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LEGACY OF DAVID SISSONS

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Ryōtarō Shiba, a bestselling contemporary Japanese author, starts his 1976 short story ‘Mokuyōtō no yakai’ (‘Dinner parties on Thursday Island’) with the sentence:¹ ‘Thursday Island is far away’.

The story recounts Shiba’s visit to Thursday Island to explore the historical presence of Japanese migrant workers on the island before the Pacific War and to meet remaining Japanese residents. He travelled to Thursday Island via Sydney after a close friend in Wakayama introduced him to ex-pearl shell divers and the encounter inspired him to learn about historical migration from Wakayama to the island. Early in the story, Shiba refers to a paper by David Sissons that was published in a Japanese academic journal in 1974.² After initially citing his correct full name, Shiba refers to Sissons as ‘Professor David’, probably assuming that David was his family name. Shiba writes about the personal experiences of those who travelled to Australia to work in the pearl shell industry, but he relies on Sissons’ paper to provide the historical background to the migration and analysis of the workers’ motives.

Shiba quotes from Sissons’ paper and appreciates his insights into the skill of Japanese divers, who were regarded as the best in the pearl shell industry. Sissons argues that they were motivated to excel in the industry by their desire to earn money to send home, rather than the widely accepted theories of racial adaptability and

1 Ryōtarō Shiba (1923–1996) was a Japanese writer of fiction and non-fiction. A number of his historical novels are bestsellers and have been dramatised as films and television programs and have influenced the Japanese public’s interpretation of historical incidents. ‘Mokuyōtō no yakai’ was first published in the journal *Bessatsu Bungei Shunjū* in September 1976 and published as a book with other stories in 1977.

2 David Sissons, ‘1871–1946 nen no Ōsutoraria no Nihonjin’ [‘The Japanese in Australia, 1871–1946’], *Ijū Kenkyū*, no. 10, 1974.

ethnic characteristics. Shiba sought an ex-diver's opinion on Sissons' argument and received partial confirmation, including that it was exciting and fun to work under the sea. Shiba praised Sissons' article for its integration of personal stories and success in addressing the essential facts behind the migration to Thursday Island. It is high praise from the famous author.

Shiba's assessment of Sissons' work confirms the rigour of his research and writing. In order to narrate and draw conclusions from historical incidents, Sissons collected individual stories through meticulous research in archives in Japan and Australia. Arthur Stockwin, Sissons' first PhD student, points out that the lengthy closure of the National Diet Library, Tokyo, for rebuilding in the late 1960s led to a fundamental shift in Sissons' research direction.³ From then on, he carried out extensive research on the history of Australia–Japan relations utilising particularly the Department of Foreign Affairs' archive's migration records. I have wondered what, if he had continued his research in diplomatic relations or Japanese politics, he would have done in his academic career. What we know is that researching the stories of ordinary individuals is often more painstakingly difficult than studying archival records of diplomatic relations. While diplomats and politicians are public figures and governments generate official records, pearl divers who migrated from Wakayama to Thursday Island did not generate personal files. Instead, their movements must be traced by checking numerous records in different archives. Sissons started to carry out his groundbreaking work in the 1960s and continued throughout his academic career. That was the time when there were no internet or digital cameras. Databases and catalogues were not available on the web. There were probably no photocopying facilities. He visited each archive and made handwritten notes. He did exactly the same type of work on other areas of research, including Australian war crimes trials, examples of which are published in this volume. With his comprehensive understanding and knowledge of archival classification systems, he had a good idea of where to go and which files to examine, but, nonetheless, collecting information on individual cases required patient and meticulous study.

This was the hallmark of Sissons' research. His work on Australian war crime trials began before the Australian Government released trials records. In this case, as he stated in his 1978 Duntroon lecture reproduced in this volume, he worked with the available Japanese records. An article by Desmond Ball referring to the diplomatic code breaking agency that worked against Japanese diplomatic communication⁴ prompted Sissons to begin research on that organisation, for which he had worked as a young translator. He was uncertain if any official documentation of its activities

3 Arthur Stockwin, 'David Sissons, my doctoral supervisor and mentor', in Arthur Stockwin & Keiko Tamura eds, *Bridging Australia and Japan: The writings of David Sissons, historian and political scientist, Volume 1*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2016, p. 20.

4 Desmond J Ball, 'Allied intelligence cooperation involving Australia during World War II', *Australian Outlook*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 299–309.

could be obtained; however, following tireless negotiations with the National Archives of Australia (NAA), he managed to access a summary report that was compiled before its closure.⁵

Despite his shyness, Sissons demonstrated a dogged conviction to collect necessary information. This also required commitment and persistence in a research milieu that encouraged devotion to a particular task — a luxury that is not often afforded to researchers today who must identify a certain set of information and data needs even before proposing a research project. Furthermore, today, the period in which research results must be produced is much shorter and tangible outcomes are necessary in order to secure further funding. Sissons was lucky to have a secure, tenured research position at a premier national university during his career.

