

ASIAN HISTORY



Farish A. Noor

America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900

Before the Pivot

Amsterdam
University
Press

America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900

Asian History

The aim of the series is to offer a forum for writers of monographs and occasionally anthologies on Asian history. The Asian History series focuses on cultural and historical studies of politics and intellectual ideas and crosscuts the disciplines of history, political science, sociology and cultural studies.

Series Editor

Hans Hägerdal, Linnaeus University, Sweden

Editorial Board

Roger Greatrex, Lund University

David Henley, Leiden University

Angela Schottenhammer, University of Salzburg

Deborah Sutton, Lancaster University

America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900

Before the Pivot

Farish A. Noor

Amsterdam University Press

Cover image: Photograph by Farish A. Noor

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 562 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4853 677 1 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462985629

NUR 692

© Farish A. Noor / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2018

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

*To my daughter,
Puteri Isabella*

Contents

A note on spelling	11
Introduction	13
The eagle in the Indies: America's early encounters with Southeast Asia, and how Southeast Asia was imagined in the nineteenth century	
I A book about books, and why books matter	13
1 The curtain rises	21
America's independence and the birth of a new naval power	
1.I 'To be considered as Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre': America's genesis and the world beyond	21
1.II The birth of a new naval power	24
1.III Between expansionism and isolationism: America's neutrality tested	30
1.IV Marking borders and stepping out: Southeast Asia awaits	33
2 Pepper and gunboats	39
The Kuala Batu affair and America's first gunboat action in Southeast Asia	
2.I Boom! America's 'pepper rush' begins	39
2.II Not so friendly after all: The attack on the American merchant vessel <i>Friendship</i>	41
2.III 'You are authorized to vindicate our wrongs': America's first attack in Southeast Asia	46
2.IV Drama awaits: The controversy over the Kuala Batu affair back home in America	50
2.V 'Conducted in a desultory manner': Francis Warriner's account of the Kuala Batu attack	59
2.VI 'We have made no conquests, dethroned no Sultans': Jeremiah Reynolds' defence of American aggression	66
2.VII Far from the madding crowd: Embedded writers and the beginnings of American scholarship on Southeast Asia	74
3 Friends, but not equals	79
Edmund Roberts' mission to Siam and the birth of American Orientalism	
3.I In search of friends: America's mission to Siam	79
3.II 'Not a single vessel of war was to be seen': Roberts' mission to secure a friend for America	82

3.III	The great unknown: Edmund Roberts' arrival in Siam	85
3.IV	The American eagle and the British lion: 'Frienemies' in the Indies	94
3.V	Regarding the feeble, un-Christian Other: Oppositional dialectics in Roberts' narrative	98
3.VI	Edmund Roberts as the American Orientalist	104
4	'It was a scene of grandeur in destruction'	109
	Fitch W. Taylor and America's second attack on Sumatra in 1838	
4.I	Boom! Back to Sumatra we go	109
4.II	'May a merciful as well as a just God direct': Fitch W. Taylor's Christian universe	119
4.III	Finding comfort in the familiar: Fitch W. Taylor's deliberate blindness	125
5	Flirting with danger	131
	Walter Murray Gibson, the American nobody wanted	
5.I	From sea to shining sea: America's expansion and consolidation in the 1840s and 1850s	131
5.II	'Jealousy had met me at the threshold of Netherland India': Walter Murray Gibson's misadventure in Sumatra	134
5.III	The Walter Gibson affair and its impact on American-Dutch relations	140
5.IV	Those who can't do, write fiction: Walter Gibson as American Orientalist	151
5.V	The filibuster's demise: Gibson's final Pacific adventure	157
6	It is your shells I am after	163
	Albert S. Bickmore's voyage to the East Indies and America's coming of age	
6.I	From antebellum to post-Civil War United States: Another America rises	163
6.II	All for the sake of knowledge: Bickmore's Scientific Jaunt across the Dutch East Indies	167
6.III	'This indicates their low rank in the human family': Bickmore and the theory of racial difference	176
6.IV	Albert Bickmore's adventure in conchology and America's entry into the club of civilized Western nations	184

