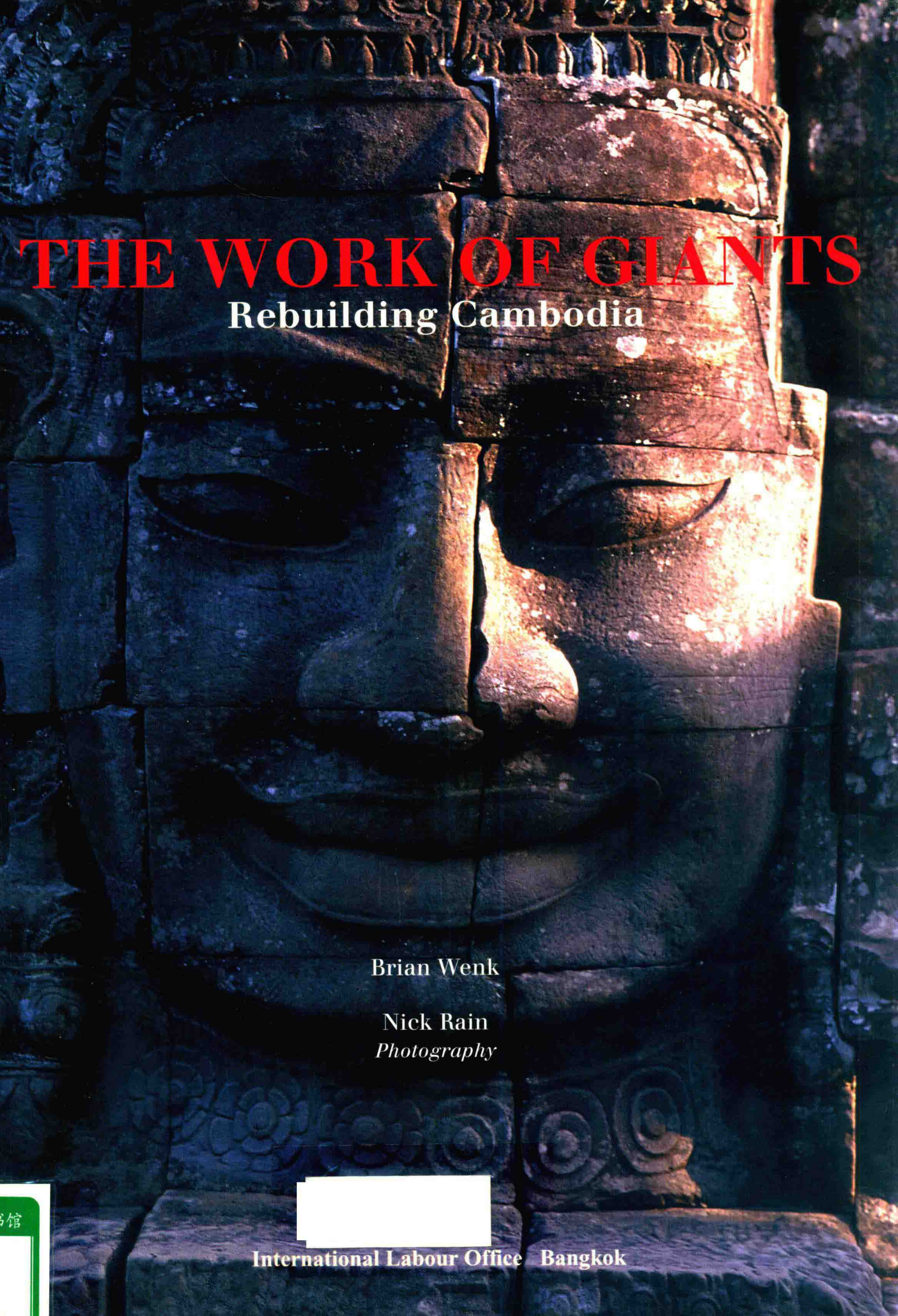


THE WORK OF GIANTS

Rebuilding Cambodia

Brian Wenk

Nick Rain
Photography

International Labour Office Bangkok

THE WORK OF GIANTS

Rebuilding Cambodia

Brian Wenk

Nick Rain
Photography

International Labour Office Bangkok

First published 2002

Wenk, Brian
Photography by Nick Rain

The Work of Giants: Rebuilding Cambodia

Bangkok, International Labour Office, 2002

Poverty alleviation, road construction, infrastructure, economic reconstruction, Cambodia.
03.03.6

