OLIVER W. WOLTERS

June 8, 1915 – December 5, 2000

Oliver William Wolters, the Goldwin Smith Professor of Southeast Asian History, Emeritus, died on December 5, 2000. He had been a member of the Cornell Faculty since 1964. He acted as a member of the editorial advisory board and was an active contributor to the journal, *Indonesia*, for many years. Following his official retirement from teaching in 1985, he remained fully engaged in research and writing into his eighty-fifth year with no diminishment of his extraordinary creativity. He was devoted to the University's Southeast Asia Program, participating fully in its activities until a few weeks before his death.

Oliver's driving passion was to recover no less than what it had meant to be alive in early Southeast Asia. Characteristically, his writing focuses on events, on transitions, and the roundedness of experience. Inevitably, he was drawn to adopt not just one method of surveying what was thought; was written; was done. Instead, he became a generalist in what is a formidably difficult and specialized field, and it is both this breadth, and the risk it entails, that gives his work its animation, its wide audience, and made him such a commanding figure in the development of Southeast Asian Studies.

All those who knew him are aware that Oliver disdained self-advertisement—that he was rather reserved and rarely spoke of his personal experience. Even close friends were likely to be unfamiliar with his background. He did, of course, say that he came to academic life late, after having spent twenty years in Malaysia as a colonial official. While the statement is factually accurate, one might just as easily point out that his introduction to academics occurred much earlier, in fact, at birth in Reading, England, where his father was starting the psychology department at the nascent Reading University, which he ultimately served as Deputy Vice Chancellor. His father's original field of study was philosophy. He was widely read in the classics and directed Oliver to the study of Greek and Latin, but his efforts to tutor him, beginning at age six, made little headway.

Oliver's mother came from a Welsh-speaking family and was a gifted storyteller. The family, including his younger sister, Gwyneth, read Shakespeare together. There was a lively interest in music, and this remained a source of pleasure throughout his life. The garden, and especially its rosebeds, were locally admired, and Oliver and his

wife, Euteen, continued this tradition in Ithaca where they maintained a handsome garden.

At the age of nine, Oliver went as a boarder to Saint Bartholomew's Grammar School at nearby Newbury. The school, founded in 1466, had high standards and some success in placing its graduates in Oxford and Cambridge. Oliver was a member of the school orchestra, took parts in theatrical productions, and learned to play rugby football with sufficient enthusiasm to break several bones. It was here that he began to focus his academic interest on history, and it was from here that he entered Lincoln College, Oxford, on a scholarship.

At Oxford, Oliver found congenial friends who shared his developed and advanced taste in the absurd—something that he retained until the end of his life. He seems to have attended lectures in a desultory fashion but read deeply in history. With his friends, he invented a fictitious Restoration poet and brought to light a body of his "just discovered" work. The perpetrators were themselves brought to attention when someone proposed in earnest to undertake research on the poet. He also was fined ten shillings for riding his bicycle the wrong way up a one-way street on a bet. Much later in life, in irritation with the zeal of US immigration officials, he insisted in listing the episode on his visa form as his criminal record.

Oliver graduated in June 1937 with a First Class Honours degree. He applied for admission to the Malayan Civil Service and was immediately accepted. This brought the great luxury of a fourth year at Oxford preparing himself for his career with Malay language and history study. In August 1938, he boarded a steamship in Marseilles and embarked on a voyage that then took three weeks and was to set his course for the rest of his life. In those days Malaya was distant, certainly tinged with an exotic glamour, and just the right destination to engage the imagination of a reader of Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling. It was also a time of rapidly gathering international tension; it would be seven years before Oliver returned to England.

Immediately upon Oliver's arrival, the Secretary for Chinese Affairs selected him for language study. His language was Cantonese, which he studied for two and one half years in Singapore, Macau, and Hong Kong, at the end of which time he could almost dream in Cantonese. He returned to Singapore in the middle of 1941 to assume duties in the Labor Department, an assignment that was to place him at the center of political developments in the immediate post-war period.

Following the brief, futile resistance after the Japanese attacked in December 1941, Oliver became a civilian internee first in Changi Prison (1942–1944) and then at the Sime Road Golf Course, until liberated in August 1945. It was a period about which he spoke very little, but the enforced leisure did allow him to keep up with written Chinese and to read in some depth about Buddhism and central Asia. He also was able to form close friendships with a number of his Malayan Civil Service colleagues.

Oliver's first post after returning to Malaya from home leave in early 1946 was as Commissioner of Labor, Selangor. He was immediately thrust into a wave of industrial actions initiated by the Malayan Communist Party. The Japanese occupation had caused economic disruption, and grievances were not difficult to identify. Oliver responded to the situation by patient, protracted negotiation of the striker's demands.

His reputation as a negotiator was such that the Governor General sent him to Brunei to help settle a labor dispute in the oil fields there.

