Dr. Benjamin A Batson

Ben Batson was arguably the brightest foreign hire that this faculty has ever recruited.

Born on 4 February 1942 at Knoxville, Tennessee, Ben was a math prodigy from an unreasonable age baffling those who came across him with an astonishing computational ability that easily defied his years. He didn’t burn out. His devoted siblings Nancy & Dan remember their older brother being regularly asked by his parents to perform at family gatherings and Ben doing so reluctantly but with awesome speed and accuracy whether it was in flawlessly divining the square root of random numbers or expressing some phenomenally complicated differential equations that only seasoned professionals had a right to know. Ben’s unique talent, staggering though it was, didn’t spoil him. He remained a quiet, self-effacing and reflective young man always willing to help others far slower than he was. This level of kindness always shone through. It never left him. Ben didn’t go to a feeder school for the Ivy League. He just got there from his humble roots purely on innate ability. To do Math at Harvard back in the late 50s and early 60s you had to be pretty extraordinary. He was and he duly graduated from those hallowed halls of learning at Cambridge, Mass., Phi Beta Kappa. It was as predictable as Lee Hsien Loong doing as well in math at the other and older Cambridge in the UK.

While he was at Harvard Ben took advantage of the scholastic smorgasbord on offer and took courses in history from one of the greats in the business Professor John K. Fairbanks. It encouraged a passion that was to eventually subsume his prodigious mathematical competence and alter his life and career. Initially, however, after graduating in 1963 Ben became a computer programmer at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory back in Tennessee writing code for the early US space programme. Although he found it tolerably
interesting, the seeds sown by Prof Fairbanks had germinated into a desire to see something of the Asia that he had studied at Harvard.

Turning his back on a fledgling scientific career, Ben joined the Peace Corps and opted to go to Thailand. This sounds eminently laudable and so it was but it left the Peace Corps in a bit of a fix. Ben was hardly an Alpha Male let alone a sporting jock. Back then he was well on the way to being as unfit as he was in later life. He didn’t work out. He had no desire to run and wouldn’t ever have thought to have gone to the gym. He ate the wrong things and didn’t take care of his waistline. Apart from that he had virtually no eye-hand coordination and was unlikely to inspire the Thai people with his mastery of any athletic discipline. You can well imagine the dilemma that dogged those in the Peace Corps who had to handle his case. “What are we to do with him?” became the question of the day. Someone fortunately had a brain wave. Let’s give him a stick of chalk and make him teach our Thai kids math. Before he could do so, however, Ben needed to master the basic elements of the Thai language. Needless to say, he went much further than this and rapidly became fluent in the language – so good indeed that he could correct his Thai students Thai. And so it came to pass that Ben came to teach math at Chulalongkorn University for two years. I can imagine the scene. Ben in his element helping young people find their way through the mathematical thicket. He would have been brilliant at doing so.

Having fallen in love with Thailand, Ben decided that he needed to know more about the history of the country and its people. He decided to recalibrate his career and move from math to history. In order to be taken seriously in this new discipline he needed at least a Masters and so he moved to his second favourite place on our planet – Hawaii - to join the university in order to obtain it. Armed with the M.A. but not satiated by it, Ben went back to his beloved Thailand and taught math for a year at the
university in Chiang Mai. He loved Chiang Mai but teaching math no longer floated his boat. History did. I’m not at all surprised.

In 1969 Ben formally broke free of his mathematical past and was inducted into Cornell’s graduate programme to take his Ph.D. under the supervision of what would later become his long term mentor and friend Professor David Wyatt. Ben’s research and fascination with the royal family brought him into contact with the Thai court and especially the Queen Mother who saw him as a loyal and learned friend of her country. In order to be accepted in this very elite circle, Ben learnt Royal Thai – an arcane language (sometimes associated with a rarefied Khmer) that has to be used when moving in these noble ranks.

While he was at Cornell ostensibly working on his thesis about the 1932 coup which brought an end to the absolute monarchy in Thailand, Ben became a trusted TA for Walter LaFeber – another one of the historical giants in US academia. LaFeber was a foreign policy expert and he trusted Ben’s instincts and let him loose on his students. A convinced Democrat, Ben became something of an unlikely expert on modern US history and regaled his students with unembellished stories of wrong doing in high places. I’ve heard that Ben didn’t preach to his students but left them in little doubt as to where his support lay and why he regarded the Republican Party as a lost cause.

It was a fascinating interlude for him personally, but the main reason he was at Cornell was to write his doctoral thesis on Thailand - a fact his supervisor David Wyatt began increasingly to remind him about. Wyatt urged Ben to concentrate his attentions on the background to the 1932 coup and investigate the players behind the movement to remove absolute power from King Prajadhipok. Ultimately, a version of Ben’s thesis would eventually
become the standard work on the 1932 coup. It was finally published in 1984 to critical acclaim and remains cited to this day.

