

# Croft House Settlement Amateur Operatic Society



Richard Ian Jeffrey

*Croft's last production of "The King and I" was at the Empire Theatre in 1959, when the part of Prince Chululongkorn was played by Richard Jeffrey of Ecclesall, Sheffield.*

*In August last year, having gained an Honours Degree in Mechanical Engineering at Birmingham University, Richard set out to see something of the world and to-date has visited some 15 countries, ranging from Europe through the Middle East to the Far East and to Australia.*

*Of all these countries, he has found Thailand the most fascinating by far. In Bangkok, he visited the Chululongkorn University and from there he sent us the following report which provides an interesting background story to our show.*

*The society would also like to take this opportunity to say a sincere thank you for your support of our cause and to wish you an enjoyable evening at the theatre.*

The country of Siam became Thailand in 1940 in accordance with the wishes of its people, who have always called it Thai, meaning free. The fact that it is the only country in South East Asia never to have been colonised is largely due to the tactful foreign policy of King Mongkut (The King).

He was born the fourth king of the Chakri Dynasty in 1804 and came to the throne on the death of his half brother, King Phra Nanglav, in 1851. Prior to his accession, he had worn the saffron robe of a Buddhist Monk for 27 years and as such had been able to know his people more intimately than any other Prince of his time. During this period, he had also studied many subjects, including Geography, Mathematics, World History, English and his favourite, Astronomy. With so many new horizons opened by his learning, he hired European Teachers (including Mrs. Anna Leonowens) for his many children, and invited Western Advisors. He was apparently inexhaustible and most prolific, having 82 children by 35 wives, introducing modern currency, re-organising the Army according to the British System and still finding time to re-write Thai History.

In 1868, Mongkut was succeeded by his eldest son, Prince Chululongkorn, who pursued and enlarged in his father's work by abolishing Slavery, building the first Railway, establishing a Post and Telegraph Service, a Public Hospital and a National Library during his reign—the longest to date of the Chakri Dynasty. On his death in 1910 he was deeply mourned by the whole country.

The Grand Palace, seat of the Chakri Dynasty and setting of the "King and I" can be seen today, in Bangkok. It is a strange and impressive building, topped with dramatic curving gables and an ornamental tiled roof of traditional Thai design. Bangkok is more than a political capital and a rich market town, it is a religious shrine. The Thai's call it Krung Thep (abode of Angels). It is a city of three hundred temples, whose high white walls and gem studded gables catch and reflect the sun high above the humbler roofs of houses and shops.

A hundred years ago, when Bangkok was almost new, and the temples freshly painted and still unchipped, her streets were a network of canals, or klongs; some were broad like highways, others no more than winding creeks with grassy banks shaded by fruit trees or lined with little wooden houses on stilts with curving gables and steps that led down to the water. Today, many of the klongs have been filled in to make room for roads and in the crowded narrow streets of the business centre, tram cars rattle, taxis and air-conditioned limousines travel nose to tail for miles and the inevitable cyclists weave between all and sundry.

Despite modernisation, something of Bangkok's early simplicity remains still. If you hire a little sampan to paddle you through the leafy klongs after sunset, or sit under the wall of a temple at night, or get up early with the dawn to catch the river before the market rush begins, you might be back in the days of "The King and I".