

THE MISSION
OF
SIR JAMES BROOKE TO SIAM.

(September 1850)

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Bowring in giving a resumé of the missions sent by the Western powers to Siam before his own, says of that of his own immediate predecessor, Sir James Brooke :

“As the circumstances attendant upon his [Sir James Brooke's] negotiations were not made public by the British Government (although well known at Bangkok), I am precluded from giving an account of them. Suffice it to say, that all his attempts to conclude a satisfactory treaty with Siam were unavailing, and that he finally broke off his communications with the Siamese Government on the 28th September 1850, and left the country with a very unfavourable impression as to our future prospects of success in establishing commercial relations with this remarkable people.”

Bowring might have been less discreet for the reasons of the non-success of Brooke's mission were set forth in his private correspondence published by John C. Templer, London, 1852, and in contemporary newspaper articles and as Bowring said, were well known in Bangkok; and in the biography of Brooke by Spencer St. John in 1868 they were repeated.

The first formal treaty with Great Britain concluded by Captain Burney, was as is known made on the eve of the Burmese war. The treaty regulated the relations between Siam and the East India Company. Also with regard to the sphere of influence these two powers exercised on the Malay Peninsula, in execution partly of the treaty between the Netherlands and Great Britain, dated March 17, 1824, regarding their possessions in the Far East.

Phra Nang Klao had at the beginning of his reign proclaimed that he would no longer engage in trade speculations, but in doing so, he forgot that as long as some of the inland taxes were partly paid in kind, it was necessary to dispose of the produce by trade,

and this was done by the ministers, who were naturally interested in the venture. The Burney treaty fixed as it is known the measurement duty and thus put the trade on a firm basis. The treaty was at the time of its conclusion considered a success, inasmuch as great hopes were entertained for a large development of the trade between Siam and neighbouring countries. The capability of the small population of Siam to absorb many goods was not however taken into consideration and thus we find disappointment soon after its conclusion. Hence the desire for a new treaty and the petitions made by merchants in England who hoped thereby to extend their trade. The Burney treaty was concluded on behalf of the East India Company and Burney had some difficulty in persuading the Siamese Government that what was done by the Governor General of India, was done on behalf of the Central Government.

Phra Nang Klao always followed the principles of a sound policy and his great aim was, as we learn also from contemporary writings, to be on political good terms with England. In the Burmese war in which the East India Company was engaged, he was successful in his policy in offending neither the English nor the Burmese. Even if by his conduct he could not gain the cordial friendship of either the English or the Burmese Government, he was able to a certain extent to localize the war, although he could not prevent the rebellion of Wiengchan which apparently was a direct outcome of the persistent rumour current at that time about the conquest of Siam by England. It was the policy of a power which recognized plainly that her strength lay and could only lie in diplomatic movements and there is no doubt that Siam in all phases of her history has recognized this. She certainly did not by this policy always gain the love of her neighbours, but she gained respect and tranquillity and this policy was the more necessary owing to the geographical position of Siam.

The trade relations between Siam and the western countries had, however, not improved in the reign of Phra Nang Klao and petitions were sent to the home Government setting forth the grievances of merchants and asking for the revision of the treaty by an Embassy. We quote in this respect a petition dated August 29th, 1849, reproduced in the Bangkok calendar of 1870 which reads as follows and which with its apparent exaggeration may be taken as typical :—

“The treaty of 1826, in one stipulation, provides that merchants at Bangkok shall be permitted to buy and sell without the intervention of any other person and with freedom and facility, all goods, with the exception of paddy and rice. The above treaty was tolerably well observed by the King of Siam till 1840, when he commenced a gradual violation of the stipulation above quoted by establishing a partial monopoly in his favor of sugar, the most important production of the country. Subsequently, in 1842, finding this obvious infraction of the Treaty was unnoticed by the British Government, the monopoly was rendered complete, and since then the producers of sugar have been compelled to dispose of it to the King's officers only, at low unremunerative prices fixed by himself, and after retaining as much as he requires for his own trading operations, the remainder is offered to the merchants at Bangkok at greatly enhanced rates.

