

Chester Wilmot Reports

Neil McDonald

Reviewed by Matt Brown

Chester Wilmot was one of the renowned Australian war correspondents of World War II and his 766-page 1952 history, *The Struggle for Europe*, is still acknowledged as a major overview work of the period. *Chester Wilmot Reports* is comprised mostly of the scripts of Wilmot's wartime broadcasts intermingled with vital notes from Neil McDonald explaining their context, insights into Wilmot's motivation and background to his struggles to report the war as he saw and understood it.

The nub of the book is first-hand reporting at its best and it should be compulsory reading for every strategic policy maker or analyst—and especially every journalist who considers reporting on armed conflict. Both the general reader and the military buff will enjoy reading Wilmot's scripts for the lucid descriptions of battle—and his appreciation of its significance.

Wilmot repeatedly offered a strategic, or at least a heightened, tactical overview even amidst the mud, dust and din, observing and describing the hardships and flow of battle on the ground. From a journalist's point of view, this is a major achievement and he does it with empathy for the fighting men he mixes with, interviewing them in the field and bringing their experiences to life.

Photos of the key players, Australian soldiers and Wilmot working on location are used a little too sparsely for this reviewer's hungry eyes. The picture of Wilmot broadcasting from Syria, a cloth wrapped around his microphone to protect it from the wind, his elbows propped on the back of a truck, demonstrate how little things have changed in sixty-odd years. It's almost the exact pose you could have seen several radio reporters adopting during the recent election campaign.

In the context of the present day debate about the value of 'embedded' journalists, Wilmot's 'embedded' but detailed and balanced accounts of battles in Papua New Guinea, Greece and Syria are instructive. In the context of the apparently perpetual 'war on terror' the book also provides real insights into the dilemmas of reporting conflict, in his case, a conflict that struck at Australia's sovereignty and very survival. How far should a journalist be allowed to go with a critique of the campaign being waged by those ordering their fellow Australians into battle? What are the costs of silencing critics in the name of preserving 'public confidence' and the 'morale of Australian forces'?

Some truly contentious material is included, such as Wilmot's overt and covert battle against General Blamey as the New Guinea campaign grinds on. Imagine an ABC reporter today telling John Howard to sack General Peter Cosgrove! But also imagine the looks on the faces of Blamey and Curtin when they read Wilmot's opening words

to a landmark report headed Observations on the New Guinea Campaign 26 Aug–26 Sep 1942: 'The situation, which resulted in the Japanese getting to within 35 miles of Port Moresby, appears to have been one which should never have arisen if enough troops, adequately trained and equipped, had been sent to New Guinea in time'. Wilmot's high-quality work is a timely reminder in this age of shrinking budgets, but increasing pressures for immediate news, of the value of having reporters in the field. *Chester Wilmot Reports* also sets a very high standard for modern journalists who produce books claiming to offer some insight or other into the events they have been privileged to observe. In comparison to Wilmot many of these latter-day compilations are just so much dross, even allowing for the usual claim that journalism is the first draft of history.

While Wilmot's broadcasting gear was heavy, cumbersome and technologically limited, he didn't let this hamper his performance and Wilmot's scripts remain great reading. In comparison, in this era of digitisation and miniaturisation in Baghdad this year, cameraman Tony Conolly and I had laptop computers and three satellite telephones to stay in touch with the rest of the world and send high quality video images and voice transmissions daily to the ABC in Sydney. The timeliness and technical quality this allows are hallmarks of modern broadcasting but the kit does not generate the pictures or words necessary to tell the story. Our computers cannot organise the thoughts or provoke the insight necessary for a good report. Wilmot's mastery of his craft, using only the basics, still provides great lessons to journalists and on-scene analysts of all types.

Wilmot's work isn't perfect and his relationships with key commanders, his contact with John Curtin and others, and his willingness to act as a sort of quasi-military intelligence analyst in some instances, warrant more attention. But, after reading this compilation of reports you'll feel that Ernest Hemingway's test of a good book has been met, 'you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse, and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was'.

That is as good as Wilmot's audience at the time could ask. Today, we could have done with a little more analysis of Wilmot's choices, his motivations and foibles. This reviewer was hungry for more detail about Wilmot's way of working, his dealings with politicians and military commanders and context about his life and times. Hopefully, these gaps will be filled in McDonald's forthcoming Wilmot biography. ♦

Neil McDonald, *Chester Wilmot Reports: Broadcasts that Shaped World War II*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2004, Casebound and jacketed, 401pp., RRP \$49.95. Matt Brown, a federal political reporter for ABC Radio, reported from Baghdad on the transition to Iraqi sovereignty in June and July this year. He is shortly to take up the position of ABC Middle East Correspondent in Jerusalem.

