

Also by Milton Osborne

BOOKS

The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859–1905), 1969; reprinted 1997

Region of Revolt: Focus on Southeast Asia, 1970; revised and expanded edition 1971

Politics and Power in Cambodia: The Sihanouk Years, 1973

River Road to China: The Mekong River Expedition, 1866–1973, 1975; new edition 1996; US edition 1999

Before Kampuchea: Preludes to Tragedy, 1979

Sihanouk: Prince of light, prince of darkness, 1994; Japanese edition 1996

Southeast Asia: An introductory history, 1979; 2nd edition 1983; 3rd edition 1985; Japanese edition 1987; 4th edition 1988; 5th edition 1990; 6th edition 1995; 7th edition 1997

RESEARCH MONOGRAPHS

Singapore and Malaysia, 1964

Strategic Hamlets in South Viet-Nam: A Survey and a Comparison, 1965

The Mekong

Turbulent past, uncertain future

Milton Osborne



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way through the thick forest that surrounded most of the temples, recording the dimensions of the buildings he encountered and describing their features with enthusiasm if not always accuracy and understanding. Not surprisingly, for instance, he did not recognise the probable symbolism of the great faces sculpted on the towers of the Bayon temple as representations of a *Bodhi-sattva*, a holy person not yet having reached the condition of Buddhahood, and in this case apparently incorporating Jayavarman VII, the king who had built the Bayon. Even today there is some doubt about this identification. He also erred both in the relative ages he assigned to the various temples he visited and in his suggested date of their origin, which he thought might be as far back as 2000 years. But these failings pale into insignificance against the detailed and perceptive descriptions he did provide, most particularly of Angkor Wat, the greatest of all the temples and the least affected by the passage of centuries. Surrounded as it is by a wide moat, Angkor Wat had not been invaded by the forest whose trees slowly but steadily had grown up through the other temples, pulling apart the heavy blocks of stone out of which they had been built.

Not the least of Mouhot's contributions was to detail the scenes found in extensive bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat and the Bayon. He described the mix of legend and history that the carvings provide, always writing in terms devoid of the Eurocentric or religiously prejudiced attitudes so obvious in Bouillevaux's account of his visit. Remarkably, given all that has happened in Cambodia since Mouhot's visit to the Angkor ruins, it is still possible to capture not just the excitement that he experienced, for this is an emotion that the site so readily instils, but also the view that he describes from Phnom Bakheng, a temple set on a hundred-metre-high hill to the north of Angkor Wat.

On the one side you gaze upon the wooded plain and the pyramidal temple of Ongcor [Angkor Wat], with its rich colonnades . . . [in another direction] the new city, the view losing itself in the waters of the great lake on the horizon. On the opposite side stretches the long chain of mountains whose quarries, they say, furnished the beautiful stone used for the temples; and amid thick forests, which extend along the base, is a pretty, small lake which looks like a blue ribbon on a carpet of verdure . . .

To the power of his description, Mouhot added the sketches he made of the temples and some of these were reproduced when his journals were published. As Michael Smithies, who has written extensively on Mouhot's life, has suggested, these pictures, in combination with his vigorous prose, probably played a large part in establishing Mouhot as the man who 'discovered' Angkor.

Returning to Bangkok in April 1860, Mouhot was soon conceiving plans for a new expedition into unknown territory. He had decided to travel through the northeastern regions of the Siamese state, an area that is today northeastern Thailand but which, in the mid-nineteenth century, was still described as Laos. It consisted of small princely states in tributary relationship with the Bangkok court and was a region in which large areas had never been visited by Europeans. Mouhot's goal was to travel to and across the Mekong until he reached the border of northern Vietnam. He would then return to the Mekong and travel down it to Cambodia. He began his journey in September 1860, accompanied by two Siamese servants, Phrai and Deng, and his pet dog, a King Charles spaniel named Tine-Tine.

Seasoned traveller though he was, Mouhot found the going hard, not least because of the difficulty he had in gaining help from local officials. His journals began to reveal an impatience that he had either not shown or had overcome in his previous travels, and his generally depressed mood was reflected in critical comments he now made about those he saw as 'the scum of the Laotian and Siamese races'. Yet he persevered and, still ready to be entranced by his physical surroundings, he reached the Mekong at Pak Lai on 24 June 1861. A month and a day later he reached Luang Prabang, having travelled by ox cart beside the river on a road constructed many decades before when there had been an active trade between parts of northern Thailand and Yunnan.

Like so many visitors since, Mouhot was pleased with what he found at Luang Prabang, calling it 'a delightful little town'. It was much smaller than he had expected, not at all the sizeable settlement that Monsignor Pallegoix had claimed it to be when he published his book and wrote of its having 80 000 inhabitants.

