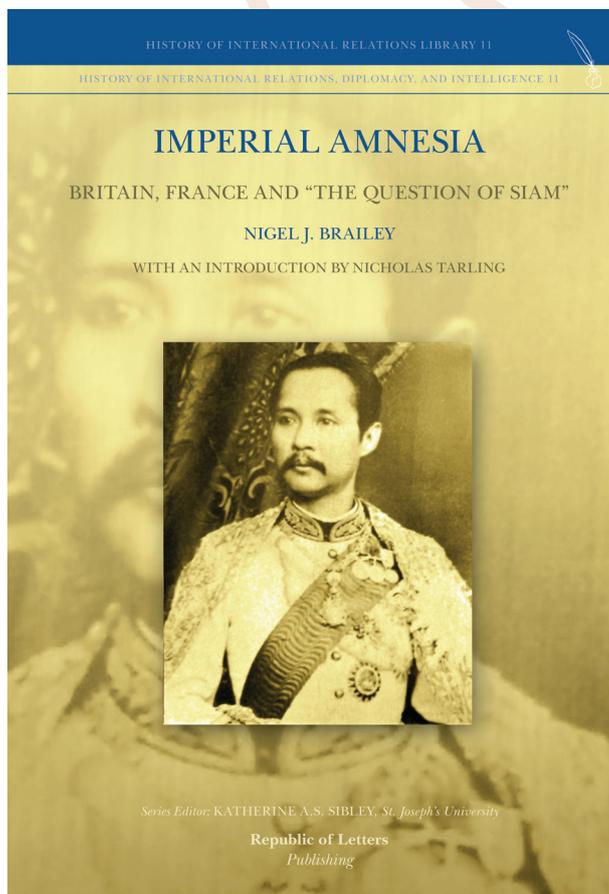


Imperial Amnesia

Britain, France and "the Question of Siam"

By Nigel J. Brailey



Nigel Brailey was born on 11 November 1942, and spent his entire academic career in two institutions. One was the School of Asian Studies of the University of London, where he took first his BA and then his Ph.D. The other was the history department at Bristol University, where he lectured from 1 September 1969 (being appointed a few months after securing his doctorate) until 31 July 2005. Even on retirement he retained the status of an honorary research fellow, which embodied a continued scholarly productivity cut tragically short by his death from cancer in 2008.

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One theme of this book is the preservation of the independence of Thailand during the age of imperialism. It suggests that the crucial years were 1902-05. It also argues that, among others, the Thais themselves, King, Princes, bureaucrats, played a crucial role, alongside their Western advisers and some of the European diplomats. It is a unique story, since all Thailand's neighbours lost their independence. It is also a story that reminds us of the role personalities play in history.

The book has a second theme. Placing the decisive shift in the early years of the new century, the author argues its importance, not only for the maintenance of the independence of Siam, but for the development of the relationships among the great powers that helped to bring about the War of 1914. The case he brings is a contestable one, but its controversial argument, drawing on some unusual sources, will be essential reading for all those, historians and others. Interested in the origins of that conflict.

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So, whilst Siam kicked against British superiority, she was also encouraged by greater British presence in the zone and the recent humiliation of China by Britain and France in the First Opium War, thus underpinning Siam position of pre-eminence within the territories of her sphere. If Siam could prevent Britain from annexing her, in theory the former could gain: a) financially, by the granting of concessions (mineral and precious stone mines, railways and canals) to adventurers from the British Empire, and b) territorially, Britain's tutelage making it possible for Siam to extend her inf The British empireImperial amnesia. Print edition | Britain. Mar 26th 1998 |.Â The most striking recent example of this imperial amnesia came from Clare Short, the minister for international development. Rejecting a request from Zimbabwe for additional aid, to buy back land occupied by settlers during the colonial era, she wrote to her Zimbabwean counterpart last Decemberâ€”â€œWe are a new government from diverse backgrounds, without links to former colonial interests.Â A recent survey of children in England and France found that whereas French children had clear ideas about why they were proud to be Frenchâ€”the traditions of liberty and equality were frequently citedâ€”the English were less patriotic, and had hazier notions of national pride.