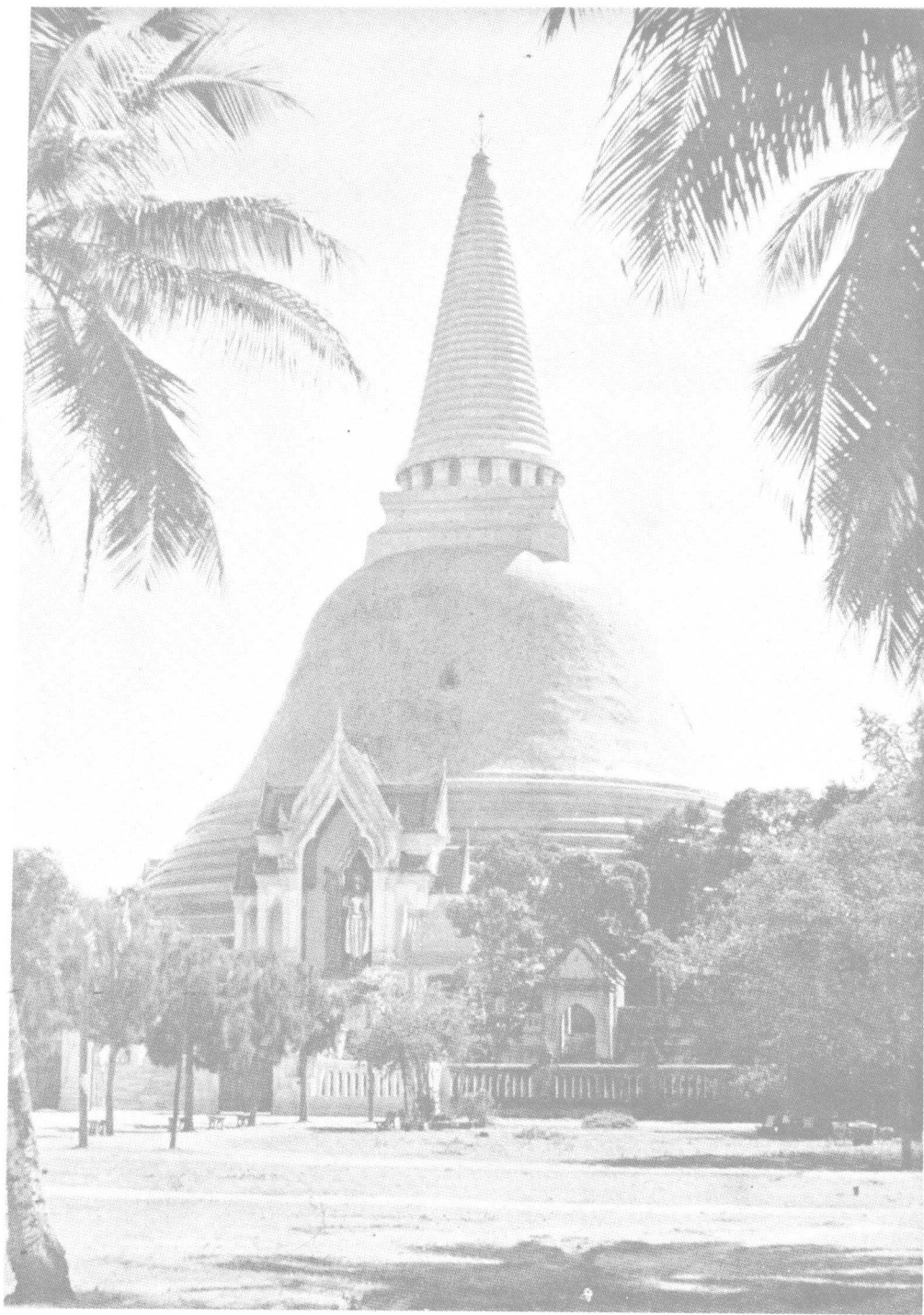


LORDS OF LIFE

A History of the Kings of Thailand



His Royal Highness
**PRINCE CHULA
CHAKRABONGSE**



Frontispiece 1. P'ra Pat'om Chedi

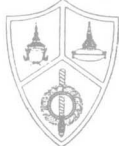


Frontispiece 2. The Author

LORDS OF LIFE

A History of the Kings
of Thailand

by



HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
PRINCE CHULA CHAKRABONGSE OF THAILAND



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of Thailand*

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LORDS OF LIFE

To Narisara Chakrabongse

Darling Daughter,

It will be a long time before you can read this book. It will be even longer before you can understand and appreciate it.

But as it is the history of our Chakri Family, I can only dedicate it to you, a very junior and humble member of that great family, for amongst their members, high or low in rank, you are naturally the one closest to my heart.