“The completion of the sugar monopoly in 1842 was accomplished suddenly and without notice, and was accompanied by an act of gross injustice to a British firm on the part of the Government, who seized several boats laden with sugar purchased by the firm, and about to be dispatched to a British vessel chartered by them. Heavy expenses were incurred by the detention of the vessel, and the sugar had to be purchased from the Government at much higher prices.

“Again in 1841 a British merchant having purchased a quantity of teak, was in the act of shipping it, when the exportation was suddenly prohibited, and it had accordingly to be sold on the spot at a very heavy loss.

“It may be added with reference to the more immediate loss from the sudden establishment of the sugar monopoly, that vessels which had paid the heavy tonnage duties, and engaged cargoes of sugar were obliged to purchase it at high rates from the King for ready money, instead of obtaining it in the usual way by barter, and other vessels subsequently entering the port were compelled to sail without cargoes.

“The measure injuriously affected trade by stopping the system of barter, while the traders were subjected to much loss

in obtaining payment for goods previously disposed of in barter for sugar to be delivered. The perfect impunity with which these wanton violations of the Treaty have been exercised has produced the impression on the mind of the King that no interference need be apprehended on the part of the British Government: and it will be remarked that the King observed the terms of the Treaty from 1826 till 1840 and then effected his purpose by degrees, and it was only after he found his conduct met with no attention or remonstrance from the Government of Great Britain, that he completed the monopoly as above stated.

“Immediately preceding the imposition of this monopoly the price of sugar at Bangkok was equivalent to about 14 or 15s. 6d. per cwt. a very high relative price. Immediately afterwards, the King at once raised the selling price to 18s. and in 1842 when the monopoly was completed, he sold all descriptions of sugar without reference to quality at about 20s. per cwt., at or near which price it now (Dec. 1848) rules. Thus the monopoly of the King has enhanced the selling price of sugar at Bangkok forty per cent, and this is so far from benefiting the producer, that he actually obtains from the King's officers, less than he did when the trade was free; and the plan of placing all descriptions of sugar on the same footing as to price has necessarily caused a great deterioration in the quality produced

“The prejudicial effects of this illegal and oppressive system are well known to all. The trade of Siam has progressively and rapidly diminished as also has the cultivation of sugar.

“Previous to 1840, when the sugar trade was free, the demand for British manufactures and employ of British shipping steadily increased, and during the five years previous to 1840, the average foreign trade of Siam by means of British and other square rigged vessels was fully half a million sterling annually, exclusive of a very large trade by native and Chinese Craft. At the same time the production of sugar increased so rapidly that it became in 1840 the double of 1835 only five years before; whereas in 1846 it was again estimated at about the quantity yielded in 1835, so clearly were the baneful effects of the monopoly evinced.

“The Treaty of 1826 permits the imposition of tonnage duties. The King of Siam has availed himself of these to all but a prohibitive extent. The impost of 1700 ticals per fathom amounts to £ 760 on a vessel in cargo of 320 tons, the same vessel if in ballast must pay £ 680.

“Articles of British manufacture imported are white and grey shirtings, maddapolems, etc., figured shirtings, cambrics, jaconets, lappets, fancy muslins, cold and printed long-cloths, chintzes, Turkey red cloth, grey and Turkey red twist, light woollen cloths, metals generally, hardware, muskets, earthenware, &c. and numerous other articles of smaller importance.

“The circumstance that every individual of the entire population is a consumer of cotton piece goods, which can be best supplied from the manufacturing districts of Britain, and a very large number of inhabitants being entirely habited therein, is clear evidence that Siam offers an immense outlet to British manufactures, if our trade be placed on a free and sound footing.

