

William J. Klausner (1928–2021)



William J. Klausner had never heard of Siam when in 1946, as an undergraduate at Yale University, he happened to write an essay on this vaguely perceived land. He certainly did not foresee that it would become his adopted home, his professional passion, for nearly seven decades until his death at the age of 92 on 27 November 2021.

Klausner's real encounter with the country came in 1955, when after undergraduate and graduate studies plus a law degree, the adventurous young scholar received a research grant which landed him about as far as he could get culturally and physically from the halls of academe to the northeastern village of Nong Khon. His year there would turn out to be the seminal experience of a life dedicated to probing Thailand's complex culture and society, and thus serving as a bridge between East and West.

At the time, Nong Khon (Log Pond) in Ubon Ratchathani had no paved roads, electricity or toilets. Travel was often by bullock cart and none of the 750 villagers spoke English. Born and raised in New York, he first lived in the village monastery as a *dek wat*, a temple boy, rising at 5 a.m. and eating food from the alms rounds. Later, he rented a house – for one dollar a month.

“It was another world, now all but vanished,” he recalled later in life, noting that the villagers of today are using mobile phones to order pizzas and going away to universities. In his day only two villagers had ventured beyond the boundaries of Nong Khon. “When I was there for that entire year, the only thing that changed in the village was me.”

Klausner closely observed the rhythms of daily life, the cycles of agrarian existence, the compassion of the monks, the value of communal solidarity, village rituals, festivals and ceremonies, all of which would inform his future work. He also met and married his lifelong partner, Kampan. “We went on many merry trips together,” remembers Sainarong Siripen Rasananda, a longtime friend. “Every night, without fail, Bill would call his wife. He always sounded like an infatuated young lover. I couldn’t help eavesdropping as we were generally together and Bill had to ask my wife to make the connection.”

Over the next decades Klausner worked for a head-spinning number of organizations, variously as a staffer, teacher, consultant and board member. But much of his activities, until the very end, were anchored around several overriding issues ranging from Buddhism’s secular role in community development to how best civil society could be strengthened. He explored ways by which the finest in Thai culture, such as he had discovered in Nong Khon, could be preserved while poverty was alleviated and Thailand progressed toward a modern liberal democracy.

“He was a force for good, and his influence through his works will be a constant inspiration to those wanting to understand Thailand,” wrote David Steinberg, a Myanmar expert, as he remembered the friend he first met in 1958.

Tony Zola, another friend and longtime development consultant in Southeast Asia, views Klausner as belonging to the post-war generation of young, well-educated Americans drawn overseas, feeling responsible to apply their knowledge and zeal to promoting prosperity through social and economic development – while defeating communist totalitarianism in the process. Zola says: “They represented an America engaged in the world, with the objective of making a difference.”

But Klausner was far from uncritical about his adopted, beloved homeland, and in the latter stages of his life, Zola perceived a measure of disillusionment: “He revisited, reflected, even agonized on a Thai society which had driven itself to confrontation, tension and acrimony. His hope had always been for a modern Thailand that in times of domestic crises and social confrontation would draw on the strong cultural fundamentals. Alas, this was not to be.”

“At present it would appear that in the immediate future, and perhaps likely in the longer term, an autocratic model of government is and will be our fate,” Klausner wrote in a letter three years before his death. But ever the optimist, he added: “However, I persevere. Hope springs eternal. I trust that a synthesis and an accommodation between tradition and modernity can ultimately be achieved.”

Widely known by Thais and foreigners as *Ajarn Bill*, Klausner taught law and anthropology courses for many years, in Thai and English, at the Buddhist University and both Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities. He instructed and advised students in Thai studies and provided much sought-after cultural orientation for newly arrived businessmen, Peace Corps volunteers and diplomats. “There was no one who has shaped my views more—of Thailand but not only—on how best to encounter, understand and engage other cultures than Bill,” wrote American diplomat George Kent.

