



Anna's Real-Life King of Siam

Donna Faulkner

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The people of Siam (now Thailand) were insulted when English governess Anna Leonowens, after spending five years as a royal tutor to his children, wrote two books depicting their beloved King Mongkut as a tyrant. Insult turned to outrage when Broadway and then Hollywood adapted her story as the musical *The King and I*.

In fact, King Mongkut was Siam's greatest ruler. Inheriting a country rife with medieval customs and feudal ignorance, he almost single-handedly brought Siam into the nineteenth century. Among his many accomplishments, he sparked the reform of the Buddhist religion; spoke eleven languages; mastered history, geography, astronomy, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. The result: He?] transformed himself from a god-king to an approachable, tolerant leader. In a diplomatic triumph, he played European powers against each other so deftly that Siam, alone among the nations of Southeast Asia, never succumbed to colonial dominance. This short-form book shares the story of this thoroughly remarkable man.

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