from the Middle East. The result is that too often we receive a picture of Curtin as the sum of his tortured parts rather than a singular political phenomenon.

The first volume of John Edwards’s study of Curtin at war, covering the period to March 1942, is a landmark in Australian political biography. His achievement is to at last liberate Curtin from the iron grasp of tired national and partisan myths, and to give us a more complete understanding of the man, his rise to power and his handling of the difficult circumstances and limitations he faced upon coming to office in October 1941.

The book is richly researched, finely judged, meticulously compiled and blends seamlessly the economic, political and strategic dimensions of the period. The result is a masterly account of Curtin’s attempt to not only drag a riven Labor Party into office, but also bring home to Australians the gravity of the danger they faced in early 1942.

Edwards is no stranger to writing about Curtin. In a previous work, Curtin’s Gift (2005), he noted that the many attempts to canonise “Saint Jack” had for too long clouded assessments of his performance in office. “There is much more to the Curtin story,” he wrote then, “than saying no to Churchill and Roosevelt, and somewhat less to that refusal than we commonly suppose.” In John Curtin’s War, Volume 1, Edwards remains true to his desire to transcend that stale narrative. He points out that while Curtin was an early supporter of greater defence self-reliance for Australia, he subsequently lost the clarity of that vision once war came; that while he wanted to keep Australia out of the war in Europe, he could not then
warn of the threat from Japan yet keep opposing conscription for home defence and increased defence spending: that he took to the 1940 election few differences with Robert Menzies on foreign policy.

After he became PM, Curtin did not institute an ‘Australia first’ program of immediately demanding the return of Australia’s divisions from the Middle East. Rather, he argued for their reinforcement. Likewise Australia’s aircraft crews continued to be sent to Britain and its ships remained under the command of the British admiralty.

Edward's conclusion is blunt: “Though he had for years warned of a Pacific war, Curtin did not prepare for one with much greater urgency than [Arthur] Fadden or Menzies.”

His treatment of Curtin’s iconic “look to America” statement of December 1941 is astute. Far from being the epiphany of Australian independence and rejection of the nation’s Britishness, this was an expedient call for help at a time when the nation was facing the prospect of a Japanese invasion.

Former PMs Alfred Deakin, Joe Lyons and Menzies had all previously appealed to the Americans to help Australia in its defence.

Curtin’s message was pronounced in far more dramatic circumstances, but it was consistent with the orthodox Australian foreign policy doctrine of searching for security in the Pacific. And in any case, after the fall of Singapore, Churchill seemed to support Curtin’s remarks by telling him that “your greatest support in this hour of peril must be drawn from the United States. They alone can bring into Australia the necessary troops and air forces, and they appear ready to do so.”

While this volume focuses mainly on the period from when Curtin became Labor leader to the time he became PM, Edwards also gives new insights into the nature of Curtin the individual. We see his evolution from the young radical socialist to one who, like the Labor Party itself in the 1890s, abandoned the picket line for parliament; we see his political teeth being cut in the bitter conscription crises of World War I and biting pain of the Depression.

We see, too, the effects of his taste for alcohol on those closest to him. When he was sprung drinking by his young daughter on the train from Melbourne to Canberra, his wife Elsie quickly confiscated Curtin’s hip flask and tossed it out of the window. He was, apparently, a bundle of nerves, telling Elsie just before becoming PM that his nature “more than ever” was “crying out for a holiday from strife”.

There was, as Edwards shrewdly observes, “some kind of moral authority” in Curtin, “difficult to define but undeniably there”. Less convincing, perhaps, is the claim here that this period “reinvented” Australia. It may have brought on a new world but it still reinforced the sense that the nation would need great-power protection to meet a regional threat.

What it did do was bring to life the nightmare scenario that Australians had feared since the beginning of the late 19th century, namely that the country would be left defenceless against Japan if Britain was engaged in simultaneous wars in Europe and the Pacific.

Curtin’s prescient doubts about the supposed impregnability of the British naval base at Singapore came true. But Edwards, looking to his next volume, knows Curtin did not see that failure as the catalyst for a new-found sense of Australian nationalism.

Indeed he would later attempt to resuscitate the concept and practice of imperial defence based not on subservience, but his belief that the empire should be made to work for the benefit of all its members. The period is notable, then, for underlining the resilience of the imperial ideal in Australian political culture.

Curtin, like Deakin, Andrew Fisher, Billy Hughes, Stanley Bruce, Lyons and Menzies before him, was a British-race patriot who vigorously pursued Australia’s distinctive political interests. Those interests, at times, grated uneasily against the powerful idea that Australians had of themselves as a British people.

Above all, Curtin wanted his country to be treated as an equal by London and Washington.

But that too would prove a struggle for him, as it had been in the past and would be for his successors.

James Curran is professor of modern history at the University of Sydney.