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In search of truth and justice: a tribute to Benedict Anderson

By [Francis Loh Kok Wah, Guest Contributor](#)

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Francis Loh Kok Wah (left) with former teacher and friend, Ben Anderson.

Benedict R O’G Anderson (1936-2015)

Author of *Imagined Communities*, Doyen of Southeast Asian Studies and Scholar-activist

Benedict R O’G Anderson, one of the most respected scholars of Southeast Asian studies passed away in his sleep on Saturday, 12 December 2015 in Indonesia. Anderson had gone to Jakarta for the launch of his latest book which had been translated into Indonesia. With a friend, he journeyed to Surabaya and then to a place on the city’s outskirts which he loved dearly. He spent what turned out to be his last night in a hotel in that place. He was 79 years old.

He was best known as the author of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, an instant classic which was translated into more than two dozen languages. Two other highly acclaimed recent books of his were *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, and *The Age of Globalisation* (originally published as *Under Three Flags*).

He was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 2009, the oldest learned society in the United States founded by Benjamin Franklin. He was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize in 2000 and received the Association for Asian Studies Award for Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies, the association's highest honours, in 1998. There were many more awards and accolades for this great intellect.

Anderson's biography, first published in Japanese due to proddings from Japanese scholars who wanted to know more about his intellectual background and formation, was translated recently and will be published by Verso in July 2016 as *A Life without Boundaries*. The titles and contents of these books capture the spirit of his life and his work which while focused on Southeast Asia also connected the region to the rest of the globe, explaining the popularity of his writings throughout all parts of the world. He was a true polyglot who excelled in the Indonesian, Javanese, Tagalog and Thai languages, and read Dutch, German, French, Spanish and Russian.

Benedict Anderson was an Irish citizen who was born in Kunming, China in 1936. He spent the Pacific War years in California before relocating to Ireland where he spent much of his youth. He studied the Classics in Cambridge University.

Deciding that he wanted to study Asia, 'out of curiosity' as he once said, he enrolled in Cornell University in 1958. He conducted fieldwork in Indonesia in the early 1960s which led to the completion of his path-breaking study *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance 1944-1946*, which explored in detail the role of youth in the Indonesian revolution, reminding social scientists the world over about the radicalism that youth always embodies. But it was also a study which highlighted that the revolution was incomplete, a theme that he returned to when explaining the ills of post-Suharto Indonesia.

Even before his book was published, Anderson was recruited to teach in Cornell where he was to remain for his entire academic career. He held the Aaron L Binenkorb Professor of International Studies chair and was Director of Cornell's Southeast Asian Program and the Modern Indonesia Project too. For decades, he served as Editor of

Indonesia, the Cornell-based academic journal devoted to the study of that country, which he co-founded back in 1966.

Anderson's *Imagined Community* and his other works which have largely focused on Southeast Asia have been taught and debated for decades, in different parts of the world and in various languages. He has been praised for his originality of thought, for being able to understand a problem or issue from the inside as well as outside points-of-view, for his use of a wide range of sources written in different languages, as well as the unwritten and unspoken, for his accurate and lively translations of Indonesian and Thai writings into English, and for his own elegant writing style. No doubt, his writings will continue to be read and deliberated on in the future, even with his passing.

In search of truth and justice

However, I wish to discuss an aspect of Anderson's work which is less often highlighted, not especially evident to most of his readers. This great intellect was also committed to a scholarship in search of truth and justice.

For me, such a commitment was honed due to his close association with George McT Kahin who was his teacher and mentor, then his colleague, in Cornell. Kahin's own classic, the landmark *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* was a highly detailed, compelling, first-person account of the 1948-49 Indonesian revolution against Dutch colonialism. The book 'exerted a powerful scholarly and ethical-political hold' on his generation of Southeast Asianists, Benedict Anderson (1998: 18) had stated.

