

Examining the Personal Library of a Political Scientist and Researcher on Nationalism and the ASEAN Community: Donations by Professor Benedict Anderson to the Charnvit Kasetsiri Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University

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Abstract

After his death in 2015, the personal library of the eminent Irish political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson was donated to the Thammasat University Library in Bangkok by his friend and colleague, the Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri. As a result, books formerly belonging to Professor Anderson, which were once housed in his Bangkok apartment as well as his home in Freeville, New York, near the campus of Cornell University where he taught from 1967 to 2002, are now shelved in the Charnvit Kasetsiri Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University. Students and lecturers benefit from this varied collection of nonfiction, literature, and popular novels which in their entirety give an intellectual portrait of Professor Anderson's concerns and research subjects. By examining his preferred reading through his personal library, we may better understand his intellectual goals and priorities. These include a focus on literature in a wide variety of languages, the determined defense of minority rights internationally, and a fervent interest in the visual arts, all of which played a role in the research and writing of Benedict Anderson's published work. Results were that examining this personal collection heightens our understanding of Professor Anderson as an author, although specific lines between works read by Professor Anderson and his own publications cannot be drawn with certitude due to lack of precise information about when he acquired each book. Nevertheless, a look at his own book collection provides a closer

understanding of the mindset of a much-revered scholar. Future research might compare and contrast the books in the Benedict Anderson collection of the Pridi Banomyong Library with specific areas of research, such as gender studies or ASEAN nations.

Keywords: Benedict Anderson, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Pridi Banomyong Library, Thammasat University.

Introduction

Analyzing a generous gift of scholarly and popular literature by eminent historians to a Thai university library

Professor Benedict Anderson (1936–2015), an eminent Irish political scientist and historian who lived and taught in the United States, was best known for his 1983 book *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1991), which explored the origins of nationalism. He was Professor Emeritus of International Studies, Government & Asian Studies at Cornell University, where he taught from 1967 to 2002, and was widely acclaimed for his scholarship in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN studies, especially for writings about Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Soon after his death while visiting Indonesia, books from his private library began to be donated to the Thammasat University Library by the noted historian Charnvit Kasetsiri. Both Professor Anderson and Professor Charnvit had been awarded the prestigious Fukuoka Prize to honor the outstanding work of individuals or organizations in preserving or creating Asian culture.

As Professor Charnvit wrote in 2017 (Charnvit Kasetsiri, 2017), he had first met Professor Anderson in Ithaca, New York in autumn 1967, when he asked the latter to serve as one of his graduate academic advisers: Anderson “was then 31, and had just finished his PhD and started teaching in the Department of Government at Cornell. From that point, we stayed in touch for 48 years.”

Professor Charnvit inherited the modest, well-worn private library of books housed in a small apartment kept by Professor Anderson at Pinklao Condominium, Khwaeng Taling Chan, Khet Taling Chan, Bangkok. These were presented to the Thammasat University Library where they are currently shelved in the Charnvit Kasetsiri Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library alongside Professor Charnvit’s personal library.

To these were added in 2019 some 2800 books from the house of Professor Anderson in Freeville, New York, near the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, the United States of America. These were shipped to Professor Charnvit with facilitation from Ben Abel, Southeast Asian Serials Assistant at Cornell University. Most of these books were in English, although there were also many in ASEAN languages, showing the wide-reaching extent of Benedict Anderson's intellectual and literary interests.

An historian's self-portrait

Looking at Benedict Anderson's self-portrait in the form of a book collection, we find in addition to anticipated volumes about ASEAN and world history, political science, sociology, economics, cultural history, film studies, art history, and related fields, many additional books of literature, all in either English or ASEAN languages.

Although Professor Anderson was able to read books in French, German, and Italian, he apparently did not choose to collect literature in these languages for avocational reading.

As a subset to these books, there were also a number of books in the field of gender studies, and a substantial collection of crime novels and thrillers by acclaimed masters of genre literature, from Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald to Elmore Leonard and Walter Mosley.

Some of the books pertain to more than one subject category, so literature by novelists such as E. M. Forster and James Baldwin involve both sociological and gender studies themes. Similarly, among the crime novels were books by detective story authors, from Michael Nava to Joseph Hansen, featuring gender studies subject matter.

