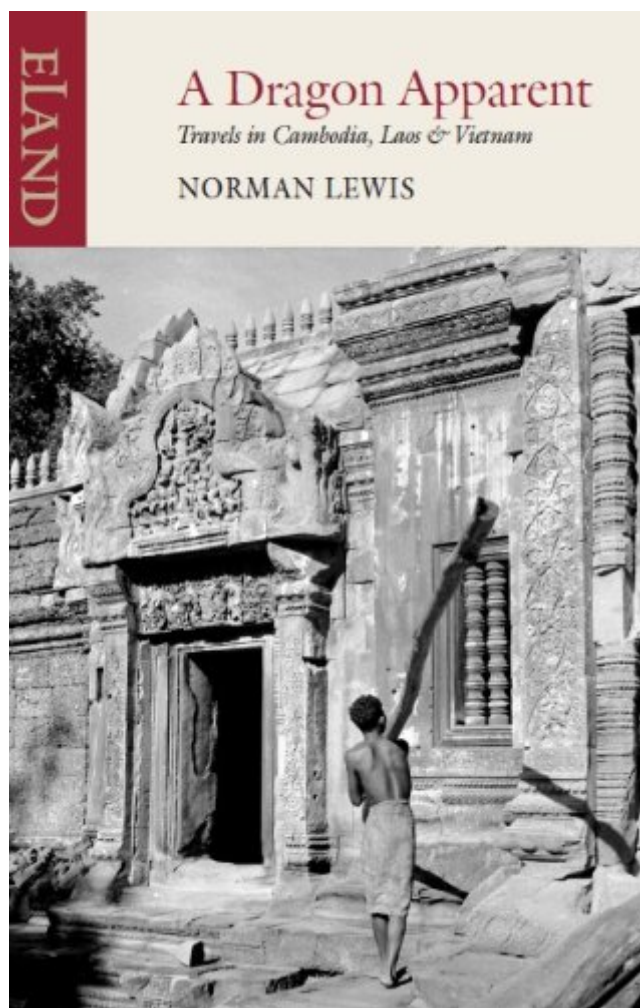


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Dragon Apparent: Travels In Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam



Synopsis

Travelling through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the twilight of the French colonial regime, Norman Lewis witnesses these ancient civilisations as they were before the terrible devastation of the Vietnam War. He creates a portrait of traditional societies struggling to retain their integrity in the embrace of the West. He meets emperors and slaves, brutal plantation owners and sympathetic French officers trapped by the economic imperatives of the colonial experiment. From tribal animists to Viet-Minh guerillas, he witnesses this heart-breaking struggle over and over, leaving a vital portrait of a society on the brink of catastrophic change.

Book Information

File Size: 1266 KB

Print Length: 334 pages

Publisher: Eland Publishing (December 16, 2011)

Publication Date: December 16, 2011

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B007C6CL84

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #991,131 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #47

inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Travel > Asia > Vietnam #64 inÂ Books > Travel > Asia > Laos #140 inÂ Books > Travel > Asia > Cambodia

Customer Reviews

I found this book both informative and entertaining. It raised questions in my mind about those countries in the period between WWII and the Viet Nam war which I intend to research.

All good.

An excellent description of Indochina just after the Second World War. A background to what

happened subsequently.

