

The Scramble for Concessions in 1880s Siam

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It is the events of the late 1890s in China which represent the most notorious example of a ‘scramble’ or ‘battle’ for concessions in the era of Western imperialism.¹ The five years following her defeat in her war with Japan of 1894–95 seemed to reduce China to chaos and the brink of dismemberment, when the so-called ‘Boxer Rebellion’ was crushed by an international army comprised mainly of Russian and Japanese troops. But the powers could not agree on how to extend the concessions they had previously secured, and the ‘open door’, championed by Britain, the United States and initially Japan, prevailed. The ultimate blow to Western imperial expansion on a world scale was then delivered by Japan against Russia in the war of 1904–05, and a mere six years later, the Chinese launched out on their own revolutionary path which was to culminate in the Communist victory of 1949.

This story not only bears comparison with what occurred in Siam, but was in various ways interconnected with or anticipated by it. Thus, just as the threat to the survival of the much smaller Siamese kingdom came earlier, so too did its ‘Scramble for Concessions’. Yet as in China, it is probable that ultimately it hampered rather than aided its dismemberment, even though the main economic interests stemmed from the two countries, Britain and France, most concerned in a possible partition. Siam’s success in repelling such interests ought to have served as an example to China. Moreover, as in Japan earlier still, the crisis seems to have promoted domestic regeneration.

I. Siam as a Target for Concession-hunters

Anna Leonowens, the famous ‘King and I’ governess, reports her

¹ See V. W. W. S. Purcell, *The Boxer Uprising: A Background Study* (Cambridge, 1963), chap. 4.

royal master, King Mongkut's complaints of the plague of concession-hunters which descended upon Siam once the country was effectively opened to foreign trade by the Bowring treaty of 1855.² And the records of the British Consuls in Bangkok have much to say of it, with particular respect to various British and French schemes for telegraph lines and a ship canal across the Kra isthmus.³ Regarding the former, the Siamese ultimately set an example by offering to construct their own lines, but by the 1880s, the Kra canal scheme, by now attracting the interest of the Suez builder de Lesseps, parallel with his Panama project, was joined by two other major ones. These were respectively, a railway from Burma to southern China through Chiangmai in the northern part of the country, and as a kind of sequel to the canal idea when it seemed frustrated, a general concession for the development of the whole of peninsular Siam. This was to be along the lines, and perhaps as a natural extension, of what was already in hand under British officials in the adjoining Malay states.

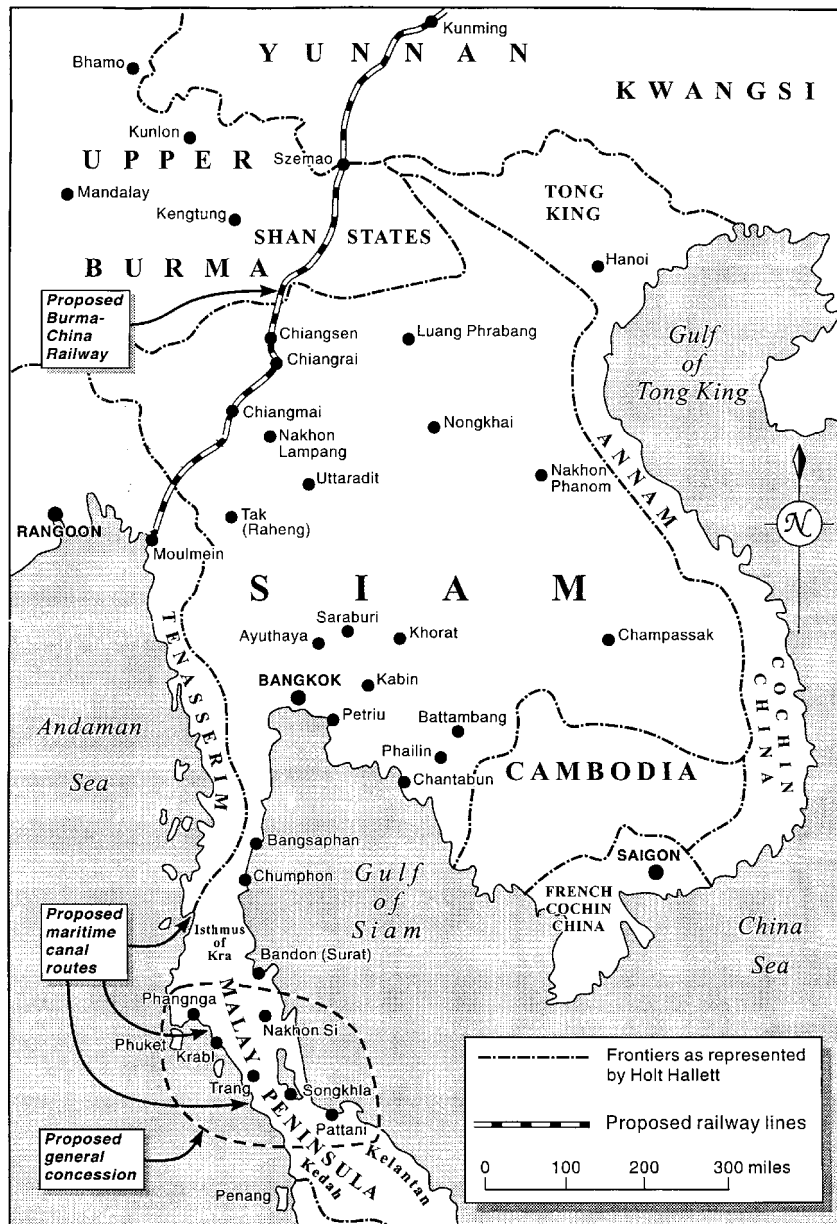
The British Minister in Bangkok of the time, Ernest Satow, gradually coming to recognize the realities of Siam's situation, noted how much of a threat this last scheme in particular represented to the integrity and survival of the kingdom. Oddly enough, in nearby Singapore, even Bangkok was supposed to be 'a land of myth and terror.'⁴ But it would be fair to say that each of these proposals threatened, in a way that did not even apply later in China, to tear Siam apart. They were conceived in Europe to serve European interests, perhaps actually because of its reputation, unlike its immediate neighbours, Burma and Vietnam, for a relatively accommodating attitude. And none of them even acknowledged its existence in their names. Evidently Siam was seen as simply the rump or residue of formerly independent Southeast Asia, little better than a no-man's-land wide open for exploitation. That it could survive long-term as a sovereign polity was barely credited by most Westerners of the time. And neither were these major schemes the limit of Western activity.

That activity was concentrated first and foremost in the teak-forests of Chiangmai and other neighbouring areas of what is now Northern Thailand, then known as 'Western Laos' or the 'Siamese

² Anna Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (Singapore, 1988 ed.), 260–1.

³ See especially Ernest Satow's Register of Consulate/Legation correspondence with inserted memoranda, Public Record Office archives, Kew, PRO 30/33/2/4.

⁴ H. W. Smyth, *Five Years in Siam* (New York, 1898), 2.



Map 1. Siam in the 1880's

Shan States'.⁵ Bearing in mind the central role of the Bombay-Burmah Trading Corporation in the final extinction of Burmese independence at the end of 1885, it might seem dangerous to dismiss the strategic implications of the foreign, mainly British, companies in Northern Thailand. Indeed, J. A. Bryce, 'head-manager' of the BBTCL, a man with influential political connections in London,⁶ after a tour of the north, arrived in Bangkok in 1884 in search of concessions soon after Satow himself. And if these were not at once secured, the BBTCL was actively at work by 1893, alongside the much earlier-established Borneo Co., and also Messrs. Louis Leonowens, founded by the son of the famous governess and childhood playmate of the current King of Siam, Chulalongkorn (1868–1910); he had begun work in the region as an employee of the Borneo Co. Others active early on were the American ex-missionary doctor, Marion Cheek, and C. H. Dennis of the Siam Forest Company.⁷ But there is no evidence that the British Government in India in this period had any desire to encroach on Northern Thailand as a followup to the annexation of Upper Burma.⁸ And none of the above interests commanded significant support back in Europe.

As for concession-seeking in other parts of Old Siam, the principal targets were coal, as the basis of possible refuelling-stations in the emerging era of the steamship, gem-stones and gold. Coal deposits in the southeast and in the peninsula were being talked of as early as the 1850s, and James MacGregor (or McGregor), a Scots miner who first appeared in Bangkok at the beginning of August 1885, claimed to have discovered extensive deposits of coal at Paklao in Phangnga opposite Phuket Island as good as those mined since the 1840s at Labuan in Borneo, and sought prospecting rights through-

⁵ See my 'Origins of the Siamese Forward Movement in Wester Laos, 1850–1892,' Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of London, 1969. Tin-mining in the south long remained a preserve of the overseas Chinese. See J. C. Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand 1850–1970* (Stanford, 1971), 98–105.

⁶ He was brother to James Bryce, the Liberal politician and writer about the United States.

⁷ Satow diaries, 1 March 1886. At an earlier stage, he had referred to him as a 'timber buyer to some firm in Bombay.' Diaries, 6 May 1885. Satow Papers, PRO 30/33/17/13, 15/9, published in Nigel Brailey (ed.), *The Satow Siam Papers I* (Bangkok, 1997), 156, II forthcoming (hereafter *SSP*). W. S. Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam* (London, 1976), 70n, specifies Messrs. Ewart Latham of Bombay who had the agency for the Bombay Saw Mill Co.

⁸ Lord Salisbury as Secretary of State for India (to F.O. 18 June 1877, Foreign Office Archives, Kew, FO 69/67), had effectively closed the door on earlier ideas of British expansion in this direction.

out the peninsula.⁹ Of special interest to Satow was his familiarity with an area which seemed to offer a possible alternative route for the Kra canal through to Bandon on the Gulf of Siam. And in short time, Satow was writing home to London in support of him and his employment in further exploring the area.¹⁰ However, in little more than a month his coal deposit claims had been checked and apparently exposed as fraudulent, and the man himself had switched his interest to gem-mining on the Cambodian border. Just 'a plausible rascal' was how Satow now described him, although more than a year later, he still seemed persuaded that there had been some substance in his claims of coal deposits in the peninsula.¹¹

By contrast, Captain Barne, an ex-army officer, was interested from the start in the Phailin sapphire mines of considerable strategic significance owing to their location near the border with French Indochina. Initially Satow recommended him too to Prince Thewawong, the Siamese Foreign Minister, and the Siamese evidently presumed that, as a British subject, he would command his own country's protection in case of a French challenge. But then they discovered that he was planning after all to recruit a French partner and decided to cancel the arrangement. Caught up in other difficulties with the Siamese by 1887, Satow maintained that they were adopting playing-off policies, attempting to mutually antagonize Britain and France, and the following year, that they were encouraging the exploration of a part of the peninsula by a Frenchman for the same reason. Also in 1888, by one account, Barne was granted a general mining concession on the remote east bank of the Mekong river, and as late as February 1889, was still negotiating for the transfer of a Kabin goldmine concession to a Sir William Arbuthnot.¹² As of 1890, this seems to have briefly been taken over by F. S. Clarke, formerly of the Borneo Co., who later switched to the Siam Forest Co., which was to end up by 1917 as the Anglo-Siam Corporation.

