

Eaton and White in Portuguese Timor: The first two Australian consuls, 1946-1950

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During the Second World War, Japanese forces occupied the islands to Australia's north, many of which were used as bases for bombing raids of the Australian mainland. As a result of these experiences Australian strategists came to believe it was essential after the war to ensure that Portuguese Timor could not be used by forces hostile to Australia in any future conflict. In 1943, Australia made an agreement with Portugal that it would meet for discussions on trade, mutual defence and other matters concerning Portuguese Timor as soon as practicable. It was with this aim in mind that Australia appointed its first consul to Portuguese Timor, who arrived in Dili in January 1946. That consul, Charles Eaton, seems to have been optimistic of Australian opportunities to develop trade and defence arrangements with the Portuguese and that optimism appears to have been shared by the Australian government. By the time Eaton was replaced in October 1947, however, that enthusiasm appears to have been on the wane. By late 1949, Australia was considering closing its consulate in Dili and the second consul, Henry Douglas 'Doug' White, was withdrawn in June 1950. The consulate then remained without Australian staff until the arrival of a new vice-consul in January 1951. The consulate remained open until 1971, when its doors were closed for good, but Australia seems to have lost interest in having a diplomatic presence in the colony long before then.

This paper seeks to discover why it was that Australia established the Dili consulate with such enthusiasm in 1946, but by late 1949 was considering withdrawing its consul and closing the facility altogether.

Appointment of Australia's first consul to Portuguese Timor

Before the end of the Second World War, Australia had been approached by Portugal to accept a diplomatic appointment to Australia, but this was not approved, with the excuse that Australia was too committed elsewhere to make a reciprocal appointment (Bruce 1989). Australia was keen, however, to post an Australian consul to Dili and Lisbon agreed (*NAA: A1838, 377/1/1 Part 4*).

The consul appointed was Charles Eaton, formerly of the Royal Australian Air Force, or RAAF. During the war, Eaton was involved in numerous reconnaissance and bombing operations over Timor and had visited Netherlands Timor in 1938 and 1941. Eaton had never set foot in the Portuguese half of the island, but he was able to boast that he knew it well, 'from one end to the other ... by air' (Eaton n.d.).¹

The reports of Charles Eaton

Eaton arrived in Dili on 26 January 1946 and in his first report made several recommendations, including the introduction of shipping and air services from Australia to Portuguese Timor for purposes of trade. Eaton's report also contained information about the governor's plans for the rebuilding of Dili in a new location, to be called Nova Dili, about sixteen kilometres from the existing town (*NAA: A1838, 376/1/1*).

Eaton was pleased to report that an air service using RAAF Catalinas had begun on 24 April, but supplies for the consulate were not delivered on time and Eaton's assistant had to prepare Eaton's first report using a borrowed typewriter. Eaton was able to report, however, that materials for a temporary consulate had been delivered and a team of workers from Darwin had begun erecting the buildings, which were officially declared open on 2 July. Many of the supplies Eaton was waiting for arrived by ship on 29 May, but the air service was proving unreliable with the scheduled flight for 5 June failing to materialise and no indication given of when it would arrive. The service grew more erratic through the year, prompting the Portuguese to start their own service to Kupang in Netherlands Timor using aeroplanes purchased in Australia. From Kupang a Dutch service connected to Darwin. The Portuguese also bought a

¹ For more information about Eaton's career before his appointment as consul, see Farram 2007.

ship from Australia, which was due to arrive in Dili in early 1947. A Dutch shipping service to Dili was also due to start in the New Year, but there were no signs that the Australian service that Eaton had suggested was about to commence (*NAA: A1838, 377/1/2 Part 1; NAA: A5954, 2269/4; NAA: A1838, 377/1/3 Part 1*).

Eaton and his wife often dined with Governor Óscar Ruas and entertained many Portuguese officials and visitors to the colony at the consulate. Eaton travelled to many districts and often accompanied Ruas on aerial tours. In fact, Eaton often acted as Ruas's pilot (Eaton n.d.). Eaton reported that many Portuguese officials sought his advice and he obviously had their trust. The Director of Air Services, for example, often sought advice on 'air matters'. Eaton also reported that the governor asked for his assistance in purchasing much-needed building materials from Australia to help rebuild the war-ravaged colony. While Eaton got on well with most Portuguese officials, by the end of 1946 he was becoming aware that not all was well in the colony. For example, Eaton had believed that the permanent consulate would be built at Nova Dili by the end of the year, but in fact no building had begun there and Eaton estimated that even the road to the site would not be completed before July 1947. In his many travels he had also become aware that not all Portuguese officials approved of Governor Ruas and that many Timorese were opposed to a highly increased head tax that he had introduced (*NAA: A5954, 2269/4; NAA: A1838, 377/1/3 Part 1; NAA: A1838, 377/1/2 Part 1*).

