

OBITUARIES

PETER JAMES BEE

1927-1982

Members and friends of the Siam Siam Society will be saddened to learn of the death of Peter James Bee, Lecturer in Thai Studies at SOAS, University of London (1964-82) and former Lecturer in English at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University (1955-64). Peter, who had suffered from a serious heart condition in recent years, died quietly in his office on May 4, 1982. His colleague, Stuart Simmonds, had stopped by to join Peter for tea and discovered that he had passed away.

Peter was born on July 12, 1927 in Leicester, England where he also received his primary education. He later went on to Clare College, Cambridge, where he received both his B.A. (Modern and Medieval Languages, 1951) and M.A. (Oriental Languages, principally Chinese Literature, 1953). In 1954, he studied Thai for a year at SOAS, and then came to Chula where he joined such stalwarts as John Blofeld, Victor Sassoon, and Robert Swann, and for almost a decade participated in what has come to be known as the "golden age of farang archarn" at Chula's Department of English. Peter's years at Chula were memorialized in the 1965 book, *mai pen rai means never mind* by the late Carol Hollinger. Although Hollinger drew excellent portraits of all her characters (all of whom were identified by name) her descriptions of Peter's sparkling wit and infectious camaraderie, as well as his brilliance as a teacher, were unerring in their accuracy. During this period, he also shared a house with J. Marvin Brown who for years had been Director of Thai instruction at the AUA Language Center. Peter often said that it was Marvin's stimulation that induced him to expand his professional interests from literature into linguistics. Peter's love affair with Thailand culminated in his marriage to Khun Chok, the woman who was to be his wife for many years and the mother of his two children.

Peter returned to SOAS in 1964 and with Stuart Simmonds and Khun Manas helped create the premier program for the study of Thai language and literature in the Western world. While Peter was not a prolific writer, the work he did publish or report on was marked by originality and profundity. He was a man of extraordinary intellectual talents.

Peter was also keenly aware of his own strengths and limitations, and he much preferred dealing with people on a personal face-to-face basis rather than through the written word. He was a superb listener (with his head cocked slightly to the left) and always responded with relevance, clarity, and stimulation. Like Socrates in the Academy, he sometimes thought that writing created too great a distance between

people and also afforded more efficient opportunities for guile and falsehood. He himself was a man totally without guile. One of this writer's greatest frustrations was his inability to interest Peter in a position at Berkeley during the early 1970's when our own new Department of South and Southeast Asian Languages and Literature was created. Peter correctly perceived that at Berkeley he would have to write more and teach less--and that was not his style.

Peter was a man of many parts. While he loved singing scatological ditties, he could also sing every Mozart opera--every part of every opera--from beginning to end. In fact, his love of music was exceeded only by his love of language.

It is of course as a teacher that Peter will best be remembered. His students are legion, and include people as varied as the last British Consul in Chiangmai, one of Thailand's most provocative Ministers of Interior (Samak Sunthornwej), and the most recent Instructor in the Thai language at UC Berkeley. In fact, one encounters Peter's students under the most serendipitous circumstances: in 1979, I had been working in California for more than a year with a Thai associate on aspects of contemporary Thai literature when I discovered that her favorite professor in college, twenty years earlier, had been Peter Bee.

Although Peter was not a practicing Buddhist, he was keenly aware of the limitations of each person's existence and yet how the consequences of that existence tied each person to eternity. Just a month before his death, one of my own students was passing through London and I asked her to phone Peter to inquire about his health and to convey my regards. Peter would not talk about himself. Perhaps in prescient awareness of his condition, he would talk only of his children. He said, "Tell Herb that my children have grown up wonderfully. I am lucky. They are good people and they are going to contribute."

Indeed, just as their father did.

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Address by Professor E.H.S. Simmonds

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“Even as the four-footed may stumble so may the wise man still blunder”.

That is a proverbial saying of the Thai which Peter held very much in his mind and was fond of quoting. For he was a modest man, not unaware of his qualities but, being wisely aware of fallibility, he was disinclined openly to recognise or advertise them. Neither did he ask us to recognise those qualities but we did so all the same.

