The British 'Discovery' of Southeast Asia*

Stephen L. Keck**

Abstract

This paper argues that the despite the fact that the British were heavily involved in Southeast Asian history, they were relatively late in beginning the organized scholarly research into the region. In fact, it would be external pressures which would motivate the British to decide to regard the area as a distinct region. Nonetheless, British civil servants and travelers had been writing about their wide and varied encounters with the region and its peoples for two centuries or more. Exploring this literature leads to the conclusion that while the British had yet to commit the resources to the organized academic investigation of Southeast Asia, they did understand it in relation to questions involving modernization, ethnic groups, commercial development and the purpose of empire.

Keywords Southeast Asia, British Empire, travel writing, Alfred Russel Wallace, Isabella Bird, V.C. Scott O' Connor, postcolonialism, and modernization

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** Stephen L. Keck is Associate Professor of History and Head of the Department of International Studies at the American University of Sharjah

I. Introduction

The appointment of Lord Louis Mountbatten to Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) in 1943 reflected a conclusion on the part of the British that the region had a distinctive identity. Southeast Asia Command, after all, was itself an invention borne of military need, which underscored war realities. The SEAC involved cooperation with Britain's American ally and decisions made about it (and its leadership) were shaped by the requirements of global strategy.[1] British planners were envisioning not only the liberation of Singapore and Malaya, but doing so from the perspective of the campaigns in Burma. The military unit was responsible for India, Burma, Indochina, Malaya (including Singapore) and the now occupied East Indies. The Philippines were excluded for political reasons just as India was included because of the location of British bases. In any case, the creation of SEAC signified a departure from many aspects of British policy because it moved from concentrating upon individual colonies and nations to the region as a whole.[2] Obviously, British planners

1) Mountbatten's appointment itself reflected a number of political calculations made by Whitehall. The Americans could accept a British general for SEAC because it helped to guarantee that one of their own would hold the more important position of Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. Furthermore, while a number of British military leaders had reservations about Mountbatten's suitability to lead SEAC, he was deemed more than acceptable to lead a unit which was made up largely of Indian troops. The combination of Mountbatten's charisma and his status as a member of the royal family made him qualified him to command SEAC. See Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 291-295.

2) It should be pointed out that there is a long history to the military description of Southeast Asia. To cite just one example, after the First World War, the British acknowledged the rise of Japanese power by reconsidering the defense of their empire. Singapore was chosen over Hong Kong and Sydney as the place where a fleet large enough to defeat or deter the

had thought about the area—now known as Southeast Asia—for centuries. While it not necessary to recount the history of Britain's involvement with the region in any detail, it should be pointed out that it went well beyond its colonial possessions. Not only had the British contested (unsuccessfully) the Dutch for control of Ambon, but they briefly occupied parts of the Philippines in the 18th century and kept a close eye on Thailand in the 19th century.

Nonetheless, an investigation of British discourses suggests that the British did not yet understand these places as part of a distinct region. Instead, they related it two or possibly three (in the case of Australia) larger areas. The land and seas later associated with Southeast Asia were either understood by their proximate relationships with India and China. It is clear that British writers were very interested in this part of the world as they left behind a relatively large body of work which traverses virtually every known discipline or area of human knowledge. In so doing, these men and women were producing 'colonial knowledge' which it has been suggested was also a manifestation of imperial power.

At the heart of the colonial worldview was the production of cartographic and geographic knowledge. The impact of cartography on both regional and national developments within Southeast Asia has been explored by scholars such as Thongchai Winichakul and others who have

Japanese navy could be based. Admiral Viscount Jellicoe concluded that Singapore was "undoubtedly the naval key to the Far East". From the point of military planning Singapore and Malaya were part of much larger Pacific region which included Australia and Hong Kong. For more on this topic see: Malcolm H. Murfett, John N. Miksic, Brian P. Farrell and Chiang Ming Shun, *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal*, (Oxford, 1999), pp. 147-150.

shown that the development of cartographic knowledge was a significant instrument not only of European colonial powers, but also political leaders within the region.[3] Articulating the significance of colonial cartographies has been a fruitful enterprise because it as usefully depicted some of the connections which defined knowledge and power under imperial rule. That said, it should be pointed out that the British (and probably other colonial powers) were keenly aware that the process of map production was as difficult as it was important. Witness Archibald Colquhoun's (1848-1914) complaint that the British lagged beyond their European rivals:

> the Government of India possesses no intelligence guide or gazetteer, and no maps of any real value brought up to date regarding the whole of our Eastern Indian frontier and neighbouring countries…. In the matter of maps the Germans possess, with the single exception of our Admiralty charts, incomparably the best, in fact the only ones containing information brought up to date, not only regarding China and Japan, but concerning all the countries of the Far East. Your Special Correspondent has been compelled to use German maps not only in the field but to turn to them in the publication of books describing parts of the East.[4]

Along with the requirements for competent diplomacy were those of commerce. It would be the needs of British colonial policy making which helped to supply the boundaries of Burma, Thailand Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. British commercial interests had long produced significant

3) Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu, 1994).

