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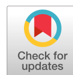

BOOK REVIEWS

The King and the Consul: A British Tragedy in Old Siam

By Simon Landy. 248 pp. Bangkok, Thailand, River Books Press, 2022.

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When I was at school in Chiang Mai in around the mid-1990s, like many students of my generation, I learned that Thailand remained the only non-colonised country in Southeast Asia thanks largely to the cleverness, masterful diplomacy, and timely adaptation of Thai elites, especially kings, during the mid-nineteenth century. According to this narrative, the dawn of such adaptive arts rose during the reign of King Mongkut (r. 1851–68), who spoke English with ease and mastered many Western sciences to the point that he was later venerated as 'The Father of Science and Technology'. The ascension of Mongkut to the throne started a new era of Siam's relationship with Western powers, especially the British, in a positive light.

One of the great achievements during Mongkut's reign was the smooth negotiation and signing of the Bowring Treaty, although Siam had to agree to unprecedented concessions such as the forced opening of its ports, extraterritorial rights, a reduction in trade taxes, and a relaxation in certain areas so that foreigners would be allowed to reside and trade in the country. These concessions lessened the threat of colonisation and prompted an amicable relationship between Siam and Western countries. While other Asian counterparts, such as China, Japan, Ava (Burma), and Vietnam, persisted in their xenophobic attitude and resisted adapting, many ended up being colonised or suffered humiliation due to unequal treaties.

In *The King and the Consul*, Simon Landy illustrates that the Anglo-Siamese relationship had not always been as smooth as is commonly understood, at least among the Thai public. In doing so, with abundant primary sources and archival research, Landy shines a light on one incident (tragedy), overlooked by many historians, that took place about a year after the Bowring Treaty was signed. This incident involved King Mongkut and the first British consul to Bangkok, Charles Batten Hillier, whom Landy refers to in the title of the book.

Landy begins with the signing of the Bowring Treaty and the supplemental agreement under the supervision of Bowring's secretary, Harry Parkes, in the context of division among Siamese elites and traditional property rights. Article IV of Parkes's agreement allowed the British Consulate to be built in Siam—a task that Charles Hillier, the chief magistrate of Hong Kong, intended to achieve. Bowring entrusted Hillier to become the first British consul to Siam on his arrival on 5 June 1856. Nevertheless, Hillier faced a harsh reality, despite the existence of the treaty and the theory that all land in Siam belonged to the king—Siamese elites remained unfamiliar with the idea of documented land ownership and the fact that the king's authority was very limited, as most of

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Siam's land remained undocumented. Many noblemen who owned the land did not want to rent or sell it to foreigners (pp. 132–34). Despite such difficulties, Hillier managed to secure a deal on a desirable plot of land next to the Chao Phraya River and near to the Portuguese Consulate.

However, what Landy called 'the tragedy' then occurred, which was the arrest of Ai-Fung—a Siamese who allegedly acted as foreman to buy land and lease that land for Christopher Puddicome, a British entrepreneur. Siamese authority interpreted Ai-Fung's act as having violated Article IV. Hillier, who was suffering from dysentery, stepped in to resolve the case. In the meantime, the situation worsened when Mongkut ordered the arrest of Seng—a Thai teacher at the British Consulate and former confidant of Mongkut when both were in monkhood—for a reason that remained unclear but presumably related to Puddicome's land. Mongkut ordered Seng to be flogged, which unfortunately led to Seng's death. In the end, Hillier was able to have Ai-Fung released and Seng's body delivered to the British Consulate. It was the success that Hillier traded his own life for, as he passed away soon after the cases were resolved (p. 166). Mongkut realised that his action might have caused diplomatic and political backlash, and so he compensated the British by giving them part of the designated land on which Hillier had planned to build the Consulate, along with other land as gifts. This lesser-known tragedy led to a huge step in developing property rights in Siam.

