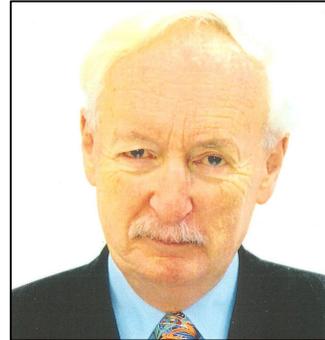


## **Scholarly Viewpoints, with Nicholas Tarling.<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABOUT NICHOLAS TARLING**

Nicholas Tarling, who was awarded the LittD by Cambridge University in 1974, was a Professor of History at the University of Auckland 1968–1996, and is currently a Fellow of the New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) at the university. He has published many books and articles on the history of Southeast Asia, particularly, but not exclusively, on the role of the British. He was the editor of *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*.



### **1. IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT WOULD BE THE CURRENT TREND OF YOUR DISCIPLINE; SPECIFICALLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION?**

The nation-state paradigm for writing history—which goes back to Leopold von Ranke and the foundation of the modern discipline —was sometimes dismissed in the late 20th century when the state was supposed, amid economic and cultural "globalisation," to be withering away. But it is still very much alive in areas where the nation-state is still establishing itself as the pre-eminent political entity. And that includes much of the "Asia Pacific." ASEAN is built on the Bandung principles that endorsed sovereignty and non-intervention. Japan was the first "modern" state in East Asia. China has, perhaps, a more ambiguous attitude. New Zealand—if not Australia, too—is very much into navel-gazing.

Indeed it sometimes seems that neighbours are reluctant to write about neighbours. Language is often a barrier, but sensitivity perhaps even more often. Those who write about "regions" tend to be "outsiders" especially students of politics and "security." Historians are more cautious. The archives they need are often closed and they wonder whether a region has reality.

"Regions," too, are often very ill-defined. Are they more than a kind of political rhetoric, constructivist though it may be? Where regional organisations of one kind or another exist, they provide a kind of diplomacy, through which national interests may be advanced or defended. That is true of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), for example, in which Japan and Australia took

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<sup>1</sup> This is the inaugural contribution for the International Journal of Asia Pacific (IJAPS)'s new section: Scholarly Viewpoints . The journal's editorial team expresses its warm gratitude to Professor Emeritus Nicholas Tarling for his contribution in this.

the initial lead. And what of India? Part of Asia, of course, but its relationship with the Pacific is limited, and, with the departure of Indians from Fiji, becoming less still.

The jaw-jaw is extensive. Ron Crocombe (1929–2009)<sup>2</sup> counted 700 Asia Pacific organisations in 2006. The organisations comprise a complex set of networks through which members of the elite may get to know each other. The extent to which the bulk of the people is involved is more open to question. Would greater involvement make the organisations more difficult to sustain or less?

Perhaps an historian should look on the Asia Pacific, as on other regions, in a comparative way, comparing one with another, as well as comparing the globalised world of nation states and regions with the world of empires it has succeeded.

## **2. IMPACT OF YOUR DISCIPLINE ON THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION; 'WHAT', 'HOW', 'WHY', ETC?**

Novelties such as the emergence of nation-states and regions may stimulate historians. It is more difficult to assess the impact of their writings. Sometimes their conclusions are taken up by others, but often in a mistaken way. Certain assessments become lessons which subsequent historians find impossible to dislodge. The most obvious is the "lesson" of Munich. You should not appease dictators, statesmen concluded. But was Nasser, as Eden thought, really another Hitler?

If leaders often get it wrong, or find it easy to think it right, the people they lead often rely on legend. History is difficult to teach, though, except in New Zealand (likewise in many other nation-states), it is usually part of a national curriculum. Putting it to the young often makes it rather boring, and prescriptions often make it rather crude. Leaders are able to use it, mobilise it, often for unhappy purpose, evoking a "memory" they have in fact created. Pol Pot could point to Angkor, even as Angkor was committing its atrocities.

More positively, I think history, or at least a view of history, contributed to the making of ASEAN. The Malayan/Malaysian leaders who took the necessary initiative evoked a history of Southeast Asia marked by outside intervention, blaming outsiders for its "Balkanisation." Implicitly, however, they accepted that foreign intervention had often been the result of local dispute or invitation, and the purpose of the ASEAN Way that modified the sharpness of nation-state interest was to avoid or bury interstate differences and quarrels.

It seems unlikely that history, accurate or not, could be used in any similar way in relation to the Asia Pacific, especially in view of its geographical

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<sup>2</sup> Eminent scholar of the Cook Islands, Pacific specialist and educationist.

indeterminacy. It might be stimulated by the concept, however, and if you believe, as I do, that history should try to be as objective as possible rather than abandoning the attempt, and that fuller knowledge can contribute to larger understanding, it may after all have a part to play.

### **3. YOUR COMMENTS ON THE STATE OF RECENT (LAST 2–3 DECADES) SCHOLARSHIP OF YOUR DISCIPLINE?**

History is an inveterate "borrower" from other disciplines, seen sometimes as more scientific or at least more fashionable. Borrowing was and is useful in Southeast Asian historiography, especially for periods and societies for which documentary evidence is unavailable, and older Rankean methods cannot be pursued.