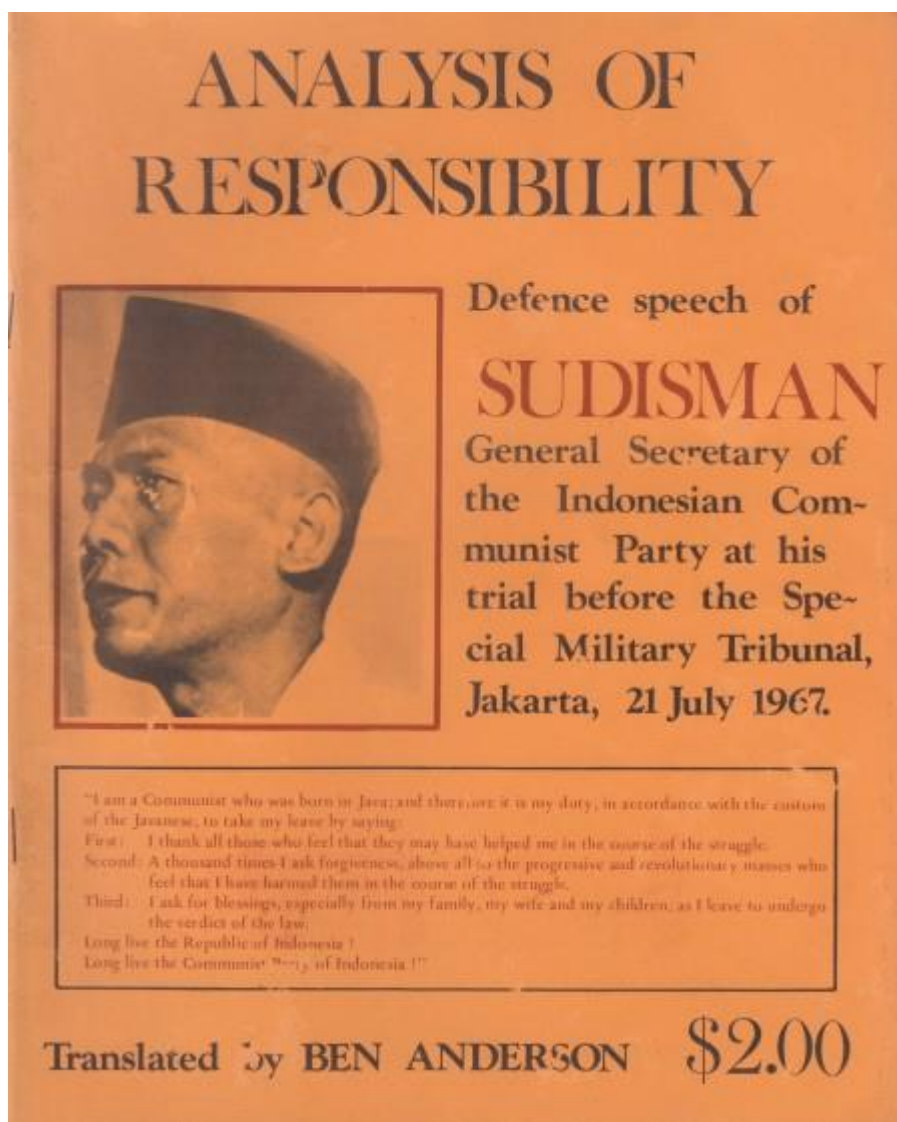
Recalling his first years in Cornell, Anderson (2003: 10) intimated:

I arrived at Cornell in the waist-high snow of January 1958, excited in a naïve way, yet with no serious intention of staying beyond a year. But the place itself, and Kahin's teaching on Indonesia, on Southeast Asia generally, as well as on American policy in Asia, soon had me hooked. I realised that I wanted to follow in his footsteps, both scholarly and political.

With pride and respect I reckon, Anderson had pronounced Kahin as 'the earliest and most prominent Southeast Asianist critic of American intervention in Indochina'. For shortly after the first American troops were sent to Danang, Vietnam in March 1965 by President Johnson (thus opening the floodgates which led to the presence of 485,600 American troops by December 1967), a day-long national teach-in was to be held simultaneously at over 100 American colleges in mid-May 1965, the highlight of which was to be a nationally broadcasted debate in Washington between Kahin and McGeorge Bundy, Johnson's National Security Advisor.

