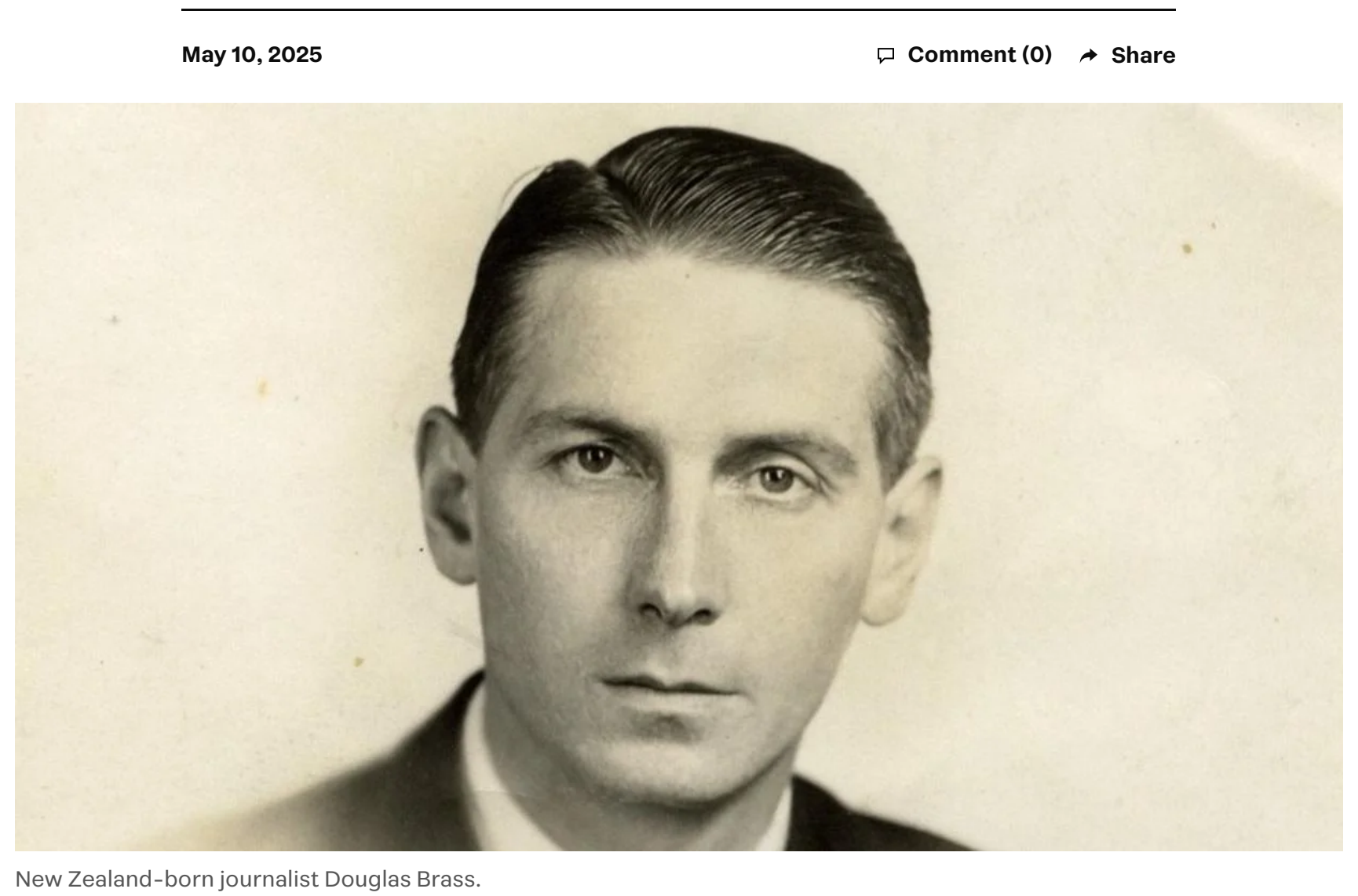
Nominate your Local Business Hero
for a chance to win up to $500*
Local Business Hero 2025 BY Prospa
Nominate
*See T&Cs for prize information
ADVERTISEMENT: WHAKATAIRANGA

From Invercargill to Africa: A reporter's life

Philip Matthews | THE PRESS

May 10, 2025

Comment (0) Share



New Zealand-born journalist Douglas Brass.
SUPPLIED

PHILIP MATTHEWS learns why forgotten newspaperman Douglas Brass is back in the spotlight.

