

## FOREWORD

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Nick Tarling is an extraordinary goad and exemplar to those of us who have come later. However much we write, he has written twice as much; when we pioneer a new frontier, he has often been there before; however broad our comparative context, or careful our archival documentation, it is hard to match either his breadth or his meticulousness. The productivity of this man in a range of fields is phenomenal. While filling a busy program of teaching and administration he still left the rest of us behind with a solid book every two or three years. Since ‘retirement’ in 1997, however, he has published well over one a year, for a round total of thirty fully-authored books on his vita today. All have something new to say. All rest on a close reading of original documents, a remarkable synthesis of the literature, or (particularly with the New Zealand volumes) on intense personal experience of the matters in hand.

I am sometimes inclined to plead with my inner conscience that Nick sets an unfairly high standard because he doesn’t have to spend time on his wife and family. But in reality if I spent as much time with my wife and family as Nick did with his theatre and his friends, mine would be protesting “too much, already”. Every year through his busiest university years he would perform in between three to six shows, each requiring weeks if not months of rehearsals. His secret appears to be to marshal his time with discipline and effectiveness. From the daily morning swim at his Devonport

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beach to the words he feeds into his computer, to the precise lecture ending always exactly on time, to the strict chairing of a meeting, there is no time wasted. Or at least that is how I imagine it to be. Happily he has never minded wasting a little time with me, and I'm sure with all his other friends around the world.

Another secret of this exceptionally productive life, I suspect, is its rather classical prizing of old-fashioned virtues. One thing Nick did not appear to do much of was to agonize about the latest twist of post-colonial theory or the latest electronic gimmick to store or present data. He resisted the computer and the email as long as it was possible to do so. And there was enough ignorance to dispel, enough confusion to clarify, enough prejudice to overcome in the world, that he seemed content to get on with it rather than argue about the epistemology.

For me Nick's achievements were more than usually alarming since I followed his path on several occasions. I went to Cambridge as Victor Purcell's last student, eight or nine years after he did. He pioneered Southeast Asian history in Australia from 1957, just two years after John Bastin whose place he took at Queensland once Bastin moved to ANU (The Australian National University), to fill the post I later inherited in 1970. As a New Zealander I was being targeted by Keith Sinclair to create his opening to Southeast Asia at Auckland University in the 1960s, but he did much better in 1965 in persuading the already very accomplished Nicholas Tarling to take up this challenge, while I went to the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. At that stage, aged 34, he had already published four books! When I helped establish the Asian Studies Association of Australia in 1975, we found that Nick had organized New Zealand Asianists three years earlier, and already had plenty of experience as first President of the NZ counterpart. In 1976 I enjoyed teaching a semester at Auckland University, on an exchange with Michael Stenson, and Nick seemed already the model of an academic leader, effectively championing the study of Asia by taking a leading role in university administration and public life more generally.

In this issue on Southeast Asian history a word needs to be said about Nick's role in building that field. The progression of his books says much, in fact, about the consolidation of a conceptual field. His thesis (1956), written in relative isolation from the emerging centres of 'Southeast Asian Studies', called its field 'the Malay Archipelago', or in the published version, 'the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago'—not unlike nineteenth century usage. The perspective and the sources were unashamedly British. The next two books (1962-3) used 'the Malay World' as a broader and more neutral concept. Already, however, Nick had begun in Queensland to teach the still new concept of 'Southeast Asia'. His first book to use that term in its title, the first of thirteen to do so, was already a comprehensive and innovative textbook—*A Concise History of Southeast Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1963). In it he

argued the merit of the term as more neutral and satisfactory than its older rivals, and claimed in very contemporary language that ‘the area has a unity in its very diversity’.

This early recognition was a very significant one, and established this prolific historian as a champion of the idea that a broader canvas can often provide more coherence for a very plural place. After his retirement he wrote a second textbook, far more ambitious and taking account of the maturity of the field—*Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001). Where the 1963 volume had still been centred around the doings of foreigners in the region, the 2001 one was thematic, Southeast Asia-centric, and socially informed. There followed a sequence of volumes on ‘Southeast Asia’, each taking advantage of the opening of European archives for the 1940s and 1950s. They were on the Japanese Occupation (2001), Imperialism (2001), Nationalism (2004) and Regionalism (2006). But for many his most remarkable achievement in promoting the coherence of Southeast Asia was the editing of *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* in 1992 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Its multiple authors were required to write not on their favourite country or language area, but on a particular theme and period for the whole region. This was hard and increasingly hard as one approached the present, but it was immediately received as a major contribution to our understanding of the region.

This collection here is not the first tribute to this remarkable historian. At his official ‘retirement’ in 1997 twelve of his colleagues compiled a festschrift entitled *Empires, Imperialism and Southeast Asia: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Tarling*, edited by Brooke Barrington (Monash Asia Institute, 1997). These included his closest past and present colleagues at Auckland (Leonard Andaya, Barbara Andaya and Greg Bankoff), Dr Barrington himself from the New Zealand foreign service, and a range of established Southeast Asian historians who could be considered the generation who immediately followed Nick. That this tribute could follow a decade later with such a remarkably different and expanded cast of characters is itself a tribute to Nick’s continuing energy and influence. Not only has his own productivity spectacularly increased after his retirement, a new generation has also emerged that is far more Southeast Asian and diverse, but which still finds Nick’s work to be a model and a challenge. Nine contributors to this collection including its editor are resident in Southeast Asia by my count, whereas only one of the previous dozen was. The only author common to the two (apart from myself), Dianne Lewis, was probably the youngest of the 1997 authors, but a veteran among this new crop.

May Nick’s next decade be just as productive, and his readership amongst the young continue to grow. Meanwhile, this issue is a fitting tribute to the continuing relevance of the traditional virtues of historical scholarship.