



WALTER FRANCIS VELLA

Anuson Walter Vella

edited by

RONALD D. RENARD

Walter F. Vella Fund
Payap University
Chiang Mai, Thailand

Southeast Asia Papers
Center for Asian and Pacific Studies
University of Hawaii at Manoa
Honolulu, Hawaii

© 1986 SOUTHEAST ASIA PAPERS

PUBLISHED BY THE
WALTER F. VELLA FUND
PAYAP UNIVERSITY
CHIANG MAI, THAILAND
AND

THE SOUTHEAST ASIA PAPERS
SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES PROGRAM
CENTER FOR ASIAN AND PACIFIC STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MANOA
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96822
U.S.A.

COVER DESIGN BY ROGER EGGERS;
ORIGINAL ARTWORK BY ATTASAT TULARAK.



DS578
A59

*Walter Vella had an affection for and
a deep understanding of the Thai people.
Those of us who knew Walter and
who likewise loved him mourn his passing.
May his soul find eternal peace.*

English Missionaries Among the Thai

KENNON BREAZEALE

It was not a good choice of years for any foreigner to be arriving in the Thai kingdom, especially not for an Englishman. The king had ascended from a position of power rather than status by birth, having half-brothers of higher princely rank, the elder of whom was rumored to be the rightful heir. He was a scant three years on the throne, and had inherited from his father an awkward position to the south in his rebellious Malay dependencies adjacent to the English settlement at Penang Island. In the northeast he was embroiled in a war with his largest Lao dependency. From the west there were fears of a renewed invasion by the Burmese; and before long there were to be major wars in the east and the far north as well. It was a reign filled with suspicion and anxiety, that knew no peace with its neighbors. The English East India Company had just taken possession of the peninsular lands of Burma, peopled by the Mons; and the contiguous Thai territories across the mountains—indeed, even Bangkok itself—were heavily populated by their Mon relatives. The Rajah of Kedah for many years had been living in the safety of the Penang settlement, following an incursion by Thai soldiers into Kedah. Was it possible the English would use these bases to move next against the Thai kingdom itself? They were obviously a most powerful neighbor. They had defeated the Burmese, whose armies had often proved tactically superior to those of the Thai. Their ships were swifter and stronger, carrying immeasurably greater fire power, as the Thai well knew as a result of their own frequent trading missions aboard Chinese-style junks to Singapore. There were at the time rumors that Buddhism would be vanquished by a foreign religion, which many interpreted as a reference to Christianity. And there was also the anxiety among Bangkok officials over which side the English might support in the Thai war with Kedah.¹ In spite of misgivings and much opposition in Bangkok, the English Company had obtained only two years earlier a treaty with the Thai kingdom in order to begin opening the port of Bangkok to foreign trade—a unique docu-

ment concluded at a time when all the surrounding kingdoms were strongly resisting the idea of formal relations of any sort with anyone.

Into this inauspicious setting sailed the first two representatives from the London Missionary Society (LMS), aboard a Chinese junk from Singapore, arriving at Bangkok in August 1828. Charles Gutzlaff was sponsored by the English Society, although a Prussian by birth, with unofficial connections in the Dutch missions of the East Indies. He was already far more at home in the Orient than his companion, Jacob Tomlin, who was fresh out from England to the Malacca mission of the Society that very year.² One of the first important men they met in Bangkok was the *Phra Khlang* (a kind of combined treasury and foreign affairs minister), a kindly old man whom they first encountered sitting on a bamboo bench at home, working in his carpentry shop, clad in nothing more than a sarong.³ Although he was one of the most powerful individuals in the kingdom, and the minister charged with foreign affairs, he had never heard of the German people, and could not quite make out where Gutzlaff had come from.⁴

The two new arrivals found themselves practically alone as Europeans in Bangkok. The only resident Europeans at the time were an English merchant, Robert Hunter, who had arrived at Singapore in 1821 and subsequently began to trade to the settlement from Bangkok;⁵ several French Catholic priests, who limited their efforts to the native Portuguese-mestizo Christian community, and whom Tomlin regarded as the 'greatest enemies' of the Protestant missions;⁶ and finally the Portuguese consul Carlos de Silveira. The consul, a Brazilian by birth, had been in Bangkok for eight years already.⁷ He was a liberal Catholic, however, and having little to do with the priests, he did not hesitate to provide housing for the two new arrivals in a little cottage on the riverbanks. There, they were in the midst of the largest concentration of the poorest classes in the entire kingdom. In those days, land-based Bangkok was an agglomerate of villages, separated by gardens and padi fields, connected by footpaths that became muddy and difficult to negotiate during the monsoon season already in progress when Tomlin and Gutzlaff landed. The royal city situated along the east bank was an exception, with its solidly built palaces and temples, defended by a city wall with concentric canals beyond. A Chinese commercial quarter was in the making, too. The remainder of the population lived and worked in the innumerable floating bamboo houses and shops that lined the riverbanks and canals, naturally relying on small boats as the principle means of transport.