7 Empire at last	193
America's arrival as a colonial power in Southeast Asia	
7.I Travelling in the shade of empire: American tourists and amateurs in Southeast Asia	193
7.II That other Great Game to the East: America's rise as a colonial power from 1898	200
8 Conclusion	209
American Orientalism in Southeast Asia	
8.I American Orientalism: The contours of a new language-game, and its users	209
8.II The gathering of minds: How the echo chamber was formed	213
8.III 'Indians', Indians, Asians, and the disabled Native Other	216
8.IV Talking to themselves: American works on Southeast Asia as self-referential texts	220
8.V The stories we tell: America and Southeast Asia's entanglement, then and now	228
Appendix A	235
The Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Siam and the United States by governments of the Kingdom of Siam and the Republic of the United States of America, otherwise known as the Edmund Roberts Treaty (1833)	
Appendix B	239
The United States-Brunei Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Commerce and Navigation (1850)	
Appendix C	243
The Treaty of Kanagawa or the Convention of Kanagawa, between the United States of America and the Empire of Japan (1854)	
Appendix D	247
Timeline of America's involvement in Southeast Asia, 1800 to 1900	
Bibliography	255
Index	269

A note on spelling

A note on the spelling of words and names as they appear in this book.

I have retained the spelling of names as they appeared in the texts that I refer to in the following chapters, and in some cases there have been differences between the way some names were written by different authors. In the case of place-names, I have retained the original spelling as found in the texts I refer to in the first instance, but have otherwise used contemporary local spellings in subsequent references. Whatever discrepancies or inaccuracies in spelling found in the originals have been retained, and are indicated as well.

Introduction

The eagle in the Indies: America's early encounters with Southeast Asia, and how Southeast Asia was imagined in the nineteenth century

All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them.¹
– Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

I A book about books, and why books matter

Book! You lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts.²
– Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

This is a book about books; and work on this book began while I was working on another book, that was also about books. What ties this work to my previous effort is my interest in how Southeast Asia was seen, imagined and depicted in the books that were written by Western authors in the nineteenth century; and how an entire region along with its peoples and cultures were discursively constructed in the writings that were produced by those who had come from the West and were encountering the world of the East Indies face-to-face for the first time.

This book will look at the writings of American authors – who came to Southeast Asia at different times and with different intentions – and how the Americans of the nineteenth century came to see Southeast Asia as a region that was distinct and different from the world they knew back home. I will attempt a close reading of their works, in order to show how the early encounters with Southeast Asia helped to frame an understanding of America's own identity (in the minds of the authors) as well as the identity of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asians, that were cast as America's constitutive Other. In the course of doing so, my approach will be a combination of both

¹ Vonnegut, pp. 26-27.

² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 429-430.

literary and discourse analysis, though set against a broader backdrop of history and political economy. I would like to state at the outset that this is not a work on the history of Southeast Asia or America, for much work has already been done in both domains by scores of able scholars. Rather, the aim of this work is to look at how American writers had imagined a part of Asia through the perspective of their own national identity, and how that identity was put in bold relief as it was contrasted to the idea of Southeast Asia as a region that was foreign and alien to them. In the course of this work I wish show how that idea of Southeast Asia was added to, modified and redefined time and again, as America's own development took it along a path which led it from being a former colony to an Asia-Pacific power.

There are three points that I would like to address in the introduction of this book: The first is that America's presence in Southeast Asia dates back much longer than many people may realize. In Southeast Asia today there is the popular belief that America's presence in Southeast Asia can be dated back to America's conquest of the Philippines after the Philippine-American War of 1899 to 1902, and that America's influence was most strongly felt across the region from World War Two to the end of the Cold War in 1989. This is obviously true, and America's hold on the Philippines in particular has been well documented by a range of eminent writers, both Filipino and American. McCoy and Scarano, for example, have looked at how America's conquest of the Philippines (and the occupation of Hawaii, Guam and Puerto Rico) expanded the territory of the United States and transformed it into a Pacific power, and also expanded the scope of American governmentality into domains that had hitherto been untouched, such as colonial race relations, colonial law enforcement, colonial education and the development of a vast communicative and logistical network that held America's Pacific territories together.³ Theirs is an impressive volume that has offered a broad, macro-level account of the building on America's Pacific empire; and how that vast domain was regulated and governed by the modern American state. But my intention is to push the clock back even further, and look at how America was already present in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and how America's first tentative attempts to gain a foothold in the region had set the stage for its eventual arrival as a colonial power in the East Indies.

