

**IN MEMORIAM**  
**Dr R. Suntharalingam**  
**(18 October 1936 – 21 June 1998)**

Ramanathan Suntharalingam was born in the Malaysian state of Pahang. He graduated from the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur in 1956, and then attended the University of Malaya in Singapore where he earned a First Class Honours Degree in History. He joined the faculty of the University in 1960, and earned his MA there in 1962. His work was extremely well regarded, and the then Raffles Professor of History, K.G. Tregonning, described him as “a man with an academic field marshal’s baton in his rucksack”. His students and colleagues (who included Edwin Lee, Ernest Chew, Ong Chit Chung and Yeo Kim Wah) remember him as a diligent scholar, an inspiring tutor and a caring colleague.

Dr Sunthara, as he was commonly known, did his early research on Sumatra and retained an interest in Southeast Asian history throughout his career, but he also developed a deep interest in Indian history and wrote his doctoral dissertation at London University on nationalism in South India. This work was published as a monograph of the United States’ Association for Asian Studies under the title *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South Asia, 1852–1891*. A full list of his publications appears at the end of this notice.

In 1967, Dr Sunthara became Chief Editor of the *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, and he was instrumental in transforming this publication into the more broadly conceived *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* which succeeded it in 1970. He edited the first issue of the new journal, and served as Chairman of the Editorial Board for the first three years of its existence, while he was Acting Head of the History Department.

In 1975 Dr Sunthara accepted an appointment with Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, joining a young history programme in a university which had received its first intake of students five years earlier. In Penang, he was known as an earnest and highly principled scholar, and a teacher who so inspired his students that in the first years after his retirement groups of them continued to meet him for informal tutorial sessions. Dr Cheah Boon Kheng, who retired as Professor of Malaysian History at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1994, has written the following account of Dr Sunthara’s time in Penang.

Sunthara (as I knew him for the last 20 years) and I had become very close colleagues and friends by the time he retired from the History Department at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang in 1991, when he reached the university’s compulsory retirement age. One of his major contributions to the department was his great interest in and knowledge of historiography, and his personality was so formidable that he influenced his colleagues to take a similar interest in the field. Many of our course outlines and much of our research bore the impact of Sunthara’s ideas, and we benefited from his close scrutiny of our work. He spoke of Leopold van Ranke, R. Collingwood and Thucydides as if they were his soul-mates. Later he confided to me that contrary to what some of us his colleagues thought, he had, in fact, only developed a late interest in the subject. His readings on the great historians had been forced upon him as head or coordinator of the History Programme in the 1975–76 academic session when no one else could be found to teach the core history course on Theory and Method. But Sunthara took to the challenge like a fish to water.

He was a meticulous scholar and a capable administrator as well as a disciplined and dedicated teacher. In private discussions and in seminars his sharp mind and cutting wit often won an argument. At Universiti Sains Malaysia, Sunthara achieved a master of the Malay language that allowed him to use it both for writing and teaching, and he produced for the department two standard textbooks on historiography, *Pengenalan kepada Sejarah* (1985) and *Pensejarah Barat* (1987), the first of which went into a second edition. Both books are now out of print but remain required reading. Sunthara also initiated and participated in three departmental research projects dealing with nationalism, imperialism, and violence and the state, each resulting in a book (in Malay). In retirement he attempted to come to terms with the great impact of the new intellectual movement of Post-Modernism on historical writing in Europe and the U.S. He was excited by the debates surrounding it, but in the end was unable to embrace it fully as he felt it subverted the fundamentals of the Rankean concepts and methodologies that formed the basis of his training.

Besides historiography, he taught Indian history. History majors dreaded to enter his tutorial classes if they had not done their readings, but poorer students and even some of the bright ones knew if they confessed their weaknesses he would lavish his kind attention on them, and loan them books to read. Once when he taught a Theory and Method course for off-campus students, he flew to Kota Bharu, in the state of Kelantan, at his own expense to conduct a tutorial discussion with his students (mostly teachers, clerks and junior government officers).

In the university Senate and at faculty or departmental meetings Sunthara was a strong advocate of high standards, moral integrity and professional discipline. His nonsense approach commanded the respect of Deans and higher authorities in the Chancellery. His own character I thought aimed at a Gandhi-like perfection. He was simple in dress and spartan in his diet (his daily office lunch consisted of biscuits or a sandwich, a banana or an apple and some nuts), and only occasionally allowed himself a more sumptuous meal at the canteen or at a restaurant. He was a stickler for punctuality, and could be found in his office at 8 a.m. every day, well before other staff members including the Dean arrived for work, and at 4.30 sharp he would walk out of his room with a book or a file under his arm and go home. Colleagues joked that they could synchronise their wrist-watches simply by his times of arrival and departure.

In retirement Sunthara and I saw each other frequently, meeting fortnightly over lunch at Gary Nair's banana leaf restaurant to talk about politics and historiography, two subjects close to his heart. Occasionally he called me on the telephone for an hour's chat to overcome his loneliness. He was a bachelor and lived alone. News of his death left me grief-stricken. At the funeral in Kuala Lumpur, relatives said his death was entirely unexpected, and had been caused by a heart attack. I had gone to Singapore to take up a three-month fellowship at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in April 1998, and before my departure Sunthara told me he had bought a house in Kuala Lumpur and intended to shift there permanently to be close to his relatives. To my surprise, he presented me with a large and valuable collection of history books which he had acquired over the years. "I'd rather you take them than anyone else, as you are still doing research and writing while I have no further use for them", he said, as if he had some premonition of his approaching death. The rest of his personal library went to Universiti Sains Malaysia. His books will be a lasting reminder of the sad loss of a dear friend and close intellectual companion.

**Paul H. Kratoska and Cheah Boon Kheng**

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