

Correspondence

A Rejoinder to Yeo Kim Wah's Review Article "David Marshall: The Rewards and Shortcomings of a Political Biography"

On reading Professor Yeo Kim Wah's review article on my book, *A Sensation of Independence: A Political Biography of David Marshall* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984) published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* XVI, No. 2 (September, 1985): 304–321, I was immediately struck by the difference in approach between him as historian and the author as biographer so that I thought a rejoinder would not be out of place.

In writing the political biography of David Marshall, my principal objective was to explore biography as a writing form, to personalise politics by constructing a life and give proof of life in political actions and policies. A successful biography is not just a historical product, it is also a literary form. I will take up the second point later as this is a significant consideration and the craft of writing dictates a method.

I am struck by Professor Yeo's statement that one of the criteria for a successful biography is "a balanced, objective and in-depth analysis of Marshall's political career". This surely is not the only approach to biography. Whilst all biographers strive for balance in the analysis, it is within a biographer's legitimate right to choose to write a sympathetic biography to enhance appreciation of the subject or a negative one, to diminish the reputation of the subject. In this case, I wrote a sympathetic biography. I was certainly aware at the start of the project that Marshall was dismissed as a politician amongst the People's Action Party leaders in Singapore, although there may be some re-evaluation of his role in history today, and that in many circles he was simply looked upon as "flamboyant", "erratic", "vain" and "inconsequential". I therefore thought it worthwhile to give him a full hearing and to try to understand him on his own terms. But whether a biographer chooses to be objective, sympathetic or negative, selectivity and partiality is inevitable, indeed is necessary in the process of writing. No biographer wants to bury his subject alive under a ton of facts. And a biographer as Doris Kearns so rightly reminded us, begins with an angle of vision from which he views his subject.¹ That angle of vision may shift as the work unfolds and usually does, but it is always from an angle, an angle shaped, if we are to be honest with ourselves, by the author's own biography — his attitudes, his perceptions and his feelings towards the subject and the raw materials of facts. From that angle, the author projects the subject, painting in broad strokes, yet sifting through a myriad of facts, incidents and relationships surrounding the subject.

I came to understand David Marshall from a certain vantage point, an insight gained through constant contact during the many interview sessions I conducted with him and through the opportunities of observing him in different contexts, to catch the characteristic phrase and the typical response that reveal the private persona. I saw in Marshall and still see in him a mixture of idealism and vanity, integrity

¹Doris Kearns, "Angles of Vision", *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Washington: New Republic Books, 1979), pp. 90–103.

and ambition, commitment and impatience, leadership and naivety. But the most salient qualities of Marshall in the multi-faceted personality lie in his strong sense of integrity, his idealism and his naivety, which Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew so aptly referred to as “adolescent integrity”. Consequently, I have emphasised these aspects of Marshall’s character, putting more weight on his values and his attitudes as factors propelling his actions.

Ultimately, a biographer’s task is different from that of a historian who is concerned with giving a comprehensive balanced analysis of an event looking at every possible fact and circumstance connected with it. A biographer’s concern is first and foremost to tell the life-story of his subject, to recreate a character, to convey something of the personality and identity of the subject in the actions and to reconstruct how that life was lived. And because subjects can be viewed differently by different people, we often see many versions of the same life. It isn’t that one is wrong and the other right. Multiple lives of the same figure are produced because of the differing angles of vision. The configuration of the life, not the facts, alters. Sometimes new data and new theories can call for a reevaluation of past biographies. Developments in science and knowledge affect the way we view the world, historical and moral changes generate new concerns and cause a whole generation of scholars to ask a different set of questions, thereby stimulating a fresh presentation of the life of the same individual.

Finally, I would like to address the problem of the “numerous minor errors” which the review so painstakingly documented. While I thank Professor Yeo for pointing out the details of citizenship and multi-lingualism among others which I missed, I do not seriously believe for one moment that the course of history is changed simply because I wrote that Dr Chan Heng Chee was from the National University of Singapore rather than the University of Singapore in the context of the narrative (Yeo’s list of errors — p. 9, 4th para., 1.1–2); that Jean Marshall joined the Department of Social Work rather than the Department of Social Studies (the same department which went through a few changes of names — p. 10, 1st para., 1.30); that Malcolm MacDonald was described as originally having come to Singapore to become the Governor-General of the Malayan Union rather than to become the Governor-General of the Malayan Union and the Colony of Singapore, Colony of Sarawak, Colony of North Borneo and State of Brunei or put another way, Governor-General of Malaya and British Borneo (p. 72, 2nd para., 1.3–7). I doubt too that it should be held up as an error that I used the word “reunification” interchangeably for “merger” for stylistic variation (Professor Yeo listed this four times but indicated this was the same error). Professor Yeo was overly particular and I do know the legal implications of “reunification”. Singapore was part of the Straits Settlements, together with Penang and Malacca, but the latter two settlements were included in the Malayan Union along with the Malay states leaving Singapore as a separate Crown Colony in 1946. In the White Paper proposals of the Malayan Union, Singaporeans with specified qualifications could obtain Malayan Union citizenship although this was not included in the Order in Council establishing the Malayan Union because of the controversy surrounding the whole question of citizenship. The point I am making is that Singapore saw itself as part of Malaya, was historically separated from it after 1946 and there were always people in Singapore who thought the two territories should be reunified. This was the prevailing political wisdom, that is, up till 1965.