The city was not just alien to them, but also wary of them. Protestant-style missionary work was something entirely new to the people of

Bangkok, who regarded the existing Catholic community as just another peculiarity of a city with a very heterogeneous population drawn from throughout the mainland of Southeast Asia and China. The appearance of these two strange individuals who, unlike the quiescent Catholic community, went about talking of religion to everyone indiscriminately, naturally aroused a certain amount of suspicion. One man came to investigate them because, in his home village some distance away, an old man had predicted that the millennium was drawing near and that holy men would soon appear. It was imagined by some that this might mean Tomlin and Gutzlaff!⁸ Many people in Bangkok, including the king, thought they might merely be spies, perhaps sent to prepare the way for an English attack on Bangkok. These fears were heightened by the appearance in a nearby provincial town of a young girl claiming to be the reincarnation of a princess who had died in Bangkok. Although threatened with death by the court if she continued to persist in the claim, the girl adamantly insisted that she was indeed the princess reborn in another body. A great stir arose in official circles after a high-ranking *bhikkhu* interpreted the episode to mean that some disaster would befall the kingdom; fanciful imaginations immediately focused on an English invasion, adding credibility to the theory that Tomlin and Gutzlaff were spies.⁹

Much suspicion was aroused also by the religious pamphlets that were brought from the Malacca press and distributed liberally by the two foreigners. The tracts were all printed in Chinese, which the Thai themselves, of course, could not read. The king, having a set collected and translated, found nothing really dangerous in them, however, and no seizures were made at first.

Unfortunately, a major political scandal was brewing just as the foreigners arrived; and this was to have an adverse effect on their work almost from the beginning. The explanations of the scandal vary. According to one source, a group of licentious *bhikkhus* were discovered in an attempt to enter the royal harem, with the help of two princes.¹⁰ According to another, the king had tried to conscript the *bhikkhus* for state services—probably in the Lao war the year before—against which they rebelled.¹¹ At any rate, several hundred of them were arrested. In the confusion, an edict was issued prohibiting anyone from accepting any more of the missionaries' pamphlets. Some tracts were actually seized from the Chinese; then Consul de Silveira was censured, obliging the missionaries to move temporarily to Hunter's house; and finally Hunter was approached about the possibility of shipping the pair out of the kingdom.¹²

Part of the difficulty at first was that they were working mainly

among the Chinese, because Gutzlaff was already fluent in the Chinese language and also because few Thai came to see them. They were thus suspected of being spies sent to organize the Chinese community to assist an English attack.¹³ After the scandal, and when they were in danger of being expelled from the country, Gutzlaff went to the deputy *Phra Khlang* minister, who understood Chinese (and was probably at least part-Chinese himself), in order to explain fully the purpose of the mission and the nature of their work.¹⁴ They appealed also to the provisions of the recent treaty, which vaguely recognized the right of Englishmen to visit the country so long as they did not contravene any of its laws.¹⁵ The *Phra Khlang* himself finally informed them that no one would object to their work, if only they would act quietly and discreetly.

After the initial fright, life soon settled into a regular pattern. They found that, in spite of the edict, the curious were still seeking them out and taking away the Chinese pamphlets. Indeed, within their first two months they gave away twenty-five of the twenty-seven boxes of tracts that they had brought with them.¹⁶ Gutzlaff was particularly popular because he was a physician. Soon, Teochiu (Swatowese) and Cantonese speakers, as well as Vietnamese residents of Bangkok who could communicate with him through the use of Chinese characters, were coming in droves for consultations and medicines.¹⁷ Some were women, including Vietnamese ladies educated well enough to read the Chinese pamphlets.¹⁸ One visitor was a Cantonese woman who claimed the distinction of being the sole genuine Chinese woman living in Bangkok.¹⁹ Nonetheless, few Thai people ever bothered to pay a call.

