

Michael Smithies, 1932–2019



At about 1.00 a.m. on 2 January 2019, Michael Smithies, Honorary Member of the Siam Society (elected 1996), passed away peacefully at the Institute of Tropical Medicine, Bangkok, where he had laid bed-ridden for some time, after hospitalisation at the Phra Mongkutklao Army Hospital.

Michael had been a member of the Society ever since he first arrived in Bangkok in 1960 as Education (English Language) Officer at the British Council. He was twice Honorary Editor of this Journal (1969–71 and 2002–09) and was the publisher, editor, and author of many of the Society's publications over the years.

I first met Michael in September 1962 at the house of Andrew Turton, then with the British Council. Andrew was hosting breakfast for me and Francis Cripps, who had just completed his Voluntary Service Overseas year at the Mahasarakham Teachers Training College, and we were both going up to Cambridge that year. Michael joined the party, walking into Andrew's house with his usual quizzical smile, which could turn into a smirk or a cynical sneer. Even at that first, brief encounter, I was struck by how interested Michael was in things Thai and how he exuded intellectual curiosity. Looking back, he was of the calibre of such distinguished representatives of the British Council as Maurice Cardiff in Bangkok and John Villiers in Jakarta, who represented the best of British and European culture and were deeply interested in the local intellectual and cultural scene as well. In the case of Michael, as he himself recalled in a memorandum,

he “wrote part-time art and music reviews in the *Bangkok World* and organized art exhibitions”. He did more than that: he organized concerts of chamber music at the old Erawan Hotel and was a prominent member of Bangkok cultural life of the time.

Michael left in 1964 and was posted to Phnom Penh until 1965, before returning to British Council Headquarters as Assistant Director, Visitors Department, from 1965 to 1967. In the summer of 1965, he organized at a London art gallery an exhibition of modern Thai paintings, including the works of our very own manager emeritus, Euayporn Kerdchouay, among others. I was surprisingly invited and travelled from Cambridge for the opening reception. We renewed our acquaintance, which blossomed into a lifelong friendship when I joined Michael on the Council of the Society in 1969. At the time, he was a member of the University of Pittsburgh Rockefeller Foundation English language project in Bangkok, having resigned from The British Council in 1967.

In November 2012, Michael became an octogenarian. As a birthday present, Chris Baker, the present Honorary Editor of the *JSS*, proposed to the then Council of the Siam Society the publication of a collection of twenty of Michael’s articles published originally in the *JSS*, *Aséanie*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, a couple of festschriften, and so on, nearly all dealing with the impact of the French presence in Siam from 1685 to 1688.

Michael had also prepared his collection of *Seventeenth Century Siamese Explorations* and had asked if I would write a preface to the volume, to which I readily agreed. The majority of the articles in that book were first published in the *JSS*, and it is with the *JSS* that one associates Michael the most, for it was at the tumultuous Annual General Meeting of March 1969 that Michael first became the Honorary Editor of the *JSS*. He immediately changed the *Journal* cover from the nondescript brown to shiny green; it is said that the colour was chosen by the artist, Uab Sanasen, at the request of Sulak Sivaraksa, the instigator of that year’s complete change of Council. After the sudden death of the new President, *Phraya Anuman Rajadhon*, and the resignation of *Khunying Maenmas Chawalit*, I was co-opted on to the Council to replace the latter as Honorary Librarian, and thus began my own association with the Society and collaboration with Michael on the *JSS* and the Publications Committee.

This first bore fruit in the publication of *In Memoriam Phya Anuman Rajadhon: Contributions in Memory of the Late President of the Siam Society*, edited by the two of us, and published by the Society in 1970. In our editorial, we wrote that “We have allowed authors to adhere to their own transliteration systems, of which the reader is offered a variety ... Our editing has largely been technical, and faults we accept the blame.” That was Michael’s editorial policy and subsequently mine as well for the two periods when I was Honorary Editor of the *JSS*. We did our best to continue the work of our predecessors in maintaining the quality of the content and adhering to the general ethos of the Society. Michael and I served as each other’s readers. We also called on a wide circle of friends, colleagues and acquaintances of different age groups and varied academic disciplines, both to review articles and to write reviews for the *Journal*. This peer-review process was onerous but necessary, for we had some memorably and truly difficult contributors and contributions. Despite some complaints and objections, the process was worthwhile in the long run and most of what was published in *JSS* in the years when Michael and I were responsible in one way or other will, I sincerely believe,

stand the test of time as enduring scholarship.

Michael's contributions to the Society were not confined to the *JSS*. Over the years, he was also responsible for many of the Society's publications. An example is *Five Hundred Years of Thai-Portuguese Relations: A Festschrift*, which Michael edited for the Society, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, and published to mark the quincentennial of Thai-Portuguese relations in 2011. Michael contributed two articles of his own as well as a translation.

Michael's published output is prodigious. On Thailand and Southeast Asia, he wrote, edited, or translated fifty-seven books and fifty-two academic articles; on language teaching, he published seventeen books and twenty-eight articles; for UN agencies, he edited forty publications; as for journals, he edited ten volumes of *JSS*, eight issues of the *Siam Society Newsletter*, and four issues of the *Journal of Oriental Studies* in Hong Kong; he also found time to write a volume of poetry, another of short stories, and books reviews beyond count.