I hope that when you come to read and understand this book, you will be truly and rightly proud of your Chakri ancestry and your direct descent from five kings and five queens, as well as from your grandfather who did not live long enough to complete his work for the country he loved so well. In all your actions I ask you always to try to cherish and honour their sacred memory.

With my very best love and wishes for your *happiness* above all else.

PAPA.

Tredethy, near Bodmin, Cornwall.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IN ENGLISH

Wheels at Speed
Road Racing, 1936
Road Star Hat Trick, 1937-38
Blue and Yellow, 1939-1946
Dick Seaman, Racing Motorist
Brought Up In England
The Education of the Enlightened Despots
The Twain Have Met, or *An Eastern Prince Came West*
First-Class Ticket

IN THAI

Frederick the Great of Prussia
Catherine the Great of Russia
Congress of Vienna
Cavour and the Unity of Italy
Hannibal
Nelson
Autobiography in Three Volumes
etc., etc.

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Author's Preface

THIS IS AN attempt to write a History of Thailand (or Siam) in English, a task not accomplished since W. A. R. Wood's book was first published in 1924. There have been many different works in which some parts of T'ai history have been included, and some excellent monographs on certain personages and aspects of that history. Also an English book by a T'ai, Phra Sarasas, was published first in Japan, in December, 1940, which dealt partly with History, Geography, and T'ai Civilization.

I have chosen to concentrate on the Absolute, or rather Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok (1782 to 1932) for three reasons. Firstly because it is the most fully documented period, secondly because it leads directly to Thailand today and her relations with the rest of the world, and thirdly because Wood barely touched on it at all. Also I feel that the House of Chakri, judged by any standards, has been an outstanding dynasty.

As there has been no general History of Thailand in English since Wood's, which may not be so universally available now, I have added a preceding chapter dealing briefly with the history of the T'ai race since they were first known until the fall of Ayudhya in 1767. Without knowing something of the earlier periods, it would be difficult to measure the work of the Chakri monarchs of Bangkok. For students of present-day T'ai affairs, I have closed this book with a chapter on Thailand after December 10th, 1932, which is really a catalogue of events and dates down to the end of 1959.

The book is mainly based on T'ai sources, published and unpublished, as well as contemporary sources in English and French. I have also drawn upon and freely quoted modern works in these two languages, largely because T'ai sources and early English and French sources may not be so readily available to the general reader for consultation. I gratefully acknowledge with thanks my indebtedness to these later and living authors, but wherever I have had to disagree with their interpretation of T'ai history, I have clearly said so, and I trust, with supporting evidence or justifiable surmise.

I have tried to write this book objectively and not from the T'ai point of view. I wished especially to avoid references to

myself, but as my father held a prominent position and was involved in dynastic problems, and I myself have been an eye-witness of certain events, as well as being the recipient of important information and letters, my wish has not proved possible. It has also been necessary almost to over-stress the importance of the rank of *Chao Fa*, which I have followed King Mongkut in translating as *celestial*, for without understanding its importance or difference, it would be impossible to comprehend the dynastic problems or the very fabric of ranks in the Chakri Family.

No rule has yet been definitely laid down for the writing of T'ai or T'ai-Sanskrit names in Roman characters, as to whether it should be phonetic or by transliteration. I have chosen to compromise on what is nearest in writing or in sound. As the word written as *Thai* should be pronounced as *tie* rather than *thigh*, I have followed the other custom of writing it as *T'ai*. The reason for the usual existence of the "h" is to show that the "t" is not aspirated. In the T'ai language we have both aspirated and unaspirated "t" and "p".

I have used the name *Siam* for the country as it was so universally accepted, until I come to the time when it was officially changed to *Thailand*, as accepted by the United Nations and all the countries with which Thailand has diplomatic relations. As I maintain that the equivalent of the name or adjective *Siamese* does not exist in our language, I have used the term *T'ai* throughout.

I have acknowledged at appropriate places the valuable help I have received from so many kind and interested persons. I want to pay a tribute of gratitude especially to my cousin, Prince Dhani, for his help in the form of information, advice, and clarifying some of my doubts. I should like here to thank Professor H. R. Trevor-Roper for his preface, my wife for her constant interest and inspiration, Captain Bisdar Chulasewok and Captain R. W. Potts for their assistance to me in writing this book, in Thailand and in England respectively. I also wish to pay a sincere tribute to Alvin Redman for his encouragement in urging me to write this history which has for so long been in my thoughts.

CHULA-CHAKRABONGSE.

Tredethy, near Bodmin, Cornwall.

