

Guide to the Robert Ashe Papers

GEN MSS 2157



Quin DeLaRosa

May 2025

P. O. Box 208330
New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	3
Requesting Instructions	3
Administrative Information	3
Immediate Source of Acquisition	3
Conditions Governing Access	3
Conditions Governing Use	4
Preferred Citation	4
Processing Information	4
Biographical / Historical	4
Scope and Contents	5
Arrangement	5
Collection Contents	6
Series I: Correspondence and reports, 1977-1984	6
Series II: Photographs, circa 1975-1981	8
Series III: Press and publications, 1974-1986	12
Series IV: Maps, circa 1953-1970	13
Selected Search Terms	14

Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
P. O. Box 208330
New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

CALL NUMBER: GEN MSS 2157

CREATOR: Ashe, Robert

TITLE: Robert Ashe papers

DATES: 1953–1986

BULK DATES: 1974–1986

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 8.08 linear feet (12 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English; French; Mon-Khmer languages (Khmer script)

SUMMARY: The Robert Ashe papers consist of correspondence, reports, photographs, press clippings, publications, and maps documenting British humanitarian worker Robert Ashe's involvement with international relief efforts to aid Cambodian refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.ashe>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.ashe>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Aam Zamila Ashe-Blair, 2023.

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

Copyright and other associated proprietary rights for unpublished materials authored or otherwise produced by Robert Ashe was transferred to Yale University in 2023. These materials may be used for non-commercial purposes without seeking permission from Yale University as the copyright holder. For other uses of these materials, please contact beinecke.library@yale.edu. Copyright status for other collection materials is unknown. Transmission or reproduction of materials protected by U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.) beyond that allowed by fair use requires the written permission of the copyright owners. Works not in the public domain cannot be commercially exploited without permission of the copyright owners. Responsibility for any use rests exclusively with the user.

Preferred Citation

Robert Ashe Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Processing Information

Collections are processed to a variety of levels, depending on the work necessary to make them usable, their perceived research value, the availability of staff, competing priorities, and whether or not further accruals are expected. The library attempts to provide a basic level of preservation and access for all collections, and does more extensive processing of higher priority collections as time and resources permit.

These materials have been arranged and described according to national and local standards. For more information, please refer to the Yale Archival Processing Manual.

The order of the materials has been substantially rearranged by the archivist to promote usability. Creator-assigned descriptive information has been used to devise file titles and can be identified by the use of quotation marks.

A selection of the materials in Series IV are currently undergoing in-house conservation and will be made available for research following the completion of this intervention.

Biographical / Historical

Robert Ashe (1953-2022) was an English humanitarian best known for his role as director of Nong Chan refugee camp on the Thai/Cambodian border and later career with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Born in Woolwich, England, Ashe completed his studies at the Agricultural College in Cirencester before embarking in 1973 on a series of humanitarian posts in Southeast Asia. His work with refugees began in Vietnam as a member of Project Vietnam Orphans (PVO), a non-profit organization that his parents founded to support orphaned and abandoned children. This association with PVO – since renamed to Christian Outreach – evolved into a sustained leadership role from 1975-1980, during which time Ashe directed other international volunteers in providing aid within refugee camps along the Thai/Cambodian border. From 1979-1980, while seconded to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Ashe directed the operations of the Nong Chan refugee camp on the border between Aranya Prathet in Thailand and Poipet in Cambodia. Ashe implemented the "Land Bridge" initiative, a cross-border operation to funnel food and agricultural tools to refugees in Cambodia via Thailand. It was during this time Ashe became embroiled in an international incident as one of four Western civilians taken hostage by Vietnamese troops from June 27-30, 1980, amidst their military offensive into Thailand.

Following his work with ICRC, Ashe worked with Food for the Hungry International (FHI) before joining UNHCR for the remainder of his humanitarian career. UNHCR assigned Ashe to posts in Sudan (1986-1989);

Geneva, Switzerland (1989-1994, 1996-2002); The Hague, Netherlands (1995-1996); and Jakarta, Indonesia (2002-2009).

Ashe was married to Var Hong, a Cambodian refugee at the time they met, from 1982-1993. He later married Aam Zamila Dachlan in 2002, whom he remained with until his death in Indonesia in 2022.

Scope and Contents

The Robert Ashe papers consist of correspondence, reports, photographs, press clippings, publications, and maps documenting British humanitarian worker Robert Ashe's involvement with international relief efforts to aid Cambodian refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The collection provides a window into Ashe's experience directing a refugee camp amidst a complex political situation and in coordination with several international humanitarian organizations. Much of the materials also document the experiences of Cambodians fleeing political violence, famine, and economic devastation in the aftermath of the Cambodian Genocide and subsequent Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

Correspondence, reports, and photographs illustrate Ashe's personal experiences and reflections on his humanitarian work along the Thai/Cambodian border. Maps, press clippings, and publications collected by Ashe provide a wider perspective on the refugee crisis extending potentially as early as the 1950s and as late as the mid-1980s. While English is the predominant language of the materials, numerous instances of French and Khmer are present.

