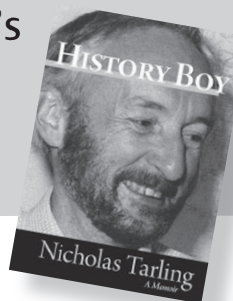


In our third age

In our third age, whether we like it or not, the past catches up with us and demands that we face it. It is a time in which memories that lay dormant for 50, 60 years unexpectedly leap to life; that skeletons spring from their closet and we have to deal with indecisions that cast their shadow over our lives. Gracefully, if we have faced up to our frustrations, grudges have dissipated and the past may, accordingly, become a storytelling friend; a pleasant companion – as is apparent from Nicholas Tarling's *History Boy: a memoir*.

Niels Mulder



Tarling, Nicholas. 2009.

History Boy; a memoir.

Auckland: Nicholas Tarling, through Dunmore Publishing Ltd., Wellington. 277 pages. ISBN 978 1 877399 45 9

WHILE STILL IN THE FIELD, I crashed into the wall that separates the second, or the working stage of our lives, from the third, the age of retirement, reflection, and recollection. It came abruptly and decidedly; all of a sudden, I was through; I knew I did not want to do any new research; the things that had preoccupied me during 35 years of professional life lay behind me. I would retire, somewhere around the Mediterranean; Southeast Asia was over and done with.

Even Amsterdam, the town that had always been like a warm womb in which I would relax after a stint of high visibility 'in the field', didn't agree with me any longer. In between exploring a few cities at a good distance from the harsh northerly

winter, I still wrapped up my remaining findings in an ultimate academic title, *Southeast Asian Images*. Upon its conclusion, I was free to indulge in writing about how I had gained my insights and evolved from young dog in the mid-1960s to professional stranger at the end of the 1970s. It opened the gate through the wall. The gate, though, turned out to be like Alice's mirror as it landed me in a place where prospects had gone topsy-turvy and where time stood, as it were, in reverse.

The point is not whether we should deal with the past or not; with our lives willy-nilly revisiting us, we have little to choose from. The point rather is how we deal with the inevitable *temps perdu*. Some of us write about it to exorcise and be through with it; others visualise the evolution of their lives and personality in a *Bildungsroman* that may offer something of interest to people who have never known them; certain scholars, most memorably Clifford Geertz with *After the Fact* and 'An Inconstant Profession', write intellectual biographies that visualise the origin and evolution of their celebration in the context of contemporary theorising and history; quite a few produce a memoir that relates the way they went to their offspring. Tarling's is within this latter category, but in the absence of marriage and children, his privately published memoir is presumably addressing an audience of former students, friends, relatives and colleagues.

The recounting

As a fellow Southeast Asianist preoccupied, first, with my field biography and, currently, with the adventure of growing old and older still, I am interested in the relations of others, and so I solicited to do a review. As a result, and for fairness' sake, I had to read through a 277-page soliloquy devoid of inner tension, plot or action in which hundreds of names are dropped and not a single character comes to life. Even the author remains a shadowy figure. Whereas it is clear that he holds his Mum dear – the biography draws heavily on their letters – no personality appears. We get to know the names of his siblings but nothing about the author's relationship with them. At the end, we know that Tarling has no affinity with dogs, the army and sports; that he is a reticent person, sticking to himself and books, a perennial bachelor, a keen student and a successful academic; noisy dorms, colleges, flats, hotels, and neighbours (three to four score mentions) get on his nerves, at the same time that he finds relief in the concert hall and in listening to his records – he hints at two to three hundred performances and compositions. He also likes to watch theatre and, especially in

his later career, to act on the stage, but also there we have to do with listings that, in the absence of context or setting, fail to enliven the narrative. In a way the author anticipated that his would not qualify as a *Bildungsroman* or even as an intellectual biography when he warned the reader that he has no real aptitude for 'original' or 'imaginative' writing (p.47).

For the outsider, the interest of the book is in fleeting remarks about one or the other of some one to two hundred place names that occur in the text, such as Singapore as a China town in the late fifties and Hong Kong without high rises, or about certain historical conditions, such as World War Two, postwar scarcity, the novelty of having a radio, sea travel to Australia, and occasional opinions on the academic curriculum, but like with the names of persons referred to, it all remains perfunctory.

Intellectual biography

We need scholarly memoirs that show us the origin and development of ideas, and so I sympathise with the urge of describing our course in retrospect. The challenge, though, is in producing an enjoyable text. As eggheads, we usually have no experience with creative writing; the texts we produced were written in an entirely different mode, and with close to 20 books to his name, Tarling will be remembered as a prolific historian of Southeast Asia. To give the intellectual background of that enterprise would have provided us with a significant contribution to historiography-in-action. With *History Boy*, however, we have no more than a boring, linear progression from station to station, from student to renowned scholar, then from dean to vice-chancellor – in brief, an extremely personal account that holds little of interest for his fellow Southeast Asianists.