Who was Douglas Brass? Thousands of people read him once, but very few would know the name.

That is often true of journalists, even those who witness world-changing events and write the first drafts of history. If they are lucky, proper historians might later rescue them from oblivion. But most are unlucky.

Christchurch business adviser and author Peter Cox had two links to Brass: one through his wife's family and the other through his personal interests. The result is Cox's third book, *Tunis is Mad Tonight: The Life and Times of New Zealand Journalist Douglas Brass.*

Brass in Australian infantry uniform, with his son Alister in 1942.
SUPPLIED

First, some facts about Brass. He was born Henry Douglas Brass in Invercargill in 1910 and died in Melbourne in 1994. He went to Southland Boys' High School and then Waitaki Boys' High School. The second of those schools was crucial.

While at university in Christchurch he worked part-time at *The Press*, which he joined full-time in 1934. It was a good time to be on the paper. Poet Denis Glover was around and became a life-long friend. Artist Rita Angus contributed to the children's page. Poet Allen Curnow joined in 1935.

This was part of the arts scene labelled "Bloomsbury South" by writer Peter Simpson in his book about Christchurch between the 1930s and 50s.

Brass was reporting from Parliament for *The Press* when he was just 24. He talked about the challenges of "digging up stories from rumours and reports and hints and trying to persuade ministers to make statements and answer questions". Not much has changed.

ADVERTISEMENT
ADVERTISE WITH STUFF

He moved to Melbourne and worked for legendary journalist and media boss Keith Murdoch. Wartime found him back in New Zealand as the Melbourne *Herald*'s correspondent before he enlisted and went to North Africa. He got the break that put him on the global stage, as Cox sees it, when his report on the German surrender at Cape Bon made the front page of the London *Evening Standard* and other papers.

As he dug through the clippings, Cox was struck by the literary quality of Brass' reporting. This was him at the liberation of Tunis, in a scene that gave the book its title.

"We had literally to force our way through the crowds," he wrote. "Men clung to the running boards, seized our hands, shouted 'Vive l'Angleterre' and kissed our cheeks. There were five bereted Frenchmen riding on our roof and seven on the bonnet. Children were thrusting themselves against the very wheels of our car; women were weeping and waving handkerchiefs and flags, and throwing kisses.

"We felt like Lindbergh on Fifth Avenue.

Brass in North Africa, 1943.
SUPPLIED

"Militant friendliness, relief and happiness are shining in every eye, and there are shouts of 'De Gaulle, Eisenhower, Montgomery'."

After the war, Brass stayed on in London and covered the reconstruction of Europe. He was in Germany for war crimes trials and wrote that he saw German children "waiting outside in the dismal sleet to pick up cigarette ends". The survivors looked like "so many dispirited animals, huddling in groups at night for warmth, foraging by day for food".

"He was a very perceptive man," Cox says. "A very human guy. A lot of his writing is about the impact of these events on ordinary people. Particularly the ones in Germany. I found that really moving."

