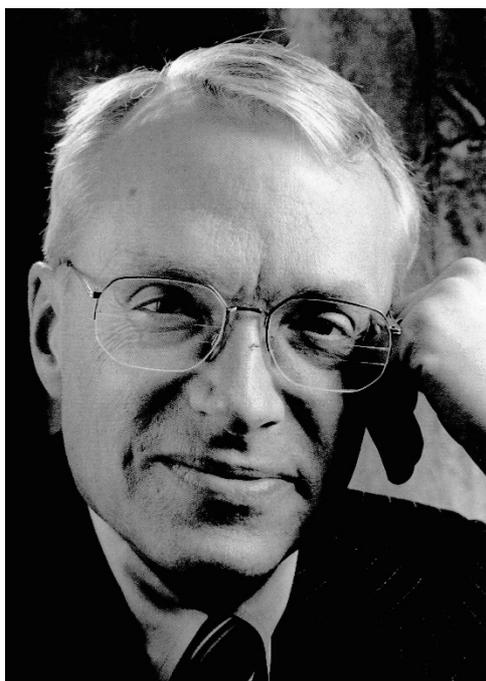


# Merle Calvin Ricklefs AM FAHA

1943-2019



*Australian Academy of the Humanities archives*

Merle Ricklefs was a pioneer in exploring Java's past in its own terms, in training a generation of scholars in Indonesian history, religion and politics, and in expanding opportunities in tertiary education for Indigenous Australians. His time in senior Australian university roles marked a high point in the 'mainstreaming' of Southeast Asia in Australian universities. Elected to the Academy in 1989, he served as a Council member and International Secretary from 1992 to 1995.

Born on 17 July 1943 in the small mid-western prairie town of Fort Dodge, Iowa, ideologically as far from central Java as imaginable, he

overcame its limitations with a strong work ethic and sense of purpose encouraged by his parents, and a fortunately excellent school that began his language prowess with a foundation in German and French. He escaped initially to a small liberal arts college in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, but transferred to Colorado College just outside Denver for his last two years. He starred as a history major, sufficient in 1965 to earn scholarships for graduate study in the best universities. Just why the lad from Iowa chose Indonesian history is something of a mystery, but having done so Cornell University was the obvious place to do it.

Southeast Asia was at the time central in the American consciousness in a way it would never be after 1975. US policy in Viet Nam was ever more widely challenged after the introduction of conscription for service in a war not seen as directly involving the defence of the US. The desire to better understand what was really behind Southeast Asian resistance to US pressure drove an exceptional cohort of idealistic young Americans to take up graduate study on Southeast Asia. Cornell was seen by many of Merle's generation as the place to do this because of the activism of its Professor George Kahin. The academic pioneer in sympathetic analysis of Indonesian nationalism and the Republic to which it had given birth, Kahin had been recruited to head a Ford Foundation-funded Modern Indonesia

Project at Cornell in 1953, within the context of a strong Southeast Asia Centre there. In the sixties Kahin became deeply involved in public debate about the US Indochina involvement, making Cornell even more a symbol of liberal values in relation to Southeast Asia.

Merle experienced Cornell (1965–67) at its most politically engaged and turbulent. In addition to the Indochina issues, the leftist coup in Indonesia on 1 October 1965 and the ensuing brutal suppression of the Left played out in his first months as a graduate student. The ‘Cornell Paper’ written by Ben Anderson, Fred Bunnell and Ruth McVey, though intended as a provisional explanation for a select group of specialists, became a major factor in the international response and made it difficult for Cornell scholars to visit Indonesia.

Merle, along with Craig Reynolds FAHA, was one of the first students of Oliver Wolters, the former British colonial Chinese specialist in Malaya, recruited to Cornell’s faculty to extend its reach into earlier history. His dense lectures on the ‘classical’ Southeast Asian kingdoms were not for everyone, but they appealed to Merle in a way that politically-engaged Kahin and Benedict Anderson did not. Craig relates that Merle was immediately drawn to Wolters’s enthusiasm for his subject, and challenged rather than intimidated by the languages needed to study it. An early term paper, based on French translations of the epigraphy of tenth-century Cambodia, so impressed Wolters that he encouraged an early publication in the prestigious *Journal of Asian Studies* of May 1967. Merle’s second publication was a translation from middle Javanese, in collaboration with the ANU Javanist Supomo Suryohudoyo. He mastered Indonesian and began reading Dutch, spurred on by fascination with Wolters’s lectures on C.C. Berg and his battles with the other Dutch Javanists.