Niels Mulder

niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph

References

Geertz, Clifford. 1995. *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*. Harvard University Press.
Geertz, Clifford. 2002. 'An Inconstant Profession: The Anthropological Life in Interesting Times'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 31, pp. 1-19.
Mulder, Niels. 2008. *Doing Thailand; The Anthropologist as a Young Dog in Bangkok in the 1960s*. White Lotus Press.
Mulder, Niels. 2009. *Professional Stranger; Doing Thailand in its Most Violent Decade: A Field Diary*. White Lotus Press.

Inventing ourselves as Filipinos

Despite myth and ideology, the US is a multicultural society that, because of its segregationist tendencies, nurtures 'primordial' identity feelings. As one of the biggest Spanish-speaking countries, this is obvious enough among the Chicanos and variant Latinos, but other second and third generation descendants of original immigrants are also stimulated to keep their ethnic identity alive. Over time, such identity is increasingly rooted in group- and generation specific rituals and other invented traditions. Identities evolve over the years and, at the personal level, even over one's life time.

Niels Mulder

Gonzalves, Theodore S. 2010.

The Day the Dancers Stayed; Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press. xii + 215 pages. ISBN 978 1 59213 729 9 pbk.

GONZALVES PARAPHRASED his book's title from 'The Day the Dancers Came' by the Filipino American writer Bienvenido Santos. In that story, an old-time 'indentured' labourer eagerly anticipates reviving his youth, his nation, his origin, through watching a Philippine cultural show that has come to town – and that does not evoke any recognition. He has outlived his roots as it were, and so he realises that he is an outcast, without identity, and no better than refuse.

The audience of the performances the author describes is as different from our pariah as the other face of the moon. It consists of the children (and grandchildren) of post-war, mainly middle-class immigrants who currently study at colleges and universities and who organise, for their own benefit, the yearly Philippine Cultural Nights that are the proper subject of the monograph.

A national repertoire

In order to trace the evolution of the shows' contents, the author takes us back to the 1930s, when contemporary cultural expressions were emulating the example of American popular culture. At that time, educators Jorge Bocobo and Francisca Reyes Aquino felt that the country, on the eve of commonwealth status and impending independence, needed to develop a cultural repertoire rooted in the pre-Spanish past. In order to do so, they sought inspiration in the folklore (costumes, music, dances) of the groups that had withstood the Iberian intrusion and retained much of their own. Subsequently, they invented and developed a national repertoire that, in the 1950s, culminated in the internationally acclaimed pageant of the Bayanihan Philippine Dance Company. According to a foreign critic, this troupe presents 'an ethnic dance culture which has gone beyond simple preservation and into creative growth', while becoming the government's Official Cultural Mission to the Americas and Europe (p.72).

Whereas it may be expected that, in the course of its adaptation to theatre and stage, and in its development as a world-class dance company, the original sources of inspiration 'up there in the hills' get distorted or even become unrecognisable, the rise of Bayanihan (and similar groups) coincided with a time of a deep cultural crisis in which the nation seemed to be deprived of identity and purpose. In this way, Bayanihan filled a void and became a primary icon of 'Philippine culture.'

This iconisation of folklore-derived 'culture' that exists as it were without identifiable culture bearers moulded the yearly Philippine Cultural Nights at a variety of campuses. Then, the second and third generation student-children of Filipino immigrants celebrate an idealised origin in dance and display à la Bayanihan, interspersed with a standard repertoire of

historical skits. Whereas the participants commit much effort and pride to the perfection of these shows, they have, from the 1970s and into the present, acquired such a rigidity as to become standardised 'rites of passage' that, of course, with each following generation of students will be understood in different ways. Be this as it may, as a staple ritual the PCNs have become an easy target for satire (ch. 5) that has, however, not made a dent in the programming.

The crux is the performance

The author is a musician, composer and theatre performer who, as an academic, focuses on Filipino American and performance studies, and so it is not strange that 'performance' takes the centre stage. This results in straightforward descriptions of shows, countless names, and a collage of dates and historical tidbits that fail to evoke the forest that has gone lost for the trees. What has become clear, however, is that the PCNs are there to stay as a ritual marker of belonging to the Filipino community in America, comparable to celebrations of those of Irish, Italian, Mexican, or Chinese descent. In this context, the author has used the idea that participation in a PCN serves as a rite of passage, presumably on the way to becoming a fully fledged Filipino American [?], with the rite itself evoking nostalgia, or the desire to obliterate history and to turn it into a private or collective [presumably identity-confirming] mythology (pp.142-3).

Whereas this interpretation sounds plausible, I dearly miss the subjective experience of the audience and, largely, of the performers, too. By stating that the PCNs are an expression of diasporic identification, we still remain in the dark about what the performances trigger off at the individual level. What are the images and illusions of the Philippines evoked? Do these play any role in one's identity feelings or in the way one shapes one's life? How are these things being talked about? etc. But perhaps, in this day and age, simulacra à la Baudrillard substitute, or 'surrogate' as Gonzalves calls it, the real thing without question and render research into the personal moment superfluous.

Niels Mulder

niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph