



A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam

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Originally published in 1951, it is said that A Dragon Apparent inspired Graham Greene to go to Vietnam and write The Quiet American.

A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam Details

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From Reader Review A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam for online ebook

Fuat says

A really charming book. Contains a lot of interesting stories about the natives, missionaries, the French colonials, Cambodian temples, etc. But most of the times I find it hard to read, probably only because of my limited vocabulary knowledge. So, 3.5 stars.

Tom Mcquillen says

I loved this book, the writing was lovely, really poetic. His observations were spot on, love the way he skewered French Colonialism and the evangelical missionaries. So interesting to hear about this part of the world pre-Vietnam war.

Martin Allen says

Started off with real promise and I couldn't put it down, and whilst it never lost its captivation, I did find it became a bit repetitive in places and the end just happened - it just ended; no summary, no full circle, no final thoughts. I loved his dry, black humour style and his narration, in the main, was entertaining, if the experiences became a little samey. The quality of the photographs in the book are very poor - even allowing for their age, there are plenty of programmes that can enhance old photos but these were often just black, largely indistinguishable blobs on the page.

keith koenigsberg says

One of the best travel books I have read in a long time. Norman Lewis tramped through southeast asia in the 50's as the region was undergoing a transition from fighting the French colonials to (they didn't know it yet) being caught in the Cold War conflicts of the 60's. Lewis was fortunate to observe the vanishing ancient cultures as they went down for the third time: the Viet Minh were on the rise and repelling the French, and the region's cultures would, in the next 5 years, be incinerated.

Lewis' prose is tight and "British", full of understatement and dry humor, very enjoyable in an old-world way. Mostly it's just a travelogue: jeeps being caught in the mud, tribal chiefs falling down drunk, etc. But there are glimpses of ancient cultures, visits with kings, and description and criticism of the colonial system and the ways it had already been crushing the life out of the populace for many years.

Dave Reid says

Interesting to read as a snapshot of Vietnam when all the conflict was still contained within its borders. This

was before US intervention and shows how the french struggled to keep order before withdrawing completely. Lewis has a good eye for highlighting the constant beaurocratic delays so often encountered in oriental countries and spends most of this book travelling around in army jeeps, freight lorries and diplomatic vehicles rather than face delays at airports and rail stations. I felt that there was more to be said on Laos as the book is predominantly based in Vietnam but is still enjoyable

Florian Blümm says

Travel memoirs from back in the day, when Indochina was a French colony. Fun to read, if you've been to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia before.

Patrick McCoy says

I decided to read Norman Lewis' fascinating travel book on Indochina, A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (1951) for inspiration and preparation for travel in Cambodia. Lewis travels to Vietnam in 1950 as the French are trying to hold onto their colonial possessions by employing tactics that will ultimately fail for the Americans as well. Most of his analysis comes from the French perspective, but near the end of his travels he meets with some Viet Minh people to get their perspective, which is independence ala India. He visited the Cao Dai temples on the outskirts of Saigon, which I still exist today and which I have visited. The Cao Dai is a strange universal religion which includes Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, and Duc de la Rochenfouald among its sacred people and fantastic designs of their temples. Another fascinating passage describes his meeting with General des Essars, commander of French troops in Cambodia, informally at Madame Shum's opium den resigned to the fact he will never make fighters of the Buddhist Cambodians. Every man spent a year in monastery and were taught not to kill any living creature. This seems ironic in hindsight when one considers the extensive killing that the Khmer Rouge did in the name of revolution. It is also interesting to read his anecdote of a woman who takes offense of Graham Greene's portrayal of British colonialism in Africa in his novel, In The Heart of the Matter (1948). Little does she realize that he will write about Vietnam in The Quiet American later in 1958. Lewis also travels to Cambodia and wanders among the ruins of Angkor Wat and then onto Laos where he will visit Vientiane, van Vang, and Luang Prabang much like those on the backpacker trail of today. It is a fascinating look at a Southeast Asian that no longer exists especially the isolated tribes like the Moi tribe he describes in detail in the book.

Chris Taylor says

Hard work for me...

