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# JOHN LEGGE (1921–2016), AO, FASSA, FAHA: HISTORIAN, SOUTHEAST ASIANIST, INSTITUTION BUILDER

Anthony Milner

In the words of former president of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Elaine McKay, “more than any other, it has been John Legge who helped Australia to make the transition from orientalism to modern Asian studies” (McKay, 1986: 177). Throughout the great expansionist period of the Australian university system (1960s and ’70s), he was a leader in the building of Monash University—first as a professor of history, and then as dean of the faculty of arts—and also in the vital interaction between academic analysts and government policy-makers. Through his international and Australian networks, and growing numbers of students, he influenced Australia’s engagement with Asia. Internationally, Legge was especially recognized for his writing on Indonesia (see selected bibliography at the end of this essay), and also as a theoretician in the discipline of history.

A graduate of Melbourne University and of Oxford University, where he was supported by an Australian National University scholarship, Legge’s early writing was on colonial government, with major books on Papua (*Australian Colonial Policy*, 1956) and British Fiji (*Britain in Fiji, 1858–1880*, 1958). The Papua project on Australia’s administration of the territory arose from Legge’s wartime work in the government’s

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DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND CIVIL AFFAIRS, which was headed by the extraordinary Alf Conlon, and recruited also the poet James McAuley and future Governor General John Kerr. At the University of Western Australia in the immediate post-War period (1946–60), Legge was also a pioneer in the teaching of Asian history—prominent government minister Fred Chaney, and Ambassador to Japan Sir Neil Currie, among others, spoke in later years of how Legge's survey course changed their lives. His years in Western Australia, working in the department of history founded by Fred Alexander and living in St. Georges College under the wardenship of the respected and eccentric “Josh” Reynolds, were particularly happy ones for Legge. It was there that he met and married, in 1952, the beautiful and talented Alison Hale, a fellow Oxford graduate and the star of a legendary local theatrical production of Shaw's *St. Joan*.

In 1956, Legge and Alison spent a sabbatical leave at Cornell University, the preeminent center for Southeast Asian Studies in the United States. Here Legge was inspired by the academic leadership of George Kahin, with his focus on modern Asia rather than Orientalism; his (often critical) engagement with Washington, DC; and his network of relations with the rising new elites of postcolonial Southeast Asia. The much-respected Indonesianist Herb Feith, who knew both men well, once reflected that, despite their many common perspectives, Legge's “emancipatory liberalism” was “more playful and skeptical, less passionate, less romantic and less radical” (Feith, 1986: 85).

Legge's particular Australian style was shaped in part in Western Victoria—at Warrnambool State School and Geelong College. His father was a Presbyterian clergyman; and his great grand uncle was the famous missionary James Legge, the translator of Confucius and first professor of Chinese at Oxford. In the midst of academic debate, the expression on John Legge's face could sometimes convey the type of Protestant tenacity suggested in portraits of his ancestor.

As a student at Melbourne University, Legge studied in the Department of History—at a time when its influential professor, R. M. Crawford, was questioning the nature of history as a process of inquiry, and also warning Australians that the age of European empires had ended, and that they must now come to terms with the societies of the new Asia Pacific. In future years Legge addressed these two themes himself as an academic leader, especially when he moved to the new Monash University in 1960 as foundation professor of history.

Established in Melbourne with Alison and their three children—David, Catherine, and Colin—Legge set about recruiting faculty for Monash's history department, which was soon regarded as one of the finest in the country. It was distinguished by a fresh approach to the study of theoretical issues, an extraordinary range of expertise—including some of Australia's most prominent specialists in Australian and European history, and a collegiality that has become a hallmark of the department.

Legge was also central in developing the Monash Centre of Southeast Asian Studies—modeling it in some ways on Cornell's Southeast Asia Program—and achieving a wide international reputation in Southeast Asian Studies for all of Australia, as well as Monash, with amazing rapidity. The first Southeast Asia specialists who came to Monash—including Herb Feith, Cyril Skinner, Michael Swift,

Ian Mabbett, Jamie Mackie, and Milton Osborne—were renowned in their various fields and gave young Australians immediate access to distinguished institutions in the United States, Britain, and Europe. Monash was also now equipped to contribute to the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the region itself. Legge, for instance, spent 1969–70 as director of Singapore’s now-famous Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. One of his initiatives at ISEAS was to institute weekend seminars where public servants, business people, and journalists could interact with academics. As always, he believed an academic institution “should not be an ivory tower” (McKay, 1986: 193).

