

***Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer.* By Alexander Laban Hinton. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. Softcover: 350pp.**

Alexander Laban Hinton's *Man or Monster: The Trials of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* revolves around Kaing Guek Eav (aka Duch), the commandant of Democratic Kampuchea's S-21 torture and confession-generating centre, and perhaps the most written about figure of the Pol Pot regime, apart from Pol Pot himself. This is well-trod territory, and, apart from mostly informal interviews Hinton recorded with witnesses and participants in Duch's trial, much of the source material is in the public domain (Hinton's long relationship with the Documentation Center of Cambodia provides him with access to the Center's materials and photographs, which adds substantially to the book's overall impact).

So what is new here? The answer is the organization and presentation of the material. Hinton's narrative abilities breathe new life into a familiar subject. For first-time readers of the violence and death perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, this is a useful resource for delving into Duch's role in the torture and killing symbolic of the regime, as well as a handy record of Duch's trial proceedings. But for veteran Cambodia watchers, Hinton's approach has to pass a higher bar. Does it?

Individual scholars' mileage may vary, but despite some quibbles here and there, I found much of the book difficult to put down.

It is a strange beast, not quite fish and not quite fowl, but rather something that Hinton himself calls an "ethnodrama" which "draws on literary techniques, including poetry, to evoke and convey ambiguity, uncertainty, disruption, contradiction, and the redactic ... [placing] myself directly in the narrative" (p. 36). Things get interesting quickly. The book opens with an *abecedarian* centring on Duch (pp. 41–43), an *erasure* (poetry based on deliberately redacting text) (p. 168) and a *collage* (pp. 171–75). The abecedarian is surprisingly effective, as are the other devices, but they form a relatively small part of the book, much of it organized into a dozen chapters of normal prose.

These other chapters take the form, alternatively, of courtroom reportage, personal musings and self-reflection and attempts to shed some new light on Duch himself. Hinton has a fluid and refreshingly accessible and engaging writing style. He frames his protagonist's life story around how Duch himself has been presented, at his

trial under the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), in the Tuol Sleng Museum, in existing biographies and other venues, and the like. Although, as noted, Hinton calls the approach “ethnodramatic”, much of it might be better described as deep, descriptive journalism, allowing the reader to imagine sitting next to one of the today’s top Khmer Rouge scholars in the visitor’s galley at the ECCC while the Duch trial was in session.

*Man or Monster* follows the trial proceedings, drawing from the witness statements, the prosecuting and defence attorneys, judges and key witnesses. Hinton spends some time discussing Francois Bizot — the French anthropologist incarcerated by Duch for several months in 1971 and the only foreigner ever imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge to survive — as a witness and as a chronicler of his personal experiences with Duch, although he misses a key opportunity to discuss what for many is the key insight of Bizot: that Duch had enough freedom to argue in favour of Bizot’s innocence to the even then ruthless Khmer Rouge military commander Ta Mok (even convincing Mok to part with the wristwatch he expropriated from Bizot). If Duch had the requisite agency to spare Bizot in 1971, what had changed in the security apparatus and within Duch himself by 1975, when such an action had become unthinkable? Tracing this particular inner journey within Duch would have been a key part of understanding the man.

Other sections of the book are devoted to the physical layout, organization and workings of S-21 itself, which are disturbing, vivid and unsparing in describing the horrors therein. Much of this is brought to a human level of suffering through the author’s regular interactions with some of the handful of S-21 survivors, particularly Bou Meng.

Still other parts of the book focus on procedures and on the various controversies they encompass, such as the rights and roles of civil parties, the decision to cast a net beyond the five defendants of cases 001 (Duch) and 002 (Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith, and Khieu Samphan). These can get a little tedious, no doubt reflecting the even greater (and genuine) tedium of following the trial day in and day out; perhaps this part could have benefitted from more ethnodramatic flourishes.

Although I would hesitate to call this a traditional scholarly work, as there is no demonstrable substantive new data, it might well be considered a “scholarly memoir”, informed by Hinton’s previous work on the motivations towards violence by “ordinary” Khmer Rouge cadres. Although parts of it might strike some as self-indulgent

(e.g. on p. 255, “I notice a figure in the fourth row of the gallery ... The figure watches Duch’s greeting and then writes something in a notebook. It’s me.”), it is genuinely personal — “this book is my articulation of Duch” (p. 9). Above all, Hinton’s “scholarly memoir” is a commendably brave work, one that should be appreciated and, above all, read by many.

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