E.H.S. SIMMONDS: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

C.D. Cowan

Stuart Simmonds, as he has for many years been known to his friends and colleagues, was born at Littlehampton, Sussex, on 7 August 1919, and christened Edward Harold Stuart. The family home was in Warminster, and from the age of eleven he was sent as a weekly boarder to Lord Weymouth's School, Warminster.

Throughout his Wiltshire boyhood Stuart was exposed to two distinct family traditions. His father came from Oxfordshire farming stock, and had retained close links with the countryside whilst building up a prosperous business in the distribution of agricultural machinery and farming supplies in the southern counties. He expected that his son would succeed him in the management of his business, and was concerned to pass on to him his own interests as a naturalist, a sportsman (he was a keen golfer and horseman) and in the literature of the countryside. He was a devotee of Matthew Arnold. Stuart's mother, on the other hand, came from an Indian Army family. She herself had been born in India, and her father and her brothers were all military men. She would have been happy for her son to maintain this tradition, and to her influence in this direction was added that of his school where there was a strong military connection and amongst the boys a high percentage of the sons of army families.

When he left school in 1937 there were, therefore, conflicting views within the family as to his future. These were resolved by his father who, wishing to secure for his son a commercial training which would equip him for the management of the family business, enrolled him in a course sponsored by the Institute of Bankers. Stuart does not seem to have found this congenial. Eventually he extricated himself from the situation by enlisting in the ranks of a Royal Horse Artillery unit attached to the local Yeomanry regiment, and after the outbreak of war with Germany was commissioned in 1940.

As an artillery officer Stuart Simmonds was involved in the disastrous campaign which followed the Japanese attack on Malaya at the beginning of December 1941. He took part in the fighting in north-west Johore and the retreat and withdrawal into Singapore itself until, soon after the British forces surrendered on 15 February, he became a prisoner of war.

The next four years, spent initially in Singapore, but for the most part in southern Thailand in the labour camps of the notorious Burma railway, were an experience which made a deep and
lasting impression on Stuart, and in one way or another were to condition the rest of his life. His army service, with its successive phases of training in England, the long voyage in a troop-ship around the Cape and across the Indian Ocean, and fighting in Malaya, had familiarised him with the bureaucracy, cynicism and comradeship of ordered military life, and the fear, excitement and confusion of action. He was no stranger to death and the infliction and suffering of pain in hot blood. He had emerged from it all strong and healthy. Now he was to live with death and suffering on a larger scale and in a different guise, from cholera, dysentery, malaria, malnutrition and starvation, and the considered inhumanity of man to man. But the ordeal also brought its own bounty. The birds, flowers and plants of Thailand offered a rich store of material to the English naturalist; contact with the Thai people in the areas around the camps, and with their way of life, nurtured the development of a new field of interest; above all, immersion in the daily miseries and struggle for survival of himself and his fellow prisoners of many nationalities presented all too many opportunities for the exercise of sympathetic understanding of, and charity towards, the troubles and idiosyncrasies of others.

In many of the camps in which Stuart was kept, officers, as distinct from other ranks, were not compelled to work. In the time between morning and evening roll-call there was scope for other activities. One such was the planning of escape. In truth this seems always to have been impracticable because of the geographical remoteness of the camps from any area still under the control of the western powers, the difficulties of the terrain and the lack of provisions. In investigating the feasibility of escape, nevertheless, on some days Stuart became a daytime escaper, making his way into the nearest village in order to establish contact with the local people and to obtain information about the area and the routes out of it. In the process he gradually obtained some familiarity with the language and the ways of the people. At one stage he was caught at this by the Japanese, and sent to a camp for 'incorrigibles', specially used to accommodate potential escapers. On other days there was time to benefit from the varied experience and professional expertise of other men from many walks of life, thrown together by the chances of war. One of these, J.C. de Casparis, a member of the archaeological service in Java and a Sanskrit scholar, was later to be Stuart's colleague in London. And there were times simply for reflection and for taking stock.

All these experiences were reflected in the poetry which Stuart wrote in these years. These poems spin their webs out of material drawn from nature, from peasant life, from aspects of Thai Buddhism, and from his observation of life and death in warfare and captivity. But their themes were almost all variations on the insubstantial nature of human life; the reader must always
'Remember that a tear
Hangs secret at the core
Of all the world.'

