

A Life Beyond Boundaries: A Memoir

Review by CHRIS SCHREINER

A Life Beyond Boundaries: A Memoir by Benedict Anderson. London: Verso, 2016. 205 pages. \$13.57.

Benedict Anderson, author of the intellectual memoir, *A Life Beyond Boundaries*, died in Java in 2015, soon after he had corrected its proofs. According to the obituary in the *Jakarta Post*, “Anderson died at a hotel in Batu, Malang, East Java. His remains will be cremated on Tuesday in Surabaya and his ashes will be spread over the Java Sea.”¹ Although a serious loss to the world of scholarship, it was fitting that Anderson’s life ended in Java. He had frequently sojourned there, conducting research and establishing enduring friendships and professional contacts ever since he did the field work for his Cornell doctoral thesis in Java from 1962 to 1964. By the time he completed his dissertation in 1967, he was already teaching at Cornell, where he would spend 35 years as a Professor of Government, eventually retiring in 2002. At the time of his death, Anderson was the Aaron L. Binenkorb Professor Emeritus of International Studies, Government & Asian Studies at Cornell. While he was obviously treated well in Ithaca, where from the start he was “enticed by the beautiful natural setting” of upstate New York, Anderson preferred to be doing fieldwork overseas. The years he spent in Java prepared the grounds and framework, the language and research skills, for the subsequent masterpieces he published, starting with *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* in 1983. Anderson went on to publish *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (1985); *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (1990); *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (1998); *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia* (2001); *Debating World Literature* (2004); *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (2005); and *The Fate of Rural Hell: Asceticism and Desire in Buddhist Thailand* (2012).

The autobiography under review is another fine achievement which, like his other works, demonstrates a flair for writing as befits an undergraduate Classics major and, as he says in his chapter titled, “Interdisciplinary,” a specialist who likes to wander across boundaries in his reading as much as in his travels. Hence, he can say at the end of his career, “Herman Melville is still my no. 1 great novelist” (29). Like so much else in Anderson’s life that he attributes to happenstance, *A Life Beyond Boundaries* was unplanned until a Japanese editor suggested the idea of a memoir to him, based on the notion that memoirs of scholars in the social sciences are scarce compared to those of notable scientists, artists, and political leaders. She felt it would be instructive for young Japanese scholars and graduate students to look behind the scenes at the way a successful academic career develops. For this reason, the original edition of *A Life Beyond Boundaries* was published in Japanese in 2009, appearing later in the revised 2016 English translation that had been overseen by Anderson and published by Verso.

In a gregarious and accessible style continuous with his previous writings, but uncommon in Anderson’s eventual *métier*, political theory, this memoir retraces the international routes,

¹ Dandy Koswaraputra, “Indonesianist Benedict Anderson Dies at 79,” *Jakarta Post* (December 13, 2015). Retrieved from: www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/13/indonesianist-benedict-anderson-dies-79.html

byways and stopping places, the unanticipated interviews and friendships, that Anderson had a knack for turning into career opportunities. Justifiably famous at the end of his career, his humility is such that he credits luck as much as persistence in all the stages of his ascent as a scholar: “There is no need to recall all the good luck that befell me in the first twenty-one years of my life” (25). Even his birth in China, where he spent his first five years, seemed propitious, although it would not be the site of his future research. Later, he credits his mother with sending him from Ireland, his homeland, to the British school system, where he says he had the good fortune to win a scholarship to Eton after cramming for entrance exams at his grandfather’s place near London. Even before then, while he was still a student in Ireland, his mother decided he should learn Latin instead of Irish, for although both were nearly extinct as spoken languages, she knew that “Latin is the mother of most Western European languages,” and that it has “a great literature which every well-educated person should know” (12). Anderson writes that this sensible call by his mother was a “most important piece of luck for me,” seeding the soil for the growth of his multilingual proficiency, which enabled him to develop a career “beyond boundaries” where his aptitude for foreign languages proved indispensable. It is noteworthy that even in their youth, before they had proven themselves as commanding intellects in their respective fields, Benedict lauded his younger brother, Perry, for being intellectually superior. Both went on to Eton and later achieved academic stardom, with Benedict at Cornell, while Perry, after attending Oxford and launching and editing the *New Left Review* in London, enjoyed a distinguished professorship in history at UCLA, where he continues to teach today.