ISBN 92-2-112280-8

ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data

Design by Keen Publishing
Printed in Thailand

THE WORK OF GIANTS

Rebuilding Cambodia

Most of Cambodia's roads now lie across the land like ribbons crumpled by an angry child. I travelled south to Kampot; it was just eighty miles away, and the journey took us nine hours, crawling around ditches, potholes, rubble, and poorly filled trenches cut across the roads by one of the many armies that had fought along them in the last ten years. Every town along the road had been blasted away by war; in place of concrete homes and wooden-stilted houses were only shacks and wrecked buildings in which people were attempting somehow to reorder their lives.

Much of the history of the decade lay along that road. The carcasses of American trucks and armoured personnel carriers, supplied to General Lon Nol during the 1970-75 war; bomb craters filled with stagnant water and mosquitoes; twisted remains of concrete bridges with Bailey bridges flung haphazardly across them; grandiose canals and embankments constructed by the Khmer Rouge with slave labour; relics of towns and villages, some almost all gone, others half standing like roughly cut stubble in a plowed field.

William Shawcross
The Quality of Mercy, 1984

Preface

Though mementos of the horror lie not far from the new roadsides, it is difficult to believe now that the green and pleasant land of Cambodia was so recently the scene of truly epic barbarity. Nature quickly covers the wounds, sometimes harshly washing them away with floods, more often cloaking them with crops.

Men and women, too, are lending their minds and hands to reconstruction and restoration. This book focuses on a part of that effort: the building of roads around, to and from the fabled temples of Angkor.

Not long ago, David Salter, a single-minded Canadian engineer who is the chief technical adviser for the ILO's infrastructure work in Cambodia, walked me along many of these roads and drove me over the rest. Crestfallen at the beginning of the second afternoon, he said to me, "Well, I guess you have seen them all now. You have spoken with the team. I don't know what we can do until your flight goes out this evening." "David," I replied, "there is one of the wonders of the world in the middle of all these roads. Perhaps we could have a look at that."

So committed, so entirely taken up with planning, building and maintenance were David and his team that Angkor Wat and the other temples of Siem Reap had become simply an architectural backdrop for the more important business of roads and the people building and maintaining them.

There is a parable in the tale. The statues of Angkor survey impassively the follies and cruelties of the humans around them. But we, fellow beings of the countless victims, cannot – and must not – be so aloof. The story in this book is of courage and determination. It is about building ways out of a deep and evil pit, creating the veins and arteries of revived economic and social interaction. Helping to restore the Kingdom of Cambodia so that its citizens, once again, have the dignity, the means and the time to lift their heads from the roads and marvel at the works of their forefathers.

This is a great opportunity to thank David Salter and his colleagues. I should like to thank, too, Brian Wenk and Nick Rain for recording so vividly this episode of Cambodian reconstruction. May it inspire others in the International Labour Office and beyond to persist in the work of building better societies even in the face of tragedy and destruction.

Ian Chambers
Director
ILO Office and Technical Team for East Asia

Acknowledgements

When a road takes you somewhere, how many people can you thank for getting you there? The workers who built it? The engineers who designed it? The people who paid for it? The mapmaker who told you about it? Your list will be so long, wherever you start, that you cannot include everyone who should be on it.

Like road-building, putting together a book like this is in many ways a collective task too. Your story is something others have achieved, and most of what you say and show is what others have taught and shared with you.

An author and a photographer, if not thieves, are at best borrowers who take from one group of people to pass on to another. We hope that by telling this story of the Khmers' move "from black-and-white to colour" we'll have begun to return some of the fine things they let us slip away with.