However central Cornell was in the political debates on Southeast Asia policy, it could not teach him the Middle Javanese he needed to understand pre-colonial Javanese society. For that he needed the scholars, manuscripts and archives of the Netherlands, already a strong presence in Wolters’s teaching. Merle found fellowships, including the Ford Foundation’s sought-after Foreign Area Fellowship, that would allow him to study at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, 1967–68). The School had appointed one of the leading Dutch Javanists, Christiaan Hooykaas, to a rare lectureship in Old Javanese. In weekly visits to Hooykaas’ house outside London and frequent visits to Holland, he polished his skills in reading the difficult eighteenth-century scripts of both Dutch and Javanese texts of the time.

The formal niceties of ‘old Europe’ appear to have made a deep impression, and might explain his exceptionally formal dress thereafter. England also gave him an ideal life partner, Margaret, as formally courteous as himself. In December 1968 they married, and set off a month later to tackle the cultural challenges of Jogjakarta (now Yogyakarta) and its arcane court life. Merle had to read the texts preserved in the kraton (palace) sitting cross-legged in the appropriate hall, the most sacred ones having been ‘brought in ceremonial procession from the *Prabajeksa* to the *Bangsas Manis*, on a suitable day and accompanied by appropriate offerings (*sadjen*) borne by *kraton* officials’ (*Jogjakarta*, p. 194n.).

He carefully sidestepped the war among the handful of Dutch Javanists as to how much if any historical credence could be given to the relatively well-known, quasi-mythical history of Java in the *Babad Tanah Djawi*. Mythical texts were invaluable, he wrote, ‘for reconstructing myths, cultural values, and idealized perceptions of actual situations’ (*Jogjakarta*, p. xix). But rather than the *Babad*

*Tanah Djawi* Merle focussed on lesser known texts he identified as ‘historical’, which even though in poetic form described their own time with dates and details that held up well when compared with Dutch sources.

Enormously demanding, his thesis was completed only in 1973, but in a polished form that could be published by OUP the following year as *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi, 1749–1792: A History of the Division of Java*. There he set out his high standards of how Javanese history could be written to satisfy modern expectations of accuracy through combining the matter-of-fact (but often confused and misled) Dutch records with the essential Javanese court narratives. Oxford Javanist Peter Carey noted that he read it cover to cover in two days and immediately thought this had set a new ‘gold standard for Javanese studies’. I thought the same when I reviewed it in wonderment a little later. The problem is that the bar was set so high that few but he could reach it.

Fortunately he delivered abundantly of himself in the prolific career that followed. Two further volumes (1993 and 1998) covered with the same meticulous detail the even more obscure period 1677–1749 before that of the Jogjakarta book. Once freed from his demanding administrative roles in the present century, he charted another ambitious trilogy, explaining historically the unique path Java took in negotiating between the demands of global Islamic orthodoxy and the conviction that Javanese mysticism had much of its own to contribute. The first volume, *Mystic Synthesis in Java* (2006) showed how Java’s strongest king, Sultan Agung, crafted the particular Javanese amalgam of outward conformity with Islam and the continuing guidance of the Indic gods and sages embodied in wayang. The second, *Polarising Javanese Society* (2007) showed how the colonial period allowed for a different dualism, whereby the aristocrats who

dominated the Dutch-devised new order could refine their Javanese tradition, while increasing contacts with Mecca through the pilgrimage and other currents of Islamic reformism created rival elites — the origin of the *aliran* (currents) pattern of competing world-views made famous by Clifford Geertz. The latest stage of the ever-wider spread of Islamic, indeed often Arab, norms since 1930 was charted in *Islamisation and its Opponents in Java* (2012).

Well before the PhD was awarded, SOAS was far-sighted enough to recognise his talent and appoint him Lecturer in Southeast Asian History (1969–79). Teaching the subject in London quickly turned his thoughts to the need for reliable and accessible guides to the subject. In 1978 he proved his case that some of the Javanese chronicles were historically reliable by publishing a critical edition and translation of a previously little-known dated chronicle, though the oldest extant Javanese chronicle, which he labelled *Babad Ing Sangkala* and dated 1738 (*Modern Javanese Historical Tradition*, 1978). This remarkable text was one of those brought to London by Raffles, all of which were included in his catalogue, *Indonesian Manuscripts in Great Britain* (Ricklefs and Voorhoeve, 1977), showing the surprising wealth of texts that ended up in the UK rather than Holland.

