OBITUARY

O. W. Wolters (8 June 1915–5 December 2000)

by Craig Reynolds

Professor O. W. Wolters, the Goldwin Smith Professor of Southeast Asian History Emeritus at Cornell University, died after a short illness in December 2000. A member of the Southeast Asia Program from 1964, he retired formally in 1985 but remained active in his scholarship and as a senior adviser to the Program for the next fifteen years. He had received the Order of the British Empire for his work in Malaya as an official in the Malayan Civil Service, and in 1990 the Association for Asian Studies honored him with its Distinguished Scholarship Award. He was rejuvenated by meeting scholars just coming into the field, and for the duration of his retirement he gave generously to younger people his time and intellect. A number of Thai academics who took his courses at Cornell or placed themselves under his tutelage are prominent in Thai university life today.

Oliver Wolters came to academic work late in life, having served from 1937 until 1957 in the Malayan Civil Service, "the happiest years of my life," he would often say of this earlier career. He entered the colonial service immediately after graduating from Oxford, where one of his classmates at Lincoln College was Heinz Arndt, the noted economist of Indonesia at the Australian National University, whom he never failed to visit on his trips to Canberra. After graduating from Oxford University with a first class Honours degree in 1937, Wolters was accepted into the colonial service. He was sent to Malaya and selected to work in the Department of Chinese Affairs, the preparation for which necessitated the study of Cantonese in Singapore, Macau and Hong Kong. In the middle of 1941 he returned to Singapore to work in the Labour Department. When the Japanese invaded Singapore Wolters was taken prisoner and detained as a civilian internee for three and a half years, most of the time in Changi Prison. While in prison he read widely, especially about central Asia and Buddhism, and continued his studies of Chinese.

After the war and a brief leave in England Wolters returned to Malaya and was appointed Assistant Commissioner of Labour in Selangor. During the Emergency, which began with an armed uprising in 1948, Wolters's duties included negotiating with strikers in Selangor and establishing a rehabilitation centre for captured Communist sympathisers in Taiping. He brought to the negotiating table sympathy with workers' demands and acknowledgement of genuine grievances stemming from the harsh, post-war economic conditions. He later commented that the Emergency was a consequence of the British under-governing the rural Chinese population. His skills in handling resettlement and labour unrest came to the attention of his superiors and in 1955 he was appointed Director of Psychological Warfare. Towards the end of his career in Malaya he was District Officer of Larut and Matang in nothern Perak, with headquarters in Taiping, and of Kinta in central Perak, which was his final posting. He relished this time in his life when he was "out and about" and referred to it as "a time of unbridled adventure."

In 1955 Wolters married Euteen Khoo, who had been trained in England as a Froebel teacher and who was stationed in Malacca as an Inspector of Schools. In 1956 it became clear to them that with the Emergency no longer a reason to postpone independence, they would soon have to leave Malaya, which they did in February 1957. Anticipating this moment, Wolters had kept in touch with friends at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), whom he had known since 1945. As he prepared to leave Malaya for a lectureship at SOAS, he wrote to several eminent scholars of

ancient Southeast Asia, such as Gordon Luce and George Cœdès, to seek their advice on his future studies, and on his way back to England in 1957 he toured a number of the classical sites of early Southeast Asia.

In England he took up a lecturership at SOAS with the encouragement of Professor D. G. E. Hall, who was to supervise his doctoral dissertation. He bought a suburban house in Surrey, from where he commuted to London, planted a garden, and looked forward to settling down in his native land. But D. G. E. Hall, who lectured from time to time at Cornell University, had been on the look-out for a full-time Southeast Asian historian. He recommended Wolters to the Southeast Asia Program there, and after a trial teaching stint at Cornell in 1962 Wolters and his family moved to Ithaca where he took up his appointment in 1964.

His doctorate on the history of the early Malayan maritime power, Srivijaya, was published by Cornell University Press in 1967 as *Early Indonesian Commerce: The Origins of Srivijaya*. One of the methods Wolters used to reconstruct early Indonesian commerce was to study the dynamics and ambitions of small entrepôts dotting the coastlines of peninsular Malaya and the archipelago in the early centuries C. E. These trading centers had been brought into the historical record by Chinese envoys dispatched by the imperial court to gather commercial intelligence and to maintain the proper functioning of the tribute system. In a series of studies Wolters brought to life several of these toponyms recorded in the Chinese dynastic histories. One of these preliminary studies, concerning Chen-li-fu, a toponym Wolters located inland to the west of the Chaophraya River with its port on the Gulf of Siam, was published in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1960.[2]

In 1966, in another essay published in Thailand, "A Western Teacher and the History of Early Ayudhya," Wolters puzzled over how the old Mon center of Lavo became Khmer and then Thai.[3] The alert reader will observe that Wolters was outlining a prehistory of Ayudhya by charting the fortunes of Lavo (Lopburi), a frontier city-state struggling under the over-lordship of Angkor. In another essay concerning Siam, on the diplomatic initiative of King Naresuan in the late sixteenth century to help the Chinese emperor against Emperor Hideyoshi of Japan, Wolters made one of his most important contributions to early Southeast Asian statecraft. He proposed to understand Naresuan's gesture in terms of the *Arthasastra*, the treatise on Indian statecraft written by Kautilya, sometimes referred to as the "Machiavelli" of India.[4] In proposing secretly to send troops for a direct attack on Japan "in order to embarrass (Japan's) rear," King Naresuan was responding to a critical international situation by offering to attack the enemy (Japan) of Siam's friend (China). Wolters had no evidence that Naresuan had read the *Arthasastra* or that the Siamese king even knew of its existence, but his conviction that the early Southeast Asian mainland should be seen as a geographically extensive circle of principalities whose leaders had adapted Indian example and principles to the requirements of Southeast Asian circumstances encouraged him to connect Naresuan's behavior to Kautilya's treatise on strategy.