Here I will mention only a few from this enormous output, which are a testament to Michael's multifaceted interests. In *Witnesses to a Revolution: Siam 1688* (Siam Society, 2004), Michael edited and translated "twelve key texts describing the events and consequences of the Phetracha coup d'état, and the withdrawal of French forces from the country". This is surely Michael's most important contribution to Thai historical studies, for of the documents published in this volume, as Dhiravat na Pombejra, another former Honorary Editor of the *JSS*, pointed out in his foreword, "all except one have never appeared in English and five have never been published before at all". I had sent those unpublished texts, at his request, to Michael from Paris while I was Ambassador to France. I am very happy that he translated them and the Siam Society published them. Years have passed and they have barely been used by Thai historians, but one day they will be.

Seventeenth Century Siamese Explorations was a worthy supplement to *Witnesses to a Revolution: Siam 1688*. It contains Michael's articles pertinent to the study of 17th century Siam, certainly some of highly rarefied interest, but there are also translations of documents which have not been published before. There is even an article about M.L. Manich Jumsai's 17th century books about Siam (*JSS* 89, 2001), which were exhibited for the first time at the Siam Society in October 2001 and are now deposited on permanent loan from the Jumsai family at the Society's Library. What is most important is that this volume brings together in one place articles which were scattered in different publications, and makes it convenient and easy to read and follow Michael's scholarly interests over the years.

Michael left Bangkok in 1971, and pursued a peripatetic academic career in the region. He went to the University of Hong Kong as assistant registrar and lecturer in French until 1974. Next he went to Indonesia for the British Council as Director of the Staff English Language Training Unit at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. That was followed by a foundation professorship of Language and Social Science at the University of Technology, Lae, Papua New Guinea (1976–1982), and a spell as associate professor in communication studies at the new Nanyang Technology University, Singapore (1982–1985). I visited him in Hong Kong and we had a marvellous reunion in Jakarta at John Villiers' residence when Michael was on his way from Yogyakarta to Lae. The conversation was

so hilarious, I never laughed so much in my life. A British Council couple, who unexpectedly dropped in on their boss, left the house visibly stunned by so much merriment.

Michael came back to Thailand for good in 1985, when he was appointed visiting professor at the Asian Institute of Technology's English Language Centre, from which he left to be a special lecturer at Burapha University, Bang Saen. As his last job, he joined the United Nations ESCAP staff training unit in Bangkok in 1987. Reaching the age of mandatory retirement in 1992, he retired to a village in Bua Yai, Isan, to spend the rest of his days happily with his last companion, Uthai, an artist.

Michael's retirement was very productive, especially for the Siam Society, where he again became Honorary Editor of the *JSS* from 2002 to 2009. Apart from building a house in Bua Yai, Michael also maintained a house in the charming French village of Coulon, near Niort, where he spent the summers with Uthai. This was an area where Michael had spent a year out from Oxford in 1954–55. Michael had gone up to Oxford as an Open Scholar in Modern and Mediaeval Languages at University College in 1952. He was proud of the fact that he was "the first person in his family to go to University", where he became President of the University French Club and founder of a French-language periodical, *La Chouette Aveugle* (The Blind Owl). This could have been Michael's first foray into journal editing unless he did something similar at Isleworth Grammar School, which he attended from 1944 to 1952. For his contributions to French and international studies, the French government made Michael a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2006. As an Education officer in Gibraltar, where he did his National Service in the RAF in 1958–60, "just prior to it being abolished", Michael had also run the station magazine, *Roundel*.

In Coulon, everybody knew Michael and he was always greeted warmly in the village market. When I was Ambassador to France, my family and I travelled from Paris to spend a long weekend with him and Uthai. Michael's house was full of modern Thai paintings and old French books: it was a lucky man who purchased the house and its contents in its entirety.

I was abroad from 1986 to 2001, and when I came back, Michael was just about to start his second stint as Honorary Editor of the *JSS*. In spite of my schedule at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we still managed to have lunch regularly during his editorship. This continued after 2009, quite a while after his first hospitalisation. Whenever he came into town from Bua Yai, we would have lunch at Mamma Mia, the little Italian restaurant behind the Society. We reminisced about the good old days of the Society Council under the wise and benign chairmanship of H.R.H. Prince Wan Waithayakorn, served by our Honorary Secretary, the effervescent M.R. Pimsai Amranand. We toasted absent friends, pretending that it was Pimsai's Punch, which is still served at some Society functions.

The Society hosted prayer ceremonies the evening of Thursday, 3 January 2019 at Wat Aphai Thayaram (Wat Makok), just up the road from where Michael passed away. Dr. Sumet Jumsai, Honorary Member of the Society (elected 2002), presided over Michael's cremation at 1.00 p.m on Saturday, 5 January 2019. It was a truly moving occasion in honour of an outstanding member of the Siam Society.

Tej Bunnag