When existing records did not provide sufficient information, he did not hesitate to get in touch with the informants directly by writing to them. There was no shyness there at all. He wrote extremely polite introductory letters filled with rich background information when approaching an informant for further information. The person who received such a letter would be intrigued enough to respond. Ball, as an editor, insisted on including Sissons' correspondence in *Breaking Japanese Diplomatic Codes* because the letters showed Sissons' methodical approach to collecting information and are an example to all scholars of impeccable academic manners. Sissons was careful to demonstrate his substantial prior research before asking further questions.

However, Sissons' research interests did not fit comfortably in the international relations community in which academic debates and discussions were dominated by a preoccupation with power in politics and diplomacy. His main focus was on Australia–Japan relations illustrated through experiences of ordinary people, who were far away from political power or notable social standing. It must have been rather uncomfortable to announce to his colleagues in the international relations academic community that his research topics were Japanese pearl divers or prostitutes. Throughout the 1970s to 1980s, annual reports of the Research School of Pacific Studies of The Australian National University, with which he was affiliated, recorded his research in a short sentence: 'Mr D. Sissons continued his research on the history of Australian–Japanese relations.' It was probable that some staff members and students did not hold such topics in high regard and expressed some discreet disdain. Sissons was well aware of these views. Yet Ball, who worked in the same department, respected him and his work. Sissons and Ball were a study in contrasts in physique and personality but felt some camaraderie, as is revealed in their correspondence regarding diplomatic code-breaking in Australia.⁶

5 Desmond J Ball & Keiko Tamura (eds), *Breaking Japanese Diplomatic Codes: David Sissons and D Special Section during the Second World War*, Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013, p. 6.

6 Ball & Tamura 2013, annexes 7, 11, 12, 13 and 14.

Sissons' academic research and study was firmly based on individual experiences that examined archival sources. He was also keen to examine how the system functioned. Thus, immigration policy in the case of Japanese migrant workers, or the legal system in the case of war crimes trials, became important aspects of his research. Furthermore, he studied both Australian and Japanese sources.

His pursuit of information was relentless and he did not give up until all the pieces of his particular historical puzzle were assembled.

Sissons' reputation for perfectionism, and his shyness, are regarded as the main deterrents in his limited public speaking activities and published works. And my experience confirms that he was a shy but essentially warm person. His work reveals that he cared about and was interested in the people that he wrote about. He made no moral judgement of the Karayuki-san, Japanese prostitutes who were sent overseas, for example. His interest in lived experience was backed by his commitment to fairness. This was most strongly revealed in his research and writing on war crime investigations and trials. He thoroughly studied each case, regardless of whether the individual was a Japanese war crime suspect or Australian military personnel, and he assessed them within the social and legal framework in which their experience occurred. He sought to grasp all the information in order to arrive at a conclusion.

Bronwen Sissons remembered with affection that her husband found it very difficult to write conclusions. She was usually asked to read his drafts and make comments after which she would compliment him on his writing and content and ask what his conclusion was to be. He often did not manage to give her an answer. I have wondered why he found it so difficult to write conclusions. Over this project's 10 years' duration, I have read and examined his work and come to see that he always remained an objective observer and rarely expressed his own views. With this in mind, I propose an alternative to perfectionism and shyness as the explanation for his limited number of publications. For Sissons, the activity of research and writing was more like weaving original pieces of fabric in which each thread was an individual's story interwoven with historical records. The weaving continued as relevant threads became available and, sometimes, the work was suspended as he went in search of a particular type of thread. Sissons wove his threads thoroughly and meticulously, without a fixed idea of what kind of pattern his cloth would ultimately reveal to his readers.

While compiling a selected bibliography of Sissons' published work for this volume, I realised something of which I was not aware previously. While Sissons did not publish a monograph in his long academic career, his final tally of publications is not small. The archive of his writing is distinctive for the fact that he started to publish early in his career, even before completing his master's thesis. Second, he published regularly in the disciplines of history and political science throughout the 1950s to 1970s, and many of those papers are included in the three posthumous volumes

of which this is the final one. Third, from the early 1980s, he was commissioned to write entries on the Japanese in Australia and Australian war crime trials for various encyclopedias and dictionaries. Producing entries for reference works requires intensive research and the writing needs to be concise and the information must be accurate and relevant. Towards the end of his academic career, Sissons produced many such entries while he continued with his research into Australian war crimes trials. His contributions to reference works continue to be cited and are used by many academics as the starting point for extended research projects, despite the decades that have passed since they were first published.