Whatever in the pages that follow makes sense and is pleasing, we owe it to more people than we could ever name here. The blemishes, though, are ours.

Brian Wenk
Nick Rain

Bangkok, 8 August 2001

Contents

Introduction

This is the story of rebuilding a country savaged by one of the cruellest 20th century wars. The insults the Cambodian people suffered during the final decades of that century cost them their homes, their families, their teachers and their livelihoods. When the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) arrived in 1991, it found a country largely bereft of necessary infrastructure, education and agriculture.

But somehow the people had retained their desire to rebuild Cambodia into a country they could be proud to call their own. Theirs was the spirit that had shown at Angkor a thousand years earlier what it could do without bulldozers, cement mixers and other heavy equipment. On a November 1991 visit to Angkor, the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) observed that:

> Angkor, city of the Khmer kings, is waiting to become once more the symbol of its country. Vestiges, which bear witness to a rich and glorious past, reflect all those values that are a source for the Khmer people of hope reborn and identity recovered.

While many intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations subsequently answered the call to contribute to the reconstruction of Cambodia and the restoration of the symbolic site of Angkor, this book will deliberately focus on the work of a single one: the International Labour Organization (ILO). In post-conflict Cambodia, the ILO has found ways to generate sustainable employment – which the people ardently desire – while rebuilding infrastructure and exemplifying the international labour standards for which the Organization stands. It has created millions of days of paid employment, given training in a host of trades, set up a thriving micro-credit institution and built rural roads and bridges.

In the northwestern province of Siem Reap, which paid so stiff a tribute to the Khmers Rouges, the ILO was instrumental in the clearing of jungle growth and debris surrounding the monuments of Angkor. With the return of political stability to Cambodia, it is becoming increasingly plain how important the site of Angkor is to economic growth in the country.

Though widely known and respected among the people of Cambodia, the ILO's work has remained surprisingly discreet. In many respects, this is as it should be given the Organization's commitment to helping the workers, employers and governments that are its members to help themselves. What matters is not what an international organization can do, but what the people do.

Yet the need for ILO expertise in alleviating poverty while rebuilding disaster-torn countries continues to arise in other parts of the world. So perhaps it is time to reveal a further secret of Angkor.