4) Archibald Colquhoun, *English Policy in the Far East* (London, 1885), pp. 7-8.

information about both 'mainland Southeast Asia' and its island counterparts. Nonetheless, despite these fulsome efforts, the British had not been interested in the defining the borders or boundaries of the region. Furthermore, as new nations developed in Southeast Asia it became a refrain that the British were successful imperialists because they practiced 'divide and rule' policies. There is no question that 'divide and rule' politics were a tool of British governance, but it should be pointed out that they perceived the places in the region to be fundamentally divided from the beginning. That is, many if not most of these British authors were content to depict and describe the ethnic, religious, social and geographic divisions which they believed defined their subject matter.

These authors were usually not professional specialists, but in many cases writing about their experiences which furnished them with expertise. Their publications preceded, for the most part, the explosion of British scholarship about the region, which Victor King has ably described in "The Development of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom (and Europe): the Making of a Region".[5] In fact, given the empire's diplomatic needs, British scholarship about the region appears to have developed slowly. Despite the fact that Britain had both a range of colonial possessions (and responsibilities) and commercial interests in the region, there did not exist any kind of "British Asia center" the home country.[6] Attempts to develop any kind of systematic or organized program for the study of Southeast Asia did not succeed in Britain before World War II. To

5) Victor T. King, "The Development of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom (and Europe): The Making of a Region" in *The Historical Construction of Southeast Asia* (Seoul, 2010).

6) Ibid, p. 141.

cite a couple of examples, in 1917 lectureships were established at SOAS: a Readership in Malay and a Lectureship in Burmese. However these positions could have hardly said to have fostered the creation of any kind of wider organized program of study for the larger region. In addition, the academic exploration of the areas which would later be known as Southeast Asia at SOAS faced hurdles involving funding and student interest.[7] In 1932 SOAS did organize six departments to study regional languages and cultures, one of which was 'South East Asia and the Islands' (which included the Malay-Indonesian as well as the Austronesian diaspora). Nonetheless, this program was discontinued in 1936.[8]

The publication of the Scarbrough Report in 1947 marked a 'vital watershed' in the growth of the study of Asia in Britain. With the underlying political dynamics greatly changed, research into Southeast Asia now flourished. Regional specialists might well become nostalgic for some of the developments which the Scarbrough Report seemed to herald: D.G. E. Hall took up the newly created Chair in South East Asian history at SOAS in 1949; at the same time, their was an increase in both the depth and breadth of linguistic training.[9] More important, perhaps, these developments were followed by a sustained commitment to the academic exploration of Southeast Asia in Britain which would not reach its zenith for nearly a generation.[10] To put this in perspective, as Britain was withdrawing from Southeast Asia, it was increasing the resources for scholarship dedicated to comprehending the region.

7) Ibid, p. 142.
8) Ibid, pp. 142-143
9) Ibid, p. 146.
10) Ibid, pp. 148-150

Nearly a generation after the establishment of SEAC and as study of Southeast Asia was beginning its 'golden age' in Britain,[11] John Smail's famous article pondered the possibility of producing an 'autonomous history' for Southeast Asia. Smail's article reflected the needs of scholars who sought to emancipate themselves from what they understood to be the persistence and domination of colonial categories.[12] These scholars were sensitive to challenges inherent in trying to write the history of the region without being dependent upon Western (and implicitly colonial) patterns of knowledge. Their enterprise began with the expectation that region's history has been already shaped—virtually prefabricated—by the production of knowledge in the colonial period. The boom in scholarship dedicated to the region—of which these researchers were a part—simply followed this now problematic paradigm.

However, this paper will start with an alternative assumption: namely, that even if British writing about the region proved to have a sustained legacy, the British were themselves slow to recognize the distinctive character of the region as a unique and definite entity. In fact, the paper will explore the possibility that despite the fact that the British produced large bodies of knowledge about many aspects of Southeast Asia, the British 'discovered' the region as they were on the verge of leaving it—as the needs of empire were beginning to give way to the dynamics of the Cold War. Postcolonial criticism has suggested that the production of knowledge—through descriptions, classifications and definitions has

11) Ibid, p. 150.

12) John R. W. Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia", *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, 2 (1961)

reflected the realities of power. Furthermore, the production of knowledge was indicative of power and it was used to reinforce colonial authority; yet, this paper will illustrate that for at least some of the colonizers, the manufacture and organization of information about local societies and geographies in Southeast Asia was done with a great awareness of limitations. It was also a product of the intense pressures produced by imperial rivalries. All told, reviewing both the lack of sustained scholarship in Britain and problematic conditions under which the British produced information about Southeast Asia points to its episodic nature. To take this suggestion further, British writing was much less organized than many may remember, but the limitations under which it was produced required huge efforts which ultimately produced some significant achievements. The history of British thought about Southeast Asia in the colonial period remains to be written, but it seems clear that as we will see, the British came to the definition late—but still generated significant information about the region.

For our purposes, we will examine a range of discourses which might be deemed to be representative of this large body of work. This period will draw upon British writings from the second half of the 19th century. Nicholas Tarling has characterized this period of British engagement with Southeast Asia as 'reactive' because he has argued that imperial expansion was conditioned by a range of external factors.[13] That is, the British were not determined to construct an empire in Southeast Asia, but political and economic developments motivated them to gain control over more areas

13) Nicholas Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia* (London, 2001), p. 105.

of Burma, Borneo and Malaya.

