

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS JOHN RICHARD WHARTON SMAIL

John R. W. Smail, professor emeritus of history, died on October 20, 2002 at the age of 72 after a long illness. John was born in Cairo, Egypt, where he lived until his family moved to the United States when he was nine, but he remained proudly bicultural--British and American--throughout his life. He received his B.A. from Harvard in 1951 and his M.A. in 1952, both in English history, following which he served in Japan during the Korean War. While there, he traveled throughout Southeast Asia and India, which led to his interest in Indonesian history. On his return in 1956, he enrolled in Cornell's noted Southeast Asian Studies program, where he worked with many of the leading scholars and students in the field. He also met Laura Woolsey Lord, a fellow student, and they were married before setting out for two years of fieldwork in Bandung. Shortly after their return, he joined the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin in 1962, and received his Ph.D. from Cornell in 1964.

At Wisconsin, John was notable for his leading roles in establishing major new programs. First was Southeast Asian history, which he initiated with courses on ancient and modern Southeast Asian history and later, the Vietnam Wars. He next helped to found and direct the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, now one of the leading centers in the country. Third was the Comparative Tropical (now World) History Program that he pioneered with Philip Curtin. Their lectures on the World and the West were path-breaking explorations of an inclusive world history, and they continue to form the basis of many world history programs today. In the process, the comparative program provided the seed appointments for many of the other areas of non-western history that have become such a distinguishing feature of the history department today. Finally, John pioneered the development of Environmental Studies at Wisconsin with his innovative course on The Natural History of Man.

John was an extraordinarily broad thinker, spanning both the world and the history of humankind, while always careful to observe how the particular informed the general. His lectures were models of conceptually imaginative and carefully crafted expositions that appealed to undergraduate and graduate students alike. He was one of the few scholars on campus who knew much about Vietnam and students flocked to his classes in the late 1960s, but if they came for the politics, they stayed for the intellectual challenges John posed. Few have used the lengthy process of quietly cleaning a pipe so effectively to create a space for students to explore their own ideas and those of others. John also had a way of framing intellectual engagement with a student that turned the student and John into mutually respectful and caring scholar-partners embarked on a common quest for knowledge. One of us remembers vividly one such case, when John explained to a disappointed graduate student why a Ph.D. thesis draft was not yet acceptable for the degree, yet conveyed the news with the kind of good will, friendship, and genuine intellectual engagement that inspired renewed effort--and a superb new draft. Many, indeed, were drawn to an academic life by John's example.

John's scholarship was equally influential, but writing did not come easily to him. His article, 'On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Southeast Asia,' published while he was still a graduate student in 1961, is as insightful today as it was then; his monograph on Bandung in the Indonesian revolution is a modern classic of interior history; and the text he co-authored, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, remains the standard text in the field today.

John was not simply a consummate scholar and teacher. He also played an active role in the life of his family and that of the community. He thoroughly enjoyed his life with Laura and their two sons, John and Dan, especially the weekends they spent at Smailberry, the cabin they built themselves in the
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country. He was also a dedicated gardener and game player, whose croquet course confounded his opponents as it wound around his house. And he was a leading critic of the Vietnam War, helped organize the anti-war movement in Wisconsin, and was a member of the McCarthy delegation at the Chicago convention in 1968.

John retired in 1988 after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, but he tackled his illness with the same quiet nobility that he approached life, committing himself to his family, friends, and reading as long as he was able.

John was the complete academic, as committed to ethical thought as scholarly analysis, to the Third World as the First, to teaching as to scholarship, and to the social community as to the academic. He was an intellectual without guile, welcoming, demanding, critical, and generous; an engaging friend; and a loving family man.

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