Although the latter suddenly withdrew from the debate, nonetheless, Kahin was able to use the opportunity to debunk the 'domino theory' and deny that the cause of the war was an invasion of Vietnam by 'Communist China'. He demanded more transparency and information on the war which was leading to increasing numbers of young men being drafted to fight in Vietnam.

Throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Kahin continued to research, write and speak out against the war in Vietnam; its escalation which led to the Pentagon and CIA's involvement and support for the military in Cambodia; which also resulted in Sihanouk's ousting. An early criticism of US policy appeared in *The United States in Vietnam* (co-authored with John Lewis). In later years, Kahin published his masterly *Intervention: How America became involved in Vietnam* where these developments which he had warned about and protested against have been carefully documented, thanks to access to official and classified documents once the war was over.



Making Indonesia: Essays on Modern Indonesia was presented to Kahin by his former students including Anderson. In the Foreword, the editors Daniel Lev and Ruth McVey reflected on 'the moral character' of Kahin's work which was 'informed consistently by an unequivocal concern for both truth and justice...evident in his research on the Indonesian revolution and on the intervention of the United States in Vietnam, Indonesia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia...'.

Many students probably had come to Cornell because they were attracted to the Southeast Asia Program that Kahin had co-founded, and the Modern Indonesia Project which he had started. However, by the time they graduated, they had learnt that scholarship could not be divorced from politics, that they ought to seek truth and justice, and should also 'speak truth to power', like their mentor. Anderson and his fellow students shared a common affection and deep respect for their teacher.

Benedict Anderson's own writings are imbued with this search for truth and justice. He, too, had been critical of political oppression and American intervention in Southeast Asia in his academic writings and also in the public domain, not without consequences for his career.

Following the military takeover of Indonesia on 1 October 1965, which was followed by a massive bloodbath of an estimated 600,000 to one million people who were accused of being communists or had pro-communist sympathies, Anderson and two other colleagues (Ruth McVey and Frederick Bunnell) had written the 162-page 'Cornell Paper' released anonymously in 1966.

Drawing upon vast resources of Indonesian newspapers held at Cornell's library and classified Foreign Broadcast Information Service reports, also stored in Cornell, they had challenged the Indonesian military's claim, which the US administration was also informing the American public, that the military takeover was sparked by the so-called Gestapu, a power grab led by the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI).

Rather, Anderson and colleagues had argued, it was 'an internal military affair' spearheaded by colonels in the province of Central Java, though involving some low-level PKI members. It made no sense for the PKI to conduct a power grab when it was already doing so well by resorting to the 'peaceful road' to socialism, the authors had argued. 'To undertake violence would have involved pitting itself against a vastly superior military force and might have thrown the President into alliance with the military'.

Although there were suspicions among the Indonesian military and the US establishment that Anderson had been involved in the writing of the document, he managed to enter Indonesia in 1967. That short visit had allowed him to verify that the Indonesia which he loved so much had been transformed, and the leftist contacts he once interviewed for his research had been killed or disappeared.

With another former Cornell student, Herb Feith, he had the opportunity to attend the trial of Sudisman, the general secretary of the PKI, who was ultimately sentenced and killed. A transcript of Sudisman's speech before he was sentenced was smuggled out from Court and after it was translated by Anderson was published in 1975 as a 28-page pamphlet titled: *Analysis of Responsibility* with a lengthy introduction by Anderson.

Meanwhile, in 1971, the Cornell Paper had been released as *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965, Coup in Indonesia* with the names of Anderson, McVey and Bunnell. In April 1972 when he tried to enter Indonesia again, he was expelled. It was not until 26 years later, after *Reformasi* and the ousting of Suharto that Anderson was able to set foot on Indonesian soil again, in December 1998. Indeed, George Kahin too had been banned from Indonesia, though for a shorter period.

From Indonesia to Thailand, to Philippines, to Imagined Communities

Banned from entering Indonesia, Anderson spent his 1974 sabbatical in Bangkok instead, then in political ferment after the overthrow of the military there on 14 October, 1973, following a popularly supported student uprising. Anderson had started Thai language studies in Ithaca prior to his sabbatical and began to return to that country regularly to conduct research and write about contemporary Thai politics thereafter.