Analysis of missionary, military, academic, and bureaucratic discourses—many of which are nicely contained under the banner of 'travel writing' indicates that while the British did not consider it important to define the area as a region, it is evident that they came to view the subject matter with reference to a number of key concepts, themes and tropes. This will paper will draw principally upon figures such as Alfred Russel Wallace, V.C. Scott O' Connor, Isabella Bird and other writers because they bring together the attempts to make sense of different places in the region: Wallace, of course, wrote The *Malay Archipelago* (1869) mostly about the Dutch East Indies [14] in *The Golden Chersonese* (1883)[15] Bird concentrated on the Malay peninsula; last, O' Connor' s *The Silken East* (1905) and *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma* (1907)[16] reflected a deep affection for Burma. These works cannot in any way be comprehensive, but they are meant to be suggestive of the ways that the British regarded these different places. Burma, to state the obvious, was part of India while Malaya and Singapore were not. Nonetheless, it is clear that while each one of these figures wrote with a particular stance and agenda, it is clear that they shared a number of viewpoints.

Taken together, these themes reveal that while the British had not provided definition to the region by describing, naming and then classifying, it remains that they had articulated a pattern of discourse which proved to be more durable than might be imagined. In fact, scholars might

14) Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (London, 1869).

15) Isabella Bird, *The Golden Chersonese* (London, 1883).

16) V.C. Scott O' Connor, *The Silken East* (London, 1905) and *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma* (London, 1907).

find that despite the degraded status of 'orientalist' or 'colonial knowledge', many of the issues addressed by these authors lived far beyond the life spans of colonial states and, ultimately, helped to provide the foundation for emergence of Southeast Asia as a region.

The characteristics of this discourse can be detected in a number of themes—almost tropes—which came to help define British ways of thinking about the region. Even though these figures traveled in different places and did so for different reasons, it should be clear that there were some common themes which interested them. It is precisely these common areas of interest and attention which I will argue provides some basis for reconstructing the manner in which the British came to understand the region which today is called Southeast Asia.

It should be noted that when the British wrote about specific places they often did so in relation to the question of modernity. Sometimes this was placed before (or against 'tradition') but invariably it meant the framework with which to compare the West with specific phenomena in Southeast Asia. In addition to the idea of modernity, lay a fascination with ethnicity. Understanding ethnicity (often more directly, and meanly, articulated as 'race') implied not only comparisons with Western modes of life, but also evaluations with how the many different peoples of the region encountered and compared with one another. The negative confluence of these first two themes could be gleaned when discussions about 'savages' were made evident. These topics were affected both by the gendering of knowledge and by religious considerations. Scientific naturalism also played a role in the ways in which the British formulated discourse about the region. The desire and understand and exhibit the many things seen in places such as Burma, Malaya and the Malay archipelago promoted

curiosity and furthered the need to classify and rank. Less obvious, it also promoted the need to generate an encyclopedic or totalistic understanding not only of the flora and fauna of the region' s many places, but also of its peoples, their customs and history.

At least two other themes formed British perceptions of Southeast Asia. The first was commercial opportunity. British travel writers, for example, invariably wrote not only about the exotic, but also things practical. As we will see, some recorded patterns of commercial exploitation, but others were more often interested in depicting business practices for their own sake. Increasingly, the fascination with commerce also meant writer for the a new type of Briton—the tourist who after 1869 (with the opening of the Suez Canal) were beginning to make their way to Southeast Asia in every larger numbers. These tourists, of course, came not only to see or work, but now to consume. The second theme was understanding places in Southeast Asia in their relationship to the British empire. For Britons writing about places already under the British flag, this implied an evaluation of imperial governance. However, for those who wrote about Siam, or the Dutch East Indies or Cochin China, then there was potentially more at stake. These sites meant the occasion to reflect comparatively not only about the relationships which might exist between Westerners and Asian life, but about those amongst the colonizers themselves. The differences between the British, Dutch, Spanish, and French (as well as the Americans) might strike those who have grown up accustomed to postcolonial realities as quaint or unimportant, but, in fact, they had a great deal do with the ways in which the British understood both the region and their roles in it.

II. Key Themes in the British Conceptions of Southeast Asia

1. Challenges Amidst Modernization

Many British authors evaluated societies which they encountered in Southeast Asia through the lens of modernity. That is, the measured places, forms of social organization, gender and wealth against modernization. In most cases, these judgments were instinctive and often superficial, with Southeast Asian locales either on the way to modernity or simply not modernized. It should be pointed out that for these writers modernity was an assumption, which itself was not completely articulated. Therefore, when colonial authors assessed things within the region in the context of modernity, they did so without scholarly rigor. The realities of modernity were so clear to them as to be self-evident; yet, for some Britons it meant material living conditions, commercial prosperity and public health, while for others it also implied the destruction or erosion of social practices and traditions. Any of these realities (and others) might become the basis for differentiation, analysis and even measurement. Nonetheless, within this framework, ideas about a places' history , ethnic competition, social reform complemented visions of economic progress in a beautiful and exotic region under progressive imperial rule.

