Vale Douglas Miles
(10 October 1939 – 2 September 2013)

Ground Control to Major Tom
Ground Control to Major Tom
Take your protein pills and put your helmet on
Ground Control to Major Tom
Commencing countdown, engines on
Check ignition and may God’s love be with you...

Upon hearing of the death of her father, it was this David Bowie song that kept repeating itself to his daughter Jai. She wondered why this should be until she remembered that one of her happiest memories was the time Doug took her to a David Bowie concert, encouraging her to dance with the crowd in front of the stage, while keeping a protective and watchful eye on her from the stands. Jai arranged for the song to be played at Doug’s funeral. Indeed the song brought smiles to the faces of family and friends who attended the service at the Norwood Park Crematorium in Canberra on Tuesday 10 September. We appreciated its quirky evocation of Doug’s character.

Our old friend and colleague Doug Miles died in his sleep during the early hours of Monday 2nd September. His health had been in decline for several years, yet he had maintained his passion for anthropological research and enthusiasm for intellectual enquiry and debate. During the past few months he was still agonising over every sentence, trying to edit and polish what he thought might be his final publication: ‘Mountain-wards (kaja) versus Sea-wards (kelod) in Defiance of Suharto: Hindu-Balinese Orientation Trumps a Sukarnoist theatre of Protest in Bali during the Thirst of Ramadan, 1978’. The last time I talked to Doug was by phone in July to let him know that I had discussed the possibility of publication of this paper with Greg Acciaioli, editor of Anthropological Forum. Doug had always had great respect for Greg and his work in Indonesia and said he would be proud if his paper was submitted for potential publication in Anthropological Forum.

I first heard a version of this paper some time during the late 1990s delivered as a lecture to students in one of his subjects, for which I was the tutor. It was in the days when students still knew how to take lecture notes and there was no expectation that ready-made notes would be provided online. Doug lectured in a slow and steady style, emphasising key points in such a way that it was easy for students (and the tutor!)
to take notes. The lecture was brilliant; unforgettable, perhaps partly because of the requirement to take one’s own notes. As with most of Doug’s lectures it was a publishable paper based on his own first hand research and deep ethnographic understanding. I remember asking him after the class whether he was planning to submit it for publication. But, it was not until after his retirement from JCU that Doug was able to focus on writing. This was facilitated by a Professorial Research Fellowship at the Centro in Contri Umani, Ascona, Switzerland, followed by another at the Cairns Institute, JCU.

Doug’s scholarship was such that he found it difficult to edit his papers to what could be presented in the time frame of a University seminar, even in the days of the traditional two hour seminar. The first paper I heard Doug give at JCU was in two parts. He wove a complex tapestry leaving the threads tantalisingly untied, until we returned the following week for the finale. Doug presented fewer papers in the final years of his career. The reduction of seminars to mere 40 minute PowerPoint presentations, rushed through during a lunch hour, did not allow the presentation of complex arguments and intellectual debate that he considered to be the hallmark of good scholarship.

Doug started work at JCU in 1993 as a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology. He quickly made himself at home in Townsville with his wife Toi. They hosted many wonderful feasts. Toi cooked delicious Thai food (and the occasional lamb roast to satisfy Doug’s Australian taste buds) while Doug was always the perfect host, a fantastic conversationalist and storyteller. Doug and Toi loved life in tropical north Queensland and immersed themselves in the place. Once they hired a house boat with Rohan Bastin and Bruce Kapferer to explore the Hinchinbrook Channel. It seems no one on board knew much about how to actually steer the boat! They grounded it on a sandbank and had to sweat it out for hours until the tide came back in, all the while fearful of the crocodile infested waters. As I remember the story, only Toi remained unfazed, fishing to her heart’s content.

Before joining us at JCU, Doug had first lectured at Sydney University, where he did his MA and PhD, and then at the Australian National University, where he supervised many postgraduate students, including me. I was one of those frustrating students that no one thought would ever complete her thesis. It was during the period of my life when motherhood was a priority. My principal supervisor, Anthony Forge, threw up his hands in exasperation and handed me over to Doug to see what he could do with me. Doug,
who clearly delighted in the ways of little children, happily permitted me to bring my then two year old daughter, Roselani, to supervision sessions. On one occasion he gave her a pen and paper to keep her occupied. Unfortunately, she enthusiastically coloured in not just the paper but also the carpet. Doug told me, years later, that the red ink had been impossible to remove and that, unless ANU has since refurbished the AD Hope building, Lani’s artistic talent still graces the carpet in his old office.

