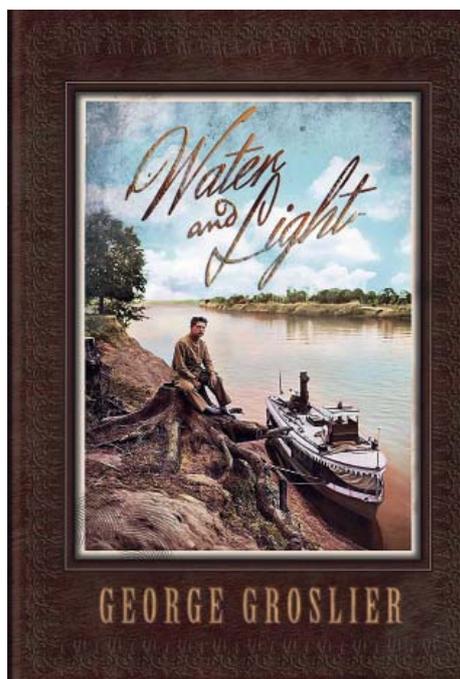


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*Water and Light*, by George Groslier, translated by Pedro Rodríguez, edited by Kent Davis (Florida, USA: DatAsia Press, 2016). ISBN 1934431877 and ISBN 978-1934431870. US\$34.95.



*Water and Light* recounts two river journeys on the Cambodian Mekong made by George Groslier in September-October 1929 and February-March 1930. Born in Phnom Penh in 1887 to Antoine Groslier, a French administrator, and his wife Angelina, George's first stay in Cambodia only lasted two years. When Angelina miscarried her second child, she quickly took George back to the safety of France, later giving him the opportunity to benefit from a Western education, studying at the School of Fine Arts in Paris. In 1910, aged 23, Groslier returned to Cambodia to take charge of a mission at the service of Albert Sarraut (1872-1962). Then Minister of Public Education, Sarraut would in his long political career serve as Governor-General of Indochina, as Minister for Colonies and briefly as Prime Minister of France. Sarraut's trust in Groslier's abilities would have a profound effect on his

professional life. Groslier was tasked with the documentation of the kingdom's most remote Khmer temples and founding a new school for the preservation and restoration of Cambodia's traditional arts. His real mission, and enduring legacy, was to preserve Khmer art and culture by establishing the Albert Sarraut Museum (now the National Museum of Cambodia) and the School of Fine Arts.

The background of *Water and Light* was Cambodia at a time when the country was as yet untouched by the great crises that would befall Indochina in the 1930s and beyond. The two journeys took Groslier to numerous places, including Kampong Cham, Stung Treng, Kratie, the Bassac River, Angkor Borei, the Tonlé Sap and Kampong

Chhnang. The travel accounts are populated with villages stretched along the Mekong, screaming children playing in the water and exotic plants. It was a journey for the senses, where hearing plays its role in assembling and making sense of life in the immediate surroundings: “At dawn I checked the nocturnal picture sketched by my ears” (p. 13).

The objective of Groslier’s account, as he states in his Preface, is to inform anyone who had “never seen Cambodia”, or indeed anyone who would probably never see the country. At times, his enthusiasm in trying to share *his* Cambodia with readers in faraway lands can result in added emphasis, as when he defines as “drought” the period of dry weather that follows the seasonal rains, no doubt to convey better the arid state of the land. In September and October, at the height of the rainy season, torrential rains transform the lives of subsistence communities dwelling on the banks of the Mekong. The river has scaled five metres to reach the once dry lowlands. Banana trees have lost their trunks, animals sleep on rafts fashioned from banana trunks and only boats ply the waters between houses. The dry season ensues from December to May, and communities anxiously await the onset of the rainy season to saturate their parched land. The trees that were inundated by torrential rains a few months earlier, and to whose trunks Groslier tied his boat, now tower over him by some five metres, with their exposed roots dishevelled but still somehow managing to remain upright.

By reworking descriptions of repetitive routines for the daily tasks of riverine life, Groslier has transformed a potentially “dry” documentary account into a work of art, like “a painter producing a new sketch daily” (p. XVII). The book’s unique strength lies in its ability to provide a detailed account of life in rural communities and the slow-paced daily routine punctuated by hardships, acts of kindness, rituals and devotion, but chiefly, by the challenges inherent in communities where acceptance of one’s fate has its own rewards.

Groslier took steps to revive and insulate Cambodia’s traditional arts from Western influence, in all its manifestations. For instance, he laments the decline in travel by boat due to the automobile becoming the chief mode of transport: “the old Cambodia has been so thoroughly upset by Western influence that soon any voyage, even at a rower’s pace, will be thoroughly disappointing” (pp. 3-4).

This context is useful in dealing with Groslier’s indignation at the influence exercised on the traditional arts by foreign concepts, as when he discovers that images of French soldiers guard the entrance to a concrete pagoda, replacing the traditional *dvarapala* guardian deities. Groslier is unable to contain his disdain for the soldier’s representation: “a melon atop his head, a rifle, and a toothy expression. Over the past eight days I have seen more French soldiers at pagoda doors than are stationed at the Phnom Penh garrison” (p. 49).

