

Anthony Farrington, ed., *Low's Mission to Southern Siam, 1824*. Bangkok, White Lotus, 2007, x + 126 pp. Price not given.

Not content with producing, with Dr Dhiravat na Pombejra, the magnificent two-volume compendium of texts in *The English Factory in Siam 1612–1685* in 2007, the now retired deputy director of the British Library in charge of the India Office and Oriental collections, Anthony Farrington, has also found the time to publish in the same year a slim volume detailing James Low's abortive mission to Nakhon Sithammarat in 1824.

Low was an unusual character. Along with Henry Burney, he was the only officer in the Indian army who bothered to learn both Malay and Siamese; Low produced the first account of Siamese literature (reproduced in *JSS* 2007) and the first grammar of Siamese in a Western language. Sent on a mission to what was known to foreigners as Ligor, and simply Nakhon to locals, to find out if support might be forthcoming from its 'rajah' in the form of boats to supplement the planned British attack on Burma, Low was also deputed to discover the extent of the writ of its quasi-feudal ruler. During the course of the mission it became very clear that the 'rajah', unlike the Malay kinglets further south, was entirely subject to the rule of the 'Emperor of Siam', and did not dare make a move without the agreement of his overlord.

In fact, on this mission Low was not given permission to travel overland to

Ligor, and never met the 'rajah', but only his youthful son, who proved surprisingly competent a diplomat. Low refused to divulge the subject of his request to meet his father, and reasonably enough the 'rajah' refused to move and meet him until the subject was revealed. So Low hung out in the Trang River and sent numerous missives to Nakhon, while the Siamese played the long-tried game of polite delay and inaction. The British had declared war on Ava on 5 March 1824, the *causus belli* being frontier incursions into India, and by 10 May were in complete possession of Rangoon. By then, the need for supplementary boats had passed; so had the need for support in any form from Siam, and the limited authority of Ligor's 'rajah' had also become obvious.

All this is detailed in this delightful little book. It takes the form of a general introduction to Low, his report of his Mission, dated 1 August 1824, the journal of his mission from 5 May to 8 August in that year, and relevant official correspondence from March to July 1824, which starts off with a 'Secret Letter from the Governor General of India in Council', Calcutta, 12 March 1824, to the Governor of Penang, announcing 'the declaration of hostilities' with the state of Ava, the anticipated need of boats, and the possible occupation of Tavoy, Mergui and Junk Ceylon (Phuket) – the last-named not to be.

The book concludes with a bibliography of Low's extensive writings and cartographic work in the region, helpful end notes, and an index.

Unlike the French expeditions of 1685 and 1687-8, Low had the good sense to take along an artist, probably recruited in Penang, Bun Khong, whose works, reproduced elsewhere by the late Henry Ginsburg, are charming Siamese examples of the Company School. The Low album in the British Library shows details of a Buddha statue being carried in procession, which has often been reproduced; there is also a pencil drawing of a Ramayana performance which Low witnessed on 4 June at Phangnga, and one of the arrival at Trang harbour of 'the Boota or Boot', i.e. the son of the 'Prince of Ligor' on 24 June 1824.

Low, well known for his maps and indeed enriched by them (he was granted 2,000 Spanish dollars for his map of Siam, Cambodia, and Laos presented to the Penang government in April 1824), is not so well served here. The 1824 map of Siam reproduced in this volume is on too small a scale to be of much use. A detailed one of southern Siam (or an enlargement of the 1824 map of this part of the country) would have been useful for current readers. The cover of this volume, though, an enhanced version of the now faint drawing (found on p. 12) of Low's meeting with the Boota, is extremely successful.

It becomes a pleasure to read Low's elegant, some might say pompous prose, though while accepting that 'gratulating under the idea' or 'two inosculating streams' are terms that could be expressed more directly, it is better than certain would-be with-it historians' use of terms like trope, Other, oecumene, or

topos. Even Low has lapses, though, as with 'to distinctly understand' (p. 8).

Low returns several times to his belief that the Malays of southern Siam 'detest and fear the Siamese', though offers little proof of this. There was, of course, no love lost for the Burmese, and what he terms 'man-stealing', a long-practised occupation, remained common: 'the Siamese have carried many thousands of Burman families into captivity'. He was probably right to believe that the Siamese 'entertain [the notion] that the attack on Ava is only a prelude to one upon Siam.' Like so many of his time – though, in the end, not of the authorities in Calcutta – he is convinced that 'Salang' (i.e. Junk Ceylon, otherwise Phuket) and its inhabitants would be better off 'if placed by negotiation under British rule... diffusing happiness, the chief end of good government', a thought, fortunately for the Thai treasury today, which remained no more than that.

He carefully explores the coast and details the products and economy of the different southern provinces coming under the governancy of Nakhon. There is a good deal of information here about the west coast, in particular Phangnga and Phuket, which were virtually depopulated and unknown at the time.

As an observer, he is often acute, and was very aware of the evils of corvée labour, leaving the women to work the fields as well as cope with household and family chores. He notes that the Chinese are very leniently taxed, in part

because they contribute to the flow of funds to Bangkok.

In short this is a very good read, and while one must be thankful that his expedition bore no fruit, one must also be grateful for his having left so fascinating a record of it.

Michael Smithies

---

Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2006, 234 pp., Bt 625.

In *Subject Siam*, Dr Tamara Loos examines changes in family law in Thailand, formerly Siam, beginning in 1855, when Rama IV signed the first of several unequal treaties with foreign powers, and ending in 1935 when the government finally promulgated the family law code. In this period, at the behest of the crown, Siamese jurists who had studied abroad and various foreign legal experts rewrote Siamese family law. In the newly incorporated Muslim south, the country's rulers created separate 'native' courts for the application of Islamic family law, modelled after colonial forms of jurisprudence in neighbouring British Malaya. In the rest of the kingdom, after much debate, Siamese legal reformers eventually abolished polygyny and established monogamous marriage as the legal norm, following the conventions established by Siam's neighbouring imperial powers. The debate over polygyny had important implications for the legal definition of a legitimate wife and the inheritance of wealth and status. After legal reforms in the reign of Rama VI, ideal male citizens were those who had stable marriages with "honorable" women, not with harlots, prostitutes, or mistresses. According to Dr Loos, family law was "the pivotal arena in which the leaders of Siam negotiated modernity, proved its