Other merits that stand out in this book are that Landy shows the reality of how Mongkut's authority was very limited and that the Siamese court fumed with division. There were the 'liberal', consisting of Mongkut, Si Suriyawong (the Kalahom or the Minister of the South), and Prince Wongsa, who wanted to push forward the reform including the signing of the treaty (p. 33), while the 'conservative', who were Somdet Ong Yai, Si Suriyawong's father, Phraklang (equivalent to the minister of foreign affairs), and Somdet Ong Noi, Ong Yai's younger brother, resisted the change (p. 37). The Thai king's authority had not always been supreme for an untraceable amount of time, but it was fragmented and needed to be balanced by other nodes of power such as the Front Palace and the influential Bunnag family. One example is that the land on which Hillier planned to build the consul was owned by a nobleman who pledged allegiance toward the Front Palace, whom Mongkut advised Hillier to contact directly, as his power was limited (p. 141). Mongkut's decision to give land as gifts to the British could also be seen as his way of exercising power against other factions.

Another interesting point of the book is the human dimension of Mongkut. Unlike the main Thai narrative that projects him as highly intelligent, calm, and benevolent, Landy's book projects him as a human being who sometimes got consumed by his own temper, especially regarding his order to flog Seng, which principally led to the tragedy. His hot temper later made Mongkut regretful and he fixed the damage by giving land as gifts to the British.

Although the book culminates around Hillier's tragedy, it has great potential as a valuable scaffold for future comparable studies to build upon—Siam's relationship with other Western countries that signed treaties with it might experience such a 'tragedy' as did the British. Another point that Landy himself declares as a limitation (p. 197) is how property rights, land grants, and freehold for foreigners worked in other parts of Thailand. A recent research project at Chiang Mai University argues that vast land plots, which are a huge part of the university today, were once owned by British families, such as the McFees and the Queripels (britishheritageinchiangmai.com). However, the main narrative of the university has not mentioned anything about these ownerships.

In sum, *The King and the Consul* is a rich and well-documented book about the overlooked tragedy that played a significant role in the development of property rights in Thailand. It shines a light on Hillier, the less well-known figure compared with Ernest

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Satow (1843–1929), the first British minister to Bangkok, or Josiah Crosby (1880–1958), the British minister to Bangkok during the Second World War. The book could also be a helpful reference point for comparative studies with other Western powers in Thailand. It is a vital addition to the studies of Thai diplomacy and the making of the modern Thai state.

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March to Freedom: Reflections on India's Independence

Edited by Mrinalini Venkateswaran. 273 pp. New Delhi, DAG, 2022.

Tipu Sultan: Image and Distance

Edited by Giles Tillotson. 175 pp. New Delhi, DAG, 2022.

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The Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) has become a remarkable phenomenon on the Indian cultural scene. It was founded in 1993 and has, by the skilful buying and selling of Indian art, both built up a major collection of Indian art and become a significant patron of activities relating to it, with centres in New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and New York. The two volumes under review, in both cases hardback volumes produced to the highest standards, are the catalogues of exhibitions put on by DAG in the summer of 2022. *March to Freedom* is designed to celebrate the 75th anniversary of India's independence. It was planned by Mrinalini Venkateswaran, who is a Leverhulme early career fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London, and was launched at the Indian Museum in Kolkata. *Tipu Sultan* was planned by Giles Tillotson, who was senior vice-president of Exhibitions and Publications at DAG, and the exhibition took place in Delhi.

The artworks selected for *March to Freedom* have come primarily from the DAG collection. They enable us to see, as Venkateswaran tells us, 'how the arts as a whole (from painting to cinema), the economy (and the ordinary people driving it), public spaces (and public use of it) colonial institutions (such as courts, and museums, and universities), infrastructure (notably the railways), and colonised disciplines (such as history and art history) were all repurposed and re-imagined as sites from which to resist colonialism, and shape an independent nation' (p. 11). Eight scholars contribute the essays that expand on these themes. Maroona Murmu points towards those who are underrepresented or forgotten in the official histories of India's freedom movement, such as the Adivasis, Dalits, and the tribes of the north-east. Sumathi Ramaswamy reminds us of how women are frequently overlooked in popular nationalist imagery while, ironically, the female form was the embodiment of the nation. Sujit Sivasundaram, through a fascinating study of the Madras Observatory and the role of Indians in providing the scientific information for longitude calculations, demonstrates the links between trade, science, and political thought. Aashique Ahmed Iqbal, not least through some remarkable Indian Railways posters, tells of how the railways helped Indians to imagine India. Lakshmi

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