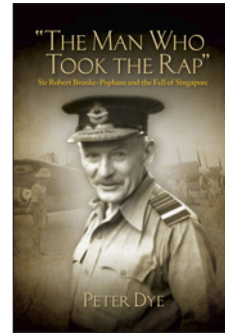


## Book Review

# The Man Who Took The Rap: Sir Robert Brooke-Popham and the Fall of Singapore



By Peter Dye

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Reviewed by Air Commodore (Retd) Prof Peter Gray

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**Biography:** Professor Peter Gray retired from the Royal Air Force in June 2008, having reached the rank of Air Commodore (1\*). He was the RAeS Senior Research Fellow in Air Power Studies at the University of Birmingham until 2018 and is now RAeS Chair of Air Power Studies at the University of Wolverhampton. Gray spent his early career as a navigator on the F4 Phantom and, more recently, commanded 101 Squadron flying VC10 K tanker aircraft. Gray holds degrees from the Universities of Dundee, London, Cambridge and Birmingham (PhD). He is a Fellow of the RAeS, the Institute of Leadership and Management and the Royal Historical Society.

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## Introduction

**A**ir Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was appointed as Commander-in-Chief Far East in October 1940: Singapore fell to the Japanese invasion in early 1942, an event which is widely symbolised as the end of the British Empire. At the time, Churchill described this in the *Hinge of Fate*, (the fourth volume of his self-serving memoirs of *The Second World War*) as 'the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British History'. In the same paragraph, Churchill stated that he, and Parliament, had taken the view at the time that a Royal Commission into the defeat was not practical. Characteristically, he went on to suggest that his chapter was not a substitute for such a court. At the time, and subsequently, Brooke-Popham was widely condemned and vilified in the Press and in Parliament. The contemporary criticism was regrettable, but possibly understandable in the quest for a scapegoat, or even a villain. The reality was that the empire had been in general decline for many years; or possibly more correctly, British power on the world stage was being eclipsed as the century evolved. The subtleties of such arguments were, and

are still, easily swept aside. It was far easier to deride Brooke-Popham as a 'nincompoop' or worse. Politicians, and other decision makers of the era, were more than content to let Brookie (as he was more generally known) carry the can than to encourage a deep analysis of their own roles in policy decisions taken throughout the inter-war period when Britain's resources just could not cope with providing a credible defence of possessions in the Far East. Brooke-Popham's sixteen-month tenure could hardly have changed the course of history and more important folk than him would have been in the firing line.

In *The Man Who Took The Rap*, Peter Dye has sought to offer a more nuanced version of the events leading to the Fall of Singapore and, in some way, belatedly speak on behalf of Brooke-Popham who chose never to do so for himself. The Singapore section of this book makes it essential reading for all students of the conflict in the far east as well as those interested in the wider history of the Second World War. But the book goes well beyond this, and to many readers of *Air and Space Power Review*, it will be the biographical aspects of this leading and highly influential airman which will be of great interest. Brooke-Popham's influence spanned whole generations of air force personnel and included his time as an active pilot on the western front; his tenure as Commandant in the early years of the RAF Staff College at Andover and subsequently at the Imperial Defence College; his preparations for the Air Defence of Great Britain; as Inspector General of the RAF; and as an Imperial Governor. After his retirement, Brooke-Popham was well known to RAF Staff College students at Bracknell for the named essay prize given for the best dissertation. So, this book effectively is a full-scale biography of Brooke-Popham in the context of his life and times and is to be commended for that alone.

In an era of broader contemporary, or modern, history, traditional biographies of great men and women have gone out of vogue. The reasoning behind this goes well beyond the fickle whims of academe. A sizeable portion of contemporary readers of military histories prefer tales of 'derring-do' at the tactical level, of individual 'heroes' or, more often, of groups made up of brave folk often in the face of their incompetent or heartless leaders. A more pragmatic reason for the demise of the traditional biography is the difficulty in shedding the shackles of hagiography. If an author is dependent on access to family archives for research material, it may be necessary to tone down criticism of the subject. It is also all too easy to become immersed in the story, the context and personnel and, at least, exhibit a less than critical sympathy with the subject at hand. It is therefore no surprise that a scholar's library remains full of dated biographies.

In this work, it is clear that Pete Dye did have excellent access to family papers and to the family members themselves; the Foreword by Francis Philip Brooke-Popham is immediate evidence of this. There is also a noted sympathy for the Brooke-Popham himself. But this does not amount to hagiography. Peter Dye writes with too much authority for such a charge to be sustainable. His scholarship, and outstanding deployment of historical sources in support of his arguments, provide him with more than an adequate defence. Furthermore, the same skills

shed considerable light on various episodes of British and RAF history that are most welcome. This book is therefore a highly welcome addition to the canon of British air power literature and has considerable further merits to commend it to a wider audience.



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