

Book

Not quite Cambodia for dummies

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Somewhat out of its depth, this beginner's guide to Khmer history can't match the scholarship of David Chandler

This volume is one in a series edited by Milton Osborne, and the author tells us it is directed at "tourists, students and general readers". It is clearly in competition with David Chandler's well-established "History of Cambodia", also from Silkworm, but is probably justified because it anticipates a different readership.

Chandler is more academic, making use of primary sources in Khmer, and has useful endnotes for sources, which are sadly lacking in Tully's work.

Tully starts with a general introduction to the people and their environment, but, unlike the late Donald Lancaster, makes little of the politically significant fact that one of the "four arms" of the Mekong flowed, depending on the season, in an opposite direction.

Tully includes the tale found elsewhere of a ruler's head being presented on a platter, which, in the telling here, presupposes an early conversion of central Java to Islam – which was not the case.

Then comes the description of "the ancient Angkorean civilisation", which inevitably draws heavily on Chou Ta-Kuan (Zu Dagan), whose work does not appear in the bibliography.

The writing here tends to be flowery, talking of "cold stone" (in the tropics) and gilded "domes" (the true arch was never discovered by the Khmer) and curious "y-shaped poles" for palanquins, and supposes that silk came from abroad.

Zu is quite specific about this: "The natives do not practice [the raising of] silkworms or the [cultivation of the] mulberry tree, and their women understand nothing of sewing or thread." The silk they wore, Zu adds, was made by Siamese.

Another red herring is the statement that Sir John Bowring was a "foreign visitor" to Cambodia. He was in Bangkok, Hong Kong and Manila, and reported the population of Cambodia as "about half a million", but he never visited the country (which he considered a dependency of Siam).

There is a serious irritant in the writing, constantly giving labels to persons quoted (but without textual source): "The Australian archaeologist Roland Fletcher", "celebrated English historian CR Boxer", "historians Chandler and Mabbett".

None of these people (and there are many, many more as one progresses through the text) appears in the index, nor do other scholars mentioned in passing. To make the index you have to be a politician like Sam Rainsy or a murderer like Pol Pot.

The emphasis is on more recent times. Half the book covers the 20 centuries up to 1953. Subsumed in this are Funan, Angkor, the "Dark Age" (1431–1860) when Cambodia was a pawn swapped between Siam and Vietnam, and the French protectorate (1863–1953).

The other half goes from 1953 to 2005, but just fails to mention the recent discovery of oil, which some fear is unlikely to benefit many.

The more recent period covers the rise of Sihanouk, the break in US–Cambodian relations (but without giving the reason current at the time), the years of decline from 1964, the desperate Lon Nol republic from 1970 to the

murderous rule of the Khmer Rouge.

For anyone who could well be forgiven for losing the thread of the political turmoil in the last half-century, these pages provide a useful summary of events. Again, the book is reasonably up to date, since it tells us of Sihanouk's retirement from the scene for the pleasures of Beijing, leaving Sihanouk (who also fails to make the index) since October 2004 as king.

Tully does not avoid unseemly episodes, like the ruthless suppression of the Samlaut peasant uprising in 1967, and goes lightly over the Sihanoukist film mania in the late 1960s, which many saw as retracing the steps of Nero in a different medium.

More details will undoubtedly surface with the passage of time, as here, where use has clearly been made of recent State Department material – though one would prefer a more precise source rather than the nameless "one historian of the period" who is quoted on one page.

The book looks very briefly at the uncertain future, and concludes with a glossary and list of abbreviations, just four endnotes, several pages of "Further Reading" and a very deficient index.

There are few obvious errors. One is to attribute "the frenzy of temple building" to the reign of Jayavarman VIII instead of Jayavarman VII. To talk of "Sanskrit books" is rather misleading since they were all manuscripts or inscriptions, not printed books in the modern sense. The shifting frontiers outlined on some maps are extremely confusing.

For those still in the foothills of Cambodian history, this book provides a reasonable general introduction, but for those wanting a more measured survey from the peaks, Chandler's history retains its claims to superiority.

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