2. The Inevitability of Modernization

A number of Britons adopted a melancholic tone when discussing the modernization of the region. While they would communicate their excitement about the obvious evidence of modernization (increased commerce, travel, changes in education and improvements in heath care), British writers encouraged their readers to ponder the vast collection of ruins in

many parts of the region. Wallace took his readers to Borobudur, and tried to explain its size by saying "the amount of human labour and skill expended on the Great Pyramid of Egypt sinks into insignificance when compared with that required to complete this sculptured hill-temple in the interior of Java." [17] Whether this could have been confirmed or was nothing more than conjecture remains unclear. Nevertheless, it was O' Connor who devoted Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma to the subject. For O' Connor, the contrast was vivid:

At Rangoon the imagination strains forward into years that are yet to come, to some hint of that great Destiny that awaits it; at Mandalay one only wonders how much longer its crenellated walls and crumbling battlements will survive; how much longer its gilded pillars and tapering spires will speak to the eye of things that can never live again. [18]

British Burma was part of a vast and burgeoning commercial system which would bring growth and development, but this also implied the lost of the country' s past. O' Connor' s work was ultimately a work of historic preservation: using descriptions, diagrams and photographs, he sought to make it possible to hold onto as much of Burma' s past as possible.

The advance of modern life also enabled Britons to place the region into a comparative position with developments in the Western world. Comparative modernity, as such, produced several frameworks which were frequently replicated in British thought and writing. The most obvious placed Southeast Asian places within striking distance of the

17) Wallace, p. 116.

18) O, Connor, *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*, p. 3.

modern world. O' Connor' s Rangoon, for example, was heavily modernized but retained a number of premodern elements. Colonial life followed a Whig pattern of history: the advance of modernity was inevitable. Not all Britons believed that this meant progress: Talbot Kelly, who also wrote engagingly about Egypt, mourned the passing of Burmese life and traditions. Isabella Bird, who was less worried about the encroachments of modern life, also tended to consider the development of Malaya and Singapore as both positive and probable .

At the same time, British writers invoked the concept of civilization in order to underscore these points of differentiation. In addition, it is certainly possible to recover evidence for the prevalence of the 'civilizing mission' as an organizing motif in British encounters with the peoples and societies of Southeast Asia. Yet, at times, the comparisons could lead to some surprising results—with British writers asking out loud about the health of the modern civilization from which they came. At least three examples are worth mentioning: O' Connor' s view of modernity which emerges from the pages of *The Silken East*; Harold Fielding-Hall' s praise for Burman life which could be found in works such as *The Soul of a People* (1898) and *A People at School* (1906)and Alfred Russel Wallace' s conclusion about the inadequacy of his own civilization which he articulated the end of The Malay Archipelago :

> We should now clearly recognize the fact, that the wealth and knowledge and culture of the few do not constitute civilization, and do not of themselves advance us toward the "perfect social state". Our vast manufacturing system, our gigantic commerce, our crowded towns and cities, support and continually renew a mass of human misery and crime absolutely greater than has ever existed before. They

create and maintain in life-long labor an ever-increasing army, whose lot is the more hard to bear, by contrast with the pleasures, the comforts, and the luxury which they see everywhere around them, but which they can hope to enjoy; and, who, in this respect, are worse off than the savage in the midst of the tribe…. until there is a more general recognition of this failure of our civilization—resulting mainly from our neglect to train and develop more thoroughly the sympathetic feelings and moral faculties of our nature, and to allow to them a larger share of the influence in our legislation, our commerce, and our whole social organization—we shall never, as regards the whole community, attain to any real or important superiority over the better class of savages. This is the lesson I have been taught by my observations of uncivilized man.[19]

3. Modernization and the fate of ethnic groups

If the British assumed the near inevitability of modernization, they came to believe that the competition between ethnic groups—itself predicated on the opening of both societies and markets which came with colonial governance—might produce drastic results. A number of different conceptions towards ethnicity defined British thinking and writing about ethnic differences in Southeast Asia. Victorian positivism, Social Darwinism and ideas culled from discussions about urban decay helped to anchor British writings about ethnicity. Often British authors used the term 'race' interchangeably with conceptions of ethnic identity and, in some cases, these discussions collapsed into racist discourses. Nonetheless, it is probably more accurate to regard British writing about ethnic differences as nuanced and varied. Above all, British discourses regarding ethnic groups

19) Wallace, p. 598.

are not reducible to easy orientalisms; instead a through examination of these documents reveals a complex set of ideas, many of which were decisively affected by gender and considerations about the subject.

The intellectual life of the Victorian period (the 19th century) has been remembered for the development of liberalism, social criticism, Darwinian ideas, Fabian socialism (an understudied topic for the development of Southeast Asia in the 20th century) and other modes of thought, but what is easily overlooked was its reliance or even infatuation with positivism. Victorian positivism should be distinguished from the doctrines of thought and life of August Comte (which admittedly held a credible following in 19th century Britain) as the latter was ultimately more concerned with generating models of social change. In contrast, Victorian positivism was distinguished by its deep faith in describing and understanding the world as factual and knowable. Positivism, as such, produced great mountains of data and description about all facets of human and natural experience. In *Hard Times* (1854) Charles Dickens famously satirized the deep faith in facts that was prevalent in mid-century Britain.

The influence of positivism was felt in British investigations into ethnicity in Southeast Asia.Virtually every major (and many minor) British writer made significant efforts to describe in depth the physical characteristics of the many peoples of the region. Often, describing was an end in itself—just as recovery significant amounts of data was seen as significant.

However, the emergence of Social Darwinism in the later decades of the 19th century altered discussions of race and ethnicity. Description would no longer be adequate; instead, ethnic groups might be ruthlessly compared—not only with the British, but with Indian and Chinese migrants. More important, perhaps, the emergence of Social Darwinism

legitimated both the growth of racist discourses and practices. More pessimistic was the application of the language of British urban problems (another form of Social Darwinism) to the region's peoples. These issues were made explicit in parts of the region where the British divined that there was acute competition between immigrants and indigenous populations. That is, British and imperial authors drew upon the description of the social problems which had accompanied the rapid urbanization of industrial Britain, to explain what was happening to some indigenous populations in Southeast Asia.

