

Eriko Ogihara-Schuck and Anne Teo, eds. *Finding Francis: A Poetic Adventure*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015. 60 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-7271-4.

Most everyone loves a good story and *Finding Francis: A Poetic Adventure* is a good story. Edited by Eriko Ogihara-Schuck and Anne Teo, the book has an interesting origin and, as the reader discovers later, an open-ended conclusion. *Finding Francis* is a biographical account of Paul Teo Poh Leng, the “Francis” in the book title. As attested to by the editors, it was a rather challenging task to put together the story of Poh Leng and they faced many disappointing moments before they could get their hands on material which would flesh out this person called Francis who was a significant poet in the formation of the literary modernist movement in Singapore.

The Introduction in the book highlights the fascinating journey undertaken by the editors to shape this text, a journey which needed extensive “community support” as the project “spanned diverse historical periods, continents, and cultures” (6). The discovery of this poet came about under interesting circumstances. In the process of her own research, Dr. Eriko stumbled upon a book called *F.M.S.R. A Poem* (1937) which recounted a train trip between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur on the Federated Malay States Railways. This long poem has subsequently been declared “the first notable work of English poetry produced by a Singaporean writer” (8). But the chaos of World War Two, the unavailability of publication information and the fact that Poh Leng wrote under the pseudonym Francis P. Ng made the poem an “orphan work” (8). A chance encounter of a section of this poem in the 1937 issue of *Life and Letters To-day* revealed the poet’s real name. The subsequent search for the person behind the name, which included archival work and interviews led to a meeting with the poet’s niece Anne Teo. *Finding Francis* is a joint effort on so many levels and ultimately a loving tribute to a poet who, as the blurb at the back of the book declares, is “one of Singapore’s lost literary treasures.” His poems are part of the Malayan modernist movement, have been published alongside W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost and won the approval of poets from the U.K. like Silvia Townsend Warner and Ronald Bottrall. Indeed, the whole process from the initial discovery of *F.M.S.R. A Poem* to the creation of *Finding Francis* has been a “poetic adventure,” a vivid, dramatisation of the way a biography, in this context of a little known subject, was constructed.

Finding Francis is a short book, a mere sixty pages, comprising a brief but riveting biographical sketch of Poh Leng by Eriko, a selection of his poems and a concluding section by Anne Teo ending with a poem by Anne’s father (i.e. Poh Leng’s brother), Teo Kah Leng entitled “I Found a Bone.” The way Eriko met Anne and the finding of Kah Leng’s poem also makes an interesting story. Again

we are told how unearthing old material and searching for connections and underlying narratives could yield surprising results. In an account that is very touching, Anne talks about her deceased father and the similarities between him and Poh Leng; Kah Leng too wrote poems. Among his collection, Anne chanced upon “I Found a Bone” which is dedicated to Poh Leng and another brother. Both were killed by the Japanese on Ponggol beach in 1942: “I found a bone at Ponggol Beach/ Half buried in the sand/ And bleached as white by the sea and sun--/ I picked it with my hand./ It was as brittle and as light/ As coral in the sea;/ It once had been an arm like mine,/ And had a hope like me” (56). At the close of her essay Anne says that though the recovery of her uncle’s forgotten poem opened up a painful chapter in the history of the family, now “the two brother-poets will always be remembered for their love of poetry and for their hope, trust and faith” (55). The editors dedicate the book to the brothers: “While they cannot experience their reunion, they have left us with an invaluable story” (7).

In the absence of direct information or the opportunity to talk to members of the family who lived alongside Poh Leng, the editors in *Finding Francis* resorted to different resources to form a collage of a man who should go down the annals of Singaporean-Malaysian English literary history as one of the forerunners of Malayan modernism. In her biographical account of Poh Leng, Eriko does an analysis of *F.M.S.R.* She highlights the experimental techniques employed by the poet which are sometimes reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. She comments especially on his use of soundscape in the poem: “the intricate experiment with sound, and the interplay between noise and silence runs as a coherent thread through the whole poem” (22). Poh Leng’s poetry belongs to the rich, diverse tradition of Western literary modernism of the first half of the twentieth century. Like the poems by his contemporaries, Poh Leng’s poems image life during the turbulent World Wars. But Poh Leng, like the majority of modernist poets, resorted to creative ways of composition which, while capturing the despair and decay of war was, as Poh Leng himself says, a “revolution of the arts” (19). Eriko ends her study of him saying, “his courageous creation of Malayan modernism left a lasting literary legacy” (23).

I enjoyed the book tremendously. *Finding Francis* makes a powerful, multilayered story: the story of Poh Leng, i.e. the story of unearthing, and in the process remembering, a forgotten poet from old monographs and records, the harrowing tale behind “I Found a Bone,” the bond between brothers. The book reflects the power that lies in words and personal memories residing in archival material and modern resources of information. The poems in *Finding Francis* recall the rich history of Malayan literature and capture the “brotherly bond” between Poh Leng and Kah Leng in “the timeless power of this genre” (7). This book would be particularly enjoyed by scholars interested in Singaporean literature,

especially poetry, readers intrigued with the art of biography and anyone who likes a good story.

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