

*Falcon l'imposteur de Siam. Commerce, politique et religion dans la Thaïlande du XVIIe siècle*, by ALAIN FOREST (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010).

The Phaulkon industry grinds on. What is it about this Greek apostate that continues to fascinate? Perhaps it is the fact that the story is so striking, and so romantic, that one only needs to throw in a few snippets of possible conversation to link known facts, and there you have it. Or do you? Because the contradictions in the character of Phaulkon (Falcon if you prefer) are so numerous as to appear to defy logic. And so the tale of the former cabin-boy turned 'minister' to the King of Siam carries on with all its embellishments.

Professor Forest has here put his immense knowledge of the late seventeenth-century Siam and Tonkin to publishing a life of Phaulkon which seeks to put his Siamese period into perspective, linking it to the commercial fate of the region. This appears to have begun an eclipse, hastened by Phaulkon with his monopolistic policies and the shift in trading patterns away from the Gulf of Siam.

The first biography of our anti-hero, by the Père d'Orléans (1690), was a Jesuit hagiography complete with visions. It was immediately rebuffed as untrue by the 'English Catholic' (who may or may not have been the trader George White). The whole episode of Phaulkon's rise to and fall from power was politely ignored in the eighteenth century, but is repeated by Bowring in 1857 (*The Kingdom and People of Siam*

v. 2, pp. 385-410), who extracted and translated several pages from d'Orléans.

Five years further on comes the first of the pure romances, apparently based on Orléans-Bowring but so far bending the historic facts as to be called by its publishers 'A Romantic Biography'. The author, one William Dalton, sets the tone in the title, *Phaulkon the Adventurer*, and has Phaulkon in pursuit of the one love of his life, Lady Monica, met in Vietnam, introduced into his cell after his imprisonment in the Lopburi palace, but both are freed by one Prince Abdullah of Makassar (whom Phaulkon had released as an act of charity after the Makassar rebellion). After some 383 pages Phaulkon and Lady Monica sail into the sunset and presumably live happily ever after.

The trail of Phaulconnerie goes cold until 1967, when Luang Sitsayakamkan published with the energetic Donald Moore in Singapore a biography of our hero not notably adding anything new to the tale of *The Greek Favourite of the King of Siam*.

The Axel Alwen trilogy, all silks, satins and exposed bosoms, comes next. Firstly in 1988, followed by part two in 1991, and then there is a long wait for the end, in 1999 (published in French only to our knowledge, and in Canada).

The Greek envoy George Sioris then takes up the baton with an article in 1992 in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, followed by a book about Phaulkon, also published by the Siam Society, in 1998. Titled *Phaulkon, the Greek First Counsellor at the Court of Siam*, it emphasizes the original nationality

of the subject, something the subject himself never did, to the point of never having been known to have spoken Greek, or even Italian (his birthplace Cephalonia was under Venetian control in his early years). The fact that there was no such position as counsellor to the Court of Siam (i.e. to King Narai) is overlooked.

Then come the broad-brush historical novels, often excellent in themselves and well researched: John Shaw's *The Paston Papers* in 1993, Morgan Sportès' *Pour la plus grande gloire de Dieu* (a 1993 blockbuster of 726 pages), Claire Keefe-Fox's engaging and carefully sourced *Le Ministre des Moussons* (1998). These last two have not been translated into English.

In the new millennium, Phaulkon still provides inspiration or at least a source for further outpourings. Monique Jambut produced in La Rochelle *La Route de Siam* in 2000, which varied the diet somewhat by adding Protestantism and the Ile de Ré, but still leaving plenty of room for Phaulkon. John Hoskin then supplied *Falcon at the Court of Siam* (2002), which curiously combines both first and third person narrative while using plenty of imagination for the historical setting. Six years later comes Harold Stevens with *For the Love of Siam* (2008). This is a travesty of an historical novel, having Phaulkon being tall, dark and handsome (he was dismissed by his contemporaries as "the little Greek"), wearing a pith helmet, having his wife Maria complaining about the ferry service between Ayutthaya and Lopburi, and King Narai throwing a ball

at the palace to celebrate the birthday of his only child (well, at least the single child is true). Pages 323 to 326 list a bibliography of 49 works which do not appear to have been closely consulted, but perhaps the sub-title to the work gives the clearest indication of the contents: "A Biographical Fiction Story [?] of Constantine Phaulkon, the Greek Sailor who against almost impossible Odds became Foreign Minister for King Narai during Siam's Golden Age." Enough said.

But no. Because Professor Forest's biography is really carefully researched, listing three archival collections consulted, 29 items constituting 'basic sources' and 27 'syntheses and studies'. It also much more clearly looks at Phaulkon's lack of support at court other than that of the king, the enemies he made far outnumbering the friends, and the depletion of the treasury thanks to Phaulkon's generosity (and investments, via Céberet, in the Compagnie des Indes). The unexpected arrival of a huge French expeditionary force made the fall inevitable. Instead of unwanted Songkhla, Bangkok and Mergui were claimed. In the final hours Phaulkon could apparently calmly watch an eclipse. He had nothing more to lose; the house of cards collapsed. And so he could enter the palace accompanied only by three French officers, an uncle of his wife (this last detail is revealed by Fr Nogueira's account), and some fifteen English bodyguards for the curtain to come down on the fall. Yes, here perhaps he was Greek, acting out a tragedy to its inevitable end: friendless,

his wealth about to be seized, his cards toppled, his elder son dead and unburied. Perhaps Maria Guyomar really did ‘spit in his face’, when Phaulkon was led away by his executioners, as Engelburt Kaempfer has it (1690: 33).

New in Forest’s account is the trading with Tonkin, the dismissal of the whole story of the trip to Persia as fabricated, the clearer perspicacity of de Lionne (especially when compared to the arch-ditherer Bishop Laneau) and a partial rehabilitation of the trader Véret balanced by a complete dismissal of the dipsomaniac Vachet. Important in this supposed novel presentation (but one that is not new, since Claire Keefe used it) is the use of original texts and reported conversations, which enhances its veracity.

One could go on and on – as others are undoubtedly doing. This reviewer knew of another Phaulkon account of the tale being concocted in Phuket and still another in the United States. Let us hope they stick to the known facts. Somehow one feels that the story is too good to drop. Film rights, anyone?

Michael Smithies

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*Tracks and Traces: Thailand and the Work of Andrew Turton* by PHILIP HIRSCH & NICOLAS TAPP (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010). ISBN 978 90 8964 249 3 (soft)

This book is a collection of nine papers covering aspects of Andrew Turton’s considerable academic work on Thailand. It also has a select bibliography, spanning the over 30 years of Turton’s scholarly contributions, displaying a wide array of issues that have been scrutinized by the gifted anthropologist’s eye.

Like some of the contributors to the book, I was supervised by Andrew Turton when doing my PhD at SOAS. Hence I gladly took up the task of critically reading the book and writing a review on it. This was especially so since I currently live in Thailand, have spent most of the last 25 years in the country and in many ways have a vested interest in what happens in this “dynamic and rapidly changing society” (citation from the back cover of *Tracks and Traces*). That the country is changing does not detract from the benefits of looking back over the past four or so decades to contextualize matters, as much of the book does, and even to the nineteenth century, as covered in the main by the historical papers at the end of the book. Indeed, understanding the present and being prepared for what is to come can be enhanced by reading about the past, especially when being interpreted in an ethnographic manner that emphasises power relations along with socio-economic and political ramifications.