

A Great Resource for Future Historians

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David Scott: *Last Flight Out of Dili: Memoirs of an accidental activist in the triumph of East Timor* (Pluto Press, \$34.95, ISBN 1864033762)

East Timor's liberation after twenty-four years of Indonesian occupation was one of the most remarkable events in contemporary regional history. A tiny half-island with little political influence, its independence had been regarded as a lost cause by most observers. But it became a cause célèbre of a growing number of activists operating across international borders for many years. These activists were under no direct threat, and were for the most part not even of East Timorese origin.

David Scott was one of the leading activists in the early years of this exhausting campaign. In 1975, he was a 50-year-old father of two with a background in social work. He had been Founding Director and Chairman of Community Aid Abroad (CAA), and Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence. He did not realise it at the time, but East Timor would occupy his efforts from that point on. Now aged 81, he has recorded his experiences in *Last Flight Out of Dili*. The book begins in November 1975, when Scott was one of only five foreign observers to witness the swearing-in of the Democratic Republic of East Timor. The fledgling republic would be drowned in blood nine days later, but not before key leaders escaped on the last flight out of Dili. Scott played a pivotal role in their escape.

He recounts how the activist campaign for an independent East Timor was launched in Melbourne on 7 December 1975 – the same afternoon that Indonesian forces invaded. He provides fascinating insights into how this campaign survived and endured despite having very little money. A few people emerge as real heroes: one is Robert Wesley-Smith, who went broke several times and spent the better part of his adult life on a cause that seemed hopeless. Another is Cliff Morris, who had served as an Australian commando in East Timor during the Second World War. Although a dairy farmer in his mid-fifties when Indonesia invaded, Morris volunteered to break the naval blockade of East Timor on a fishing vessel along with three other men. He knew that death was a possibility, but “without their help during the war, I would not have had those extra thirty years”.

Australian diplomacy has been examined in other works, but Scott brings new material to light. He shows, for instance, that in 1975 the Portuguese governor of East Timor had made numerous official requests to Australia to re-establish a consulate in Dili. A former Australian ambassador denied the request had been made, but Scott provides evidence to the contrary. The book also contains a detailed commentary on now-declassified documents in Australian foreign policy. Some of the material dealing with tensions and disagreements in the ‘diplomatic front’ is unique, and is likely to be a great resource for future historians.

There is an unnecessary, if understandable, emphasis on the effort to keep East Timor on the United Nations’ list of ‘non self-governing territories’. After all, independence has been gained by several states despite being absent from this list. And is it really true, as Scott asserts, that “many were attracted to the cause by Jose [Ramos-Horta]’s commitment, tenacity and charisma”?

This is, of course, a memoir. As such, it contains a partial and subjective picture of the solidarity movement. A complete account would have to include the roles of Jefferson Lee, Stephen Langford, Jude Conway and Andrew McNaughtan, as well as the sterling work performed by activists outside Australia. But I know of no book that provides such deep insights into the functioning of the diplomatic front in East Timor’s independence struggle. Few people can say that they saved so many lives. David Scott and the transnational solidarity campaign can most certainly do so. Pluto Press is to be congratulated for bringing this manuscript to publication.

Dr Clinton Fernandes is a historian and author of *Reluctant Saviour: Australia, Indonesia and the Independence of East Timor* (Scribe, 2004). Disclaimer: he is thanked in the acknowledgements as having “provided useful advice”.

