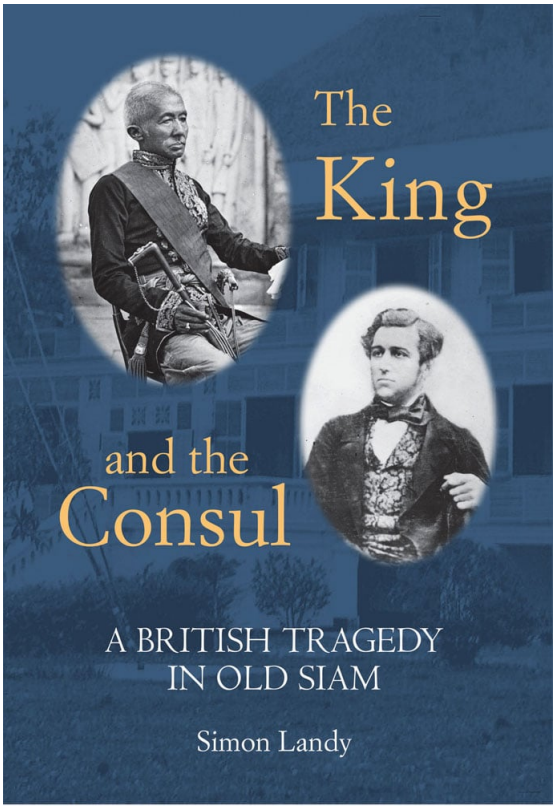
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The King and the Consul

A British Tragedy in Old Siam

Simon Landy

ISBN	9786164510593
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- The King and the Consul explores UK and Thai archives
- Revealing the twists, turns and tensions of a little-known episode that pitted Thailand's renowned King Mongkut, Rama IV, against the first British Consul, Charles Hillier

In 1856, just months after Britain and Siam had finalised the historic Bowring trade treaty that would prevent the countries colonisation, the violent death of a Siamese official at the new British consulate threatens to scuttle the deal and lead to war.***The King and the Consul*** explores UK and Thai archives to reveal the twists, turns and tensions of this little-known episode that pitted Thailand's renowned King Mongkut, Rama IV, against the first British Consul, Charles Hillier. The crisis was resolved without war, but not without cost for the participants who suffered unintended tragic outcomes. By examining the background to this tragedy, the book reveals how history has often overlooked the importance of an issue that lay behind it the right of foreigners to own land in the country, and issue that continues to be a thorn in the side of Thailand's foreign relations to this day.

"The tragic deaths in 1856 of the first British consul to Siam and a Siamese official had an unusual impact on Thailand's property law and Britain's diplomatic presence in the country. This intriguing book could only be written by someone with long residence in Bangkok, through knowledge of Thailand's property law, and enthusiasm for history. Simon Landy gives us a slice of legal and diplomatic history with close attention to its human dimensions. An unusual and lovely read" – Chris Baker


Introduction

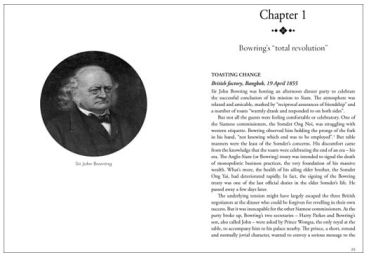
British ambassador's residence, Bangkok, February 2018

Boris Johnson was working the room. He had given a short welcoming speech consisting one or two obligatory fun pun and was now well into the final, glad-handing stage of the reception. The unease was struggling to cope, but Britain's foreign secretary (as he was then) was exemplar, unperturbed, as if he had attained an equilibrium of disbelievism. No one could have guessed that the visible despite his having arrived in the country only a few hours earlier.

The reception marked the first official visit to Thailand by a British cabinet minister since Bangkok's 2014 military coup. When Boris drifted over to my small group, I realised I should have something of substance to say. By then, the foreign secretary must have answered questions on Brexit at least a dozen times. His position on that was well known and I had little sympathy with it. Confrontation would be pointless.

I thought it possible no one had asked about the property we were in. I glanced at the ambassador and then down at Boris (he was surprisingly short) and, for want of something better to say, ventured: "Many Thais don't like foreigners owning land." Boris looked at the ambassador who was looking at me weirdly. I ploughed on: "We all understand the need to maximise value, but will it be possible to preserve the house and the other historic assets?" But Johnson was pretend: "We'll get a shiny

Opposite page: Statue of Queen Victoria in the grounds of the former British embassy at Phaeolit, photographed by Mark Belinski in 2003.


Chapter 1

Bowring's "total revolution"

TOASTING CHANGE

British factory, Bangkok, 19 April 1855

Sir John Bowring was hosting an afternoon dinner party to celebrate the successful conclusion of his mission to Siam. The atmosphere was relaxed and amicable, marked by "reciprocal assurances of friendship" and a number of toasts "warmly drunk and responded to on both sides".

But not all the guests were feeling comfortable or celebratory. One of the Siamese commissioners, the Somdet Chao Phraya Si Suriyawong, was struggling with western etiquette. Bowring observed him holding the prongs of the fork in his hand, "not knowing which end was to be employed". But table manners were the least of the Somdet's concerns. His discomfort came from the knowledge that the toasts were celebrating the end of an era – his era. The Anglo-Siam (or Bowring) treaty was intended to signal the death of monopolistic business practices, the very foundation of his massive wealth. What's more, the health of his ailing elder brother, the Somdet Chao Phraya Sri Suriyawong, had deteriorated rapidly. In fact, the signing of the Bowring treaty was one of the last official duties in the elder Somdet's life. He

Sir John Bowring

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