Sensitive content is present in Boxes 3 and 5, which contain photographs featuring graphic depictions of deceased persons.

Arrangement

Organized into four series: I. Correspondence and reports, 1977-1984; II. Photographs, circa 1975-1981; III. Press and publications, 1974-1986; IV. Maps, circa 1953-1970.

Collection Contents

Series I: Correspondence and reports, 1977-1984

0.83 linear feet

Series I contains correspondence and reports created, received, and/or compiled by Robert Ashe.

Correspondents include numerous private individuals, many of whom sought Ashe's perspective for their research on humanitarian operations. Representatives of numerous organizations -- government, international, and non-governmental -- are represented in the correspondence as well. This notably includes the militant partisan leader Kong Sileah. Ashe's reports to ICRC and Christian Outreach, circa 1979-1981, feature heavily in this series. Ashe's leadership of Nong Chan, especially regarding the operations of the "Land Bridge," is a central topic across each of these categories.

Personal narratives written by Cambodian refugees are interspersed across this series. Most of these writings have been translated into English.

Series I is arranged chronologically.

b. 1, f. 1	Refugee narratives and correspondence with British officials	1977
b. 1, f. 2	Robert Ashe, <i>The Dark Night</i> pamphlet	1977
b. 1, f. 3-4	Correspondence, reports, press, and personal narratives on the forced repatriation of Cambodian refugees English; Mon-Khmer languages Material is in English and Khmer. Also includes an article by historian Ben Kiernan.	1979
b. 1, f. 5	Refugee narratives and Paul Quinn-Judge's <i>Notes on the Political Sources of Conflict Between Vietnam and Cambodia</i> English; Mon-Khmer languages Material is in English and Khmer.	1979 February, undated
b. 1, f. 6	Correspondence between forcibly repatriated refugees and their friends and families	1979 April
b. 1, f. 7	Assorted press, correspondence, and reports	1979-1980
b. 1, f. 8	Reports on Nong Chan Land Bridge, speech by Tith Sarun to UN Secretary-General Waldheim, and refugee narrative	1979-1980
b. 1, f. 9	Reports to Christian Outreach and other correspondence	1979-1980
b. 1, f. 10	Robert Ashe's correspondence with Kong Sileah and the Moulinaka English; French Material is in English and French. Also includes some clippings relating to the Khmer Serei groups and a few photocopied maps.	1979-1980
b. 1, f. 11	Robert Ashe's reports to ICRC and related correspondence Also includes a few hand-drawn maps and one ICRC publication.	1979-1980
b. 1, f. 12	"Border Relief, 1979-1981"	1979-1981

b. 1, f. 13	Correspondence and reports involving ICRC and Christian Outreach	1979–1981
b. 1, f. 14	Correspondence and Thai government reports	circa 1979-1982
b. 1, f. 15	Reports and clippings on famine and food distribution	1979–1982
b. 2, f. 1	Assorted press, correspondence, and reports	1980
b. 2, f. 2	Correspondence on Robert Ashe's capture by Vietnamese military forces	1980 June–1980 July
b. 2, f. 3	Correspondence on the operations of Nong Chan refugee camp	1980–1984
b. 2, f. 4	Correspondence and reports from the Comité Européen d'Aide aux Réfugiés	circa 1982
b. 2, f. 5-6	Draft and correspondence relating to book chapter	1982–1984
b. 2, f. 7	Robert Ashe's correspondence with William Shawcross and Robert Porter on book production	1983
b. 2, f. 8	Correspondence on international relief aid and related television program	1983–1984
b. 2, f. 9	Descriptions of the Cambodian Genocide by the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crime	undated
b. 2, f. 10	Personal narrative on the Nong Chan refugee camp French Material is in French.	undated

Series II: Photographs, circa 1975-1981*3.25 linear feet*

Series II contains approximately 1,100 color and black-and-white photographic prints compiled by Robert Ashe. With the exception of one file containing 8"x10" prints, almost all are roughly 3"x5". Versos often contain additional information such as film roll numbers and, occasionally, descriptive captions.

Image content features extensive subject matter relating to life in the refugee camps with a focus on Nong Chan. Such content includes though is not limited to images depicting Robert Ashe, resident and non-resident refugees, relief workers, construction of camp facilities, recreational activities, childrens' educational programming, distribution of rice by ICRC, distribution of fishing nets by Christian Outreach, and the funeral of militant partisan leader Kong Sileah.

