

The Launch of *Jim Plim* by Jeremy Hearder

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This is a very happy occasion – a great subject, an excellent book and an audience including many old friends of the subject himself, of the author and of myself, the launcher. Warmest welcome!

The range of situations that a modern diplomat has to cope with is amazingly wide. Let me give you two examples. First, that of Garry Woodard when he was a member of the staff of the Australian Embassy in Washington DC in the late 1960s. He and a State Department representative had been invited to address the students at Howard University on the Vietnam war. The students, all blacks, listened to the American politely. When it came to Garry's turn, those facing him all turned their chairs around and presented their backs to him while he was delivering his speech. Poor Garry was too shattered to return to the office in the Embassy that afternoon and went to the Baltimore races to recover!

The second relates to Dick Woolcott when he was Ambassador in Jakarta in 1976. I visited Jakarta to take part in a conference, and Dick gave a dinner party one evening. He welcomed us with a poem that he had composed for the occasion in honour of some of the other guests, who included the well-known jazz band, "Galapagos Duck". The opening line of the poem was: "What luck! Galapagos Duck!" Forgive me for not recalling the rest. The group then played for us, and Dick took up the drumsticks and played with the band to great effect.

Although these incidents both took place in the Plimsoll era, Jim himself performed a rather different range of tasks. He did not have to face mass opposition to what he was saying; nor did he play in a band. But he did a lot of other things – most of them with real distinction.

Jeremy, you have given us a very clear and convincing portrayal of the outstanding features of Plim's professional life.

Let me mention the main ones:

His intelligence and his fine perception of balance and nuance.

His deep interest in international affairs across the world, not just in the country to which he was accredited.

His knowledge and understanding of Australian national politics, which he used as a framework of feasibility for his own policy advice to his ministers. He understood the limits on their flexibility.

His habits of extremely hard work – a normal working week for Plim was around eighty hours in length, and he had a capacity to extend it to 120 hours. No wonder hard-pressed ministers loved having him available to read drafts of speeches and inform them on events around the world, at all hours of the day and night!!

His readiness to talk to and exchange thoughts with others across levels within EA/FA and across professions outside his department – he trusted people, and in conversation he talked real substance and this was how I came to know him from 1969 onwards.

His humility – he respected others and treated people as equals.

His frugality and simplicity of lifestyle – he had no house, no car, few personal possessions, only two suits, a white shirt and a dark tie. He personally bore some of the costs of some of the Embassy social events for which he was responsible.

Menzies' expressed a very perceptive view of him: Plimsoll was not one of those who tried to impress or who "had tickets on themselves". What a relief it must have been to political leaders who sometimes found themselves treated to theatrics or disdain by their advisers!

I think that most of us who knew Plim would agree with Robert Menzies, and see his qualities as assets to be treasured in a foreign service that was still establishing itself when Plim joined it. He then played a major part in keeping it abreast of complex and powerful changes across the world. And at home he remained well

informed on shifts in the political fundament and tempered his advice accordingly.

There were however two elements of a good life that Plim missed out on:

The first was a loving human partnership. Plim was a loner, without appearing to be lonely. He did not seem to need much company, especially when he was busy or made the centre of attention when he was an ambassador abroad or in his role of Governor of Tasmania. But he was a human being after all, and must have missed the loving support of a partner.

Second, as Jeremy tells us, Plim had a dread of retirement because he believed it would take him out of interesting company and events, and into a limbo in which his purposeful study of complex international affairs and policies would have no impact. Most of us will know that this is only a partial view and that there are many compensations in retirement from a full and busy life with lots of international connections. As it happened, Plim died in his seventieth year, so he did not have to face the challenge of what to do with the following decade or two.

What did these qualities enable him to achieve?

The simple answer is: great results for Australia over thirty-five years, both in terms of the policies he shaped and implemented, and in terms of helping to build a first class diplomatic service. He also scored some major achievements for the UN and other international bodies for which he worked, and he led a very good life for himself in many ways, despite being, as one might say, a loner.