We remember Peter for his constant generosity as a teacher. He had an active wish to share his knowledge and he preferred to do so person to person. He was unstinting of his time and effort, giving freely to all who sought him out—not only to those students who were bonded to appear in his classes. It was no real bondage because he carried his students with him in an enterprise of learning with clear and progressing aims. The beginning student found at Christmas that he could read and write Thai when in October he or she had no inkling of the structure of the sounds or the patterns of the script. Some Christmas present! If it was no bondage then it was no easy ride either. Peter was a determined taskmaster. I think that is the word—*determined*, NOT harsh NOT hard. It would be conventional to say that he did not suffer fools gladly, but that would be wrong. If he encountered fools he suffered with them and for them, determined kindly and firmly to mitigate their foolishness.

Peter had his idiosyncracies. He was very much an individual. This sometimes expressed itself in the complex arrangement of his material; perhaps sometimes puzzling to students. But the puzzle was always resolved. His aim was always to make difficult things easy, not easy things difficult.

His students had no doubt about the end result that his teaching had for them. I have heard from Chiangmai in northern Thailand where presently reside two students of Peter's. One is a former British Consul, now retired, and the other a young geographer who writes to say how both could share fond memories of Peter's inimitable enthusiasm for the language and the way it works. He referred to Peter's drilling of the rules. At the time they seemed bizarre (not quite the right word perhaps) but invaluable when once the language was put to use, enabling him now, as he said, to do all his research work in Thai.

I have had a tribute from the most recent Foreign Office student of Peter's who writes for himself and his colleagues who were taught by Peter, and he includes Her Majesty's present Ambassador in Bangkok who was once a fellow student of Peter's at the School. These tributes, and they are many, speak for themselves.

Peter was first of all a student of language. At Cambridge, Clare College, he read the Modern and Mediaeval Language Tripos which gave him German and Russian,

Also he took the Diploma in Classical Chinese and he began his Thai studies at the School. Then, of course, he taught at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, for nearly a decade.

His published works were not many. They lie mainly in the field of linguistic investigation and they are important. He always claimed a lack of sensitivity towards literature yet was able to write an article full of personal insight into the life and attitudes of one of Thailand's most accomplished contemporary poets.

In later years he undertook a study of the language of the Mahā Chāt—The Great Life—The Vessantara Jātaka. His work was intensely detailed. He gave several fascinating papers as the research progressed but, alas it remained unfinished.

Over the years, in his personal life, Peter knew the love and happiness of a wife and family and saw his children grow and emerge from schooldays into the commencement of their careers.

As a scholar he had a great love for his subject—that we all recognise. In the best sense he loved all with whom he came into contact through his work. People were for him a link between his research and his teaching.

We remember Peter for his unfailing cheerfulness. His ready smile was familiar to us all. And we recognise his quality of openness—he was a man without guile. No one who knew him doubted that he was entirely worthy of trust. He was not naïve. There was a quality of shrewdness in his judgments whether they were made about the problems of his work or about people. And in his judgments of people he was eminently fair and just.

Peter no doubt knew the nature of *tanhā*, desire and temptation—attributes that could, in the Buddhist explanation, lead to the acts that bind us to the wheel of existence. He was not a Buddhist but he also knew the value of the way of moderation, even of renunciation and austerity. He trespassed against none.

Towards the end of his life he lived under the shadow of ill-health and this perhaps was one of the things which created a sense of loneliness in him. He did not allow this to intrude into his relations with others. He threw himself into his work and his teaching and the School became a place of great significance to him.

People responded to his caring with caring of their own. His younger colleagues and his students were the friends he did not ask for but nevertheless needed. They gave a lot to him as he gave to them. And he and they enjoyed the hours of fruitful evening talk over a glass and a simple meal.

His honesty and his loyalty made him, you see, a true man and that true-ness does not die with death. It lives with life. It is, I believe, a quality, still existent, almost perhaps a constituent of the air we breathe and we who still live can take it to ourselves if we have the will to do so, as we remember Peter James Bee.

RICHARD DAVIS

1943-1981

Richard (Dick) Davis was born in New York in 1943. He took his first degree in 1965 at the University of Virginia. He had spent some time in France and it was probably then he discovered his natural talent, and the requisite capacity for hard work, which led to his mastery of foreign languages. This must have played some part in his decision to volunteer for the Peace Corps and his acquisition of extraordinary fluency in Thai. Dick was not unaware of his accomplishment, but acknowledged it with modesty. He once said to me there were some things he did not fully understand—like the exact distinction between the uses of the relative pronouns *thii* [ที่] and *syng* [ซึ่ง].