Graphic depictions of deceased persons are present in Boxes 3 and 5. These images include depictions of mass graves, decomposing corpses, and victims of the Cambodian Genocide.

Photographs were removed from their original housing -- small, flip photo albums -- for preservation considerations during processing. These albums have been retained for their inscriptions and production information and are represented in the description by the file "Original photographic housing, circa 1976-1981."

Series II is arranged primarily by ascending numerical groupings of film rolls. Within film rolls, files are arranged chronologically.

	Film 00	
b. 3	"Film 00 May '77"	1977 May
b. 3	"MAY 1977"	1977 May
	Film 07	
b. 3	"Film 07 SEPT. 77"	1977 September
	Film 09	
b. 3	"FILM 09 OCT. 77"	1977 October
	Film 23	
b. 3	"FILM 23 MARCH 78"	1978 March
	Film 40	
b. 3	"FILM 40 August 1978"	1978 August
	Film 41	
b. 3	"FILM 41 Aug 78"	1978 August
	Film 44	
b. 3	"FILM 44 Sept. 78"	1978 September
	Film 49	
b. 3	"FILM 49 Nov. 1978"	1978 November
	Film 50	

Film 50 (continued)

b. 3	"Film 50 Nov. 1978"	1978 November
	Film 51	
b. 3	"FILM 51 Nov. 1978"	1978 November
	Film 52	
b. 3	"FILM 52 Nov. '78"	1978 November
	Film 57	
b. 3	"FILM 57 Dec 31 '78 / Jan 1 '79"	1978 December 31–1979 January 1
	Film 68	
b. 5, f. 1	"FILM 68 April 1979"	1979 April
	Film 77	
b. 3	"Film 77 July 1979"	1979 July
	Film 80	
b. 3	"FILM 80 August 1979"	1979 August
	Film 82	
b. 3	"Film 82 August 1979"	1979 August
	Film 89	
b. 3	"FILM 89"	circa 1979
	Film 91	
b. 3	"FILM 91 OCT 1979"	1979 October
	Film 92	
b. 3	"Film 92 OCT. 1979"	1979 October
	Film 93	
b. 3	"FILM 93 October 1979"	1979 October
	Film 94	
b. 5, f. 2	"Film 94 OCT '1979"	1979 October
	Film 95	
b. 3	"Reprints from Film 95" Photographic content includes graphic depictions of deceased persons.	1979 October
b. 3	"FILM 95 Nov. 1979" Photographic content includes graphic depictions of deceased persons.	1979 November

Film 96

b. 3	"FILM 96 OCT. 1979"	1979 October
b. 5, f. 3	"Film 96 Nov. 1979" Photographic content includes graphic depictions of deceased persons.	1979 November
b. 3	"Reprints from Film 96" Photographic content includes graphic depictions of deceased persons.	1979 November

Films A-E Nong Chan

b. 3	"FILM A Jan. 1980 Nong Chan"	1980 January
b. 3	"Film B Jan. 1980 Nong Chan"	1980 January
b. 3	"Film C Feb. 1980 Nong Chan"	1980 February
b. 3	"FILM D FEB. 1980 NONG CHAN & SAMET"	1980 February
b. 3	"FILM E MARCH 1980"	1980 March

Missing film rolls

b. 5, f. 4	Mass graves and victims of the Cambodian Genocide Contains 8 8"x10" black-and-white photographs. Photographic content includes graphic depictions of deceased persons.	circa 1975-1979
b. 3	Untitled Photographic content includes graphic depictions of deceased persons.	circa 1976-1980
b. 3	Untitled	circa 1976-1980
b. 4	"OCT. 1976"	1976 October
b. 4	"NOV. 1976" An inscription on the original housing suggests these images could potentially comprise parts of film roll 36, yet the dates cast doubt on this.	1976 November
b. 4	"DEC 77"	1977 December
b. 5, f. 5	"FEB 1979"	1979 February
b. 5, f. 6	"April 1979 Wat Koh, Aran. New arrivals (taken by Buzz)"	1979 April
b. 4	"LUMPINI TRANSIT CENTRE"	1979 June
b. 4	"November 1979"	1979 November
b. 4	"November 1979"	1979 November
b. 4	"November 1979"	1979 November

