Preface

Sir Arthur Tange was perhaps the most powerful Secretary of the Australian Defence Department and one of the most powerful of the great ‘mandarins’ who dominated the Commonwealth Public Service between the 1940s and the 1970s. Here ‘powerful’ means having a strong, and often decisive, influence on both administration and policy. Tange exerted that influence by virtue of his intellectual capacity, his administrative ability and the sheer force of his personality. He served as Secretary of the Defence Department from 1970 to 1979, the last decade of his career, having previously served as Secretary of the Department of External Affairs (later renamed Foreign Affairs) from 1954 to 1965.

Tange wrote this account in his last years. The last draft was dated 6 November 2000, about six months before his death on 10 May 2001 at the age of 86. It is a memoir rather than an autobiography, being based largely on memory supplemented by limited reference to documentary material. He worked on it in his home in the Canberra suburb of Manuka, tapping at an ageing typewriter on his dining-room table, while I was working in his study on a full-length biography. That biography, Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins (Allen & Unwin, 2006), made use of this text as well as his personal papers (now held in the National Library of Australia as MS9847) and other documentary and oral sources.

While that book gives a full account of his life, many friends, family members and former colleagues wanted to see his own account. Controversies from his time in Defence, including those associated with ‘the Tange report’ and ‘the Tange reforms’, echo to this day, and it is still easy to identify both staunch admirers and vitriolic critics in defence and public service circles.

This memoir says little about Tange’s life and career before he came to Defence in 1970. He intended to write a similar memoir of his time in External Affairs, but only a few preliminary passages had been sketched by the time of his death. Nevertheless, one of the major themes implicit in this memoir (and argued in greater detail in the biography) is the extent to which his administrative decisions and policy advice in Defence in the 1970s were based on his experience in External Affairs in the 1950s and 1960s. As Secretary of External Affairs, for example, he was a member of the Defence Committee, the most important source of advice to the Government on defence policy. Through that and other associations, Tange had a close view of the relevant Ministers and their most senior advisers, uniformed and civilian. This account shows what lessons he derived from that experience and how he applied those lessons when he, rather unexpectedly, became Secretary of the Defence Department.
Arthur Tange (1914–2001)

Arthur Harold Tange was born in Sydney on 18 August 1914. His father, Charles Louis Tange, was a lawyer who moved from Sydney to an orchard property at Mangrove Mountain, near Gosford on the Central Coast of New South Wales. This proved a rash investment, losing the family much of the financial and social status that had been gained by Charles’s father, Anton Tange, who had emigrated from Denmark in 1854. Although he was the seventh and youngest child of his father’s two marriages, Arthur’s upbringing was in many ways more like that of an only child. He attended Woy Woy Primary School and Gosford High School, matriculating with good results although aged only 16. With the Depression starting, Arthur was fortunate to get a job with the Bank of New South Wales, of which the General Manager (the position today known as the Chief Executive Officer of Westpac) was Sir Alfred Davidson, who was married to Arthur’s oldest half-sister. Davidson’s support not only secured Arthur a job, but also enabled him to go to university. He studied arts, majoring in economics, at the University of Western Australia (UWA). Arthur took an honours degree, then regarded as a post-graduate qualification, writing a thesis on the Australian banking system. In later life Arthur liked to speak of the three great achievements of his student days in Perth: he gained a first-class honours degree; he played rugby for Western Australia against the Springboks; and he won the hand of Marjorie Shann, daughter of the UWA professor of economics and history, Edward Shann. Arthur and Marjorie were married at Christ Church, Claremont, on 19 November 1940. They subsequently had two children, Christopher John, born in Canberra on 7 April 1944, and Jennifer Jane, born in New York on 31 January 1947.

The Bank of New South Wales employed Arthur first in the Economic Department, the bank’s think tank in Sydney, and then in Fiji. After the outbreak of war in 1939 he was protected under the manpower regulations from being called up for military service, but in 1942 he was recruited, as a temporary research officer, to the Department of Labour and National Service. His division soon became the Department of Post-War Reconstruction (DPWR), in which Arthur spent much of his time working on the international negotiations, principally with the United States and the United Kingdom, over the Lend-Lease agreement. In 1944 he was a member of the small Australian delegation to the international conference at Bretton Woods, which established the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Towards the end of the 1939–45 war, the Department of External Affairs (DEA) developed an interest in economic aspects of international affairs. For some months Tange’s services were shared between DPWR and External Affairs,
until in 1946 he joined the DEA full-time. He was immediately posted to the Australian Mission to the United Nations in New York, where his colleagues included one of his future Ministers, Paul Hasluck. On his return to Canberra, he rose quickly to a senior position in the small and youthful External Affairs. In 1953, Tange was sent to the Australian Embassy in Washington, with the diplomatic rank of Minister. The Government probably hoped that, as deputy head of mission, he would curb the tendency of the Ambassador, Sir Percy Spender, to act as if he were still the Minister for External Affairs. This task, however, proved too much for Tange.