I'm going to beg to differ with the other reviewers... I've been reading for fifty years, but I have seldom come across a book containing so many words I was unfamiliar with! This made reading disjointed and, together with the author's slightly "colonial" attitude, resulted in the low rating.

I bailed out at 20% - but will re-read later...

Reanne says

Fascinating insight into Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the 1940s right before it all changed dramatically. The animated and witty narrative of Mr Lewis' adventures meant I couldn't put it down and subsequently bought four more of his books! Highly recommended!

Dana Bolink says

A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam by Norman Lewis is a beautifully written, highly enjoyable report of his travels through three countries that no longer exist.

His writing style is descriptive and compelling, with an underlying tone of dry humor that is hard to get, but makes it all the more enjoyable. His subjects are three of the most beautiful countries in the world during a time when their beauty had not been marred beyond recognition by war. No wonder then that A Dragon Apparent kept my interest for all 317 pages of the book.

The position in which Lewis undertakes his travels is also one that no longer exists today: as a journalist he is invited to tea with kings and high ranking diplomats, whether he wants to or not and has access to many places the average traveler will never get to. In addition, he traveled Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam during a time when travel was not as common place as it is now, certainly not in Asia. And of course the timing is unique; the French colonial regime is struggling to keep a grip on the region. Lewis suspects that this region will be forever altered and this might be his last chance to see it in its current glory, adding an extra layer to the book.

In short A Dragon Apparent is a very good travel story, which provides imagination stimulating insights into the French colonial era, as well as the life and situation of many an Asian tribe that has since disappeared. I predict you'll enjoy reading the book as well as fantasizing about the world Lewis describes when you not reading it.

Lisa Lieberman says

It's easy to see why Graham Greene was lured to Vietnam by Lewis's account. The sense of a country -- indeed, an entire region -- on the verge of revolution, beleaguered colonial officials gamely assisting the author in procuring transport from one crumbling outpost to the next, the documentary feel of his descriptions of tribal peoples, struggling to maintain their traditional way of life as their communities are decimated, not by the guerrilla war, but by the exploitation of French plantation owners, who have obtained the right to work the young villagers to death: Greene recognized a good story when he saw one.

Much cause for moral outrage here, but Lewis does not neglect the landscape:

At this season, in early February, there were no flowering orchids, but sometimes in the valley-bottoms, half-extinguished among the bamboos, we caught a glimpse of the fiery smoke of flamboyant trees. A flower, too, grew abundantly by the roadside which looked like willow herb, but was lavender in colour. These were visited by butterflies of rather sombre magnificence—typical, I suppose, of dim forest interiors. Usually they were black with splashes of green or blue iridescence. They did not settle, but hovered poised like fruit-sucking birds, probing with probosces at the blooms. They fluttered in their thousands above the many streams and once, passing through a savannah, we came across what proved on investigation to be the mountainous excretion of an elephant. At first nothing could be seen of it but the flirting of the dark, splendid wings of the butterflies that had settled upon it.

And he introduces us to some colorful characters, such as the French official, Dupont:

“He was a corsair out of his day, an adventurer who was swaggeringly going native and whose ardors Laos would tame and temper. Dupont had married a Laotian wife in Luang Prabang and said that he would never return to France. His children would probably be brought up as Buddhists, and by that time, no doubt, Dupont himself would be paying some sort of lax observance to the rites... Dupont was in a great hurry to get back to Luang Prabang because his wife was pregnant and he was afraid that she would hurt herself on her bicycle, although he had dismantled it and had hidden some essential parts.”

What I liked best about *A Dragon Apparent*, probably because it suits my own way of storytelling, is Lewis's meandering style. He wanders about, hitching rides with traders, military convoys, staying with anybody who will have him, and his impressions feel fresh, spontaneous. We catch him worrying whether he has come down with some tropical affliction, are invited to share his amusement over the nostalgia of former Free French operatives who cherished their memories of time spent in drab English provincial towns, "seen now across the years of fierce, sunny exile as congeries of quaint pubs, full of tenderly acquiescent maidens and wrapped in a Turner sunset."

A delightful way to start the new year, embarking with Lewis on an exploration of colonial Vietnam.

