

Introduction

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David Sissons was born on 21 December 1925 and attended Scotch College in Melbourne, from which he matriculated in 1942. He spent one year at University of Melbourne, reading classics, before being called up for active service on 27 June 1944, aged 18. He was at a training camp at Cowra, New South Wales, at the time of the mass breakout of Japanese prisoners from the nearby prisoner-of-war camp on 5 August, and was involved in rounding up those who had escaped. After eight weeks at the training camp, he was sent for seven months of Japanese-language training and, between April and September 1945, he worked as a linguist/translator in the D Special (Diplomatic Special) Section, a highly secret unit of the Australian Military Force HQ in Melbourne, involved in cryptographic decoding. Little or nothing was known about the D Special Section until, in the 1980s, David and Professor Desmond Ball, with others, began to unearth and publish information relating to it.¹

In November 1945 David was posted to Morotai, on which was located the headquarters of the Australian element of the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section. Morotai and neighbouring islands were the scene of Australian field trials of Japanese officers and men accused of war crimes and, in February 1946, David served as a defence interpreter for three trials.² In Morotai, he also had opportunities to mix with surrendered Japanese troops and to improve his proficiency in their language and culture. A trial in which he was involved resulted in a Japanese officer, Captain Kato, being found guilty of the murder of an Australian prisoner of war and executed. David believed the trial process to have been fair, however, he judged

1 For a comprehensive account of their findings, see Desmond Ball & Keiko Tamura (eds), *Breaking Japanese Diplomatic Codes: David Sissons and D Special Section during the Second World War* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013).

2 Georgina Fitzpatrick, 'War crimes trials: "Victor's Justice" and Australian military justice in the aftermath of the Second World War', in Kevin Jon Heller & Gerry Simpson (eds), *Histories of War Crimes Trials* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 329.

the death penalty as excessive in light of subsequent judgements in later trials.³ No doubt it was this experience that stimulated his later determination to research issues of atrocities and war crimes trials, and he regarded his work in this area as being among the most important of his research career. The extent of his concern with issues of justice in these trials is shown by his anguish at the condemnation of an officer (Katayama) who had, under orders, executed a Canadian officer but who was, in David's opinion, essentially a man of moral rectitude.

David did not confine his investigations to atrocities that were allegedly committed by Japanese military personnel, but also applied his sharp analytical approach to possible ill-treatment by Australian armed forces of Japanese prisoners in the islands. The depth of David's commitment to understanding such situations is graphically indicated by a long letter (see volume 2, in preparation) to his brother, Hubert, a distinguished physician, concerning the effects on prisoners of heat stroke and related illnesses. Hubert wrote back telling David, in effect, that David now understood more about the subject than he did.

In March 1946, David was posted to the British Commonwealth Force in the Allied Occupation of Japan, based in Ube, western Japan, where he once again acted as interpreter. He was also asked to teach English in a school and was part of the Occupation effort to propagate the values of democracy. He regarded his first time of arriving in Japan as one of the most exciting events of his life. Ube was near to Hiroshima, and so he visited that city and saw the devastation caused by atomic bombing. He noted, however, that the main railway station was functioning and the trams appeared to be running normally. When asked towards the end of his life how he regarded the destruction of Hiroshima, he replied that at the time he was perhaps not so sensitive to the suffering caused, but that he now regarded it as a war crime. He remained in Japan until the early months of 1947, when he was demobilised and returned to the University of Melbourne to complete his undergraduate degree. In 1950 he graduated with a BA Honours and, between 1951 and 1955, was a tutor in international relations at Melbourne, as well as a research officer for the Australian Institute of International Affairs. In 1956 he was working as a research assistant for Professor W Macmahon Ball, then head of Political Science at the University of Melbourne, who exerted a strong influence on him and convinced him to move into the field of political science. In 1956 he graduated with a Masters in political science from Melbourne, having written

3 David Sissons, interview, 15 August 2003, in *Australians at War Film Archive*, Archive number 653, Part 3/9 27' 30" to 34' 00"; australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/653-david-sissons?destination=aXRlbXNfcGVyX3BhZ2Uma2V5d29yZHM9c2lzc29ucyZvcD1TZWFyY2gmZm9ybV9idWlsZF9pZD1mb3JtLXhhUEpwbWjFBT2F0dEF2OHM5MFh6dFZmbEgxbzFPRWFZVUZIRW01bXZfeGcmZm9ybV9pZD1zZWYy2hfYmxvY2tfZm9ybQ (accessed 14 March 2016).

a thesis entitled ‘Attitudes to Japan and defence, 1890–1923’. This is said to be the most consulted unpublished thesis on Australian history in existence. It is, however, available online.⁴

Between 1956 and 1960, David was supported by a Saionji Memorial Scholarship to conduct research in Tokyo on issues of contemporary Japanese politics in what was then a highly contested political scene. His article ‘The pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution’, published in *International Affairs* in 1961, was a pioneering piece of original research on this enduring and still controversial issue.

In 1961 he was appointed to a research fellowship in the Department of International Relations at The Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, and was promoted to a full fellowship in 1965. He remained at ANU until his retirement in 1990 and, from the late 1960s, redirected his attention from contemporary Japanese political matters towards issues in the history of relations between Australia and Japan. David maintained this historical interest following his research for his Masters, and it became the principal focus of his study.

Following his retirement from ANU in 1990, David took up a three-year post to establish an Australian Studies Centre at Hiroshima Shūdō University in western Japan. Returning to Canberra for what was technically his retirement, he pursued his archival researches with vigour and persistence across a wide range of aspects of the Japan–Australia relationship.

David Sissons was, in many ways, a shy man, whose shyness concealed a mind of great subtlety and historical understanding. He was also meticulous in everything he did, to the point where his innate perfectionism inhibited him from publishing much of his research because he was not satisfied that he had fully covered every aspect of the subject under review. After his retirement, he gathered together his research materials, including both published and many unpublished articles, as well as voluminous correspondence with archivists and participants in the events he was analysing, carefully organised them and placed them in 60 capacious boxes at the National Library of Australia Manuscripts Collection in Canberra. When he was diagnosed with what was to be his final illness, he added more research material to the boxes at the National Library, and made sure that his work was carefully ordered according to categories of research. Librarians there remember him visiting the library for this purpose in a wheelchair. He died on 17 October 2006.

⁴ The thesis is available online from the University of Melbourne Library: minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/38791.

Using David's archive, it has been our task as editors of these two volumes to bring into the public domain the outstanding research output of this most important historian of Australia, Japan, and the complex interactions between them since the 19th century.

This volume begins with five essays, one written by a Japanese colleague of David Sissons and the remaining four by doctoral students that he supervised at ANU, reflecting on their engagements with him. We have selected seminal papers that he wrote, both published and unpublished, on Australia–Japan relations, and these constitute the remaining chapters. The topics he covered are diverse, but his meticulous and detailed research is evident in every chapter, and readers will appreciate his approach of examining historical incidents from both Australian and Japanese perspectives.

The second volume of David Sissons' work is in preparation and will cover his research on the Pacific War and Australian war crimes trials in the south Pacific. These two volumes will be a companion to Desmond Ball and Keiko Tamura (eds), *Breaking Japanese Diplomatic Codes: David Sissons and D Special Section during the Second World War* (2013).

This text is taken from *Bridging Australia and Japan: Volume 1*.
The writings of David Sissons, historian and political scientist,
edited by Arthur Stockwin and Keiko Tamura, published 2016 by
ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.