

COMMUNICATION

A TRIBUTE TO REGINALD LE MAY

Reginald le May is surely a name familiar to most members of the Siam Society. It seems that hardly a book or article on Siam — the country, its culture, art, coinage or stamps — fails to refer to some work of le May. For my part, after reading a number of his books and articles, I became determined to meet this scholar and old resident of Siam, who had once occupied the very house in Chiang Mai that I lived in myself for many years. In 1971 le May kindly agreed to meet me in Tunbridge Wells while I was on a visit to England. At the time of his death, a few months thereafter, he was an Honorary Member of the Siam Society, but an obituary was never published in *JSS*. The following notes, which are based on my one meeting and a perusal of 10 volumes of his books lodged in the India Office Library in London, are a tribute to Reginald le May, who did much for the Society and for Siam where he lived and worked for 26 years.

Reginald Stuart le May was born on 6 January 1885 in Kent, England, one of a large family. He was known as Rex. He went to Framlingham College from 1898 to 1902, and there won the Modern Languages Prize and excelled at games. Afterwards he was at King's College, London, and on obtaining his degree he worked first as confidential clerk to the British Consul-General in Zürich and later as an assistant master at his old school. In September 1906, le May came eleventh in the examination for student interpretership in His Britannic Majesty's Far East Consular Service (serving China, Japan and Siam). He joined the British Legation in Bangkok in February 1908.

Le May arrived in Chiang Mai in March 1913 (by train to Den Chai, and from there on foot), where he was Vice-Consul until November when he was transferred to a similar post in Lampang. Reginald le May straightaway started on a tour of the north, having as transport the five elephants normally kept at the Consulate in Chiang Mai. An account of his entourage makes interesting reading today. It totalled 17 persons: two clerks (one Siamese, one Burmese), one headman (in charge of the elephants, but also acting as barber and cook), four mahouts (one per elephant), one head syce (in charge of the mules), two syces (for the mules), two carriers, two messengers, one cook and two 'boys'. Le May gives a detailed description of the route he took in *An Asian Arcady*. Starting from Chiang Mai he visited Lampang, Phrae, Nan and eventually returned to his post in Lampang after a journey of five months and 700 miles.

In 1915 le May went on sick leave to England, where the following year he married Dorothy Madeline Castle. (They had one daughter, Audrey. She eventually married Captain John Fanshawe of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.) Le May was back in Bangkok later in 1916 as Vice-Consul. In 1920 he was sent to Saigon as Acting Consul-General.

Le May resigned from the Far East Consular Service in 1922. He gave as his reason that there were three younger but more senior persons in a service which did not have many officers, and he thought that there was little chance for promotion. He entered the service of the Royal Siamese Government, which seemed to him to give better prospects for more constructive work. He became Adviser to the Minister of Commerce and Communications, an assignment which included responsibility for the spread of rural credit societies throughout the country. He and his staff also edited *The Record*, the official journal of the Board of Commercial Development.

In 1929 le May was consulted regarding proposed plans for celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of Bangkok, notably the plan for construction of the present-day Rajadamnern Avenue. He suggested that a road bridge built over the Chao Phraya River might be even more of a national attraction. This suggestion was adopted by HM King Pradjadhipok and by le May's own Minister, HH Prince Purachatra. It should be remembered that at that time there was not a single road bridge over any major river in Siam except the River Ping at Chiang Mai. A contract was let to Dorman Long and Co., and the Memorial Bridge was completed and opened on time in 1932, an achievement with which Reginald le May was always proud to be associated.

Reginald le May joined the Siam Society in 1923. He took a lively interest in Society affairs, and contributed to *JSS*. He served on the Council of the Siam Society as Honorary Secretary, during 1926 and 1927, and thereafter as Vice-President. It was during his Vice-Presidency that le May claims to have initiated the fund for the construction of the Society's premises on Soi Asoke. Altogether 30,000 ticals was collected, which was enough to achieve the objective. Le May persuaded an old Indian friend, Mr A. E. Nana, to donate three acres of land for the site, and invited Mr Healey, a British resident, to give his architectural services free of charge. At my meeting with le May in 1971, he recalled with satisfaction the finding of a permanent home for the Society which meant so much to him. Le May received a rare honour in being elected an Honorary Member of the Society, in February 1938.

On le May's retirement a luncheon was given in his honour by the Siam Society at the Trocadero Hotel, which was reported in the *Bangkok Times* edition of 28 November 1932. He went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he obtained his PhD in 1937 at the age of 52. He lectured at meetings of learned societies, interpreting East to West. His last lecture, entitled "The glories of Angkor", was held at Burlington House under the chairmanship of Lord Butler (at present Master of Trinity College, Cambridge), and was given a grand ovation by all the notables attending.