Anderson reports many other episodes whereby, in his view, chance and good fortune determined auspicious developments in his career. Two episodes seem conspicuously salient to him as he reflects on the series of events that helped secure his uniquely bimodal academic identity as a *nomad* of distant places while a *tenured* professor at Cornell. First, his longstanding affiliation with Cornell and its “Cornell Mafia” of scholars came about when a TA-ship suddenly became available there due to a tip from a friend from Eton, who himself had a temporary position at Cornell. With only a BA in Classics in hand, and no previous desire to study or work in America, Anderson joined the Department of Government at Cornell, where he took classes while working as a TA. He unknowingly joined a handful of rising stars who were instrumental in establishing the most prestigious Southeast Asian program of its time. A key figure, later Anderson’s mentor and thesis advisor, was George Kahin, “the world’s leading expert on contemporary Indonesia, and [...] an active supporter of the anti-colonial armed struggle of 1945-49” (24). Anderson was inspired in his choice of role model: “By the end of my first year at Cornell, I realized that I had finally decided what I wanted to do in life: become a professor, do research, write and teach, and follow in Kahin’s footsteps in my academic and political orientations” (32). This was at a time, Anderson explains, when government (including CIA) funding for research in Southeast Asia was expanding, mainly because of urgent political events unfolding there, such as the French, and gradually American, entanglement with the struggles for independence in Indochina, and the perceived danger of Communist influences from both the Soviet Union and China. Anderson stepped headlong into a whirlwind of events and personalities that not only determined his academic specialization, but gave him permanent job security in the most promising of environments.

The second propitious event that Anderson attributes to luck is the widening of his scope as an East Asian specialist after being banished from Indonesia due to his political writings critical of the Suharto regime. This is a classic example of someone turning a misfortune into an opportunity. Anderson ended up, through a series of unanticipated developments, refocusing his

attention from Indonesia to the nationalist politics and literary culture of the Philippines. The outcome of this intellectual peripety was his first masterpiece, *Imagined Communities*. It is in this groundbreaking work that Anderson first deploys literary insight as a key methodological component of his interpretation of the origins of nationalism. He leveraged his close reading of José Rizal's novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* to show that Filipino identity as a distinct nationality, free of Spanish and other colonial guises, became possible via acts of popular literacy. In other words, the people of the Philippines came to understand themselves *as* Filipinos and strive for self-determination through *acts of reading*, particularly of the writings of the doomed patriot and martyr, José Rizal. In short, Anderson described two modern conditions for the possibility of national (or nationalist) self-understanding and self-determination: the growth of literacy, and the emergence of a local literature of sufficient stature and global reach to convince both Filipinos and foreigners of the stand-alone integrity of their nationhood.

The fact that Rizal's novels were romantic in their contents and themes did not lessen their power to define the Filipinos *to themselves* as a unique people with their own struggles and aspirations under bimodal domination by the Catholic Church and colonial powers. Romantic novels serve more purposes than can be gleaned in the reveries of an office worker when he reads during coffee break. Such is Hegel's point in arguing, not long after the French Revolution, that romanticism brings art to its final stage of historical development as a revolutionary force of spiritual and cultural transformation. After that, it becomes a spectator sport, something static to be viewed or collected, thus the rise of stately, exorbitant museums like MOMA funded in large part by wealthy donors. Furthermore, according to Anderson, the revolutionary potential of nationally definitive literature and its spirited adoption by local readers does not necessarily lead to violent uprisings or cultural destruction. Even if literature stirs feelings of anarchy as much as autarchy (self-rule) in individual readers, the visible learning outcomes are in many cases long-term, in subtle changes of behavior and policy impacting human rights, curricular reform, teaching methods, publishing, as well as attitudes toward religion and entrenched authority. José Rizal's expatriate education in European centers of learning, which taught him enlightenment principles of freedom such as autarchy and the cultivating force of art espoused by Friedrich Schiller and others, stimulated his belief in the virtues of a civilized mode of response – free elections, critique, informed argument, non-violent protest, with violence being a last, least civilized alternative.

To a literature professor like myself, Anderson's hermeneutic gesture of valuing literature as a prism for the self-recognition of national identity and belonging (or alienation, its dialectical backside) comes as no surprise. I take it as a given, for example, that an American student reading about the misadventures of Huckleberry Finn might say to himself, "That's sort of like me!" or "That used to be typical of an American boyhood, but these days kids don't play outside now that they have X-Boxes." Or a young African American and his or her racially diverse classmates, reading Richard Wright's *Native Son*, might each in their own way recognize the claustrophobic limits of expression and behavior imposed by white employees in the struggles of Bigger Thomas, and say, "That is America, land of the free, in the time of our grandfathers." Likewise, a disenchanted British housewife in London, solidly bourgeois, having abandoned the romantic dreams of her youth, will recognize her own spiritual emptiness in the elegiac musings of Clarissa Dalloway. These are the existential givens of readership. But when Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities* that Filipinos *found themselves* and their national predicament in the novels of José Rizal, and that literature and literacy were at the origin of national identity, it was a nearly unprecedented hermeneutic strategy for a political theorist, posing a challenge to the way his colleagues conducted their research and teaching. Anderson taught literary works in some of

his most advanced seminars at Cornell in government, political science, and Asian studies. Yet, from the limited conversations I have had with colleagues in history and political science, it is not a common practice for them to teach novels as prisms of cultural and historical understanding. No one I spoke with, for example, uses Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* as one among other ways to understand the American Civil War, or, say, a novel by Dickens to grasp the dark side of the Industrial Revolution in England, or for that matter, Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" to vicariously experience the dehumanizing predicament of clerical workers during the rise of Wall Street and the empire of corporate finance.

