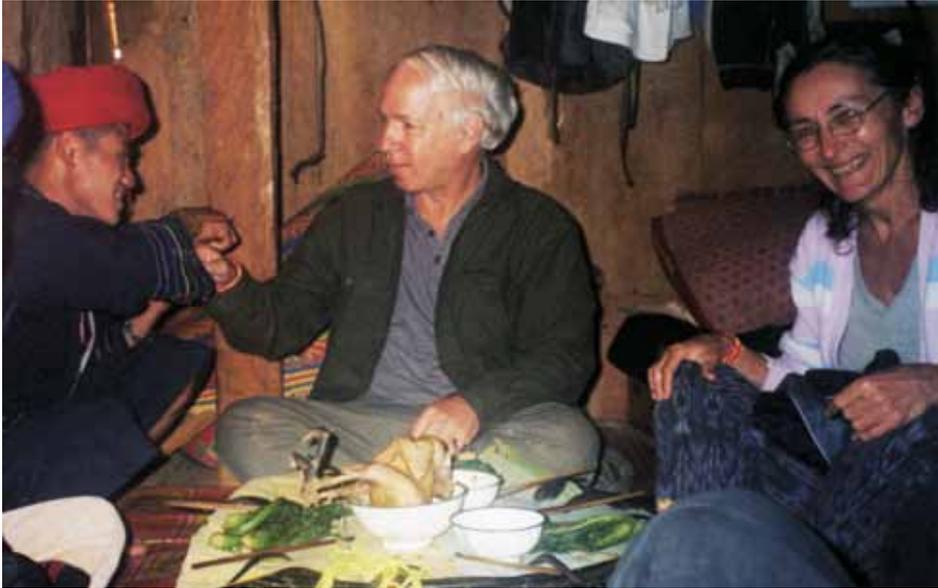


Ronald Duane Renard (1947-2014)



Ron Renard, a former Honorary Editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society* (1999-2001), departed us in Chiang Mai on December 27, 2014. Born in San Jose, California, on February 28, 1947, he became, with patience, work and honor, a bridge between America and Southeast Asia where he passed away after a fight with cancer. In Chiang Mai, he leaves his wife, Dr Anchalee Singhanetra, and in California, one daughter with two grandchildren. In spite of the natural grief of separation, those who have regarded him as a colleague or a friend cannot but celebrate and thank this man for the gifts he left us through his work, his friendship, and his life.

I became a friend of Ron, not because he was a scholar, and a good one, but because he was a normal man, dedicated and decent; though, in the end, I was happy to come to appreciate and even love ... the scholar. He was a simple man; he often talked about being the only son of a director of the French Branch of the Bank of America in San Francisco and of a city clerk in San Mateo County. You knew immediately from his conversation that he was a genuine person, holding his parents in very high esteem. I even retain the impression that we could not have a meeting without him telling of, or alluding to, his father or his mother in one way or another. Searching for his roots, he went as far as exploring France for the places where his ancestors lived, testing, in passing, my ability to decipher and read archaic French in ancient legal documents dating to 1695. Alternately, he paid filial homage to his mother Lillian, the “Lily of the Valley” as she was called, by publishing her autobiography.¹

¹ *Lily of Sunshine Valley: The Torre Family of Moss Beach, on the San Mateo County Coastside related by Great-Grandma Lillian Renard (Lily of the Valley) 2008-2013*. Printed in 2013 for the celebration of her 100th birthday.

From his father's French lineage, he inherited the name "Renard" or "Fox". A fox is often considered a cunning character, whom you should distrust. But there are always two sides to a coin or a person, and Ron actually chose the other nature of the fox, the primary and positive one—a person always curious about everything, never satisfied with what he knew, always on the run, sniffing around for an ever-evasive truth. That natural instinct made a conversation with him so inquisitive, so instructive, often surprising, and always enjoyable. From *Sam Kok* to the transliteration of Thai, from French literature to indigenous mores, from narcotics gossip to the Karen harp, we leaped, bounced and danced over mysteries, countries, centuries, and parted gratified with some new information, while longing for the next encounter.

A dedicated scholar

In his Curriculum Vitae, he defined his areas of expertise thus: "The history of northern Thailand and those Tai areas outside Thailand, hill tribe groups, and narcotic crop cultivation and control." His training in history began far away, in several US universities: Santa Clara, San Jose and Hawaii. In contrast to most members of the academic tribe, and in spite of a short tenure at Assumption College in Bangkok and from 1980 onwards at Chiang Mai and Payap Universities in Chiang Mai, Ron did not build his experience and reputation at a world-famous university or a well-known research institution. Yet these formative years were the soil in which he tested his research tools, sowed fruitful relationships, and harvested first-hand knowledge, soon ripe enough to be widely shared.

Although I cannot remember exactly how we ended up knowing each other, the Informal Northern Thai Group may have been our first meeting place because he was one of the founding team in 1984. I recall that his first visit to my home was related to the preparation of the second edition of his "Southeast Asia Course Outlines". I was soon seduced by a man who could dedicate so much of his time and energy to work on something that was not directly "useful" for himself, but could instead help younger students. This true, but hidden, Christian virtue of consideration for others, for the deprived, for the forgotten, would be one of his constant traits.

