

John M. Echols

March 25, 1913 — June 16, 1982

When John Echols and his family arrived at Cornell in 1952, he had already had a distinguished career. In completing his doctorate in linguistics at the University of Virginia and in subsequent study, he mastered a full dozen tongues, specializing in the Germanic languages and, with that powerful intellectual curiosity that always fueled his scholarship, encompassing Hittite as well. (Fortunately for Cornell, his love affair with Hittite later yielded place to the attractions of the Indonesian languages.) During World War II he had served in Naval Intelligence, first in Washington, and from 1944 to 1947 as assistant naval attaché in Stockholm—one of the many places where he was at home in the local language. Then, as deputy director of the language program in the State Department's Foreign Service Institute, he was challenged to prepare its first Indonesian language program so that our foreign service officers could finally learn to speak the language of the world's fifth most populous country. So well did he fulfill that difficult assignment that in the course of a single year—1952—the American Council of Learned Societies invited him to prepare an Indonesian-English dictionary, the Ford Foundation asked him to organize and direct an English-language teaching project in Indonesia, and he was invited to Cornell as associate professor of linguistics and Asian studies, in charge of instruction in Indonesian, Malay, Javanese, and Malayo-Polynesian.

Once settled in Ithaca, with his enormous energy Professor Echols was able to carry forward all three endeavors to success. Very quickly he established himself as one of the foremost authorities on Indonesian languages and literature. He developed new methods for teaching Indonesian languages, and his students went on to form the main cadres for its instruction in this country and in Australia. English teaching in Indonesia owes him a similar debt. And he also pioneered the teaching in this country of Southeast Asian literature in translation. As a valued member of the Department of Modern Languages, where he was promoted to full professor in 1957, he also taught courses in linguistics, Dutch, Swedish, and Norwegian and served as external examiner for these languages at other institutions throughout New York State.

John Echols never much liked administration, but at Cornell he did considerably more than his share—serving as chairman of the Department of Asian Studies from 1956 to 1961, and as associate director of the Southeast Asia Program from 1961 and of the Modern Indonesia Project from 1955 until his retirement four years ago. Towards all of them he had a strong sense of responsibility and was vital to their growth and success.

Outside of teaching he focused most of his scholarly efforts on producing what have become the standard Indonesian-English (1961; revised edition, 1963) and English-Indonesian (1975) dictionaries and was in the process of compiling a third edition of his Indonesian-English dictionary when he died. He was devoted to this staggering task, which he enjoyed despite his fondness for quoting those who disparaged such work—a Dutch colleague who chided him with, “What crime have you committed to be saddled with this?” and the French scholar who remarked that “the worst criminals should neither be executed nor sentenced to forced labor but should be condemned to compile dictionaries.” In a more serious vein, he frequently acknowledged that without the help of his wife, Nancy, he could never have seen these projects through. And it is certain that her cheerful and supportive involvement in the typing and other tedious aspects of this work made it possible for him to do so.

There was yet a third major contribution John Echols made to Cornell. It was as much a labor of love as were his teaching and dictionaries, but it was not a function of his academic appointment nor supported by any foundation grant. This was his prodigious input in building up the University Libraries’ Southeast Asia collection. In this sustained thirty-year effort he gave constant support to its curator, Giok Po Oey, and was crucial to making the collection the strongest in existence. Working late into the night, he maintained an enormous correspondence with hundreds of scholars and collectors around the world to enlist their help in acquiring rare and ephemeral items. It is entirely appropriate that the collection has been given his name.

Professor Echols was a member of many professional associations, including the Linguistic Society of America, the American Anthropological Association, the American Oriental Society, Societas Linguistica Europea, and the Indonesia Council of the Asia Society. He acted as consultant to institutions in this country and abroad, among other things serving as external examiner in linguistics and Malay studies at the University of Malaya and assessor for appointments to its Department of Malay Studies. He wrote an extraordinary number of articles and reviews in the fields of Indonesian languages and literature, being an especially conscientious reviewer for the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. To the *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the Twentieth Century* he contributed articles on Dutch as well as Indonesian authors. He translated and edited A. S. Tselekin’s *Old Javanese (Kawi)* and as well edited *Modern Indonesian Literature in Translation* and half a dozen bibliographies. He received many honors. He was awarded fellowships from the Ford, Guggenheim, and Rockefeller foundations and from the National Endowment for the Humanities; he served as president of the national Association for Asian Studies; he was representative for North America of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal, Land en Volkenkunde; and he was one of only eight people to be elected honorary member of the Malaysian branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

But this recognition aside, what does his work all add up to? One can fairly say, we believe, that his career has built a bridge between this country and Indonesia and that over it there is a heavy two-way traffic. Thanks to his development of language programs in the United States and in Indonesia and thanks to his unrivaled dictionaries, communication, verbal and printed, between peoples of the two countries is enormously greater than would otherwise have been the case. And it is to the John M. Echols Collection—now a magnet for scholars from all over the world—that Indonesians as well as other Southeast Asian, European, Japanese, and Soviet scholars come to carry out research in a collection unmatched in their own countries.

While the fruits of Professor Echols's work are known far beyond Ithaca, his modesty and unassuming mien will, we believe, have obscured these accomplishments for many of those who have known him here. He was refreshingly unpretentious, and his accomplishments were achieved quietly and without fanfare.

Above all he will be remembered here for the qualities of his character and the ways in which he affected the lives of so many people. Some of his many friends will recall his exhaustive and precise bibliographic knowledge and, similarly, his ability to keep in mind the name of practically everyone he ever met. Some will remember his low-key, deliberate, and reticent manner of conducting business or his generosity and patience with his students. Others will remember his delight in music—the classical operas, operettas, and chamber works—as well as his enthusiasm for a wide range of sporting events. All will remember his equable temperament, the breadth and liveliness of his range of interests, his absolutely irrepressible sense of wry humor, and his inability to overlook the possibility of a pun. None will forget his deep concern for the welfare of those around him and his spontaneous impulse to help them.

He is survived by his wife, Nancy Doner Echols; two daughters: Jane E. Libbey, of Largo, Florida, and Renny E. Staples, of Newfane, New York; two grandchildren: Dorinda and Brooke Libbey; a brother, Edward C. Echols, of Exeter, New Hampshire; a sister, Mrs. William B. Patterson, of Waynesboro, Virginia; and nephews.

Knight Biggerstaff, Harold Shadick, Lauriston Sharp, Oliver W. Wolters, George McT. Kahin