Whether or not Oliver's success in diffusing some of the pent-up demands and tension in the labor field played any part in the decision, the Malayan Communist Party switched tactics and launched an armed resistance in 1948. This period, the Emergency, again saw Oliver fully in the thick of things, and he seems deliberately to have exposed himself to personal risk. He was ambushed twice, escaping without injury, and undertook to travel repeatedly in areas of known insecurity. His background in Chinese affairs fitted him to play a significant role in the implementation of the massive resettlement of hundreds of thousands of rural Chinese squatters who were located in areas outside of the reach of governmental administration and on the fringe of the forested areas haunted by the guerrillas. This source of recruits and material assistance was the sea in which the guerrillas swam, and to deny access, half a million of these squatters were moved to areas patrolled by police check points. Governmental services—health, schools—virtually non-existent before, were now provided to them in an effort to at least temper their alienation. This policy proved effective and, by 1954, the armed insurrection was essentially contained; and if not eliminated, at least it no longer presented an immediate threat.

Before that, however, in 1951, Oliver requested a posting as a District Officer, and this brought him into a major emergency area in Tapah in southern Perak. Here he first met General Templer, whose energy, flair, and decisiveness Oliver came to admire. It is not too difficult to read these characteristics embodied by Templer as prefiguring Oliver's later scholarly reconstruction of an early Southeast Asia-style of charismatic leadership.

From Tapah, Oliver was posted to the more-senior district of Lurut and Matang in northern Perak. Here in this setting, with the emergency now under control, Oliver passed three happy years. It was here that he learned a valuable lesson in political theatre by organizing the celebration of Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953 and the birthday of His Highness the Sultan of Perak in 1954. As master of ceremonies for these spectacles, Oliver stood at a reviewing stand for a parade including police, public services, Boy Scouts, and elephants.

With independence clearly in sight, Oliver's Malayan career was now drawing to a close. He was appointed Director of Psychological Warfare with an office in Kuala Lumpur. In 1955, he married Euteen Khoo, who at the time was stationed in Malacca as Inspector of Schools. Euteen's family, on both sides, were notable founding fathers of Kuala Lumpur. Both Oliver and Euteen looked forward to a future in England where Oliver was to take up a lectureship in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. They left Malaya in February 1957, settling in Reigate, Surrey, where they built a suburban house, developed a garden, and where Oliver became a historian with a specialization in the early history of Southeast Asia. They remained in England until 1964, when Oliver joined the Cornell faculty as its first Professor of Southeast Asian history.

For Oliver, the Malayan years were exiting and full of recognition. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire and was also decorated for his service by the Sultan of Perak. His responsibilities had taken him to diverse landscapes—interior villages,

coastal settlements, mangrove swamps, and major cities. He participated as an actor in the institutions through which public life is shaped. What role did this background play in his scholarship?

No major body of creation, and I think this language is justified if one looks at the totality of Oliver's work, can be explained by presenting a chronicle of life's circumstances. There is always a gap, an indeterminate zone, between the life and the work. Since the historical past is not something simply to be found waiting there in the archive, but is also formed within the memory and imagination of the historian, the interesting question is how does he or she transform experience into perception? In Oliver's case I think there is everywhere a vitalizing tension between his educative journey, the key to the formation of a distinctive self, and his scholarly achievement.

He had a singular voice, unmistakably his and fully formed in his early writing. It is audible in one of his earliest articles, "China irredenta: the South" published in 1963 in *The World Today*. He gives a brisk, fluent, tour of China's foreign policy, its perennial objectives in maritime Southeast Asia. The language might easily be found either in strategic intelligence appreciations or in the subtle weighting of courses of action and assessments of probable outcomes typical of diplomatic correspondence. The vantage point seems to be from whatever might have served as a conference room in the T'ang dynasty Foreign Office, and there is a determined effort to make clear that the historical springs of action are still a shaping force in contemporary Chinese initiatives. At its core this policy aims to protect China's maritime communications to the Indian Ocean and beyond by backing a single dominant polity, a commercial center, which could guarantee the tranquillity of the major sea lanes in a region considered by the Chinese to feature inherently unstable polities.

This principal power was Srivijaya (7-13th c.); its location, organization, capabilities, and the character of its hinterland was the focus of Oliver's PhD thesis at The University of London. The thesis was published in 1963 as *Early Indonesian Commerce*, and after he joined the Cornell faculty in 1964, it continued to engage his imagination throughout his career. He published a second book on the topic, *The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History* (1970) and followed this up with a series of papers in the 1980s.

All this effort, drawing on the most varied sources, including botanical evidence, archaeological survey, epigraphy, reminiscences of Chinese travelers and diplomats, art styles and iconography, established that the present city of Palembang on the Musi River was the location of Srivijaya. His contributions, when surveyed in their entirety, present a picture of the historical past, the physical topography of the landscape, and the metaphorical resonance abroad of a harbor-city whose fame and cosmopolitan glamour would rival that of Alexandria, Venice, or Trieste.