All of these represented new additions to the collection of the Thammasat University Library. Many essential texts in ASEAN studies were thereby made available in circulating form for students and instructors.

While the tradition of the scholar's library in Asia, particularly China, involved architecture and the decorative arts, among other elements, the collection of texts was always an essential element of the bibliographical core.

Benedict Anderson's scope of attentiveness went from challenging modernist world fiction, such as Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities* (Musil, 1995) and Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (Mahfouz, 2001) to works to which he devoted scholarly publications, including José Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere*. (Rizal, 1996)

Professor Anderson's interest in literature reflected concepts of nationalism in regions beyond his main areas of study. To cite one example, the Charvut Kasetsiri Room was presented with two works of fiction by the Zimbabwean novelist Dambudzo Marechera. (Marechera, 1978, 1972)

His autobiography, *A Life Beyond Boundaries*, is only a partial view of Benedict Anderson's intellectual and emotional interests. The full list of books he collected is in some ways a more candid, fuller portrait of him as historian and man.

The books donated by Professor Anderson and Ajarn Charvut reflect how a scholar may achieve a lively writing style by reading widely, beyond specialized texts in a single field of study.

Patricio Abinales, a former graduate student of Professor Anderson at Cornell, wrote in 2015 (Abinales, 2015, p. 23) the following assessment of those intellectual interests:

“A primary reason scholars may have erred in not classifying Ben as a political scientist is because he did not write like one. His most popular essays were often about political culture, and drew from biographies and autobiographies, literature and, of late, films. He translated and corrected the translations of novels and short stories, and contributed to newspapers and popular websites, ever mindful of a broader audience that read his works. These works were gregarious, lucid, impish, critical and poetic – rarely the character of most North American-based political scientists.”

In this sense, the collection of books formerly in the possession of Benedict Anderson in the Charvut Kasetsiri Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library reflects this wide range of literary interests. There are books of political humor, from cartoons by the American artist Herbert Block, whose drawings were long featured in *The Washington Post* newspaper, to the turn-of-the-century humorist and social commentator Finley Peter Dunne, whose essays were written in a comic dialect of Irish American-style speech.

Poetry is present in abundance, including books about such noted authors as Emily Dickinson, John Keats, Thomas Chatterton, and others. The impression is that Benedict Anderson's reason influenced the texture and prose rhythms of sentences he wrote. The humorists he enjoyed were expressed in the witty formulations in his books. It is a truism that to write read, we must read well, and Professor Anderson was clearly a voracious reader for pleasure, not just on topics that were his professional specialities. The sheer

impishness and openness that Patricio Abinales observed in the above quote were due to his own enjoyment in reading, creating a dialogue between past authors and himself that continued onto the page of his own works.

Examples of donations in Professor Anderson's fields of scholarly expertise

There are, of course, numerous examples of standard research texts among the books he donated to the Prid Banomyong Library. *Tales from Djakarta: Caricatures of Circumstances and their Human Beings* (Toer, 2000) is by the acclaimed Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006), whose other works are also in the TU Libraries collection. The copy in the TU Libraries collection is of particular interest because it was personally signed by the author for Professor Anderson. *Tales from Djakarta* contains short stories full of detail and atmosphere about life in Indonesia.

Written between 1948 and 1956, when Pramoedya was a young man, they were created before many difficult years during which his work was banned in his homeland and he was imprisoned. Among the translators of stories in *Tales from Djakarta* was Professor Anderson, who notes in an introduction included in the volume that Pramoedya's narratives were intended as tales told by one speaker to another.

Another example of a book valuable for all researchers in ASEAN studies that was donated by Professor Anderson and Ajarn Charnvit is *Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity*. (Zialcita, 2005) The book explains culture, customs and traditions of the Philippines in a collection of essays analyzing the confrontation between Filipino and Western cultures, taking into account Spanish influences as well as more recent discussions of ASEAN culture. Its author is Fernando Nakpil Zialcita, professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Ateneo de Manila University. Still another books displaying the range of Professor Anderson's investigations into ASEAN culture is *Generation: a Collection of Contemporary Malaysian Ideas*. (Muhammad, Raslan, and Stothard, 1998)