After his initial training he spent four years in the Peace Corps, mostly in Nan province. He worked for the Provincial Education Office in Nan and was responsible for setting up and supplying Hmong schools in the province. He made many close friends during this period. These he was to keep for the rest of his life. He also turned his formidable language learning skills to the acquisition of northern Thai (*kham muang* Nan [คำเมืองน่าน]). By 1967 he was preparing instructional material for other Peace Corps volunteers, on *kham muang*, with particular emphasis on variations between provinces.

When his period with the Peace Corps came to an end, Davis went back to a village in Amphur Sa, with the intention of doing systematic anthropological fieldwork. This was in 1969. It was during this period that he learned the northern system of writing, or at least acquired the final polish to his previous knowledge, from the gentle, learned old man to whom he never ceased to express his gratitude—Noi Inta Muang-phrom. Noi Inta died in 1980. In 1970 Davis was awarded a scholarship to the University of Sydney. He was to spend the rest of his academic life in Australia. In 1972-73 he spent another year in Amphur Sa, and in 1974 received his PhD. The next four years he spent in Canberra, first as Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology. During these years he proved himself a teacher of great skill and enthusiasm. Many of the students from that period remain passionately devoted to him and to his memory. In 1978 he took up a position as Lecturer in the Department of General Studies at the University of New South Wales. It was not the position he would have liked to have had, but economic conditions were bad, worldwide, and university jobs scarce. His task was to provide some general education for professional and science students, whose education was otherwise thought to be too narrow.

Dick channelled all his enthusiasm, his love of Jazz, of film, of Southeast Asian ethnography and general anthropology into his courses, but by its very nature it couldn't give him back what he so desired from teaching.

For many years Dick Davis had suffered from a serious disorder which increasingly interfered with the way of life he chose and intended to live. Leaving his affairs in meticulous order, he died in June 1981 of his own choice. He was cremated, with Buddhist rites, in Sydney.

My colleague, Michael Young, has eloquently paid tribute to Richard Davis as man and scholar, and all his friends would, I am sure, like to read this (*Canberra Anthropology* 4, (2) : 95-7, 1981). Rather than, inadequately, trying to cover this same ground, let me here make a brief preliminary assessment of Davis's work; one that may be of interest to readers of this *Journal*.

Davis's major work is the revised version of his PhD thesis, *Muang Metaphysics : A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual*, which we hope will soon be published. All the rest of his extant work is either incorporated here, or is closely integrated with it. Unpublished papers unconnected with his central interests, of which there was at least one, appear to have been destroyed. Myth and ritual remained his central and, as far as anthropology was concerned, finally, his only interest. All his talents and energy were devoted to the task of presenting and explaining this substantial portion of northern Thai ethnography. The book is a detailed account of just about all the ritual activity engaged in by northern Thai peasants. On one side, as it were, the detail of the ritual merges into peasant secular activity, and on the other into more orthodox Buddhist ritual. The observational detail is supported by a wealth of material from northern Thai texts and finally placed within the context of Tai ethnography, using a wide range of secondary sources.

As an anthropologist, Davis was profoundly concerned with theory, but his exceptionally detailed knowledge of Muang ethnography and linguistic skill made him extremely cautious about theoretical speculations, or jumping to conclusions. One sees in his work, therefore, a constant attempt to have the ethnography make its own theoretical point, with but the barest intervention by the theoretician. Because it seems the least theoretical of his published work, his paper on the northern Thai calendar (1976) may perhaps best illustrate this point. This is the very detailed exposition of one particular aspect of *muang* belief, but carefully located in the real world of use, rationalization and manipulation. To state, baldly, that myth and ritual are in the very nature of man, may appear to be trite. In the book, Davis proceeds to *demon-*