Introduction

by

H. R. TREVOR-ROPER

Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford

IN THE NINETEENTH century the ancient monarchies of the Far East surrendered one by one to the power of Europe. For three centuries they had known Europe and felt its touch; they had realized, or been made to realize, its technical superiority; but they had still preserved their independence and their pride. The Emperor of China regarded George III as an outer barbarian whose emissary could only come to pay tribute. The King of Burma insisted on treating George IV as one of his 'vassals'. These rulers were prepared to use Europeans: they did not expect to be used by them. But then, as the nineteenth century wore on, the cascade began. The 'Opium War' in China was the warning signal. By the end of the century, what was left of ancient Asia? China, the Celestial Empire, the symbol and pillar of tradition and stability, was humbled, cantoned, garrisoned. The British, from India, had imposed their rule on Burma and Malaya, the French on Indo-China. Indonesia had long been Dutch. In South-East Asia only one historic kingdom preserved its independence: Siam, or, as we should now call it, Thailand. Like Japan, Siam stood out as an island, circled but not swamped by the imperialist flood.

How did Siam survive? We have compared it with Japan, but in fact it is not comparable. Japan is an insular power, protected by its insularity. It also protected itself by a revolution: it resisted Europe by imitating Europe and becoming an industrial, military power. But Siam had no such advantages. It is accessible by land on all sides. It was not an industrial or even a commercial power. Its occupation was agriculture. At that time it did not even, as now, export rice. Its only export was a trickle of elephants. Its trade was passive,

carried on by Chinese settlers and merely taxed or skimmed by Thai rulers and courtiers. And yet it was not, like Tibet, ignored by the West as unimportant. Successive missions and treaties showed the interest of Europe. Siam offered opportunities: it could be a consumer of British goods; it also offered dangers; it could be a focus of resistance to the French in Indo-China. Its survival among all these dangers is therefore all the more remarkable.

Partly, of course, it was due to good luck. In their imperialist expansion the European powers sought to avoid expensive conflict with each other. To do so, sometimes they agreed on equitable division—a free hand in Morocco to the French in exchange for a free hand in Egypt to the British. But sometimes they found it more convenient to maintain buffer-states between them. Thus, in the Middle East, Britain and Russia agreed to preserve Persia and Afghanistan. Thus, in the Far East, Britain and France agreed to preserve Siam. Between them, they had destroyed its traditional enemy, Burma, and had pared away its vassal states in the Malay Peninsula, in Laos and Cambodia. They had ensured an open market for their goods. They had even, indirectly, fostered its prosperity: for to pay for those goods they had stimulated rice-growing not merely for consumption but for export. Having done all this they could afford to leave the country politically independent, a comfortable poultice between their otherwise raw frontiers.

To British readers this diplomatic history is the most obvious and most accessible explanation. And yet it is only part of the story: the external part. If the internal history of Siam had been different—if the country had been unskilfully ruled, or divided, like so many Asiatic monarchies, by social unrest or courtly or tribal or religious quarrels—how much easier it would have been, or seemed, for the colonizing powers to invade and conquer rather than to spare and cultivate it. A buffer-state loses its purpose unless it is also a stable state: an unstable state is a standing danger, and better partitioned. As the only buffer-state which European imperialism left in East Asia, Siam must have given evidence of extraordinary stability.

That stability, all historians agree, was the achievement of an extraordinary line of kings, the Chakri dynasty, which

ruled, as absolute monarchs, 'Lords of Life', for 150 years from 1782 until 1932, and which still reigns under a new middle-class constitution. The work of this dynasty was so important, and made such an impact on British history in Asia, that it deserves to be better known in Britain. If it is not known, that is largely because it must depend upon Siamese as well as upon British sources. To be understood, it must also be written from a Siamese, not a British, point of view. After all, we can easily see 19th century Siam through British eyes—through the eyes of the government of India, of Rajah Brooke, of Sir John Bowring, of that English woman who was for five years the governess of the Siamese crown, Mrs. Leonowens. But this is an external view. To see how the problems of Siam were faced and solved from within, by the Siamese rulers, requires a different perspective. We must put ourselves in the place of men who, with their own ancient traditions behind and around them, found themselves suddenly face to face with a new force—a force which was dissolving the whole world around them and might easily, if they failed in understanding, or nerve, or tact, or duty, dissolve theirs. To do this requires, on our part, an effort of imagination. We can be helped if the historian who interprets this history to us comes himself from the society which faced, instead of posing, the problem.