Historian as detective

Yet there is also an abundance of recreational reading which suggests that the ludic aspects of reading and writing were always present in Professor Anderson's mind. He relished thrillers, and intellectual adventurousness provided comparable excitement. Dozens of crime and detective novels from his personal library show that Benedict Anderson

enjoyed this type of reading. But there may have been other motivations to delight in these books, most of which look well worn, as if they had been thumbed through repeatedly. A possibly relevant book edited by the Canadian historian Robin W. Winks, *The historian as detective: essays on evidence*, also from the library of Professor Anderson, points to one possible incentive. (Winks, 1970)

Historians have traditionally been seen as detectives, gathering evidence and forming hypotheses. Yet Professor Anderson showed little interest in the cerebral whodunit in which a detective assembles clues by thought processes to solve mysteries. Instead, he appears to have been more intrigued by what are called hard boiled crime stories, sometimes violent tales told by wisecracking investigators as protagonists. So rather than seeing history as a subject for subtle detection, Benedict Anderson's preference in crime novels would imply a view of history as a sequence of brutal crimes that must be witnessed, and if possible, avenged.

Sherlock Holmes, the epitome of the ratiocinative detective who stays home and ponders, is not present in Professor Anderson's collection, perhaps because Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's creation is too quintessentially British. Four novels about the American writer Rex Stout's sedentary fictional detective Nero Wolfe are, however, included among the mystery stories.

As an Irish republican, Anderson's favored crime novelists were mostly from former British colonies, with some detective protagonists who were members of racial or sexual minority groups.

Rather than making a thorough examination of the history of the modern crime novel in the United States of America and the United Kingdom, Professor Anderson appears to have followed his own taste.

The violence in many of these narratives by Raymond Chandler and others may suggest that activism and defending the rights of the persecuted as a writer of polemic texts was not a peaceable occupation. Instead, it required a sense of the importance of fighting to right wrongs, and the need to accept aggression as a human trait.

So Benedict Anderson did not read crime fiction as escapism into a dream world, but rather as a gritty reminder of the low deeds of which humans are sometimes capable. This

point of view prepared him to be unsurprised by the actions of some international political leaders.

In his choice of books, he sought to travel vicariously, rather than affirm his own identity as an Irishman. Indeed, even in more general Irish literature, where a fuller demonstration of interest might be expected, James Joyce is represented solely by an unscholarly edition of his novel *Ulysses*. (Joyce, 1992) There is nothing by later celebrated Irish authors. Instead, expression of interest in Irishness is limited to a copy of *Irish Fairy Tales* (Chandler, 2001) and *Mr. Dooley's Opinions*, a collection of turn-of-the-century Irish comic dialect articles. (Dunne, 1906)

Female authors of crime fiction are completely omitted, although there are many books in Professor Anderson's collection written by women historians, political philosophers, and philosophers. Of the recreational books that he collected and read regularly, as the aforementioned list indicates, the most popular in terms of number of books is Ross Macdonald, a pen name of the American-Canadian writer of crime fiction Kenneth Millar (1915–1983).

Ross Macdonald wrote 19 hardboiled novels set in Southern California and featuring private detective Lew Archer, of which Professor Anderson appears to have purchased the complete set in paperback form.

Another author collected is a bit further afield, reflecting Professor Anderson's lifelong interest in former colonies and minority populations. Arthur Upfield (1890–1964) was an English-born Australian writer, best known for his works of fiction featuring Detective Inspector Napoleon "Bony" Bonaparte of the Queensland Police Force, a mixed-race Indigenous Australian. Upfield's narratives include evocative descriptions of life on the Australian outback life from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Comparable to this interest in minority populations are the novels by Tony Hillerman (1925–2008) an American author best known for his Navajo Tribal Police mystery novels. His writing includes cultural details about Native Americans of Hopi and Zuni ancestry as well as Navajos. His books are also concerned with the natural wonders of the American Southwest.

Further minority viewpoints are reflected in books by Walter Mosley (born 1952), an African American author who has written a series of historical mysteries featuring the

hard-boiled detective Easy Rawlins, a black private investigator living in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California.

Detectives who belong to gender minorities are also present in Professor Anderson's collection, in the novels of Joseph Hansen and Michael Nava. Hansen (1923–2004) was an American author of crime novels featuring Dave Brandstetter, an openly gay insurance investigator who embodied the tough, no-nonsense personality of the classic hardboiled private investigator protagonist.