Colonial Burma furnishes the best instances of this type of discussion. Both O'Connor and Taw Sein Ko wrote about the Burmans in the face of successful Indian immigration into the colony. O'Connor felt the need in the *Silken East* to address 'the Burman Question'. For O'Connor, the Burman was not adapted to economic competition from South Asia. Taw Sein Ko makes an interesting case because while he was not British, he was the product of the imperial system: he had been educated at Christ's College, Cambridge and the Inner Temple in London. Taw Sein Ko would rise to the position of Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey. He was not pessimistic when he claimed that "Burma is a perfect ethnological museum" but understood that the Burmans themselves faced the challenges posed by mass emigration. Taw Sein Ko continued under "British rule, foreigners enjoy equal privileges as far as local tradeis concerned…. Rangoon is practically an Indian City, and Mandalay is likely to follow her example in the near future."[20] The Burmans might still surive because they "are a virile and prolific race, they are not quite ready to commit racial suicide…. it is more than possible that the Burmans will continue as a nation." As he explained that under "the aegis of British rule,

the Burmans have a great future before them."[21] In addition to examples gleaned from Burma, it is certainly possible to find writers who were less than certain that Malaya would ever by controlled by Malays.

However, it seems clear that the British were slow to understand the importance (and extent) of Chinese immigration into the region. Isabella Bird was hardly the first writer to come to comprehend that the Chinese were becoming dominant. Bird's *Golden Chersonese* has been remembered by postcolonial scholars for its devotion to British imperial power. However, the journey which forms the basis of *The Golden Chersonese* amounts at least as much to a gradual discovery of Chinese power and influence. Her observation began in Singapore where she noted that with 86,000 Chinese out of a population of 139,000, the place had the "air of a Chinese town with a foreign settlement".[22] The Chinese seemed far more energetic as it is "only the European part of Singapore which is dull and sleepy looking".[23] Bird took the Rainbow to Malacca and observed: the "Rainbow is one of many tokens of preponderating Chinese influence in the Straits of Malacca. The tickets are Chinese, as well as the ownership of the crew."[24] In addition, she noted that the "cabin passengers are all Chinamen. The deck was packed with Chinese coolies on their way to seek wealth in the diggings at Perak."[25] Upon reaching Malacca Bird discovered that this famous place was "to most intents and purposes a

20) Taw Sein Ko, "Burma: A Melting Pot of Races" in *Burmese Sketches*, vol.2 (Taw Sein Kow, edit), (Rangoon, 1920) pp. 322-323.
21) Ibid, p. 323.
22) Ibid, p. 115.
23) Ibid, p. 118.
24) Ibid, p. 123
25) Ibid, p. 123.

Chinese city".[26] She also reflected upon the co-existence of the Chinese and the Malays concluding: the Malays "dream away their lives in the jungle, and the Chinese…are really the ruling population."[27] However, it was in Sungei Ujong that Bird virtually conceded:

> A good many roads have been made in the State, and the Chinese are building buggies, gharries and wagons, and many of the richer ones own them and import Sumatra ponies to draw them. To say that the Chinese make as good emigrants as the British is barely to give them their due. They have equal stamina and are more industrious and thrifty, and besides that they are always sober, can bear with impunity the fiercest tropical heat, and thrive and save where Englishmen would starve."[28]

Bird's admiration was limited by the possibility of gang violence. The massive amount of emigration meant entail a "great risk"[29] but the Chinese tended to obey:

> certain leaders known as "Capitans China," who contrive to preserve order so far as is known by a wholesome influence merely, and who in all cases, in return for the security which property enjoys under our flag, work cordially with the Resident in all that concerns the State. How these "Capitans" are elected, and how they exercise their authority is as inscrutable as most else belonging to the Chinese.[30]

26) Ibid, p. 132.
27) Ibid, p. 150.
28) Ibid, p. 190.
29) Ibid, p. 190.

Yet, many British writers were content to describe the Chinese as one more instance of the picturesque or cosmopolitan phenomenon which gave the region its color and vitality. These writers tended to miss that many Chinese were coming to parts of Southeast Asia at roughly the same time as European colonizers. To a lesser extent, this held true of representations of Indians as well. O' Connor' s *The Silken East* (1905) stands out as a vivid exception because in his elegiac effort to capture the beauty he found in Burma he was led to demonize the growing Indian population. In essence, O' Connor saw the Indians as the 'other' — because they had emigrated into the land which he loved and wanted to identify with and they were now in the process of despoiling it.

For Bird, the Malays were somewhat like the Burmans—struggling against a newly arrived immigrant population. In this case, the main competition was the Chinese and Bird believed that the Malays had serious problems to overcome—including their religion. Obstacles to modernization were considerable and deeply rooted. Bird viewed Islam as an impediment for the Malays development. Bird argued:

> Islamism is always antagonistic to national progress. It seems to congeal or petrify national life, placing each individual in the position of a member of a pure theocracy, rather than in that of a patriotic citizen of a country, or a member of a nationality. In these States law, government, and social customs have no existence apart from religion, and, indeed, they grow out it. It is strange that a people converted from Arabia, and partly, no doubt, civilized both from Arabia and

30) Ibid, p. 190.

