

NON-FICTION

Dan Coggin --- Bangladesh's friend

HAROON HABIB

In December 2011, when Bangladesh was celebrating its 40th independence anniversary, Dan Coggin was on his way to Dhaka after many years. From San Francisco, where he lived after virtual retirement from his long luminous career, Dan reached New York on his way to Dhaka in the third week of December. Not in good health, he was too excited to be in Bangladesh, where he had spent a great time of his career in covering the events of our Liberation War.

We, from the Sector Commanders Forum and Muktiyuddho Jadughar, were eagerly waiting to receive the great American journalist who had witnessed the holocaust of 1971. But despite all his excitements, which he had communicated to me from time to time, Dan could not finally make the trip: he suddenly fell sick and was admitted to a New York hospital. And finally the shock came; his close aide Aninda Atik communicated the sad news: Dan Coggin breathed his last on January 22 after the artificial respiratory system was taken off.

We had invited Dan to be the guest of honour at the Sector Commanders' Forum national convention in Dhaka, held on December 3, 2011, along with two other great Americans Sally Willoughby and Arnold Zeitlin. Arnold, then the Pakistan bureau chief of the Associated Press, was the first Western journalist who dispatched a brief censored report on the Pakistan military's crackdown in Dhaka on March 25, 1971. And Sally, then a young woman, is one of the few courageous American conscious keepers, who, along with her associates, played an exemplary role in organizing the historic blockade of American arms shipment to Pakistan from Baltimore and Philadelphia ports. The two were in Dhaka in December but not Dan, whom we wanted so desperately.

I pay tribute to Dan, who, despite varying risks on his life, covered the crucial events of 1971, painstakingly and extensively, than many other foreign journalists could do. The coverage, including several cover stories in TIME magazine, that Dan and his colleagues had produced on political, military and humanitarian issues, will always be remembered as the most dependable eyewitness accounts of Bangladesh's independence history.

Dan not only covered the Bangladesh war but also wrote extensively on the Vietnam war while posted in Saigon. The veteran U.S. journalist worked for Associated Press (AP) and TIME magazine in 1954-82, besides carrying out his special

assignment for the UN Under Secretary General for the Asia Pacific region.

Dan proved to be a bold reporter, displaying both courage and conviction in the job he was entrusted with. Hours after the launch of the tank-led offensive against unarmed civilians in Dhaka on March 25, 1971, the marauding army imposed a virtual blockade on the brutal crackdown by expelling all foreign journalists from Dhaka. TIME correspondent Dan Coggin, who had to leave Dhaka, did not surrender. He trekked back. He first entered India where thousands of Bangladesh refugees were then pouring in.

Dan was a dashing journalist who was not only interested in covering the refugee

its army was carrying out a large-scale massacre and other persecutions on unarmed Bengali civilians.

But the great American people, including Senator Edward Kennedy, did not agree with Nixon and Kissinger's Bangladesh policy. The influential U.S. media played their due role: they covered the Bangladesh genocide and mass rape quite extensively, to let the world know about the atrocities by a state military machine upon unarmed civilians. And Dan Coggin was one of those prominent journalists whose contribution to unbiased reporting in 1971 was enormous.

In his long career, Dan was not only a reporter per excellence in all his assign-

mentments, he also contributed immensely to ESCAP, producing documentaries and other creative writings. The speeches he wrote for ESCAP's regional inter-governmental meetings were variously technical, propagative, propositional and descriptive of socio-economic problems, with the aim of fostering inter-country action to accelerate development. An advocate for justice, Dan Coggin's major speeches in global forums, such as the UN, sought primarily to put the case of the majority of the world's neediest people in perspective.

Dan resigned from TIME in Mid-1972 to be editor of the Beirut-based Middle East newsmagazine SKETCH. But the growing

hostilities in Beirut forced the magazine to close in late 1974. In January 1975, Dan moved to Jakarta to cover Indonesian issues, including the Pertamina financial crisis, for the Far Eastern Economic Review and The New York Times. In early 1976, as editor-in-chief, Dan Coggin undertook a project in Jeddah by launching the English-language daily Saudi Gazette. He free-lanced in the United States briefly in late 1976 before moving to Hong Kong to join The Star. He was also in the serious investigative business monthly INSIGHT, in Hong Kong, as assistant editor until moving to Bangkok in early 1978 as editor-in-chief of two daily newspapers.