“The difficulty of obtaining profitable returns for our imports has always acted injuriously on our trade with Siam ; but now that the staple export of the country is monopolized contrary to treaty, the difficulty is very greatly increased, and this coupled with the exorbitant dues levied on British shipping has reduced our trade to one tenth its natural dimensions.

“At present the collection of the entire sugar crop is farmed out to a few officials, who derive a large income therefrom by compelling the cultivators to deliver the article to them at unremunerative prices, which offer no inducement to an extended or improved cultivation.

“This oppressive system alienates the affection of the inhabitants from the King and his Government and has recently resulted in some rather serious disturbances in the sugar districts, producing considerable alarm in Bangkok. These evidences of disaffection have perhaps for the first time shown the King the impolicy as well as injustice of his conduct.

“The success of Great Britain in the Burmese war in

1826, and more recently in China have fully impressed the King with just ideas of the power of Great Britain, and the hopelessness of resistance on his part.

“ A freedom in the trade in sugar in accordance with the treaty, would be of most important benefit to our commerce with Siam, but this would be greatly increased by the substitution in lieu of the present enormous tonnage duties—an equitable tariff on goods the revenue from which would readily yield as large an income to the Government. The export of rice is prohibited, as there is a law requiring a three years stock to be kept on hand in the land : but as the production of this article is very large and capable of great extension, the liberation of this article, at least to a certain extent, would be of great advantage.

“ Should circumstances render an Embassy expedient—such would be gratefully acknowledged.”

“ The memorial of the undersigned humbly sheweth.—

“ That your memorialists venture again to come before you, urging that the state of trade with Siam has not undergone any improvement since the above document was forwarded, but on the contrary has much fallen off and has been subjected to new restrictions and impediments, the effect of which has been to throw almost the whole trade into the hands of the King and his ministers, that the heavy measurement duty exacted from English ships prevents their being sent to Siam, except in a very few cases, and the foreign merchants there, have been in the habit of chartering or loading goods on private Siamese vessels which paying no duty or a moderate one have enabled the merchant to export his goods with some prospect of advantage.

“ But this has lately been prohibited, the King's being the only Siamese vessels now available to the foreign trader for the export of his goods to Singapore or elsewhere.

“ That the King's vessels are nearly all in bad order, some overrun with white ants, exposing goods to great risk, and rendering insurance impossible or difficult. Thus British property

is kept locked up in Siam, and profits diminished or swept away, while merchants elsewhere dare not send because incurring delay, and risk, and lessening chance of profit."

Under these circumstances the British Government decided to send a mission to Siam and also to Cochinchina with the view of improving the trade relations, and for that purpose they selected Sir James Brooke, who it was supposed had acquired especial knowledge of the affairs of the East. He had two years previously arrived from Borneo in England, where his action did not find universal approval, though the Government of Lord Palmerston apparently was satisfied with his conduct. His action was discussed in the home Press and he found in the *Times* and *Globe* staunch supporters, whilst the *Daily News* and *Spectator* imputed to him all sorts of misdemeanours. These discussions found of course an echo in the Far Eastern Press, and especially in an article which appeared in the *Straits Times* of April 27th, 1849, violently attacking Sir James' policy.

It is to be inferred that these rumours reached Bangkok and that they were much exaggerated by those who were not eager that a new treaty should be made, or that the old Burney treaty should be modified to suit circumstances.

When Sir James arrived in Penang after having settled some troubles in Borneo, he found definite instructions from home to proceed if he thought it expedient to Siam and Cochinchina with a view of putting the commercial relations with these two countries on a more satisfactory footing.

The Admiralty had also received instructions to put at his disposal some vessels on which to proceed to Bangkok. In March, 1850, Sir James sent the *Nemesis* to Bangkok with a letter for the foreign ministers, advising them of his mission, and he himself with a staff started for Siam on August 3rd, 1850, on board H. B. M. S. *Sphinx* with the *Nemesis* in tow. On arrival at the mouth of the river he sent Captain Brooke and Spencer St. John, whom he had appointed Secretary to the mission, to Bangkok to advise the foreign ministers of his arrival. After the permission had been received, both the *Nemesis* and *Sphinx* proceeded to Paknam, but through a misunderstood signal the *Sphinx* stuck on the bar, and the assistance of the Siamese Government had to be asked for.