The surrender of Japan in 1945 freed him to return to England and to the family home, which by now had shifted to Oxford. In 1946 he was admitted to Keble College to read for a degree in English language and literature. At Keble Stuart's interests, and the main emphasis of his work, were initially very much in literature. For the study of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English texts, however, Stefanyja Ross was his tutor. The facility with which he mastered the phonology and grammar of an unfamiliar language impressed her, and through her Stuart made the acquaintance of her husband, Alan Ross, then Professor of English language in Birmingham. Two things flowed from this connection. The Rosses, seeing in Stuart a future philologist and rather regretting the emphasis on the literary side of his studies, were concerned to reinforce his interest in linguistics and phonetics. Alan Ross, through his family connections with the School's first Director, Sir Denison Ross, and his professional contacts with Sir Ralph Turner and J.R. Firth, was aware of the new developments on foot at the School of Oriental and African Studies following the Scarbrough Report of 1946. As he became aware of Stuart's interest in the Thai people and their culture Ross was thus able to put him in touch with the new opportunities opening up in South East Asian studies in London. A visit to the School in July 1948 to discuss the prospects for the development of Tai studies with Professor Eve Edwards decided him to apply for a post there, and in October of that year he was offered and accepted an appointment as Lecturer in Linguistics.

The Scarbrough Commission had recommended that as part of the general programme of growth in all fields of study relating to Asia and Africa, work on the languages of South East Asia should be concentrated at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Stuart Simmonds' appointment was part of this development. There had been a short-lived department of South East Asia and the Islands at the School between 1933 and 1935, staffed by a Reader in Malay and a Lecturer in Burmese, but that had been dissolved in 1936. It had now to be recreated from scratch. It was, therefore, decided that the training of Stuart and four other colleagues who were appointed at about the same time should take place initially within the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, under the direction of Professor J.R. Firth.

As part of this training it was decided that Stuart should spend a year in Thailand, and this visit was arranged for 1950. He sailed from Southampton in the Dutch liner Oranje on 14 January 1950, and after spending a few days in Singapore revisiting the scenes of some of his earlier experiences he arrived in Bangkok on 10 February. Stuart had been fortunate in that in the autumn of 1949 he had met in London M.L. Pin Malakul, the
Under-Secretary of State for Education in Thailand. His influence was an important factor in assisting Stuart to establish himself in Bangkok. He was able to set himself up in a small bungalow with Thai servants, and the ability to live in a Thai community almost from the beginning of his stay and to entertain all kinds and conditions of people was a great help in his work. M.L. Pin was also helpful in providing him with introductions to Rong Syamananda, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in Chulalongkorn University, and to senior officials in several provincial centres. It was fortunate also that Nai Singto Pukanuta, who had been a Tai language assistant in the Department of Linguistics during Stuart’s early days in the Department, returned to Bangkok during 1950 and was put in charge of setting up a small language laboratory in the Ministry of Education there, in which Stuart was able to work. For part of his time in Bangkok he was joined by H.L. Shorto, and was able to help him in recording Môn material. This must have been one of the earliest examples of a joint research project at SOAS. When Stuart Simmonds returned to London in April 1951 he had not only a very solid command of the standard spoken and written language used in Bangkok and for all official purposes, but had also done a good deal of work in provincial dialects. He brought back with him a large number of language recordings, which were of immediate use in teaching. Perhaps most important of all, his first post-war visit to Thailand had confirmed the affection for the country and its people which he had first felt as a prisoner of war, and the conviction that the study of its language and culture would be an important and rewarding enterprise.

In 1951 Stuart was transferred to a Lectureship in Tai in the Department of South East Asia. For the next fifteen years his efforts were directed to the task of developing the study of Tai languages, literatures, and culture, and establishing these studies at university level in Britain. For most of this time, like several of his colleagues in the Department, he worked alone. The demands made upon him were many, and covered a wide range of activities. Every year there was a beginner’s language course to be given to diplomats and other government servants, students embarking on research in history and the social sciences in Thailand, businessmen and others requiring a knowledge of the language for their work. More advanced courses were sometimes wanted, and as his reputation grew Thai graduate students began to be sent by their universities to undertake research in Thai literature under his supervision. Examining for outside bodies soon became a regular annual task; in 1951 the Scottish Universities’ Entrance Board, the Civil Service Commission and the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate all called upon his services, and the list grew from year to year. So did the list of broadcasts made in the Overseas Service of the BBC, and of public lectures in many aspects of Thai culture and current affairs which he was called upon to give. "Consultative work" (as the School’s Annual Report somewhat unimaginatively called it)