Based in Beirut, Saigon, New Delhi, Singapore and Jakarta, responsible for TIME magazine's news coverage at various times in nearly forty countries from North Africa eastward throughout the Middle East and Asia, Dan Coggin covered spot news and wrote analyses of political, military and economic developments, including of the Vietnam War during the peak 1966-1968 period, the 1970 invasion of Cambodia, Indonesia's 1965-66 anti-communist bloodbath, the Middle East turmoil, two India-Pakistan conflicts and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. He wrote book-length reports on the Vietcong and the Indonesian upheaval. He has to his credit extensive interviews of the late Ahmed Sukarno, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Yasser Arafat, among others.

Dan was one of the few Western journalists who interviewed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman just before March 25, 1971, when the Pakistan military arrested the Bangladesh leader following the launch of 'Operation Searchlight' in Dhaka.

Although he began his career as a domestic reporter, Dan covered the Indian subcontinent quite extensively. He is one of the great reporters who covered President Kennedy's assassination in the mid-sixties. In Georgia and Alabama, in the early years, he covered racial problems, state politics, crime and sports.

Dan Coggin understood the need to serve the cause of humanity and justice, putting his pen precisely opposite to what his country's government did in 1971. We deeply mourn the death of Dan Coggin, the great friend of Bangladesh.



Dan Coggin with Bangabandhu in March 1971

problems in the bordering Indian states, but also developments well inside Bangladesh, where the Mukti Bahini were putting up effective resistance against the Pakistan army and its local Islamist cohorts. In a painstaking journey, he trekked back from India by motorcycle, truck, bus and bicycle, and finally became the first expelled American journalist to re-visit Dhaka. Dan was also in Dhaka to report on the historic surrender of the Pakistan army to the joint India-Bangladesh command on December 16, 1971.

The United States, under Richard Nixon, was in no mood to support Bangladesh's independence. Washington was rather supportive to Pakistan, despite the fact that

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POETRY

My mother tongue will never die!

ERKIN VOHIDOV

A speaker said: "This is the fate! This is the will of world history!

All languages will disappear. Only one language will remain in the world".

"You chatter-box, come on! From where have you got this rubbish?" Navoi and Pushkin arose from their graves.

Angered and surprised, came up one by one Dante, Schiller and Byron, Firdausi, Balzac, Tagore.

"Stop your sermon, brother! What you say will never come true!"

All said together: "My mother tongue will never die!"

"Hey, what a strange idea!" Sacred cup in hand, Khayyam recited a rubai about the Farsi language.

Tears in his eyes, Beranger asked passionately: "Do you mean the French language will die one day?"

Neruda and Lorca stood up along with Cervantes:

"Who dares assault our language with a sharp sword?"

Fizuli exclaimed, enraged: "The Azeri language will not wane like a flower!"

All said together: "My mother tongue will never die!"

To make our languages many-colored like a rainbow,

We took pains for centuries, we suffered for thousands of years.

The efforts to make our languages sweet, were they all in vain?

If so, alas, there is no peace for us even in graves!"

"Faust" burst into flames, "Hamsah" took to fire.

One voice resounded all over the world, crossing mountains.

This voice will be heard for ever and will never be silenced.

The whole world says: "Never! My mother tongue will never die!"

THE POEM IS A TRANSLATION FROM THE ORIGINAL UZBEK. IT WAS MADE AVAILABLE FOR THE DAILY STAR BY JUSTICE MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN.