The last of these three most prominent small-fry concession-seekers of the 1880s, the Jewish Italian 'Chevalier Angelo di Luz-

⁹ E. H. French to Satow, 7 Aug. 1885, PRO 30/33/2/1, and Satow Diary, 5 Sept., *SSP* II. Satow and French appear to have considered him an Australian.

¹⁰ Satow to Salisbury, 12 Sept., and to Currie, 13 Sept. 1885, FO 69/105, and *SSP* II.

¹¹ Satow diary, 12 Oct. 1885, 18 Dec. 1886, *SSP* II, III.

¹² Satow diaries, 7 April, 18 May 1886, 27 Jan., 12 Feb., 26 Aug. 1887, 23 Feb. 1889, *SSP* II–III. Also Satow to Jervoise, 10 Aug. 1887, and Satow memorandum of 2 July 1888 on Sir C. Smith to C.O. of 5 May 1888, *SSP* III.

zatti' as he apparently chose to call himself, years before ennoblement by King Umberto entitled him to, was always an 'adventurer' according to Prof. F. King, historian of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. Nonetheless, the latter's interest stems from the fact that Luzzatti (or Luzzati) personally represents a link with the late 1890s scramble for concessions in China. By then he was agent for the Peking Syndicate Ltd., incorporated in 1897, which thereafter secured mining and railway concessions in Shanxi and Henan.¹³ He seems originally to have appeared in Bangkok in early March 1885, before either MacGregor or Barne, with letters of introduction from the new Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin. Within weeks, apparently at Satow's instigation, he was seeking a passage to the south, and when offered this by the Siamese in the company of Khun An Bunnag, a special commissioner and grandson of the late ex-Regent, Satow recruited him also to investigate a previously bruited route for a Kra canal, from Phanom to Bangri.¹⁴ However, when he returned to Bangkok in early August, it was with a commitment to exploiting the gold deposits in the area of 'Bangtaphan' or 'Bangsaphan' as it is now known, north of Chumphon, and the British Legation's interest in checking possible routes for a Kra Canal had been transferred to MacGregor.¹⁵ In early September, Luzzatti and MacGregor were fellow dinner-guests of Satow, along with several Western local business-leaders in Bangkok.¹⁶

Yet no sooner had Luzzatti been confirmed by the Siamese in possession of his Bangtaphan concession than he seems to have sought to sell it off. Briefly he negotiated with the local Bangpakong Mining Co., also concerned with the Kabin area, but he soon took off for Europe, and did not return for more than a year, in January 1887. From the first, Satow had encouraged him to launch an explicitly Italian company, and to exclude any French involvement as bound

¹³ Satow diaries 12 March, 24 April, 6 May 1885, and acting British chargé E. H. French to Satow, 7 Aug., *SSP* I-II. Also F. H. H. King, *The Hongkong Bank in the Period of Imperialism and War, 1895-1918* (Cambridge, 1988), 302-3, his 'Angelo Luzzatti and Early Mining Concessions in Siam, 1885-91,' in *Fourth PICTS* (Proceedings of the Internat. Conference on Thai Studies), Kunming 1990, 102-10, and private communication.

¹⁴ Satow diaries, 12 March, 6 May, *SSP* I.

¹⁵ In Thai, both *taphan* and *saphan* mean 'bridge', and there are today twin towns called Bangsaphanyai and Bangsaphannoi. The area guaranteed to Bangkok by the famous Anglo-Siamese Joint Declaration of 15 January 1896 terminated in the south at 'Bangtaphan'.

¹⁶ Satow diary, 7 Sept., *SSP* II.

to antagonize the Siamese. Now he seemed to have secured the support of the Società Generale di Credito Mobiliare Italiano or 'Bank of Italy' which, to check the authenticity of the Bangtaphan concession, had sent out with him an engineer called Aristide Zanella. According to Luzzatti when they returned to Bangkok from the peninsula in April 1887, the concession amounted to 5000 acres, and would yield per acre 108 oz. of gold at a cost of \$462. Auriferous quartz was also present.¹⁷ Zanella was rather reticent.

Satow's final involvement with Luzzatti came mainly in the autumn of 1887, after his return to England. In early October, Luzzatti met him in London to tell him that the Italian bank had withdrawn on the grounds that they feared involvement in Siam in the absence of 'direct' Italian diplomatic representation there. The new options that he outlined foreshadowed information that Satow subsequently secured from other sources in London and Bangkok that, quite contrary to his advice, Luzzatti was contemplating either English or French backing. What is more, this backing was likely to involve the notorious Franco-Jewish Panama Canal backer, the Baron Jacques de Reinach, and also the Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate in which Reinach had an interest, and whose efforts to secure a quite extraordinarily ambitious concession in southern Siam had already been ruled completely out of order by the Bangkok government the previous year (see below). By November 1887, it was reported that Luzzatti had sold his concession to the MPES for £15,000 plus one-third profits, and early in 1888, he reappeared in Bangkok with yet another engineer, an Anglo-Indian by name of Cooper, to run a further check on the concession.¹⁸ Satow's last apparent contact with him was to meet him at a dinner-party given by Frederick Verney, long-time Secretary to the Siamese Legation in

¹⁷ Satow diaries, 7, 16 Oct. 1885, 27 Jan., 16 April 1887, *SSP* II, III.

¹⁸ Satow diaries, 3 Oct. 1887, James McCarthy and E. B. Gould to Satow, 25 Nov. 1887, 25 Jan. 1888, *SSP* III, PRO 30/33/2/17, 2/2. Against McCarthy, other sources suggest that Luzzatti transferred his Bangtaphan rights direct to the Gold-fields of Siam when it was set up in 1888 in return for shares, which he then committed to the MPES. For Luzzatti in Bangkok in early 1888, mis-spelt 'Cavaliere Nosotti', see also Mrs F. Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Sutherland's Yacht Sans Peur* (London 1889, Singapore, 1992), 195. He seems only to have obtained the title in 1889; by 1894, in Constantinople, he was calling himself 'Ministro Plenipotenziaro' to the King of Siam! Caddy mentions too, 194, 'two gentlemen, just back from prospecting the gold-mines on the west coast of the Gulf of Siam [who] say there are millions (?better say hundreds) of shafts of former workings.' Patent mis-spelling of Reinach's name, except by McCarthy, as 'Rayner' and 'Reinardt', suggests that he was not too well-known yet outside France.

London and scion of a famous aristocratic Liberal family, in November 1888. Others present included the French Ambassador, William Waddington, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the India Office, Sir Arthur Godley, and Lord Thurlow, chairman of a company called The Gold Fields of Siam Ltd, set up the previous May to take over Luzzatti's Bangtaphan concession following a favourable report from the engineer Cooper. Verney represented the Siamese Government on the board of this company.¹⁹

II. The Kra Canal Scheme

Of the three major schemes to come to a peak in the 1880s, that for a canal across the Kra Isthmus, has already been discussed in an article by Prof. V. G. Kiernan.²⁰ However, this was one of a pair, now nearly forty years old, written as studies of late nineteenth-century imperial rivalry.²¹ At that time, it was still almost inconceivable to consider the implications of such schemes for the local polities which were simply not taken seriously. According to Kiernan, Siam was merely 'to survive as a buffer-state between the two rival empires, but not until after she had served as the occasion of a first-rate crisis in Anglo-French relations, that of 1893.'²² And she is dismissed facilely as a 'feudal' kingdom, thus commanding little sympathy from a Marxist historian.²³

¹⁹ By mid-1889, when the young Arthur Keith arrived as medical officer to the Gold Fields of Siam Company, MacGregor was in charge of the Bangtaphan concession, though replaced in late 1890. Sir A. Keith, *An Autobiography* (London, 1950), 106, 125–6. I am grateful to Dr P. J. Tuck of Liverpool Univ. for drawing my attention to Keith.

²⁰ V. G. Kiernan, 'The Kra Canal Projects of 1882–85: Anglo-French Rivalry in Siam and Malaya,' *History* (Feb.–Oct. 1956), 137–57. See also P. J. Tuck, *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb* (Bangkok, 1995), 58–61, with particular respect to Deloncle and the scheme, J. G. Scott, *France and Tongking* (London, 1885), Chap. XXIII: 'The Proposed Kra Canal', and for its general significance, attributing it to the 1890s, M. S. Anderson, *The Ascendancy of Europe, 1815–1914* (London, 1985), 40.

²¹ The other was 'Britain, Siam and Malaya, 1875–1885,' *Journal of Modern History* XXVIII (March 1956), 1–20.

²² *Ibid.*, 140, an assessment reminiscent of the similarly Eurocentric A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (London, 1954, 1987), 343–4, 405n. Though cf. H. Trevor-Roper, introduction to Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life* (London, 1960), 11: 'A buffer-state loses its purpose unless it is also a stable state: an unstable state is a standing danger, and better partitioned.'

²³ This is no less evident in his later *Lords of Human Kind* (London, 1967), where criticism of the West rules supreme.

Kiernan's account also fails to indicate how, in succession to earlier British interest, France had already taken up the idea in the 1860s, provoking a serious panic amongst the Siamese regarding French intentions in general. For France, it offered a likely short-cut to Saigon in its new Vietnamese colony, by-passing Britain's Singapore. By contrast, by the 1930s, it was probably of more potential value to Japan, but its feasibility was always at issue.²⁴ But engineering developments in the meanwhile, in particular the construction of the Suez Canal, did make it more conceivable by the early 1880s.

In terms of the early 1880s, Kiernan introduces the names of Frenchmen such as the agent Ternisien, Jules Harmand, the ambitious French consul successively in Bangkok and Calcutta and future Minister in Japan, and François Deloncle, ex-Quai d'Orsay official, imperial publicist and future deputy for Saigon, who were able to apply a good deal of pressure to the Siamese Government. One can also see how British Government reservations were diminished through the involvement of the Suez Canal Co. directorate comprising as it did various British figures beside the Frenchmen such as de Lesseps and the Baron de Reinach. However, the predominance of French engineering expertise evidently left it still essentially a French project, and meant that British fears, particularly locally, were never wholly allayed. Ernest Satow's great concern to divert MacGregor and Luzzatti to the peninsula thereby becomes comprehensible, while the British Straits authorities in Singapore saw the scheme as further reason for pursuing a partition of Siam with the French.²⁵ Admittedly the Siamese themselves seem to have remained fairly firmly opposed to the canal, but the moderating message from London did not help.²⁶ However, by the mid-1880s, the whole idea

²⁴ See Satow's memorandum under Register of correspondence entry for 31 May 1858, PRO 30/33/2/4.

²⁵ See my 'Protection or Partition: Ernest Satow and the 1880s Crisis in Britain's Siam Policy,' *Journal of S.E. Asian Studies* 29, 1 (March 1998), 63–85.