When war broke out between 'fraternal socialist countries' Cambodia, Vietnam and China in 1978-79, Anderson also began to reflect over their causes. His study led him to investigate the origin of 'imagined communities' called nations, and the spread of the nationalism that they spawned. His younger brother Perry Anderson, the editor of *New Left Review* was instrumental in directing his attention here, and had encouraged him in the endeavour.

In the late 1980s, he had shifted his research focus again, on to the Philippines. Learning Tagalog and teaching himself to read Spanish, he plunged into a detailed study of Jose Rizal, the father of Filipino nationalism and his writings. Contrary to existing studies, Anderson argued in a new book *Under Three Flags* the influence of anarchism on the anti-colonial imagination including Rizal's, especially during his years in exile in Spain.

Hence Anderson's major works include not only *Imagined Communities* and works on Indonesian politics like *Java in a Time of Revolution*; *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*; and *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia*.

His research and writings also produced accounts of the bloody military coup in Thailand in 1976; of the relationship between violence and politics in Thailand in the 1980s; of the 'old oligarchy' and cacique democracy in the Philippines; many of these appearing in his *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*. There was also *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* and reflections on 'colonial cosmopolitanism' as captured in *Menjadi Tjamboek Berdoeri*.

Hence the ban from entering Indonesia saw Anderson acquiring new languages and broadening the scope of his research interests over a period of some 40 years! Meanwhile, he continued to teach in Cornell.

His enormous contribution to Southeast Asian studies and later, his reputation as the author of *Imagined Communities* attracted graduate students – from the US, Japan, Australia, Europe and Southeast Asia – as before, with one major difference. Whereas previously he had attracted students who wanted to write their PhD dissertations on Indonesia, beginning from the late 1970s, his students included those who wanted to write their PhD thesis on other countries in Southeast Asia too.

Still others wanted to study nationalism, beyond Southeast Asia. To honour and thank their teacher on his retirement, some of these students contributed towards a festschrift: *Southeast Asia over Three Generations*. It is quite clear from the articles in the volume (as well as from the trajectory of their careers) that they had imbibed 'the inseparability of politics and scholarship' which Anderson had learnt from his own mentor (Anderson, 1998: 19).