In early 1947, Eaton continued his travels throughout the colony, including travelling with Australian businessman Alex Dodson, who was interested in gaining oil and agricultural concessions. Australians had been involved in oil exploration before the war, but all concessions had since been placed with Portuguese and American companies, although Eaton argued the situation with prior concessions was 'obscure' and suggested Ruas be invited to Australia to discuss this and other issues. Ruas did travel to Australia in July 1947 and met various officials and was made promises of improved air and shipping services (*NAA: A1838, 377/1/3 Part 1; NAA: A1838, 377/1/3 Part 2*).

The invitation to the governor to tour Australia suggests that the Australian government still valued good relations with Portuguese Timor. This was underlined by a subsequent goodwill visit to the colony by a party of Australian officials, including the Minister of the Interior, Herbert Victor Johnson. Australian interest in Timor was shown even more by the fact that Eaton had earlier been instructed to 'make an opportunity' to visit Netherlands Timor and report on the possibilities of obtaining a long-term lease of the colony or parts of it, most likely for defence purposes. Nothing came of this and it now seems extraordinary that Australia could have considered leasing Dutch territory at a time when the whole of the Netherlands Indies was shifting to Indonesian control (*NAA: A1830, TS400/1/9/1/1; NAA: A1838, 377/1/3 Part 2*; see also De Ranitz 1979).

Eaton is transferred to the Netherlands Indies

The growth of Indonesian authority in the Netherlands Indies has a strong bearing on this story. Eaton received a new posting in October 1947 and became the Australian consul-general to the Netherlands Indies and was also appointed to a United Nations Consular Commission monitoring a cease-fire between Dutch and Indonesian forces in Java and Sumatra. Following the Dutch transfer of authority to the Indonesians, Eaton became chargé d'affaires to the Republic of Indonesia. Eaton's transfer to the Netherlands Indies from Portuguese Timor was greeted sadly in Dili and the Portuguese government later sought permission for Eaton to receive the decoration of Commander of the Portuguese Military Order of Christ for his help in the reconstruction of the colony, but owing to Australian regulations permission was not granted (*NAA: A1838, 377/1/2 Part 1*).

The appointment of the second Australian consul to Portuguese Timor

Eaton was replaced by Henry Douglas 'Doug' White who arrived in Dili on 18 October 1947. One of the first things he was asked to do was to report on the necessity of having an Australian consular assistant based in Dili. White replied that without an Australian assistant he would be reluctant to travel outside Dili as he would not leave his wife alone in the consulate. Nevertheless, the Australian assistant was removed, which seems to indicate a lessening Australian interest in Portuguese Timor (*NAA: A1838, 377/1/2 Part 1*).

The reports of Doug White

By early 1948, White was aware that there was friction between Governor Ruas and the Portuguese Minister for Colonies, a mutual animosity that dated back to the 1920s or early 1930s, when both men were in Timor. In February 1948, White also reported that there seemed to be some fear among Portuguese officials, including the governor, that Australia had imperialist aims in Timor, a perception not reported by Eaton, but one which would remain constant from then on (*NAA: A1838, 377/1/3 Part 2; NAA: A1838, 378/3/1; NAA: A1838, 377/3/1 Part 1*).

Trade continued to languish even though a three-monthly shipping service from Australia had been established. The Portuguese administration wished to purchase building materials from Australia, but found difficulty securing export licences, as it was argued the materials were needed in Australia. Development capital was unforthcoming from Portuguese sources, but Governor Ruas put great stock in Alex Dodson. As it turned out, many of Dodson's plans were not approved by Lisbon. Few other Australians showed much interest in Dili apart from an ex-aeroplane mechanic, Arthur Seddon, who established Dili's first cinema. Seddon was involved in several other projects, always unsuccessfully, and was described by White as a complete failure as a businessman (*NAA: A1838, 756/1 Part 1; NAA: A1838, 3038/10/12/2 Part 1; NAA: A1838, 3038/10/12/1*).

The lack of business activity resulted in the Australian shipping service being cancelled in August 1948. In September 1948, however, an Australian report argued that from a defence perspective it was vital that good terms be maintained with the colony to allow Australia to use facilities there in time of war and deny them to Australia's enemies. Trade must be developed, said the report, as an economically weak Portuguese Timor was a weak spot in Australia's defences. Nevertheless, nothing was done about it and trade did not develop (*NAA: A1838, 378/8/1; NAA: A1838, 377/3/5 Part 2*).