For this reason, we could hardly have a better guide than Prince Chula Chakrabongse, himself a member of the Chakri dynasty, the grandson of its greatest, most revolutionary king, Chulalongkorn. Prince Chula, like so many of his family in the last century, is an anglophil prince, educated in England, resident partly in England, married to an English wife. At the same time he remains devoted to his own country which he here interprets to us as he has previously, by his writings and his translations, interpreted us to them. As a member of the dynasty, his history is necessarily a family history. A family history, in this sense, like a family biography, has its special charm, as it also has its special difficulties. But Prince Chula, while displaying this charm, is fortified against the difficulties: he has studied history at Cambridge and has written 'objective', 'professional' history before turning his industry and talent to this tempting but intimate and therefore difficult subject. He is therefore, in many ways, the ideal biographer of his line of kings.

Introduction should be brief, and I do not wish to forestall Prince Chula's narrative. I shall only say something about what the reader may expect to learn from it. In the first chapter he will find eighteenth century Siam placed in its long historical perspective. He will see it, as it were, developing out of the past, out of itself, out of contact with its immediate neighbours. He will learn the terms of its existence, the basis of its nineteenth century problems. And he will see the state to which it was reduced just before the accession of the new dynasty. After a century of anarchy and isolation, the ancient capital of Ayudha had been sacked by the Burmese, its buildings and records destroyed, its life and government and culture dislocated. A successful usurper for a time restored order, only to lapse into whimsical megalomania, on one hand unfrocking the clergy by thousands, on the other hand seeking, by concentrated private devotion, 'to enable himself to fly in the air'. It was a palace revolt against this interesting *dévot* which brought his most successful general in haste from Cambodia to accept the throne and become the first Chakri king. Such was the inauspicious beginning of the dynasty which, from its new capital of Bangkok, would soon have to face the mounting pressure of imperialist Europe throughout the Far East.

Through the rest of the book we can follow the fortune of this new dynasty: a dynasty which ruled absolutely, taking its ministers largely from its own numerous members, but which nevertheless first rebuilt and reformed the fabric of the state and then, by understanding the realities of power—by study, imitation, adaptation, and occasional timely surrender—carried its country independently through the nineteenth, the colonial, into the twentieth, the ex-colonial century. The greatest of these kings, without doubt, were the two who faced the colonial thrust at its heaviest: King Mongkut, who, after 27 years as a reforming Buddhist abbot, ruled over Siam from 1851 to 1868, and who, by learning the English language, and through it, the sciences of the West, enabled his country to keep its independence; and his son, King Chulalongkorn, the widely-travelled 'revolutionary on the throne', whose reign, from 1868 to 1910, saw the peaceful abolition of slavery, the creation of a modern administration, and the beginning of that tradition, which Prince Chula himself illustrates, of sending all the royal princes to Europe for their education.

These are undoubtedly the greatest of the Chakri kings; but the others also, though less famous, are equally essential to the story. And running through it all, besides the great work of construction and adaptation, there are certain family characteristics which it is pleasant to detect: an unbounded intellectual curiosity, and a natural gentleness which extends even to the revolutions by which the absolute rule of the dynasty was both installed and ended.

This intellectual curiosity, which Prince Chula describes as a typical Siamese trait, finds many forms among the Chakri kings. One of them wrote poems, another reformed historical study, another the ballet, a fourth pained his subjects by performing on the stage. King Mongkut, among his many attainments, studied astronomy and confounded the old believers by predicting a total eclipse of the sun. He learned from everyone, including Christian missionaries, whose virtues he so shrewdly summarized: 'what you teach us to *do* is admirable, but what you teach us to *believe* is foolish'. Most Chakri kings were lovers of elephants: one even had a doctorate in the abstruse science of elephantotrophy; another, King Mongkut himself, wrote a book on the point of a good elephant, which includes, apparently, 'a beautiful snore'; and a third removed the white elephant from the national flag because, in that setting, the noble animal too often resembled a pig. Later members of the family have moved on from elephants; King Chulalongkorn's widow, we read, turned night into day sitting up in bed reading *The Motor* and *The Autocar*, and a younger prince has more recently distinguished himself in Europe as a racing motorist. King Chulalongkorn himself had his literary interests: in the intervals of revolution from above he wrote a cookery book. As for gentleness—how pleasant to read the language of King Mongkut's edicts: 'the absolute monarch's advice against the inelegant practice of throwing dead animals into the waterways', or his insistence that the electors of judges should not hesitate, 'thinking that perhaps their choice would not meet with His Majesty's approval'. And then there are the amiable traits of Mongkut's half-brother and predecessor, King Chesda (Rama III), who—much to the annoyance of Catholic missionaries, who declared it a useless superstition—bought up animals from the slaughter-house and set them free; and of their father, King Isarasuntorn (Rama II), who commuted the