INTERVIEW

Sounds and syncopations of syllables

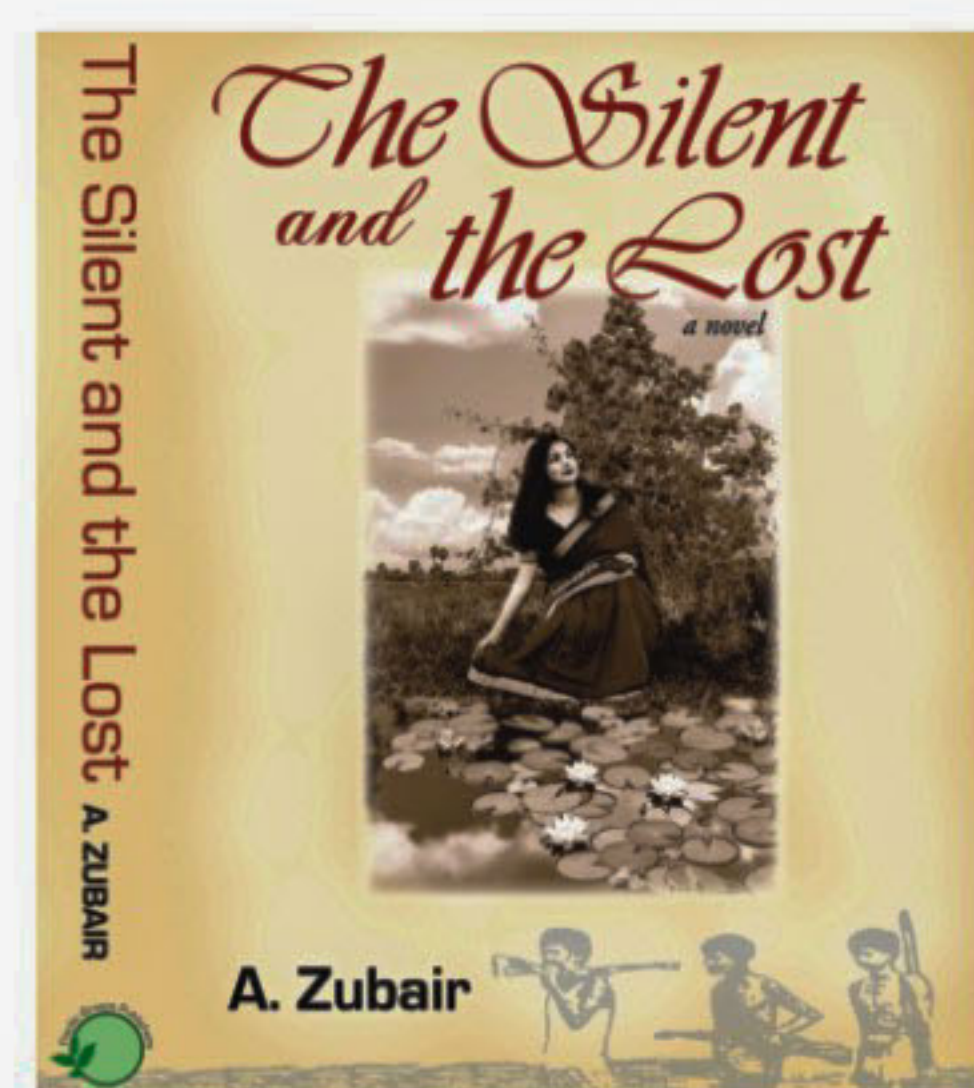
Abu Zubair is an author, an electrical engineer and a California farmer. He was born in Dhaka. At the age of fourteen he was awarded a scholarship to Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Since then he has been living in the US. He holds degrees from Boston University in Computer Science, Computer Engineering and Electrical Engineering and is a member of the Tau Beta Pi Honorary Engineering Society. He was awarded the Bendix Award for Physics. His debut novel, *The Silent and the Lost*, was short-listed in the 2011 Sharp Writ Book Awards from America, making the top three finalists in the fiction category. In an interview with Takir Hossain, Zubair talks about his work and what motivates him to write fiction.

Takir Hossain: How did you get to write this book?

Abu Zubair: It's been my life-long ambition to write a historical novel telling the brutal story of the birth of Bangladesh and the suppressed genocide. *The Silent and the Lost* uniquely places the birth of Bangladesh in the global context, in the light of America's South East Asian policy of the '70s driven by the Vietnam War, covering the back story of '47, and reaching all the way to '97. Spanning fifty years, centered in a pivotal point of time, 1971, my novel chronicles the most revolutionary change in the socio-political landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

I have tried through my novel to tell the story of our country from the point of view of a war baby, Alex Salim McKensie, tormented by the enigma of his birth, that leads into the tale of his mother, Nahar Sulatana, a Birangana. It is about untold accounts of heroism and betrayal, family and friendship, love, anguish and of course our suppressed genocide.

Across the world, sadly very few people even know about the bloodbath that led to the birth of Bangladesh. I believe it is impractical to think that justice can be rendered to the people who were killed in 1971 but we can at least have the world acknowledge the atrocities inflicted upon us during that time. TH: What is the theme of the book? And what motivated you to write it?



Bangladesh, is adopted by the McKensies of California who lost Frank, their only son, in Vietnam. Alex's search takes us into the boiling cauldron of clashes in East Pakistan in 1971. There through the eyes of the newlyweds, Nahar and Rafique, we are immersed into the revolution that created Bangladesh.

Writing has always come naturally to me. And significant experiences throughout my life drove me to write *The Silent and the Lost*. At an early age I started writing poems and published "Freedom" and "Curiosity" in the Morning News and Young Observer. Then I wrote "Memoirs of a Child," my recollection at eleven of the horrific events of 1971, of the Razakars coming to our house, looting it. It won the Shankar Prize from the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1973. Meeting her in Delhi, saluting her as she was smiling at me, saying "Thank you for saving my life," was the highlight of my early writing life--- and what a thrill and motivation to keep writing that has been!