White's 1948 reports show that there was much inefficiency in the Portuguese administration and that a Treasury Inspector visiting from Portugal in April had discovered that many departments were overstaffed and in financial difficulty; one of the worst was Public Works. In August 1948, White visited the Nova Dili site and noted that no work had been done there in the preceding ten months; in May 1949 White reported that the planned new capital had been abandoned and Dili was to be rebuilt on the old site (*NAA: A1838, 378/3/1; NAA: A1838, 3038/3/1*).

White is withdrawn

In late 1949, an official from Australia's Department of External Affairs travelled to Portuguese Timor to report on trade conditions and to make an assessment of the utility of the Australian consulate. The assessment was negative and in May 1950, White was instructed to sell all government property and return to Australia as early as he could. White departed Dili on 23 June 1950, on what was also the last flight of the RAAF air service. The withdrawal of the RAAF service effectively isolated Portuguese Timor from Australia (*NAA: A1838, 376/1/1; NAA: A1838, 377/1/2 Part 1*).

What had changed since 1946?

It was not until January 1951 that a replacement for White arrived in Dili and the consulate seems from then on to have been little regarded in Australia, eventually closing in 1971. Why had Australia's enthusiasm for its Dili consulate changed so dramatically since the early days in 1946? One reason is that Australia appears to have never had a 'whole of government' policy on Portuguese Timor. For example, while the Department of Defence and the Department of External Affairs stressed the colony's strategic importance, there was continued confusion over the purposes of trade and communications, which were difficult to establish and maintain because they were judged on commercial considerations. Export licences could not be obtained for goods that Portuguese Timor wished to purchase from Australia and Australia did not wish to purchase the goods produced in Portuguese Timor. There was also little interest from Australia in investing in the colony and shipping and air services were erratic. With subsidies and strong direction from the Australian government these difficulties may have been overcome.

The people with whom Australia chose to discuss its aims for Portuguese Timor was also a problem. Eaton pointed out in some of his earliest despatches that many matters were best discussed directly with Lisbon and urged the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Herbert Vere 'Doc' Evatt, to proceed

there as soon as the opportunity arose. Rather than talk with Lisbon, however, Australia preferred to deal with intermediaries such as the Portuguese consul in Sydney, the governor of Portuguese Timor and the Portuguese ambassador in London. In most cases these people had no authority to deal with Australia's requests, which had to be referred to Lisbon. Evatt did not visit Lisbon during his term as minister; nor did his successor Percy Spender during the period of the first two Australian consuls, despite both Evatt and Spender receiving a number of invitations to do so. It was indicated by Lisbon that the visits could be used to hold talks as outlined in the 1943 agreement. Australia, however, chose to ignore these suggestions, yet in internal reports accused Portugal of showing no enthusiasm to proceed with the talks as envisaged in 1943 (*NAA: A1838, 3038/10/1 Part 1*).

Trade may have been inhibited because of the perception that Portugal was ill disposed to Australia's desire to be involved in development of the colony. This tendency would have been exacerbated by reports which suggested that Portuguese Timor was poorly governed and scantily regarded by Lisbon. Eaton had hinted at this, but White's reports portrayed greater levels of corruption, nepotism and inefficiency than had previously been known. White's reports also revealed the lack of urgency with which the Lisbon authorities regarded the rehabilitation of Portuguese Timor. One example of this was the fact that a ship from Portugal did not visit the colony for a period of two years during White's stay, despite Lisbon's earlier promise of a regular six-monthly service (*NAA: A1838, 378/3/1*).

A major cause for the change in Australian policy was the altered geo-political reality following the Second World War. Australia had put great emphasis on the importance of Portuguese Timor for defence purposes. Australia feared the territory could be used by a hostile resurgent Japan, but the United States of America's policy of seeing Japan as a potential ally in the emerging Cold War altered Australia's thinking (Watt 1967, 209). Also, the emergence of the vast, independent Republic of Indonesia, which completely surrounded the small Portuguese colony, was another new factor effecting Australian thinking. It became obvious that Portuguese Timor was only one of a number of places needing Australia's diplomatic attention. Nearing the end of White's time in Dili the relationship with Indonesia was starting to be seen as more important.

Conclusion

In June 1950, Australia withdrew its consul from Dili and cancelled the RAAF air service from Darwin. The aim in doing so was stated in an Australian Department of External Affairs report as to 'force Portugal to take some heed of [Australia's] objectives' (*NAA: A1838, 377/3/1 Part 2*). With hindsight, however, it is obvious that Australia's 'objectives' were far from clear. Later, a new Australian consular official was appointed to Dili, as Portuguese Timor was still viewed as being of economic and strategic importance to Australia, but only marginally so, and earlier concerns with establishing trade and defence arrangements were largely forgotten. The consulate finally closed its doors in 1971, but by then the enthusiasm with which it had been established in 1946 was little more than a faint memory.

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