

# David Kent Wyatt

*September 21, 1937 — November 14, 2006*

David Kent Wyatt, the John Stambaugh Professor Emeritus of History in Cornell's History Department, died November 14, 2006 at the age of 69 in Ithaca. He was widely regarded as one of the world's foremost living historians of Thailand, and was acknowledged as such not only in the international community of scholars, of which he was a vital part, but in the kingdom of Thailand itself. He spent nearly all of his four decades-long career at Cornell.

A ceremony was held in Ithaca soon after his death, and a memorial Buddhist "sanghadana" was held at Wat Makut Kasatriyaram in Bangkok where many of David's students, colleagues, and friends were present. Also that same day, a memorial seminar was held at the Thai National Archives sponsored by the Association of Thai Archives, the National Archives Office, and the Historical Society under the royal patronage of H.R.H. Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. David was a favorite of Somdet Phra Thep who would make time to attend lectures given by him when he was in Thailand. A David Wyatt fund was also established to promote the study of Siamese history and archives.

David was born in Massachusetts in late 1937, just as the clouds of the Second World War were gathering over Europe. He left his home in Iowa to get a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy at Harvard, and this was where he met his wife, Alene, who was a student at Radcliffe. His lifelong fascination with Gilbert and Sullivan started to become serious at this time. His interest in Thailand, a little-known country on the other side of the world from where most of the globe's main events seemed to be happening, began only after his graduation, when he had reached Ithaca as a graduate student. He eventually became fascinated with Thai history at Cornell, where he was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1966. Thereafter, he spent several years teaching Southeast Asian History at the University of London in the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and a further year at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

In 1969, he came back to Cornell, when he was offered and accepted a tenured position in the History Department. From this time onwards, he became extraordinarily active in academia, becoming the Director of the Southeast Asia Program from 1973-76, and the Chair of the History Department (twice) from 1983-87 and then again from 1988-89. He was given a named Chair in 1994 when he became the John Stambaugh Professor, and he eventually served as the President of the Association of Asian Studies as well, the largest grouping of scholars working on Asia anywhere in the world.

From his position at Cornell, he eventually taught and mentored many of the next generation of scholars working on Southeast Asia, so that his impact on the field will be felt for many decades to come. His liveliness in the classroom was legendary, as was the breadth of his knowledge. Though he was a specialist on Thai history, his teaching spanned the region, and he served on dozens of graduate committees that had nothing to do with Thailand per se. Several times in the 1970s he led processions of graduate students to offer ablutions to a concrete traffic marker in front of Uris and Statler Halls, as the marker was in the shape of a *lingam*, a traditional Buddhist phalus as seen in many temples in Southeast Asia. Bemused Cornell students watched as David and his students poured *ghee* (clarified butter) on the pseudo-*lingam*, while chanting Buddhist sutras. He knew how to enliven a centuries-old past for his students in ways that few other professors could emulate.

Taking early Southeast Asia as his specialist field of interest, he learned many languages, often very difficult ones, and he used materials in Thai, Lao, Khmer and Burmese, as well as in Western languages. He was particularly adroit with royal and Buddhist chronicles, a vexing category of sources that many other scholars eschewed, either on genuine intellectual grounds, or—as one suspects—because they are often so difficult to use. David made these chronicles come alive, and though they were written in arcane forms of Thai and other languages, his translations of them were light and eerily beautiful. His sustained use of many of these kinds of sources, some of them called *tamnan* and *phongsawadan*, actually led to vociferous debates in the field as to the validity of such texts as markers of the distant past. David argued eloquently for their inclusion as historical substrate, however, and translations or annotations of many of these sources now make up parts of many normative narratives on the flow of Thai history.

David's work on chronicles started at the beginning of his career and continued up until nearly the very end of it. He co-published an abridged version of a Cambodian chronicle written in Thai (a Thai version of Khmer history, in other words) in 1968, and in 2000 came out with a synoptic translation of the Royal chronicles of Ayutthaya, one of the main dynasties of Thai history. In between, he published translations and annotations of many other chronicles, including political and religious sources on Thai-Cambodian relations (1969), a number of texts from Laos (1972), the Nan Chronicle (1994) and the Chiang Mai Chronicle (1998). Changes in time period, geography, and language in all of these texts show how important this overall achievement really was—there were only a handful of people on the planet who could have comprehensively read, let alone translated into English, all of these texts.

