

Benedict Anderson

The inner life of a restless intellect

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Chronicle of a life unforetold

A Life Beyond Boundaries. By Benedict Anderson. *Verso*; 205 pages; \$24.95 and £14.99.

IN SOUTH-EAST Asia Benedict Anderson, who died last December aged 79, was an intellectual giant. In 1966 he was part of a team at Cornell University that published an influential report on what really happened during the violent takeover of Indonesia in October of the previous year. The report was leaked to the *Washington Post* and Anderson was eventually barred from entering the country.

He remained cut off from Indonesia for 27 years until the fall of Suharto's dictatorship. But he found new passions, studying Thailand and the Philippines. In 1983 his meandering studies and wide reading led him to write the book he is most famous for, "Imagined Communities", which explores the enduring allure of nationalism.

Outside South-East Asian circles, Anderson's prolific and diverse output is more obscure. This should change with the publication of his memoir, "A Life Beyond Boundaries". As the title suggests, Anderson is an enemy of the bubble, whether nation, school or language. He returns again and again to an image in Thai and

Indonesian cultures of a frog who lives its entire life under half of a coconut shell. "Sitting quietly under the shell, before long the frog begins to feel that the coconut bowl encloses the entire universe," he writes. "The moral judgment in the image is that the frog is narrow-minded, provincial, stay-at-home and self-satisfied for no good reason. For my part, I stayed nowhere long enough to settle down in one place, unlike the proverbial frog."

Reading Anderson feels like emerging from the coconut shell. You come away wanting to see films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a Thai film-maker he admired, to learn Tagalog on the side or to read a grand Filipino novel, "Noli Me Tangere" ("Touch me not"), by José Rizal, which Anderson tried to translate line by line in an effort to learn Spanish. He praised Indonesia's great young novelist, Eka Kurniawan.

Born in 1936 in Kunming, in Yunnan province, to an Irish father and an English mother, Anderson (pictured in China with his nanny) moved to Ireland, along with his two siblings, in 1945 after a brief period in America. His father died soon after; his mother became a guiding force. Anderson went to Eton and then to Cambridge, before going to Cornell as a teaching assistant. There, he met George Kahin, a leading expert on Indonesia whose lectures set Anderson on his path. This willingness to be open to new experiences and challenges was the key to his brilliance.

"Scholars who feel comfortable with their position in a discipline, department or university will try neither to sail out of harbour nor to look for a wind," he writes, paraphrasing an expression in Indonesia. "But what is to be cherished is the readiness to look for that wind and the courage to follow it when it blows in your direction." Although "A Life Beyond Boundaries" is about the life of a scholar, it is asides like these that give the book a universal touch. Anderson went to three privileged institutions of learning. They could have given him many opportunities to remain in his bubble. But he just wasn't that kind of frog.