Angkor Wat Photo/Tom Smith

chapter 1

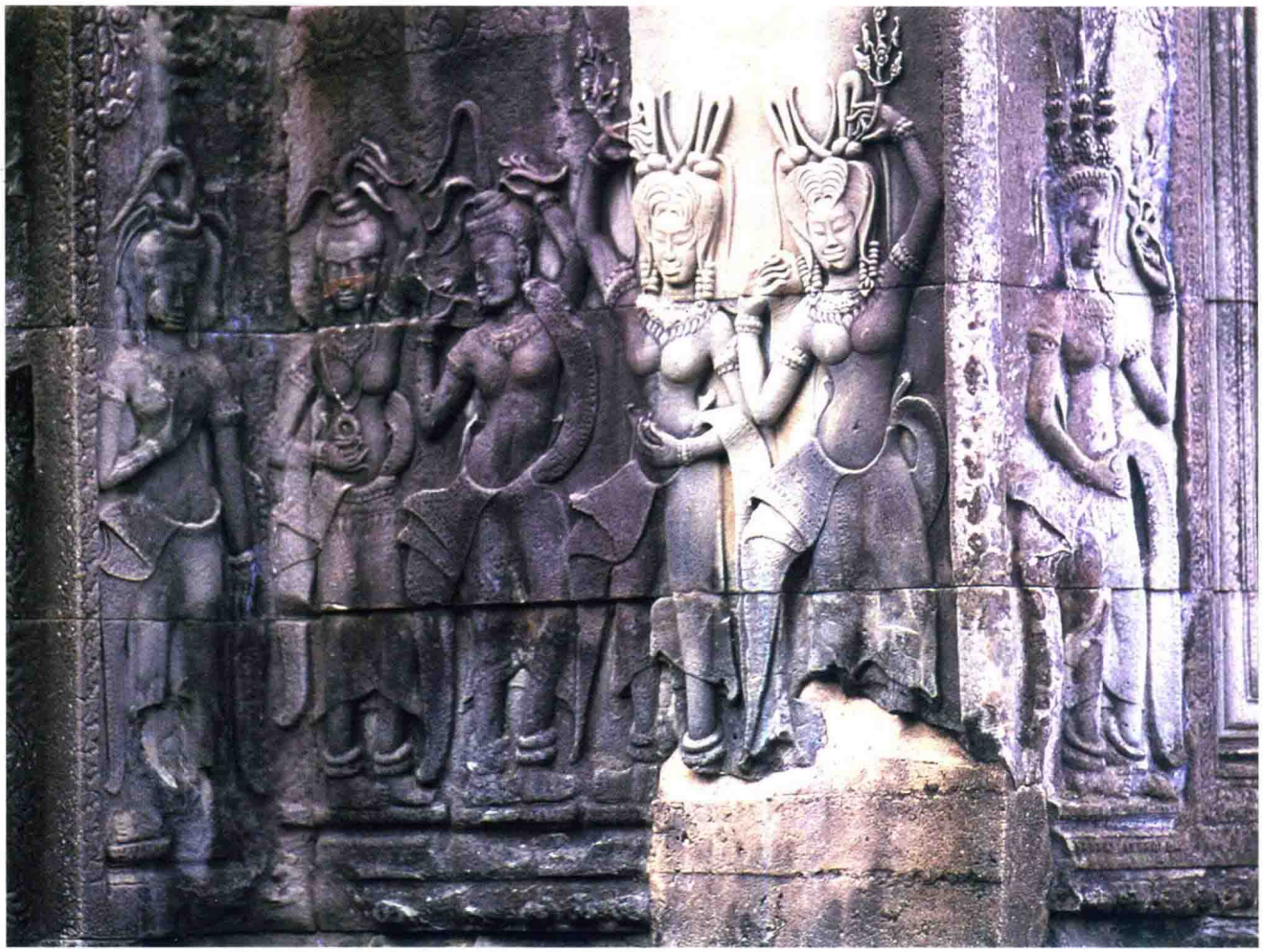
VESTIGES

Some 1,200 years ago, a line of Khmer builder-kings began having vast stone structures erected in dense jungle to illustrate their might. They oversaw the construction of towering sanctuaries, entire temple-mountains, huge reservoirs and moats. From their capital at Angkor, in the basin of a great lake linked to the Mekong River, their empire had spread over much of south-east Asia by the 11th century: southward to the Gulf of Thailand over central and southern parts of present-day Thailand, westward deep into Myanmar, northwards into Lao territory and eastward into Viet Nam.

Kingdom of builders

By 1150, the Khmer had built what remains to this day the world's largest religious monument: the temple of Angkor Wat. Set on a sprawling 210 hectare site, Angkor Wat is framed by a moat 190 metres wide that describes a rectangle several kilometres around. A majestic causeway crosses the moat towards the main entry through an outer wall that runs for 5½ kilometres.

Inside is a complex of elaborately sculpted buildings all of which seem to reach for the sky. As visitors approach the central shrine, they penetrate a succession of covered galleries, each one higher than the one before. Finally, in the centre of the monument, some 470 metres from the moat, a square-shaped platform supports a tower at each corner and a taller fifth tower in the middle that rises 65 metres. However grandiose, Angkor Wat is but one of scores of temple complexes that dot the site of Angkor, which covers more than 200 square kilometres. Among the others are Angkor Thom, the Bakong, Banteay Kdei, Banteay Srei, Krol Ko, Neak Pean, Preah Khan, Preah Ko, Ta Keo, Ta Prohm and Ta Som. All form part of an ancient tradition of labour-based technology to which we



Dancing for eternity

also owe the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal. They give powerful testimony to the majesty that smart engineers – and artists and labourers – can attain without the use of machines.

