

# The Unofficial Mission of John Morgan, merchant, to Siam in 1821.

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The foreign relations between Great Britain and Siam up to the time of King Mongkut were carried on through the East India Company, which had extended its influence over a part of the Malay Peninsula.

After the destruction of Ayuthia and after the King Khun Luang Tak, who had established the Capital of Siam in Thanaburi, had been deposed by Chao Phya Maha Suk Songram, who afterwards ascended the throne as Phra Buddha Yot Fah, it was the chief concern of the Kings to consolidate the empire. The outlying provinces and dependencies were not directly governed from Bangkok, and as far as the dependencies of the Malay Peninsula were concerned, their supervision was entrusted to the chiefs of Ligore and Singora, acting under the Kralahom, whilst the administration of the northern provinces was entrusted to the Mahat Thai Department, and the seaboard provinces near the capital were administered through the Foreign Office. After the Burmese war, the outlying provinces had all, more or less, tried to become independent of the central power, and had arrogated to themselves the power of making treaties. These dependencies enjoyed from olden times home-rule, and they were only bound to acknowledge the sovereign power by sending to it tokens of respect and by assisting the central Government in all warlike operations. But what foreign relations existed were of course controlled from the capital. Subsidies were at that time specially expected in the numerous raids and wars against the Burmese, for after the destruction of Ayuthia in 1767 no formal peace had been signed and a latent state of war always existed.

The East India Company had always desired to get a foothold on the Malay Peninsula and thus to forestall the extension of Dutch power, and only in 1824 a treaty was made between Holland and

Great Britain clearly defining their spheres of influence in the Malay Archipelago. The opportunity to extend the influence of Great Britain was therefore considered propitious when, in 1782, the Rajah of Kedah offered to the East India Company a strip of land for an annual payment in the hope that the company would assist him in his quarrels with his superior the King of Siam. When Captain Light on behalf of the East India Company, in 1786, made a treaty with the Rajah of Kedah, the information was withheld that Kedah owed allegiance to Siam and the consequence was that the construction put on the meaning of the clauses of the treaty laid the foundation of all future disagreements with the sovereign power, who however never seems to have seriously contested the validity of the territorial cession. All subsequent treaties, such as that of May 1791 regarding the mutual surrender of fugitive slaves, and for the supply of provisions, and the treaty of 1796 made by Sir George Leith which stipulated for the further cession of a piece of territory (Province Wellesley), were construed in different ways by the Rajah of Kedah and the East India Company. The policy of the Company was not to interfere with the internal affairs of the different chieftains of the Malay Peninsula, whilst they construed any cession made as a promise to render actual assistance. Kedah had certainly by her behaviour lost the good will of the Sovereign power and when Kedah applied to Penang for interference in its favour with Siam, the question was referred to the Central Government. This last returned the same answer which was afterwards incorporated in the instructions given to Crawford on his official Embassy to Siam, and the record is therefore worth quoting :

“In the year 1813-1814 an application was received by the Government of Prince of Wales’s Island from the King of Queda, for the friendly interference of the British Government in his favour with his superior, the King of Siam. On that occasion, the Government of Prince of Wales Island referred the question to the consideration of the Supreme Government, when it was determined that, whatever might be the claim which the King of Queda might be thought to possess to the attention and regard of the British Government, our mediation for the adjustment of the differences subsisting between Siam and that country might lead us into an embarrassing participation in the interests and concerns of one or both States ; and the Government of Penang was accordingly instructed to limit its proceedings to opening a communication with the King of Siam, and address-

ing a letter to him, framed in conformity with the views and principles which were distinctly laid down for its guidance."

The East India Company was always guided by these principles and, whilst certainly amongst the merchants established in Penang there was a desire to extend the British influence over the whole of Kedah, the Penang Government kept a cool head and, whenever appealed to by Kedah for advice and help, gave the plain advice not to enter into political intrigues with Burmah, which had unofficially approached Kedah to render assistance in the intended invasion of Siam. Kedah seemed inclined to follow the advice tendered, but it showed otherwise a pronounced passive resistance to orders which were transmitted by the Bangkok Government, so that finally the Central Government deputed the Rajah of Ligore to suspend the Rajah of Kedah until he offered apologies and submitted to Bangkok. The "Ligorian" sent word to the British authorities of all he was doing and he advised the Rajah to submit to what appeared the lawful command of the Central Government. This the latter would not do and took refuge in Penang.