It is possible that his reluctance to step back into retirement led to his failure to take good care of his health while he was in his sixties? This is a time when many of us, like Plim, have had heart problems. In continuing to live and work as he did, Plim was asking for trouble – trouble of which he had been forewarned by earlier heart attacks and fainting fits. I don't believe he wanted to die, but he should have known better and helped his body gently to transition into one of the most enjoyable of life's many phases!

Why do I think this is an excellent book?

First Plim is such a good subject – Jeremy has discovered and analysed some first class material on him that has not been published before.

Second, Jeremy knew him and many of his contemporaries well, and without that knowledge a biography as good as this one could not have been written. Jeremy has put a lot of time and effort into this task – 17 years of it – including some superb documentary research and interviews with key people who have been able, through Jeremy, to tell us a lot about Plim and his life – sources such as Hazel Craig, Menzies' secretary, Rosemary Viret, and many of those who worked for Plim in EA/FA and around the world. This is one of those rare books where I read the footnotes as keenly as I read the text of the chapters.

Third, the book also has been written with style, balance and proportion – we get the feel of the real Plim and the people he worked with – all remarkable men in their own way, but not supermen.

Fourth, this biography tells us much about how Australia is governed and how it relates through its government to the rest of the world. Let me return to those themes later.

How did Plim get his start?

It is interesting to learn from Jeremy's account how very important Evatt was in Plim's early career. Evatt was roundly disliked by many of those who worked for him, yet beneath his paranoia and megalomania he was looking for bright young men who would be high quality diplomats for Australia in the decades ahead. In choosing Plim as a desirable candidate, Evatt was demonstrating sound and perceptive judgement. He also showed in appointing Plim to the Department of External Affairs that he had a remarkable ability to tolerate someone whose political views were strongly and clearly opposed to his own. Plim told Evatt directly before his appointment to the Department of External Affairs that

his personal political views were opposed to his, but Evatt accepted him none the less.

Evatt had an unorthodox approach to recruiting – Plim was his personal choice for DEA, not the result of a careful selection by a panel of seniors. It is interesting that Alan Watt and Bill Forsyth were essential connectors in this chain to Evatt, but Jeremy shows us that the clinching decision to choose Plim was taken by Evatt himself.

Plim at three Crisis Points.

1. Korea 1950-52.

When I moved to the ANU in December 1969, Alan Watt was Director of the AIIA and had an office just along the corridor from mine in the Coombs Building. I had just been appointed to write the official history of Australia's part in the Korean War, and that gave me a strong link with Alan, and via him to virtually all the key members of the DEA who had carried important responsibilities during the Korean War. Alan had, of course, been Secretary of the Department from 19 June 1950 until 24 January 1954 – right through the Korean War, and most importantly, for the period when the ANZUS Treaty was conceived by Spender and given birth by Truman. All this was despite Menzies' dismissal of this possibility as a superstructure built on a foundation of jelly. Spender and Watt then brought it to maturity as one of the vital and enduring foundations of Australian foreign policy in the post-Second World War period.

With Alan's assistance I was able to make personal contact with three other people who were to be major sources for my history: Percy Spender, Arthur Tange and Jim Plimsoll. They gave me extensive interviews, and all three read the whole of Volume One – about a quarter of a million words – in draft, chapter by chapter, as I wrote it during the 1970s. Through talking with Alan I was able to see that my war history would need to be at least as much a diplomatic history as a military, naval and air history. Indeed the political and foreign policy aspects of our participation in the Korean War were much more important than the operational, and

Plim was a major figure on the diplomatic side of the conflict for two years.