Rather than paraphrase the detailed account of his career that Anderson provides, it might prove more worthwhile here to describe how *A Life Beyond Boundaries* distinguishes itself as an academic memoir. It provides an intimate and appreciative – as opposed to predictably critical – recollection of academic culture and its "old boy" networks before the internet, and before the widespread imperative to "publish or perish." Anderson published his first essay, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in 1972 when he was 36; eleven years passed before he published *Imagined Communities* in 1983. Today, such a long span of time needed to publish one's first book, at the age of 47, while teaching at an Ivy League institution, would result in a denial of tenure. (Colleagues of mine at such places indicate that two book contracts are expected by the sixth year, with one additional year granted as a grace period before expulsion.) However, Benedict Anderson was already a *full professor* by the time his first book was published. His excellent teaching, fieldwork, collegiality, reputation among experts, his inquiring and endlessly curious intellect, his way with words, all pointed to his exceptional promise as a scholar; these personal and intellectual traits were sufficient to accelerate his promotion process in a manner that is unimaginable today.

Anderson accounts for his decade of preparation in granular detail, showing the growth of his international worldview and the major influences on his thought about politics and culture. For example, he explains the remarkable extent to which his younger brother, the historian Perry Anderson, at the time affiliated with *New Left Review*, shaped his understanding of political theory by introducing him to works by radical thinkers such as Marx, Sartre, Adorno, Althusser, Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, and Habermas. "From 1974," Anderson writes, "I started to read the NLR from cover to cover and was profoundly educated in the process. Here I came into contact with the work of Walter Benjamin, which had a decisive impact on me, as readers of *Imagined Communities* will immediately recognize" (120).

While working on *Imagined Communities*, another major influence on Anderson's approach to scholarship in his field of Southeast Asian studies was James Siegel, "who is today, in my opinion, the most arrestingly original anthropologist in the U.S." (121). The emphasis on *originality* here is conspicuously uncommon for a social scientist, and reveals Anderson's ambition to make a difference with his first book. Anderson first met Siegel in 1964, in Sumatra; and it was pure coincidence, as Anderson likes to tell it, that Siegel later ended up teaching at Cornell, where they team-taught interdisciplinary seminars, "including one seminar in which we insisted that every student speak in Indonesian!" (122). Siegel, like Anderson, was a voracious reader of literature, and he introduced his colleague to books in literary criticism such as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. In Benedict Anderson, Siegel's recommendations found an ideal audience. As Anderson fondly recalls, Siegel said to him: "Ben, you are the only one among my friends and acquaintances who reads books unrelated to your own field." Anderson adds: "I took this as a great compliment" (185).

Anderson's collegial enthusiasm is irrepressible when he speaks of Siegel's presence at Cornell: "Our favorite class was a joint seminar on the fiction of Indonesia's great writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who was then in one of Suharto's gulags. Careful, close-up reading of fiction with a group of excellent students was quite new for me. Thanks to Jim [Siegel], I began to think about how I could use my early training in Classical and Western European, as well as Indonesian, literature for a new kind of analysis of the relations between 'imagination' and 'reality' in the study of politics" (122). What strikes me in such passages is not only Anderson's openness to new ideas and methods, his appreciation of the merits of team-teaching, and the innovative use of literary fiction by social scientists, but Anderson's selfless candor in crediting Siegel with being a major influence on the critical methodology deployed in *Imagined Communities*. Here as elsewhere, Anderson is unashamed to highlight the collegial support and networking – derogated today as the "old boy" system – that were indispensable for the growth of his career and his intellectual development. He gives thanks where thanks are due. The aggressive self-promotion demanded of candidates for tenure today lacks the gregarious tone that characterizes the recollections of Anderson, who freely admits to the fertility of what for many has become an empty catchphrase, the "community of scholars." He refreshes if not reinvents the very meaning of collegiality.

Reading over this review, I realize it sounds consistently laudatory, and lacks passages of critical judgment, censure, and disagreement that seem *de rigueur* in book reviewing today. But *A Life Beyond Boundaries* is written by an incomparable scholar who humbly transformed and invigorated not only his own field, but the pursuit of comparative research across disciplines from social science to the humanities, and he did so not so much *while* as *by* forming lasting friendships, not by showboating himself or burning bridges. What impresses one and silences negativity is that Benedict Anderson's scholarly engagements quickened his life, made him feel *more alive* as a global citizen, as his own roving intellect and amicable personality enlivened the community of scholars with whom he interacted. For once *critique* gives way to *noblesse oblige*.