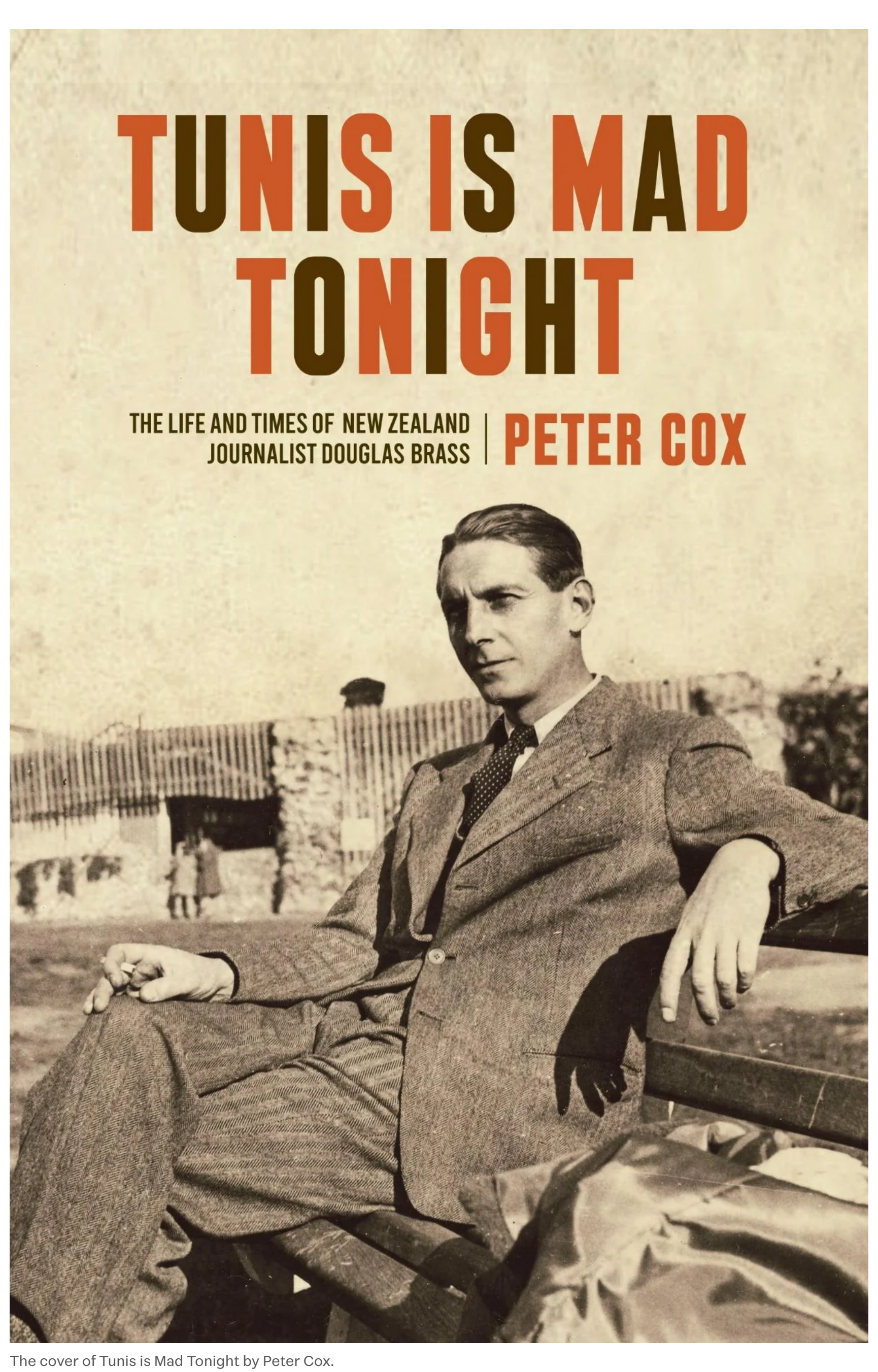
The Waitaki boys

This is Cox's third book. His first started as an answer to his son's question about what granddad did during the war, titled *Good Luck to All the Lads: The Wartime Story of Brian Cox 1939–43.*

He followed that with *Desert War: The Battle of Sidi Rezegh*, a deeper dive into the North African battle his father fought in.

He was onto a book about the war in North Africa and national identity before he was diverted by circumstances. Brass was Cox's wife Robin's great uncle and after Robin's mother died, Cox was handed stacks of old newspaper clippings, letters and photos. There was a book here, and Cox chose to take it in a less expected direction.

The clue is in the emphasis on Waitaki Boys' High School. While he was there, Brass became friends with James Bertram, Ian Milner, who was the son of the school's rector, and Charles Brasch. Bertram and Milner were both Rhodes Scholars at Oxford in the 1930s, along with another ex-Southland boy, Geoffrey Cox. Brasch, a poet, founded *Landfall* magazine and helped invent New Zealand literature.



The cover of Tunis is Mad Tonight by Peter Cox.
SUPPLIED

Cox adds Brass to this celebrated cohort of bright young New Zealanders and sees the culture of Waitaki Boys' High School as central to it. Bertram called the school an "imperial nursery, a Rugby of the South Seas".

And then there was the Christchurch of Glover, Angus and Leo Bensemann, with whom there is another link.

"My mother Peggy was the sister of Leo Bensemann, the artist and Caxton Press man," Cox says. "She lived in Christchurch in the late 30s and early 40s and knew a lot of those people too. She was the one always pulling the books out at home for us to read. She was a big influence.

"I can remember *Landfall* magazines arriving when I was at primary school. Virtually all the sources that I mention in there are books I've got myself and know well."