Missing film rolls (continued)

b. 4	<p>"Fishing net distribution. NONG CHAN."</p> <p>The following statement is inscribed on the original photograph housing: "Being done in conjunction with a rice distribution which is not funded or organised by C.O.R. Nets are in packets of 10 on top of rice sacks. Each group of 30 people people receive 2 packets of nets."</p>	1980 April
Multiple film rolls		
b. 4	<p>Untitled</p> <p>Contains images from film rolls C, F, and possibly more.</p>	1980
b. 4	<p>Untitled</p> <p>Contains images from film rolls A, B, C, D, and possibly more.</p>	1980–1981
b. 5, f. 7	<p>Photography book by Tim Carney, <i>Kampuchea: Balance of Survival</i></p> <p>Photographs taken from 1979-1980. Book published in 1981.</p>	1981
b. 5, f. 8-9	Original photographic housing	circa 1976-1981
b. 6, f. 1-5	Original photographic housing	circa 1976-1981
b. 7, f. 1-5	Original photographic housing	circa 1976-1981

Series III: Press and publications, 1974–1986

1.25 linear feet

Series III contains press clippings and publications collected by Robert Ashe during his humanitarian posts in Mainland Southeast Asia. These works are of varying national, international, and organizational origins. Collectively, they highlight the evolving political turmoil in the region between the 1970s and 1980s, spotlighting its impacts on the Cambodian refugee crisis and accompanying international humanitarian response.

Most materials in this series represent the following national or international perspectives and publications: British (*The Guardian*, *Observer*); American (*Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*); English-language Hong Kong (*Far Eastern Economic Review*); English-language Thai (*Bangkok Post*, *Voice of the Nation* / *The Nation*, *Bangkok World*, *Business in Thailand*); English-language publications from non-governmental organizations (i.e. from the International Committee of the Red Cross); and limited instances of unidentified publications. The most abundant viewpoint is that of the English-language, Thai print news media.

Series III is arranged chronologically.

b. 8, f. 1-3	Clippings	1974–1976
b. 8, f. 4-8	Clippings	1977
b. 9, f. 1-4	Clippings	1978
b. 9, f. 5-8	Clippings	1979
b. 10, f. 1-3	Clippings	1979
b. 10, f. 4	Clippings	1979–1980
b. 10, f. 5	Clippings	1979–1981
b. 10, f. 6	<i>Business in Thailand</i>	1979 December and 1981 November
b. 10, f. 7	ICRC, <i>Red Cross Times Special Edition: Report from the ICRC delegation in Thailand</i>	1980 March
b. 10, f. 8	ICRC, <i>Red Cross Times</i>	1980 May–1981 March
b. 10, f. 9	Clippings	1981
b. 10, f. 10	Thailand Ministry of Interior, <i>An Instrument of Foreign Policy: Indochinese Displaced Persons</i>	1981 September
b. 10, f. 11	ICRC, <i>Kampuchea: Back From The Brink</i>	1981 October
b. 10, f. 12	Articles from <i>The New Yorker</i> and <i>The New Republic</i>	1986

Series IV: Maps, circa 1953-1970*2.75 linear feet*

Series IV contains numerous maps collected by Robert Ashe.

Most of the materials in this series are published, large-format maps. These feature political and topographical projections of Cambodia, including its capital of Phnom Penh, in English, French, and Khmer. Also included is a small quantity of hand-drawn sketch maps depicting the locations of refugee camps and other notable sites along the Thai/Cambodian border.

A selection of the materials in Series IV are currently undergoing in-house conservation and will be made available for research following the completion of this intervention. At present, these materials are represented by the file "Miscellaneous maps, undated."

Series IV is arranged chronologically.

b. 11 (Oversize), f. 1	French map of the Kingdom of Cambodia French Material is in French.	circa 1953-1970
b. 11 (Oversize), f. 2	U.S. Army map of Phnom Penh English; Mon-Khmer languages; French Material is in English, Khmer, and French.	1961
b. 11 (Oversize), f. 3-4	Two French maps of Cambodia French Material is in French.	undated
b. 12, f. 1	Hand-drawn sketch map of Nong Chan refugee camp	undated
b. 12, f. 2	Hand-drawn sketch map of Thai/Cambodian border refugee camps and road system	undated
	Miscellaneous maps These materials, comprising a minimum of six items, are currently undergoing in-house conservation to support long-term preservation and access. The items will receive enhanced descriptions of their content and be made available for research following the completion of this intervention. Please contact the appropriate curator for further information.	undated

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Genocide -- Cambodia
Humanitarianism
Non-governmental organizations
Political atrocities -- Cambodia
Refugee camps
Refugees -- Cambodia

Geographic Names

Cambodia
Cambodia -- History -- 20th Century
Cambodia -- Pictorial works
Southeast Asia
Thailand

Genres / Formats

Clippings (information artifacts)
Correspondence
Maps (documents)
Photographic prints

Names

Ashe, Robert

Acquired From

Ashe-Blair, Aam Zamila