St. John ascribes to this the failure of the mission. Certainly it did not conduce to the success of the mission, but it is perhaps only one of the causes, and a very minor one. The Government on the arrival of the mission in Paknam placed at their disposal state barges, and in these they were in old fashion conveyed to Bangkok.

Sir James, after having communicated with Chao Mün Way Voranath (who in the reign of King Mongkut became Prime Minister, and who acted as Regent during the first years of the reign of King Chulalongkorn), had then his first interview with Chao Phya Phra Klang the Minister for Foreign Affairs. It was he who in the reign of the King Mongkut received the title of Somdet Chao Phya Parama Prayurawongse and signed some of the treaties conducted with foreign powers.

Boats were placed at the disposal of Sir James, and the fears which St. John has expressed in his book about a premeditated attack on the mission proved absolutely groundless.

The usual questions were asked at the first interview with the foreign minister about the time he had left England. Sir James replied that he had done so two years ago and that he had received orders regarding a treaty to be made between Siam and Great Britain. On the further question about an autograph letter from the Sovereign to the Sovereign, Sir James replied that it would be difficult for a Sovereign to write to another Sovereign before a treaty was signed and that he was only the bearer of a letter from the foreign minister Lord Palmerston to the Siamese Minister for Foreign Affairs. To the explanation given, the Chao Phya Phra Klang replied, that a treaty between England and Siam had been signed in 1826 by Captain Burney, and that this he supposed was known in England and that, as it had not been denounced, it was still to be considered in force. Sir James replied that the treaty alluded to was well known, but that it was a treaty made between the East India Company and Siam, and that it was thus like the treaty made between a province and a Sovereign state, whilst the present treaty would be one between two Sovereign states. With this view, the foreign ministers did not agree, as Siam always understood, according to what Captain Burney had told them, that it was a treaty made between Sovereign States, as the King of Great Britain had

delegated his power for treaty making in India to the Governor General of India, and this view was maintained in all subsequent interviews. However, the Government, Sir James was assured, was not in principle adverse to the revision of the treaty, but it to a certain extent insisted that as the treaty had been in existence for 27 years, Burney, who had concluded it, should also amend it in consultation with the foreign ministers. They hinted that as Burney had been the bearer of an autograph letter, accrediting him, so if the treaty was to be amended, it could only be done under the authority of another autograph letter conferring the same powers as those held by Burney. This was the tenor of all correspondence, and as Brooke insisted in writing in Siamese with an English translation attached to it, this gave perhaps a not always unwelcome pretext for not falling in with his views. Brooke also insisted in his correspondence more than perhaps was necessary on the high office he held, and we judge from his private correspondence that he considered all Asiatics with whom he had to deal as inferior and only fit to govern themselves under European guidance and that meant by Europeans. Sir James arrived, as is well known, not long before the death of the King Phra Nang Klao and the succession to the throne was necessarily discussed in government circles. Sir James thought it incumbent on him to use his influence that the successor to the throne should fall in with his views for opening up the country, and he thus wrote in a letter addressed to Major Stuart dated Singapore, June 17, 1850 :—