He has signed copies of books by D'Arcy Cresswell and Ngaio Marsh, and not as a collector but because this stuff has come down to him.

In Peter Simpson's *Bloomsbury South*, there is even a photo of his mother, with her brother Leo and the artist Rita Angus. It is pure Christchurch bohemia.

So there is the interest in war and the interest in New Zealand's literary history. Cox, who is now 76 and dislikes the word "retired", is still working part-time and still has more books to write.

Cox, the author of Tunis is Mad Tonight and other books, is 76 and not retired.
WILLIAM SMITH / SUPPLIED

Christchurch is a small world with strange connections. Cox's long career in business governance included a stint as chairman of the board at Ballantynes. Rita Angus worked there too, but not at the same time, he hastens to add.

The Murdoch years

In many ways, the immediate post-war years were as interesting for Brass as the war years. He was in Israel in 1948 and observed the new country's "stubbornness of spirit", a refusal by "the extremists" among them to slacken up or compromise. That might seem prescient.

He covered royal tours and was in the media pack when Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip were in New Zealand over the summer of 1953 and 1954. In Christchurch, he caught up with his old friend Denis Glover, whose marriage and career were "in tatters". But the city looked pretty and nostalgic.

As a royal correspondent, he felt sorry for Princess Margaret when she was forbidden from marrying Peter Townsend. He reflected on England, "a funny old country full of shams, compromises, humbugs, inconsistencies, contradictions, mystifications, hypocrisies, injustices".

He later observed "Britain is a little bit ashamed" when it hanged murderer Ruth Ellis in 1955.

But Brass could also be critical of New Zealand, which he saw as complacent, with a false sense of superiority towards Australia and lacking in high culture. Like many Pākehā of his generation, especially expats, he had a blind spot when it came to Māori and wrote that New Zealand had "no serious native or colour problem".

"He would have had virtually no contact with Māori at the time he was growing up in Invercargill and even in Christchurch," Cox says.

Brass in Kenya, covering the Royal Tour, in 1952.
SUPPLIED

While in the UK, Brass mentored Keith Murdoch's ambitious son, Rupert, and became a News Ltd executive once he returned to Australia. He and his wife, Joan, had one son, Alister, who predeceased them.

He stayed in Australia but there was another New Zealand link to come. As a Murdoch man, he helped to launch the *Dominion Sunday Times*, the ancestor of the *Sunday Star-Times*, after News Ltd invested in the *Dominion*. This came with another problem, as the man who had risked his life in North Africa "did not regard Wellington Airport as being safe".

Towards the end of his time working for Murdoch, Brass became famous for trenchant anti-Vietnam War columns in *The Australian*. One published soon after the My Lai massacre became public asked, "How much longer can we Australians stomach this filthy war that the hapless Americans have got us into?"

As for the young boss, Brass thought the junior Murdoch was "warm-hearted and generous, hyperactive and adventurous". But he also thought he was ruthless and wielded power in a less "gentlemanly" fashion than his father had. Like other News Ltd executives, he opposed the move into UK tabloids.

Cox met Brass a few times before his death. People used words like taciturn, elegant, severe, formal, patrician, dour and suave to describe him. They add up to a man who was not easy to get to know.

"Even talking to the family, you'd ask what he was like, and they'd say he was just Doug," Cox says. "They found him really hard to describe. He was friendly and amicable, but very reserved. Very quiet."

But what a career. Here is a largely forgotten New Zealander who made an impact.

Tunis is Mad Tonight: The Life and Times of New Zealand Journalist Douglas Brass, by Peter Cox (Quentin Wilson Publishing, $45).

Philip Matthews • Senior writer
philip.matthews@press.co.nz
Philip Matthews is a senior feature writer for The Press, with more than 15 years' experience.

Add or View Comments (0)

THE PRESS

Share

homed LOCAL PROPERTY SPOTLIGHT
Christchurch
Ray White
Bring Your Vision to Life!
692b Weedons Road, Rolleston, Canterbury
Emma Langton-George
Harcourts
Packed with Potential
17 Wyatt Place, Russley, Canterbury
Josh Hilbers
BAYLEYS
Breathtaking views in an enviable location
24 Highview Lane, Scarborough, Christchurch City
Angela Webb
Complete Rural Pack
117 Swamp Road, Spri
Justin Le Lievre
LICENSED UNDER REAA 2008

Copyright © 2025 Stuff