Within a year, the Minister for External Affairs, R.G. Casey (later Lord Casey), offered Tange the position of Secretary of his Department. Tange took up the post in early 1954, aged 39. Over the next eleven years he proved a strong leader, reforming and modernising many aspects of the Department’s administration and greatly improving its ability to give the Government well-informed advice on foreign policy. Within weeks of his taking up the post, External Affairs had to handle the breach in relations with the Soviet Union occasioned by the Petrov affair. The subsequent years saw considerable growth in the Department’s capacity to represent Australia abroad, especially in Asia, and to advise the Government. There were also numerous international crises, including those associated with Suez, Laos, West New Guinea, Indonesia and Malaysia, and Vietnam. In some cases Tange was at the heart of Australian policy-making; in others, most notably the Australian commitment to Vietnam in 1964–65, he appears to have been deliberately excluded from influence.

This partly reflected his changing relationship with his Ministers, who were four of the most significant politicians of the twentieth century: Casey, Robert Menzies, Garfield Barwick and Paul Hasluck. Tange had an almost filial relationship with Casey and a close and effective working relationship with Barwick. Menzies’ attitude towards Tange seems to have been adversely affected during the two years that Menzies was Minister for External Affairs as well as Prime Minister (1960–61), but the chilliest relationship was with his former colleague in New York, Hasluck.

Tange was knighted in 1959, the year he turned 45, and from then on was almost invariably known as ‘Sir Arthur’. He had previously been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1953 and Commander in the same order (CBE) in 1955. Later, after the introduction of an Australian honours system, he was made a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in 1977.

In 1965 Tange was dispatched as High Commissioner to India, the only head-of-mission appointment in his diplomatic career. There he remained for five years, often thinking that he would never be offered another ambassadorial or other senior appointment. Then, in late 1969, he was successively offered, in circumstances that mingled weighty decisions with farce, the three most
important positions open to an official working in national security: those of ambassador in Washington, Secretary of the Defence Department, and his former post as Secretary of External Affairs. Although he had started preparing himself for Washington, he turned that option aside in order to become Secretary of Defence.

Tange served there from early 1970 until his retirement at the time of his 65th birthday in August 1979. This period included two changes of government, from the conservative coalition to Labor and back to the coalition. The Prime Ministers and Ministers for Defence whom he served included John Gorton and Malcolm Fraser in both capacities, as well as William McMahon, David Fairbairn, Gough Whitlam, Lance Barnard, William Morrison, and James Killen. These were years of major, often controversial, reform in the administration of Defence, which at times brought Tange to public attention. His report on the reorganisation of the Defence group of departments, generally known as ‘the Tange report’, charted the way for the Departments of Navy, Army, Air and Supply to be merged into the Department of Defence, a process often known as ‘the Tange reforms’. These administrative reforms were closely linked to changing ideas on strategic policy, including the relative importance of alliance commitments and developments in Australia’s immediate neighbourhood in the shaping of Australian defence policy.

This memoir is Tange’s own account of his part in those administrative reforms and policy shifts. It also records his involvement—or non-involvement or alleged involvement—in several of the political crises of the 1970s, including the downfall of John Gorton as Prime Minister and the dismissal of the Whitlam Government.

The memoir closes with some brief comments on events in his retirement and reflections on his life and career, especially his relations with many ministers and Prime Ministers. Sir Arthur Tange died on 10 May 2001. His funeral service was private, but a State Memorial service was held in Parliament House, Canberra, on 24 May 2001.

Editorial note
This memoir was written very late in Sir Arthur Tange’s long life. Earlier in his retirement, he had written a short family history, entitled Looking Back, which was perhaps a better example of his skill as a writer. Tange was always fond of writing but recognised that, throughout his life, he was inclined to be prolix and to insert too many qualifying phrases into a single sentence. Some errors found their way into the text, some no doubt occasioned by the difficulty of reading his typescript with its many handwritten annotations and amendments. Several individuals were identified only by surnames, and he was not always consistent in spelling terms such as ‘South East Asia’ and ‘Southeast Asia’.
In editing the text, I have kept editorial interventions to the minimum. In a few cases, I have adjusted the word order, punctuation and/or syntax to make the meaning clear, but have restricted that practice to the occasions when it seemed absolutely necessary. Where appropriate I have added forenames and positions. Footnotes have been added where they seemed necessary, including those cases where Tange had specifically indicated that he wanted sources to be noted. References to other relevant works have been made where that seemed especially appropriate, but not to the above-mentioned biography, as such references would have appeared on almost every paragraph. Readers should assume that this memoir will be of greatest value if read in close coordination with the relevant passages of the biography.

Throughout, I have sought to preserve not only the meaning but also the style and tone of Tange’s text. For example, Tange’s use of capital letters for words such as ‘Service’, ‘Department’ and ‘Minister’ have been left unchanged, as a reminder that these are the words of someone who had followed Public Service conventions for several decades.

Acknowledgements

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