²⁶ The Siamese seem to have found persuading the French to accept their rejection of the second scheme in 1882 rather more difficult than the first in 1866. See Satow's Register of Consulate/Legation Correspondence, PRO 30/33/2/4. At quite an early stage, Chief Commissioner of British Burma Col. Fytche had proposed that the canal should only be built by British interests. Consul Knox to F.O., 20 June 1864. FO 69/42. This stance the Foreign Office seems to have sustained thereafter through the 1870s, but during 1882, began to wobble. Thus by March 1883, the Foreign Office had informed the English directors of the Suez Canal Company merely that 'H.M.G. will not offer any opposition to [a] concession w[hi]ch shall reserve to B[ritish] S[ubjects] and B[ritish] vessels equal rights & privileges with subjects or citizens of any other nation.' F.O. to Palgrave, 12 March, FO 69/96.

does, as Kiernan indicates, start ‘dropping into the background,’²⁷ never really to revive in this era, not even in 1893. Instead it was to be replaced by the MPES, with other figures appearing on the British side, such as the long-established Singapore entrepreneur W. H. Read, and his virtual namesake, the former naval architect and ‘constructor’, Sir E. J. Reed M.P.

III. The Colquhoun–Hallett Burma–China Railway

In the scale of threats to Siamese sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Burma–China railway was to exceed the Kra canal as the railway in turn was to be exceeded by the MPES. Like the Kra canal idea, that of a Burma–China link had its antecedents several decades earlier, although it has attracted even less serious scholarly notice.²⁸ As early as 1837, departing from Moulmein on the Bay of Bengal at the mouth of the Salween river, and travelling via Chiangmai in Western Laos, a Lieutenant (later General) W. J. McLeod reached the beautiful little upper Mekong town of Kenghung (Chiangrung) on the borders of China. This represented the climax of the efforts of the government of the province of Tenasserim, annexed from Burma at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War 1824–26, to develop a commercial hinterland.²⁹ But McLeod, seeking to open up a back-door route to China just as the opium crisis at Canton was about to flare into open war, was turned back by local frontier officials.

Some years later, in the 1850s, Captain R. Sprye and his sons sought to revive interest in the overland route to China. This campaign eventually focussed on a railway through the mountains between Burma and Siam, following the Salween valley, thereby by-passing the Chiangmai area. But as an effort somewhat comparable with the contemporaneous French Lagr  e–Garnier Mekong

²⁷ Kiernan, ‘The Kra Canal Projects’, 154. Cf. also E. Thio, ‘British Policy in the Malay Peninsula 1880–1910.’ Unpub. London Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1956, chap. 5.

²⁸ D. F. Holm, ‘The Role of the State Railways in Thai History, 1892–1932,’ Unpub. Yale Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1977, skates over this most important early phase in Siamese railway development. More surprisingly, J. Chandran, *The Burma–Yunnan Railway: Anglo-French Rivalry in Mainland Southeast Asia and South China* (Ohio, 1971), simply anticipates the final two-fifths of his later *The Contest for Siam, 1889–1902* (Kuala Lumpur, 1977), with its coverage limited to the years 1895–1902.

²⁹ Most of the expeditions launched during this decade were led instead by McLeod’s colleague, Dr David Richardson.

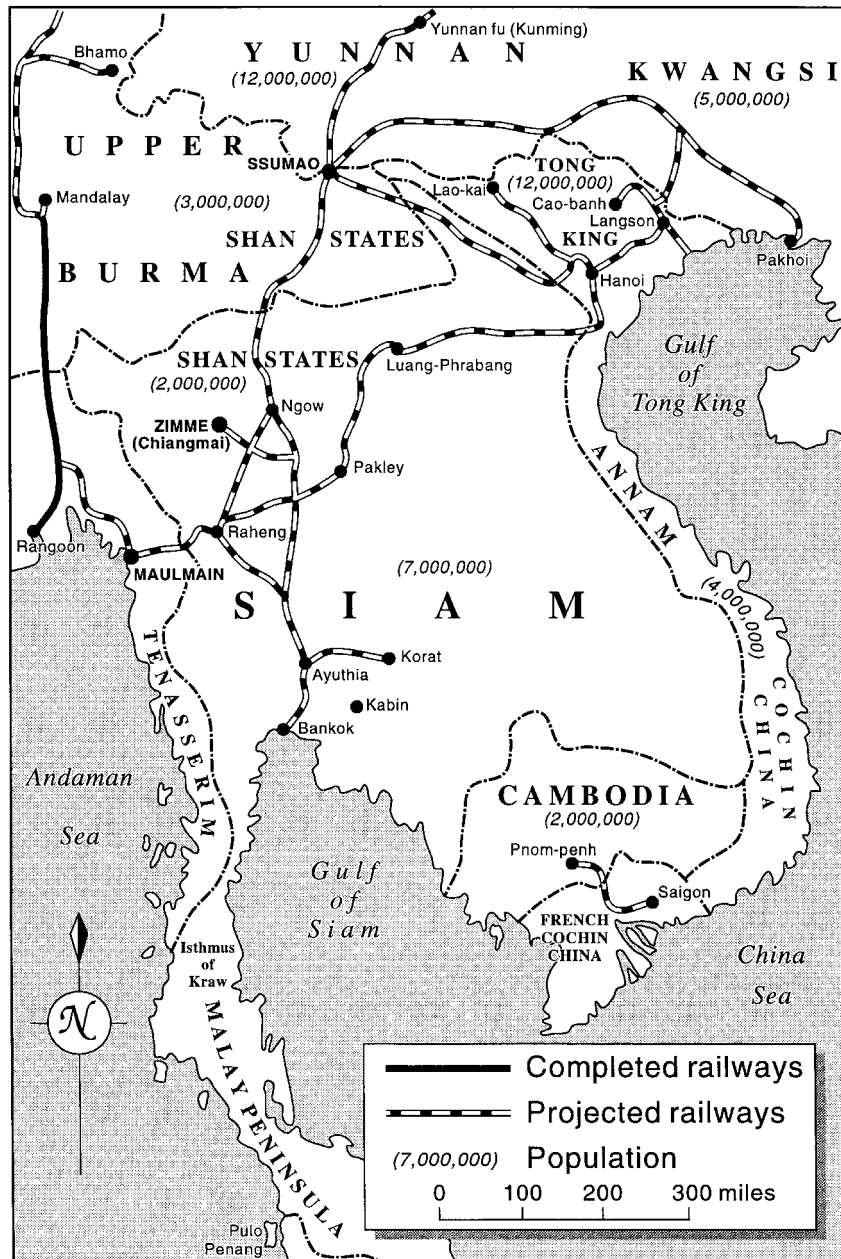
expedition, 1866–68, it simply revealed what the locals had always known, the total unsuitability for communication of the narrow, often gorge-like Salween valley.³⁰ But the campaign was not simply abandoned. A further effort to open up a route via Chiangmai seems to have stemmed from the mission in 1879 of the Secretary to the Government of Burma in Rangoon, Major C. W. Street,³¹ to check the working of a treaty signed in 1874 between the Government of India and Siam. This treaty was concerned with the settlement of lawsuits between Asian British subjects mainly active in the teak timber business, and the local Western Lao nobility, many of them forest-owners. However, Street was accompanied by a fellow British Burmese official, Archibald R. Colquhoun, who later published an account of the mission.³² Within a couple of years, he had linked up with another British Burmese official, Holt S. Hallett, an engineer with experience of railway construction in England, and the ‘Colquhoun–Hallett’ scheme as it was originally termed, was launched.

Hallett had already resigned from government service in 1880, and seems thereafter to have committed himself quite wholeheartedly to the railway scheme for upwards of a decade. He therefore became mainly if not wholly dependent on the revenue that soon came flowing in from Chambers of Commerce back in England and other British business interests both there and out East. By contrast, the rather younger Colquhoun simply obtained leave of absence from the Government of Burma, and was able in part to finance his activities thereafter in the context of the Sino-French war of 1884–85, as a

³⁰ The Mekong, though quite ambulatory, even as a waterway was much more suitable in stretches. However, it is periodically interrupted by serious rapids. For the Spryes and Lord Salisbury’s early interest, see N. A. Pelcovits, *Old China Hands and the Foreign Office* (New York, 1948), 113–22. But he largely neglects the later stages of the railway schemes. Cf. also D. Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London, 1962).

³¹ The British position in Burma had been further enlarged as a consequence of the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852–53. British India had then also annexed the Burmese province of Pegu, cutting off the still nominally extensive Kingdom of Burma from direct access to the sea. From 1862, the administration of the three provinces of Arakan, Pegu and Tenasserim was centralized at Rangoon at the mouth of the Irrawaddy river, but the mouth of the Salween to its east was still seen by many as the natural outlet for trade with China.

³² This work, *Amongst the Shans* (London, 1885), did not appear until the campaign for a Burma–Chiangmai–China railway was well launched, then accompanied by an Appendix containing evidence of press support for the scheme. It was accordingly preceded by Colquhoun’s two-volume *Across Chryse* account of a journey direct from Burma into China published in 1883.



Map 2. Holt Hallett's scenario of prospective railway-building in Southeast Asia (from his *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant*, Edinburgh, 1890)

nationalistic and often alarmist special correspondent for *The Times*.³³ Even at the time of his arrival in Bangkok in July 1884, Satow first termed him a 'traveller', and he later pursued his career in South Africa in the 1890s, and then in various other parts of the world. Arguably the climax of their railway effort was the surveying expedition undertaken by Hallett from Moulmein via Chiangmai to Chiangsen on the Upper Mekong during the dry season of the first half of 1884, with a subsequent diversion to Chiangdao and Fang directly north from Chiangmai.³⁴ Hallett then descended the Chaophraya river from Chiangmai to Raheng and Bangkok, where he met up with Colquhoun arriving from China, to seek the aid of the newly-arrived Ernest Satow in pressing their ideas on the Siamese.³⁵ Indeed, they also arrived just after Annan Bryce of the BBTCL who had accompanied Hallett for part of his journey over the mountains to Chiangmai.

It seems apparent from Hallett's own account of it, that his surveying visit was rather rushed and ill-planned. Thus, for instance, he crossed the mountains to Chiangmai via Mae Sariang, only to decide thereafter that the Myawadi-Raheng route was the more suitable. (His hopes of traversing the latter the following year were to be frustrated by lack of funds, but it had previously been surveyed by Siamese government officials.) And he also came to the conclusion that the route from Raheng to Chiangsen via Lampang was rather more practicable than that via Chiangmai. This he revealed to King Chulalongkorn's half-brother, Prince Phichit Prichakon, when the latter arrived in Chiangmai as a Special Commissioner in May 1884. He also claimed to the prince that he regarded the projected line up from Bangkok as the 'main line', and the connection from Raheng to Moulmein as much a 'branch line' as that to Chiangmai would be.³⁶

³³ This was in tandem with J. G. Scott, his onetime secretary and future British Chargé in Bangkok and Superintendent of both Northern and Southern Shan States. Apparently Colquhoun came recommended by Sir Owen Burne, a very anti-French official at the India Office.

³⁴ Hallett later recorded this in his *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States* (Edinburgh, 1890), like Colquhoun's *Amongst the Shans*, replete with Chambers of Commerce and other tributes. He did in fact depart from Shwegun on the Salween river where he had hitherto been serving, on the assumption that a connecting route from Moulmein to Hlaingbwe could easily be worked out at a later date.