Persia, should have never constructed anything permanent…. They have not been destroyed by great wars, or great pestilences, or the ravages of drink, nor can it be said that they perish mysteriously, as some peoples have done, by contact with the Europeans, yet it is evident that the dwindling process has been going on for several generations.[31]

Furthermore, both polygamy and slavery "the usual accompaniments of Islamism"[32] were at least partly to blame for the decline of the Malay states. Bird claimed that this was "emphatically 'The dark Peninsula' and she noted as well that missionary efforts were no longer aimed at Malays, but were largely directed instead at the Chinese.

4. Isolation and Savagery

Studying the less populous ethnic groups might lead to the conclusion that modernization might not arrive at all. Alfred Russel Wallace's encyclopedic descriptions of the Malay archipelago present many settlements as decisively isolated from significant social intercourse. Wallace's ethnographic discussions are numerous, but it worth providing the following example because it illustrates how unflinching he could be. Visiting the Matabello islands he noted:

The villages are situated on high and rugged coral peaks, only accessible by steep narrow paths, with ladders and bridges over yawning chasms. They are filthy with rotten husks and oil refuse, and the huts are dark, greasy, and dirty in

31) Ibid, pp. 338-339.
32) Ibid, p. 361.

the extreme. The people are wretched ugly dirty savages, clothed in unchanged rags, living in the most miserable manner; and as every drop of fresh water has to be brought up from the beach, washing is never thought of; yet they are actually wealthy, and have the means of purchasing all the necessaries and luxuries of life. Fowls are abundant, and eggs were given me whenever I visited the villages, but these are never eaten, being looked upon as pets or as merchandise…. The chief men of each village came to visit me, clothed in robes of silk and flowered in satin, though their houses and their daily fare are not better than those of the other inhabitants. What a contrast between these people and such savages as the best tribes of Hill Dyaks in Borneo, or the Indians of the Uaupes in South America, living on the banks of clear streams, clean in their persons and their houses, with abundance of wholesome food, and exhibiting its effect in healthy skins and beauty of form and feature! There is, in fact almost as much difference between the various races of savage as of civilized peoples, and we may safely affirm that the better specimens of the former are much superior to the lower examples of the latter class.[33)]

The picture which emerged was one of stagnation or social decay. British writers who sought to describe to their contemporaries the lives of Southeast Asia's hill peoples often portrayed their subjects in a similar vein.

Significant narratives reflected these realities in other ways. Isabella Bird could hardly be said to be the only European to travel places and be impressed to have seen things not yet viewed by anyone in either Britain

33) Wallace, p. 373.

or Europe. She informed her readers that "These glimpses of a native tropic life, entirely uninfluenced by European civilization are most interesting."[34] The prospect of seeing or beholding remote societies before they were overcome by the crushing forces of modernization proved to be a signal motivation for many to travel, write and on occasion ruminate.

More dramatic, the concept of savagery was used without hesitation. Again, Wallace employed this concept to depict the profound differences not only between Westerners and inhabitants of the Malay archipelago, but also between Malays and other groups. Savagery was not portrayed in romantic or sympathetic terms; instead, it occupied the place below the concept of civilization. To anticipate, the concept of the savage would be deployed not so much in comparisons with the British but with other inhabitants of the region; in assigning inferior status to many of the peoples of a given society or place, these colonial writers actually looked ahead to some of the ethnic and developmental tensions which marked the new Southeast Asian nations in the second half of the 20th century.

5. The Commercial Development of An Exotic Tropical Region

Victorian scientific naturalism was itself on display in Southeast Asia. Alfred Russel Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) remains one of the most underestimated books of the Victorian era. Today Wallace is chiefly remembered as the scientist who could lay equal claim with Charles Darwin for developing or discovering the idea of natural selection. However, Wallace's journey and energy in collecting specimens were

34) Bird, p. 312

important and memorable in their own right and enabled him to produce *The Malay Archipelago* which was occasioned by his efforts to collect flora and fauna of the area. It should be pointed out that in eight years Wallace traversed the archipelago, collecting some 125, 660 samples of flora and fauna. *The Malay Archipelago* was the result of his experience—written later from his notes. Both Wallace's task and his narrative were extraordinary, but were, in fact, indicative or larger or broader cultural experience. Collections remain an understudied subject, but they motivated Sir Stamford Raffles and others to see, recover and transport as many things as possible from the region. The narratives of Wallace, O'Connor, Bird and others all testify to the British fascination with the landscapes, flora and fauna of the region. In *Burma Painted and Described* (1905) R.Talbot Kelly would come to paint Burma and continuously describe it as 'picturesque'. This concept was useful to those such as Wallace and Bird who deployed it throughout their travels.

Yet, these narratives also reveal another British concern: namely, the inherent difficulty of living in a tropical environment. These problems were manifest in a number of ways: the experience of fever, mosquitoes, monsoons, the inability to travel and the extreme heat. More important, tropical conditions were so difficult that they proved to be determinative (at least in the minds of many colonial writers) for patterns of social organization. If the experience of industrialism had shaped British life, then these authors understood the environments of Southeast Asia to be no less moulding.

