A historical book on Phuket

COLIN Mackay’s A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region (White Lotus, Bangkok, 2012, 418pp) is a magnificent achievement: a towering work of erudition leavened with sly humor and fascinating side-bars. While destined to be the standard reference text for the island’s history, the book is so vividly written that it deserves to be a raging best-seller.

Mackay covers the early waves of migration down the Malay peninsula — Negrito, Malay, Mon, Burmese, Thai — until the dawn of empires: Funan spreading from Vietnam, Srivijaya from Sumatra and Chola from the Tamil Coromandel coast of India.

The latter two empires clashed in an epic battle near Ipoh in 1026, as described by a temple inscription, “written with all the natural historionic and vain-gloryous cliches of early Indian inscriptions, which related history in much the same style as Bollywood movies do today”.

Next, it was the turn of the Mon-Khmer from Pagan to occupy Phuket from 1058 till 1210 when Burma was sacked by the Mongols, leaving, “a pit of infighting between snarling Shans, Mon and Burmese warlords”.

The people of Phuket were always treated abominably and they often rose up and slaughtered their occupiers to a man. This happened to the Cholas and the Sri Lankans. Mackay characterized the governance of Phuket as “dictatorship tempered by assassination”.

Then the Thais arrived in 1293, during the reign of King Ramkamhaeng, and hung on for 1293, during the reign of King Ramkamhaeng, and hung on for 1293, during the reign of King Ramkamhaeng, and hung on for 1293, during the reign of King Ramkamhaeng, and hung on for the remaining 800 years of Thai rule.

For hundreds of years afterward, Phuket stagnated, ravaged by pirates and oppressed by rapacious Thai governors who robbed with impunity. A scattering of Malay fishing villages on the coast and a trio of Thai hamlets in the interior were hemmed in jungle.

In 1687, an English sea captain observed of Phuket: “There is nothing beautiful, good, rare nor curious in this place. One sees on all sides only impenetrable jungle full of tigers, wild elephants and rhinoceros which we eat sometimes in place of beef.”

At sea, pirates ruled. On September 29, 1544, four Portuguese pirate captains infesting the Surin Islands defeated a Thai fleet captained by an Ottoman mercenary. There were Malay, Sea Gypsy, Japanese and Chinese pirates. Most fearsome of all were the Bugis from the Celebes and the Illanun from the Sula Sea, who rampaged for booty and slaves from 1600 to 1850. In iron helmets and chainmail, aboard double-decker 100-foot galleys rowed by slaves, they were the Vikings of the age.

Meanwhile, the Burmese sacked Phuket time and time again throughout the 18th century until 1810. Peace came only when the British seized the Tensassirim coast from the Burmese and steamships from Penang, Malacca and Singapore finally brought piracy under control. In the 19th century, Phuket was occupied by a legion of Chinese tin miners and entered into its golden age. Rubber plantations also spread and the jungle retreated.

Mackay focuses upon two interrelated Chinese families, the Tans and the Khaws, who in making their tin fortunes assumed civic authority and brought forth roads, bridges, sanitation, police stations, hospitals, “the mansions, banks, clubs, schools, hospitals, cinemas, steamships, automobiles and Phuket’s first ice factory.

British, Australian and Dutch companies joined the local Chinese families in launching massive tin dredgers that raised Thailand’s world’s top tin producer in 1940. The next big development happened in the 1980s as Phuket switched from tin to tourism, sparking a boom in infrastructure and employment.

The Asian Crisis of 1997 brought on the drastic devaluation of the baht and prompted, “the next mad rush of greedy immigrants who arrived in Phuket at the start of the 21st century — the foreign property developers”. Housing for foreigners popped up “like acorns”. Land prices skyrocketed. But many of these resident foreigners — who now make up 10 per cent of Phuket’s population — have married into the local population and a new generation of “look krueng” promise a fruitful future for Phuket. As an example, Mackay displays a photo of his own two half-Thai daughters.

Photos abound in this handsome volume, as do maps and old illustrations. With a large hardbound, tome of glossy pages, the publisher White Lotus has outdone itself. Mackay’s history is not only a fascinating read but a collector’s item.