

LITERATURE AND THE AUSTRALIAN STUDY OF INDONESIA¹

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The Beginnings

Despite earlier attempts to promote a knowledge of Australia's wider region (see in particular Brewster and Reid 1985 on A.W. Hamilton), it was not until 1955 that the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia decided "to grant to the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne, and Canberra University College, a sum of £A 14,000 to develop Indonesian and Malayan Studies" (Bastin 1957: 201). There was no single model for that enterprise. The Committee supervising the course at the University of Melbourne favoured an area studies program. As the aim was not to produce linguistic specialists, it was decided "not to appoint a linguist to take charge of the department" (201). The Committee considered that "the course should aim rather at making students fluent in *Bahasa Indonesia*, which would then become the tool for further work in the fields of geography, politics and sociology". At the Canberra University College, "the Indonesian Government [was] now meeting the expenses of an appointment in Bahasa Indonesia" and it was possible that "the finance originally provided by the Commonwealth Government to develop Indonesian Studies at the College will be used to make further appointments in this field" (202). While at

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the University of Sydney, it was decided at the end of 1955 “to establish a separate Department of Indonesian and Malayan Studies in charge of a Senior Lecturer or Reader”, who, it was proposed, would develop “in the first instance a general course, at Pass level, in the history and cultures of the region ...” It was also expected that “an additional member of staff will be appointed to teach Bahasa Indonesia and/or sociology” (203).

After brief comments on activities at the University of Queensland, the Universities of Western Australia, Adelaide and New England, as well as the Australian National University (a purely research institute at that time), John Bastin concluded his short contribution to the *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* with the words:

Although an encouraging beginning has been made in Indonesian and Malayan studies in Australia, it will be obvious to Dutch readers that at present these are generally lacking a broad foundation. Because of the reasons enumerated in the opening paragraph of his report [namely Australia’s increasing involvement “in the economic and political affairs of South-east Asia through both the Colombo Plan and the South-east Asia Treaty Organization”], there has been a natural preoccupation with Indonesian political problems and this produced a certain prejudice against the more traditional linguistic and indological studies which have developed in the Netherlands. Much, therefore, depends upon Dr. F. H. van Naerssen and his Department of Indonesian and Malayan Studies in the University of Sydney, as he alone in Australia has the equipment necessary to begin, among other things, old Javanese studies. (204)

The continuing preoccupation with “Indonesian political problems” has ensured that Old Javanese studies have never attained the centrality in Indonesian Studies for which Bastin hoped. The “more traditional linguistic and indological studies” did become established at Sydney and the Canberra University College. At Sydney, this was the legacy of van Naerssen. Glenda Adams, one of the first Honours students and later a major Australian writer who won the Miles Franklin Award in 1987, has written:

When I was a student, I recall that the most inspiring lectures were given by a professor at Sydney University who allowed himself to think out loud in front of us. He allowed us to see how his mind worked, how he approached a problem, and worried it. He admitted us to his private professional world. It didn't matter that the subject was Old Javanese inscriptions, his speciality, one of which he was trying to decipher. What mattered was his approach, his manoeuvring around the words on the stone, unafraid to retract one idea and put forward another, unafraid to speculate, revealing his doubts and uncertainties. At the same time he referred us to published work that might help, inspiring us to approach our work in the same way, ready to admit mistakes, all the time retaining a kind of playfulness toward and pleasure in the material. (Adams 2007: 6)

After graduation, Adams spent two years in Indonesia, during the height of the Guided Democracy period. She describes this experience in an article published in *Australian Cultural History* (1990) and in her first novel *The Games of the Strong* (1982), or as the Indonesian acronym had it “gastro”. In 1964 she sailed to New York to study journalism. Stuart Robson and Peter Worsley, members of the next Honours year, soon set out in the opposite direction: to Leiden, to share in “the Dutch philological tradition from which Sydney University’s study of Indonesia derived, by way of its founding father” (Vickers 2005:4). This was a brave option in that the Netherlands did not recognise Australian degrees at all (neither did Oxford or Cambridge, it should be pointed out). It should also be noted that the “additional member of staff appointed to assist Van Naerssen, firstly A.H. Hill, and then following his unfortunate demise in an aircraft crash on his way to Borobudur in January 1961, Russell Jones (Hill’s former pupil), were also philologists, both trained at SOAS. A.H. Johns, at the ANU was also a SOAS product. It is interesting to wonder why few, if any, Australians pursued philological studies in London, where their earlier degrees would perhaps have been recognised.

