

Empires, Imperialism and Southeast Asia: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Tarling.
 Edited by Brook Barrington. Monash Asia Institute, Clayton, Victoria, 1997. 250 pp.
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THIS VOLUME was commissioned to honour Nicholas Tarling on his retirement from his position as Professor of History at the University of Auckland. The authors are colleagues who have worked with him in New Zealand and in Australia: mainly Southeast Asian historians, but also some specialists on wider issues of empires. Nicholas Tarling has been a distinguished and prolific historian over more than 30 years and still has a number of research and writing projects in train. The broad theme of empires and imperialism in the Southeast Asian context was chosen to represent this major interest. They are a fitting tribute.

As might be expected, the individual essays relate only loosely to each other as they endeavour to address the themes of the volume. The authors valiantly strive to show how their essays illustrate the chosen themes, but these are themselves so broad that it is at times difficult to find a clear connection between essays in a volume that, for example, opens with an excellent essay by Barbara Watson Andaya on 'Raiding Cultures and Interior-Coastal Migration in Early Modern Island Southeast Asia' and concludes with an essay by John Wong on 'The Legacy of British Rule in Hong Kong and its Interaction with Beijing's Objectives'. It is a common problem with most multiple-authored works, but it is compounded here by the diverse time, place and thematic interests of the 12 contributors. Many of them, including John Legge, Leonard Andaya, Barbara Watson Andaya, Anthony Reid and Khoo Kay Kim, have themselves made long and substantial contributions to our understanding of the history of Southeast Asia. There are no dud essays in this collection: all are worth reading, though because of the diversity of periods, topics and areas it is a book that most readers will want to dip into from time to time rather than read from cover to cover at one sitting.

It is difficult to review such a diverse collection without referring to every article or doing a disservice to those ignored. The essays divide into two broad groups. First there are those that are reflections on big themes — historiographical in nature — which might well be used in undergraduate courses or as a stimulus to would-be postgraduate students. I mention here essays by Greg Bankoff ('Europe's Expanding Resource Frontier: Colonialism and Environment in Southeast Asia'), John Legge ('A New Imperialism in the Late 19th Century? Revisiting an Old Debate') and Leonard Andaya ('Writing a History of Brunei'). A collection honouring a distinguished colleague rightly concentrates on historiographical issues: the broad questioning of the field, new areas that might be opened up and new ways of thinking about old issues.

I particularly enjoyed Bankoff's essay because it opened up new issues and questions for Southeast Asian historians. Bankoff applies the concept of the resource frontier to understand the historical development of Southeast Asia since European colonization. Drawing on wide theoretical literature and writing on other times and other places, he argues that the shape of Southeast Asia — environmentally, socially and politically — was to a large extent determined by first European and then Japanese efforts to circumvent the closure of their own resource frontiers. The essay is by way of an initial foray into the subject, but one which promises to provide a rich reinterpretation of the broad framework of Southeast Asian history over the last 500 years. I look forward to major work emerging from this promising research.

Leonard Andaya's essay also opens up important issues of how to write the history of a small, ethnically diverse country like Brunei. He stresses that historians will have to rely on collecting oral sources as much if not more than on archival remains, in order to illuminate whole decades of that small country's history. He demonstrates clearly the underdevelopment of its history, yet the possibilities for the next generation of Brunei

historians to tap into new sources and create a rich tapestry. Finally, he speculates on possible, creative ways of approaching Brunei's past.

The second group of essays are more specialized in content. W. David McIntyre discusses the Commonwealth and Southeast Asia, which draws on extended work he has been publishing on the Commonwealth over the last decade. Brook Barrington's article on British regional policy in Southeast Asia, 1944–1954, is very much in the area of Tarling's recent work, which is appropriate in a book honouring him. The chapter by Ian Nish, 'Overseas Japanese, Overseas Chinese and British Justice, 1931', is highly focused but casts light on broader issues. Anthony Reid on W.H. Reid and Khoo Kay Kim on Sir John Anderson both approach their subjects from new angles, thereby adding to the fabric of our understanding of prominent colonial figures.

The book is well produced by the Monash Asia Institute, further adding to its claims as a major producer of research monographs on Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular. Despite not really holding together as a book, there is something in it for all specialists who seek to better understand empires and imperialism in Southeast Asia.

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