The second point follows from the first, and it is this: That on both sides of the Pacific America's early encounter with Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century is an area that has received relatively less attention

3 McCoy and Scarano.

when compared to the works that have been written about America's role in Asia in the twentieth century. Weatherbee's very detailed account of American-Southeast Asia relations, for instance, focuses on relations that were developed from the 1950s.⁴ In my cursory examination of the history textbooks used in the schools of Southeast Asia I have seen that students – at both primary and secondary school level – are taught about the American revolution and America's role in the Pacific during World War Two; but the image of America that is conveyed is that of a *distant* land that has had little contact with Southeast Asia until very recently.⁵ When discussing the colonial era from the eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, school books in Southeast Asia have tended to focus on the role played by the major European colonial powers – Britain, Holland, France, Spain and Portugal – while overlooking the fact that during the nineteenth century Southeast Asia was a region hotly contested by other states as well, and that citizens of many other countries, including America, were trying to establish a presence there for both themselves and their respective countries. Andreas Zangger's work on the history of the Swiss in Singapore is one of the few works that has looked at the role of other Europeans who were active in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century,⁶ while Khoo Salma Nasution's work on Germans and German-speaking Austrians and Jews in Penang is another work of importance as it traces the history of German missionaries like Johann Georg Bausum and freemasons such as Felix Henri Gottlieb.⁷ Most recently Richard Hale's *The Balestiers: The First American Residents of Singapore* (2016) is among the few books that have focused on Americans in Southeast Asia in the same century.

The third point that I would like to raise is that America's rise as an Asia-Pacific power and a colonial presence in Southeast Asia was not a linear, predetermined process, but rather the result of a range of competing factors and pressures. The contingency that was at the heart of the American revolutionary project and present in its genesis, has been best captured in my opinion by Ellis in his study of the founding brothers of the revolutionary generation⁸; while it is Herring's recounting of America's complex evolution

4 See Weatherbee.

5 Noor, 'How Indonesia'.

6 Zangger has noted that by the 1820s there was already a Swiss presence in Southeast Asia, thanks to the solitary efforts of the Swiss merchant Auguste Borel, who had been sent to Cochinchina on behalf of the French government, and who later acted as a private Swiss merchant (pp. 19-24).

7 Nasution, pp. 21-30.

8 Ellis, *Founding Brothers*.

from colony to superpower that presents America's history painted upon a broad canvas, and which captures the contingency, accidents and ironies of America's eventual ascendancy as the undisputed power in the Pacific.⁹ Ellis' work brings to the fore the complex questions of identity and purpose that troubled America's founding fathers so, while Herring's work highlighted the manner in which America's quest for recognition and later prominence necessarily brought it into contact with the rest of the world, and in the course of doing so shaped America's identity and destiny as well. Both these works remind us that contingency is the bedfellow of history, and that historical progression is hardly ever neat or linear. They also remind us that history is something that can be recorded at a number of levels – from the macro to the micro – and that there are in fact layers of histories that have to be peeled one by one. And that is where this work comes in.

Once again I would like to state that this is a book about books. What I intend to do in this work is to bring together some of the earliest known writings on Southeast Asia that were written by American authors in the nineteenth century. As we shall see in the following chapters, these authors were themselves men of diverse backgrounds – some of them were diplomats by appointment, others attached to the navy or the clerical orders – and they were among the first Americans to write about their experiences in Southeast Asia. They were often well aware of the fact that they were Americans abroad, and they were writing for the benefit of their fellow Americans back home. Elsewhere I have looked at how British authors – men of the East India Company in particular – had likewise produced a body of writing on Southeast Asia for the benefit of their king, their company patrons and their fellow countrymen, and in the course of doing so also defined themselves and justified their presence in Southeast Asia, creating a self-referential narrative that spoke as much about themselves as it did about the place they were writing about.¹⁰ In this work I wish to show how America's early encounter with Southeast Asia not only produced some of the first American works on the region, but also helped to create a discursive community of like-minded American scholars, diplomats and adventurers who saw America as a nascent nation that was Western, and yet distinct and different from the rest of Europe – at least at the beginning.

What I aim to demonstrate is that the early American travellers to Southeast Asia did see themselves as a people who were different from other Westerners, and who wished to communicate and record that difference in

9 See Herring.

10 Noor, *Discursive Construction*.

their writing and the manner that they saw the world differently as well. Scholars like McCoy and Scarano have claimed that the American empire in the East was, in some respects, a distinctive kind of imperial state – a claim that echoes America's early claims to exceptionalism and uniqueness. But as this is a book about books, my intention is to offer a close reading of the works that were produced by the American writers who wrote about Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. As such this work will focus on the content, tone and tenor of the writings that were produced by these American authors for the benefit of their fellow American readers at home; to see if there was anything distinctive about the works themselves, and if it could be said that there was a particular American understanding of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century.

Before proceeding further I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank those who have been my fellow-travellers in this journey back to the past.