Tomlin was not in good health; and he finally conceded to what he deemed "the will of God." Leaving Gutzlaff to continue the mission work alone, Tomlin departed in May 1829 on a schooner bound for India with a cargo of sugar.²⁰ Within three months of his return to Singapore he married another missionary.²¹ He and his wife Sarah were then sent to the Society's station on the island of Java, where they spent the latter part of 1829 and early 1830, returning to Singapore in May 1830 because of Tomlin's continuously declining health.²²

Gutzlaff had written to Tomlin in July 1829 with the news that Consul de Silveira had decided to leave Bangkok, and that shortly Gutzlaff and the two remaining French priests would be the sole Europeans in the city.²³ Hunter had already left, and another trader, Captain Steward, had long since left on his schooner with Tomlin. An American Captain Coffin had stopped at Bangkok in January 1829, but he too had already departed, taking to America the famous Siamese twins and also an appeal from Gutzlaff to the American churches to organize an American mission to the Thai.²⁴ There are no records to show how

much longer Gutzlaff remained. He did not correspond with the Society in London, and his letters to the Straits missions have not been preserved. Instead of going to China as he was planning, he returned to Singapore, where he married Miss Maria Newell of the Society. Together they left Singapore in February 1830 to return to Bangkok.²⁵ Mrs. Gutzlaff, who knew the Chinese language already, was learning Vietnamese as well; and the couple continued the work begun the previous year. Their twin daughters were born in Bangkok in February 1831—probably the first Europeans to be born in the new Thai capital. One of the infants died at birth, followed by the mother a few hours later.²⁶

Meanwhile, another of Gutzlaff's appeals had reached Dr. David Abeel, an American missionary in China who was a minister of the Dutch church in North America. Abeel went to Singapore in 1831, where he joined Tomlin.²⁷ Sarah Tomlin went to stay at the Malacca mission while her husband and Abeel proceeded to Bangkok together, expecting to join Gutzlaff. Having suffered much insuccess and the loss of his wife, Gutzlaff had already found passage aboard a Chinese junk to Tientsin and had gone downriver from Bangkok on June 3. He was delayed a fortnight on the bar at the mouth of the river, during which time he received news that his surviving infant daughter, left in the care of friends, had died. His junk finally sailed from the river on June 18.²⁸ Only twelve days later, on June 30, Tomlin and Abeel arrived at the bar on their way up from Singapore.²⁹

Tomlin and Abeel continued the mission work for another half year. But in January 1832 they started out again for Singapore on a merchant ship commanded by Captain C. L. Shaw, carrying Hunter (who had returned to Bangkok) and another merchant named McDonald.³⁰ Tomlin rejoined his wife but never visited the Thai kingdom again because of his poor health. The Society in London was dissatisfied with his work and dismissed him officially in a letter dated November 1832, although because of the slow communications of the times he was still at Malacca in the middle of the following year.³¹

Abeel returned alone to Bangkok in May 1832, distributing religious tracts to junks, which he hoped would take them to China. This work apparently very much annoyed the high officials in the capital—who were, by this time, involved in major wars with the Vietnamese and with the Malays of Kedah again. Abeel encountered far more obstruction than his predecessors.³² His departure in November 1832 from the kingdom³³ marks the end of the missions sponsored by the LMS, which had lasted slightly more than four years altogether.

There was a fifth missionary from the Society who travelled in the

kingdom but never went up to the capital. Dr. Walter Henry Medhurst, who served at the Malacca mission from 1816 and then on Java from 1822 to 1843,³⁴ had himself suggested the 1828 mission to Bangkok, back in 1826, including a possible general tour of Indochina as well.³⁵ He had intended to accompany the first mission but arrived at Singapore only a few days in 1828 after Tomlin and Gutzlaff had sailed for the first time. Unable to find any trader bound for Bangkok or Cochinchina, he obtained passage on a junk stopping at all the towns on the eastern side of the Malay Peninsula as far north as Songkhla, returning to Singapore by the same route, during August, September, and October.³⁶ Eventually in 1843 he, like many others, moved to China itself, never having seen Bangkok at all, in spite of several plans to do so dating back to 1821 when he was residing at the Malacca mission.³⁷

Only five missionaries sponsored by the LMS visited the Thai kingdom during the years 1828 to 1832. Nonetheless, with the exception of a few months at the end of 1829 and early 1830 (when Gutzlaff was at Singapore) and early 1832 (when Tomlin and Abeel went to Singapore), an LMS mission existed in Bangkok for a period of four years. Tomlin, Medhurst, and Mrs. Gutzlaff were English; Gutzlaff was German and Abeel was American. All of them, except Tomlin, were trained primarily to work among the Chinese, which is one of the reasons why the Thai mission never became a permanent one. There are numerous other reasons for the failure to establish a lasting mission, besides the simple factor of limited financial resources. An important consideration was that the LMS missions in the Straits Settlements themselves were not permanent. But to understand this in relation to their plans for the Thai people, one should first examine briefly the formation of the Straits missions.