Peter Worsley produced a study of the *Babad Buleleng*, “a Balinese dynastic genealogy” (1972). Worsley was critical of those scholars whose philological approach to texts made them indifferent to “this literature as literature”, with the

consequence “we have little understanding of the concept of genre, little insight into structure, plot, characterization, style, imagery, and so on” (V). His work consisted of three chapters. Worsley described these chapters in reverse order in his Preface. Chapter III provided a critical edition of the four manuscripts of the *Babad Buleleng*, “critically edited so as to define as accurately as possible the linguistic entity which was to be subjected to a literary analysis”. The chapter contained commentary notes as a way of explaining “a number of difficulties and obscure passages”. Chapter II dealt with “a number of problems of a general nature related to the editing of Old and Middle Javanese”. While Chapter I provided a “literary analysis”, which “concentrated on the narrative passages in the *babad* and mentioned the genealogy “only where it is directly relevant to the *babad*’s narrative”. Worsley limited his discussion to “form, theme and characterization”, with “no attempt ... to discuss the style of the narrative”. The chapter concluded with “a number of ideas used in the *babad* as criteria for determining the legitimacy of the succession – the chief preoccupation of the *babad*” These were “projected into a short discussion of the *babad*’s notion of causation and time; the questions of the *babad*’s function, its authorship and time of composition have also been considered in the light of the preceding discussion” (VII).

In 1966, Stuart Robson completed his MA at Sydney University under the supervision of Russell Jones, an edition of a “modest Malay romance”, the *Hikayat Andakan Penurat*, and it was subsequently published in 1969 as the second volume in the Bibliotheca Indonesica series of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde. The published form, Robson notes dryly notes, “was very different from the present – the translation had yet to be added, for instance” (V). Robson’s doctoral work, *Wangbang Wideya: A Javanese Panji Romance* (1971), too, aimed to be a literary study, “expressly restricted to one work only – to its critical edition, translation and some comment on it” (1). He described it as deliberately “conservative” (2). In explaining the method behind his editing of the text, Robson made reference to the principles set out in *Scribes and Scholars, A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, by L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson (Oxford, 1968)(40).

Reading Worsley's work from the beginning (rather than from Chapter III), it is clear that his thesis consisted of an introduction, an edited text and annotations – obviously the conventional way of doing things after all. His choice of an historical text was perhaps unusual, and his decision to treat it as a modern literary text no doubt even more unusual. Australians have subsequently continued to make a significant contribution to the tradition of Indonesian and Malay philology. I do not as yet have a complete list of this work, and I apologise to those whose names I am about to omit, but some of the more obvious titles include Virginia Matheson Hooker's edition of the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (Monash University 1973); Helen Creese's beautiful *Parthayana* (1998), an extension of her earlier work on the Old Javanese *kakawin* the *Subadhrawiwaha* (ANU 1991); and more recently, Julian Millie's *Syair Bidasari* (Leiden 1999). Mention should equally be made of those Indonesian scholars who completed their studies here and have continued to make a contribution to Indonesian philology in Australia, especially Doctors Soewito Santoso (*Sutasoma*, ANU, published in 1975) and Supomo (*Arjunawijaya*, ANU, published in 1977).

As in all fields of literary study, even Indonesian philology was decisively challenged by the theories of the mid-seventies that we call "postmodernism". Perhaps the most open attack came from Adrian Vickers in his Sydney University thesis on the Balinese text *Kidung Panji (a)Malat Rasmi* (published in Leiden by the KITLV 2005 but "completed over a decade ago", vii, 1986), although it was one to which many Dutch scholars subsequently proved sympathetic (83). In the "Prologue to his book, Vickers writes:

One of my aims in writing that thesis was to shake up the way we look at Indonesian texts, and I accordingly adopted a provocative approach to what I saw as the views which limited studies of texts as cultural utterances or performances. In particular I have reacted to aspects of the tradition of textual studies centred at Leiden University. Broadly speaking I have characterized this tradition as one which sees the literary practices of Bali as survivals of an ancient Javanese culture, and for that reason presents texts as objects. (vii)

The consequence was "a study of texts in pre-colonial Bali", or more precisely "how we might think about set of 'texts' as they circulated in pre-colonial Bali, in

particular how they expressed an ideology of royal rule in a part of Southeast Asia where European control and modern nation states had not yet come to dominate the lives of the people of that island and its neighbour, Lombok” (vii). As he further notes: “I began ... as a philologist looking for his text, and ended it as an historian of a cultural world otherwise deeply overlaid by a combination of tourist images, colonial re-orderings of the state, and Indian-based assumptions about kings ran their realms” (1).

Vickers’ postmodern contribution to Indonesian philology begins with the contemporary understanding that there is no one “text” and no singular “meaning” of any text. He notes:

In place of [a critical edition], I offer a mapping of what ‘Malat’ may mean, or have meant, for Balinese in different times and places, how, starting from a Western view of the text, the Malat spills over from the written word into types of performance and visual representation, and how the written word makes little sense, or is at least ‘boring’, unless you understand that it is part of a wider process of representation, linked to notions of genre and to cultural models. (9)

In his “farewell lecture”, Teeuw (1991) suggested that Vickers’ approach “takes us one step further away from the idea that we could and should publish critical editions of texts” (220). Teeuw was also concerned that such an approach meant that “it is even fundamentally impossible to explain, to expound texts, linguistic utterances of any kind” (222). Vickers replied that he was attempting to do was “to demonstrate what a set of Balinese limits of interpretation may be, and how those limits include the way in which the text is rendered or performed” (viii). This was “what you need to do and know before you edit” (viii); a life-time’s work, as Worsley earlier admitted (1972: VII). The focus of philological studies had broadened but, potentially, in the end not changed – text (fragmented though it may now be) and context were still the name of the game. As Teeuw concluded: “nothing new certainly, but most important of all: the lesson which has to be drawn from developments both in textual criticism and in literary criticism, both in Indonesia and elsewhere, is that the two need each other as badly as ever. They are two sides of the one coin” (225-6).

Modern Literature

The study of Modern Indonesian Literature has similarly moved from a focus on single, finite texts, bearing clear (or not so clear) and correct meanings, to an acceptance of multiple and polyvalent texts, shaped by contexts that bear ideologies of personal and political power.

Only slightly earlier than Worsley was asking his literary questions about classical Indonesian texts, A.H. Johns wrote in *Westerly* in 1966:

Modern Indonesian poetry ... remains very much an unknown world, as much – if the truth be told – in Indonesia as elsewhere. Fundamental questions to which a whole range of possible answers need consideration and comparison are not even asked. Despite the verbiage proffered by critics faithfully following each others' footsteps, we still lack a definitive study of the work of any Indonesian writer: an account of his cultural formation, the sources of his inspiration; his indebtedness to his predecessors, his relations with his contemporaries, whether as a poet, personality or thinker; his influence upon them, theirs upon him. We are equally in the dark concerning the aesthetics of modern Indonesian writing; we know next to nothing of the dynamics of Indonesian prosody, or what it is in the genius of the language which determines variety of pace and rhythm, influences mood, or suggests force, vitality, gentleness or despair. We still need to ask by what criteria the language of poetry may be distinguished from that of prose, from whence it derives dimension, and its potential for overtones. (1979: 82)

Johns set about answering these questions not only in essays published in the *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* and various academic volumes (including Ruth McVey's *Indonesia*, 1963; Bastin and Roolvink's festschrift for Sir Richard Winstedt, *Malayan and Indonesian Studies*, 1964; A.R. Davis *Search for Identity: Modern Literature and the Creative Arts in Asia*, 1974) but also in the literary journals *Westerly*, *Quadrant* and *Meanjin*. In the 1970s, each Indonesian Department (except for Melbourne) had its own Indonesian author – Balfas at

Sydney, Achdiat Kartamihardja in Canberra, and Idrus at Monash. Amin Sweeney once joked in a seminar at Monash that Western philologists were the last scribes of Indonesian and Malay classical literature; Australian critics of modern Indonesian literature have always been tempted by the possibility of becoming Indonesian *seniman*, engaging both in creative and academic work, in both public and scholarly forums, in Indonesia and in Australia (but not in Leiden or London).

