

E.H.S. SIMMONDS: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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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.G. 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 Pukahuta, 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)

covered an extraordinary variety of tasks, from advising Pitmans on a system of Thai shorthand to cataloguing the Thai manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. And above all he worked constantly to extend and deepen his own mastery of Tai languages and cultures, which increasingly made him the foremost scholar in this field in the western world.

Stuart's travels throughout Thailand had interested him in the study of dialects from the beginning, and he was particularly concerned to extend his knowledge of Lao. When, therefore, in 1956 he was granted a year's research leave he took the opportunity to spend the major part of it in Laos. He was now married and together, he and his wife flew to Bangkok before setting off by Land Rover for Vientiane. They arrived there in mid-February and spent the remainder of the year in Laos. For most of this time they were mobile, moving about the country and living in the Land Rover, which Stuart had equipped with a lean-to tent; during the rainy season from June to October, however, they were forced to settle into a rented house in Vientiane since, with most of the bridges washed out, travelling was out of the question. They returned to Bangkok by way of Cambodia and Angkor Wat during December, and after renewing Stuart's contacts with members of Chulalongkorn University and other Thai scholars in Bangkok, and a visit to Sukhothai and Chiangmai in the north returned to London by sea in April 1957.

The wide range of Stuart's scholarly interests and the day-to-day demands of his work in London had led to a certain slowness in his contributions to knowledge appearing in published form. From 1957 onwards, however, a steady stream of journal articles and contributions to books began to appear in print, as different projects came to fruition. Some were bibliographical, such as the section on Tai linguistics in *Bibliographies of Mon-Khmer and Tai Linguistics*, published in the London Oriental Bibliographies series in 1963. But for the most part his work fell into two categories, language and literature, and modern political developments. His literary and linguistic work covered topics such as Thai shadow-play, poetry, prose fiction, eighteenth-century history, linguistic structure, and Tai dialect studies. On the political side he was constantly in demand as an authority on the contemporary scene in Thailand and Laos in a period in which the Vietnamese crisis kept mainland South East Asia in the public eye. In 1966 his status as a world authority in these fields was recognised when the University of London conferred on him the title of Reader in Tai Languages and Literatures, and in 1970 he was appointed to the Chair of the Languages and Literatures of South East Asia.

As the School of Oriental and African Studies expanded and its national role grew, and as Stuart's own experience widened, he was inevitably involved in administration and committee work of many kinds. This side of his responsibilities took

on a new dimension when in 1966 he was asked to act as Head of the Department of South East Asia and the Islands; he was confirmed in this position in 1969. It fell to him to preside over the Department's work at a time when its teaching activities were expanding. Up till this point only Burmese and Malay had been available as full-time degree subjects, and student numbers had been small. It was largely Stuart's doing that new degree structures were now introduced which made it possible for undergraduates to offer one of the whole range of South East Asian languages in combination with Anthropology or History. His influence too ensured that language work was introduced almost from the beginning into the new M.A. Area Studies programme, and that members of the Department played a full part in the co-operative research and seminar work of the newly established Centre of South East Asian Studies at the School. Under Stuart's leadership the Department grew both in numbers and in vigour in these years. After carrying the banner of Tai studies alone for so long, he was now able to secure the appointment of Peter Bee and Manas Chitakasem to reinforce his work. The Department as a whole, which in 1966 had contained twelve full-time teachers, had grown to a lively group of sixteen strong ten years later.

Stuart also made a large contribution to the development of Asian studies outside the School, at both the national and international level. He had long been involved in the work of the School's Extramural Committee, which was concerned to extend knowledge of Asian and African affairs and awareness of their importance within British society as a whole. From 1969 to 1979 as the Committee's chairman he devoted much of his time and energy to fostering extra-mural work in schools and colleges of education, and to developing special courses and seminar programmes for businessmen and senior members of Government departments. The outstanding success of the Extramural programme in enhancing interest in, and understanding of, Asia and Africa, as indicated for instance in the steady increase of students wishing to study them in British universities, was largely due to Stuart's efforts. He was prominent too in the affairs of the Royal Asiatic Society, where he served in succession as the Society's Director, as a Vice-President, and as its President.

In all these capacities (and many others too numerous to record in this short note) Stuart Simmonds brought a matter-of-fact commonsense approach, tolerance and wide experience to bear on the problems of organisations and people. His natural modesty, tact, and ease of manner, which secured the confidence and co-operation of his colleagues, were allied unobtrusively with a willingness to invest time in mastering the elements of projects and problems, many of which were far removed from his own subject and from scholarship. In 1974 when the office of Dean fell vacant at the School it was without hesitation that the then Director, Professor Sir Cyril Philips, turned to Stuart to fill it. It was the same six years later, when the new office of

Pro-Director was created. Someone was needed who enjoyed the trust of his colleagues, had the confidence of the School's Governing Body, and the experience and capacity to act as Director at need. Stuart once more was appointed without question.

When he retired in 1982 Stuart Simmonds could look back on a working-life as a scholar spanning nearly thirty-five years, and a connection with Thailand going back to 1942. Virtually single-handed he established the study of Tai languages and literatures, and of Thailand itself, in Britain, a unique contribution to the academic life of this country. In 1983, to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the development of Thai script in the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, Chulalongkorn University had made a number of replicas of the Ramkhamhaeng Stone inscription. It presented one of these to the University of London in appreciation of the work done there in Thai studies. There could be no more striking testimony to Stuart's achievement.