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Book Review: Angkor the Magnificent: Wonder City of Ancient Cambodia by Helen Churchill Candee

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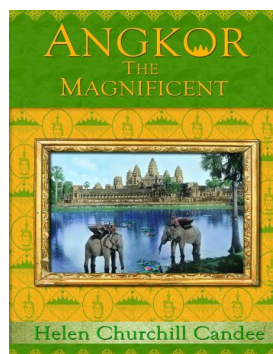
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Reviewed by

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Even before I understood what it really was, growing up in Southern California, I knew I had entered a Khmer home when I saw a painting of Angkor Wat proudly displayed in someone's living room. No, it is not the Cambodian flag that represents and connects the Khmer people; the essence of what it means to be Khmer is captured in Angkor Wat, a splendid ancient stone temple built in the 12th century which is presently located in the province of Siem Reap, Cambodia (Chandler, 2008; Rooney, 2006). For many Khmer people living overseas and in Cambodia, Angkor Wat is a national treasure, and it quintessentially symbolizes their firm roots to the Khmer culture and heritage.

In 1922, after surviving the horrific sinking of the passenger liner, RMS *Titanic*, on her return trip from Europe to New York, an American woman by the name of Helen Churchill Candee visited Angkor Wat and the other great Angkor ruins of temples and palaces in a far away land of Cambodia. Her astonishing trip was captured in a book entitled *Angkor the Magnificent: Wonder City of Ancient Cambodia* and it was published in 1924. In 2011, DatASIA, Inc. reprinted a paperback edition of Candee's original work which was used for this review. According to the publisher, this reprint contains the original 19 chapters written by Helen Churchill Candee, along with the 79 photographs and one map. Unlike the original 1924 edition, this updated edition includes two appendices. The first contains a biography of the extraordinary life of Helen Churchill Candee written by Randy Bryan Bigham. The second contains Candee's personal accounts of that freezing tragic night aboard the *Titanic* that she wrote and was published as a cover story in *Collier's Weekly*, a prominent magazine of the time.

Before perusing chapter one about the ancient Khmer ruins of Angkor, I would suggest the reader to wait a bit. Instead, go to Appendix One and first read about this amazing lady known as Helen Churchill Candee and her extraordinary life. After getting to know her and her background, the reader will understand and appreciate her prose, her particular choice of words and how they are weaved together to provide delightful details and descriptions of what she saw



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of the ancient Angkor temples and palaces as well as nature's beauty. Here is an example of the delight she writes of the sky and the weather, "the sky above was a mass of filmy decoration on a ground of blue" (p. 30) and "The weather! It was made of polished opal" (p. 30).

Helen Churchill Candee's personal account of her trip to the Angkor ruins makes up the 19 chapters of the book. Roughly, these 19 chapters are sub-grouped into a set of two or three chapters which are devoted to describing a particular ruin or a group of ruins. In between these sets of chapters, a chapter focuses on a topic other than the stone structures, providing the reader a brief break from the intense descriptions and focuses on a lighter subject such as a dance or water. For instance, in the first four chapters of the book, Candee describes her boat journey that begins in the harbor of Hong Kong. She boards a boat called the *Pak Hoi*, which takes her from Hong Kong harbor to Canton. While sailing on the *Pak Hoi*, Candee listens to tales of piracy on the high sea as skillfully told by a Scottish Captain. In Chapter 2, Candee vividly describes the people and animals sailing together on the *Pak Hoi* to be dropped off in Canton. These include other passengers, especially the poor and prosperous Chinese passengers, along with sheep, fowls, and cabbages.

Her brief stay in the harbor city of Saigon is chronicled in Chapter 3. It is here that Candee takes the liberty to comment on the state of colonialism and its effect on both the colonists (the French) and the native citizens (the Annamites, now known as Vietnamese). From Saigon, she traveled to Phnom Penh (the capital city of Cambodia) on the Mekong River, which connects the two countries. Here, Candee provides a contrast of the atmospheres between the two harbor cities and their state back in the early 1920s when both countries were France's protectorates.

From Phnom Penh, Candee boards *Messageries Fluviales*, the boat of the French Company, which sails on the Mekong River to the lake of Tonle Sap and finally arrives her destination in Siem Reap at night. Candee's first view of the splendor of Angkor Wat and what she sees there are captured in Chapters 5 and 6.

Although beautiful, the endless descriptions of Angkor Wat can be overwhelming, especially for the Western readers of her time. As if to give the reader a break, Chapter 7 provides an intermission (a brief stepping away) from the in-depth details of Angkor Wat. This chapter brings the reader back to the present time by describing Khmer classical dance to take place at the Cruciform Terrace located on Angkor Wat grounds. With the fragrant torches lighting the stone stage that is filled with beautiful Khmer dancers, Candee sees as though the Apsaras (heavenly dancers or celestial nymphs) carved on the walls of Angkor Wat during the day suddenly appear in persons as dancers on the stage.

While two chapters of 5 and 6 are devoted to the descriptions of the magnificent Angkor Wat, chapters of 8 and 9 are focused on another staggering structure known as Angkor Thom. While Angkor Wat has been described as a temple, Angkor Thom is regarded as a royal city where the king's residence was located during ancient Angkor time, his palace. Since the grounds are so extensive, Candee and her group of Westerners survey the city on the backs of elephants. Effie was the name of her giant grey friend. In Chapter 8, Candee provides a survey of the grounds and the many fine structures of Angkor Thom. As a great story teller, Candee not only describes the splendid stone structures she sees before her but also imagines what it must have been like to view these fine structures in their full splendor and pageantry many, many centuries ago. Chapter 9 focuses on the Bayon, the grandest and the oldest monuments within and at the center of the royal city's walls.