Important literary critical work was done by, among others, Keith Foulcher on *Pujangga Baru* (1980), Lekra (1986), and the Generation of 1945, especially Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Roskies 1993); Paul Tickell, on pre-Balai Pustaka writers; David Hill on Mochtar Lubis; Pam Allen and Barbara Hatley on writing by women; by Marshall Clark on the use of *wayang* in contemporary writing; as well as by Andy Fuller on the stories (and comics) of Seno Gumira Ajidarma. Much more, in my opinion, could have been done. We have seldom produced book length studies of specific authors and scarcely even started to answer the questions Johns asked forty years ago.

To my mind, two volumes stand out in this diverse field. The first is Virginia Matheson Hooker's *Writing a New Society: Social change through the novel in Malay* (2000). The book is a study of "the relationship between social change and literary practice" and analyses in significant depth the "urgent and consistent" anxiety to be found in the Malay novel from the early 1920s on about "the condition of the Malay race" (xv). The other is *Clearing a space: Postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian literature* (2002), edited by Keith Foulcher and Tony Day, the fruit of a three day workshop held at the University of Sydney in May 1998 and attended by some thirty scholars and writers from Australia, Indonesia, Europe and North America. This sort of cooperation is admirable but unfortunately rare. Foulcher and Day saw "postcolonialism as "a reading strategy, bringing to bear questions that can help identify the traces of colonialism in critical as well as literary texts and evaluate the nature and significance of the textual effects of these traces" (2). The effects were, they argued, particularly to be seen in the way in which language is used in constituting reality (5), and in "hybridity" as a way of referring to "the interaction of disparate cultural forms that over time results in the formation of new cultures and identities with their own histories and textual enactments" (9). Here is an area in

which Indonesian Studies had much to say that could have been of interest to a discipline, Postcolonial Studies, which itself owed much to Australian-based scholars (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989); that discussion has yet to begin.

The Teaching of Literature

The study of Indonesian literature has formed a variable part of the curriculum in Indonesian Studies in Australia over the past five decades. Sometimes literature has been seen as the highest stage of language learning, a mirror of society, and a valuable insight into the hearts and minds of people in a way which is not otherwise readily available. At other times, literature has been seen as irrelevant to language learning (especially communicative language learning), elitist (belonging to the court and/or the urban intelligentsia), and difficult to understand in a world dominated by the mass media.

George Quinn, in private correspondence, has offered a good description of the current decline of interest in Indonesian Literatures at the ANU, and no doubt his words could be appropriately applied to other universities as well:

The study of Indonesian and Malaysian literature used to be an important component of courses offered in the Faculty of Asian Studies at the ANU. It no longer is. The decline in undergraduate study of Indonesian and Malaysian literature can be attributed to two main factors: (i) declining levels of interest in literary studies coupled with an increasing unwillingness on the part of the University to tolerate specialist courses with small enrolments, and (ii) declining staffing levels that compel staff to devote their time increasingly to the nuts-and-bolts teaching the Indonesian language.

But the study of Indonesian and Malaysian literature has not entirely disappeared. Two courses with literary subject matter remain “on the books” though they have not been offered in recent years. These are *Reading Modern Malay* and *Literary Activism and State Power in Contemporary Indonesia*. The latter was a course I devised and first taught in 1998 and it was last taught by Dr Marshall Clark in 2002.

In addition two other courses continue to be offered that focus partly on the literary culture of Indonesia and Malaysia. They are *Reading Traditional Malay* and *Popular Cultures in Southeast Asia*. Both these courses are offered in 2008 and remain viable, with enrolments of between 13 and 20 students respectively, but neither of them offers detailed, comprehensive or advanced studies of literary texts.

Despite this, study of literary texts remain alive in the courses *Readings in Southeast Asian Culture* and *Advanced Readings in Southeast Asian Culture*. These are advanced-level “empty box” courses in which students who already have a good reading command of a Southeast Asian language negotiate an individualised program of reading in that language with a supervising lecturer. They engage in fortnightly discussions on their reading in small groups, submitting fortnightly reports on their reading tasks and writing a final essay that must involve substantial elements of research and analysis.

