

A LETTER BY SIR ROBERT H. SCHOMBURGK  
H.B.M.'S CONSUL IN BANGKOK IN 1860

*Introduction*

By  
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Robert H. Schomburgk was born at Freiburg in Silesia in the year 1804. At the age of 27 he accepted an employment by the Royal Geographical Society of London which sent him to South-America. He explored British Guiana and was appointed as British Commissioner for surveying and marking the boundaries of that country. Schomburgk's brother, Richard, accompanied him on these expeditions. Both brothers interested themselves in the flora of the country and Robert published several papers on the subject. The name of the water-lily, *Victoria Regia*, was suggested by him. Robert H. Schomburgk was knighted in 1844; his brother was knighted as well. In 1857 Sir Robert was appointed H.B.M.'s Consul in Bangkok, where he resided from 1857 - 1864. He was a keen collector of flowers and plants and acquired a considerable knowledge of the fauna of Siam. The Schomburgk-deer (*Cervus Schomburgki*) of which he presented the first pair of antlers to Queen Victoria, was named after him. (Cf. Francis H. Giles, "The Schomburgk-Deer" - J.S.S. Natural History Supplement Vol. XI/1 and U. Guehler, "Another Note on the Schomburgk-Deer"—J. S. S. Natural History Supplement, Vol. XIII/1). Schomburgk's botanical collections are still kept at Kew. A. Kerr writes in "Early Botanists in Siam" (J.S.S. Natural History Supplement Vol. XII/1): "I have seen no specimens collected by him on his long trip to Chiangmai and Moulmein". The here following letter describes this voyage, and - as Kerr already mentions—it is likely that his collections of plants and animal skins were destroyed on the trip from Moulmein via Tavoy to Khanburi, on which the party had met

with heavy rains. Kerr states that a genus of tropical American orchids was named "Schomburgkia" in Schomburgk's honour. The letter sheds a light on living conditions in Siam at that time, especially so on the life at the British Consulate. At the same time we gain some insight of Schomburgk's own nature and character. Social life seems to have been very dull then, quite to the contrary of our present days. Schomburgk's passages about his powers of jurisdiction seem especially interesting, and the primitive methods of travelling invite comparisons with modern transport facilities.

The Prussian Flotilla, mentioned in the first paragraph of his letter, stayed at Singapore from August 2-3, 1860, during the outward-journey from Germany to China and Japan. The ships were under the command of Captain Sundwall (not "Sunderland") who had been appointed "Commodore" for the time of the expedition.

Sir Robert H. Schomburgk returned in 1864 and died in Berlin in March 1865.

Bangkok/ 18.12.48.

*Translation of a letter written in German by Sir Robert H. Schomburgk, H. B. M.'s Consul in Bangkok, in 1860.*

Bangkok, 6th September, 1860.

Dear Cousin William,

Many thanks for your kind letter of December 1st, 1859, which was sent to me from Singapore by Captain Sunderland since the Prussian Flotilla is not coming to Siam for the time being, and is visiting Japan and China first.

... I was glad to see from your letter that you are well. Without doubt your life is not as eventful as mine, but surrounded by your family, it must be much more agreeable. I live all alone in my large house. There is no society life to speak of, and my days pass in monotonous routine. I get up very early and immediately sit down at my desk. The office opens at 10 o'clock. The staff of the Consulate, when complete, consists of the consul, one interpreter (next to me in rank, and my 'locum tenens' in my absence), two assistants, and two student interpreters. Besides these there is a doctor who is also allowed to practise outside the Consulate, and who is better off than any of us. These all receive their commissions from the Foreign Office, but I receive mine direct from the Queen. Apart from the afore-mentioned, there are also employed by the Consulate two constables, one jailer, one porter, one linguist or interpreter, and two messengers. I have at my personal disposal one cockswain and twelve boatswains. We are, all in all, more than thirty people, not counting our personal servants. I inhabit a large house of two storeys — the other officials two houses of almost the same size. The prison is back of the Consulate, so are a number of houses for the other people belonging to the Consulate. The entire grounds, covering an area of more than 7 English acres, are surrounded by canals and walls. The Menam, the river of Bangkok, runs along the front, and in view of the many boats, sailing vessels, steamships, etc. plying thereon, at all times, from

sunrise to sunset, offers a picture of lively activity. The Bangkok flotilla of steamships already amounts to 15, and the local dockyards are busy preparing to add to this number. As the consul I have jurisdiction over all British subjects resident in Siam. On those accused and found guilty I can impose penalties up to 3 months in prison, with or without hard labour, or fines up to 1000 dollars. There exists a right of appeal against my sentences. This however may only be lodged with the Supreme Court in Singapore, which lies more than 800 English miles away from Bangkok. Moreover the appealing party has to furnish substantial bail. Ever since my arrival in Bangkok, we have had no appeals here. The cases arising are heard by me, adjourned if necessary, or decided upon summarily. In cases of grave indictments I summon two assistant judges of British nationality by birth. In these cases I naturally preside, and if the assistant judges do not agree with me, my verdict holds good subject to the right of appeal on the part of the defendants. Serious criminal cases are decided upon in Singapore, but I have the right to expel from Bangkok any who have committed serious offences three times.