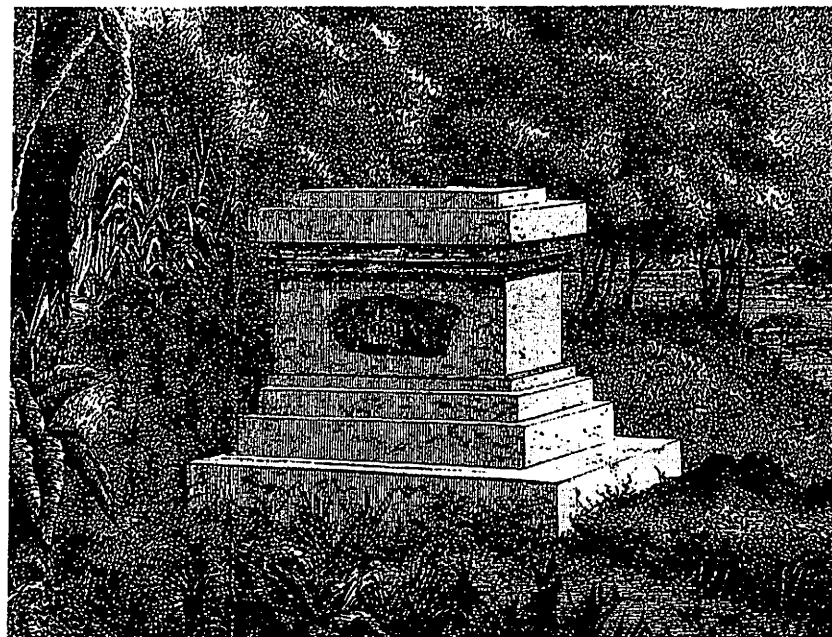
Instead, he estimated the population at '7000 or 8000 only', and continued: 'The situation is very pleasant. The mountains which, above and below this town, enclose the Mekon, form here a kind of circular valley or amphitheatre . . . Were it not for the constant blaze of the tropical sun, or if the mid-day heat were tempered by a gentle breeze, the place would be a little paradise.' And now, beguiled by the landscape through which it ran, Mouhot formed a different view of the Mekong.

In a letter I wrote from Cambodia I described the Mekon river as imposing but monotonous and unpicturesque; but in this part of the country it presents a very different appearance . . . There is almost an excess of grandeur.

At Paklaïe . . . I had the pleasure of again seeing the beautiful stream, which now seems to me like an old friend; I have so long drunk of its waters, it has so long cradled me on its bosom or tried my patience, at one time flowing majestically among the mountains, at another muddy and yellow as the Arno at Florence.

Remarkably, as is the case with the Angkor ruins, a modern visitor to Luang Prabang has no difficulty in sensing why Mouhot found the town so attractive. Not, of course, in the newer sections where the all-too-familiar graceless concrete buildings are devoid of charm, but in the oldest quarters built around Mount Phousi, where Luang Prabang is built on a peninsula bounded by the Mekong on one side and the Nam Khan on the other. Here, in a world of gilded pagodas and wooden buildings, one does not feel far removed from the sleepy settlement of Mouhot's time. Even more strikingly reminiscent of the town that existed in the nineteenth century is the view to be gained of Luang Prabang from the right bank of the Mekong. We know what this view was like in the 1860s because Louis Delaporte, the talented expedition artist who accompanied Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier up the Mekong, recorded it while he was in Luang Prabang in 1867. To climb up the steeply rising hill from the river bank to the ruins of Wat Chom Pet is to be rewarded with a panorama that is only marginally changed from what Delaporte saw with his artist's eye.

On 9 August, Mouhot left Luang Prabang to travel further east. He had been received by local royalty, to whom he offered,



Mouhot's tomb is located by the Nam Khan River, close to Luang Prabang. Originally constructed by the French Mekong Expedition in 1867, it can be seen in its restored form today.

(From Francis Garnier, Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine, Paris, 1885)

as he had done in Cambodia two years earlier, the gift of a rifle, but now he wanted to press on to complete the outward section of his travels. Having reached the village of Nam Kane, east of Luang Prabang, on 15 August, he was once again in Luang Prabang two weeks later. From this point on his journal is largely a collection of geographical and meteorological information, though there is a stirring account of his having shot a man-eating tiger and of witnessing a rhinoceros hunt. By now he was having difficulties with the authorities at Luang Prabang, who were anxious to prevent him travelling towards Vietnam, and it is unclear exactly where he spent the days before he was struck down by fever on 19 October. He made his last journal entry on 29 October 1861, with the stark words: 'Have pity on me, oh my God'. Twelve days later he died in a camp beside the Nam