Necessarily all these transactions interested the Indian Government, and it was decided to send an official Mission to Siam with the view of establishing the relations on a sound basis, of arranging the Kedah affair and also of seeing what might be done with regard to the development of trade, especially as Portugal, the United States and Holland were eager to extend their trade to Siam. For this purpose Crawford was selected by the Calcutta Government, and he has written a long and faithful account of his mission to Siam and Cochin China. In the meanwhile also the newly established Colony of Singapore had thought it expedient to enter into direct commercial relations with Siam and to acquire an unbiased knowledge of things there. So they tried the experiment of entrusting with this mission a merchant who, they thought, would combine it with his commercial venture untrammelled by political etiquette. The person so selected was one Mr. Morgan, of Singapore, who was recommended for that position by one Mr. Palmer, of Calcutta, who was financially interested in the venture. Mr. Morgan received very full instructions and was to deliver a letter addressed to the King of Siam by the resident councillor of Singapore, Colonel Farquhar, and he was guaranteed against all possible losses in his venture. In his instructions it was made quite clear that he

was only to speak in his own name and not commit the Government by any act. Mr. Morgan purchased and loaded a small boat "Non me recordo" of 70 tons burden, in Singapore, and left for Siam on the 25th of April 1821, arriving there on May 15th. On his arrival he had an interview with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who in the evening conducted him to an audience with Krom Mün Chesda, the later King Phra Nang Klao. At that time Siam was making preparations for a war with Burmah and it is known that during a number of years Siamese troops had been sent to the frontiers "to catch Burmese." In fact it was only at the death of the King Phra Buddha Löt La that the troops were recalled. Siam thought it expedient, whenever opportunity offered, to ascertain what position the British Government would assume and whether it would remain neutral, and they were consequently glad of the mission. Morgan, to whom these questions were put, answered them diplomatically without committing himself, under the plea that he was a merchant and did not know anything about the matter, and to the question whether Great Britain would assist Burmah in case of war and to the subsequent remark that it would be better for Great Britain not to do so also kept diplomatic silence. Evidently, however, Krom Mün Chesda was satisfied with the answer received, and on the 5th of June early in the morning a boat was sent by the Foreign Minister for Mr. Morgan to conduct him to an audience with the King. The presents which were sent by Colonel Farquhar were displayed before the throne as well as those which Morgan himself had brought, and a letter addressed to the King was read aloud.\* Morgan conformed to the usual ceremonies and the King addressed to him the customary enquiry about the health of the resident and also enquired about the abandonment of Malacca, about the newly established settlement of Singapore, and why he had not brought muskets which he knew were wanted. After these questions permission was granted to Morgan to carry on trade without let or hindrance, which he did, believing that after the permission made to him his venture would prove very successful. He was, however, disappointed and he ascribed his non-success partly to the interference of the Chulias and native Portuguese, in whose hands the trade was and who necessarily looked upon him as an interloper, and it may be here mentioned, that Crawford, Burney and Malloch held the

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\* See appendix.

same opinion about them. On the other hand it must not be forgotten that Morgan imported opium, which was absolutely forbidden to be imported, and clandestinely disposed of it, a fact which was certainly known to the authorities. The only excuse that Morgan could make was that in this trade a beautiful profit was made, and that all high officials and Chinese were interested in it. He admits on the other hand, as a further excuse, that the only persons using opium were the Chinese. Morgan in all his trading transactions did not forget the semi-official mission with which he was entrusted, and he came to the conclusion "that any treaty that could be made could not protect merchants from the frauds practised on them without some person being on the spot to represent them." In a subsequent audience Morgan had with Krom Mūn Chesda, the question of British trade was raised and he was asked whether the British wanted a factory in Siam. In accordance with his instructions he replied he would report about it. It is curious to notice that in the instructions Crawford received and in the letter which he was to deliver to the King, it was especially mentioned that the Government did not desire to establish a factory or a Consulate in Bangkok, and Burney we know likewise repudiated the idea and even went so far as to say that the establishment of a Consulate or factory in Siam would lead to complications. Be that as it may, certainly the establishment of a factory would not have been viewed with favourable eyes by the Portuguese, the relations between whom and Siam were renewed in 1817, when the Governor of Macao had a letter forwarded to the King in which he requested for the establishment of the former intercourse.