You as a jurist will be surprised that such far-reaching powers are in the hands of a consul. It is, however, necessary. Most of the British subjects in Bangkok are Asiatics hailing from Calcutta, Bombay, Madras etc., who give me enough to do. No day in the week passes without my having to decide on one or more indictments, and then these Asiatics are as slippery as eels and snakes.—In order to get an insight into the English summary police court proceedings, I was, before I left London, obliged to attend police courts there for some time, also to acquaint myself with these proceedings by the study of books.

The office closes at 4 p.m.—In fine weather my boat with its 12 boatswains awaits me at the landing-stage, and I go for a trip up or down the river, or along the numerous canals, for Bangkok is a little Venice in this respect. I dine at 6.30, usually "solus cum solo". Every now and then I give a dinner party which, however, since I have no "better half" nor any other female help, causes me more trouble than pleasure.

You herewith have a description of my daily life.

I am on good terms with the two Kings and their Ministers — if only there were a little more social life in Bangkok! My salary amounts to £1,200 — which, counting the awful income tax as well as the losses incurred due to the rate of exchange, still leaves me £1000.— But at the end of the year I, as an old bachelor, have, in view of the otherwise expensive life here, little left over.

I am still as keen on travelling as ever. On December 12th, 1859, I left Bangkok by two lovely boats belonging to the first King, accompanied by two of his nephews and one of the student interpreters, in order to make a short excursion into the interior of Siam. As already mentioned, the King had placed two of his own barks with the boatswains in Royal liveries, at my disposal, and had given orders that we should be provisioned everywhere by the authorities. After a journey of 28 days we left the boats since the river was too shallow, and continued across country, i. e. on elephant-back. The discomfort of such a mode of travel, especially at the beginning, is difficult to describe: A feeling similar to sea-sickness overcomes the novice, and then the animal goes so slowly that you can hardly cover  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles per hour. On the other hand the surety with which the elephant climbs the most dangerous paths up and down hill, is admirable, and inspires so much confidence that you do not worry even if the narrow path, possibly only 3 feet wide, is next to a precipice on one side or the other.

After 43 days since our departure we arrived in Chiengmai or Zimmainus. This town — the most northerly point of my journey — has a circumference of approximately 3 English miles, and is the residence of a Viceroy who, however, at that time was in Bangkok. The town itself is surrounded by walls, bastions and towers — the suburbs by palisades. The inhabitants (Laos) are of fine physique and lighter colour than the Siamese, above all the fairer sex, among whom many as regards their complexion can be compared to Italian women. Unlike the Siamese they wear their hair which is coal-black and shiny, *à la Chinoise*, whereas the Siamese women cut it short, only leaving a round patch covered with hair, similar to those of a brush, on their heads. The unmarried women wear dresses

woven out of silk, which reach only half-way; the bosom is uncovered — they merely throw a shawl of light silk and bright colours (which hides nothing) across their bosoms. The married women, on the other hand, conceal their bosoms with a thicker shawl, thrown crosswise across their breasts.

I had spent 13 days in Chiengmai before I could leave the city. From there I wanted to penetrate across the large mountain range to Moulmein on the Bay of Bengal. This route was considered unsafe in view of wild Indian tribes, and so I was given an escort of 140 men and 39 elephants. Two noblemen were in charge of the caravan.

In Moulmein we were received with great hospitality. I do not have to tell you that Moulmein is the largest town belonging to the Queen on the Bay of Bengal in the Tenasserim Provinces. On our journey we had crossed mountains, in which the temperature sank to 6 degrees Réaumur, where oaks grew and we crossed pine forests. As I said, we were very well received in Moulmein. Having left Bangkok more than 3 months ago, it was pleasant again to enjoy European company. We spent a week here, and then went along the Bay of Bengal by Government steamer to Tavoy. Here too, we were cordially received. Once more the crossing of the mountain range between the Gulf of Bengal and Siam stood before me. The rainy season had set in in the meantime, and I who suffer so much from rheumatism, had to continue on my voyage completely exposed to tropical rain for five days.

On April 26th, 135 days after my departure, I and my companions safely returned to Bangkok. We thanked God Almighty that He had protected us so well during a voyage lasting so long, and covering approximately 1000 English miles. The two young Princes, the eldest of which only 14 years old, had seen something of our civilization, and have, I am sure, gained hereby.

I hope to go on leave in 1862, and to go to Europe for one year. I will travel via Australia in order to visit my brothers and sisters there ...

Your cousin,

sd. Robert H. Schomburgk.