The careful media management accompanying the Australian National Archive’s release in January 2004 of cabinet papers covering the first year in office of the Whitlam government underlined the interest of the ageing ex-prime minister and his supporters in safeguarding his status as an Australian icon. It was a success: most analysts agreed that the papers showed that in 1973 the newly elected Labor government performed with exceptional dynamism and transparency.

Whether or not this feat can be repeated next year, when the 1974 Whitlam cabinet papers are released, is another question. They may include documents concerning the negotiations with Indonesia’s ex-dictator Suharto over the future of what was then Portuguese Timor, material dealt with expertly by former diplomat James Dunn in East Timor: A Rough Passage to Independence. However, this is not guaranteed, as many close to the story say the issue was rarely discussed in cabinet, and that Whitlam even hid his undemocratic dealings with Suharto from his own foreign minister, Don Willesee.

For many Australians, East Timor was the flamboyant Labor leader’s Achilles heel. His reputation was first tarnished by his meetings with Suharto in central Java, in September 1974, and at Townsville, in April 1975, during which the two men discussed the territory’s fate in the light of Lisbon’s decision to decolonise. It laid the political groundwork for Indonesia’s December 1975 attack on the territory, with Australian complicity.

Between that time and East Timor’s liberation from Indonesian rule in 1999, Dunn was an unremitting critic of successive governments, Labor and Liberal, insisting that they should support the territory’s right to self-determination, in keeping with Australia’s treaty obligations. His was never an easy voice to ignore. He was an establishment figure — a diplomat who had served in Paris, Moscow and Timor — and he pursued his idée fixe like a terrier with its teeth on a trouser leg.

Even after Australia’s policy change in 1998 and East Timor’s subsequent deliverance from Indonesian occupation a year later, Dunn remained unpopular in DFAT circles because he preached the need for honesty about the past.

This is neither a trifling nor an abstract matter. Had Dunn’s view prevailed, the East Timorese might have been spared twenty-four years of military occupation, during which arbitrary arrest, imprisonment without trial, torture, rape and summary execution were the norm. The question of Indonesian war guilt is now being dealt with by the UN, but who will answer for Australia’s complicity?

In the closing pages of East Timor, Dunn points out that ‘the tragedy, which cost more than 200,000 Timorese lives, could have easily been avoided if the principles set out in the UN charter had been observed by the principal parties in 1975’. He continues:

East Timor’s nightmare of occupation ended, it should not be forgotten, largely because of the Asian economic crisis, which precipitated the fall of the Suharto dictatorship, and not because of a change of heart on the part of those powers who twenty-four years earlier had readily accommodated the colony’s annexation. Until the very end the Suharto régime continued to enjoy their support.

Dunn was first posted to Portuguese Timor in January 1962, when its prime interest to Australia was as a listening post. The Salazar dictatorship was firmly entrenched in Lisbon, and Indonesia’s Sukarno was at the height of his power. As he arrived, Angolan nationalists were staging the first armed uprising in a Portuguese colony, and aggressive anti-colonialist propaganda from Jakarta was unnerving Dili officials. Indonesia’s secret military campaign to take over West Papua had begun, and confrontation with Malaysia was brewing. In short, it was a fascinating posting. The young Australian consul developed an abiding affection for the East Timorese, and an awareness of their aspirations to democracy.

When revolution finally erupted in Portugal in 1974, heralding a decolonisation programme, Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs had few people available to match Dunn’s knowledge. He was by then head of the parliamentary library, and was sent to Dili on a fact-finding mission by the Whitlam government. His assessment did not please. It was the beginning of the falling-out with his peers that led him to choose early retirement a few years later and to devote his energies to East Timor’s freedom.
The reports that he produced for the parliamentary library before his departure are gems of their kind. He was firm in his objections to Whitlam’s belief that East Timor naturally belonged to Indonesia, that small states were not viable, and that the territory’s aspiring leaders were ‘mestizos’ (mixed-race Timorese), without credibility. As he writes:

The prime minister, and those officials whose advice he heeded, seemed to have a kind of hypnotic fascination with the Indonesian connection and a disdain for, and insensitivity towards, East Timor. To them the Timorese were a nondescript, backward people.

Those reports laid the foundations for the books he has published since. Dunn’s personal stand influenced a dedicated group of Labor backbenchers who supported self-determination, and also inspired a generation of journalists.

This new book, published by Longueville, is Dunn’s first to deal with independence in 2002, and is adapted from two earlier works: one published by Jacaranda Press, in 1983, the second by ABC Books, in 1986.

History has proved Dunn right, and, despite minor flaws, East Timor is an important work of record, setting out the sad story of East Timor’s betrayal by the international community at large, and by Australia in particular. It charts the Indonesian takeover, from first covert operations in 1974 until withdrawal in 1999, and the tiny republic’s triumphant accession to independence.

Since Dunn’s 1983 book, new sources have opened on Timor’s World War II history (notably the Salazar archive, in 1994), and he would do well to revise this aspect in any future edition. He labours the point that Australia has a major debt to the East Timorese because they fought the Japanese alongside Australian commandos and paid a terrible price when they withdrew two years before war’s end. In reality, the Timorese were divided, many others fighting with the Japanese in the hope of freedom from European colonial rule, a common pattern in South-East Asia. When the Allies restored Portuguese power, under an international deal cheating the East Timorese of their first chance at independence, it was their turn for reprisals.

Founding Fretilin leader Xavier do Amaral became a nationalist in the postwar period after relatives accused of Japanese collaboration died in detention on Ataúro Island. ‘They were simple people with no idea of the wider issues,’ he recalled. ‘It was then that I first began to hate the Portuguese.’

The book is marred by misspellings: of thirty-six glossary entries, seven have errors, for example. It would also have benefited from tighter editing. At fifty-six pages, the key chapter, ‘Invasion, Occupation and Resistance’, is too long: Dunn’s style is naturally heavy, and what he has to say here is so important that it would have been worth breaking it up into two chapters, or using subheadings to enhance readability.

These are minor quibbles, however, for a work that has stood the test of time so well.