He proved a vital resource to numerous philanthropic institutions—The Asia Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, John F. Kennedy Library

Foundation, Fulbright Program, James H.W. Thompson Foundation, American Alumni Association and the National Council on Social Welfare of Thailand. He also served as an advisor to the Ministry of Interior in forging community development programs and assisted the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

He was a devoted member of the Siam Society from 1983, and was made an Honorary Member in 2000. He wrote only two articles in *JSS*, but a large number of book reviews. The articles were a short and charming account of tales about in-laws from the northeast, published in 1973, and an appreciation of the Thai monarchy in 2018. His reviews mostly covered books on Thai culture and Buddhism, but they also included an appreciation of Chinua Achebe's path-breaking novel on Africa, *Things Fall Apart*. He was consistently generous in providing financial support, or helping to find financial support, for Society projects, and played a major part in developing the good relations between the Society and the James H.W. Thompson Foundation.

From 1967 to 1970 Klausner served as the country representative of The Asia Foundation, where many of his papers are housed. As a consultant he assisted the Thailand office of The Ford Foundation for more than twenty-five years, "providing context for its grants in areas such as the arts, culture, the humanities, refugees and the social sciences," said Peter Weldon, who overlapped with Klausner at the foundation. He was key to the establishment of the first regional office of The Rockefeller Foundation and provided advice on development of strategic programs.

Just days after his arrival in Thailand, Klausner was dining at the table of Jim Thompson, the "Silk King," who became a close friend. Thus in 1975, he was instrumental in setting up The James H.W. Thompson foundation, later becoming its president. He resigned from its Board of Trustees in 2009 and accepted an appointment as President Emeritus. Always a booster for the northeast, he hired graduates fluent in English, French and other languages from the region's teachers colleges to act as guides at the museum situated on the Jim Thompson compound.

Klausner's work extended beyond Thailand, and he made numerous trips to Laos, especially Luang Prabang where he was invariably ringed by a lively band of "Klausner groupies" who cherished his personality and his assistance. These included Tara Gujadhur, co-director of the outstanding Traditional Arts and Ethnology Center (TAEC). "It is difficult to quantify how instrumental he was to the TAEC's development, and where we would now be had we not had his support," she explained. As president of the Thompson Foundation, he facilitated start-up funding for research, staffing and exhibitions. Over the years, through the Foundation and then with his personal funds, he supported research and exhibitions.

Throughout his career Klausner found time to write several books that should be required reading for anyone truly interested in the country: *Reflections in a Log Pond*, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, *Transforming Thai Culture: From Temple Drums to Mobile Phones* and *Thai Culture in Transition: Social and Political Implications*. He also penned hundreds of *haiku* as New Year's gifts to friends, variously poking fun at his own struggles with modern technology, satirizing the politically powerful and seriously reflecting on the human condition and his advancing age.

There is a charming photo of Klausner—sunburnt, a *pakama* wrapped around his

head, heaving sheaves of rice stalks on a pole in Nong Khon, a kind of Caucasian *dek Isan*. Afterwards, ensconced in Bangkok, another portrait emerges, perhaps hinting at Klausner's dual identity.

"I'm a white collar and cuffs sort of guy," is the way Klausner described himself to Kent on their first meeting. Kent got to think of his friend as a typical New Englander, lean and hard in body and mind, speaking in a clipped, refined, northeastern patrician accent. "An elegant and charming American," Kent wrote after his death. "He was both a wise gentle man and a gentleman." Ms. Gujadhur echoed Kent's words, recalling a "warm, kind fatherly figure. He always felt like someone from a different era, in the best way possible. He was always outfitted formally—starched, collared shirts with cufflinks, pressed trousers, and dress loafers."

Many friends and work colleagues offered fond reminiscences and quirky anecdotes, like Bill's passion for madeleine cookies or his brainy rather than athletic moves on the tennis court. Perhaps the finest summing up came from Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of Chulalongkorn's Institute of Security and International Studies, not to mention Klausner's frequent tennis partner. The institute became Klausner's primary professional home in the later stages of his life. He would arrive promptly mid-morning and have a kind assistant send out emails he had painstakingly composed in longhand. Then he would retire across the road for lunch at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. Thitinan wrote:

Ajarn Bill's long and illustrious life attests to the deep and dense Thailand-United States relationship, whereby a lanky young American could come to this kingdom so long ago and make it his home, bringing with him an outside world from which Thailand has learned a lot.

He also brought a lot of Thailand for outsiders to see and know, and in doing so *Ajarn* Bill became a bridge between from whence he came and where his adopted country remains.

Rest in peace, *Ajarn* Bill. As you would sign off... 'As ever...'

Denis D. Gray