Sissons' woven cloths are assembled here and in the two other posthumous volumes published in 2013 and 2016. Each makes a significant contribution to its relevant field of research, and provides some indication of fruitful opportunities for further investigation.

Personal reflections on David and the project history

In conclusion, I take the opportunity to record my reflections on David Sissons and the history of this project.

I met David in 1997, soon after I started to work for the Australia–Japan Research Project at the Australian War Memorial. This Japanese Government project was part of the Murayama Initiative to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. An international symposium was organised in the early stages of the project to explore the research directions. As one of the guest speakers, David presented his paper on Japanese wartime records, for which he had prepared several handouts.⁷ He objected to our proposal to distribute them before he spoke and requested that they instead be distributed during his talk and on his cue. My first impression of him was as controlling and thorough.

It was not until I received a Harold White Fellowship in 2002 to carry out research at the National Library of Australia (NLA) on an expatriate community in Kobe, Japan, that I had the opportunity to get to know David better. My main archival source was the Library's Harold S Williams Collection. Williams (1898–1987) was born in Melbourne, moved to Kobe in his youth and lived there for most of his life as a successful businessman and historian of the Western community in Japan. Williams and David corresponded, and some of their letters were deposited in the collection. I contacted David to find out more about Williams and we met at the NAA for tea.

⁷ 'Sources on Australian investigations into Japanese war crimes in the Pacific', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 30, 1997, www.awm.gov.au/articles/journal/j30/sissons (accessed 12 December 2018).

On that occasion, David confirmed the frugality so well remembered by his students by producing tea bags and biscuits for us to share.⁸ He expressed keen interest in my research and provided valuable assistance to my study.

After this encounter, David became more relaxed with me and our friendship started to develop. He occasionally rang me up to ask some questions on computing, a subject on which I was certainly not an expert, but he was always very appreciative of my hesitant advice. We met for coffee a few times and, on one occasion, he even told me some jokes! The last time I saw him was at the NLA after his diagnosis with terminal cancer. He told me of his illness with an exhausted and desperate look. As his health declined, he had come to realise that he did not have enough time to complete his work.

At his funeral in St John's Church, Canberra, in November 2006, one of those gathered remarked on his unpublished manuscripts. Although I was not directly involved in David's research, I thought it was important to make his works available to a wider readership. David's family, particularly his wife, Bronwen, was supportive of the idea. After some false starts, Arthur Stockwin joined the project in 2010. Other professional commitments meant that our progress was slow. In June and November 2011, Arthur travelled twice to Canberra from Oxford to examine and assess suitable manuscripts for publication among the 60 boxes of the Papers of DCS Sissons (MS 3092) at the NLA. During Arthur's second visit, a meeting was arranged with the late Desmond Ball, Professor in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at The Australian National University. Arthur taught Des in an undergraduate course at the ANU before he moved to Oxford, and Des and David worked in the same department and respected each other's research. David and Des shared a keen interest in examining Second World War code-breaking organisations. When Des became aware that David had left an unpublished manuscript on D Special Section, the Australian diplomatic code-breaking organisation of that period, he proposed to publish it with an introduction. With the support of Craig Reynolds, chair of the Asian Studies editorial board of ANU Press, Des and I worked together to publish the paper before Des' health deteriorated. The book, *Breaking Japanese Diplomatic Codes: David Sissons and D Special Section during the Second World War*, was published in 2013.

After the first book came out, Arthur and I started to work on the next volume, which covered David's research on Australia–Japan relations. David published little in this field, but each example is stamped with the hallmark of his craftsmanship backed by thorough research. These publications are regarded as essential reading, but over the years since their initial publication, some have become difficult to

⁸ See Arthur Stockwin & Keiko Tamura eds, *Bridging Australia and Japan, Volume 1*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2016, Chapter 1.

access. We selected several key published and unpublished works with the aim of making them available for readers and researchers with an interest in the relationship between Australia and Japan.

The current volume, *Bridging Australia and Japan: The writings of David Sissons, historian and political scientist, Volume 2*, is the third and last of the project and includes David's writings on the Pacific War, the Australian war crimes trials as well as his early political science writings. We believe Sissons' writings are relevant to contemporary researchers, as proved by Georgina Fitzpatrick's use of Sissons' manuscript in her study on Australian war crimes trials. Just as Georgina managed to discuss the war crimes material with David, I have carried out my own lengthy conversation with David over the years of this project. I am in awe of the vast fields of study that David canvassed throughout his academic career. I am also grateful to have met many unforgettable people as I have worked on David's papers. Most of all are my co-editors, Desmond Ball and Arthur Stockwin, two brilliant academics and good men whom I respect deeply. Over the years and through numerous conversations, Bronwen Sissons told me many stories of David with deep affection. I feel I understand David much more now. I feel David somehow introduced me to them after his death.

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