Paul Cornelius says

At the beginning of *A Dragon Apparent*, Norman Lewis relates that he is advised to visit Indochina immediately if he has any wish to see the tribal people and their culture before they vanish forever. It was good advice. Lewis traveled there in early 1950, just as the fall of China to Mao's Communist forces was making an impact on the war between the French and the nationalists of Indochina, especially the Viet Minh, although Lewis also documents the role of the Issaraks in Cambodia (and even Laos) as well as the Cao Dai in Vietnam.

Most of Lewis' travels, however, focus on the minority tribes in Indochina. The greatest portion of the book is spent on the tribes of Mois (Dagar) in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. But there is also an intriguing chapter on the Meo (Hmong) of Laos. In both instances, these tribes of fiercely independent people were caught between the forces of dehumanizing colonialism, on one hand, and a Communist movement, on the other, that Lewis does not hesitate to compare to Nazi Germany. The Mois are sold into virtual slavery, to be worked to death on French plantations. And because they refuse to accede to the Communist ways that would trample their traditional way of life, the Viet Minh also mark them for extermination. The Meo, who may have been the most rugged of individualists in all of Indochina, meanwhile, come in for respect for their tenacity but criticism of their way of life in denuding the countryside of all vegetation in slash and burn agriculture.

Lewis is sympathetic, albeit somewhat paternalistic, in his attitude. It was 1950, after all. Nearly all the secondary characters Lewis interviews and describes are French officials or colonials. But the last chapter is devoted to Lewis' expedition into Viet Minh territory. His discussions with them clearly frighten him. They are described as putting into place a totalitarian system of life entirely too similar to Hitler's Strength through Joy program--these are Lewis' very words. But the book ends with Lewis recognizing that the end is in sight for France in Indochina. And this was four years before Dien Bien Phu and the final defeat of the French, forcing them out of the region once and for all.

This book is an historical document of a part of Southeast Asia about to be changed forever. Nevertheless, Lewis was also able to note the unique and, for him, terribly valuable ways of life about to disappear. His

travels on roads into remote villages describe a landscape just barely in touch with the twentieth century. In particular, his description of the road convoy necessary to reach Vang Vieng from Vientiane tells of almost impassable valleys, washed out bridges, and narrow mountain roads that drop away into vast chasms. Anyone travelling there, today, of course, will find a much improved "highway," although it is still dangerous, filled with rock slides, rampaging rivers in rainy season, and sheer drops on switchback after switchback after switchback, snaking up and down the mountains.

Yet Lewis the travel writer was more akin to an explorer than what passes for travel writing these days. No GPS for him. No laptops reserving a cozy air conditioned room at the, now, tourist-laden venue of Vang Vieng. No help if shot by rebels, bandits, or colonial troops. No medical rescue for broken bones, malaria, or dysentery. Only in reading this book do you realize what changes have come over the region in the past almost seven decades. Where only the most fearless and adventurous would once have gone, there is now the millennial backpacker outfitted in all his technological splendor. It's a different world.

Mindy McAdams says

Update: I had to give this 3 stars, not 2, because it's well-written and I enjoyed reading it for long stretches of time. If I could judge it on the writing, storytelling and descriptions alone, I'd give it 4 stars. My objections are below.

Written in 1951 by a well-traveled Englishman, this account of his travels documents a surface or superficial view of the lands still controlled by the French and seen then 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 his 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.

Patricia says

A charming travelogue through Southeast Asia in the days when Vietnam was still a French colony, not that Vietnam's fight for independence was 'charming' but Lewis can make us smile even when describing a bowl of stinking local soup with river octopus arms draped over the sides. This is my favourite form of escapist reading--a well-written travelogue of countries one is interested in, with just the right dash of background history and cultural nuggets.

Carol Jardine says

A terrific book that colourfully and truthfully takes you with the author through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in the last days of French colonisation. It shows the cruelty and disparity that exists between the native people of "INDOCHINE" and the ruling French.

It is humorous in places, and historically spot on, it even sniffs out the foreboding American presence waiting in the shadows; and it certainly doesn't predict Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge arriving in the mid 70's, when the French could barely scatch a Cambodian army together due to their disposition to kill and strong Buddhist beliefs.

An informative, interesting and humorous read.