³⁵ Satow at this point still held the title of Agent and Consul-General like his two predecessors, T. G. Knox and W. G. Palgrave. He was not to be promoted to Minister Resident until February 1885.

³⁶ Hallett, *A Thousand Miles*, 381–2.

In Bangkok, as Hallett was later to confirm, Satow gave himself and Colquhoun every assistance, at least at the outset. So far as Satow was concerned, the moment was 'propitious' to put a 'check to the acquisitive tendencies of our lively neighbours,' i.e. the French, and he was telling the Siamese that 'they must try to get European capital into the country' as 'their only possible safeguard.'³⁷ At a preliminary meeting with Prince Thewawong (at this point officially still just the King's foreign correspondence secretary and known as Prince Thewan Uthaiwong), like projectors of telegraph lines earlier, the two proponents of the railway requested a contribution from the Siamese, of £3500, towards the cost of exploration. But the Prince seemed to show apprehension regarding Colquhoun's anti-French sentiments, and Colquhoun himself was quite abashed by this. However, an interview with the King followed, and Satow was soon telegraphing home urgently for Indian Government support for the scheme, if only to bolster Siam's independence.³⁸

Yet there appears to have been no reply from India whatever.³⁹ Colquhoun departed for Burma and India in the hope of prompting some, and during the first week of August, Satow took Hallett on a boat-trip up the Bangpakong river east of Bangkok. But by the time they returned to Bangkok, they knew that no finance could be obtained from India at less than seven percent interest, or from London at less than nine. The Siamese declined to offer the £30,000 per year that even a guarantee of a Bangkok-Khorat line would cost, let alone the fifth of their total government income of £1 million that all the proposed lines would require. And the Indian Government's support was still refused. A wild Colquhoun telegram to *The Times* sent while he was in Bangkok reporting an imminent French attack on the city hardly helped, and as Hallett departed by sea on 23 August, Satow confided to his diary his relief and his resentment at Hallett's

³⁷ Satow to Currie, 30 July 1884. Cf. Satow to same, 11, 16 July, *SSP* I, 54, 50–1, 52. Colquhoun referred similarly to the French as 'our lively neighbours' in his telegram to *The Times* of 15 July.

³⁸ Satow to Austin Lee, 16 July 1884, *SSP* I, 53.

³⁹ However, as a measure of how seriously it was taken, it was discussed between the Viceroy and Secretary of State Lords Ripon and Kimberley, with the latter in September 1884, expressing his enthusiasm. See P. J. Tuck, 'Jules Ferry, Upper Burma and Siam: The Defence of the French Imperial Frontier in Mainland Southeast Asia, 1883–1885,' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* VI, 3 (May 1978), 230.

'perpetual abuse of Siam and the foul stories about Siamese he was perpetually raking up against them.'⁴⁰

Hallett had promised to return, and did so before long, but there might have been another reason for Satow's relative equanimity about this. Already in June, he had learnt that Annan Bryce of the BBTCL, visiting Bangkok ostensibly to secure teak-forest leases, had also raised the possibility of aiding the Siamese in building the railway-line they really desired. This was the line from Bangkok to Khorat (Nakhon Rachasima), and he had gone home promising to arrange a survey.⁴¹ Such a line would help secure to the Siamese control of the provinces most threatened by the French, and at the same time be no mere branch-line as the Hallett-Colquhoun Bangkok-Raheng connection always looked like being, transferring the trade and ultimately even the political allegiance of Chiangmai and the north to British Burma.

Nonetheless, apparently it was above all Sir Charles Bernard, Chief Commissioner of British Burma, who was opposed to the Hallett-Colquhoun scheme, as Satow heard from Colquhoun when himself passing through Hongkong at the end of November.⁴² Colquhoun was now concentrating on his journalism in China, and simultaneous with Hallett's return from Shanghai to Bangkok on 31 December, Satow heard from Prince Thewawong that two other British railway surveyors were on their way out from Marseilles representing a company called Tancred, Faulkener. Hallett left again within a few days, 'to Rangoon and Calcutta to see the Chief Commissioner and Lord Dufferin,' and would 'try to persuade them to annex Upper Burmah and the Shan States away to Chiengtung [Kengtung],' something Colquhoun later claimed credit for in *Who's Who*. Satow and the Siamese then relaxed to await the new engineers.⁴³

IV. The Climax of the Railway Issue

The sequel seemed at the time promptly to sound the death-knell for the railway schemes. The engineers in question, Messrs. Drysdale

⁴⁰ Cf. also entires for 8, 10, 11 July, 15 Aug. in same, and Satow to Currie, 26 Aug. 1884, *SSP* I, 64, 50-1, 65.

⁴¹ Satow diary, 18 June, and Satow to Currie, 30 July 1884, *SSP* I, 43, 54.

⁴² Satow diary, 30 Nov. 1884, *SSP* I, 104.

⁴³ Satow to Currie, 5 January 1885, *SSP* I, 116-17.

and Murray, arrived on 26 January, and left quickly in the company of a senior Siamese official, Phra Thep Phalu (Sin), a friend of Satow's who had already expressed some enthusiasm for railways. He took them to Petriu (Chachoengsao), from which they ascended the Bangpakong river to the locality of the gold-mines around Kabin, and then apparently struck across country northwards to Saraburi and east to Khorat. By late April, they were back in Bangkok, and sailed for home around the 28th or 29th.

In Bangkok they had made it clear that they would not draw up any detailed plans until they reached England. But rather than a line over the hills from Kabin and/or Prachinburi, they revealed at once that they favoured a line direct from Bangkok to Saraburi via Ayuthaya, and claimed that not only that but an extension through the hills to Khorat would be of no great difficulty (and they thus anticipated exactly the route that was finally taken in the early 1890s). Tancred, Faulkener were to bid for the construction, but either 'money might be found in Siam, or a company got up.'⁴⁴

From the start, Satow was sceptical of the motives of the Siamese, maybe with a touch of sour grapes on behalf of Colquhoun and Hallett. 'It is only meant to throw dust in the eyes of the European public,' he was soon claiming to Currie in London.⁴⁵ But to Bernard in Burma, he was observing, 'I consider the Colquhoun scheme dead, as you tell me you are not in favour of it at present, and the Indian Government is hardly likely to take it up [alone?].'⁴⁶ In large measure, this seems to have been acknowledged by Hallett himself in an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 16 March, and finally in another letter to Currie of 28 April, on the eve of the departure of the engineers Drysdale and Murray, Satow reported prince Thewawong's claim that the King did not want a line from Raheng to British Burma, at any rate until there was a trunk line to Chiangmai 'which may I think be referred to the Great Kalunds.'⁴⁷

This was effectively the last Satow heard of these major rail schemes for more than two years, by which time he was back in

⁴⁴ Satow diary, 3 Feb. 1885, cf. 26 Jan., 24 April, *SSP* I, 126, 125, 153. A report in *The Times*, 8 Dec. 1884, had suggested that the Kabin–Chachoengsao line would never be more than a branch. It also envisaged a connection with Phitsanulok in the North, though not Chiangmai.

⁴⁵ Satow to Currie, 19 Feb. 1885, *SSP* I, 130.

⁴⁶ Satow to Bernard, 14 March 1885, *SSP* I, 138.

⁴⁷ Cf. Satow diary, 24 April, *SSP* I, 154, 153.

London himself. For some months he kept in touch by letter with Hallett and Colquhoun in Burma and India, while they briefly toyed with a plan for a Burma–China telegraph-line via Chiangsen as a precursor of their railway, which he now also advised against.⁴⁸ In the spring of 1886, there were rumours of German interest in Siamese railway-building which, rather against his natural inclinations, Satow was instructed by Foreign Secretary Lord Rosebery to block. And then Prince Naret as Siamese Minister in London, was advised by of all people Joseph Chamberlain, recently resigned from the third Gladstone administration over Irish home rule, not to risk borrowing British money for the same purpose.⁴⁹ By September 1886, the King was suggesting in his annual birthday speech that he was after all willing to grant concessions for mines and railways, and there were soon stories that the expatriate employees Dr Gowan and Captain Loftus were to be given the rights for railways from Chantabun to Battambang and Bangkok to Petriu (Chachoengsao) via Paknam respectively. In February 1887, Loftus was even to get a concession for a line from Paklat (Samutprakan) opposite Paknam to Bandon down the peninsula, dismissed by Satow as ‘A *bogus* concession, intended to bluff off other applicants.’⁵⁰ And in early July in London, Satow was still insisting to Hallett that the Siamese would never give a penny for railway construction, nor help any project for connecting Moulmein, Raheng and China; ‘that nothing but pressure supported by force would induce them to give way.’⁵¹

Less than three weeks later, however, Satow had much more to say. Now he was informing Hallett together with Colquhoun that he had heard that Sir Andrew Clarke, former Governor of the Straits Settlements who had earned King Chulalongkorn’s lasting gratitude by mediating a dispute between him and his cousin the Uparat back in 1875, was ‘all agog for [a] railway from Bangkok to [the] Chinese frontier . . .’ But Satow added that ‘as [a] bimetallist friend of mine

⁴⁸ Satow to Currie, 8 Aug. 1885, *SSP* II.

⁴⁹ Satow diaries, 28 March, 16 April, and to Currie, 29 March, 20 April 1886, *SSP* II. Also Satow to Rosebery teleg., 29 March and vice versa. FO 422/13. The rumours involved Prince Pritsdang, see below, and perhaps anticipated developments of the early 1890s.

⁵⁰ Satow diaries, 15 Oct., 18 Dec. 1885, and 12 Feb. 1887, *SSP* II, III.

⁵¹ Satow diaries, 2 July 1887. Back in Bangkok, 23 April, he had heard stories from the French consul, the Comte de Kergaradec, of a concession for a line inland from the Siamese Malay state of Pattani: ‘I jeered at the idea. Told him I did not believe the Siamese would ever give a sixpence for the construction of railways.’ *SSP* III.

(P. Tidman) had told him it would be impossible to get any money in the present position of silver.⁵² In November, a Captain Lowther of Punchard, McTaggart & Lowther who had been speaking to Captain Loftus and the Siamese Government surveyor, James McCarthy, was told by an again rather jaundiced Satow:

that I did not think he could get the Siamese to give a guarantee, and that the real difficulty would be extraterritoriality, which they could not contract themselves out of. Siamese would be otherwise glad to have railways if they could get them for nothing. He asked whether it would be any use Sir Andrew Clarke going out. I said I doubted it, but [and?] hoped he would not go unless sure of success. Siamese professions of friendship worth little.⁵³

Subsequent to this, Satow was not even to be further consulted regarding the railway schemes, although he was not to resign as British Minister in Bangkok in favour of Montevideo in Uruguay until nearly a year later. In the meanwhile he was merely the recipient of reports sent back to London of developments on the spot. Indeed, it would appear that even as Satow was talking with Lowther, Sir Andrew Clarke was preparing to leave England to lay his ideas before the Siamese Government, according to one source, representing Brasseys, a railway company with a world-wide role.⁵⁴ What is more, the fourth Duke of Sutherland, Cromartie Sutherland-Leveson-Gower K.G., a well-known entrepreneur concerned with both the London and Northwestern Railway in England and the teak trade in Siam,⁵⁵ was on his way soon after aboard his own yacht, the *Sans Peur*, on an extraordinary six-month trip, to make rival proposals. Apparently he had received an invitation from Prince Thewawong to bid for the railway contract when the Siamese Foreign Minister visited England for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1887. The Duke remained in Bangkok a mere fortnight, and was put up at Sapatum Palace, but Clarke was already present at least three weeks before him aboard a steamer of the Holt Line which he used

⁵² Satow diary, 21 July 1887, *SSP* III.