You will not be surprised to learn that Plim himself gave me a huge amount of assistance in my task. I had the full Departmental records available to me, but there were times when I missed reading an important document because it had been filed under a heading which did not relate directly to the Korean War. Plim was wonderful in detecting such omissions. I recall one particular letter he sent me after reading a chapter, in which he expressed general agreement with my analysis but added that I had missed an important memorandum that he had prepared. He gave me the approximate date of the document, and then told me what it contained. Armed with those pointers I was able to find the document itself – it was on a set of files dealing with other issues. When I checked its text against the contents of Plim's letter to me, written some twenty-five years after his memorandum he described, I could see why Plim's memory was so revered by his colleagues. His letter covered all the important issues in his original memorandum. He was a walking archive of everything that he had ever worked on!

I do not have time to discuss the assistance I received from Spender and Tange, but I should not omit mention of an important similarity between all three, one which is well brought out in Jeremy's book. They were busy men, with many demands on their time, but when they applied their minds and experience to reading departmental memoranda or my chapters, they worked with care and deliberation. Their comments were succinct and helpful. I really had to salute their commitment to and concern for the truth. These were the qualities that helped to shape and apply our foreign policies through such a rich period of development in the 1950s.

Jeremy refers, understandably, to Plim's period as Ambassador to the United Nations, 1959-63, as "The Highlight of His Career". But to me personally the most spectacular episode in Plim's career was his service as the Australian representative on the United Nations Commission on the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea, UNCURK, 1950-52. He was appointed at full ambassadorial level, on Watt's suggestion, at the age of thirty-three, to a body which

was intended to afford fuller UN political control over and moral legitimacy to the UN Command's military operations in Korea. Australia was a member of the seven-nation body because the Americans needed us. The other six members were Chile, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and Turkey.

The key challenge that UNCURK had to face was how to control President Syngman Rhee. Jeremy relates the dramatic episode of Plim's midnight pursuit of Syngman Rhee to Seoul airport early in the war. Plim, wearing only his pyjamas, for such was the urgency of his mission, caught up with the President and persuaded him not to flee from his country – as he had evidently intended to do. Plim also had to persuade other UNCURK members not to flee to the greater safety and comforts of Japan. It soon became apparent that the only Commission member with real influence on Rhee was Plim. He proved equal to the challenge and played a vital role in the higher diplomacy of the war, at both political and military levels, over the next two years.

Whenever Rhee transgressed the norms of good democratic practice, such as when he locked up all members of the National Assembly until they passed legislation enabling him to continue in office for another term, Plim had to remonstrate with him and try to move him back onto a less self-destructive course for South Korea. While Plim did not control Rhee, he had more direct influence on his behaviour than anyone else on the UN side in Korea. When the time came in 1952 to re-post Plim, loud and clear protests were made by the Truman Administration, from Secretary of State Dean Acheson downwards. Achieving this status was a remarkable achievement for a young man in the early stages of his career, forty-two years younger than the aged tyrant he had to work with. At the age of thirty-five Plim had become a widely-known and highly regarded diplomat around the world, and particularly so in Washington, London, and at UN headquarters in New York.

2. Washington, 1973.

Let me move to a second instance of Plim's powers of crisis management. Jeremy, and James Curran in his recent book "Unholy Fury", discuss the storm provoked in Washington by Prime

minister Gough Whitlam's letter of 20 December 1972, and some early statements made by senior members of the Whitlam Government, in response to Richard Nixon's Christmas bombing of North Vietnam. In my view, Whitlam had sent Nixon a reasonable letter of protest, but it caused amazingly strong offence in the White House, chiefly because in closing, Whitlam had exhorted both North Vietnam and the United States to resume negotiations towards an armistice and American withdrawal. Nixon was deeply affronted by being linked with North Vietnam, in this apparently even-handed way, by an ally.

I can testify personally to the depth of the resentment caused in Washington because I arrived there a few days after Whitlam's letter had been delivered, on a State Department Leadership grant. I had known about this award for several months and had put a lot of time and effort into planning the visit, particularly in securing appointments with Administration people whom I wanted to meet and interview. Plim had been very helpful in setting up some key appointments for me and he was kind and generous in his offers of hospitality during the few weeks for which I was going to be in Washington.

