

## Book Reviews

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***The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future.* By Milton Osborne.**  
Brisbane: Allen & Unwin, 2000. 295pp.

The outside world knows little about the Mekong region, in spite of its topographical significance and large influence on the lives of those who live around it. Ambitiously covering almost twenty centuries of history along the Mekong River and in its basin countries, this book is a comprehensive compilation of no less than forty years of scholarly research, professional contacts, and personal experience. With “a deep abiding fascination” (p. 11) for the Mekong, this book presents in lively prose a combination of a history and travel journal, graced by lyrical and compassionate personal insights. It may be that such a conjunction of analytical and personal accounts most naturally convey what is gained through long and dedicated work, as was the case with *Tristes Tropiques*, which Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote as a scholarly and emotional manifestation of his long involvement in ethnography. In offering a more straightforward and vigorous search for the past — and the future as well — Osborne brings to bear his accumulated knowledge of the literature on the region, even though limited to English and French sources. The book is full of local accounts collected throughout his travels up and down the Mekong, capturing the sights, sounds, and smells of this little known but abundant river and the often tragic history of the region.

The author traces the major eras across the long history of the Mekong region: early settlements in the Mekong Delta and the much contested territory of Funan; the rise and fall of the Khmer empire; early European arrivals to the Mekong, mainly the Portuguese and the Spanish; the French imperial incursion and colonial rule; the wars and

tragedies of Indochina; and the post-war experience with its grievous environmental, political, and social concerns.

This history of the Mekong reflects, for the most part, Western knowledge of and interaction with the region. As a historian of nineteenth century Cambodia, the author naturally writes more exhaustively on this period. The readability of the book modestly conceals the richness of Osborne's command of the literature and the rigour of the archival work behind it, especially in the chapters on the nineteenth century French expansion and rule. Through lively descriptions of historical events, however, the reader is able to appreciate the many internal contradictions and misadventures of the French occupation in Indochina, as well as the individual personalities and human faces of the early imperial explorers. The author acknowledges the forgotten heroic endeavours of the French explorers without either endorsing their colonial enthusiasm or sympathizing with their nationalism.

In covering the period of the Indochinese wars and post-war upheavals to the present, the author relies more heavily on oral history and less so on archival sources, although the history is always supported by available primary and secondary sources. The period between the first and second Indochinese wars saw many dam projects planned by regional and international agencies, opening up a new type of human involvement in the Mekong and its tributaries. For example, the Mekong Committee, established in 1957 as a child of the Cold War, planned to develop the first comprehensive scheme for the economic exploitation of the river outside China, a non-member state of the Mekong Committee (p. 190). As the Indochinese war grew in intensity, however, these plans to transform the river did not materialize. The lower and middle Mekong was sealed off completely in 1975, when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge and Vientiane to the Pathet Lao. The new communist governments of Vietnam and Laos carried out harsh re-education campaigns. To the author's frustration, it may never be possible to understand why or how such an unimaginable atrocity could have occurred in Cambodia. At the very least, he pursues uncovering as much truth as possible. For example, the Khmer Rouge's four-year reign of terror, often believed to be targeted at the bourgeoisie, actually victimized people of all classes (p. 212).

As settlement of the Cambodian problems came into view, the basin countries turned their full attention to the Mekong as an economic resource. An increasing number of dam projects from the 1980s to the present have exploited the Mekong harshly, causing environmental damage and provoking controversy among the governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations. A

“surge in bridge building” (p. 249) after the mid-1990s, continuing illegal logging in the riparian countries, and increasing pollution together add more complexity and problems to the Mekong region. Osborne’s closing impression of the present-day Mekong Basin region, fraught with political turbulence and uncertain choices, derives mainly from acknowledging the many conflicting opinions on how to develop the region. Osborne touches not only on the environmental concerns, but also on the fundamental social and political problems, drawing attention to “the capacity of the governments linked to the Mekong to act as wise custodians of the river in the future” (p. 254). Eventually, towards the end of the book, he draws an important distinction between the interests of the riparian states themselves and of their peoples.

In the interest of protecting the river and of better understanding the history of its areas, the book explores the implications of perceiving the Mekong Basin as a region, not in the economic utilitarian sense as embodied in the Mekong Committee or the later Mekong River Commission, but in the sense of a historically connected area facing a common adverse legacy of the past and uncertainty of the future. Acknowledging that there were periods during which sub-areas followed very divergent paths, as exemplified by French Indochina and the period under China (p. 172), the author characterizes the Mekong Basin as a generally perceivable common region.

Differing, then, from an approach that looks at mainland Southeast Asia as a single unit, Osborne’s Mekong region approach, with the crucial inclusion of China, reveals a striking trajectory in the Mekong’s roles as perceived and anticipated throughout its history. France, for example, hoped to make it a river highway to Yunnan. In the context of Cold War politics, the United States saw that this river could be developed through large-scale engineering projects to counteract the spread of communism. For very different reasons, and with different political motives from those of the United States, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) had similarly envisioned the construction of large dams as being economically and developmentally resourceful for the region. The post-war Mekong region took up these developmental strategies of water resource exploitation either at the national level, as in China, or at the regional and international organizational level, as, for example, with the Mekong River Commission and the World Bank. One might feel less persuaded by the Mekong region approach in grasping the eruptive events of the post-revolutionary period and to some extent those of the wars as they had little to do with the Mekong River *per se*. Nevertheless, the author’s poignant message conveys the urgency and the perplexing nature of problems that the river and these war-torn peoples and societies are facing.

With the enormous task of covering such a vast geographical area with such a long history, this book is unavoidably schematic, especially in its coverage of the post-colonial period to the present, which suffers by comparison with the rich description of the colonial period. One finds some details questionable, such as calling ECAFE a United Nations specialized agency when it is, in fact, a regional headquarters; the use of the politically nuanced term “Lao” in the present period, which was originally an ethnic name that was extended and adopted as a post-revolutionary term indicating national, political, and social organizations; and referring to Vientiane as the Vietnamese capital instead of the Laotian capital.

Nevertheless, this book should prove beneficial to students of Southeast Asian history and political science, environmentalists, travellers in the region, and anyone who has read too many dry descriptions of political history. This is history with a human voice.

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***Political Transition in Cambodia, 1991–99: Power, Elitism and Democracy.* By David W. Roberts.** Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001. 259pp.

*Political Transition in Cambodia* provides a useful and detailed account of developments within the political parties in Cambodia, and their relationship with internationally imposed agendas. In consequence, it will doubtless become a standard reference for researchers and students alike. Roberts’ book addresses two major themes: firstly, it critiques a Western approach to Cambodia variously equated with the “Liberal Project”, the “Standard Total View”, and the “institutional memory” of the United Nations; and secondly, it examines the ways in which Western goals in Cambodia have foundered upon the “rocks of Khmer culture”.

With regard to the first theme, Roberts challenges what he sees as a prevailing body of international opinion that is overly sympathetic to the parties that emerged in the 1990s from the resistance armies of the 1980s civil war — namely, the Front Uni Nationale pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutrale, Pacifique et Cooperatif (FUNCINPEC) and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). In calling this body of opinion “the Standard Total View”, Roberts suggests the emergence of a hegemonic discourse,