After Cornell Ben held a number of post-doc academic positions and was recruited in 1982 from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at ANU in Canberra to join the swelling number of expats at our Kent Ridge campus. If the NUS authorities thought they had a quiescent American scholar on their hands who would keep his nose to the grindstone and tow the line, they were in for a major surprise. Ben was as bizarrely unconventional as he was highly idiosyncratic. In those days our faculty expected its staff to remain in their offices for all eight hours of the working day and especially on Saturday mornings up to 1pm. Ben did not conform to these precepts. He arrived often after everyone else had left and left before everyone else arrived the next morning. Even so, he never cut class or a meeting with a student. He was his own man. He worked as hard as anyone else but just did it at odd hours. He was a non-conformist at a time when NUS was not wild about such people. Thinking out of the box was one thing – providing you were at the right pay grade – but acting out of the box was a whole lot different. Ben was sublimely unconcerned about these sort of conventions and did his own thing discretely and without drawing any attention to himself.

Ben loved Coke – I don’t mean the narcotic but the effervescent calorie-loaded stuff that he used to drink from those bright red cans before the American company tried to reinvent itself and added a Diet version to their offerings. Ben used to subsist on too much Coke and an insufficient supply of decent food, but although his family and friends told him it was a poor combination, we all recognized that it was almost impossible to get him to alter the habits of an adult lifetime.
Ben’s day had been formed over many years. He would come alive at night
and I used to see this on a weekly basis because he would arrive at my
home about 11pm on a Saturday evening armed with a considerable amount
of Anchor beer cans and stay until 4am or later the next morning, becoming
the more animated and expressive the later it got and as the pyramidal
structure of his discarded cans grew on the tiled floor between us.

His interests were vast and he could talk intelligently about them all. I learnt
so much from him. It was a privilege to be taught by him. I had never
tackled SEA history during my undergraduate days. Ben made up for that
deficiency by taking me across the islands and land masses of the region in
what seemed to be a series of weekly 5-hour tutorials. There was no hiding
place. It was one on one – a quintessential Oxbridge learning platform with a
very learned scholar. Numb to the sheer quantity of new information
about, say, Laos and Cambodia at 3am, I would often throw in a stray
question about the iniquities of the American Establishment in Washington.
This would set him off for another hour as he fulminated about who was
doing what to whom and why they were being allowed to get away with it.

Whatever he might think about the US and he loved it despite all its flaws
and shortcomings, Ben’s abiding passion remained Thailand and its people
whom he genuinely loved. He used to financially support the poor Thai
workers in Singapore and would return regularly to live in his wooden house
along the banks of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok or go north to Chiang
Mai to meet up with his old friends who lived there or along the Mekong.

Part of the tragedy of Ben is that he didn’t have the time to finish his work
on Thailand. He had been commissioned by the publishers Macmillan to write
a history of the country and no one would have been better qualified to have
done so, but he never got round to putting his ideas down on paper. It’s a
huge loss to us all. What he did finish (illuminating studies of Kulap Saipradit,
Wanit Pananon, and Phra Sarasas as well as the fascinating Thai-Japanese connection in World War II) merely underlines just what the scholarly community is missing without a much larger volume on the nation itself. A life of Rama VII was another possibility but that too he took to his grave.

A Catholic by choice, Ben had just about the worst singing voice in the whole of Christendom. I well remember one Midnight Mass in which he struck up a version of Once in Royal David’s City at the Church of St. Ignatius in King’s Road and it virtually flawed the assembled parishioners. Could anyone be that off key? Ben could and was. Bless him.

Unfortunately, he died in highly suspicious circumstances in Holland Village in the early hours of 7 January 1996. His last weeks had not been happy ones. He had been persecuted by an individual who was intent on doing him some harm. Sadly, our police force didn’t protect him and I fear the man who was hounding him contributed to his demise. Although the official records have it that he died of heart failure, this verdict masks another possibility altogether. Ben was only 53 when he died. I miss him greatly. He was my closest friend and counselor at NUS. We were all the poorer for his loss. Nancy and Dan lost a beloved brother who adored them; NUS lost a great scholar; my kids a dear and eccentric uncle; and those of us who were his close friends had to say goodbye to an irreplaceable presence in our lives.

We are here tonight to honour his memory and I’m proud to do that. I just hope he would have approved of what I am about to discuss.

Before I do, however, I should reaffirm that I’m not a Southeast Asianist. I don’t speak the languages (how can you claim to be an expert on a region if you don’t?), and cannot claim to wield the local knowledge of so many of our distinguished audience here tonight. Nonetheless, Ben was what I am not and in his honour I felt that my talk should embrace the region which he loved so much. Many of you will not know that Ben left the Department of
History S$100,000 in his will. Apart from supporting our outstanding history students, this money has helped to fund a whole series of memorial lectures on Southeast Asian themes, of which this may be the last one.