Merle’s most popular work, *A History of Modern Indonesia, ca. 1300 to the Present* (1981) was also a product of these London years. Though not the easiest read among Indonesian histories, it remains the most factually dense and reliable, and proved indispensable. He revised and updated it for new editions in 1993, 2001 and 2008, and it became the first of his books to have popular Indonesian editions (1991, 2005, 2008).

Despite his highly specialised work on Early Modern Java, he always believed that the best historians should also write for a broad audience. In 1979 he joined the editorial

board of *History Today*, an illustrated magazine with some 50,000 readers, notably British history teachers. Merle remained active in giving it an Asian dimension through his Australian years — the last of his six articles there appeared only a year before his death. His later ANU appointment allowed him the human and material resources to establish an ambitious local replica, the equally glossy *Asia Pacific Magazine*. Unfortunately it proved impossible to sustain after three years, 1996–98. Later, notably in Singapore, he wrote a series of think pieces on Indonesia and Islam for the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Singapore Straits Times*, 2004–06.

Meanwhile, he became one of the American-trained stars who brightened the Australian firmament of Southeast Asian Studies in the 1970s and '80s. Australia's discovery that it was closely tied to Asia peaked in this period, just as the rich crop of American graduate students inspired by the Indochina conflict found there were no jobs for them in the United States.

Monash University had been established in 1960 and needed signs of being more progressive than the well-established Melbourne University. John Legge from the University of Western Australia was appointed its first chair of history in 1960, having already taken up the challenge of becoming an Indonesianist through five months study at Cornell. He was the dominant factor in establishing Monash's Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (1964) and making key appointments to staff it. When he himself moved on to become Dean of the Faculty in 1977, he fought hard to ensure that his chair be filled in Asian History in addition to the two other professors since appointed. Merle was flown out for an interview in June 1979, and the position was his for the decade that followed (1980–93).

John Legge had built one of Australia's strongest history departments in his twenty years at its helm, with a good balance between regions of the world. The professors rotated the headship, and Merle had three two-year stints at the helm. He could seem formal to a department with a reputation for radicalism, and did not suffer gladly those he considered fools or charlatans, but he was always supremely fair. He developed an efficient numerical scheme to allow the most productive researchers to spend more time on research and others (sometimes strong teachers) on teaching.

Legge's other great achievement had been to build an American-style Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, with a dedicated Director (David Chandler in Merle's time) and Secretary, but other appointments residing in the discipline departments. Its key function was graduate study, and it attracted dozens of students from around the world. Merle proved a superb supervisor of eight PhDs and four MAs in his time at Monash, able to encourage and steer even the most wayward of students to a satisfactory outcome. They included some prominent academics — Professors Dewi Fortuna Anwar and Djoko Suryo in Indonesia, and Greg Fealy at ANU. Later there would be six more Indonesian PhDs in his time at Melbourne.

At Monash in particular, Merle devoted his reforming passion not (like many colleagues) to Southeast Asia's conflicts but to the unacceptable everyday racism he found in the society around him. Within a year of arrival in Australia he had begun working on better access to university for the grossly underrepresented Indigenous community — there were then only about 10 Indigenous students in Australia. In 1983 he could establish the Monash Orientation Scheme for Aborigines (MOSA) to provide pre-tertiary training for indigenous students not otherwise qualified for entrance. By the time he left

Monash it had eleven staff and fifty students, had produced a dozen graduates and was accepted as the kind of success that had to be widely replicated.

Shocked that a fellow Melbourne historian, Geoffrey Blainey, should have been the one to appear to legitimise opposition to Asian migration to Australia in the wake of the fall of Saigon, Merle also helped mobilise a group of colleagues with alternative views of the issue. The book he co-edited with Andrew Markus, *Surrender Australia? Essays in the Study and Uses of History: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration* (1985) was his one major incursion into political debate.

Although known internationally for his meticulous research in a very difficult field, Merle Ricklefs had demonstrated at Monash that he was also, unusually, a very fair and efficient administrator over fields very far from his own. In 1993 he was appointed to the pinnacle of Asian Studies in Australia, as Director of ANU's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS). This was a difficult stage of static or, after 1996, reduced funding, when some of those who had not lived up to the expectations of tenured research-only appointments had to be let go. At the time I admired the intelligence and orderliness with which Merle managed this, through obliging each division to establish its priorities and discreet discussions with those eased into retirement. By hindsight, in contrast with more recent arbitrary blood-letting at ANU, it was a marvel of keeping standards and morale high through difficult times.