“ Siam is, however, a country well worthy of attention, and, in a commercial point of view, second only to China, but the Government is as arrogant as that of China, and the King, by report, is inimical to Europeans. The difficulty is rendered greater by twenty-seven years of non-intercourse, which has served to encourage the Siamese in their self-conceit, and which has lowered us in their opinion. I shall try every means to conciliate their good opinion, and not force a treaty upon the King, which, when concluded, would be but wasted parchment, if not enforced, and if enforced, would inevitably lead to a war, though a petty one; on the contrary, I consider that time should be given to the work of conciliation, that their prejudices should be gradually undermined, rather than violently upset, and that, as we have delayed for thirty years doing anything, in the course of this policy we may wait till the

demise of the King brings about a new order of things. Above all, it would be well to prepare for the change, and to place our own king on the throne, and the King of our choice is fortunately the legitimate sovereign, whose crown was usurped by his elder illegitimate brother. This prince, Chow-Fa Mongkut, is now a priest, and a highly accomplished gentleman, as far as things go. He reads and writes English in a way, is instructed in our astronomy, and has a very high opinion of our arts, learning, and government. This prince we ought to place on the throne, and through him we might, beyond doubt, gain all we desire."

Sir James forgot evidently in his estimate of the Siamese the historical fact that Siam had from early times been in political communications with other powers, that the affairs of the outside world were known in Siam through the foreign residents, the American and French missionaries, the English, American and Portuguese merchants. However that may be, he submitted to the Government certain proposals for the amendment of the Burney treaty, mostly with reference to trade and commerce. This draft treaty was submitted by the King, after he himself had made certain remarks on it, to the council of ministers and especially some officials who were supposed to know something about foreign political affairs. The great point in the treaty was to know on whose behalf Brooke was acting and whether it was expedient to enter into negotiations with him or not, and the King in submitting these questions to his ministers, insisted that they should give their unbiased opinion. He insisted further in his instructions on the great power of England with which country, during his whole reign, he had tried to be on excellent terms. The whole correspondence with Brooke was submitted consequently to all officials and through His Royal Highness Krom Khun Issaret (afterwards Phra Pin Klao) to Chao Fa Mongkut, the later King Phra Chom Klao, who at that time was still in the priesthood. The resident American missionaries were also consulted with regard to the meaning of certain expressions used.

The main points of the treaty were the reduction of the measurement duties, rules for regulating the contravention of the opium laws, the import of which was entirely forbidden, the residence of foreigners, the fixing of the duty on such articles as did not

form a monopoly, the export of rice. None of the demands were for various reasons agreed to, and when Sir James appealed for reciprocity the Government at that time declined any interference with their own subjects who might have gone to foreign countries.

With regard to the demand for religious liberty which was also noted, the Government stated that perfect tolerance existed for all religions and, whenever appealed to, the Government had granted all necessary facilities to the followers of the various religious sects in Siam. The only thing insisted on by Government was that those living in their realm should conform to their laws, and just with regard to that point, the Government could instance the acts of one Mr. Hunter, who was one of the oldest merchants resident, who had been in many instances government purveyor, and who, because the Government would not buy a steam-launch from him at his price, made himself obnoxious and had entered into partnership with Chinese merchants for the import of opium, which during the whole reign of Phra Nang Kiao was absolutely forbidden, and the import of which was visited with the severest pains. The conduct of this Mr. Hunter was the pretext for simply repudiating all demands for allowing free residence of Europeans otherwise than already stipulated for in the Burney treaty. St. John in the biography of Brooke admitted that the Government was under these circumstances justified in their actions.

With regard to the question of appointing a consul to reside in Bangkok, the Government did not under these circumstances see the necessity for it, and instanced the case of the two Portuguese Consuls, under whom trade and commerce had not increased, and who were only suffered to reside in Bangkok. Wherever reciprocity was appealed to the Government stated that it was not interested in the fate of such of their subjects as had left the country of their own free will, and that foreign governments could treat them as they liked as they were traitors to the country of their birth, just as much as other governments might claim absolute jurisdiction over foreigners who had resorted to their country if they acted contrary to law.

