

THE
BURNEY PAPERS

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I-V

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 1825, the Governor-General of British India, Lord Amherst, decided upon the appointment of Captain Henry Burney to lead an official mission to the Government of Siam at Bangkok. This step, taken at a time of rapid change in the international relations of South and South East Asia, was of enormous significance for the history of the region as a whole; but its importance is especially great in the history of the Kingdom of Thailand.

Many issues were of urgent and immediate concern to the English East India Company at the time of the Burney Mission. The Company was involved in a serious war with Burma, which at the time the mission was despatched was not going well. The Company was concerned for the provisioning of its troops, and anxious to have at least the assurance of Thai neutrality in the conflict, if not the active assistance of Thai forces. It was anxious to reassure Bangkok of its good intentions in a situation where it appeared that British troops would be stationed on the frontiers of the Thai empire for some time to come. To the south, on the Malay Peninsula, the major East India Company base was the settlement of Penang, the trade, food supply, and local security of which was threatened by an aggressive forward policy executed on behalf of the Thai court by the "Raja of Ligor"—the Thai governor of

Nakhon Si Thammarat, the chief Thai centre on the Peninsula—who in 1821 had evicted the ruler of Kedah from his state. The Sultan of Kedah invoked the treaties under which he had ceded Penang and Province Wellesley to the Company, to claim British protection and demand assistance in regaining his throne. Nearby, the Thai threat to other states neighbouring Penang, in particular Perak and Selangor, upset the stability and trade and threatened the security of the west coast of Malaya. Further south, the port of Singapore, established only in 1819, depended upon rapid trading growth in order to assure its viability as an entrepôt and way station on the route to China. British interests in the region, both political and economic, were complex; and insofar as the Company's objects were to be attained, they demanded of the Thai Government a major departure from its earlier policies of relative isolation or insulation from the West, and the reform of commercial practices which placed European traders at a disadvantage in relation to Asian traders. (1)

In his choice of an officer to head the mission to Thailand, Lord Amherst was perhaps more fortunate than he might have expected to be. Captain (later Major) Henry Burney (1792–1845) was born in India, the son of the headmaster of the Military Orphan School in Calcutta and related to the illustrious Burney family so prominent in the intellectual life of

1. The standard general accounts of the subject are Walter F. Vella, *Siam Under Rama III* (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1957), and L. A. Mills, *British Malaya, 1824–67* (Oxford University Press, 1966).

London. An Army officer, he appears to have served with the Company's forces in the Archipelago during the period of the Napoleonic Wars. Thereafter he was posted to Penang, where he studied the Malay and Thai languages and became, with James Low, one of the post's experts in Thai affairs, dealing with the Bangkok Court's officers in the peninsular provinces.(2) Burney was a superlative linguist and a serious student of the Asian societies with which he came into contact; and his skills and sympathies made him an extremely effective negotiator. It was he who concluded the first treaties with the Thai in the peninsular states in 1825, and it was these diplomatic moves at a local level which the Governor-General followed up with the official mission to the Thai capital at the end of the same year.

The organization of *The Burney Papers* reflects both the circumstances of their compilation and the enormous complexity of interests and issues in the period 1822-1844. The Vajirañāna National Library of Bangkok undertook early in this century a programme of publishing important records and documents of Thai history which began with the reprinting of James Low's translation of *The Keddah Annals*. (3) *The Burney Papers* was the second of these publications, and seems to have begun with the intention of publishing simply Burney's journal

2. D. G. E. Hall, "Burney's Comments on the Court of Ava," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XX (1957), 305-6, and "Henry Burney, Diplomat and Orientalist," *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, XLI (Dec. 1958), 100-110.

3. (Bangkok: Vajirañāna National Library, 1908).