Groslier has been called an anti-colonial French colonialist. His account largely refrains from using the disparaging terms employed by some of his contemporaries: scholars and administrators steeped in the colonial mould, borne out of France’s *mission civilisatrice*. Unlike most colonial administrators, who were born and bred in Metropolitan France, Groslier charts his journeys as someone who is proud of his birthplace, for its beauty, achievements and inherent flaws. He depicts life along the Mekong not as a foreign observer, but as a patient host, leading the reader by the hand

and generously sharing his knowledge of the country. However, it is not a wholly objective account because, by his own admission, his pen was swayed by “fifteen years of Cambodian life” (p. 4).

In his native Cambodia, he feels sufficiently at ease to use self-deprecating terms. Though far from corpulent, he blames his “seventy kilos of flaccid flesh” (p. 31) as the source of discomfort during his trips. At other times, his “Western rump” (p. 14) overhangs a 50 cm-wide pirogue, barely adequate for local lithe bodies. On another occasion, a makeshift bridge fashioned from bamboo poles can only advance at the rate of 500 metres (0.5 km) per hour, despite his manservant pushing the contraption, because Groslier is “no acrobat” (p. 39).

Scattered in this delightful book are hints that Groslier struggled to accept some aspects of Cambodia’s customs, as when he expresses disapproval for the discarded religious icons “left to the termites”, or other religious artefacts “disassembled and rotting in a calamitous heap” (p. 51) inside a pagoda. His indignation, laudable for its concern with Cambodia’s cultural heritage, should be juxtaposed against the context of impermanence, the same concept that surrounds the creation and immediate destruction of a lovingly constructed sand mandala in Tibetan Buddhism. What Western eyes construe as ‘neglect’ may just embody acceptance of the inescapable process of perishability in a Theravada Buddhist country. Other seemingly incongruous aspects of Cambodian life lead Groslier to retort, not without a hint of irony, that Buddhist monks are beholden to a life of begging but are nevertheless served like princes, sworn to humility but addressed by people who kneel in their presence, and whose vows of self-denial appear not to interfere with the consumption of large quantities of food and sweets (p. 66).

At the end of the 19th century and early in the 20th century, numerous publications relayed journeys across Indochina or along the Mekong, for the most part commissioned by the French government and lasting two years or more. The longest, and arguably the most renowned, of the 19th century missions to Indochina was led by Auguste Pavie (1847-1925) and his trusted officers. Though some of these early river journeys are on a very different scale, some comparisons are useful, particularly with the expedition led by Ernest Doudart de Lagrée (1823-1868), whom Groslier briefly mentions (p. 139).

In July 1866, Doudart de Lagrée sailed from Stung Treng (in present-day Cambodia but formerly a Lao territory) to explore the Mekong as a trade route between southwestern China and the mouth of the river near Saigon. His voyage of exploration became a template of sorts for subsequent Mekong voyages, including the 1882 expedition led by Paul Neis (1852-1907), a French naval surgeon who documented his explorations in *Travels in Upper Laos and Siam*. Neis, who ascended the Mekong from Bassac, expressed his admiration for “the rigorous exactness of the itineraries of the mission of Commander de Lagrée” (p. 11). Although the journeys narrated in *Water and Light* span weeks, rather than months, what they lack in chronological scope is generously compensated for by richness of detail.

Whereas Groslier’s account illustrates the *minutiae* of daily life along this majestic river, Doudart de Lagrée’s descriptions are concerned with the constraints and challenges of quantifying the navigability of the Mekong, as documented in his *Exploration*

*et missions de Doudart de Lagrée*, published in 1883.<sup>1</sup> His account is not wholly preoccupied with quantitative details, however. Included are instances of compassion and understanding of human frailties, as when he writes, without a hint of rancour, that the expedition members had to share their rice with the boatmen, who misjudged the duration of the Mekong journey and had insufficient rice stocks of their own. It is these poignant details that bridge the gap with Groslier's *Water and Light*, an intimate account narrated by an "insider" at ease in the country of his birth.

Distilled to around 200 pages from an original manuscript of 600 pages, Groslier's recollections flow without discernible gaps. As an account of life along the Cambodian stretch of the Mekong early in the 20th century, *Water and Light* fills a gap in the literature, to balance the precisely quantified accounts from the period, which often lack the qualitative details for a window into a country's soul.

*Water and Light* is greatly expanded from the original and includes annotations, hand-restored colourised images, additional images and supplemental materials, with appendix articles by Paul Boudet, Paul Cravath, Kent Davis and Solang Uk. This new version also includes the French text of *Eaux et Lumières* published in 1931 by the Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales in Paris, a useful feature since extant copies are now mostly consigned to the 'rare' books section at libraries around the world. Select chapters of *Water and Light* were also published in French in the review *Terre et mer – la géographie*, from September to November 1931. This special colour edition was inspired by, and prepared under the guidance of, Nicole Groslier Rea, Groslier's eldest child, who passed away on 15 February 2015, aged 97. She is pictured with her doting father on p. VI of the book, at the front gate of their Phnom Penh home in 1923.

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<sup>1</sup> Doudart de Lagrée died in Yunnan in March 1868. Captain A.B. de Villemereuil, expedition member, edited and published his detailed travel diary.