

Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: a Cultural and Literary History*. Oxford, Signal Books, 2008, xvi+232 pp., ill., index, ISBN 978-1-904955-40-5.

As a fledgling Australian diplomat in 1959 to 1961, Milton Osborne was posted to Phnom Penh. At the time, I was a fledgling American diplomat. Osborne and I overlapped in Cambodia for almost a year. In that far-off era, we both fell in love with a city that was then perhaps the prettiest in Southeast Asia. My memories of the place often came to mind as I read my old friend's deft and engaging book.

In his opening chapter, which follows an amiable foreword by William Shawcross, Osborne recalls what the city was like when we were both first there and sketches what happened in Cambodia at large between then and 2008. The next two chapters take us from the semi-mythical 'foundation' of the city in the 1400s (evidence suggests it was inhabited much earlier than this) through the Spanish and Portuguese intrusions of the 1590s until the eighteenth century when Cambodia passed off the radar screen, for Westerners at least, for over a hundred years.

Chapter Four, 'Royal City, Colonial City' (pp. 49–74), covers the first two decades of French 'protection' that began in 1863 with King Norodom's acquiescence and lasted for ninety years. When the French imposed their control, Cambodia's capital was upstream at Udong, but at French insistence Phnom Penh, which was better suited for com-

merce, became the capital in 1866.

The French developed the city more or less from scratch. In 2008, the north-eastern quadrant of the city, along with the kingdom's provincial capitals and Cambodia's road network, is probably France's most enduring legacy. Between the independence monument and Wat Phnom, dozens of gracious villas and a few mustard-coloured government buildings still give that part of the city an air of southern France. The Art Deco Central Market, built in the 1930s, is another souvenir of the colonial era, and so is the royal palace.

The chapters that cover the colonial period (pp. 79–123) form the centre-piece of Osborne's book. They are drawn from a range of sources including archives and travellers' accounts and are uniformly excellent. Osborne makes good use of the writings of such sojourners as Pierre Loti, Paul Claudel, Charlie Chaplin and Somerset Maugham. He also revisits French novels about Phnom Penh, and resuscitates several other books, probably best forgotten, that give us glimpses of the city when, as he puts it, it was (as it still is, for most travellers) a 'way station to the Angkor temples'.

Osborne calls the period 1939–1953 'the watershed years' because it was in this period that Cambodia entered a wider world, under pressure from the Second World War and the First Indo-China War (1946–1954). In 1953, the kingdom received its independence after some hard bargaining by Cambodia's young, Francophile monarch, Norodom Sihanouk (1922–). In exchange for

granting independence, France retained its economic and cultural stake in the kingdom. Until the 1970s, French was Cambodia's official language.

In Chapter 8 (pp.12–140), which Osborne calls 'Sihanouk Time' we learn that Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 1955 to become an 'ordinary citizen'. He formed a political movement, the Sangkum (literally 'Society') that dominated Cambodian politics for the next fifteen years. Osborne, who has written a biography of the prince, condenses a crowded era into seventeen adroitly written pages and conveys Sihanouk's charm, as well as his ruthlessness, while recognizing with hindsight that for Phnom Penh as well as for the prince, his country and the people he called his 'children', tragedy was just around the corner. The chapter closes with what struck me an overly brief description of the Khmer Republic, which came to power following a bloodless coup against the prince in 1970. Osborne probably felt that he needed to reduce his description of these years (1970–1975) to allow space for the tsunami of the Khmer Rouge that he covers in Chapter 9 (pp.144–167). However, Chapter 10, 'Writing Obituaries for the Old Phnom Penh' (pp. 168–178), concentrates on Western writings about the city on the eve of the Khmer Rouge takeover, and might have fitted better had it come immediately after Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 is harrowing and clearly set out. The most important event in the city in this period was the forced evacuation of its entire population soon after the

Khmer Rouge victory on 17 April 1975. Perhaps as many as two million people, including hospital patients, were driven into the countryside in the hottest month of the year, because the Khmer Rouge had no way of feeding or administering them, and also, ideologically, because the Khmer Rouge leadership believed that all urban dwellers were enemies of the revolution, who just might redeem themselves by growing rice.

For the next three and a half years, Phnom Penh housed a skeleton administration, thousands of soldiers protecting the leadership, a few small factories and the regime's fearful interrogation center, known as S-21, where over 15,000 'enemies', nearly all of whom were innocent of the crimes they confessed to committing, were interrogated, tortured and put to death. Very little is known about conditions in Phnom Penh in the so-called Pol Pot period, but the leaders lived nicely, had excellent medical care (provided by the Chinese) while the rest of the population, with some regional variations, lived very poorly indeed.

Osborne describes the rebirth of Phnom Penh under the Vietnamese protectorate that followed the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 and lasted until 1989.

Chapter 12, 'Today's City' (pp. 1956–212), covers the enormous changes in the city since Cambodia opened up to the wider world in the early 1990s. These have included air pollution, random bulldozing, horrific new mansions, shopping malls, unending traffic jams and most recently (unless the financial

crisis catches up with them) its first ungainly, inexplicable skyscrapers. Despite this battering, old and new friends of the city can still find areas of considerable charm, some of which – like the airport and Riverside Park – date from the past few years.

Milton Osborne writes skilfully about Phnom Penh's long history while managing to give readers a 'feel' for the city as it exists in 2008. For first-time visitors to Cambodia, *Phnom Penh* is highly recommended. For those of us who have lived in the city for any length of time, it's a reader's feast.

David Chandler

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