⁵³ Satow diary, 22 Nov. 1887, *SSP* III. In his diary entry of 21 July above, Satow refers to McCarthy interest in a concession to Khorat and Phichai, which presumably came to nothing.

⁵⁴ British Chargé d'Affaires E. B. Gould to Satow, 25 Jan. 1888, PRO 30/33/2/2. Thomas later 1st Earl Brassey (1836–1918) was Civil Lord of the Admiralty in Gladstone's 2nd administration, and a well-known Liberal imperialist.

⁵⁵ E. H. French to Satow, 24 Dec. 1886, PRO 30/33/2/1. The Duke had also been pressing the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank to open Bangkok offices.

as his yacht. Clarke appears to have stayed a couple of months, finally securing thereby a contract for what was reported to be merely a survey of the Bangkok–Chiangmai route.

Access to the archives of the BBTCL for this period might reveal much more of the story from the London end.⁵⁶ Regarding the Duke of Sutherland however, on its return journey, in late February 1888, the *Sans Peur* was spotted re-entering Singapore by of all people the young Joseph Conrad, currently in charge of his first and only command, the *Otago*, bound for Australia.⁵⁷ And it also had aboard a chronicler of his voyage, a Mrs Florence Caddy, apparently substituting for his regular secretary, who supplies us with a good deal of information on why the Duke's efforts had been disappointed. But she was present also as companion to a Mrs Blair, sister to the legal adviser to the Siamese Government, Edward Michell, and reportedly at the time also mistress to the Duke. The King claimed subsequent to their departure to have been insulted by the Duke's relationship with Mrs Blair, but in the end did nothing to penalize Michell for having kept him ignorant of it. It may be true therefore, as Gullick speculates, that the Duke was intended from the start to be a stalking-horse for the Clarke camp.⁵⁸ Michell naturally did his best to help the Duke's cause, while other expatriates such as James McCarthy and Dr Gowan were more supportive of Sir Andrew Clarke.

But the Duke also seems to have made no secret of his commitment to the railway scheme after the Colquhoun–Hallett model; i.e. the Bangkok connection should be a mere branch to 'the projected main line from Moulmein to China.' What is more, Mrs Caddy, while insisting that 'These gentle, peaceful people should be allowed to develop themselves independently,' acknowledged that, at least if the China railway was built, 'we cannot permit the French to annex or protect them; if the French threaten their independence, it may become our duty to take the Siamese under our protection.' Indeed, the railway would be the ideal means of pouring British troops into Siam at the shortest notice. Her other estimate of them might therefore have been the more appropriate: 'So the sleek, silky Siamese

⁵⁶ They seem always to have been kept closed to independent researchers.

⁵⁷ N. Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge, 1966), 192–3. He recorded the event in both his 'End of the Tether' and *Shadow-line* novellas.

⁵⁸ J. M. Gullick, 'Biographical Note,' in Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya* (Singapore ed., 1992), xi. Cf. E. H. French to Satow, 1, 30 March, 26 Nov. 1888, 30/33/2/2.

fence off the question with the Duke . . .⁵⁹ She too was convinced more than a century before time, that Southeast Asia as a whole, with special reference also to Johore and Muar in Malaya which the Duke's party subsequently visited, was shortly due to hum with development.⁶⁰ And she also remarked that, '*Several* Europeans, Sir Andrew Clarke at the head of them, are here, besieging the king for railway concessions. The king's idea is, "Siam farà da se," and he wishes to keep the railway schemes, if inevitable, in his own hands; and thus to introduce them very gradually.'⁶¹

Satow's deputy, E. B. Gould, though a natural sceptic, put the affair in its real context even before the Duke's arrival compounded it:

The fact of a man of Sir A. Clarke's position and reputation appearing suddenly in the place with 6 millions in his pocket has brought the Siamese suddenly face to face with the great world which appears determined by hook or crook to have a railway through Siam. They all seem to think that the time has come when they must do something—what they *can* do—they do not know & therefore still less what they *will* do. The present idea is to have a preliminary survey to cost forty thousand pound—calculated at £100 a mile. This is supposed to take about 2 years and to form when finished a working plan for a railway—and the means of calculating accurately [the] cost of making. This the Siamese are to repay if after all they don't give the Company the concession. This is however only one of many suggestions, one [other] being that the Company and Line should be under some special mixed Court.⁶²

Nearly three years earlier, Satow had suggested as being the greatest obstacle to railways, 'the very natural one, that a concession to a foreign company would mean a great extension of extraterritorial jurisdiction, which they desire to limit by all means in their power.'⁶³ And in 1886, his respect for Hallett and Colquhoun already much diminished, Satow had raised with another of the King's half-brothers, Prince Phichit, the possibility of the Siamese building their own railways as they had most of their telegraph lines.⁶⁴ He had then

⁵⁹ Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya*, 138–9. However, E. H. French, to Satow 1 March 1888, 30/33/2/2, suggested it was also a matter of being unable to secure from the Siamese either a guarantee of interest or a grant of land.

⁶⁰ 'In Siam civilization is potential, in Johore it is at work.' Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya*, 254.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 142. Italics added. Capt. Loftus, to Satow, 8 Feb. 1888, PRO 30/33/2/17, claimed some interest on the part of the then Lord Rothschild.

⁶² Gould to Satow, 25 January 1888, 30/33/2/2.

⁶³ Satow to Currie, 26 August 1884, SSP I, 65.

⁶⁴ Starting with the troubled Bangkok–Amya Pass line. The French had insisted on building the Bangkok–Saigon link.

supposed however, that they would have to mortgage their customs revenues to finance them, and had indicated his doubts whether they, the King or the government as a whole, would be willing to do so.⁶⁵ By contrast, Prince Pritsdang, a royal cousin and King's College London-trained engineer, who worked for a time on the Zuyder Zee drainage scheme in Holland before becoming Siam's first native diplomat in Europe, had started by welcoming the Colquhoun–Hallett scheme.⁶⁶ And on the arrival of Colquhoun and Hallett in Bangkok in 1884, Satow heard initially positive comments from a number of well-placed figures such as the entrepreneurial Phra Thep Phalu of the Siamese Foreign Ministry, subsequently governor of Samutprakan (Paknam), Prince Ditsaworakuman (later Prince Damrong), and even Thewawong himself.

By 1887–88, even leaving aside the obvious apprehension of the King and downright opposition of more conservative interests, the mood seems to have changed.⁶⁷ Of the more radical, enterprising figures, the Oxford-educated Prince Sawat, younger full brother to Prince Thewawong, Prince Phanurangsi, the King's younger full brother in charge of the Posts and Telegraphs Department, and even Prince Pritsdang all favoured Siam attempting to build its own lines. As Gould reported:

The Siamese think that a [Western] Company under extra-territorial privileges would be altogether too strong for them. They want to be given the money and to make the railway themselves and keep the control of it. Sir A[ndrew] tells me that the King says that the Siamese are not capable of doing it themselves. Pri[t]sdang, Swasti and I believe Ong Noi—say they are.⁶⁸

More than that, the Edinburgh-trained Dr Suaphan Sanitwong, another royal cousin, assigned as interpreter and guide to the Sutherland party, reiterated the King's preference going back to 1884, for a line from Bangkok to Khorat. 'What, to connect Siam with

⁶⁵ Satow diaries, 28 March 1886, *SSP* II.

⁶⁶ Letter of 5 June 1883 in Colquhoun's *Amongst the Shans* p. 374. For Pritsdang as Siamese Minister in London 1881–84, Paris 1884–86, see my *Two Views of Siam* (Arran, 1989).

⁶⁷ Again back in 1884, Satow had been reporting to Currie, 26 August 1884, *SSP* I, 65, that 'There were too many of the old hands in the Government who objected both to the construction of a railway and to a guarantee [of costs].' Similarly, Mrs Caddy, *op. cit.*, 140, commented as of 1888 'The king, absolute monarch as he is, hardly dares move in the direction of Western ideas because of the Tory body of the older nobles, who view all progress with a jealous eye.'

⁶⁸ Gould to Satow, 25 January 1888, PRO 30/33/2/2.

French territory?’ Mrs Caddy had asked. ‘Oh, dear no, but to develop the eastern and highly populous districts of Siam, which need development.’⁶⁹ As we have seen with the development of the Tancred, Faulkener survey, the focus had originally been on the Chachoengsao/Kabin/Prachinburi area which did doubtless qualify as relatively populous, only for it to be superseded by the Ayuthaya/Saraburi/Khorat route. The latter linked with regions beyond which were not so populous, over which Bangkok exercised an only vague control, and which were prospectively threatened by French westward expansion. The immediate British threat to Chiangmai and northwest Siam was clearly not considered comparable, particularly if railway construction *through* that region was prevented, rather than fostered.

What eventually emerged was that Sir Andrew Clarke’s survey was explicitly directed to the more easterly route to Chiangmai via Uttaradit and Phre, followed by Satow on his visit to the North in 1885–86.⁷⁰ What is more, it was to comprise three ‘branch’ routes, on from Chiangmai to Chiangrai and Chiangsen, from Uttaradit to Paklai on the Mekong river, and from Ayuthaya to Saraburi and Khorat. The first at least did correspond to a part of the proposed Burma–China line, but deprived of the essential connection via Raheng. The second could be called a genuine ‘branch’, but reflected obvious Bangkok strategic concerns as the easiest means for the Siamese to move troops to the Upper Mekong valley. And the final so-called ‘branch’ was of course the trunk line that the King for one had always favoured.⁷¹

Poor relations with the current German Minister in Bangkok, Dr Kempermann, seem to have delayed the exploitation of contacts Prince Thewawong had also made during his 1887 tour with Krupps of Germany. At all events by late 1890, Karl Bethge, the Krupps agent in China, had been recruited as Director-General of a new Siamese Royal Railways Department with a view to building the

⁶⁹ Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya*, 150. Cf. Satow diary, royal audience, 17 June 1884, SSP I, 43. M. R. Suaphan was a son of Mom Chao Sai Sanitwong, another friend of Satow’s, and a grandson of Prince Wongsathiratsanit, a leading figure in the reign of King Mongkut (1851–68). For Suaphan, see also D. B. Johnston, ‘Rural Society and the Rice Frontier in Siam, 1880–1930,’ Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Yale Univ. 1975, 58–9, 272–4.

⁷⁰ See his *A Diplomat in Siam*, edited by the present writer (Gartmore, Stirling, 1996).

