

OBITUARIES

A Tribute to Professor Jan Wisseman Christie (1947–2021)

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It is with great sadness that I write this obituary on behalf of Jan Christie. I could hardly bring myself to write this when I heard of her death from cancer in February 2021 from her husband, Clive Christie. She was a dear friend and colleague during the 30 years that I was privileged to work with her. I spoke to her on the phone in December 2020 and within two months from that phone call she had left us. I studied and taught with her and Clive Christie in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies at the University of Hull from early 1984 until the University senior management made the decision to close the centre in 2002. Jan and Clive Christie then decided to retire and moved back to Llanafan, Ceredigion, Clive's mother's home, around 10 miles from Aberystwyth. Jan has been laid to rest in Llanafan.

After Clive's and Jan's retirement to Wales, my wife and I then made regular visits to Jan's and Clive's cottage in Llanafan. These were some of the most memorable experiences of my later academic career. Not only could Jan work miracles in the kitchen – she was a consummate cook – but we enjoyed long conversations about the early history of South-East Asia. Clive also specialised in the provision of late afternoon cocktails. And my garden in Newland Park in Hull owes much to Jan. She gave me *Gunnera manicata* and *Euphorbia characias* which are now flourishing. They remind me of Jan, and I like to think that the far reaches of my garden in Hull provide a lasting memory of Jan's presence.

Jan devoted her life to the study of the early history of Southeast Asia. She demonstrated the close transatlantic connections between the USA and the UK. Born in Boston on 27th April, 1947, she decided to study for her doctorate at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in the

late 1960s, where she submitted her thesis on “Patterns of Trade in Western Indonesia: 9th through 13th centuries AD”. She was awarded a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and a Thouron Scholarship. She then spent considerable periods of time working on excavations in Sumatra, Java, Bali, and in various sites in Malaysia, including Sarawak. In her early career she had worked with Dr Bennet Bronson who had served as the Curator of Asian Archaeology and Ethnology at The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago (1971–2008), and then, following his retirement, Emeritus Curator. In Southeast Asian circles, he is probably best known for his work with Pisit Charoenwongsa on the stone and metal ages in Thailand (1988) and his paper on upstream and downstream connections in coastal states in Southeast Asia (1978), a perspective which Jan applied in her studies in Sumatra, Java and Borneo.

I first met Jan in 1981 in Penang and at that time, she had formed a close relationship with Clive Christie, one of my colleagues at the University of Hull, who had been on secondment from Hull to Penang from 1979 to 1980, and whose studies of mainland Southeast Asian political history I admired, and continue to do so. He was also in Penang during my visit with my wife. Jan and Clive married in 1981 (a partnership which lasted for over 40 years), and then Jan, having completed her contract as a lecturer in history at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), came to Hull in 1984. I enjoyed an extraordinarily productive relationship with Jan. She was instrumental in ensuring the continuation of the Newsletter of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom (*ASEASUK News*) which we collaborated on as joint



Jan in her garden in May 2013. A gardening enthusiast, Jan spent hours in this fulfilling indulgence taking pride in her delightful floral collection as well as sharing her “green thumb” as Victor could attest.



Jan and her husband, Clive Christie preparing the barbeque. The Christies often entertained family and friends in the outdoors, the rather damp Welsh weather permitting. The photograph was taken in May 2014.

editors from 1987 to 1993. During this time, we also wrote a paper together on metal-working in Borneo (Christie and King 1988).

It is strange what one remembers from one's early encounters. I returned to Sarawak in mid-1983 after 10 years of absence, and long after my research in Sarawak and Indonesian Borneo in the early 1970s. I found a rather empty academic space in Kuching; nothing much was going on in primary research, or so I thought, though my friends and colleagues in Sarawak continued to be unfailingly hospitable, especially Dr Hatta Solhee, Dr Peter Kedit and Lucas Chin. For several years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, restrictions were placed on foreign researchers working in Sarawak. On my arrival in Kuching, I immediately returned to what I felt to be my second home, the Sarawak Museum; it had been a kind of haven for foreign academics, a place in which we found comfort and scholarly nourishment, and in the coffee house of the Aurora Hotel, a five minute-walk from the museum. This was well before the foundation of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) which was officially incorporated in 1992 as a state-funded university. The state government graciously permitted me to undertake research on resettlement and agricultural development in Sarawak in the early 1980s, a project which was made possible by the kind support of the late Dr James Jemut Masing (later Tan Sri Datuk Amar, and Deputy Chief Minister) and Gabriel Adit who were then working for the Sarawak Electricity Supply Corporation (SESCO) and Mike de Alwis (Manager on the Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority [SALCRA] Mayang tea project in Sri Aman Division).

There I was in splendid isolation in the Sarawak Museum library, poring over copies of *The Sarawak Gazette*. What a difference from 10 years before when Cliff Sather, Stephen Morris, Hatta Solhee, Peter Kedit, Peter Eaton, Stephanie Morgan, Paul Beavitt, Carol Rubenstein, Christine Padoch (recently arrived at that time), and others were there. Then Jan Christie opened the door to the library, and said “Why is someone from Hull sitting by himself in a library in Kuching. Can I join you?”. Jan had arrived there from Penang to examine some of Tom Harrisson’s materials from his archaeological excavations in Santubong from which she published a paper on P’o-ni (Christie 1985a). We then spent extended times together sampling *tuak* in various Kuching bars and *kolo(k) mee* with *char siu* in restaurants in Jalan Padungan.

After her position at USM came to an end, Jan came to Hull in 1984 and taught on early history in our Southeast Asian Studies programme. This happened to be a period when Southeast Asian Studies at Hull was on an upward trajectory guided under the steady hand of Dr David Bassett. Undergraduate students who encountered Jan in the first year of their degree found her extraordinarily efficient and demanding as a lecturer, someone who commanded her field of studies with enthusiasm and scholarly energy. After two hours with Jan, inevitably they experienced extreme exhaustion. She was an excellent teacher, and someone who possessed the skills to convey her enthusiasm for her subject to our students. She also published groundbreaking articles. I am not knowledgeable in her field, but for me four papers are arresting and continue to demand our attention (Christie 1985a; 1985b; 1986; 1995). Clive Christie and John Miksic have provided an appreciation of her accomplishments and publications (2021) and I do not feel the need to dwell on these.

I continue to miss and think of Jan Christie. My memories of her will persist, her companionship, her intellect, her warm personality and hospitality, her wonderful skills in the kitchen, and in the garden that she established and tended with her husband in Llanafan, and the generous way in which she shared her knowledge of Southeast Asia. My enduring memory of her was when we stayed with Jan and Clive in Wales, the last time I was with her, and we shared company with Dr Ian Glover, a long-standing colleague of Jan’s, also sadly no longer with us, and to whom she dedicated and co-edited a book in his honour (Bellina et al. 2010) and ensured the publication of Ian’s proceedings of the annual conference of the Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists in Europe (see, for example, Christie 1990; Glover 1992). Jan possessed and expressed in her teaching all the qualities of an accomplished

scholar. She leaves a legacy in her research and publications and in the guidance she gave to a generation of undergraduate students in Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hull and in the History Department at USM.

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