



Dacre Raikes 1925-2013

Francis Dacre Raikes, who died on 26 March, 2013, aged 87, was a distinguished British businessman who made Thailand his home for over sixty years and became an expert on Thai culture and Thai classical music. He was appointed a Member of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand, also of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to Thailand and to Anglo-Thai cultural relations.

The son of Vice-Admiral Cecil Staveley Raikes, Dacre Raikes was educated at Radley College, then joined the Royal Navy as an Ordinary Seaman at the beginning of World War II. His war service took him to Ceylon on a signalling mission which he described as ‘completely futile’ but which sparked off his enduring love of the tropics. After the war, he took up a post in British Guiana as a sugar planter, before moving to Thailand in 1951 at the invitation of the Borneo Company. His first post was in the forests of Northwest Thailand as a manager of the company’s teak concessions, an experience which made a lifelong impression on him. During his four colourful years as a ‘teak wallah’, living in the small town of Chiang Mai, close to the local inhabitants and to the flora and fauna of the region, Raikes became fascinated by the Thai way of life and the Thai landscape. His cine film of life in the teak forests is an archive treasure. It was in this setting that he first heard Thai music played on traditional instruments.

Dacre Raikes remained in Thailand for the rest of his life, rising to be Managing Director of the Borneo Company, which was absorbed by the Inchcape Group in 1967. He was Chairman of the British Chamber of Commerce in the late 1960s, and on the boards of many other companies and organisations, most notably the Siam Society. He held a senior role in Metal Box after retiring from Inchcape though by then his cultural work absorbed much of his attention.

As Regional Manager of Borneo-Inchcape, he presided over a major expansion of the company’s interests in the region. His imposing official residence occupied an area of parkland in South Sathorn Road, Bangkok, now encompassing the German Embassy. Here he lived in style, which led to some friction with an influential, retired General on Inchcape’s board who paid him a visit and declared the property too palatial for a single man. Raikes countered that the company’s prestige (‘face’)

obliged him to represent Inchcape at such a level, and he eventually won the argument. Later, on an official visit to London, he found himself seated at lunch next to the General who ignored him throughout the meal.

Raikes was closely involved with the activities of the Siam Society for forty years, especially in the performing arts. He served on its Council for much of that time, was Vice-President of the Society from 1984-1999, and was elected an Honorary Member in 1992. In 1979, he organised a series of workshops on Thai classical music for music students and musicologists in London and Aldeburgh, and on the same visit staged concert performances by Thai musicians and dancers from Srinakharinwirot University at the universities of Cambridge, Sussex and York. His association with the Department of Fine Arts at Srinakharinwirot (Prasarnmit) lasted over three decades, during which time he introduced their Classical Music and Dance Troupes to audiences across the world. He was tireless in using his contacts to organise and promote annual concert tours to cities all over South East Asia, Europe and North America. Invariably he accompanied the tours himself, combining the roles of tour leader, translator, programme editor, cultural guide, dietary adviser, and nanny-in-chief for groups of 35 or more, most of whom had never travelled outside Thailand. In Chicago, in the winter of 1988, he was seen carrying a pile of jumpers and woolly hats and running after a group of his musicians who were playing in snow for the first time in their lives, but inadequately dressed. Unsurprisingly, he was held in great affection by generations of young performers whose horizons he had widened so dramatically.

In the mid 1970s, Dacre Raikes built himself a magnificent teak mansion, Ban Phlu Luang, on Khlong Saen Saeb in Bangkok, north of the Petchburi Road. Here he entertained his wide circle of friends, sometimes with classical concerts and dance performances. He had learned to play two instruments himself and was occasionally persuaded to join in. A tall, lean man, ginger-haired in his youth, Raikes had a disarming personality, containing a touch of the old-world breeziness and bonhomie found in characters drawn by PG Wodehouse, but leavened by a more reflective and scholarly side. He was a master of the self-deprecating anecdote and had a sublime sense of the ridiculous, invariably finding something amusing to savour and share, even in his declining years. At his home in Bangkok, English afternoon tea was always served.

His setbacks were bravely endured. He once suffered a vicious attack by an intruder at his house and sustained a serious head injury. Only his gold Rolex watch was stolen – the fruit of a visit to Geneva to negotiate the Rolex concession in Southeast Asia years earlier – and, after a long period of recovery, he speculated that a neighbour with an eye on his property had wanted him out of the way.

In later life, his years in the teak forests under a tropical sun took their toll and he suffered bouts of skin cancer that afflicted him unrelentingly. But he remained undaunted, his sunny disposition always to the fore. When he was no longer able

to walk unaided, this was no barrier to his attendance at concerts, lectures, British Club lunches, and Siam Society meetings, where he held sway unerringly on the conservative wing. There was an element of theatre to his arrival at these events: on his feet but bent almost double, with someone ahead of him to open doors, an attendant on each arm, and his driver bringing up the rear with a wheelchair, Raikes and his retinue would make their entrance, and move cheerfully at a snail's pace to a strategic vantage point. His memory for names and faces never deserted him.

Raikes was a lifelong bachelor, but never short of companions. His friends were drawn equally from the Thai and European communities, and long-term British friends helped him manage his affairs in his last years. He was eventually obliged to move out of Ban Phlu Luang and into an apartment off Sathorn. Here, surrounded by mountains of books, papers, and correspondence, he worked on a second volume of his autobiography, going right back to his early days in the teak forests, the loss of which he greatly lamented. One publisher, shown a draft of the book, advised him that there was too much on the logging industry, and not enough on the characters he had encountered. Raikes agreed and embarked on a fresh draft of the book. From then on, whenever he was asked what he had been doing, he would say, "I've been putting more chaps back in my forest!" Sadly, at his death his book was unfinished and his forests were no more.

Tim Butchard

