Paper Title: David Sissons – A Memoir

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Abstract

This presentation does not attempt to evaluate David Sissons’ significance as a scholar of modern Japan, although his published contributions to the field, relatively few in number but always meticulously researched, balanced and judicious, were undoubtedly substantial. The paper looks instead at David Sissons as an academic supervisor, as a mentor and as a human being.

The present writer, then a doctoral candidate in the Department of International Relations in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, was supervised by David Sissons throughout his PhD programme, from January 1967 until December 1971. The paper looks at David’s somewhat unique, “hands off”, indirect approach to supervision, at how, like some distant, silent sherpa, half obscured by mists and snow flurries on a neighbouring mountain peak, he subtly guided the present writer from the time he enrolled as a Research Scholar in the Department until the moment he submitted his thesis on Christmas Day 1971. It focuses, in particular, on the rationale behind the careful arrangements he made for the writer’s three year programme of language study and field work in Japan (1967, 1968, 1969), including the means of transport to Tokyo and the route taken, on his selection of a Japanese language school and a Japanese guarantor, on the absolute freedom he extended to the writer to select his own thesis topic, conduct his research and develop his ideas in his own way and at the significance of his decisions regarding the composition of the Examining Committee. It also looks at his attitude to the writer’s plan to spend the long summer holidays of 1968 in the USSR, especially in Soviet Central Asia, a region little visited by foreigners in those days, and at the insights which flowed from this small adventure. Finally, the paper looks at David’s personality, at the human face of this very reserved, thoroughly old fashioned, intensely conservative, parsimonious, warm hearted and extremely amiable character, to whom the present writer, like all his former students, owes so much.