When I arrived I found that most of my Administration appointments had been cancelled. I was distressed. An opportunity like that was not likely to come my way again. Fortunately the Embassy staff, including Plim when he returned from consultations in Canberra, set to and used their personal connections to restore a substantial part of my program. There were some people in the National Security Adviser's office and in the White House that I was not able to meet with, and I could see that I was in the middle of a major crisis in inter-allied relations. Plim was seriously upset by it. He was critical not so much of Whitlam's letter to Nixon, as of the statements made by other members of the Government, particularly Cairns, and also by some Trade Union leaders. Plim managed the whole crisis without being recalled by Whitlam and he eventually received Nixon's thanks for his role at that time. Nixon finally received Whitlam in Washington on 30 July 1973.

3. Moscow 1976.

Jeremy has given us a third example of Plim's ability to discern the true essence of a changing situation in his account of Plim's tenure of the Moscow Embassy, 1974-77. I had occasion to visit him in 1976, just a few weeks after a fire had damaged several rooms in the Embassy's main building. It was an old mansion, built for the mistress of a Russian sugar baron by the leading Russian architect Shkotel in 1902. Plim loved to show guests around the building, which was his residence as well as the chancery. The reception room was a perfect cube with sides of some sixty feet. Just think of the ceiling height that these dimensions require.

During my visit we talked about the looming prospects for major political, social and military change in the Soviet Union. Plim suddenly took me by the arm and led me to his car. We drove to Gorky Park, where, like many Muscovites who wanted to exchange thoughts of a sensitive nature, we went walking together. I will not go into the detail of our discussion but Plim could see big changes underway, which would lead the Soviet Union into a less confrontational relationship with the West. His immediate problem was how to convince Malcolm Fraser that it was time to re-adjust Australian policies towards the USSR. Jeremy's detailed recounting of Plim's role in the Baltic States recognition crisis is very valuable in analysing how an ambassador who disagrees with established policy may be able to influence his government's decisions.

Politicians and Diplomats.

Jeremy's book gives a very clear and sometimes worrying picture of the workings of the relationship between Australia's leading diplomats abroad, the Department in Canberra, and our political leaders, especially the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. The best of our diplomats are extremely well-informed on the country to which they were accredited and how Australia's interests might best be served. The Department in Canberra takes on board the information and analyses provided by our missions, and then digests, distributes and files them in a well-organised way. The real problem in this system is how to convince a minister or prime minister who might be far from expert in international affairs, and also under the influence of a party ideology which leads him or her to reject some or all of the advice that is on offer. And to complicate matters from the diplomats' perspective, the minister

can move you on or recall you if he or she thinks you are not implementing or supporting the government's policies adequately, or if they simply find you irritating.

It takes courage to be an effective diplomat, not only in times of obvious tension such as during the Cold War, but also in more recent years as world affairs have become more complicated and many politicians know increasingly less about them. I believe there is a need today to provide better training and development of rising young politicians in the field of international affairs. It was probably easier for them in the Cold War where the issues were more salient and fewer in number. Many politicians then had their own experience of the Second World War on which to draw. Today the issues are more complex, more weighted towards social and economic problems, and less towards military, although obviously as recent events in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan have shown, the military dimension remains significant. My experience in Europe inclines me to think that we could learn from the examples of some of the major political parties in France and Germany in developing our parliamentary representatives.

But that is another issue, although Jeremy's book has brought it to the front on my mind. Returning to the Plimsoll years, we have here some valuable examples to study in order to maintain the qualities of our policies and of our foreign service as a whole as the world and this nation continue to change. We can be very grateful to Jeremy for giving us such a clear, interesting and well-balanced view of what Plim did to advance Australian foreign policy over thirty-five years, and to build the Department responsible for implementing it. But let us also recognise the broader lessons this book has to impart, and set about applying them to meet the demands of future years.

Thank you very much for this portrayal, Jeremy, and the research and hard thinking behind it I have much pleasure in launching *Jim Plim Ambassador Extraordinary*. May it have a wide and thoughtful readership!