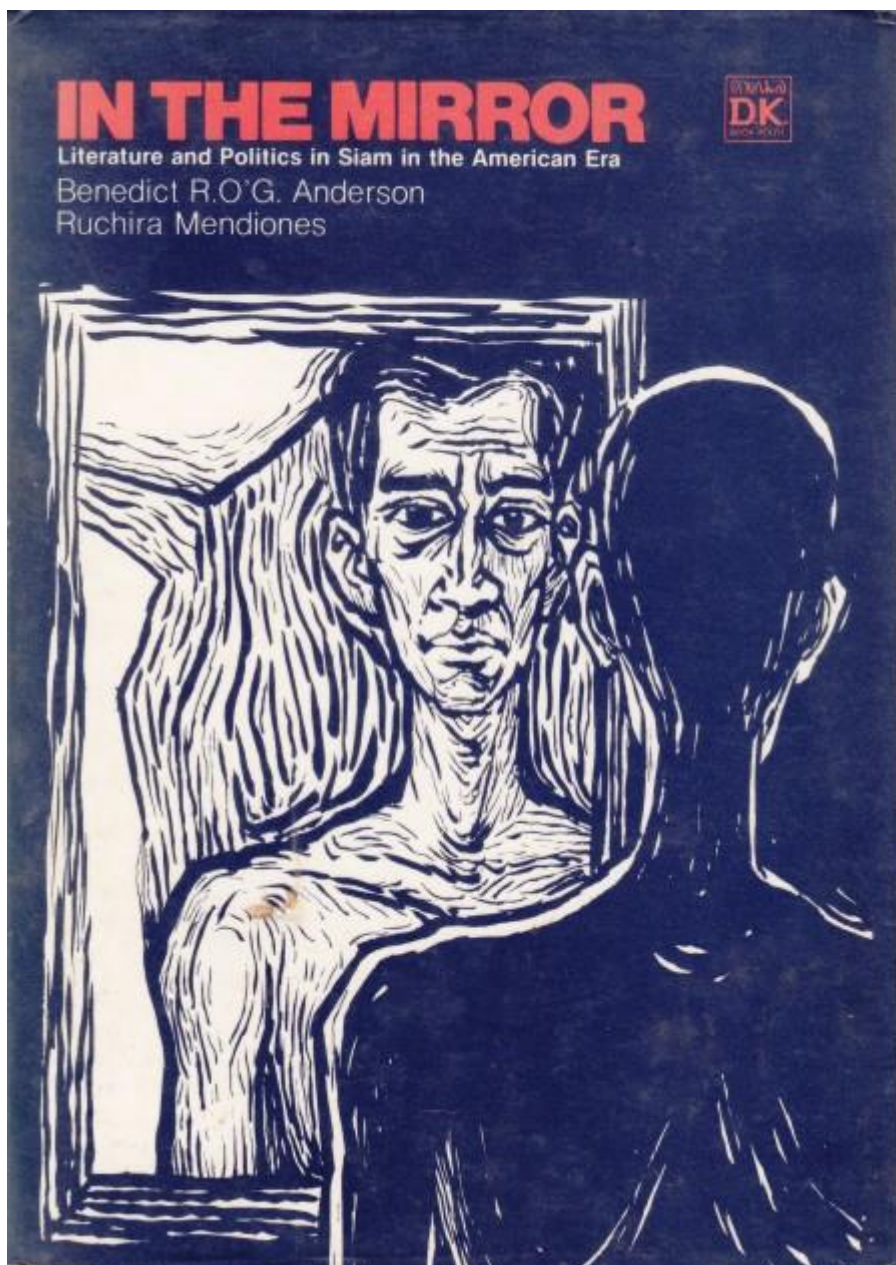
Missing Scholar-Activists?

I recall when I was a student in Cornell in the late 1970s that Anderson's commitments had included not just teaching and supervising us. Now and again, he would leave the ivory tower to play the scholar-activist or the public intellectual.

He had testified on the subject of East Timor under Indonesia occupation to two US Congress sub-committees, and had spoken publicly on many occasions against the brutality of the Thai military in the 1976 coup. There was also a document prepared for the United Nations on Decolonisation in East Timor. I recall, too, meticulous preparation of comprehensive 'Fact Sheets' on these events, as if to say 'speak truth to power', which had been distributed widely.

After he had retired from Cornell, Anderson began spending a part of the year annually in the region. From his home in Thanom Pinklao, Bangkok, he travelled to conduct research and to give talks throughout the region, but especially in Indonesia after he was allowed in December 1998 to re-enter the country, following *Reformasi* there.

He was a much sought after speaker and constantly asked to share his thoughts on political and other developments throughout Southeast Asia, indeed, the entire East Asian region. In the case of Indonesia, he often called for courage to seek truth and justice about the past, particularly the 1965-66 massacres there. For him much of today's political and social ills there are a result of the incompleteness of the Indonesian Revolution.



In the course of this role as public intellectual cum scholar-activist, Anderson was invited to be keynote speaker at the 10th anniversary of the Asian Public Intellectuals (API) Programme, a celebration held in Manila in 2009. The API Programme offered some 20 to 30 fellowship awards each year to Southeast Asian and Japanese academics and activists to pursue comparative research in another Southeast Asian country.

The three main themes for the API program had been: changing identities, the quest for social justice and grappling with globalization. The Fellows and the Programme was geared towards 'the betterment of society' Applicants could either be young or senior activists or scholars. Anderson was quite excited by the challenge to engage with a conference of some 300 public intellectuals from throughout the region. To prepare his key note address, he had perused ten years' worth of reports by the API Fellows.

Alas, he was disappointed. In his keynote, he had lamented the 'missing public intellectual'. For in spite of the occurrence during the previous decade of 'the most colossal and global economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s', which had begun with the 1997-98 regional financial meltdown, initially accompanied 'by an outburst of reformist politics', but ultimately 'ending depressingly with the entrenchment of oligarchies in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia', 'what struck me' he had observed '...was the relative invisibility of all this turmoil' in the papers he read (Anderson, 2012: 44). He decried that there was 'no new Renato Constantino, Pramoedya Ananta Tur, or Sulak Sivaraksa' among the API Fellows.

