IN THE SHADOW OF ANGKOR
Unknown Temples of Ancient Cambodia

GEORGE GROSPLIER
IN THE SHADOW OF ANGKOR

Unknown Temples of Ancient Cambodia

Notes and Impressions by

George GROSLIER

Project Manager for the Mission to Cambodia for
The Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts
1913–1914

Foreword by Milton OSBORNE

Edited by Kent DAVIS

Translated by Pedro RODRÍGUEZ

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About the cover:
George Groslier at the Bayon in Angkor Thom, Cambodia circa 1912.
Photo courtesy Nicole Groslier and her daughter Margaret Squires.

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À Monsieur Albert SARRAUT
Ancien Ministre de l’Instruction Publique,
Ancien Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine.
Très respectueusement,
G. G.

To Mr. Albert SARRAUT
Former Minister of Public Education,
Former Governor General of Indochina.
Most respectfully,
G. G.
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George Groslier
February 4, 1887 — June 18, 1945
For anyone with an interest in the great temples of the ancient Angkorian empire, whether as a tourist or scholar, the publication of George Groslier’s wonderful book, *A l’Ombre d’Angkor: Notes et impressions sur les Temples Inconnus de l’Ancien Cambodge*, is a cause for real celebration. Now made available in a sensitive English translation as, *In The Shadow of Angkor: Unknown Temples of Ancient Cambodia*, this bibliographically scarce book is a great deal more than an extended catalogue of what were once little-known, Cambodian temple ruins—temples such as Preah Vihear, Banteay Chhmar and Wat Phu, located far from the main Angkor complex sited close to the modern provincial town of Siem Reap. But while much of the interest in the book stems from the description Groslier provides of these temples as he saw them in 1913, when they were indeed virtually unknown to more than a few western scholars, there is much more to be found in this book of lyrical, and at times poetic, writing.

At its most fundamental, the book is an account of a young man’s journey through a Cambodian and Lao landscape into which the West had barely penetrated. We rest with him after he has climbed to the upper shrine at Wat Phu and share his exertions as he clambers to reach the summit where Preah Vihear looms above the northern Cambodian plain. The immediacy of his descriptions in this book do more than hint at his later ventures into the field of fiction, a field in which his sense of landscape is richly present. For those who know the areas through which Groslier travelled, what is striking is the extent to which much of what he describes
has remained unchanged to the present day. At the same time, and emphasising the author’s humane personality, the book, is also a sympathetic account of the peasant Cambodians and Lao whom he encountered in his travels. It is, as well, a penetrating reflection on ancient Cambodia’s art and architecture and on the Hindu and Buddhist religions that were the wellsprings of its beliefs.

As is already clear, George Groslier was a man of many talents, and one with a distinctive personal background. His contributions to our knowledge of Cambodian arts in their many forms remains important to the present day. It is fitting, therefore, that he is remembered today through his greatest monument, the remarkable Cambodian National Museum in Phnom Penh, of which he was both architect and for more than two decades its director after its inauguration in 1920. The first child born to French parents in Cambodia in 1887, Groslier had grown up in France with a deep awareness of the country in which he had been born. Apparently, this did not lead to his initially having any great interest in returning to what was then French Indochina, where his father had continued to serve as a colonial civil servant while George, his siblings, and his mother lived in France. His talent as an artist led to study at the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris and to short-listed participation in the Prix de Rome competition. But his failure to win the prize was the catalyst for his being selected to be sent on a mission to Cambodia by the Ministry of Public Education in 1910, an assignment that led to his first important publication, *Danseuses cambogiennes, anciennes et modernes* (*Cambodian Dancers: Ancient and Modern*), now happily available under Kent Davis’ editorship and which provides a detailed account of Grolier’s life. The book is illuminated by Groslier’s own illustrations.