Much of the work done after the Second World War (1939–45) in the early days of the nation-states and national history was stimulated by archaeological, anthropological and sociological studies, at some risk to the perception of change over time, and, rather paradoxically, at the risk of adopting inappropriately "Western" approaches and categories.

I am, however, less convinced of the advantages of the subsequent "linguistic turn." But clearly well-researched comparative studies of "ethnicity," for example, have made and will make regional sense, especially on a comparative basis.

The fields in which I have largely concentrated my efforts are international, diplomatic and post-imperial history. I am concerned that scholars investigating such topics are often unable to access government records in their own countries and have to rely on those in ex-imperial countries that operate a 30-year rule. That is something of a paradox and is certainly a limitation.

### **4. ON CURRENT SCHOLARS OF YOUR DISCIPLINE, VIZ. INDIGENOUS OF THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION OR FROM WITHOUT, INTERESTS, CHARACTERISTICS, ETC.?**

This year (2012) will mark the 60th anniversary of my first visit to what was then the Public Record Office in London, to start on my thesis on British policy in the Malay Peninsula and archipelago, 1824–71 under the supervision of an old Malay hand, Victor Purcell (1896–1965). Over this 60-year period the business of history has, of course, changed considerably. In one major way, for the better: the involvement of local scholars, challenging though their task is. At the same time I am concerned by the diminution of interest in most of the "region" on the part of scholars and students in other countries: I have in mind

the U.S., the U.K. and Australia and New Zealand, more than the Netherlands, Germany or Scandinavia. Whatever boundaries are drawn for the region, it ought to be the focus of world-wide scholarly interest, and exemplify the discipline's power to encompass, analyse and compare changes that occur, if not world-wide, in a wide range of societies.

I read quite a wide range of historians and on quite a wide range of topics, but I cannot offer a general comment. I particularly enjoy two types of history-writing: that which throws light on a subject by thorough and detailed research, preferably presented without too much jargon; and that which puts a topic in a new light by making novel connexions and comparisons or educing what Vic[tor] Lieberman<sup>3</sup> calls "strange parallels."<sup>4</sup> I am much less attracted by those—and there are some—who seem to be saying in an unnecessarily complicated if not designedly obfuscatory way what is already known. There is still plenty of music to be written in C major.

## 5. THE FUTURE OF YOUR DISCIPLINE IN RELATION TO THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION, VIZ. TRENDS, DIRECTION, VISION?

The concept of the Asia-Pacific region seems unlikely to spur on the writing of a history of the Asia-Pacific region: the young will feel it is foolhardy and not something that will earn a place in a peer-reviewed journal or other bonus points; and the old realise that they have no time left so far as they can tell. But it may be that it will stimulate the re-examination of old connexions—across the Pacific, for example, with the aid perhaps of galleons of treasures in the Spanish archives—or old perceptions such as "Austral-Asia."

Juxtapositions can also be stimulating. I read recently of the sharp practice that led to the incorporation of Hawaii as a state of the Union in 1959, and wondered if it threw some light on the readiness of the Americans soon after that to promote the incorporation of West New Guinea into Indonesia under the quite unsatisfactory arrangements of the Bunker plan.

If my observations of New Zealand are more widely applicable, I would need to criticise an undue focus on one part of the region. That is clearly the result of the "rise" of China. Southeast Asia gets left out of most general histories. It should not be by-passed in considering the history of the Asia-Pacific. China's own interests, after all, are world-wide.

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<sup>3</sup> Marvin B. Becker Collegiate Professor of History and Professor of Southeast Asian History at the University of Michigan.

<sup>4</sup> *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830, vol. 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

## **6. SOME ADVICE AND GUIDANCE FOR UP-AND-COMING SCHOLARS FOCUSING ON THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION?**

"Old men forget," as Shakespeare absurdly suggested. But, in retirement even if still honourarily affiliated, they do get out of date. So any advice I might give to those up-and-coming is even more hesitant than it used to be. Universities have changed, even though retaining the name. They have become more like corporate bodies with top-down management, and the knowledge they purvey has been commodified. History is not doing well in this environment, though there is still a popular interest in the subject. You need to be keen and hard-working and, if you succeed, you may still find a niche in the university if that is your objective or in another field in which your skills can be turned to account. But you may find that that your research will have to be its own reward, and it will be, if you have pursued it loyally and objectively. History is also, of course, a good discipline to sustain you in retirement: bowls, also concerned with bias, is surely more boring. And golf is for Southeast Asian statesmen.

## **7. ANY OTHER OPINIONS, VIEWPOINTS TO EXPRESS, SHARE, ETC.**

A further current concern as far as the Asia-Pacific is concerned is that it risks being concerned with the "Rim" and leaves out the islands, the hole in the doughnut. Only Papua New Guinea is a member of APEC: it is an observer at ASEAN. The Pacific islands are divided into metropolitan territories and states more or less independent, exposed to foreign intervention, and possibly exposed, as the technologies become economically viable, to increased economic exploitation. How can they play a role in their own fate? Can it only be by following the lead Australia has given since the Howard government changed its policy? Historians have written on the individual island states, especially Fiji. They have also written on the islands and the islanders more generally. What are the possibilities of a regional approach? Interested in the history of ASEAN, I have been wondering whether historians can elicit any useful comparisons or point, as Jusuf Wanandi once did, to any useful connexions.