Following from his sabbatical at Cornell, Legge’s principal academic focus was Indonesia, which he recognized as a country of the highest possible importance for Australians to understand. The first Australian historian to devote himself primarily to the study of Indonesia, his initial research (*Central Authority and Regional Autonomy in Indonesia*, 1961) was on regionalism and local government, a topic of vital importance today, and one for which Legge’s work on Papua and Fiji had been useful preparation. During his field trips to Indonesia he collaborated closely with key Indonesian officials and scholars, including the future ambassador to the United States, the intellectually charismatic Sudjatmoko. Legge later (1988) published an important study, *Intellectuals and Nationalism in Indonesia*, that focused on the young elite around Sudjatmoko’s brother-in-law—the socialist political figure Sjahrir—and took issue in certain ways with Ben Anderson’s assessment of the Indonesian revolution. The subjects of this study, Legge commented, had been preoccupied in the late 1930s and early ’40s with the same “political and theoretical matters” that had been the “preoccupations of my own student generation” in Australia—though in a “very different world” (Legge, 1988: vii).

Legge’s two best known works on Indonesia, however, are a richly textured and beautifully written biography of Indonesia’s founding statesman, Sukarno, a man who had troubled many Australians (*Sukarno: A Political Biography*, first published in 1972); and a highly innovative general history (*Indonesia*, first published in 1964). The general history is remarkable in bringing together Legge’s desire to understand Indonesia, especially the historical processes that have shaped the country, with his commitment to making theoretical advances in the discipline of history. *Indonesia* is an achievement in interdisciplinary collaboration, with the historian Legge—responding to some extent to his old teacher Crawford’s claim that the practice of history is itself fundamentally scientific in character—reaching out to a range of social scientists. In particular, Legge saw the way the imaginative, illuminating concepts developed by the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz could deepen a historian’s understanding of Indonesian society and the manner in which Indonesia was changing. Geertz, who went on to become America’s leading anthropologist, acknowledged that it was Legge more than any other scholar who had brought the disciplines together in Indonesian studies.

Alison was diagnosed in the late 1970s with a terminal illness, a blow that the couple met with dignity and fortitude. Legge faced the untimely death of his 52-year-old partner in life with a strength that may have drawn on his childhood in the manse and the early death of his mother. A second, sixteen-year-long marriage to Jane

Drakard, a fellow Indonesianist, brought Legge new happiness, intellectual stimulation, and an enduring friendship.

An outstanding publication in Legge's later career was a long, authoritative essay in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (1992): a survey of the whole field of historical writing on Southeast Asia. In this much-quoted work, Legge combined—as no other contemporary historian could—a vast professional knowledge of the range of research that had been undertaken with an intense philosophic interest in comparing the methodological and theoretical approaches that shaped these studies. One aspect of this and other reflections on the practice of Southeast Asian history was a friendly but rigorous debate—carried on in correspondence and in discussions in Canberra and rural Braidwood, as well as in print—with Cornell's O. W. Wolters, including about what, exactly, ought to be entailed in the execution of textual analysis.<sup>1</sup>

It was from his strong academic foundation in history and Southeast Asian studies that Legge played a broader role in Australian public life. His students—many inspired by his rigorous interest in problems of analysis and interpretation—went to key academic positions all over the country (including the University of Queensland, the University of New South Wales, and the Australian National University), and have held influential positions in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and other government departments. Legge himself was comfortable when in the limelight of Australian politics, and was unapologetic for being so as an academic and intellectual. He was at his most active at a time when Australian universities were expanding and looked upon as highly prestigious.