I must thank Professor Yeo for investing much of his time going through my book. It is my regret that he did not find it sufficiently rewarding. If, however, I have led him to appreciate David Marshall, the man behind the reputation more than before he began I would consider my work as having succeeded in its objective.

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Chan Heng Chee

A Reply

In her well-written rejoinder to my review article Professor Chan Heng Chee states that her intention has been to write a sympathetic biography of David Marshall. This is fully justifiable because “while all biographies strive for balance in the analysis, it is within a biographer’s legitimate right to choose to write a sympathetic biography to enhance appreciation of the subject or a negative one, to diminish the reputation of the subject”. This is offered as a rebuttal to my assessment that overall, the book “inclines too much in favour of Marshall”.

I am afraid that Professor Chan has missed the main thrust of my review which is that a scholar — be he a biographer, historian or political scientist — has an obligation to observe an acceptable degree of factual veracity and accuracy. I am not so concerned with the strong pro-Marshall bias of the book as with the fact that this pro-Marshall slant is based on a series of major analyses and assessments that are factually incorrect. Regrettably, one cannot avoid pointing out that three of these assessments collectively convey a key message of the book, which claims that in his political career Marshall rendered invaluable services to the PAP and therefore, to Singapore. The gist of this message is as follows. As the first Chief Minister of Singapore, Marshall bought time for Lee Kuan Yew and other PAP moderates and thus helped them to defeat the pro-communist movement in the island (Chan, para. 2, p. 245). As a peripheral politician, Marshall prevented Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock late in 1958 from detaining Lee Kuan Yew and his moderate colleagues, and enabled Lee to lead the PAP to victory in the 1959 general election (Chan, para. 2, pp. 215–16). And in his political career Marshall spawned “numerous good ideas” (such as multi-lingualism, a nation-building education policy and so on) which were subsequently translated into policies and implemented by the PAP (Chan, last para., pp. 245–46). Seen in the context of the existing writings on Marshall which, unlike PAP leaders, have been generally sympathetic, the above represents an entirely original, even a revisionist, interpretation of Marshall’s political career in Singapore. Unfortunately I consider this message to be a mistaken reading of the situation, and that it constitutes the single most fundamental weakness of the book. Through this message and in other similar ways, Marshall’s role in Singapore history has been very substantially inflated. In my opinion no biographer’s licence, approach or method can justify such a presentation of David Marshall’s political career.

Professor Chan cites Doris Kearns to the effect that a biography is shaped by an approach which embodies two components namely, “the angle of vision” from which the subject is viewed and the selection of “facts, incidents and relationships surrounding the subject”.

Her version of Marshall therefore, naturally differs from that of a historian who adopts a very different approach. Professor Chan implies that “it isn’t that [her account] is wrong and the other right”; it simply means that “we often see many versions of the same life”.

The biographer’s approach is not a matter of dispute. What is amiss in *A Sensation of Independence* is that the second component of this approach is often weak and consequently, the author has misread the interactions between Marshall, the man, and several objective historical situations. Of the ten major analyses and assessments selected for discussion in my review, seven have been demonstrated to be factually incorrect, one (on the 1955 general election) partially wrong and two others (on the July 1955 constitutional crisis and the registration of the Chinese school student union) overly biased. These errors cannot be explained away by a claim that the author (a biographer) has viewed Marshall from a certain “angle of vision”, while the reviewer (a historian) has examined Marshall from a wider perspective and that consequently, they have come out with different but equally valid versions of the same man. For instance, it is factually wrong for anyone to claim that Marshall was “the first to initiate the struggle for *merdeka*” in Singapore (Chan, p. 176) or that Marshall saved Lee Kuan Yew and other PAP moderates from political detention late in 1958. Judged by the data available to scholars at this point of time, these errors will stand as errors no matter from what “angle of vision” and by whom they are viewed. I am afraid that more convincing reasons should be presented before I would reconsider my conclusion that while Marshall, the man, has been well delineated in the book, the man in action has not.

I note that Professor Chan has offered no comment on the major questions I have discussed but has spent time on making a distinction between minor error and inaccuracy in relation to three minor issues. Compared with the major drawbacks of the book, the minor errors listed in my review are relatively unimportant. They have been included in the review because my intention had been to offer a comprehensive review in which all the merits I could see in the book would have been highlighted and accorded generous praise and all the defects, big and small, frankly and honestly discussed. It is a matter of regret that I have not stated more explicitly that all these minor mistakes only constitute a small flaw that, needless to say, has not really affected the value of the book.

A few words on the merits of the book would not be out of place in view of the final paragraph of the rejoinder. As stated in my review, I have been more than satisfied by the author’s vivid portrayal of Marshall’s character even though Marshall’s personality traits are well-known. Also, the book “has filled two lacunae in the existing writings on Marshall namely, Marshall in Singapore politics to 1953 and Marshall as a fringe politician between 1957 and 1978”. No less important, the book is “one of the most absorbing and readable books on postwar Singapore”.

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Yeo Kim Wah