Rather than addressing the critical issues of the day – rising authoritarian rule, continuous human rights abuses, worsening socio-economic inequalities and environmental degradation — the API Fellows, he claimed, had focused on rather specific problems faced by particular communities and groups. Perhaps the major achievement of the API program was that it enabled the Fellows to learn about neighbouring situations and to network with their counterparts in the region who shared the same concerns. There was little evidence of the 'betterment of society'. Still less the emergence of a new generation of Southeast Asian public intellectuals!

For Anderson, this decline of the traditional public intellectual had to do with two profound changes. First, the professionalisation of the local universities resulted in academics specialising in particular disciplines, and writing for one another rather than for the public. As well, the universities to which they were attached were state controlled encouraging them, as civil servants, to align with the political elites who could offer them promotions, recognition and status.

Moreover, to supplement their meager incomes, some began to consult for government, to align themselves to foreign foundations or to media moguls which resulted in research and reports on specific development-related projects. There occurred little independent research, writing and questioning of the broader issues of development policies, the socio-economic and environmental consequences of those policies, and of the political orientation of the regimes in charge of those development policies (Anderson 2012: 44).

Second, Anderson had highlighted the changing culture of national elites and the ways they made use of the state to maintain their hegemony. He was particularly concerned with how the political elites had transformed the universities into institutions that prioritised the training and production of professional-commercial graduates in fields like management, economics, engineering, IT who could be useful for the development effort (Anderson, 2012: 48). A consequence of this thrust had been the sidelining of the humanities and the social sciences, as well as an erosion of a culture of serious writing and reading. Apparently, Anderson was criticizing the 'technocratic turn' that has occurred in the educational programmes throughout the region.

Consequently, Anderson had argued, there were hardly any serious works by local academics on the major issues of the day, and especially of the political dominance of the so-called 'veto groups' and the ruling oligarchs, either for fear of the dire consequences, or because the academicians had been co-opted into the mind-set of the political elites.

Drawing from my experience as Director of the 2009/2010 API Regional Workshop, I agree with Anderson's critical observations. Put simply, although the quality of the research work produced by the API Fellows was laudable, nonetheless, there was a disconnect between these studies of specific problems and issues to a broader study of overall development policies driven by neo-liberal globalisation, of the structural societal changes occurring, and of the re-emergence of undemocratic rule in the region. Simply put, the small pictures were not adequately connected to the big picture.

This was a major indictment of the API Programme. I think Anderson had intended to say that one does not and cannot produce public intellectuals via a Fellowship Program! Not long after, ostensibly because of funding difficulties and after a period of internal auditing, the API programme was restructured. In December 2014, SEASREP (Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program) Foundation, yet another organisation funding regional research, organised a workshop 'The Role of Public Intellectuals in Southeast Asia' to evaluate Anderson's lament of 'the invisible public intellectual'.

My concern here is not to report on the deliberations in the workshop which I participated in; I wish only to stress how seriously Anderson's critical observations were taken by a substantial part of the would-be public intellectual community in Southeast Asia — for such was Anderson's reputation as a scholar-activist.

Concluding with Penang

I cannot say that I have kept in very close touch with Ben since I left Ithaca in 1979. However, with access to the email nowadays, keeping in touch has been made easier. Nonetheless, unlike for his former students and colleagues in Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Japan, I had not had much opportunity to interact with Ben face-to-face. For he had not incorporated Malaysia — whose ethnic-based politics he found particularly distasteful — directly into his scope of research.

However, because he had spent his winter months in Bangkok, an hour's flight away from Penang, I had some occasion to visit him. In April 2004 I was invited to speak alongside him in an international forum: 'Statesman or Manager? Image and Reality of Leadership in Southeast Asia' held in Chulalongkorn University. In Spring 2005, he participated in a regional workshop I had organised in Bangkok on 'Peacemaking in Southeast Asia'. And in December 2011, he had attended an ARENA (Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives) Congress event, also in Bangkok, upon my invitation.

