

# GEHAN WIJEYWARDENA (1932-2000)

## Eclectic Career Provided Links

ERUGE JUDDERY

When the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific Studies (later Asian Studies) decided a few years ago to regroup its departments into "divisions" Gehan Wijeyewardena jacked up. He managed to lay his hands on enough copies of the now-outmoded Department of Anthropology letter heads to operate, until his retirement three years ago, as ostensibly the sole member of his department.

"A sort of intellectual anarchist," as one collage described him soon after his death in Canberra last month, the Sri Lankan-born Dr Wijeyewardena was for more than three decades a key intellectual link between Australian and South-East Asian, and particularly Thai, academe.

His career was marvelously eclectic. Born into a well-to-do Ceylonese family he earned a first degree in English literature at Peradeniya University in Kandy, he helped organize a student strike, to which the colonial police were summoned, and to which his mother rushed to rescue him, but both of whom he evaded.

He changed specialties and awarded the Stephen Behren Cohen studentship moved to King's College, Cambridge, where he successively won a bachelor's, a master's and in 1982, a doctorate in anthropology. Many colleagues were surprised in later years to learn that his thesis touched on Ki-Swahili coastal communities in Kenya and what then was Tanganyika (though he also did extensive research in Uganda).

From Cambridge he moved on to what then was the Singapore campus of the University of Malaya (now the University of Singapore) then, in 1964, to the ANU. There he stayed until his retirement

three years ago—occasionally remarking wryly to some of the many graduate students whom he supervised, on the progress of the gum tree outside his window at his research school, Coombs Building, from inches in height to better than nine metres.

In the meantime, Dr Wijeyewardena developed an extensive expertise in the politics and social relationships of northern Thailand, neighboring Chinese provinces and Burma/Myanmar. He was active in Canberra in campaigns on behalf of Burma's National League for Democracy and its leader, Aung Sang Suu Kyii.

He was appalled at the dissemination of HIV/AIDS through South-East Asia largely, as he read it, through the activities of local truck-drivers making short pit-stops on their rounds, and did a great deal to alert international opinion to the threat.

He translated modern Thai fiction—notably *The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp* and *Teacher Marisa*, both by Khammaan Khonkhai, into English.

His academic career during the last few years of which he edited a newsletter specialising in the affairs of what is loosely described as the Golden Triangle, was attenuated by a series of minor strokes during the mid-1980s, and a frailty exacerbated by a serious accident in Bangkok three years ago.

Dr Wijeyewardena's home life was almost as eclectic as his academic. His wife Margaret was German. She survives him as do three daughters, plus several grandchildren.

### 'They'

THE Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
New right to breed an honourable race.  
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change.'  
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

Siegfried Sassoon  
(1886-1967)