⁷¹ Holm, ‘State Railways,’ 43. This is the point at which Holm really takes the story up, but almost entirely from the Siamese point of view, oblivious to the sort of pressure foreign interests had hitherto been bringing to bear on Bangkok.

Bangkok–Khorat line. Punchard, McTaggart and Lowther, sidelined by this arrangement, refused to tender to the new office, and other British interests involved in building lines in South America were also deterred by this arrangement.⁷² Instead the bid of a small under-financed British Malaya-based company, Murray Campbell, albeit backed initially by the Hongkong trading company Jardine Matheson, was accepted in preference to an alliance of three substantial German banks. The Siamese were getting the line they wanted, excluding Europe-based interests, whether British or German, and when Murray Campbell finally and perhaps predictably ran out of resources in mid-1896, the Royal Railways Department cancelled his contract. Lengthy litigation followed, and the Siamese were finally forced in 1901 to pay some £200,000 compensation. But already, in the meanwhile, the RRD had been freed to commence construction-work itself, the Khorat line as the first of several built by the early twentieth century, being opened amidst great jubilation on 21 December 1900.⁷³ Not even the always rather strange concession granted to C. Dunlop in 1891, for the route from the British border with Kedah to Songkhla, was ever realized. Supported by Frank Swettenham and Governor Smith, it was pregnant with possibilities from the point of view of Straits expansion into southern Siam,⁷⁴ but the line was eventually built by the Thai themselves, with the inevitable connection through to Penang, as part of the 1909 deal whereby Bangkok ceded four of the Malay states over which it claimed suzerainty in return for keeping the rest, and also secured a large loan to finance a railway all the way from Bangkok to the revised British Malayan frontier.⁷⁵

V. The Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate

Most critical of all perhaps, as Satow saw it, as a threat to Siam's independence, was the Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate. The

⁷² Holm, 'State Railways,' 56–7.

⁷³ Holm, 'State Railways'.

⁷⁴ It was perhaps peculiar that the Siamese government ever granted the concession at such a time, though it was hedged around with restrictions rather like the Clarke/Punchard, McTaggart & Lowther arrangement, and was to lapse around the same time as the cancellation of the Goldfields of Siam concession without apparent British demur. See *ibid.*, 46–7.

⁷⁵ Thamsook Numnonda, 'Negotiations Regarding the Cession of the Siamese Malay States, 1907–1909,' *Journal of the Siam Society* LV, 2 (July 1967), 227–35.

full implications of the MPES affair can probably only be appreciated in the light of my 'Protection or Partition: Ernest Satow and the 1880s crisis in Britain's Siam policy.' Suffice it to say that both governors of the British Straits Settlements in the 1880s, Sir Frederick Weld and Sir Cecil Smith, oblivious to the implications for the survival of the kingdom of Siam as a whole, were committed to the annexation, hopefully peacefully, of its peninsular territories, and their integration with British Malaya. In face of British Foreign Office opposition prompted by Satow, though not clearly articulated until the end of the decade, the project was put on ice by both the Colonial Office and Singapore for the duration of the 1890s, and by the time of the replacement of Lord Salisbury as Foreign Secretary by Lord Lansdowne in 1900, circumstances had changed, and even Swettenham's simultaneous succession to power as governor of Singapore made little difference. Instead, in retrospect at least, Swettenham's premature resignation and return to England at the end of 1903, seems to reflect an awareness that the chance had gone. The half-hearted and final revision of the Malayan-Siamese frontier made in 1909, merely transferred to Singapore control the four Siamese Malay states of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Perlis.⁷⁶ In consequence, it came to seem that the only real challenge to Siam's independence had come from the French in Indochina to the east.

Yet it remains intriguing that in 1883, the British Foreign Office modified its initial opposition to the cutting of a canal through the Kra isthmus by interests supported by the Suez Canal Co. Of course, both de Lesseps's other main projects had profound political consequences, the setting up of the Caisse de la Dette and ultimate British domination of Egypt, and in central America, the secession of what came to be called the Republic of Panama from Colombia, dominated by the United States as the power most interested in its canal. Where Kra was concerned, not surprisingly both the British Admiralty and the local colonial authorities had developed great apprehension of the proposed canal for as long as it seemed likely, for fear of its implications for Singapore in its role as first-class base and Southeast Asian commercial centre. Where the MPES scheme was concerned, the question was whether it amounted to a Kra Canal project mark II, or a retort to the original idea.

The MPES seems to have had its origins in a meeting in Paris in early 1886, between François Deloncle and W. H. Read C.M.G., a

⁷⁶ This ignores their temporary return to Siam under Japanese auspices, 1942–45.

leading British merchant based in Singapore since the early 1840s and a member of the local Legislative Council. This meeting moreover, was the culmination of contacts and maybe wider consultations going back to the time of Deloncle's original explorations in the Malay Peninsula in the early 1880s.

Deloncle claimed to hold certain 'rights and surveys' from that period of association with de Lesseps, although the Siamese argued that they had always covered themselves most carefully against making any promises, and that the King had declared explicitly that he considered the proposed canal 'not an achievement for our time.'⁷⁷ It seems that there may have been some prior contact between Read and Sir Julian Pauncefote, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, but the whole idea of the MPES was effectively launched through *two* letters from Read in Paris to Pauncefote of 6 March 1886, for submission to Lord Rosebery, currently Foreign Secretary. At this point, with the company as yet unnamed, it was proposed only to 'feel the way with respect to the Siamese, to apply for the concession of a reef of gold quartz at Ulu Sai, in the Malay Province of Patani, which is nominally tributary to Siam . . .' The F.O. seems to have been persuaded that 'Deloncle and his friends' had accepted both 'the idea of an English Company and the temporary postponement of the Canal scheme.' And Read then went on to argue expansively and rather long-windedly:

It appears to me that as the country which has been explored [by Deloncle] is under the suzerainty of Siam, in a more or less nominal degree, it would be of great advantage to British interests to extend our influence in those parts . . . [through] the formation of a powerful Company, with offices and direction in London, and the best means to effect this purpose, would be to obtain from the Siamese Government a concession of a certain portion of the said territory, which concession being obtained would enable a company of standing and respectability to be formed, which might gradually extend its operations over a great part of the Malay Peninsula between Penang and Perak, our [Burmese] Tenasserim Provinces and Bangkok.

In his second letter of the same date, conceivably, unlike the first, not shown to Deloncle and his French associates, Read insisted, in explanation of his motives:

I have taken the liberty to write to you, officially, with respect to the project I spoke to you about, and one of my main objects is to put a stop to French intrigue to a certain degree at the Court of Siam. I have seen the principal people here [Paris] and they quite adopt my views and wish to leave the

⁷⁷ Satow diary, 18 December 1886, *SSP* II.

chief action with the English as they see that their chance of recouping their expense of exploration lay in our hands, but I am not certain how long they may continue in this frame of mind.

I hope you will agree with me that the importance of spreading our influence over the Malay Peninsula is not to be [put?] aside under present circumstances, and may eventually prove the means of saving Siam from the French. However my views on this subject are of little importance to one in your position.

My position in Singapore, and supposed influence with the Malay Rajahs[,] has been the cause of my help being sought, as I am too old to expect to see the project carried out to a successful termination I fear.⁷⁸

In fact, Read lived on till 1909, and as late as 1901, was still publishing a brief memoir, 'An Old Resident,' *Play and Politics: Recollections of Malaya*. Dedicated to Sir Andrew Clarke as Governor of the Straits Settlements, 1873–75, 'To whose prescient and decisive policy the Federated Malay States [set up in 1895] owe their development and prosperity,' the memoir indicates the ramifications of his own Southeast Asian interests. These included, inevitably as a Singapore merchant, the Dutch East Indies, for which he was appointed successively Consul and Consul-General in Singapore, French Indochina, commencing in the late 1850s with the initial French establishment in Saigon, and Siam. Indeed, during the reign of King Mongkut, by his own account, Read seems to have ingratiated himself in Bangkok by helping to stem French encroachment on the country, and then accompanied King Chulalongkorn on his 1871 visit to Java. He was friendly with Thomas Knox, the long-time and much disliked British Consul-General in Bangkok, and also often associated with Tan Kim Ching, the Chinese similarly long-time consul for Siam in Singapore. As of 1886, Governor Weld was to describe him as 'our oldest inhabitant.'⁷⁹ Yet Read's own harping on the uncertainty of Siam's claims to part or all of the peninsula south of Bangkok was continued by others who later took up the ostensible leadership of the MPES when it came to be founded. Thus in October, Sir E. J. Reed M.P. was talking ignorantly of the peninsula as a whole being inhabited by 'Samsam peoples, who, while recognizing the suzerainty of Siam, are, as you know, almost entirely independent.'⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Read to Pauncefote, 6 March 1886, FO 69/112.

⁷⁹ Weld to E. B. Gould, 17 June 1886, PRO 30/33/2/9.

⁸⁰ Reed to Sir Villiers Lister, 11 October 1886. FO 69/113. For the very limited location of the Thai Muslim 'Sam-sam', see K. P. Landon, *Siam in Transition* (Chicago, 1939), 84.

The initial reactions at the Foreign Office, approved by Lord Rosebery, appear to have been entirely positive, although it was decided to consult both India and Colonial Offices. Read himself paid further visits to the F.O. on 26 March and 20 April, the latter just prior to his return to Singapore. And he was then accompanied by Deloncle, and also Sir Edward Reed, currently a Lord of the Treasury in Gladstone's third administration, introduced as 'the engineer of the proposed company,' and a Mr Marris of Ashurst, Crisp and Co., solicitors, the latter two 'the persons who would represent the affair in his absence.' By now, Reed was able to read out 'a portion of the prospectus and stated that preliminary steps had been taken for forming the company and obtaining the necessary capital.' On arrival back in Singapore, W. H. Read persuaded Governor Weld to write supportive letters to both Minister Satow in Bangkok and the Foreign Office. And by early August, Sir E. Reed, appointed 'consulting engineer' to the syndicate now formed supposedly 'to put the whole matter on a thoroughly British basis,' had taken 'full powers' to appoint English directors to form an overall majority given the acknowledged continuing French financial interest.⁸¹

The first evidence of genuine reservations within the British Government emerges in a note from Sir Owen Burne of the India Office to the F.O. of a week later:

This *seems* satisfactory, and I hope you will support it at Bangkok subject to Sir Edward Reed giving us more complete information than he seems inclined to do in *writing* as to the names of the Syndicate, the capital, and other details which will satisfy you and the Colonial Office of the bona fides and respectable character of what you are called on to support. I believe it to be of the greatest importance to get Englishmen into Siam, and I hope you will succeed in following our good example in Burmah in ridding 'them parts' of the Gallic cock.⁸²

Burne was thus very much out of line with other British Indian officials with regard to British interests in both Burma and Siam such as Chief Commissioner Bernard, who favoured a clear-cut hands-off approach. But there is good reason to view the recipient of the note, the Assistant Under-Secretary at the F.O., Sir Philip Currie, as of very like mind in terms of his anti-French sentiments and corres-

⁸¹ Minutes by Currie, 26 March, 20 April, Weld to Satow, 17 June, and to Currie, 18 June, and Reed to Currie, 12 August 1886, FO 69/112, 113, and PRO 30/33/2/9.