But there was also a Penang connection. In early 2003, quite unexpectedly, Ben had enquired about the possibility of visiting Penang to conduct some research on his 'roots'. His father, he intimated, had been born in Penang in 1893. I followed up on his enquiry and after some dead-ends discovered in the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, a four-page broadsheet published during colonial times, a one-line item announcing that Captain Francis Anderson had been blessed with a son's birth at Lomond, up in Penang Hill. Within a few weeks, Ben was in Penang and we were trekking to the said colonial-era bungalow.

Ben, his brother and his sister already knew that grandfather Francis was the Deputy Colonial Engineer. Poring over the microfilms of the *Pinang Gazette* in the library of Universiti Sains Malaysia to which I was attached, we discovered that he had been in charge of all works and construction in Penang Island and parts of the surrounding mainland. He had worked on the reservoir in the Botanical Gardens and was responsible for re-designing the long delayed Penang Harbour Improvement Scheme.



His proposal was more ambitious and included extending the on-going construction of the Swettenham Pier, building the Church Street Ghaut Wharf, dredging the harbour and related reclamation works. He had been an ex-officio member of the Municipal Commission and had served as acting chairman whenever the Resident was away. The *Pinang Gazette* printed detailed reports of all the Commission's public meetings, so that from its pages one could learn a great deal of what grandfather Anderson did and had said. Before returning to England, he had acted as Colonial Engineer and was sworn in as a member of the Executive Council of the Straits Settlements.

We also discovered that Francis Anderson, subsequently, had built his own bungalow called 'Gracedieu', which Ben shared was also the name of a family estate a few miles from the city of Waterford, in southeastern Ireland. From his mother he had learnt that his father's line had 'been cheated out of inheriting the place'. 'A real tropical fantasy', Ben had commented. Alas, the Penang Hill bungalow that grandfather Anderson built had since been torn down and a newer brick bungalow now stands in its place.

My last communication with Ben was in late October 2015 via the email. I had shared with him about my recent visits to Burma where I had been conducting workshops and training sessions on federalism which he was rather excited about. I enquired when he would be in Bangkok again so that I could visit him on my next trip to Burma. He had replied that he was leaving the United States in early November and had a tight schedule over the next two months: two weeks in Manila to help a friend move into his new house; 10 days in Bangkok; then another 10 days in Jakarta, presumably for the book launch. He was keen to come to Penang to conduct some follow-up archival work on his grandpa. So we agreed to meet in early Spring, and maybe visit Burma.

Unexpectedly, a week later, I received from a Penang friend who had helped Ben and me to track down Lomond and Gracedieu in 2003, a digital version of an old photograph. It showed a European couple with a child taken in front of the Lomond bungalow. It was tentatively dated 'before 1893'. Might the man be Captain Francis Anderson? I forwarded the photograph to Ben who replied immediately.

The photo is definitely my military grandfather and my grandmother. The child is definitely my father. He was the only one of the children who was born in Penang. And when she was ready to give birth they had to summon a doctor whose only way was to ride up [Penang Hill] on a horse...My father was born definitely in the year of 1893. I hope this spring I can go to Penang to persuade the library to scan in the local newspaper for the speeches and reports while he was in the Council.

That email was posted on 30 October. Thereafter he must have been busy travelling from his house in Freeville, outside Ithaca in upstate New York, to Manila, to Bangkok, to Jakarta for the book launch, to Surabaya enroute to this special place on its outskirts that Ben reportedly loved. It was where Ben would breathe his last. So, Ben will not be coming to Penang in Spring after all. Instead he has begun another journey.

Selamat Jalan my dearest teacher and friend. Terima kasih daun keladi.

Francis LOH Kok Wah was Professor of Politics in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang (1979-2012). He received his PhD in Government and Southeast Asian Studies from

Cornell University in 1980. His dissertation was supervised by Ben Anderson and George Kahin. He is currently president of Aliran (www.aliran.com), a multiethnic human rights NGO, also devoted to social education, based in Penang. He contributed to the festschrift to his teacher.

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