Doug was a pioneer of anthropological studies of South East Asia in Australia and he brought that pioneering spirit to his teaching and research at JCU, including as the Director of the Centre for south East Asian Studies (now disestablished). His deep knowledge was based on long term fieldwork conducted among the Ngadju Dayaks of Borneo (1959-60, 1961-63), the Yao of Northern Thailand and Laos (1966-69, 1970, 1996-97, 2010) and in Indonesia (1974-75, 1978) on shadow puppetry, the economics of flower production and contemporary literature, particularly the work of the playwright and actor, W.S Rendra.

Doug’s expertise on the anthropology of South East Asia has to date never been replaced at JCU; perhaps proving that he is indeed irreplaceable! One of his first initiatives at JCU was to take a group of first year students to Bali on a two week field trip, assisted by his wife Toi and our School administrative officer, the late Lyn Burrows. Doug is fondly remembered by one of these students, Donna Clay, as having been ‘in his element, taking us through temples and all sorts of places, explaining all the time as we went along – the lecture in action’. During this trip he took the students to visit the Balinese healer Jero Tapakan, whose life has been famously documented by Linda Connor and portrayed in a series of ethnographic films by Patsy and Tim Asch.

In recognition of Doug’s outstanding contribution to scholarship in the field of anthropology, and to honour his legacy as a supervisor, a group of his old students organised a panel at the Australian Anthropological Society Conference, held at JCU on the Cairns campus in 2006. Our plan was to present papers on the very work that Doug had supervised over the years, to find the threads that linked us. We published this Festschrift as a special issue of The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, entitled ‘Connecting the Miles’ (2008, Vol. 9, No. 3). Doug contributed the conclusion to this volume. It was a difficult but cathartic paper for him to produce (and for the editorial team to nurture towards publication) but at last he was able to write about ‘The Thailand Controversy’ and his traumatic experiences during and
following the aerial bombardment of the Yao village in Thailand where he had conducted fieldwork in 1968. He had buried his field notes in a crate in his garden before escaping. Two young Thai border policemen volunteered to collect them but were gunned down and killed as they were returning with the crate. Doug was to carry the weight of this traumatic event with him for the rest of his life. In the final paragraph of his paper he expressed his gratitude for having been ‘…afforded the opportunity to attempt again what I failed to do 40 years ago, to document the oppression of Thailand’s upland minorities by the Royal Thai Army (Third Region) during a period when the kingdom accepted Australian aid to promote the welfare of the highlanders under its sovereignty…’ and the controversial role of anthropology in this agenda.

Doug was a man of complex character, a stickler for correct protocol while at the same time wonderfully irreverent, as evidenced on the occasion he marched in the academic parade at an ANU graduation ceremony draped in a colourful woven tablecloth and a Russian Cossack hat! He loved theatrical performance and was a wonderful conversationalist and storyteller. This is also what made him a great teacher. As one of his students Chris Eipper remembers in the paper he wrote for Doug’s Festschrift (2008, p.202):

More than any other, Doug was the teacher I had who brought the field home with him. He would drape batik around the lectern, exhibit objects and artefacts, recite poems, play music, show slides. Rather than the perfection of the performance, it was the eagerness of the effort, the largesse of the display, that was so appealing. It was as if he were playing host-offering us not a banquet of morsels to delight, but a bricolage. These were not always entirely successful adventures. The technology had its gremlins and Doug had his. He had a particular problem with time. Digressions struggled to conform to the clock. So much remained to be said. Not everything ended up clarified. A profundity could remain hanging in the air like a suspended gesture. And yet some of us came away from these lectures more inclined to think for ourselves than we may have done if Doug had fully achieved his ambition. Rather than master magician, he was more the enthusiastic uncle, and we were the better for it. His lectures remain memorable not because he was a maestro, but because he had the gift of making what mattered to him matter to us.

Rosita Henry