⁸² Minute by Burne, 13 Aug. 1886, on Read to Reed, 23 June 1886, FO 69/113. He evidently refers here to the causes and outcome of the Third Anglo-Burmese War of the previous year. The italics are his own.

ponding lack of concern for the sovereignty of Asian states.⁸³ Nonetheless, not long afterwards, he was noting that the solicitor Marris had withdrawn from the syndicate, and regarding Reed added:

He does not however give the information we asked for and simply states that a Syndicate has been formed, and that he has the power of nominating additional members to it which gives him the real control of the affair. It has been arranged that the Concessions are to be granted to him individually, and he is prepared to submit the names of the syndicate directors for the approval of the F.O. From what I have heard of Sir E. Reed's pecuniary position I do not think that he is in a position to carry out any such concession unless he is strongly supported . . .⁸⁴

Currie therefore supported Burne's requests for more information. By early September some was forthcoming, and Sir E. Reed was able then to report backing from an associate of N. M. Rothschilds, Carl Meyer, later chairman of the Peking Syndicate, and also an Ernest Louis Franklin of the up-and-coming Samuel Montague. Indeed, he submitted a full list of the syndicate's subscribers, an account of its arrangement with the original French Kra Canal syndicate, and a thirty-page memorandum. However, he also stressed the difficulty of launching the company before the full extent of its concessions were known, and indicated the syndicate's intention 'not to work the various parts of the Concession, but to furnish an organization for the formation of sub-Companies for carrying them out respectively.' Furthermore, Holland, Son and Coward were now announced as replacements for Ashurst, Crisp and Co. as company solicitors. However, a month later, W. H. Read indicated his complete withdrawal from any involvement with the Syndicate, and the India Office continued to express unhappiness, if not with the makeup of the company, then with the expected opposition of Minister Satow in Bangkok.⁸⁵

The need to secure Satow's support was something W. H. Read had urged from the very outset in his 6 March letters, and the unwillingness of the Foreign Office to agree until 11 November, would seem in large measure to explain his apparent withdrawal from the whole scheme in October. Indeed, even at this point, Satow was

⁸³ See Currie to Satow, 5 Sept. 1885, PRO 30/33/1/6, and for Bernard's attitudes, my 'Protection or Partition.'

⁸⁴ Minute by Currie, 25 Aug. on Read to Reed, 23 June 1886.

⁸⁵ Reed to Currie, 8 Sept. 1886, I.O. Under-Secretary H. Walpole to Currie, 24 Sept., 27 Oct. 1886, FO 69/113. Deloncle too, by this time seems to have transferred his interest to French activities in the Mekong valley. Tuck, *French Wolf*, 92-3.

instructed merely to 'ascertain unofficially whether the objects which the syndicate have in view are likely to be favourably entertained by the authorities at Bangkok,' and report by telegraph.⁸⁶ On behalf of the Syndicate, Read had hoped to visit Bangkok and enlist Satow's support personally in pressing their interests before returning to England in September, and on the face of it, he had just lost patience.⁸⁷

The India Office's concern regarding Satow's attitude during September–October, evidently derived from its knowledge of how he was currently being forced by the Colonial Office, through Sir Philip Currie, to adopt a hectoring stance towards the Siamese. The issue was a proposed solution to the Perak–Raman, Malaya–Siam border dispute, involving a lease to the 'British-protected' state of Perak of the disputed territory. But in Satow's view, the proposal was redolent of the recent transfers from the Ottoman Empire of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Austria, and Cyprus to Britain, both of which might be expected to become permanent, and he was convinced that the authorities in Singapore represented a threat to the stability of the whole kingdom. A year earlier, Indian officials both in London and in India and Burma had been forced to contemplate the prospect of a partition of Siam with France as proposed to the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, by the French ambassador in London. And Lord Randolph Churchill as the Secretary of State for India, doubtless speaking for a considerable body of Anglo-Indian opinion, nervous for instance of the prospect of a coterminous Anglo-French frontier, had concurred in Satow's opinion that the French idea should be rejected out of hand.⁸⁸

As for Satow himself, he had received an initial indication of the MPES scheme from Weld while he was in Japan on sick-leave in July. Presumably, he had thereafter perused the first Foreign Office despatches on the matter of 10 June and 26 August, on his return to Bangkok at the end of September. Not until his receipt of the despatch of 11 November was he required to take any action, however. By that time, he had even had an audience with a distinctly unhappy King Chulalongkorn to discuss the matter of the Raman lease, and virtual impasse on that issue seemed to have been

⁸⁶ Iddesleigh to Satow, 11 Nov. 1886, FO 69/108.

⁸⁷ Read to Reed, 6 July 1886, and to Currie, 14 Oct. 1886, FO 69/113.

⁸⁸ I.O. to F.O., 8 October 1885, FO 27/2779. Again see my 'Protection or Partition?' Tuck, 'Jules Ferry,' argues that the French were always as afraid of British domination of Siam as vice versa.

reached. His true reaction to the MPES proposal seems evident in the concluding remarks to his private letter to Sir Philip Currie the day after his raising it with Prince Thewawong on 18 December:

If my opinion was asked, I should say that under existing circumstances with regard to the Perak boundary question, the patronage of the British Government would be a hindrance rather than a help to the syndicate. I should no doubt be told that the Siamese ought not to suspect the purity of our intentions, but if they do suspect, it is not very much use saying that they ought not to. At any rate I think it is my duty to tell H.M.G. what they do think as far as I can discover their mind.⁸⁹

In the light of such comments, it might well be supposed that Satow had sought to over-egg the omelette in presenting the MPES scheme to Prince Thewawong. In his diary, he indicates how he talked of a Company which had been formed in London under that title with Sir E. Reed for its consulting engineer, to acquire from Deloncle all his rights and surveys. 'It was to be located/registered in London with English directors for the purpose of making roads, railways, tramways, work mines and fisheries, to construct canals perhaps including a maritime canal, for irrigation, reclamation, improvement, sewerage, drainage, water supply, gas, hotels, warehouses, markets, public buildings—in Singora [Songkhla], Lakhon [Sithammarat], Trang, Taloung [Phuket], Satien and Patani.' And following instructions, he had enquired whether the Siamese Government would be 'disposed to favourably entertain an application for a concession for these purposes and comprising these states', with the promise that if so, it would be supported by London.⁹⁰

But Thewawong's response was to insist that Siam was still firmly opposed to the idea of a maritime canal, although in passing he volunteered the opinion that the Bandon-Krabi route was doubtless the most likely. Of course, the King had already declared a new willingness where railway and mining concessions were concerned, to which Satow responded that any railway might need to be 'accompanied by alternate grants of land along the route, as in case of American and Canadian trans-continental lines.' Regarding the other objects of the syndicate, Thewawong declared that 'their schemes were too vast, and implied granting away a portion of sovereignty if the Syndicate were to make the improvements that were properly speaking the affair of the local chief[s].' And again, Satow

⁸⁹ Satow to Currie, 19 Dec. 1886, *SSP* III.

⁹⁰ Satow diary, 18 Dec. 1886, *SSP* III.

jumped in with the comment 'that population being deficient, immigration would be necessary; also that I understood that exclusive concessions would be asked for . . . He said they would only grant separate and limited concessions in point of area.'⁹¹

Towards the end of the interview, Satow did raise the issue of whether enlarged British investment in the kingdom might not enhance its stability. But of course, this anyhow begged the question of whether or not the MPES was a predominantly British or French company, for which the Siamese presumably had their own evidence. In his private letter to Currie the next day, he added that previously, 'One of the inducements which Deloncle & Co. mentioned to the Siamese Government in connexion with the canal concession he asked for was that it would prevent English encroachments! said the prince.'⁹² At all events, the two seem to have parted on the best of terms, Satow at once telegraphed the negative outcome of the interview back to London, and no more seems to have been heard of official British support for the syndicate, as Satow had perhaps anticipated. The Foreign Office files back in London are not even further minuted as an indication of the British Government's reaction, as if it too had expected nothing else.

VI. The Failure of the Concession-hunters

Yet London's subsequent stance did not end Satow's concern. Another step he took on his return to England in 1887, was to request his friend James McCarthy, surveyor to the Siamese Government, also on leave, to investigate the MPES further. The latter's reply detailed briefly the story of the original French canal company and the hostility to it of the British Government:

The company was transferred from Paris to London. The chief of the company in Paris was Baron Reinach. The director in London is George Cawston, who is supported by Mr. Alfred Mattei, 3 Plowden Buildings Temple, and one Stokes described as 'in the City'.

The capital of the company is £335,000, of which £330,000 belong to subscribers in Paris, and what I understand 5000 to the subscribers in London, who make it an English Exploration Syndicate. After the subscriber capital is paid back with interest it is arranged they all go halves.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Satow to Currie, 19 Dec. 1886, *SSP* III.

If concessions were granted W. H. Reid [*sic*] would receive £5000 if not granted £1000. He has not been paid the thousand yet.

Mr. Luzzatti has given over his gold mine concession to the Syndicate for which he will receive £15000 and one-third profits.

The whole business is so neat that I think it should appear in the 'Times'.⁹³

There appears to be no firm evidence that Satow passed this information on to his Foreign Office masters, but it would seem improbable that he did not, unless, quite possibly, he had reason to suppose that they were already fully informed. Of course, the absence of official British Government support would not be expected to cause the company to completely abandon its ambitions any more than it did Punchard, McTaggart and Lowther or, in particular, the Duke of Sutherland, in their quest for railway concessions. Thus Charge Gould reported to Satow from Bangkok in early 1888, the continued involvement of the MPES with Luzzatti and his gold mine schemes, 'being the present form of the adventurers in whose behalf Deloncle came here, and whom W. H. Read was at one time inclined to back[,] but whom he has now I believe firmly abandoned.' This time the involvement was in reverse, with Messrs. Cawston, Stokes and Reinach all featuring separately and, according to Gould, being entitled to equal shares in the profits divided four ways.⁹⁴ As indicated above, the Association of the Goldfields of Siam was thereafter set up with substantial Siamese holdings, and the complete absence of all the above names, although the MPES remained as a minor shareholder.⁹⁵ By contrast, according to a company memorandum registered in November 1889, the MPES itself still listed Messrs. Stokes and Mattes amongst its one-third non-French shareholders, and indeed George Cawston as the second largest of the total of sixty. Yet the largest was still the Baron de Reinach at the head of the French two-thirds. As of March 1894, however, a month before the syndicate's final winding-up, the late Baron's estate had much reduced its holding as had also Cawston, while François Deloncle had mysteriously appeared low down the list.⁹⁶

⁹³ McCarthy to Satow, 25 Nov. 1887, PRO 30/33/2/17. See above, n. 18, for reservations about McCarthy's information. George Cawston, a founder of the British South Africa Company, was also to be a director of the later Pekin Syndicate. Stokes had been a director of the Suez Canal Co. while 'Mattei' was presumably 'Mattes', see below.

