

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review Essay

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/>

H-Diplo Review Editor: Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: John Vurpillat

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

Published on **1 November 2010**

H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

H-Diplo Review Essay of:

Andrew Dalby. *South East Asia Prince Charoon and Others. (Makers of the Modern World Series)* London: Haus Publishing , 2010. xvi + 194 pp, Maps, illustrations, notes, chronology, further reading, index \$U.S. 19.95, ISBN: 9781905791859.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-SouthEastAsia.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Nicholas Tarling, New Zealand Asia Institute, The University of Auckland**

It is pleasant, especially perhaps for an old hand, to happen upon what appears to be a new approach to modern Southeast Asian history. Andrew Dalby's book, one in a series called *Makers of the Modern World*, appears to proffer this. But in the event it seems to strain after effect rather than achieve result. Perhaps the publishers set an impossible task: how is it possible to determine and assess the 'makers' of so large and complex a region in so limited a compass? The problem of 'abridgment' – as Sir Herbert Butterfield called it – is intense: who or what should go in, who or what left out? But Dalby's answer proves to be more eccentric than enlightening.

The sub-title perhaps suggests as much. It seems to accord Prince Charoon – Siam's delegate to the Versailles conference – a surprising prominence. And the cover/jacket, sent with the galleys, offers a famous picture of the Versailles meeting, in which, of course, he is the only Southeast Asian person to appear. We are perhaps to conclude from this that Versailles was of major significance in the making of modern Southeast Asia. But it is at best surely an oblique approach. Ho Chi Minh was, of course, present and active in Paris. But the largest entity, Netherlands India, was not even represented by its ruler, since the Dutch had remained neutral.

Perhaps Dalby was influenced by the thrust of the series. Most of the books pick a single country and a single 'maker': Smuts and South Africa; Massey and New Zealand; Hughes and Australia. Other books look specifically at Versailles and the League. It seems that the series itself emphasises 'Versailles' as crucial to the making of the modern world. Is that a generally acceptable judgment? And does it apply to Southeast Asia?

Certainly the First World War had major effects, even in Netherlands India, much studied in recent years. Some were direct: the severance of some markets, the demands from others; the call from belligerent powers for recruitment. Some were more indirect: the undermining of the hold of the European empires, both physically and morally, and the rise of the Japanese. Wilson issued his Fourteen Points to rival the Bolsheviks and their appeal to world revolution. The latter in particular, as Dalby emphasises, was picked up by the anti-colonial movements already at work in Indo-China as in Netherlands India. But that hardly seems to accord Versailles a priority, let alone Charoon, a conservative distressed by the subversive ideas that Siamese students absorbed in Paris.

Even in a book that sets out from such an oblique position, we should not expect to find it argued that we should count any of the colonial figures among the 'makers', though it was they who drew the frontiers of modern Southeast Asia and created that rather paradoxical entity, the 'colonial state'. In a short book much has indeed to be elided or summarized. The compensation may be found in detailed accounts of what is selected. Here Dalby does have something to offer. Ho Chi Minh is well covered, and the account of Burman nationalism is satisfying both in analysis and telling detail.

Space seems then to run out. The period from the 1930s is dealt with very briefly, including the Japanese interregnum. Historians debate whether that was crucial in the making of modern Southeast Asia, but their debate is not reflected in this book: we hear more of Semaun than Sukarno; nothing of Aung San. The closing pages sin by commission as well as omission: Burma is called a Crown Colony (130); Bao Dai emerges as 'president' (133). 'Partial independence, for southern Vietnam only, came at last in 1955' is not a good summary of the events of those years.

The chronology at the end of the book runs from 1905 to 1975. It covers Southeast Asia on the left-hand pages; and other historical and cultural events on the right. None of the last seem to be Asian, let alone Southeast Asian (though the list is still eccentric enough to include D'Albert's opera *The Golem*). Perhaps that further illustrates the 'Europe-centric' nature of the series. And perhaps it confirms that Dalby was set an impossible task. Could it really be thought possible except from such a viewpoint to cover 'Southeast Asia' – like Rumania and Bulgaria -in one volume?

Formerly Professor of History at the University of Auckland, **Nicholas Tarling** has been Fellow of its New Zealand Asia Institute since he retired in 1997. He was editor of the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. His most recent works include *Britain and the West New Guinea Dispute, 1949-1962* (Lampeter: Mellen, 2008); *History Boy: A Memoir* (Wellington: Dunmore, 2009); and *Southeast Asia and the Great Powers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

Copyright © 2010 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.