



BOOKS

WIKILEAKS

Genius or stranger in a strange land?

THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN THE WORLD

By Andrew Fowler
 Melbourne University Press, \$32.99

REVIEW RAFAEL EPSTEIN

ONLY five years ago, before he became a surprise cultural and political phenomenon, Julian Assange was living in cheap rental accommodation in Grattan Street, and the hacker turned internet activist came up with a catchphrase for his nascent project — on a whiteboard in his bedroom he wrote in capital letters the name WIKILEAKS.

Colourful details such as this flow out as the tale unfurls in Andrew Fowler's book. Since then Assange has exposed America's secret thoughts on everything from secret plans to invade Iran through to petty local politics in dozens of countries, released vast tracts of detail on the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, fallen out with other major WikiLeaks figures, descended into court action against reporters at *The Guardian* and traded barbs with *The New York Times*. All because he wanted to introduce kleptocracies, dictatorships and democratic governments to the kind of perverse and ever-present electronic scrutiny that most individuals have long been subject to.

Not too shabby. These are the reasons Andrew Fowler calls Assange a "genius" and *The Most Dangerous Man in the World* is a pacy and detailed addition to the rapidly expanding library of material on Assange: four books and counting, as well as a DreamWorks film, which will apparently be

"Woodward and Bernstein meets Stieg Larsson meets Jason Bourne".

Fowler leaves out much of the detailed work that belongs to others. He doesn't track the weird, intricate evolution of the Swedish sex charges and he doesn't mention *The Guardian's* claim that Assange blithely said of American informants named by WikiLeaks that "if they get killed, they've got it coming to them, they deserve it". Assange says he is now suing the newspaper for libel.

However, Fowler adds his own research, throwing in good detail about the AFP and ASIO efforts against Assange. The well-structured narrative also elicits judgments from Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers and was labelled "the most dangerous man in America" by Henry Kissinger — with Fowler's title implying Assange follows in Ellsberg's footsteps.

But Fowler leaves it to Ellsberg to point out that while Assange has global prominence it is "Bradley Manning rather than Assange, [who] is more like him", steering the spotlight onto the Army intelligence analyst languishing in solitary confinement in a US military prison, charged with being the source for WikiLeaks' biggest scoops.

Ellsberg should know. He spent more than a year painstakingly photocopying Pentagon documents, and could not persuade friendly US Senators to release them in Congress. Manning electronic-



Julian Assange holds up his Sydney Peace Prize after receiving the award in London this month.

PICTURE: REUTERS



ally copied staggering volumes of information while lip synching to Lady Gaga's *Telephone* but ended up confessing to the shadowy blogger who dobbed him in because, according to Fowler, he'd "been pushed to one side by Assange and felt increasingly isolated".

WikiLeaks' supposed neglect is one of the telling details and crucial judgments that add to what we know. Fowler reveals where Assange misled, misjudged and made mistakes, cutting through the blogosphere of celebrity-tinged coverage that threatens to overshadow the source and the documents themselves.

On Assange's dealings with women, Fowler gives some forthright commentary: "What happened next is rather routine for Julian; he bedded the hostess." And he reveals that Assange did not demur when asked whether he'd threatened a colleague with the words "if you f--- up I will hunt you down and

kill you" because he believed his colleague had risked the anonymity of sources.

The ABC veteran only had to interview Assange, not work with him, so he is less caustic than others when he writes of the destined-to-deteriorate arc of so many of Assange's professional relationships.

There's Daniel Domscheit-Berg, the threatened colleague who designed the crucial electronic drop box that allowed anonymous data dumps, technology Assange no longer has access to. And Birgitta Jonsdottir, the Icelandic MP who helped conceive of her country as a legally safe base for the whistleblowers global servers, who also is now estranged.

Fowler reserves special venom for *The New York Times*, whose executive editor, Bill Keller, derided WikiLeaks' impact, saying it "has probably been overblown" and that he "would hesitate to describe what WikiLeaks does as journalism". [It didn't stop the *NYT* producing a book on Assange and using WikiLeaks documents given to it by *The Guardian* — without Assange's permission — to scoop its rivals.]

According to Fowler, the paper pushed Assange out to arm's length because it ran the risk of being implicated in a crime; "an act of bastardry [that] took some beating".

Fowler left out one detail I'd include. Last year, Assange's lawyers sent out a mock Christmas card with a simple message: "Dear Kids, Santa is Mum & Dad. Love. WikiLeaks."

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