

*John Gava**

**THE WASHINGTON DIARIES OF
OWEN DIXON: 1942–1944**

**EDITED BY PHILLIP AYRES
FEDERATION PRESS, 2021**

VIII + 392 PP

ISBN 978 1 76002 254 9

Owen Dixon's wartime diaries are strangely addictive.

On 15 April 1942, Owen Dixon, then a Justice of the High Court and already having chaired the wartime Central Wool Committee and the Australian Coastal Shipping Control Board, was appointed Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States ('US'). He held this post until mid-September 1944. In taking this appointment, Dixon was not breaking new ground. The then Chief Justice, Sir John Latham, had been Australia's first Minister to Japan, from August 1940 until the suspension of relations on 8 December 1941, following the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbour and elsewhere. We might think these appointments rather unusual and exceptional, and they were. But these were also unusual and exceptional times.

Anyone wanting more details about Dixon's appointment and an analysis of his time in Washington, as well as his relations with the Prime Minister John Curtin and the mercurial Minister for External Affairs (and onetime colleague on the High Court) Herbert Vere Evatt, could commence with Ayres' biography of Dixon.¹ While it is apparent from his diary that Dixon was clearly suspicious of Evatt, Dixon did not hold forth about him, but merely noted when others, especially the President and his senior advisors, made their feelings known to him. Of course, one would need to examine the histories of the period to determine whether Dixon's attitude towards Evatt and Dixon's perception of others' attitude towards Evatt were accurate or justified.

Reproduced in this volume are Dixon's diary entries from the day he flew to Washington until the day he arrived back in Australia, more than two years later. Ayres provides succinct annotations, introducing each new person that Dixon meets and giving some context to the materials included or referred to.

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¹ Philip Ayres, *Owen Dixon* (Miegunyah Press, rev ed, 2007).

As indicated above, the diaries are strangely addictive. But, it needs to be made clear why, given what the diaries are not. They are not chatty or gossipy about the powers that be. Nor do they include Dixon's reactions to the events of the time, or the people he met. Rather, they seem to be matter-of-fact records of what he did and who he met on each day. At a guess, they would have served as his own record, acting as notes to refresh his memory in the years after his experiences at the centre of world power.

Can such dry, minimalist accounts be of any interest? I think so. Reading them, one becomes immersed in the daily activities of the representative of a minor power in what had become the centre of the world. This was not a world of wartime heroics, but one of constant meetings, constant writing of memoranda, reports and speeches to all and sundry, and, to a degree I found exhausting, dinners and receptions. Hardly a day passed when Dixon was not attending dinner, or hosting dinner (or lunch, for that matter) or taking part in or giving receptions for diplomats, US government officials, politicians, and members of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's formal and informal Cabinets and advisors. A dinner which stood out for me was one where Alexander Kerensky of Russian Revolution fame attended. Dixon did not write anything about this, other than noting Kerensky's appearance at the dinner, but Ayres does note that Kerensky's second wife was Australian, which probably accounts for Kerensky's appearance at a dinner for Dixon. At another dinner, Cary Grant was a guest.

His dry, minimalist accounts do contain some instances where Dixon allowed his feelings to come out, even if their expression is also dry and minimalist. He notes that at one meeting Douglas MacArthur 'orated to me'.² On another occasion Dixon wrote, in seeming exasperation, that he had had 'Mr and Mrs Code to lunch from twelve o'clock till 3.00!'.³ On his way back to Australia at the end of his tenure he describes John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*⁴ as 'a poorly presented narrative by a man who would have been a valuable witness if he had never been a journalist. He wrote *Insurgent Mexico*, which might be worth getting'.⁵

Reading these diaries has, however, made me revise what I had written about Dixon in a review of the Ayres biography.⁶ First, in following what Chief Justice James Spigelman had suggested,⁷ I wrote the following:

² Philip Ayres (ed), *The Washington Diaries of Owen Dixon, 1942–1944* (Federation Press, 2021) ('*Washington Diaries*') 173.

³ *Ibid* 301.

⁴ See John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (Penguin Classics, 2nd ed, 2007).

⁵ Ayres, *Washington Diaries* (n 2) 371.

⁶ John Gava, 'Owen Dixon' (2003) 24(2) *Adelaide Law Review* 337.

⁷ Chief Justice James Spigelman, 'Australia's Greatest Jurist: Philip Ayres' Owen Dixon' (2003) 47(7–8) *Quadrant* 44, 45–6.

How could such a learned, inquisitive man get bored so easily in New York, when it was, to use Spigelman's words, 'at that time the cultural capital of the world'? Is Spigelman right in saying that Dixon's intellectual depth came at the expense of breadth of interest and experience?⁸

Reading Dixon's diaries shows that this is inaccurate. Dixon was an enthusiastic walker, and whenever he visited other cities and towns (and at home in Washington), he walked whenever he could to see that city and its highlights. For example, when in San Francisco, he viewed the Golden Gate bridge and visited the Redwoods in the Muir Woods. In Chicago, he visited the famous Field Natural History Museum. He was also an inveterate visitor to bookshops, and his notes show the books, mainly American, ranging from literature to history to law and modern politics, that he read during his time in the US. He enjoyed films and art galleries. He also often visited US courts to see the law in action. Most such visits seem to have been without fanfare and without formal notification to the judges. For a busy man in the middle of a war in which Australia's short, medium and long-term interests were, at least to some extent, dependent on his work, he seems to have displayed a lot of curiosity about the US, even if this curiosity was not ostentatious.

These diaries also bring into question doubts about Dixon's effectiveness as Australia's representative made by Spigelman and David Day.⁹ Spigelman, for his part, wondered whether Dixon's close relationship to men such as Dean Acheson, a future US Secretary of State, meant that he was not linked to the 'true focus of power in Washington'.¹⁰ Was this true? The diaries show that Dixon was very friendly with Felix Frankfurter and Harry Hopkins, two very close, if informal, counsellors to President Roosevelt, and that he was in regular contact with the highest figures in the US government and military, and with Lord Halifax, the British ambassador to the US. Of course, such access is no guarantee of Dixon's effectiveness, but, at the very least, Dixon was plugged into both the formal and informal loci of power in the US.

While this volume will primarily attract readers interested in Dixon and those following Australia's involvement in World War II, it should also prove engaging to those with general reading habits.

⁸ Gava (n 6) 337–8 (citations omitted).

⁹ David Day, *The Politics of War* (HarperCollins, 2003) 380.

¹⁰ Spigelman (n 7) 45.