By 1913, and as an approbation by the Ministry of Public Education for his earlier mission, Groslier returned to Cambodia to begin the travels that are the subject of this book. One hundred years after the book was written, it is difficult to imagine just what an undertaking travel in Cambodia away from the capital and a few provincial towns was like. Groslier’s account vividly conjures up the nature of this travel, by *pirogue* or oxcart, with the need at times to float the cart across swollen rivers or to endure slow, bumpy
progress over rutted tracks under a merciless sun. It is surely not too much to imagine Groslier reflecting on an earlier French traveller who encountered similar difficulties, Francis Garnier of the French Mekong Expedition in the 1860s when he made his epic overland journey from southern Laos to Siem Reap.

Groslier’s book is very much a document of its time so far as some of the detailed archeological information he offers is concerned. His dating of some temples, both large and small, has subsequently been revised, and his suggestion that the ancient Khmers lacked mathematical ability is certainly not accepted nowadays. Despite his genuine sympathy for the Cambodians and Lao he encounters it is evident that he is a man of his age in some of the judgments he makes of them. But none of these minor aspects of the book detract from its importance and its basic humane appeal. This fact makes Groslier’s death during the Second World War after torture by the Japanese then occupying Cambodia a tragic counterpoint to his richly productive life.

It was my privilege to know George Groslier’s son, Bernard-Philippe Groslier, the distinguished conservateur of the Angkor temples. To have the opportunity to write this brief introduction to his father’s book is a further privilege for which I am deeply grateful.

Milton Osborne

Milton Osborne is a Visiting Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, and a long-time observer and writer on Cambodian politics and history. His books include, River Road to China: The Search for the Source of the Mekong; Before Kampuchea: Preludes to Tragedy; Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness; and Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History.
The Mekong at Kampong Cham.
Friday, June 6, 1913

It is low water, the river’s time of great poetry, with the steep banks cut sheer in the fleshy red earth. All the trees there grow vigorously. There are teaks, with broad leaves of tender green; sugar palms and their fruit; bamboos like spurts of water, green and slender at bottom, tumbling up top with a delicate flourish; huge banyans sheltering pagodas; black mangos. There are bony-white cadavers of great trees, their twisted branches gesturing desperately at the passing waters. Since nothing in this country is completely dead or completely sad, even the skeletons sport plumes: luxuriant creepers.

Often a little island will emerge, like a great vessel in mid-celebration, entirely bedecked with verdure, and lying at anchor in the current. And always the mauve-flowered, floating weeds; the blue birds; cormorants black and motionless in the sunshine, wings spread; a pirogue sleeping under a tree and gradually filling with leaves; a naked child bathing; the scintillating leap of a fish; saffron bonze habits, tossed up on the bank to dry.

The sampans curve up at the ends. Standing on each end, held aloft, a paddler, and seated in the center, often, a woman, dazzling
in her scarf, and set there like a great flower. Sampans ride high, on the very surface of the water. They skim past like narrow black crescents, and the water repeats them upside down. There are thus two crescents: one gliding, one trembling.

The pirogue by itself, dug out of a single tree trunk, nearly exhausts the riches of the riverside dweller. He fishes from it, transports fruits and provisions in it, under the protective cover of leaves, and often lives in it. When tired he crouches aft and showers himself with the exquisite water. He sings refrains to aid in his rowing. In his pirogue he lies down to sleep and dreams, rocked by the river in the shadow of bamboo. In his pirogue he carries his wife, “set like a flower,” while his children play at handling the paddles.

Here a tree trunk, formerly rooted at the water’s edge and rocked only by the wind. Now both wind and water have at it, and the trunk pursues its double existence, still bound to the same old bank.

All of it stirs my emotions as I watch the native sampans pass. An intimate poetry in the rocking of a wake on the calm, wide waters of the river. The whole world beyond is grand and solemn: the burning sky, the distant, mysterious banks, the silence.

II

The banks fade off to the horizon, and rocks emerge here and there. The trees, battered yearly by waters rising to meet their first boughs, display white roots reaching into the current. A thick, enduring foam swirls. Everywhere reddish eddies trace out some treacherous spot, a peril, an abyss. The great white sky is implacable. The water makes a dulcet sound. Rapids ahead.