After spending his prime as a researcher, teacher or archivist at the Chiang Mai universities, his professional attention broadened to the whole of continental Southeast Asia when he worked for various Agencies, Foundations, Programs, Projects, Funds, NGOs, and Ministries. As a consultant, manager, team-leader, or evaluator, he proved his ability working with others, analyzing a field or a problem, and proposing practical solutions. Covering agriculture, development, drug control, or opium reduction, his critical mind and knowledge were much in demand throughout Thailand, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and even China.

Space is lacking here to list all his publications. After a dissertation on the

history of Thai-Karen relations,² his next main work was a homage to Walter Vella, his greatly appreciated mentor on the history of Thailand.³ Then, two books stand out on his main fields of research, namely Northern Thailand, Burma and drugs: *The Burmese Connection*⁴ and *Opium Reduction in Thailand*.⁵ His final endeavor that he managed to complete, together with Dr Anchalee, is a book on the Mon-Khmer.⁶ He has left us with at least two unfinished projects, one on the oral literature of the Karen⁷ and another on *Long Fiction of Southeast Asia*.⁸ However, these books alone do not allow a proper appreciation of the scope of his work, exploiting history, geography and anthropology, thus making for a tasty cocktail. Beyond the dry and technical reports he had to write for various agencies, we can enjoy many of his articles that reflect the precision of his research as well as the variety of his interests. Buddhism, development, narcotics, ethnicity, food, governance, identities, interrelationships, literature, music, policy—no subject was foreign to him.

In addition, we must not forget his many book reviews. Books are not only the noble fruits of culture, science and fiction, but were the objects of our shared “madness”. David Wyatt understood this “fault” and suggested that Ron send to Cornell University books published in Thailand that were difficult to find in the West. From then on, Ron would come to my house and spend an hour or two screening my duplicates. I had the impression that he was an amazing—almost monstrous—computer, able to remember which books the Library of Congress or American universities had and did not have. He would then appear at my coffee table with one or two dozen old, worn-out, books he would later dispatch to the New World. These book sessions concluded with at least a Singha beer, and sometimes with lunch, prompting a phone call to Anchalee that he was in “safe hands”.

² “Kariang: History of Karen-T’ai Relations from the Beginnings to 1923.” A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Division of the University of Hawaii in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History, May 1980, xxv+281 p.

³ *Anuson Walter Vella*. Chiang Mai, Mahawiththayalai Phayap. Walter F. Vella Fund and Honolulu, Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa (Southeast Asia Papers), xii+370 p.

⁴ *The Burmese Connection: Illegal Drugs and the Making of the Golden Triangle*. Boulder : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996 (Studies on the Impact of the Illegal Drug Trade, vol. 6).

⁵ *Opium Reduction in Thailand 1970-2000: A Thirty-Year Journey*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001. Initially prepared for the United Nations International Drug Control Programme, Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand. Translated by Anchalee Singhanetra-Renard as จากฝันสู่เศรษฐกิจพอเพียง : สามทศวรรษแห่งการเดินทาง. เชียงใหม่, ซิลค์เวอร์ม, 2555, 13+209 p.

⁶ Ronald D. Renard and Anchalee Singhanetra Renard, ed. *Mon-Khmer Peoples of the Mekong Region*. Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University Press, 535 p.

⁷ *Indigenous Oral Literature of the Karen*. Preservation of the culture of the Karen people through their hta (traditional verse form), particularly as sung to the music of the Karen harp.

⁸ A bibliographic study of fiction on Southeast Asia in western languages; in press as an ebook from NUS Press, Singapore.

Linking people

Our conversations opened a window for me into the psychology of Americans, as well as to their indigenous customs for which he had a kind of distanced, perhaps Catholic, and almost French humor. He enlightened me on international academic fauna because he hardly missed a meeting or a conference dealing with Southeast Asia, Thai Studies or hill tribes. His recounting of these meetings was often graced with a twinkle in the eye, some witty remark, or an article in the hand.

A simple man and a dedicated scholar, Ron was also a decent colleague. As an academic, he was the model of the perpetual student whose doctorate had not been the dead end of an inflated ego, but an avenue to the processing of a never-ending quest. As a historian, he was sensitive to the human factor, which is nowadays often obscured by ideological glasses. His empathy and even sympathy with his objects of study, whether Karen, Wa, Mon-Khmer, or others, reflected his deep love for humanity. And as a member of this humanity, as a man, he would never deceive you, which is why one could, with him, always feel firmly on the ground of mutual trust and respect. This was not limited to personal relationships; at the end of the day, I realize he was the impersonation of the connection between alien communities in Southeast Asia on one side, and between Southeast Asia and the world on the other.

In what would be our final visit together last December, I saw him at home for our last book “affair”. I came out of his house emotionally affected by the fact that this conversation had been mainly about death, a death I knew was awaiting him, a death he tried his best to hide from others’ attention, a death we both contemplated, and in a way celebrated that day, communing around our last bottle of wine.

I will end this short piece of perhaps a too personal remembrance by returning to basics as observed by Chief Crowfoot, born not so far from Ron’s own birthplace:

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Ron, our dear fox, has run away from us, and we do hope he has finally found himself, beyond the sunset, in accordance with the faith which, I am sure, shaped the clay from which he was made. This little spark, who crossed our lives, will remain glittering, brilliant and alive in our hearts because he is already—through his works, his words, his assistance, his affection—a part of ourselves. That is why we should celebrate and even rejoice by being more complete from all he has given us.

Louis Gabaude