If I judged this book only on the writing, storytelling and descriptions, I'd give it 4 stars. But Lewis cared so little about the people of these countries, it frequently irritated me. Written in 1951 by a well-traveled Englishman, this account of his travels documents a surface or superficial view of the lands then still controlled by the French and seen as their colony. I was mightily disappointed that pretty much the only people he speaks with are the French government or military officials stationed in these countries. I was somewhat awed at how he just gets invited to ride in their convoys and sleep in their villas. It was an occupied country, and he was treated sort of like a war correspondent, but he wasn't that, and the war had not yet begun. Sometimes I was annoyed, or even saddened, by his stereotypes, his blithe generalizations about an entire nationality's traits or abilities. This is not the first travel memoir I've read by a British male in a developing country, but it made me feel more conflicted than most. For example, he very bluntly describes (with clear disapproval) how all the labor on the profit-making French plantations is conscripted indigenous people from the mountain villages, and he acutely documents how even a sympathetic governor is (in a sense) left with no choice but to turn a blind eye to slavery. But then, when he goes to Cambodia, he deems all its people lazy and even blames that on the practice of Buddhism, about which he clearly knows almost nothing. He gives a muddled account of the history of the Khmers and their civilization as he describes the best-known temples at Angkor, but he seems to have no feeling towards anything he sees there (except that he finds the large faces of the Bayon temple "sinister"). He neither meets nor talks with any Cambodian people and apparently made no effort to do so. Similarly, when he gets to Luang Prabang he seems to be merely bored by the town, mentioning that there is a temple on practically every block, but making no effort to learn any stories associated with them. He climbs Phousi Hill, disparages the little temple he finds there, and promptly makes arrangements to get back to Saigon. Even when he gets to hang out with Viet Minh for several days (in the final chapter), with no other Europeans present, he learns nothing about them as people. He describes only their physical features and their actions. He has no conversations about their views of past, present, future, or their motivations. I enjoyed Lewis's writing style and the sense of going along with him, seeing through his eyes (much like reading a Paul Theroux book), but by the end I was happy to quit his condescending attitudes. I've spent time in all these countries (since 2008 - not the same time frame as Lewis), and read their histories as well. It's very sad to think that for some readers, this book will be their introduction to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

First, the negative. Norman Lewis is a travel writer; he is not a researcher or a historian. He sometimes relies on what other people tell him for background information, and as a result his chapters are of varying degrees of trustworthiness: the worst point, probably, is his account of the Hmong (whom he, following the traditional nomenclature, calls the Meo) is probably the worst for misinformation. On the other hand, when he has access to first-class information--say, having learned about the Moi from a major anthropologist--his account is riveting. The truth about this book is almost precisely the opposite of what another reviewer has said. On the surface it is a mere travelogue, occasionally exciting, usually interesting, sometimes dull. Only towards the middle does one realise that one is in the company of a man of wit, imagination, insight, philosophy, humanity, and a keen passion to get to the heart of things coupled with an uncanny capacity to succeed in doing so. A visit to Ankor Wat produces a meditation on history and the nature of politics which could stand proudly on a shelf with Ruskin. His visits to primitive tribes are as revealing as those of Levi-Strauss and more readable. In a few deft incisive sentences he can lay bare the technique of the skilled propagandist or reveal the true motives behind an economic arrangement. He spends much time with humane French officials whose interest in and work on behalf of the local population--these are men who devoted their time to eradicating malaria, committing oral traditions to print, and growing vegetable gardens to improve the health of the malnourished--almost convince us that the French presence was indeed a good thing: and then we learn that half the local people on whose behalf these men did these things were taken and used as slaves on French plantations. His brief and courageous sojourn in Viet Minh-controlled territory says more about the virtues and shortcomings of the socialist imagination than Justin Wintle's entire book about Communist Vietnam would do exactly fifty years later. What starts out as mere travelogue turns into a nuanced and profound statement about the modern condition; about the tragic impossibility of any attempt to defend nature and traditional arts from the encroachments of cheap modern commercial culture. But any attempt on my part to summarise Mr. Lewis' vision will result in reducing it to a cliché. Like all individual and sensitive writing, this has to be read for itself, in its entirety. And to do so is a pleasure given Mr. Lewis' command of English prose; one puts this book down, turns with reluctance to more current writing, and says with a sigh: "they still knew how to write then!" I recommend this book, certainly to anyone who enjoys travel writing or anyone interested in anthropology or in the recent history of South-East Asia, but to also to anyone who enjoys seeing cultures and human lives described with warmth and wit.

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