

Obituary

John Minor Echols (1913–1982)

John M. Echols, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and Asian Studies at Cornell University, and President of the Association for Asian Studies in 1977–78, died in his home in Ithaca on June 16, 1982, at the age of 69. Especially those in the field of Southeast Asian studies will feel the loss of one of its pioneering figures, a scholar who was active in advancing its fronts of literature and language until the day he died.

Initially specializing in Germanic languages, he completed his doctorate in linguistics at the University of Virginia in 1940. There and in subsequent study he mastered a full dozen tongues, and, with that powerful intellectual curiosity that always energized his scholarship, he encompassed Hittite as well as Indonesian/Malay and Javanese. During the war he served in the intelligence branch of the U.S. Navy, first in Washington and from 1944 to 1947 as assistant Naval Attache in Stockholm, one of the many places he was at home in the local language.

Then for four years he was Deputy Director of the Foreign Service Institute's School of Languages and Linguistics. His major challenge there was to establish the school's first Indonesian language course. So well did he fulfill this difficult assignment that in 1952, the A.C.L.S. invited him to prepare an Indonesian-English dictionary, the Ford Foundation asked him to organize and direct an English language teaching project in Indonesia, and he was invited to Cornell as Associate Professor of Linguistics in charge of instruction in Indonesian, Malay, Javanese, and Malayo-Polynesian. He carried all of these endeavors through to success and soon established himself as one of the foremost authorities on Indonesian languages and literature. He also contributed significantly to the teaching of Southeast Asian literature in translation. His graduate students formed the main cadres for instruction in the Indonesian languages in this country and in Australia, and English instruction in Indonesia owes him a similar debt. As a valued member of Cornell's Department of Modern Languages, where he was promoted to full professor in 1957, he taught, in addition to Indonesian languages, courses in linguistics and occasionally in Dutch, Swedish, and Norwegian, and served as external examiner for these languages at other institutions throughout New York State.

At Cornell John Echols served as Chairman of Asian Studies for five years (1956–1961) and until his retirement as Associate Director of both the Southeast Asia Program and the Modern Indonesia Project, contributing sustainably to their growth and success until his death.

Apart from his teaching, he focused most of his scholarly efforts on the production of what have become the standard Indonesian-English and English-Indonesian dictionaries. Initially sponsored by the Ford Foundation, *An Indonesian-English Dictionary* was co-authored with his friend Hassan Shadily and published by Cornell University Press in 1961. A second and heavily revised edition appeared in 1963, and he was well advanced in preparing a third when he died. Its equally widely used counterpart, the Echols-Shadily *An English-Indonesian Dictionary* was published in 1975.

Professor Echols was a member of the Linguistic Society of America, American

Anthropological Association, American Oriental Society, Societas Linguistica Europea, and the Indonesia Council of the Asia Society. He acted as consultant to institutions in this country and abroad, among other things serving as external examiner in linguistics and Malay studies at the University of Malaya and assessor for appointments to its Department of Malay Studies. He wrote many articles and reviews in the fields of Indonesian languages and literature. To the *Encyclopaedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, he contributed articles on Dutch as well as Indonesian authors. He translated and edited A. S. Tselekin's *Old Javanese (Kawi)* as well as editing *Modern Indonesian Literature in Translation* and half a dozen bibliographies.

Another important contribution John Echols made to Southeast Asian Studies was in working unstintingly, on his own time, to build up Cornell University library's Southeast Asia collection. He gave constant support to its curator, Giok Po Oey, and worked late into the night, maintaining an enormous correspondence with hundreds of scholars and collectors around the world to enlist their help in acquiring rare and ephemeral items. Without his sustained thirty-year effort, the collection could not have attained the preeminence it has. Accordingly, five years ago it was given his name. Drawn on by scholars from all over the world, Cornell's John M. Echols Collection on Southeast Asia is an enduring and fitting memorial to the man who gave so much of his life to it.

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