When Siam declared war on the United Kingdom in 1941 all Siamese Government pensions stopped, and it was not until July 1943 that the British Government decided to pay to pensioners advances which would be recovered after the war. Le May commented laconically: "This

was the first concrete intimation that I received that we were going to win the war. I felt sure the British Government would never make advances unless they were pretty sure they would get them back." Pensions resumed in October 1946, and all arrears were paid in April 1947.

Le May was an eccentric gentleman with a puckish sense of humour. He was an extensive traveller— in Switzerland, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, China, Japan, the USA and Canada, besides a dozen more countries in south and southeast Asia. He passed examinations in six languages. His French was so fluent that a Frenchman once asked him how it was he came to speak English so well! His religion, le May records, was "first Christian, second Buddhist, third Muslim — in my own way, I find each gives me something that I need."

When W.S. Maugham visited Bangkok in 1925, the le Mays invited him to dinner, but the author wrote declining as he was "about to go up-country". Le May commented: "I must admit that I do not take kindly to Somerset Maugham. He has great literary talent, but he seems to go out of his way to ferret out unsavoury subjects and roll them round his tongue." Rudyard Kipling once wrote to thank le May for informing him that a boulevard in Saigon had been named after him.

Le May was an acknowledged expert on the coinage and stamps of Siam, and wrote books on both subjects. He was a founding member of the Siam Philatelic Society (c. 1911-12), and his extensive collection was purchased for an exhibition that had to be cancelled because of the death of HM King Vajiravudh in 1925. It was placed in the National Library, but its present whereabouts are not known.

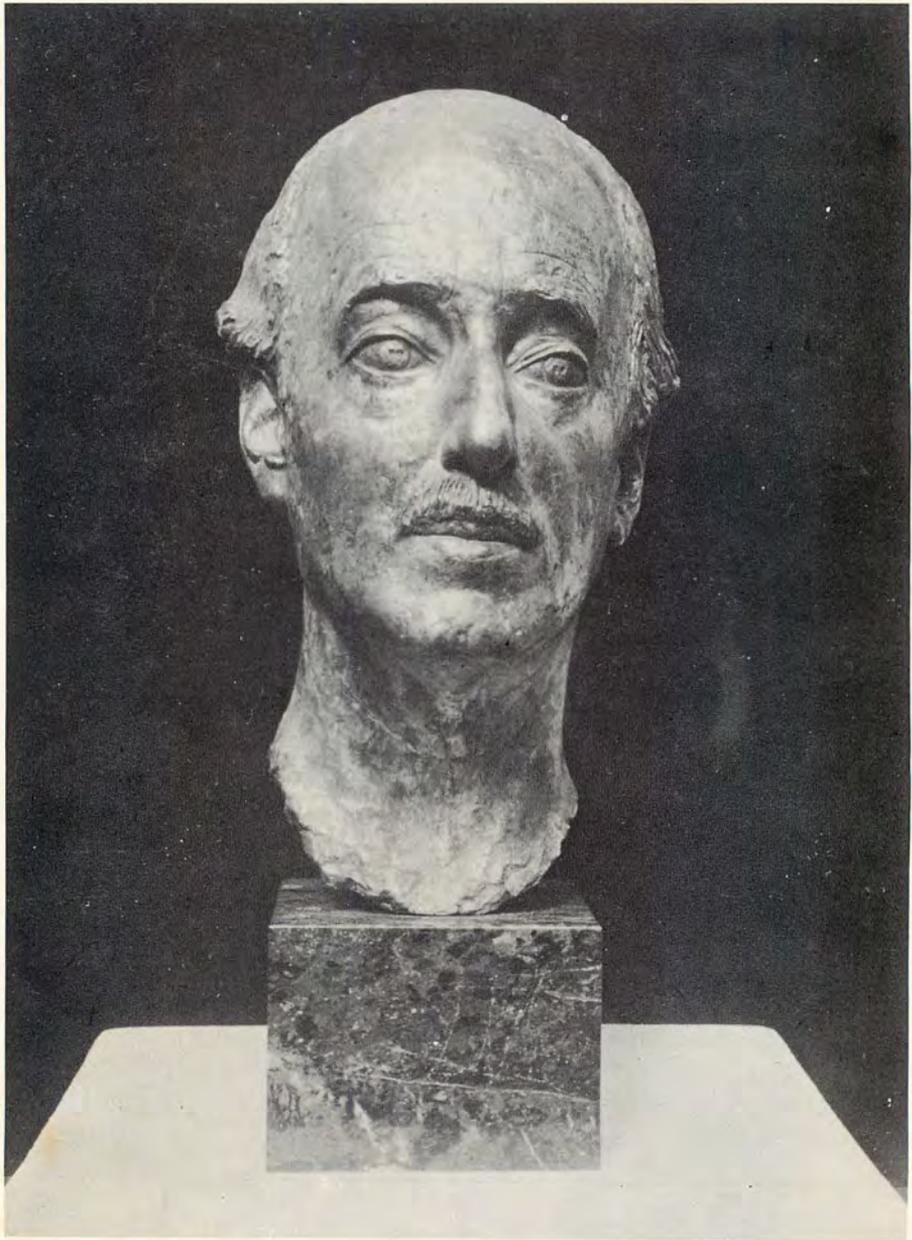
In 1951, when le May was 66 years old and Vice-President of the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society, he agreed to sit for the late Elsa Fraenkel, FRSA (Mrs E. Dane) for a sculpture which was finished in silvered bronze and later won the Silver Medal at the Paris Salon (see photo).