trate by presenting a comprehensive ethnography of the northern Thai with these topics at the focus of his attention. He looks first at political and domestic units and draws from this the principles of sexual opposition and the structuring of relations between junior and senior. He moves to the more abstract and metaphysical treatment of space and time and the oppositions emerge as "high" and "low". The next five chapters examine the emergence of these principles over and over again, in a series of rituals having to do with the division of time, agricultural production, territory and kinship. The final chapter attempts to make a more theoretical statement about myth and ritual. Here he uses ideas which appear in his paper on play (1977) and in his posthumous paper (1981). Most important, however, are his notions of ambiguity which were set out in a paper in *Ethnology* (1974). In a nutshell, Davis is saying that ritual is formalized and repetitive behaviour through which humans express both their own nature and that of the universe in which they live. For the northern Thai, at least, the symbolism of ritual is straightforward and unambiguous, though their myths often confound these same categories and shroud them in mists of ambiguity. The strength of Davis's work is not in these ideas themselves, but in the manner in which he attempts to demonstrate them. It is in the ethnography. As an example, let us consider his treatment of the male/female opposition. It first arises out of his discussion of so-called northern Thai matriliney. He presents the ethnography to bring out the fact that though domestic and kinship relations are largely structured through women, they are subordinate to an overwhelming ideology of male dominance—itsself articulated with other antimonies of northern Thai culture, such as the high and the low, senior and junior. This problem, or set of problems, is again taken up at the end of the book when he discusses the political aspects of clan and domestic rituals, and the final result is a complex presentation of the way in which the symbolic, structural dichotomy between male and female interacts with other such symbolic dichotomies, is woven into ideology, and finally emerges as political action. The ethnography is not seen merely as a manifestation of binary opposition, of functional consistency, or sexual repression, but a complex amalgam of these, and much more.

The intellectual rigour with which he approached his chosen subject, myth and ritual, had two unfortunate results. He sometimes seemed to place too much reliance on fashionable, but simplistic, notions such as those of Mary Douglas. The reason I say this, is that most of the major theoretical trends in anthropological theory, if followed through, have consequences. They lead to general notions about the way the world is. This does not seem to be so for such dichotomies as "group" and "grid" canvassed by Mary Douglas. More important, in Davis's case, is that his theoretical

explorations seem to have deepened his pessimism. The major currents of anthropological theory are basically optimistic. Despite the pessimism that sometimes emerges in Lévi-Strauss's own writings, Lévi-Straussian structuralism is at bottom a humanist affirmation of the powers of the intellect: functionalism if pushed too far is almost panglossian, and the ideas of Freud and Marx may always be interpreted in evangelical and utopian ways. Reading *Muang Metaphysics* and the earlier papers, I am impressed by a sense of control. In his last work, posthumously published, Davis pulled out of *Muang Metaphysics* the one notion hardly elaborated there—*stereotypy*. More than that, he dispassionately set out to examine himself with the sharpest analytical tools he had at his disposal. It is not, I think, doing him a disfavour to let it be known that 'The Ritualization of Behaviour' is partly autobiographical.

There were two major events in Davis's relations with The Siam Society and this Journal. His paper "Muang Matrifocality" raised the whole question of the interpretation of northern Thai kinship and spirit propitiation. It is hoped that this paper will form the core of a book on the subject that some of his friends and colleagues wish to put together in his memory. The other event was of course *A Northern Thai Reader*, published by The Society in 1970. To my knowledge it was the first and still the only work of this kind in English, and it preceded what I understand, is the standard text used at the University of Chiangmai, by the late Acharn Singkha Wanasai by about five years. I am not sure that Davis fully realized the importance of this work, though he did think the palm leaf texts important enough to leave among his effects a box full of *muang* texts carefully copied out by hand.

When the Presbyterian Missionaries went to Chiangmai in the last century they set up a press and began publishing religious tracts in what they called Lao—but what was in fact the northern Thai script. During the early years of this century, official government signs were written in this *tua muang* [ตัวเมือง]. After the Shan rebellion, Bangkok moved to unify the kingdom with one official language and one official script. In the meantime, the missionaries had discovered that this so-called Lao script was used over a wide region stretching from Chiang Tung into Yunnan and eastwards. In Laos it was the *tua tham* [ตัวธรรม], the script of the Buddhist texts. All this is known from the work of Dodd, but what has happened over the last few years is the growing interest among scholars in Chiangmai, the discovery and transliteration of texts, and the realization that the same script, rationalized by order of the Chinese Government, is actually being used around Kunming. Acharn Kraisi Nimmanheminda has also now

discovered that a considerable collection of texts was removed from the Lue country to Taiwan—and is now available there. Davis's book, from being an interesting curiosity, should now be at the centre of a small but fascinating field of academic endeavour.

In the short period available to him, he has left a substantial mark on both anthropology and Thai studies. *Muang Metaphysics* and *A Northern Thai Reader* are two landmarks in the field.

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