Materials and design

The stone used to build these monuments was of two types. The platforms, foundations, walls and vaults were made of laterite, a native stone (see *chapter 2*) quarried several kilometres away. For the elaborate statuary and reliefs that decorate the monument it is speculated that sandstone was floated by raft from the north down the Siem Reap River and then carried to the site by elephants or ox-cart.

Mammoth reliefs (Photo/B.Wenk)

Following the tune

The Khmers used no mortar. They relied instead on a painstaking technique of rubbing stones together with an abrasive sand to form a tight joint sealed with a vegetal glue. A thousand years later, many of those joints are still perfect.

The symmetrical layout and decorative features of the temples came to the region from south India, hence the "Indo" in Indochina. Hindu mythology holds the key to the design of Angkor Wat. The five towers represent Mount Meru – the abode of the gods – and neighbouring peaks. The courtyards represent the continents and the moat evokes the oceans. Fine carvings embody protective divinities. Hundreds of lithe dancing nymphs, called *apsaras*, are everywhere carved in relief.

Because paper and other vegetal material do not last long in Angkor's tropical climate, the stone carvings of Angkor are the only record of the building techniques, history and way of life in those distant times.

Enigmatic giant

Decline and abandonment

Between the 12th and 15th centuries, Angkor came under increasing pressure from neighbouring kingdoms. Persistent raids by the Thais, along with a possible decline in living conditions, finally drove the Khmers towards the south-east, where they ultimately founded a new capital at Phnom Penh.

With few exceptions, Angkor's great cities[1] and temples were abandoned to the ravages of time and jungle. Buddhist monks began caring for the great temple of Angkor Wat, which suffered far less damage than others. In the 16th and 17th centuries, reports of "an ancient city" enshrouded by jungle came from the pens of Dutch, French and Iberian traders and missionaries. Many likened it to Rome. A Japanese interpreter visited Angkor Wat in the 1630s and sketched a faithful diagram of the temple. In the 1850s, several missionaries and travellers visited and described the temple, but these accounts went largely unnoticed.

[1] Angkor's population at its zenith reached an estimated 2 million.

West meets east

It fell to Henri Mouhot, a French naturalist who saw Angkor in 1860, to arouse popular Western interest in the site. After Mouhot died in 1861 of a fever at Luang Prabang (now in the Lao PDR), the narrative of his travels appeared posthumously, based on careful notes and drawings which were returned to his family.

Mouhot repeatedly asked the people around Angkor Wat who had built it. Again and again they told him it was "the work of giants". This he thought a fitting metaphor for a place where "patience, strength and genius seem to have done their utmost to leave to future generations the proof of their power and civilization".

The origin of Angkor is but one of the enigmas that pervade Cambodian history, a history few experts have dared to render between two covers. Since ours is a story of rebuilding, it is important to know, chiefly, that destruction on a massive scale took place and that the damage had to be repaired. Yet, as a rough historical guide and to nudge the interested reader to seek out further information elsewhere, some relevant developments since Cambodia became a French protectorate[2] in 1864 will be sketched below.

Independence and beyond

- In 1941, France placed an 18-year-old prince, Norodom Sihanouk, on the throne.
- The King's crusade for independence, launched in 1953, triumphed the following year with recognition by the Geneva Peace Conference of the independent Kingdom of Cambodia.
- In 1955, the sovereign abdicated in favour of his father to play a more active part in politics. Opposition Communists, dubbed Khmers Rouges, took sanctuary in the countryside and formed the nucleus of an underground resistance movement. Upon the death of his father in 1960, Prince Sihanouk became chief of state.
- In 1965, with American troops at war in neighbouring Viet Nam, Cambodia broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. The Americans and their allies carried out raids targeting Vietnamese fighters camped inside Cambodian borders.
- In 1969, diplomatic relations with the United States resumed, and the United States began bombing suspected Communist bases in the east of Cambodia.

[2] The French put great energy into clearing, documenting and restoring the ruins at Angkor. The Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, founded in 1898, led the study of Angkor's history and archaeology for more than seventy years until 1972, when it was forced by heavy fighting to leave.