In recent years a number of students have chosen to read intensively in modern Indonesian and Javanese literature under my supervision. For example, over the last two years I have mentored a total of twelve students who – with individually tailored reading programs – studied works by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (concentrating variously on his early novels, his *Buru Quartet*, his short stories, and his less well-known novels of the 1950s and early 1960s like *Korupsi* and *Gadis Pantai*), the novels of Mochtar Lubis, short stories with Islamic motifs and themes, and *sastra wangi* or “chick-lit” texts. Four students read modern short stories in the Javanese language, and I had one student who read a variety of Javanese texts (literary and non-literary) in the Javanese *hanacaraka* script.

The most common solution to the problem of how and what to teach about literature to tertiary students is not to teach it at all. Where literature is taught, there is a tendency to open the study of literary texts up to the questions of postmodernism (see Foulcher 1994) – to the “holy trinity” of race, gender and power. Under the influence of postmodernism, it has also been argued that the line between literary

(canonical) and other texts is unnecessary and that the skills once used for reading literature can be applied to all forms of writing. Rather than compete with the Australian obsession with Indonesian politics, Paul Tickell at the Australian Defence Forces Academy of the University of New South Wales, for example, has appropriately offered courses on “P4: Politik, Partai, Pemilu, Presiden – Politics and Language in Contemporary Indonesia” (ASST 2202 Intermediate Indonesian A, pt 2 and ASST 3102, Advanced Indonesian, pt 2, Semester 2, 1999) and on Indonesian Presidents and Presidential Candidates ((Indonesian 2D/3B, Session 2, 2004).

Conclusion

In this very preliminary paper I have considered the major trends and emphases in the Australian study of classical and modern Indonesian literatures over the past half century. These studies have included literatures in various languages: classical and modern Malay, Old and Middle Javanese, Balinese, as well as George Quinn’s work on the modern Javanese novel (1992) and Campbell Macknight’s work on Buginese chronicles. There have been significant achievements: the maintenance of the philological tradition and participation in its transformation, and the sharing of these skills with Indonesian scholars, both in Australia and within Indonesia itself; as well as the personal sharing in the excitement of the modern Indonesian literary world, through scholarship and translation. There have undoubtedly been missed opportunities, particularly in the area of modern literature where, I feel, much more in-depth work could have been done. There ought to have been more cooperation with Indonesian scholars and tertiary institutions; more sharing of knowledge about both classical and modern Indonesian literatures. Within the Australian academy and literary world, what we have done has had little impact beyond Indonesian Studies. We have significantly failed to engage with Postcolonial Studies, which has remained resolutely focused on postcolonial English writing (once called Commonwealth Literature), in particular, and uninterested in other languages and other colonies.

In this isolation, change and decline, Indonesian Literary Studies is not alone. Catherine Rogers, Gabriel Jacobs and Alan Watkins have written a “Requiem for French Literary Studies” (2002), which begins:

Students reading French in a UK university during the 1960s spent the majority of their time studying the major authors of the Medieval and Renaissance periods and the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (although in some very traditional institutions the twentieth century was perceived as too recent to be academically respectable). In a typical university of the time, a degree course in French consisted of over 75% literature. Today, literary texts make an appearance in many UK curricula, even a major appearance, but they do so predominantly and increasingly as part of a larger landscape of cultural studies, thematic studies, gender studies and the like: the purely literary, conventional study of texts has, it seems, been dealt a lethal blow in the UK (1).

It is true that the old inevitably regret the passing of those things from their youth to which they have been attached throughout the rest of their lives. Rather than being of little relevance, literature and its related art forms (and there is where cultural studies comes in) continue to carry the stories which shape a culture's deepest understandings of itself, the stories that are told when the family gathers. Our students need to be able to share in those private conversations. We teachers need to be providers of more than the "vocational skills" required by business and industry. The larger landscape of the geographical region is where we are situated; the larger region of the mind is the one to which our vocation as scholars of classical and modern Indonesian literatures calls us.

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