Perched on the gunwales, those skinny planks encircling the craft, the paddlers speed up their maneuvers, their tense, bare feet striking in rhythm.
They lean far out, in defiance of gravity, backs rounded and streaming under the sun, paddle ends in their armpits, and they engage in battle. The junk goes nowhere. It rocks from side to side, tips up at the prow, grinds on branches at the water’s surface. The bamboo poles bend to the breaking point and vibrate like the strings of a viol. Men pant and cry out. Then all ceases. The obstacle is past.

Broken with fatigue, the paddlers push the junk under a leaning tree. They leap with delight into the water, drink it down in long drafts. It is a beautiful thing, this repose, this freshness, this replenishment of strength from the very element that moments ago — at a spot still within view, and where a fallen man was a dead man — had sought to wrest away their lives.

A tranquil, civilized man stretched out under the pirogue’s roof can observe these successive tableaux of violence and peace, and the matter of life thus quickly come into focus, especially when it suddenly depends on nothing but a bamboo pole that a man might break over his knee, or when the vague gaze and sunken cheek of the opium smoker are writ plain on a paddler’s face.

To me, as I am none too certain of my tranquility or my civilization, the danger seemed quite illusory. I was concerned more with the how than with the why of the men’s efforts. That, and not the rapids, is what made an impression.
Appendices

Expedition Timeline: 1913-1914

Photo Index

1926 - Banteay Chhmar by Automobile
by Darryl Collins

1937 - A Khmer Marvel: Banteay Chhmar
by George Groslier

Death of an Angel in Beng Mealea
by Kent Davis

The Works of George Groslier
## Expedition Timeline: 1913-1914

The dates and locations below reflect the dates assigned by George Groslier for each general area.

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<tr>
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<td>July 12</td>
<td>Tonle Repou (river branch towards Preah Vihear)</td>
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<td>Walking 50 km to the foot of Preah Vihear</td>
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<td>Nov 2-18</td>
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This modern edition of Shadow of Angkor is enhanced with many images not included in the author’s original edition. The editor is indebted to Nicole Groslier and the Groslier family for granting access to their personal collections, and to Joel Montague for contributing images from his archive, some of which are extracted from his book, Picture Postcards of Cambodia 1900-1950, published in 2010 by White Lotus Press. Vintage engravings from Albert Tissandier’s, Cambodge et Java Ruines Khmères et Javanais 1893-1894 and images from the DatAsia archive have also been added to improve the visual impact of George Groslier’s account.

Photo Credits:
George Groslier [GG]; Nicole Groslier [NG]; Cambodge et Java [CJ]; Montague Archive [MA]; DatAsia Archive [DA].

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What we find in the shadow of Angkor is not merely an extraordinary example of a dead civilization... but a dead civilization whose torches have been kept alight and shine on.

George GROSLEIR - TONLE REPFOU, JULY 12, 1913

The re-publication of Groslier's book is a cause for celebration. While much interest stems from descriptions of these temples as he saw them in 1913 - when they were indeed virtually unknown to more than a few western scholars - there is much more to be found in this book of lyrical, and at times poetic, writing.

Milton OSBORNE - FOREWORD

On June 6, 1913, George Groslier, a twenty-six year old French explorer, set out with a small group of native porters on a six-month trek into the Cambodian wilderness.

A millennium earlier, the Khmer empire had ruled the entire region. In the 15th century, however, the kingdom mysteriously collapsed, with dense jungle quickly covering its fabulous temples. The French government charged Groslier with documenting the most remote edifices of the Khmer legacy — among them Preah Vihear, Wat Phu, Beng Melea and Banteay Chhmar — sites that remain isolated even a century later.

This modern edition — enhanced with 75 period illustrations and detailed appendices — offers readers the first English translation of the dangers, discoveries and people encountered on his solitary adventure. Groslier’s impressions and insights still fascinate those who, even today, seek answers in the ancient shrines of Cambodia.