The Straits Settlements Missions

The London Missionary Society was founded in 1795. In the Far East, missionaries were sent to China first, and some of them began appearing in the Straits Settlements during the Napoleonic wars, at the time (1811-1818) when Java was temporarily under British control. It was Dr. Morrison, a missionary at Canton, who first suggested to the directors of the Society that Malacca would be an excellent center for a seminary where missionaries could learn the languages of the surrounding countries.³⁸ During 1813-1814 one of his Canton colleagues, William Milne, made a tour of the Malay Peninsula and East Indies, visiting Java, Sumatra, and Penang.³⁹ He stopped at Malacca in June 1813, where the East India Company's governor, Colonel Farquhar, indicated

that the Company would allow missionaries to reside in the settlement. And in February 1815 the directors despatched Reverend Thompson from London, with instructions to go out and found a mission there.⁴⁰ Unknown at that moment to the Society in London, Milne at Canton was writing in the very same month to them that he had already agreed with Morrison to establish six or seven new branches of the China mission and that the ones in Malaya and Java would come under his own supervision. He envisaged central bases in the peninsula and Java, which would allow an expansion of the work into the Thai kingdom, Cochinchina, and especially into China itself.⁴¹ Milne left Canton in April 1815, arriving at Malacca in May to found the first Straits Settlements mission.⁴²

Toward the end of September 1815, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson arrived at Malacca from England.⁴³ When the decision was being taken to found a Malacca mission and send Thompson out, the directors had obtained information from the renowned East Indies scholar Marsden that there might be as many as ten thousand Chinese at Malacca, certainly more than half the total population.⁴⁴ Milne himself was highly enthusiastic about the prospects for the missions in relation to the Chinese there and emphasized the need for written Chinese scriptures, since many of the inhabitants, whether they spoke Chinese well or not, could read no other language.⁴⁵

One of the major purposes of the Straits missions was to serve as a center for translating and printing the Bible and religious tracts in the Chinese language and to serve as a base for dispersing these works, aboard the trading junks that plied the seas of Southeast Asia, to all ports where there were Chinese settlements, and indeed into China itself at a time when China was still exceedingly hostile to missions. The Anglo-Chinese College, founded at Malacca and much supported by Milne, was removed early in 1823 to Singapore, less than a year after his death. Thus, although the Malay people were not neglected, the missions were, from the very beginning, oriented especially toward Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia.

The second mission to be opened was the one at Penang in 1820, superintended by T. Beighton from that date until 1844 when he died and the mission was finally closed.⁴⁶ There were overland trade contacts from Penang to Songkhla, thence to Bangkok by Chinese junk. Indeed, Bangkok officials sometimes instructed the governors of Songkhla or other nearby towns to send trading caravans across the peninsula to Penang to purchase foreign manufactured goods. For the ordinary traveller, however, the overland route was not a safe one because of dacoits, and junks not infrequently had to run from pirates. Thus there

were formidable communications barriers between the Penang mission and Thai territories just to the north and northeast. Although bordering on a Thai dependency (Kedah, on the mainland), the Penang mission displayed little interest in the Thai kingdom itself, not even in the upper parts of the peninsula more firmly under Thai control than were the Malay states. Beighton and John Ince made their first visit to Kedah in March 1821 to begin mission work there.⁴⁷ Technically speaking, one might regard any of the Penang missionaries who entered Kedah as working in the "Thai realm," although Kedah was not entirely under Thai control during any of this period. Before the end of 1821 they were faced with what was to become a recurrent theme in Kedah for the remainder of the days of the Penang mission. In November 1821 a Thai army attacked the capital, and the rajah and many Malays fled to Penang for safety. At this juncture Medhurst was at the Malacca mission, and a plan was already afoot to send him on a mission to the Thai country. With the outbreak of war, his visit had to be abruptly cancelled.⁴⁸

Less than a month later, the East India Company's envoy John Crawfurd arrived at Penang, en route to negotiate an agreement for opening the port of Bangkok to trade for the Company. The Straits missionaries were hoping that, if he succeeded, the land of the Thai would be opened as a fertile field for new missions.⁴⁹ But Crawfurd returned empty-handed; it was not until June 1826 that another envoy, Captain Henry Burney, negotiated and signed at Bangkok a treaty opening the port to freer trade and also guaranteeing some rights to English subjects wishing to visit or trade there. During the remaining years of the Penang mission, Beighton did add some commentary on Thai affairs to his letters and reports to the Society—at least once in every two or three years—constantly referring to the endless warfare between the Thai armies from the eastern coast of the peninsula or Bangkok and the Malay people of Kedah. From the viewpoint of Penang, it seemed impractical to think again about establishing a mission to the Thai. The situation in Singapore, however, was markedly different.

Samuel Milton and the Thai Mission Schemes

In October 1819, the year that Singapore was founded, Samuel Milton arrived at the new settlement as an LMS missionary. He worked there not only with the local communities (including Malays, Chinese, and some Thai) but also the British garrison.⁵⁰ In 1822 he wrote to the Society urging them to establish a permanent mission in Singapore, predicting correctly that the place would become the most important British