As in other countries of the Far East the economical ideas prevailing were absolutely against the export of rice, as there was always the fear that a dearth might occur, and thus the export of rice was as a rule absolutely forbidden. In Siam as well as in Burma the export of rice was only allowed if a three years supply was in the

country. To this policy the Government had adhered from ancient time, and ships frequenting Siamese harbours, were only allowed to export sufficient rice for the use of the crew to last them up the time the next harbour would be reached and, as we learn from the Dagb Register, it was considered a high privilege and favour if any ship frequenting a Siamese harbour was allowed to load rice as merchandise. The demands, therefore, of Sir James Brooke to allow an export of rice by paying an export duty of 1 salung a picul was on these grounds not acceded to.

The great question then raised was the reduction of the measurement duty. It is known that after long and tedious deliberations the duty had been fixed in the Burney Treaty at the rate of Tcs. 1,700 a fathom, whilst before Burney's time it was as high as Ticals 2,200. All arguments as to an increase of trade proved unavailing, and this demand was also refused. It was not to be wondered that after these explanations the negotiations were broken off, friendly letters and presents were exchanged and the foreign minister wrote to Lord Palmerston and the letter was conveyed in solemn procession to Sir James Brooke, just as the letter of Lord Palmerston had been conveyed to the foreign minister at the commencement of the negotiations. Once more expressions of friendship were renewed in it, all details about the mission given and then Sir James asked to be provided with a pilot to take the boats over the bar. Sir James in his private correspondence wrote under date February 22, 1851, to Templer as follows:—

“The Siam mission may be brought up, and on this point it may be boldly affirmed, that the propositions made were just and moderate; and that I strictly obeyed my instructions, in avoiding all grounds of dispute; that I was a favourite personally with the Siamese, though I was unbending, and that the English and American inhabitants fully approved of every step I took. If the enemy accuse me of delay in proceeding on the mission, answer, that when I first received the appointment, it was physically impossible that I could undertake the duty, and had I been able to do so, I could not have procured a vessel of war.”

Wild rumours about an eventual interference were current in Bangkok at that time, but nothing as we know happened.

Early in 1852 news of the death of Phra Nang Klao, who had died on April 3, 1851, and the accession of King Mongkut reached London, and the opportunity was considered a propitious one once more to enter into negotiations with regard to a new treaty with Siam. Sir James Brooke was again selected to proceed to Siam for that purpose, but the Siamese Government had intimated that they would prefer to postpone negotiations with regard to the new treaty until after the cremation of the late King. The new ministers who had served under the King Phra Nang Klao, and who had conducted the negotiations with Sir James, were re-appointed, and early in January 1852 a proclamation was issued in which practically all the wishes of the powers with regard to trade in Siam were acceded to, viz., the measurement duty was reduced to Tcs. 1000 a fathom, rice was allowed to be exported, opium which had been hitherto absolutely prohibited without its being possible to enforce this prohibition was declared a government monopoly.

It is known that Sir John Bowring, after a lengthy discussion between the Indian Board and the Foreign Office and in consequence also of petitions received from merchants to place the trade with Siam on a sounder basis, was deputed in March 1855 to make a new treaty, and by this treaty the relations between Great Britain and Siam are to a certain extent still governed

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At the conclusion of the paper, Dr. Hansen proposed and Mr. Bock seconded a vote of thanks to Dr. Frankfurter.

Supporting the vote, Dr. Carrington said the paper had been enjoyable because it was interesting, and interesting because it conformed to the facts of the case as they transpired at that time.

In reply to Mr. Petithuguenin, who said the French papers relating to this period had been published by Professor Cordier in the *T'oung Pao*, Dr. Frankfurter said that Prince Damrong had interested himself in the matter, and the India Office and Foreign Office had kindly given permission for the copying of papers with reference to official relations between Great Britain and Siam. The Burney papers had already arrived, and Prince Damrong, with the gracious consent of His Majesty, had given instructions for these to be printed and issued. They were now practically finished, and they had been distributed as they were printed. The first half of Sir James Brooke's papers had also been received, and it was thus hoped eventually to have a full record of the relations existing between Great Britain and Siam from 1782 up to the time of the death of King Mongkut in 1868.