Le May joined the Royal Bangkok Sports Club in 1908, and was a member until 1934. He was a good cricketer, playing for RBSC in many matches between February 1908 and March 1932, often as captain, and usually making good scores. In his last season (at the age of 45) his highest score was 85 not out with an average of 30. In England he played for Kent 2nd XI and for the Granville Club, and once had the distinction of being caught out by W.G. Grace, the 'grand old man of cricket'. Le May was a talented football forward, and received frequent mention in the *Bangkok Times* in accounts of matches he took part in. His last game, when he was 35, was the final of a six-a-side tournament against the East Asiatic Co., Ltd. which his side won. Le May learnt to play golf at RBSC, and soon reduced his handicap to 10, winning the Bangkok Golf Championship in 1919. Altogether he played on 30 courses in 10 countries east of Suez. After his retirement, le May played competitive bridge and won the Kent pairs county championship in 1947 and 1950 with the late Lt-Col Stopford. Le May's other recreations were attending ballet performances and art exhibitions.

Reginald le May died on 22 January 1972. He was one of many who have lost their hearts to Thailand, more particularly to northern Thailand, which in his day was commonly called



Reginald le May (c. 1920) in the uniform of His Britannic Majesty's Far East Consular Service.



This bust of Reginald le May was sculpted and finished in silvered bronze by the late Elsa Fraenkel, FRSA (Mrs E. Dane) in the early 1950s, when le May was Vice-President of the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society, and is now in the collection of the artist's son, Frank W. Dane, by whose kind permission this illustration is reproduced.

western Laos or even just Laos. If there is any doubt on this score, it can be dispelled by reading from the last paragraph on the last page of *An Asian Arcady*.

... this country of the Lao, if not the Promised Land, is yet one which grows dearer to the heart, the more one knows it, and makes the stranger feel that, if he must be exiled from his native shores, he could not find a land of greater charm and sympathy in which to spend his days.

Roy Hudson

Chiang Mai

PUBLICATIONS BY R. S. LE MAY

<i>Descriptive Catalogue of the Postage Stamps and Post and Letter Cards of Siam Issued during the Years 1883 to 1919</i> (with W.J.F. Williamson and E. Wyon Smith; Siam Philatelic Society)	1920
<i>An Asian Arcady</i>	1926
<i>Siamese Tales, Old & New</i>	1930*
<i>The Economic Conditions of North-Eastern Siam</i>	1932
<i>The Coinage of Siam</i>	1932*
<i>The Ceramic Wares of North-Central Siam</i>	1933
<i>A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam</i>	1938*
<i>The Culture of South-East Asia</i> (special Indian edition with foreword by Pandit Nehru, 1962; German edition, 1968)	1954*
<i>The Culture of South-East Asia: the Heritage of India</i>	1954*
<i>Response to Beauty</i>	1954
<i>Records of the le May Family in England, 1630-1950</i>	1958

Contributions to periodical and other publications, including

Burlington Magazine, *Asian Review*, *Oriental Art*, *Chambers's New Encyclopaedia*, *Indian Art and Letters* [foregoing titles cited by *Who's Who 1972*, London, Adam and Charles Black] and the journals of the Siam Society, the Royal Asiatic Society, and the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society. — RH

* More than one edition.