In 1974, I was awarded a scholarship to Phillips Academy Andover, Massachusetts. I have been living in the USA since then. While at Smith House at Andover, I was caught between the sons of an American and a Vietnamese army officer who were always fighting over the Vietnam War that was on



constantly on TV. At Andover I researched and wrote a paper about America supporting Pakistan with arms during the Liberation War. At that time, I used to write for the school paper. I learnt that General Yahya Khan had served in the British Indian 4th Division during World War II and was captured by the Axis forces in North Africa and sent to a war camp in Italy in 1942. The inhuman torture inflicted by Yahya's soldiers on the people of Bangladesh during the Liberation War was practically the same torture technique used by the Nazis and Mussolini.

At Andover I studied German and later travelled to the Dachau concentration camp. That is when I realized the intricate link between the Nazi torture and mentality and Yahya's techniques and how it all affected the birth of our nation. I then starting gathering information on the Liberation War and have been working on this book since 1997.

TH: Who or what inspired you to become an author?

AZ: Brother James. John Steinbeck. These two people come to mind immediately. When I

was at St. Gregory's High School in classes seven and eight, my mentor was Brother James. He was translating the "Gitanjali" and he took me under his arm and gave me great literary works to read. One day he gave me John Steinbeck's "Tortilla Flats." I immediately fell in love with it, devoured every book that came near my fingertips that said Steinbeck. Writing comes from reading and it was no different for me.

Even when I was writing "Memoirs of a Child," I was inspired by Steinbeck's writing style and techniques. I am also inspired by the writing techniques of the Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz. To tell the story of a people, the birth of a nation, I had to cross many genres and forms starting from poetic, to staccato, to journalese to narrate the different events and emotions. In John Steinbeck's writing of "The Grapes of Wrath," you will find vignettes embedded with the story of the Joads. Just so, I have 'Refugee,' my vignette about the ten million who fled to India embedded with the story of Rafique, Nazmul, Nahar and the Rahmans.

If you look at Junot Diaz's Pulitzer winning "The Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao," you will see the embedding of footnotes in his novel telling the story of the Dominican Republic. I know people will comment on footnotes in my book, but that is my decision. As an author I must give immediate and at the fingertips facts to back up this historical novel. Diaz certainly did it, and he takes much more freedom and flare in his footnoted comments.

TH: What kind of experience and education does it take to be a writer?

AZ: Experience. There's nothing like it. That's the ingredient that separates the great authors from the also wrote. A writer is a muse. A medium. Through the eyes, the ears, the skin, the senses of the writer flows in the world, thrums in his veins and finally is etched in black and white on paper.

A writer should be true to his experience --- that usually leads to the best writing taking the reader on a journey into a place, a time he or she will enjoy.

Where I sleep, where I wake up is what I write about. I live in Orange County,

California. My novel starts there. My childhood was spent in Kalabagan and Gazipur --- that is where the story of Nahar and Rafique, the protagonists of my novel, unfolds.

And to answer your question about education. Well, a well rounded education is most important for any writer. My writing started at St. Gregory's in Dhaka. Then to Phillips Academy, Occidental College and Boston University. These are great schools.

I really feel that most great writers are born on the road, in the open, in the thick of the story, and not in ivory towers. Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner and Tagore were primarily self-taught. Pen and paper is all you need. And will and determination.

I started to write pieces of my novel back in 1997. Some pages I wrote, re-wrote many times. I could not get it right. But I kept on writing, or more appropriately re-writing.

My encouragement to the young writer is to keep on writing. Writing does writing. Nothing else. Set aside five minutes a day. Just scribble the first thing that comes into your mind. Don't shoot for goals you will never reach. You will find those five minutes will lead to fifteen in our harried lives. And it is through just these scribbles that you can become a writer.

I also do timed writing with a notebook. Get a cheap notebook. You won't think twice about filling it up with just nothings. Fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes. Just write. Fill up a notebook. Random or focused. Soon maybe on page 30 of a piece you will find the opening hook to a great short story.

Writing cannot really be learned from books. It has to be done. Be a wordsmith. Find good words. Build on good dialogue. Read aloud. Make sure it sounds good. Ultimately it is the sounds, the syncopations of syllables that drive me to the final word on the page that is printed.

I am a California farmer. I am either driving a truck or working on the farm most of the time and have written this book during my spare time on a clipboard in the truck, in the fields, with muddy boots on or when I was taking a lunch break. Quite obviously, my technique is very different from most writers