Yet, as impressive as Wallace's achievements were, the dominant British interest in places such as Burma, Malaya and Borneo, it was commercial opportunity which ultimately provided the greatest stimulus to colonization and cultural interaction. The vastness of the landscapes assured that many

British writers could not anticipate the extent to which these interests would collide—especially in the second half of the 20th century. O' Connor understood that Burma' s physical landscapes were changing, but even he did not sense the degree to which economic development would imperil the country' s impressive landscapes. This is not the place to recount the commercial attractions of the region to British investors, but it should be pointed out that over the course of the 19th century Southeast Asia became much more important to business interests.

6. The Progressive Empire

British writing about the region invariably reflected sentiments about empires and their relative international positions. In *English Policy in the Far East* (1885) Archibald Colquhoun, writing before the Third Anglo-Burman War, was quite interested in the accomplishments and potential of other imperial rivals, leading him to worry about the durability of British power in 'the Far East' : it "remains to be seen whether Greater Britain is to follow the example of Greater Holland, Greater Portugal, Greater Spain and Greater France" and lose its imperial possessions. His fears stemmed from what he perceived to be indifferent British colonial policy-making:

> We already have Burmah intriguing against England, or at any rate assuming a hostile attitude towards us,…Siam, has turned from England very naturally, towards the Power on her frontier, while Japan is coming under French influence, restrained only by fear of Russia. China, with whom we have so many common and permanent interests, though inclined to trust England, fears to trust a Government which never can be relied on…if the idea once gains ground in India that we are "backing down" to Russia, he would be a bald man who would

pronounce internal troubles in India an impossibility. The impression obtains and grows on every side that England, to use the expressive phrase of one of the German papers, has become "Dutchified" [35]

Colquhoun's worries may have been atypical, but the assumption of the inherent goodness and superiority of the British empire was not. The vast majority of Britons believed in both the sanctity of imperial mission, partly because they saw imperial policy as inherently progressive. With the exception of Wallace, who wrote favorably about the Cultivation System, British authors did not automatically endorse European (and later Japanese or American) colonial ventures. Bird's encounter with Indochina produced a gloomy view of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. She told her readers that she did not "envy the French colony" [36] and more pessimistically claimed that "Europeans cannot be acclimatized," as most of the children born of "white parents die shortly after birth".[37] Instead, they saw in the British empire a force for improvement and a guarantor of stability.

Belief in empire could take a number of shapes with some preferring to focus on British presence as a positive factor in the region. The intrinsic goodness of British rule was invoked often with the acknowledgement of existing social problems or discussions of recent events (this was true in both Burma and Malaya) or when isolated incidents of imperial malfeasance. Yet, it is instructive to explore the ways in which the British understood

35) Colquhoun, pp. 20-21.
36) Ibid, p. 105.
37) Ibid, p. 105.

indigenous forms of social organization such as slavery and polygamy to make visible the ways in which they understood their own rule to be progressive.

In complaining about slavery in Malaya Bird was situating herself into a much larger strand of British colonial writing. To cite one prominent example, Raffles had engaged the problem and prohibited the practice when founding Singapore. More broadly, the issue of slavery and empire had wide currency. The abolition of slavery in the British empire produced an accompanying polemic against the many places in the world where the institution continued to flourish in the 19th century. After the South lost the American Civil War, Britons were still shocked and horrified that the practice remained widespread. Notably, it was in Africa that David Livingstone complained about the slave trade and where General 'Chinese' Gordon went to try to suppress the East African slave trade.

Isabella Bird's encounter with slavery in Malaya remains instructive. Bird described the horrors of 'debt slavery' where she found it extant. She followed Frank Swettenham, who has colonial secretary had explored the problem in some detail. Swettenham noted that debt slavery was particularly bad in Perak. Writing in 1875 he noted:

> in Perak the cruelties exercised towards debtors are even exclaimed by Malays in other states…some of the Chiefs do not provide their girls with food or clothing, but they tell them to get these necessaries of life as they best can, i.e. by prostitution, for the labour of the debtor being the property of the creditor, prostitution is in this case a necessity and not a choice.[38]

38) Frank Swettenham, "Slavery in the Malay States" in Bird, p.372.

Not surprisingly, Bird painted a bleak picture of the life under the slave system in Perak, but she took an optimistic view: "Instances of cruelty have greatly diminished since British influence has entered Perak, and I should think…will ere long mature a scheme for the emancipation of all persons held in bondage." (Bird, 360). Her confidence was based upon the fact that the British had ended the practice in many parts of the peninsula. Progressive British law, in other words, was the key to the abolition of slavery. However, Bird could not go beyond slavery (in contrast to the Dutch novelist Madelon Lulofs who wrote *Coolie {1936}*): she was relatively silent on the condition and status of Chinese or Indian coolies—who were rather a seemingly acceptable fact of life for her.

However, the intrinsic goodness of British governance allowed Bird to reconcile the latent hostility of the Malays with colonial rule. Bird did not pull any punches in describing Islam:

> Scarcely any kampong is so small as not to have a mosque. The Malays are bigoted, and for the most part ignorant and fanatical Mohammedans, and I firmly believe that the Englishman whom they respect most is only a little remove from being "a dog of an infidel." They are really ruled by the law of the Koran, and except when the Imaum of the mosque assists the judge with his advice. The Malays highly appreciate the manner in which law is administered under English rule, and the security they enjoy in their persons and property, so that they can acquire property without risk, and accumulate and wear the costliest jewels even in the streets of Malacca without fear or spoliation. This is by no means to write that the Malays love us, for I doubt whether the entente cordiale between any of the dark-skinned Oriental races and ourselves is more than skin deep. It is

possible that they prefer being equitably taxed by us, with the security which our rule brings, to being plundered by native princes, but we do not understand them, or they us, and where they happen to be Mohammedans, there is a gulf of contempt and dislike on their part which is rarely bridged by amenities on ours.[39]

The prospect of modernization under progressive British rule ensured that "the dark Peninsula" could still be effectively governed even if colonial administrators could not really understand their subjects.