Wolters continued to work on Srivijaya for the rest of his career, being compelled from time to time to return to the topic by challenges to his conclusions about the location of Srivijaya's center or by new research of other scholars that prompted him to rethink his conclusions. But he quickly moved on to historical problems in other parts of the region. He was able to do this partly because the Chinese dynastic materials gave him a window on the whole of Southeast Asia, and partly because he instinctively saw continuities through time as well as space. His study of early Indonesian commerce had taught him that disparate parts of Southeast Asia were connected by trade, by the communications fostered by trade, and by intellectual currents. Through the 1970s Wolters published studies of Jayavarman II's military prowess, northwestern Cambodia in the seventh century, and Khmer Hinduism in the seventh century. He also began to publish on Vietnamese history in the period between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. By the time of his death there were a dozen essays on Vietnam, rich studies in historiography and the use of poetry as historical evidence that deserve to be collected into a single volume in lieu of the monograph on early Vietnamese history that eluded him.

One of his most widely known publications was *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, first published in 1982 in Singapore. Wolters had been approached to write a history of early Southeast Asia, and while he had little interest in writing a textbook or attempting a comprehensive survey in the manner of *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* by George Cœdès, he felt he had something to say about "Southeast Asian" perspectives in early times. Responding in the mid-1990s to interest in a second edition, he dedicated himself to rereading everything he had said on the subject and to updating himself on scholarship that had appeared since the first edition. The original volume was reissued by Cornell's Southeast Asia Program in 1999 with his reflections in the form of a "postscript," as he drolly chose to call it, which was longer than the original text.

At the time of his death he had been writing a historical novel about thirteenth century Vietnam. He had been preoccupied with a history of Dai-Viet for nearly a decade and had recently decided to "scrap" the original plan and to write the history through an imaginary dialogue based on documentary evidence. He had read Mikhaïl Bakhtin and was reconstituting his Vietnamese material in dialogogic, polyphonic form. He left an unfinished manuscript, and his literary executors have yet to decide how, or indeed if, the manuscript is to be formally published.

When I first met Wolters in the North American autumn of 1965 he had been teaching full-time at Cornell for only a year. But he had localized himself sufficiently in American educational culture to be able to speak effortlessly the language of liberal arts education, telling his students forcefully in the very first lecture that the study of early Southeast Asia had a place in the liberal arts curriculum. What he meant by that, I think, is that Southeast Asia history was not an impossibly specialized or arcane field of knowledge, and it had as much to offer the liberal arts curriculum as American or European history. Its study required special methods that might have applicability in other fields or in other contexts.

Wolters was preoccupied by methodology, though he hardly ever used the term, and by the broader temporal and spatial continuities he saw in the region's history. He was a close reader of texts and an exacting prose stylist for whom words were of intense interest. At one point he besieged everyone he knew with questions about the difference between "appearance" and "countenance," terms he was using at the time to write about a fifteenth-century Vietnamese historian's view of good government. He was always alert to new ways of reading and interpreting texts, whether semiotic, structuralist or poststructuralist, though he preferred that these ways came to him via a well-read colleague whom he could pepper with questions. Early Southeast Asian history always came before theory. At a symposium in Canberra in 1984 a friendly participant suggested that he was invoking literary theory gratuitously and unnecessarily and treating it as some kind of black magic that could "do things to documents" to make them talk. He wheeled around in mock fury to answer his critic. "I've always thought like this," he said. "I can't help it."

He was proud of his chosen profession of "historian" and keen to impart to his students the historian's skills. In his very active retirement he kept these skills well-honed by writing memoirs of colleagues, which entailed for him the same kind of dedicated research as did the most elusive Southeast Asian toponym. These genre pieces, which locate the subject in family and geography through vivid detail, are models of the historian's craft. His obituary for Professor Tom Kirsch, published in the pages of this journal, exemplify these qualities as well as the affection with which he approached this particular task.[3] Given the range of his work over four decades, it is not surprising that he acquired critics of his scholarship and of his style, but no one could deny that he was a brilliant and inspiring teacher. Though he always refused the request, his graduate students often begged to sit in on "South East Asia to the Fourteenth Century" for a second time, one Cornell professor sat through the course three times. The weekly two-hour tutorials, in addition to the lecture course and required of all his doctoral students, were as legendary for their rigor as they were maddening for their lack of formal syllabi. Woe to the unfortunate individual who had done the reading assignment superficially or who had not done it at all.

It should be left to an intellectual biographer to connect the facts of his life to the thematic preoccupations of his history writing, but a preliminary comment might be in order here. O. W. Wolters had an abiding interest in the importance of religion for shaping human behavior, confidence in the civilizing capacities of humane knowledge, optimism about what good government could achieve, and an enduring respect for public service.

Notes

[1] Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1989-1990 Bulletin, p. 6.

[2] O. W. Wolters, "Chen-li-fu, a State on the Gulf of Siam at the Beginning of the Thirteenth Century," volume 48, no. 2 (1960), pp. 1-35.

[3] O. W. Wolters, "A Western Teacher and the History of Early Ayudhya," *Sangkhomsat paritat chabap phiset 3 wa duai prawattisat thai tam thatsanakhati samai patjuban* [Social Science Review, Special Issue no. 3: Contemporary Perspectives on Thai History] (June 1966), pp. 88-97.

[4] O. W. Wolters, "Ayudhya and the Rearward Part of the World," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1968), pp. 166-178.

[5] "Anthony Thomas Kirsch (1930-1999): A Memoir," *Journal of the Siam Society*, 88, 1 & 2 (2000), pp. xv-xxiii.