⁹⁴ Gould to Satow, 25 Jan. 1888, PRO 30/33/2/2.

⁹⁵ Board of Trade register of companies, BT/4132.

⁹⁶ Ditto, BT 31/4591.

In the meanwhile of course, Reinach had become the central figure in the French Panama Scandal of 1892, which preceded the wave of anti-Semitism that surrounded the Dreyfus case, and apparently poisoned himself. Originally ennobled in Italy, Angelo Luzzatti's homeland, he had been linked with De Lesseps' Panama Company, founded back in 1879, since its early days. But he had evidently sought other opportunities as it fell into difficulties from around 1885 thanks to the high cost of construction-work in central America and general bad management. In 1888, he seemed briefly to have saved the company. In alliance with an American-educated fellow Jewish financier, Cornelius Herz, associate of the Radical republican Georges Clemenceau and from the same part of France as Dreyfus, he was able to exploit the instability of the French Third Republic then threatened by General Boulanger, and buy a Chamber majority to authorize a company bond-lottery. But scheme and company still failed, and the revelations of 1892 not only prompted Reinach's suicide, but the arraignment of the de Lesseps, father and son, and virtual ruin of two former French premiers, and temporarily also Clemenceau. Herz fled to England and, given the chauvinism of the time, both he and Clemenceau were labelled agents of a foreign power or powers, even of the two British leaders currently seen as most anti-French personally, Lord Rosebery and Joseph Chamberlain. The apprehensions felt from the outset in England regarding the Kra scheme now seemed fully justified as a new set of politicians committed to friendship with Russia, Britain's old enemy in Asia, came to power in Paris.⁹⁷

As Professor King has shown, even the Goldfields of Siam were far from successful, and it is difficult to know whether to credit King Chulalongkorn with investing substantial funds of his own in it to prevent it threatening his sovereignty over the peninsula, or blame him for being deceived into investing in such an unlikely venture.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ D. R. Watson, *Georges Clemenceau: A Political Biography* (London, 1974), E. Holt, *The Tiger* (London, 1976), and G. Dallas, *At the Heart of a Tiger: Clemenceau and his World, 1841–1929* (London, 1993). Sir E. Reed's passionate defence of Herz, 'Dr. Cornelius Herz and the French Republic,' in *The Fortnightly Review* CCCLXI (Jan. 1897), 1–20, in denying the existence of any significant differences between him and Reinach suggests that Herz too might have been involved with the MPES. Reed apparently heard from Reinach the night the latter died. And Siam had been one of several oriental countries which received scientific commissions organized by Herz.

⁹⁸ An interesting aspect is the involvement of the still young Italian G. E. Gerini, the future Prof. Silapa Bhirasri, historian of Siamese art and architecture. He had been accused of complicity in a plot against the King in 1885 before the arrival of Luzzatti, but appears to have been restored thereafter to royal favour, partly thanks

Indeed, Arthur Keith's spell at Bangtaphan, 1889–92, saw it virtually in collapse for lack of workable ore. Keith too, with his latest manager, C. P. Gibbons, like so many before them, moved on to Chantabun on the east side of the gulf in 1891, after he had nearly sacrificed his life on a trek from Bangtaphan across the mountains to Burma to obtain expert advice on the mine's unlikely prospects. Gibbons was now in charge of another Luzzatti brainchild, The Rubies and Sapphires Co. of Siam Ltd., which appears to have expired even before the Goldfields of Siam.⁹⁹ In 1896 at all events, as the crisis conditions of 1893 passed, the Siamese Government finally felt emboldened to cancel the Bangtaphan concession.¹⁰⁰ Luzzatti for one had doubtless secured valuable experience for his much better-known activities in China in that country's late 1890s crisis, testifying to the power of the white man even in Eastern Asia in this period. He clearly disappointed British Minister Satow's efforts to promote Siam's sovereignty through the involvement of nationals of small European countries, but he was hardly representative.¹⁰¹

Yet if the Siamese bore with the smaller fry, what is remarkable is their evident success in turning away the various large-scale, Europe-based interests seeking concessions in the country during the 1880s. Regarding the railway schemes, Hallett and Colquhoun were effectively repelled in 1884–85. In 1888, the Duke of Sutherland went quietly home without even an official farewell after he had come nearly halfway round the world in vain. And the Clarke alternative adopted by the Siamese was limited and redolent with procrastination while the locals debated the do-it-yourself option. No diplomatic pressure was exerted on his behalf, even the staff of the British Legation in Bangkok seem to have been quite contemptuous

to the intercession of Ernest Satow. Keith, *An Autobiography*, 106–7, refers to him as the accountant and interpreter of the concession, and describes him as 'a highly-educated man, an authority on all that pertained to the history and language of Siam,' and again, 111, as 'an ex-Italian officer, the son of a professor in the University of Milan.'

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128–39. Later an eminent conservator and physiologist and Rector of Aberdeen University, he seems never to have had any idea of Luzzatti's responsibility for his predicament.

¹⁰⁰ It would seem possible that the decision to wind up the MPES around the same time was connected with this.

¹⁰¹ See for instance the activities of the Danes as recorded in M. Laugesen, F. Holm-Petersen and P. Westphall, *Scandinavians in Siam* (Bangkok, 1980), and also the Belgians, or at any rate, one Belgian in particular, in W. E. J. Tips, *Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns (Chao Phraya Aphai Raja) and the Belgian Advisers in Siam (1892–1902)* (Bangkok, 1992).

of what he secured,¹⁰² and events could be said to have borne their opinions out. Hallett continued to campaign back in England for a few years for the Burma–China line, and some seem to believe that he genuinely gained the support of the Lord Salisbury, prime minister 1886–1892 and 1895–1902. But his 1890 book, *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant*, notwithstanding its many messages of support including one from Salisbury’s private secretary, was more in the way of a postscript to his effort. By 1892, he was advocating instead a new Salween/Kunlon ferry route of which he had previously been very critical, and even this was later dismissed out of hand by Lord Curzon, an unusually knowledgeable viceroy, in 1898.¹⁰³

What seems most likely is that the cool way in which the Siamese dealt with the rival rail concessionaires in 1888 owed a great deal to the outcome of the MPES scheme. And that in turn clearly came as a sequel to the fate of the specific Kra Canal proposal. A French thread had been established from the start, which raised fears. And in turn, Ernest Satow and the Siamese promoted such fears. Increasingly as relations between London and Paris deteriorated during these years, any move by any Frenchman was seen as related to the regional power-balance and the ambitions of the French government, although the story of the MPES in particular hardly provides conclusive proof of collusion between French political and commercial interests. 1885 had been a year of great confusion in Southeast Asia, with France beginning to get bogged down in a decade’s pacification of northern Vietnam, and in consequence losing the leadership of Jules Ferry, one of the outstanding figures of the Third Republic. As a counter-coup at the end of the year, British India had annexed Upper Burma, but had thereafter begun to debate its stance regarding the fate of Siam.¹⁰⁴ In this context, even British economic interests suffered somewhat, though it is unclear to what extent Satow was genuinely coming to sympathize with the Siamese desire to exclude Western interests, or was simply hoodwinked by them.¹⁰⁵ More broadly,

¹⁰² See E. H. French to Satow, 1, 30 March 1888, 30/33/2/2.

¹⁰³ See, for e.g., R. Lee, *France and the Exploitation of China 1885–1901* (Hong Kong, 1988), 182, and Hallett, *A Thousand Miles*, 473, for the letter of support from R. C. Gunton. By the late 1880s, Salisbury was extremely concerned not to destabilize Siam in any way. In Persia, by contrast, he did favour ‘development’ in the same period, but in recognition of its much more moribund state. See my ‘Protection or Partition’.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, and P. J. Tuck, ‘Jules Ferry’.

¹⁰⁵ Much later, strangely (Satow to Lord Reay, 19 Dec. 1917, PRO 30/33/11/18), he seemed inclined to deny the claims of the Siamese legal adviser of the period:

one might view the 'question of Siam' as resembling that of Vietnam after SEATO had drawn its *cordon sanitaire* around the modern Thailand at Manila in 1954: 'up for grabs'. And both survived, at least in the shorter term, when few expected them to.

It has become a commonplace to argue that by the early twentieth century, Siam had become a '*quantité négligéable*' and a client-state of Britain, a classic example of informal empire and worse, internal colonialism.¹⁰⁶ Supposedly, Siam's absolute monarchy leadership, confirmed in its legal sovereignty, collaborated with the arch-imperial power to entrench its authority and so delayed the process of 'modernization' that today, though in what terms is not clear, it still lags behind many countries that were directly colonized by Western powers. Implicit in all this is the belief that Western, and above all British, economic interests secured such a hold on the country, for instance in terms of the exploitation of its teak and tin resources, that the government in London remained quite amenable to the maintenance of a purely formal Siamese independence.

Yet there can be little doubt that the Western economic interests focussed on Siam in the 1880s threatened the country with a far worse fate, territorial partition and dismemberment. This was the real spectre of the dog-days of European imperial expansion, and it nearly came to Siam with the loss of 'Laos' in the aftermath of the Paknam crisis in 1893. For that matter, Lord Salisbury still perceived 'sick men' all over the non-Western world at the time of his return to power in July 1895. Morocco and Korea for two were still to disappear, while Persia so nearly became a third. China's great advantage was simply its huge size. Yet survival, the bottom line, became increasingly plain sailing for Siam, thanks arguably to the exceptional acuteness and expertise of its leadership, already evident enough in the 1880s, albeit at the cost of certain limited concessions made to Western economic interests in the early twentieth century. How high the stakes were is plain from some comments of Colquhoun to Satow back in 1884. Apparently seeing his railway scheme

'As I left Siam in 1887 I do not know anything of the Battle of Concessions of which [E. B.] Michell speaks.'

¹⁰⁶ Essentially this goes back to the footnote in A. J. P. Taylor's *Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, p. 405, but see also especially B. Anderson, 'The State of Thai Studies: Studies of the Thai State,' in E. B. Ayal (ed.), *The Study of Thailand* (Ohio Univ. CIS, 1978), 193–247, and Holm, 'State Railways.' Cf. also the introductory chapter to R. Aldrich, *The Key to the South* (London, 1993), for pre-1933 contemporary views of how far the process had gone.

as tantamount to 'progress', and the 'beggars can't be choosers' analogy as appropriate, even though he was simultaneously applying pressure on the Siamese through a series of scaremongering telegrams to *The Times* claiming a threat of imminent French attack, he declared:

If she can't make up her mind, and the truth about Siam gets about, the country will be doomed. No more entertainment of crown princes and swells, creation of fresh embassies in Europe, decoration-giving, and general posturing on the platform of supposed progress, will save the country. Internal reforms, of a very sweeping character, are necessary, I believe, if any attempt is to be made to keep the country intact and give it a chance of life.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Colquhoun to Satow, 16 Aug. 1884, PRO 30/33/2/17. Colquhoun had a commission from *The Times* to report S.E. Asian affairs, see issues for 16 July, 22 Dec. 1884, 21 Feb. 1885 for his telegrams, and 6 Feb. 1885 for a longer report.