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OBITUARY

Alec Gordon (1931–2019)

Alexander David Gordon – always Alec to his colleagues – joined the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (JCA) Editorial Board with Issue 1 in 1981. He stayed on the Board until his passing on August 23, 2019. Alec had been a featured speaker at a very successful “Revisiting Malaysia’s Colonial Economy” conference in Kuala Lumpur on July 15, 2019, returning to his home in Cha-Am, Thailand. Sadly, he suffered a stroke soon after his return and entered hospital where he passed away in Bangkok, aged 88. His wife and research partner Napat and daughter Pailin were with him.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1931, Alec completed his National Service with the Royal Air Force in Egypt (1950–1952) before taking his degree at the University of Glasgow, graduating in 1960. For the next 12 years, he worked mainly as an industrial economist in London with the Commonwealth Committee, Economist Intelligence Unit, ICI and Unilever. He returned to study in 1969, at the School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), where he came to know one of JCA’s founding editors, Malcolm Caldwell. Much later, he wrote a heartfelt appreciation of Malcom for JCA (Gordon 2009). In that article he recalled long evening discussions on all manner of topics with Malcolm at The Sultan, a working-class pub in Lewisham, now demolished.

After completing his MA studies at SOAS, from 1970 to 1973, Alec held a Social Science Research Council Fellowship at SOAS before joining the Department of Economics at the University of Papua New Guinea from 1974 to 1979, enjoying the heady days of decolonisation and new nationhood. He then taught and researched at various universities before joining the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute (CUSRI) and, later, that university’s Institute of Asian Studies. Alec stayed with Chulalongkorn, teaching and researching, from 1984 to 2009.

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The year he retired from Chulalongkorn was also the year that, after much work, Alec completed his PhD at Radboud University Nijmegen, in Social Sciences. His thesis was “The Necessary but Impossible Task: The Promotion of Industry and the Factory Commission in the Netherlands East Indies, 1902–1926.”

Over his five decades of academic work, Alec’s interests included the history and political economy of Southeast Asia, with particular attention to plantations, peasants and non-written evidence for gender history in Thailand and Malaya/Malaysia. In later years, he focused much of his attention on the intricate work of determining the colonial surplus in Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). In addition to JCA, Alec’s work has been published in scholarly journals such as the Journal of Peasant Studies, Economic and Political Weekly, Journal of Siam Society and the Asian Journal of Social Science as well as in edited volumes. With Napat Sirisambhand, his wife, Alec wrote on women in Thailand’s history (“Evidence for Thailand’s Missing Social History: Thai Women in Old Mural Paintings.” International Review of Social History 47 (2), 2002).

Alec was a great debater. His daughter Pailin says she and her mother, miss all the hot debates they had, usually at dinnertime. Sometimes this was about colonial surplus which Alec tried to explain to Pailin. She adds that Alec had a thirst for learning and this meant that he loved teaching. Napat and Pailin hope that Alec’s life and work will inspire others through his dedication to teaching, learning and living life to its fullest. When in hospital, Alec’s family played him his favourite classical music, including the Shostakovich he always enjoyed. His other interests included medieval military architecture, literature, Thai temple painting and crafts.

Alec was a valued member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Contemporary Asia but even before he joined the Board, he worked with the editors and for the journal. He was an active participant in several of the journal’s conferences and his written contributions for the Journal began in 1973.
Alec’s final article was in 2018 and, sadly, the title carried more meaning than intended. “A Last Word: Amendments and Corrections to Indonesia’s Colonial Surplus 1880–1939” (Gordon 2018) demonstrated the attention to detail that marked all of Alec’s “colonial surplus” articles. His final review for the journal appeared in Issue 1 of 2019 (Gordon 2019).

In all, Alec published 20 articles for the Journal of Contemporary Asia (listed below) and five book reviews. As a member of the Editorial Board, he reviewed dozens of articles for the journal. As a journal stalwart, Alec is irreplaceable and his contributions will be sorely missed. Our sincere condolences to his family and friends.

**Articles by Alec Gordon in the Journal of Contemporary Asia**

“From British Empire to American Colossus” (Review Article). 36 (4), 2006.
Alec’s funeral, Bangkok, August 2019.
Photo credit: Napat and Pailin Gordon.

“How Big was Indonesia’s “Real” Colonial Surplus in 1878–1941?” 42 (4), 2012.
“Reverse Flow Foreign Investment: Colonial Indonesia’s Investment in Metropolitan Countries.” 44 (1), 2014.

References


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