And the scope of his achievement extends to the catalytic role he played in reviving an interest in the subject that had waned since the important work of George Coedès in 1918. Archaeologists, art historians, and anthropologists, encouraged and stimulated by Oliver, embarked on parallel studies, excavations, and a series of international conferences in Thailand and Indonesia. Research moved from the library to the search for pot sherds on the riverbank and the exploration of shipwrecks. These studies flourish today.

The horizon of Oliver's interests extended far beyond the search for Srivijaya. He crossed borders with impunity, writing important papers on Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Thailand. His work on Vietnam drew him to Sino-Vietnamese poetry and to the study of literary conventions. A new emphasis on "voice" and the close study of the structure of "texts" becomes evident. At the very end of his life he was experimenting with presenting history through the flux and swift transition of speech in dialogue. He left unfinished an extensive manuscript on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Vietnamese history written in the looseness and immediacy of address found in conversation. The stimulus here was Oliver's reading of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.

By inheritance and ambition, Oliver was devoted to the primary mission of the university: the creative transmission of knowledge through teaching. Research was never isolated from the broad questions of its employment in large human concerns. All of his learning and imagination were fully engaged in his sparkling classroom presentations. He would burst through the door, armed with pointer and map, and at least one large, heavy book. He would set forth a problem, a theme, a question, lay out alternatives, weigh sources, and then for fifty enlivening minutes we were in full sail but with increasing trust that we would reach some shore of light. He would then, with the utmost tact, draw his audience into a discussion, greeting each intervention as if it were a most valuable contribution to the proceedings.

And, Oliver continued to give encouragement to students, and also to colleagues, both through informal consultations in his office and by frequent lunch invitations. Although he would shrink from the grandiosity of such a formulation, he was pivotal in calling forth an intellectual community where one might otherwise have encountered only a loose aggregate of specialized producers of knowledge. He retained a large and exceptionally devoted circle of former students with whom he exchanged letters and visits long after they left Cornell. This web of exchange helped to keep Oliver in touch with publication, as well as research in progress, in many diverse fields and played a significant role in what may be the achievement for which he will be most widely remembered.

This is, of course, his remarkable *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives,* originally published in 1982 and reprinted in a second edition in 1999 with the addition of a 138-page "postscript." There could scarcely be a greater disparity between the importance of this book and the modesty of its physical presentation as a limited press run paperback. This is a major achievement for which the facts of his life seem to have disposed him without in any way explaining what is uniquely assembled as a unified vision. While there have been many significant works on Southeast Asian history, no one before Oliver has so effectively charted the contours of that discipline in such a way that it can now embark on the process of self-reflection that is a requisite of maturity. No one before him had cast a net so widely across the region or made such a compelling case that the recovery of the wholeness of experience demands the integration of perspectives provided by both the humanities and the social sciences. And, there is no parallel to the richly textured weave of the many short narratives through which he demonstrates patterns of cultural commonalities, ruling tendencies, shared proclivities, which despite many differences, persist in the region even today and give it an air of family resemblance.

Demonstrated through this work is evidence of Oliver's openness, his readiness to revise, to argue with himself, to reach beyond the conventional. His generosity extended to his critics, and the postscript—really a new book—replies with great courtesy to those who have commented on the earlier edition. Not the least of the attractive features of his presentation is the meticulously nuanced vocabulary he brings to demonstrating the kinds and degrees of historical connection, whether casual, temporal, structural, or something more allusive. This allows him to set forth the springs of social action as they are both embraced and resisted, assimilated or transformed, to form a common cultural matrix that is at the same time marked by diversity.

Many of the key themes in the book were developed over many years in his articles: mandala politics; openness to the new; the creative adaptation of Hindu cognitive structures to local realities; feebleness of governmental structures; marriage politics and charismatic leadership. At the core of this was a vision of early Southeast Asian polities which he designated as mandalas, but that could be described as unstable compounds, an event in time, fluid in borders, lacking in fixed administrative structures, a momentary constellation of interdependent interests focused on the radiant presence of a charismatic leader or "man of prowess." Very few of Oliver's friends and students will read those last words without feeling that he himself was just such a person.

The appearance of the revised edition of *History, Culture, and Region* was suitably greeted by a two-day seminar at the Australian National University. Oliver received many other honors, including the Distinguished Scholarship Award in 1990, the highest recognition bestowed by the Association of Asian Studies. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, was a Visiting Fellow of the Australian National University, and a Bellagio Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation. He was a Trustee of the Breezewood Foundation, and at Cornell he served as Chairman of the Department of Asian Studies (1970-1972).

All of his colleagues and former students will long remember his generosity, his breadth of spirit, and the gentle and honorable quality of his character. He exemplified in his person the very best values of humane learning. We express our deep sympathy to his wife Euteen, his son and daughter Nigel and Pamela, and his sister Gwyneth.

– Stanley J. O'Connor

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