After allotting two chapters to Angkor Thom, Candee once again provides the reader a break from the structural ruins and turns to the domains of the animals that are depicted on the walls and structures of the Angkor ruins (Chapter 10). She comments that “all the decorative animals that the Khmers so freely mingled with their architecture, they all take prominent part in the general scheme, a part as important as these same animals take today in the forests and waters among which Angkor is set” (p. 138). These animals are the snakes, lions, elephants, and monkeys.

The next two chapters, 11 and 12, focus on two structures found within Angkor Thom: The Terrance of Honor and Phimean-Akas. The Terrance of Honor, upheld by Garudas, the bird-like statues and topped with the Naga, a giant serpent with many heads, is a platform over a thousand feet long and about fifteen feet high. Behind it lies the great palace enclosure of the Phimean-Akas, the royal palace best known in Angkor Thom. In describing the Phimean-Akas, Candee imagines what the royal household must have been like based on accounts of the writing by Zhou Daguan, a Chinese ambassador who visited Angkor between 1295 and 1297 A.D.

Similar to earlier ones, Chapter 13 acts as another break for the reader from the ruins. Here, Candee turns to the present time and focuses on the Village of Siem Reap, the site where all the Angkor ruins are located. After visiting Phimean-Akas, Candee, with a group of American and French travelers, sets off to find what Candee describes as “nectar lying within green cocoanuts” to quench their thirst. It is during this visit that she meets the ordinary, everyday Khmer people such as a lady vendor and a group of children whom she sees as representing on the walls of the ruins of many centuries ago.

While Chapter 14 focuses on the smaller temples found at the Angkor ruins known as Prah Khan, Prah Pithu, and Temple of Ta-Keo, in Chapter 15, Candee describes the living accommodations where she and other Western travelers are staying during their trip to the Angkor ruins. It is also here in this chapter that the reader gets a glimpse of what Candee thinks of each of the other travelers. Candee refers to their living quarter as the Bungalow.

Returning to the ruins, Chapter 16 provides descriptions of a group of three temples located outside of Angkor Thom, and they are Banteai Kedei, Ta Prohm, and Prah Khan. Due to their similarity in construction and detail, it is suggested that all are built at the same period. Unlike older structures where the carved figures are associated with religious scenes, the carved figures found on this group of three temples depict a common daily life of Khmer people that does not seem to have changed much through the many centuries. Candee suggests:

Here is a place in which one may draw a parallel between Khmer art and Khmer habits of life. For five centuries the same carved figures were employed on building after building; for an even greater length of time the native Cambodian has copied his fathers in the minutia of daily living. The habitat of the common people is the same today as it has been for centuries, a small affair of the convenient bamboo with thatched roof. The bullock cart that rolls along the road on its work of restoring ruins or lost roads, is the same vehicle as that depicted on the ancient bas-reliefs. This content with things as they are is characteristic. (p. 227-28)

Besides the many, many ruins discussed in this book, Candee also turns to another feature which is ever present with the ruins and that is water. Chapter 17 is a short chapter devoted to the man-made hydraulic constructions such as the moats, pools, and reservoirs surrounding the ancient Angkor structures. Comparing to the moats encircling some castles in England and in

France, Candee comments that the dimensions of the moats found among the Angkor ruins are always an astonishment to those who are accustomed to the ones found in Europe.

While Chapter 18 covers the last two Angkor ruins: Prah Khan and Neak Pean, in Chapter 19, Candee ends the book by discussing some possible theories as to whom might these ancient Khmer people be, how they came to power and built these magnificent structures and afterward why they just vanished. Perhaps, as a tribute to these ancient people, Candee ends the book by reminding her modern reader that although the status between the East and the West are different now, but back then, “Europe was having her years of darkness in the centuries when the Khmers were growing prodigiously in intellect, in wealth, in military power” (p. 272).

As a journalist to leading magazines and journals and a celebrated author of seven books before writing *Angkor the Magnificent*, Candee was an accomplished writer and she proved it with pages and pages of beautiful descriptions of the splendid Angkor ruins. However, it is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. One of the nice features of this edition as well as the original edition is the inclusion of photos—close to 100 photos for the reader to view. The photos of the ruin temples, palaces, and terraces provide vivid images for the reader to truly see and comprehend the grandeur and majesty of the Angkor ruins. Because there are so many photos included in the book, most of the time the picture(s) are not found close to the passage where the particular ruin is described but is found many pages or even a chapter later. This could be a little annoying.

Despite this little annoyance between the timing of the description of a ruin and its photograph, overall, it was a pleasure reading Helen Churchill Candee’s personal account of her visit to the Angkor ruins. Now I cannot wait to go off and explore the magnificent Angkor ruins with my own eyes!

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About the Author

Ravy S. Lao is a PhD Candidate in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Exploring the concepts of community and everyday relations through space and time and its impacts on relationship building, in her dissertation study, Ravy examines the establishment of a multi-agency collaboration of a Khmer heritage language program in Southern California. Her forthcoming publication includes a chapter on the education system of Cambodia for the encyclopedia entitled *International Education and Human Development* (M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2012) with Rebeca Mireles-Rios and Vivian Lee Rhone. Presently, she is employed by RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California as a Field Interviewer and Validator on two studies focusing on the Cambodian community in Long Beach.



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