The first attempt of the Portuguese was singularly unhappy inasmuch as the person who was to deliver the letter became so excited by the behaviour of the people that he left Siam without waiting for a reply. The letter was, however, afterwards answered and the Consul Silveira took charge of the factory. He received on his mission a stipend of 160 Ticals a month from the Siamese Government and was solely employed in building a ship for a merchant in Macao for which the Siamese Government had also promised him money. He got actually for some time 2,000 Ticals monthly, a sum which was afterwards reduced to 800 Tcs. and finally given up, when Morgan advanced him to 5,000 Dollars for this purpose, a transaction which

when it became known was not conducive to the good name of the Portuguese. The treaty made by the Portuguese was never ratified although sent to Gov for that purpose, as clauses had been inserted to which the Portuguese Government objected ; but it must not be forgotten that according to old rules both Governments accepted silently such clauses as were agreed upon, and it must be therefore surmised that the clauses of the treaty which were agreed upon were considered binding upon both parties. The Consul received from the Government in accordance with old practice a title Hluang Abhai Banit ( the merchant by grace), which recognized him as in charge of Portuguese interests, and gave him to a certain extent charge of the foreign trade. This accounts for the intercourse he held with Morgan and for the fact that the Consul duly reported to Goa everything that Morgan was doing.

The trade between Siam and the outside world was mainly in the hands of Chinese and Malays ; as the duties they had to pay on trade were very small, trade was flourishing, and Morgan when he arrived in Bangkok counted 700 junks of all descriptions loading in the river. Trade intercourse with the United States had commenced in 1818 and when Morgan arrived, two American boats loading sugar were in the river, whilst the " Persian," also an American boat, was on her third voyage. She had brought 5,000 muskets for which a ready sale to Government was found and as the Americans had an easy way of giving and taking, the relations between the United States and Siam were very intimate. This was felt to be the more so as it was said that the President of the United States had addressed a letter to the King of Siam by the captain of the first American boat arriving in the country, in which he recommended him to the graces of the King, to whom he brought as a present 300 muskets. Certainly the Americans met with an excellent reception in Siam, especially as they brought firearms which were needed. Moreover it is said that they distinguished themselves by fairness in all their dealings and were consequently well received by the authorities, and all their commercial transactions were quickly concluded. Thus up to August 1821 twelve cargoes had been carried from Siam by American vessels, and it was said that an American factory would soon be established in Bangkok as the profits made in all transactions were good. Intercourse with the Java Government was also renewed at the time and

the Dutch commissioners under Colonel Schreyenstein were well received, but perhaps through misrepresentations no real trade relations were established, and, when the Dutch left, people spoke of warlike demonstrations on the part of Java, owing to alleged kidnapping of Javanese subjects. Nothing however came of it, although Burney in his papers alluded to the misunderstanding arising out of it.

Morgan concluded his affairs and presented a bill of his losses amounting to \$5,200.08 to the Penang Government, and after some correspondence and reports to Calcutta a sum of \$3,612.30 was paid to his firm and \$1,200 for personal expenses. When Morgan left, he received as presents from the King for the Singapore Government 9 pieces of ivory and 53 piculs of sugar. The reports made by Morgan were handed over to Crawford, but the Government did not alter the instructions regarding the establishment of a factory. It is very likely that the meaning Morgan attached to the word "factory" implied something very different from what the Government understood by it. When Morgan arrived in Siam this was a country in which the Government as such engaged in trade. Crawford's mission afterwards can in no way be considered a success, as the time chosen for it was not very opportune and no definite treaty could be signed. When Burney arrived in 1825 the King Phra Nang Klao had ascended the throne and had declared in a proclamation that the Government as such would no longer trade, and had abolished many monopolies. From being purely commercial, the interests of Siam had then become also political.

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## APPENDIX.

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To the KING OF SIAM.

After Compliments.

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I beg to acquaint Your Majesty that about two years back the English formed a Settlement in the Straits of Singapore, from which period till the present, no vessel actually belonging to the port has cleared out for Siam, but as there is now a small schooner, the property of English merchants here, about to proceed thither, I cannot permit so favourable an opportunity to pass without addressing Your Majesty the present letter, for the purpose of informing Your Majesty of the new Establishment the British Government has formed here, trusting that it may be the means of strengthening the ties of friendship and reciprocity of kindness between Siam and Singapore in all commercial affairs. Every description of Siamese goods find a ready sale here, particularly such as are at present imported by the Chinese junks sailing out of Your Majesty's ports, and numerous articles in demand at Siam are procurable here.

I send this letter by Mr. John Morgan, a respectable English merchant residing here, whom I beg leave to recommend to your Majesty's favour and protection. Mr. Morgan will be able to afford such further information respecting this settlement as Your Majesty may require.

I regret that I have nothing of suitable value to send your Majesty but as a token of friendship and respect beg Your Majesty's acceptance of a Double Barrel Gun and two mirrors.

( Signed ) W. FARQUHAR.

Singapore  
9th April, 1821.

### LITERATURE :

COPY of "Factory Records, Straits Settlements vol. 84"  
with reference to Siam. (preserved in the National Library).