My thanks go to Saskia Gieling and Jaap Wagenaar of Amsterdam University Press for supporting my work over the years, and it goes without saying that this work would not have seen the light of day without their help and encouragement. I am also indebted to Chris Hale, producer and writer, with whom I have worked over the past five years in the related domain of film-making, and whom I have to thank for giving me the opportunity to translate some of my earlier work into documentary format for a wider audience. Chris has been more than a friend and supporter; and our discussions on the history and politics of Southeast Asia often dragged on late into the night. Together we travelled across Southeast Asia and Europe as we recounted the long and complex story of Europe's arrival in the East, and taxing though our journeys have been the final results were tangible and worthy of the effort.

My thanks also go to Rachel Harrison, Peter Carey and Martin van Bruinessen, whose works on Southeast Asia – past and present – have been so important in shaping and directing my own research. Rachel's work on Southeast Asian literature and film has been instructive in so many ways, reminding me of the power of narratives and language, and how our socio-political realities are discursively constructed. Peter's work in the recovery of the forgotten stories and narratives of Southeast Asia has been crucial in determining the focus of my work as well, for he has reminded me time and again that the power of narratives is found in political structures and differentials of power. Martin has been a friend, mentor and brother to me in so many ways, and it is thanks to him that my interest in Southeast Asia was rekindled two decades ago. In so many ways all of them have always

been close to me as I laboured away in my office. By way of acknowledging their presence in my work, I would like to thank all of them from the bottom of my heart.

A special mention also has to be made of my colleagues at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the School of History of the NTU School of Humanities. My thanks go to Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS; Joseph Liow, Dean of RSIS; Ralf Emmers, Associate Dean of RSIS; as well as my colleagues Ang Cheng Guan, Ngoei Wen-Qing, Irm Haleem, and Joel Ng in particular – fellow scholars with a keen interest in Asian history and politics, and who have been kind enough to bear with my incessant ramblings and petty obsessions about lost records, obscure letters and forgotten maps. I would also like to thank my friends David Henkel, Michael Feener and Kevin Tan, whose interest in the material history and archives of Southeast Asia matches my own, and with whom I have had many discussions about the region's past over drinks and dinner. I hope that the publication of this book proves that those chips were not consumed in vain, notwithstanding the deleterious effect they had on our waistlines.

In Europe I would like to thank the friends and colleagues whose hospitality I truly appreciated, and without whose help I would not have been able to conduct my research in the archives there: Christele Dedebant, Akanksha Mehta, Eric Germain, Violaine Donadello Szapary, Romain Bertrand, Wim Manuhutu, Marije Plomp, Willemijn Lamp, Chris Keulemans, Laila Zwaini, Dietrich Reetz, Saskia Schafer, Dominik Muller, Pablo Butcher and not least the late Henry Brownrigg, whose friendship I shall dearly miss. I would also like to thank Pierre Brocheux, whose extraordinary work on French Indochina was illuminating in so many ways, and which reminded me of how complex and nuanced the realities of colonialism were.

In Japan I would like to thank my friend and colleague Haruko Satoh, with whom I have had the enormous pleasure of working at OSIPP, Osaka University. Not to be forgotten are my academic friends in Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo who have hosted me, and it is thanks to them that I learned so much about Japan's own rise as a Pacific power, which happens to be a concurrent theme in this book. My gratitude goes to Kazufumi Nagatsu, Shinzo Hayase, Naoki Soda, Misako Ito, Koji Sato, Mitsuhiro Inada, Carmina Yu Untalan and the staff of the National Diet Library and the Toyo Bunko Oriental Library of Tokyo.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues and students with whom I have had the pleasure to work with and teach at RSIS, and whose enthusiasm helped me stay focused on my work. My thanks go to Nicholas

Chan, Oleg Korovin, Abhishek Mehrotra, Maria Ronald, Prashant Waikar, Iulia Lumina, Alex Bookbinder, Ram Ganesh Kamatham, Vincent Mack, Carli Teteris, Randy Wirasta Nadyatama, Benny Beskara, Sean Galloway, Annie Yong, Adri Wanto, Anais Prudent, Rohit Muthiah and all my other students in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Last but not least, I have my wife, Amy, to thank for keeping me on the sane and lucid path. For the past three years my time and energy has been absorbed by two works that were written together at the same time, leaving me marooned in my office for nights on end. My failing health, and the maritime theme of the books, reinforced the impression that I was a leaky old rustbucket, foxed along the edges, lost at sea. During that period when I laboured alone it was the thought of Amy, and returning home to her, that kept me going; and it was Amy, my mother and my daughters who reminded me of what was truly important in life. I have them to thank for showing me that there is, after all, life after the nineteenth century.

Farish A. Noor

RSIS, January 2018