Nava (born 1954) is an American attorney and writer who authored an eight-volume mystery series featuring Henry Rios, a gay protagonist who is a criminal defense lawyer.

All of these authors provided new perspectives to Professor Anderson to how human conflict could be resolved and minority rights preserved through dauntless efforts and willingness to confront villainy with courage.

Literature as history

Some of the donations from the personal library of Professor Anderson remind us that novels, poetry, and other forms of writing can be valuable evidence for historians, political scientists, and sociologists.

Directly applicable to ASEAN studies are different translations of an important work of Filipino literature from the library of Professor Anderson. *Noli Me Tángere* (Rizal, 2006) is a novel written by José Rizal (1861-1896), an ophthalmologist and activist who worked for peaceful reform of Spain's colonial rule in the Philippines. Professor Anderson was so impressed by *Noli Me Tángere* that he wrote a book analysing it and Rizal's other writings. (Anderson, 2008)

Professor Anderson's collection also shows proof of a lively interest in writing poetry in foreign languages, as well as verse written in English as a second language.

One example is *At Home in Unhomeliness - An Anthology of Philippine Postcolonial Poetry in English*. (Garcia, 2007) It was edited by J. Neil C. Garcia, a professor of English, creative writing and comparative literature at the College of Arts and Letters, UP Diliman, where he also serves as an associate for poetry at the Likhaan: U.P. Institute of Creative Writing. This copy of the anthology was inscribed to Professor Anderson by the editor:

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For Ben – Because the poem begins to be written only when it begins to be read. Salud! Neil

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As an historian deeply concerned with the use of language in society and the way English is handled by writers in former English-speaking colonies, Professor Anderson likely found material of interest in a volume in a Malaysian literature in English series. *Ripples and other stories* (Kow, 2008) is a short fiction collection by the Malaysian author Shih-Li Kow.

Insofar as literature preserves accounts of human experience, then both poets and prose writers were evidently seen as of prime importance as sources by Professor Anderson. Moreover, throughout history, although poetic license and fictionalized accounts of real-life historical events show that literature cannot always be relied on for factual information, emotional truth-telling may be found in literature that is not available elsewhere.

As in Benedict Anderson's autobiographical accounts of his early multilingual education, we see that language itself is an instrument of human expression that preserves historical moments and tensions between cultures. These are at the heart of what Professor Anderson would later write about in his interpretations of nationalism and technological developments in printing and other related matters.

If we understand the literature of an historical time and place, then we have grasped part of the essential message of an era and its people. For this reason, Benedict Anderson's passion for literature serves as a good lesson for future historians, to not neglect these types of publications, just because they might not seem to have the credibility of archival documents.

Results and summary

From a wide range of books on political science, history, sociology, and related fields, Thammasat University students may experience some of the origins for the inspiration of Benedict Anderson's acclaimed research.

More significantly, from the wide range of Professor Anderson's interests and his emphasis on reading for enjoyment even in literary genres not directly connected to his

areas of expertise, such as poetry or crime fiction, students may be reminded of the importance of general reading for achievement in scholarly writing.

As research about Benedict Anderson's work has already been published, (Cheah and Culler, 2003) future biographical and bibliographical studies about this widely influential and internationally celebrated scholar and researcher should benefit from a closer look at his private book collection, now housed at the Thammasat University Library.

Historians and bibliographers have long researched the content and impact of private libraries, as *The Library*, the journal of the Bibliographical Society, the United Kingdom, explored in its *Virtual Issue no. 2: The Library on Private Libraries*. ("Virtual Issue no. 2", n.d.)

Future researchers interested in the life and work of Benedict Anderson should find his book collection at Thammasat University useful and informative about his inner motivations and concerns. Hitherto unexplored areas such as gender studies, his taste in popular literature, and related themes and their impact on his research might be more thoroughly explored by further studies.

By evaluating Professor Anderson's preference in classic works of literature as well as popular genres such as crime novels, students may likewise benefit from lively and dramatic historical evocations in fiction. The unique range of his books, now on the shelves of the Charnvit Kasetsiri Room of the Pridi Banomyong Library, going from erudite analyses by leading thinkers to classic and popular literature, gives an impression of a thinker and writer of uncommon breadth and humane concerns.

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