An 'Asia Committee' was formed in his time, chaired by a Deputy Vice Chancellor, to ensure that the Director of RSPAS and the Dean of the Asian Studies Faculty (Tony Milner) would cooperate closely together. Tony remembers Merle as an ideal colleague:

Reliable, flexible, ambitious for the university. Together we worked not only on coordinating the different ANU institutions but also on the

ANU's relations with Government. We both played a role in developing the Howard Government's Foreign Affairs Council – which met regularly with the Foreign Minister, and initially contained a large group of ANU Asianists. Merle and I, together with Ross Garnaut, also developed an Asian Studies Advisory Council at ANU, which brought together the VC – and a number of ANU senior Asianists – with the Foreign Minister, several other Ministers and Department heads, and the Opposition Leader.

After a five-year term in this role, Merle was invited to become the founding Director of Melbourne University's new initiative – the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies (MIALS). He was characteristically ambitious to ensure that MIALS became both a high class research school for graduate students (around 100 were enrolled by 2002) and an integrated Asia centre for the whole university, responsible directly to a DVC. It was a tougher call on the budget of a university with many other priorities, and Merle's uncompromising rejection of lowering standards for budgetary purposes made some enemies. When he was on leave at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2003–04 the Faculty of Arts was able to re-absorb MIALS as a Department, without consulting Merle or the MIALS management. He resigned from the university in protest.

This was one of several set-backs for Asian Studies in Australia at about that time, along with the 'merging' of ANU's Faculty of Asian Studies (2007) and transformation of Griffith's School of Modern Asian Studies. John Howard's government appeared to want to bury the idea of 'Asia Literacy' as an Australian priority. The opportunity to appoint outstandingly productive young Southeast Asianists, in particular, in the 1970s and 1980s had enabled many of them to rise to the top of the profession in the 1990s, as Merle Ricklefs well exemplified. The last decades of the century did mark an astonishing period of

Australian leadership in Southeast Asian Studies, although at the end of that period it was becoming clear that Australian students were less interested than they had been in signing on.

Many of Australia's best Asianists found themselves better appreciated in Asia (and the US) than in Australia in the new century. Merle Ricklefs was among them. He spent his last years of teaching in Singapore (2005–11), helping NUS take up the mantle of leadership that ANU and Monash had worn. A product of that period was *A New History of Southeast Asia* (2010) that he coordinated and co-authored with some of his NUS colleagues. He returned to Australia in retirement, between an apartment in Melbourne and a much-loved rural getaway at Mt Beauty.

The personal life of Merle and Margaret was marked by tragedy. Their daughter Deborah died at twenty-nine from a medical error. Multilingual son Norman was far away in the Middle East, while son Charles was looked after through the farm at Mt Beauty. Then came his own battle with cancer. He bore all this with stoic strength, never letting his personal life intrude into the professional. Many of his colleagues were unaware of the burdens he was carrying. Some indeed, found a new warmth in his last years.

Retirement brought some of the deserved rewards of an exceptionally creative life. The last book of his Islam trilogy, *Islam and Its Opponents in Java* (2012), was awarded the 2015 George Kahin prize for Southeast Asia scholarship. Australia awarded him a Centenary Medal in 2003 and he was made a Member of Order of Australia in 2017. Holland gave him the honour of *ere lid* (honorary life member) of the KITLV in 2010. Indonesia made him one of the first foreigners to receive its *Penghargaan Kebudayaan* (Cultural Honour) in a grand ceremony in September 2016.

Once he knew how little time he had left, Merle devoted as much as he could to ensuring a little more of his erudition found its way into print. The last work, *Soul Catcher: Java's Fiery Prince Mangkunegara I, 1726–95* (2018) completes the circle by returning to the formative eighteenth century on which he is the absolute and unique authority. It was fortunately published in 2018 to wide acclaim. Merle was able to attend the launch by Peter Carey, Virginia Hooker and Stuart Robson at Monash. Right up to the time of his death on 29 December 2019, he was working on checking the Indonesian translation of it, designing the cover himself.

At least in Australia, I fear, we may not see his like again.

**Anthony Reid** FBA FRHISTS FAHA