David had a particular fascination with the Thai south in much of his work, too, which was manifested in a number of other publishing projects he undertook over the years. In 1970, he published a version of the *Hikayat*

Patani, and then he followed this up with a book on traditional Thai views of Kelantan (now in north-eastern Malaysia) two years later. His fascination with the multi-racial, multi-religious south culminated, however, in his translation and annotation masterpiece of 1975, on the “Crystal Sands” chronicle of Nakhon Si Thammarat. This book cemented his reputation as an unusually astute student of Thai chronicles, and how they could be used to justify political, economic, religious and social arrangements in a particular time and place.

David’s interests in the second half of his career started to deviate from Thai chronicles. He always remained interested in them and continued to publish on their nature and interpretation for more than thirty years, but his horizons changed as he got older, and he started to look at other sources and questions as well. One presage of this eventual shift was a book he co-edited in the early 1980s on *Moral Order and the Question of Change in Southeast Asia*, which examined intellectual histories of the region via a number of vantages, across Buddhist and Islamic regimes. This was followed up later by a number of important articles, scattered across a variety of journals and a few books as well, charting the intellectual directions of Southeast Asia as the region confronted some wholesale historical changes in the political landscape of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. He also eventually was a main mover in the computerization of the Bibliography of Asian Studies, the principle bibliographic resource for scholars of Asia all over the world, and one of seven co-authors of the textbook, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, which came out in three revisions over the course of his long scholarly career.

By the 1990s, David had found another muse: temple murals. He spent a lot of time wandering from wat to wat in Thailand, and in these temples he found murals that excited his imagination and his sense of the outlines of the Thai past. Part of this was because he knew how to look at them. Where many other people would have only seen asparas and heavenly dancers, demons and white elephants, David knew how to interpret these paintings in a manner that few others could. His great knowledge of the chronicles served him here, and though he started off publishing only on a single temple’s designs (those of Wat Phumin, published in 1993), ten years later he penned a beautiful book called *Reading Thai Murals* (2004). This volume is now a must-read for anyone visiting Thailand and its hundreds of beautiful religious buildings: a lifetime of learning is in it, though this is always worn very lightly.

If this is true about David’s book on murals, then it is even more the case on the book that will likely be seen as David’s epitaph to the field, *Thailand: A Short History*, published by Yale University Press now in two printings. David had been asked by Yale to sum up his decades of knowledge on Thailand for a history to be published by the press for both intellectuals and travelers alike. He obliged with the book that will likely be the definitive text of

Thai history for many years to come. David literally waltzes through the centuries in this volume, equally at home discussing old Thai paleography (such as the famous Ramkamhaeng Inscription, and its controversies), the travel itineraries of nineteenth-century Thai kings, and the popular demonstrations that rocked Bangkok twice in the 1970s. And what a waltz it is—full of erudition, snappy language, penetrating insights, and deep learning. Again the panoply of sources utilized really marks out this book as being different—David was interested in *everything* about Thailand, and even the casual reader of this book can instantly see that. David was an intellectual omnivore, and that voracious appetite is evident on nearly every page of this book. Silkworm Press in Thailand will now publish his last book, *Manuscripts, Books and Secrets*, posthumously.

When David finally retired, his love of Cornell and particularly its amazing Southeast Asia Library collection, refused to let him wander far. Though he made several trips to Thailand with his wife Alene, his love for the library proved to be nearly as strong as his love for Thailand itself. The Southeast Asia Program had recently lost its Library Curator and David agreed to take on the position on a caretaker basis for eighteen months. He continued to fortify the library's collections with reams of little-known texts, adding strength to what is already the world's foremost collection of Southeast Asian books on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Graduate students continued to come to see him, and his advice and experience were eagerly sought out by the Southeast Asia program, where he was still a regular at faculty meetings well after his retirement. David had retired from Cornell, but Cornell—very wisely—did not allow David to be too retiring, and kept this great intellectual citizen within its ambit until it was no longer possible to do so on the grounds of ill health.

David Kent Wyatt died on November 14, 2006. He had divested most of his books to Cornell, to other deserving libraries, to his successors in the department, and to other students. These books were his children in some senses too, just like his three sons, who had been a source of great pride and happiness to him during his extraordinary life. His wife, Alene, who had been with him through years of failing health, and who had been quite literally a pillar of strength at his side, was with him in mid-November, and he passed very peacefully. A strange thing happened “at the end,” however. Within a day of his passing, anyone even remotely involved in Southeast Asian Studies anywhere on the planet got email after email reporting the news of his death. Dozens of emails came into Cornell, then scores, and finally the messages stretched into triple figures, all expressing sadness at the passing of the great teacher. Though he had passed, David—like the ancient texts he adored—was breathed into life again momentarily by the glowing testaments of his community. It was a fitting tribute for this giant of a scholar, who also happened to be among the most humble of men.