

## *Greg Denning: A Tribute*

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Death came to Greg Denning (b. 1931) on 13 March 2008 and took away one of the most imaginative, original and reflective minds working in the fields of history and historiography. Denning retired in 1990 from the Max Crawford Professorship of History that he held at The University of Melbourne from 1974 and was an Adjunct Professor at the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University for the last twelve years. He started out as an innovative historian of the Pacific and went to contribute to historical thinking in general. He was the author of many books including *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (1980); *The Death of William Gooch, History's Anthropology* (1988; reprint, 1995); *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Power, Passion and Theatre on the Bounty* (1992); *Performances* (1996); *Beach Crossing. Voyaging across Times, Cultures and Self* (2004); and *Church Alive! Pilgrims in Faith, 1956-2006* (2006). He was and will remain an inspiration and an intellectual guiding star to many.

Denning and his wife Donna Merwick - a gifted historian in her own right - formed part of a group once known as the "Melbourne School of ethnographic history" that also included Rhys Isaac and Inga Clendinnen, two other scholars of international repute and Denning's former colleagues at La Trobe. Together, they pioneered in Australia the "anthropological turn" in the writing of social history that occurred globally in the nineteen seventies. Denning combined a degree in history from The University of Melbourne with a doctoral degree from Harvard in anthropology. Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, and Bernard S. Cohn were among his intellectual partners and friends in this endeavor. But even in this galaxy of illustrious scholars, Denning stood out for the originality of his approach and for the intellectual risks he took right from the beginning of his career. Once, and for a long time, a fully trained Jesuit priest - he left the order in the early nineteen seventies reportedly because of the lack of "femininity" in that world - Denning brought to his history-writing not only his erudition, scholarship, and research that were always impeccable, but a sense of wonderment about human existence as well, his own kind of existentialism, one might say, that shone through every page and every line of what he wrote.

This began with *Islands and Beaches* where he alternated between narrative chapters and reflective ones but it remained his hallmark throughout his life. He faced much criticism and opposition once - it was, after all, difficult for the historians' guild to admit someone who broke with all that was routine in the writing of historical prose. Looking back, one realizes how much risk Denning took as a young scholar in a discipline that has always preferred to err on the side of caution. But Denning could not but write otherwise. As he himself said much later in his semi-autobiographical *Beach Crossings*, in life as in work, "the gamble is being yourself."

Even that fragment of a sentence I have just quoted is very Dening. He believed in and privileged the gerund-form over the plain noun, for life was in the living of it, not in the word "life." Nouns froze things too much for his taste. History was always history-making, caught up in human activity, both of the past and the present - a sense that permeated all his writings. Later in life, he would sometimes use the word "history-ing," which he appreciatively borrowed from a younger scholar, Katie Holmes, who was once his student in Melbourne. In the turning of pasts into historical texts, activities of the past and of the present came together, and Dening wanted to capture a sense of this coming together of the symbolic actions of those who existed in the present and those who were long gone. He would sometimes express this sense by saying that all history was cross-cultural. The process of decipherment of the past was always mysterious and full of human wonderment. Dening would be the first not only to emphasize this point but also to share, in his writing and teaching, some of that mystery with his readers and students. The histories that Dening wrote, for that reason, were never shorn of poetry and philosophy while never compromising on research and scholarship.

Dening spent much of the last decade of his life as a researcher, writer, and speaker but also as a very engaged teacher of graduate students. The Visiting Scholars Program that he and his wife ran almost every year at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (now merged into the Research School of the Humanities) at ANU drew students from across the country and overseas. Dening called these workshops "Challenges to Perform," aiming, with great success, to break down the thralldom of the routine of thesis-writing and to give students a sense of authorship and writerly freedom in what they did with their research and arguments. I was personally privileged enough to participate in several of these workshops and ran one last year with Greg and Donna (as they are known to their friends) for graduate students in History department from The University of Melbourne. It reminded me of their humane presence as scholars in our midst, always interested in others' work, always generous and encouraging in their criticism, always inspiring with their ideas. Stan Katz of Princeton recently described Dening as one of the last humanists of the twentieth century. The description was entirely apt.

A great scholar and a teacher to the core, Dening will be missed and fondly remembered his many students, colleagues, and admirers in different parts of the world.