The prominence of slavery was less of an issue in Burma, but nonetheless, V.C. Scott O' Connor criticized the practice where it existed. In *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma* he explored the status of the 'Pagoda Slave' in Bagan. O' Connor was also more sensitive to the status of marginal workers than Bird. Despite his ambivalence about the forces which were modernizing Burma, he, too, regarded the Empire as a progressive force.

III. Conclusion: Comprehending Southeast Asia

These themes hardly exhaust British discourses about the unnamed region. British writing explored a myriad of issues and topics and inevitably articulated concerns will beyond those exhibited here. That said, this essay will consider the possibility that the prevalence of these themes were not without consequences, because their predominance may well have inhibited British perceptions about the region. To cite just one

39) Bird, p. 140.

example, the British frequently marveled at the cosmopolitanism of places such as Singapore, Malacca, Bangkok and Rangoon. Yet, because they were looking at these specific cities they did little to understand the region as the crossroads between Europe and East Asia or, again, between India and China. To reconfigure this discussion a bit, the multiple points of picturesque cosmopolitanism formed part of a pattern—clearly discernible in the narratives and vocabulary which surround contemporary conversations about 'globalization', but not as obvious to those who might worry about the differences (and intentions) of different empires. Again, to take this line of thought in another direction, the British writers were keen to depict the places and people that they had seen. However, in their zeal to communicate their side of the encounter most had little idea that they themselves were part of a much larger global process—one that had been building for centuries, but was now in the 19th century beginning to crest.

The publication of Hugh Clifford's *Farther India* (1904) reminds us that at the turn of the century the British did not employ the name Southeast Asia. By the beginning of the new century, British rule was well now established throughout Burma and most of Malaya. Singapore and Rangoon were booming cities and British influence and power in North Borneo and Sarawak was growing. In addition, British policy makers, who had long welcomed the hegemony of the Dutch in the East Indies, had worried about French influence in Thailand and accepted that the country would be valuable as a buffer against French Indochina. In other words, by the time Clifford published the British were well ensconced in the region and had arguably as great an understanding of it has anyone—including its indigenous peoples.

The British would wait until external pressures forced them to define the region as it is today, but it seems clear to argue that they had understood it in other ways. Southeast Asia was a tropical place which was marked by great diversity in peoples, landscapes, languages, religions and forms of social organization. It was a part of the world which would be increasingly seen by British policy makers as having both strategic location and an abundance of valuable natural resources. With respect to its present and future, it was largely colonized and could expect a largely progressive future. Progress did not necessarily imply independence, but rather physical, social and economic modernization. The British understood, as well, that it was a region undergoing steady—if not profound change—change, but they might have been more sensitive to some of these variables.

British views of the region found their impact in many ways. Economic reorganization, social development, religious conversion and social change all accompanied British colonialism. Possibly the biggest legacies came in the widespread use of English and the development of nation states around British colonial areas. Southeast Asians would discover that these nations had within them many legacies of colonial rule: educational systems, civil services, foreign commitments, trading partners and multi-ethnic populations. As we have seen, the British brought the experiences of industrialism and liberal ideas to engage the region. They also carried with them a number of assumptions about the nature of state building, which might well have fit in Britain or other parts of the West, but did not necessarily work as effectively in Southeast Asia. To cite one small example (of which there are many), British writers had believed that the Kachins belonged to 'Burma' as one of its many ethnic minorities. The Kachins

did indeed belong to colonial Burma, but it does not necessarily imply that they either fit or desired to be a part of the new Burmese state.

Nonetheless, historians of the region might well acknowledge that the knowledge which the British manufactured had positive effects as well. Modern Malaysia and Singapore remain two of the most successful postcolonial states in the world. Burma, which had a modern infrastructure, strong educational system and ample resources was not treated so kindly. The long range affects of the Japanese invasion and occupation proved to be very challenging for Myanmar in the 20th century. Last, British perceptions of Southeast Asia had this one legacy: that for all its diversity the region came to be understood as a collection of different nation states. Prominence is given to ASEAN, but many of the real powers in the region are not those found in the halls of diplomacy, but are the ones which directly affect the lives of peoples of Southeast Asia. The British and Lord Mountbatten have long left the region, but *longue duree* of modern Southeast Asian history lay not with colonialism, but in the other transformative factors which began to arrive in the early modern period and continue to shape the experience of the region's peoples.

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Stephen L. Keck

Associate Professor of History and Head of the Department of International Studies (DPhil, University of Oxford; MDiv, BA, Yale University). Dr. Keck's scholarship explores modern British intellectual and cultural history, historiography, public history, the study of heritage, European imperialism and the fate of religions in the modern world. His articles have appeared in a wide number of publications and reflect his research. He is finishing a manuscript entitled *Sir Arthur Helps and the Making of Victorianism*. A second theme concerns the thought of John Ruskin, who was Victorian Britain's most penetrating cultural critic.