In a spirit of civic as well as professional duty, Legge supported research and educational projects that he believed would help the nation, and accepted high office in a range of public institutions. He was for many years a guiding influence in the Australian Institute of International Affairs, writing its history (*Australian Outlook*) in 1999, and serving as research chair and president of the Victorian Branch—and was president of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. He played a large part in numerous public forums and “teach-ins,” especially relating to Australia’s engagement with Asia. He was a prominent opponent of the American War in Vietnam, debating against B. A. Santamaria, Geoffrey Fairbairn, Frank Knopfelmacher, and other Australian supporters of the American-led campaign. From 1987–93, Legge was an executive member of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board, and for many years he chaired the Department of Foreign Affairs Editorial Advisory Board for the series “Documents on Australian Foreign Policy.”

Legge’s students and colleagues will best remember his delight in debate, fundamental fairness, and personal warmth. He was determined that Australia should be in the vanguard of international historical research, particularly with respect to Southeast Asia. His combination of open inquiry—his intense desire to understand historical patterns and processes—and his confident skepticism still offer a valuable

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<sup>1</sup> The flavor of the debate is suggested in O. W. Wolters, “Narrating the Fall of the Ly and the Rise of the Tran Dynasties,” *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review* 10, 2 (1986), 24–32; and John Legge, “The Writing of Southeast Asian History,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48–49. See also Craig J. Reynolds, “The Professional Lives of O. W. Wolters,” in *O. W. Wolters: Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2008), 1–38.

standpoint, including with respect to the great Australian task of achieving an effective accommodation with the societies of the Asian region.

### J. D. Legge's Major Publications

- Australian Colonial Policy: A Survey of Native Administration and European Development in Papua* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1956)
- Britain in Fiji, 1858–1880* (London: Macmillan, 1958)
- Central Authority and Regional Autonomy in Indonesia: A Study in Local Administration 1950–1960* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961)
- Indonesia* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964)
- Sukarno: A Political Biography* (London: Allen Lane, 1972; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973)
- Legge and A. R. Davis, eds., *Traditional Attitudes and Modern Styles in Political Leadership: Papers Presented to the 28 International Congress of Orientalist under the Convenorship of J. D. Legge* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973)
- “Southeast Asian History and the Social Sciences,” in *Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays Presented to D. G. E. Hall*, ed. C. D. Cowan and O. W. Wolters (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 388–404
- Intellectuals and Nationalism in Indonesia: A Study of the Following Recruited by Sutan Sjahrir in Occupation Jakarta* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1988)
- “The Writing of Southeast Asian History,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume One*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–50
- Legge and David Bouchier, eds., *Democracy in Indonesia, 1950s and 1990s* (Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1994)
- Australian Outlook: A History of the Australian Institute of International Affairs* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999)
- “Chance and Circumstance: A Gradual Journey towards Asian Studies,” in *Historians and Their Discipline: The Call of Southeast Asian History*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 55–71
- “The Road to Conlon’s Circus—and Beyond: A Personal Retrospective,” in *Scholars at War: Australasian Social Scientists, 1939–1945*, ed. Geoffrey Grey, Doug Monro, and Christine Winter (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2012), 149–62

### About J. D. Legge

- Herb Feith, “John Legge and Cornell,” in *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indonesia: Essays in Honour of Professor J. D. Legge*, ed. David P. Chandler and M. C. Ricklefs (Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1986), 83–96

- Elaine McKay, “John Legge and Asian Studies in Australia: ‘All That Has now Been Quite Transformed,’” in *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indonesia*, ed. Chandler and Ricklefs, 177–200
- J. A. C. Mackie and A. C. Milner, “John Legge as a Historian,” in *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indonesia*, ed. Chandler and Ricklefs, 163–76
- Essays by Ann Kumar, Milton Osborne, Selo Soemardjan, Nicholas Tarling, and O. W. Wolters, in “Engaging J. D. Legge,” *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review* 10, 2 (1986): 1–32
- Craig J. Reynolds, “The Professional Lives of O. W. Wolters,” in *O. W. Wolters: Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2008), 1–38
- John Ingleson, “A Model for a Scholarly Life,” *Asian Currents*, Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2016, <http://asaa.asn.au/model-scholarly-life/>, accessed October 17, 2016