

Panel Abstract for EuroSEAS 2017

Title: “The British Role in Burmese Historiography: Beyond Historicity”

The scholarship of the British during the colonial period (1824-1948) has had a profound, lasting impact on the writing and study of Burmese pasts. For decades, Burmese history writing has tended to pursue the project of creating an ever-more accurate understanding of the Burmese past by, bringing new evidence and interpretations forward. Much less attention has been placed on asking who has set the conversation about Burmese history has been set, and how. What historians study and what they find interesting, what conceptual tools and frameworks they use, and the practices they have brought to the study and writing of Burmese history, have grown directly from the work of the early British.

Moving away from a view of history as debates of the facts, truth, and the historicity of Burmese pasts, this panel takes forward a conversation about the role of British diplomats, administrators, and scholars in setting the tone for the study and writing of Burmese history. Each of the participants considers a different facet: the role of individual scholars, and how their intellectual interests and frameworks have been instrumental to establishing views of Burma; how local scholars have adopted and adapted British ideas as part of their understanding of themselves and their history; and how Thai scholars took on British ideas to create a national past for themselves. These last two highlight how British interventions have been crucial to local projects of creating national pasts for newly-conceived nations.

This conversation is much needed now that Myanmar has begun to reengage with the outside world, and opening which has afforded more opportunities for scholarly engagement and work inside the country. Burma Studies is slowly moving out of decades of scholarly neglect after decades of difficult access. The study of Burmese history can join a program started long ago in neighboring countries of South and Southeast Asia, in which more recent generations of scholars have reconsidered of much of the “classical” work of the earliest Euro-American scholars.

Panel Organizer/Convener: Patrick McCormick

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Discussant: Michael Charney

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Presenters:

1) Stephen Lee Keck

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“To the Court of Ava: Encountering Monarchy and Shaping Colonial Historiography”

2) Carol-Ann Boshier
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“Gordon Luce’s Influence on the Study of Early Burmese History through his JBRS Articles”

3) Thanapas Dejpawuttikul
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“Locating Colonial Burmese History in Early Modern Thai Historiography”

4) Patrick McCormick
“The British Creation of the Mons as a Historical Subject”