

The resonance of ruins and the question of history

Sarah Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins: Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2016, 302 pp., 44 col. plates, £38.95 hdbk, ISBN: 978-9971-69-849-2

Anna Blair

Thomas Stamford Raffles, today, is arguably better known as the namesake to a hotel than as an individual who played a prominent role in shaping the British Empire. 'Raffles' conjures up a particular style of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century architecture, with pitched roofs and shaded verandas accented with wicker furniture, semi-transparent fabrics and strikingly green plants; 'Raffles', to many tourists, is a place where one might splurge on afternoon tea or a drink named the Singapore Sling, invented in the Long Bar. Ralph Modder wrote, in 1993, that this drink 'seems to be enhanced in some mysterious way by the old colonial and Oriental ambience which is the soul of Singapore and which could only be found at Raffles [...] that special magic about the place which touches visitors and makes them want to return to the Raffles... and to Singapore.'¹ Raffles is a word, in short, which serves to obfuscate, presenting an image of leisure that diverts attention from the operations of power. The Raffles Hotel is a site for colonial nostalgia, presenting fiction as history, but also a site that reveals Britain's imperial presence in Southeast Asia is far from historical.

The Raffles Hotel, however, is remarkably like the ruins about which its namesake wrote, in that it is a remnant of a civilisation that has drastically changed. The Raffles Hotel is seen as a document through which to understand Singapore's past and present; the traveller's approach is assembled through the thousands of accumulated texts and images that constitute Western readings of the British Empire's history in Southeast Asia. The hotel's restoration, due to be completed in 2018, is unlikely to shift the discourse that surrounds it. The Raffles Hotel is overgrown with myth.

©

It is on Thomas Stamford Raffles' own approach to imperial mythmaking that Sarah Tiffin's *Southeast Asia in Ruins: Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century* focuses. Tiffin looks at a point prior to Raffles' establishment of Singapore and his own reputation, examining *The History of Java*, which he published in 1817 when his career, following the return of Java to the Dutch and his own recall to London, evinced, for Raffles, feelings of wasted personal potential that he projected upon the island's monuments.² Tiffin's examination of this book's text and images in relation to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century ruin culture offers a fascinating study of the ways in which post-enlightenment, pre-industrial British audiences processed

¹ Ralph Modder, *Lions and Tigers*, Singapore: Roseapple Books, 1993, 280.

² Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, London: John Murray, 1830.

information, and has implications stretching beyond that time to provoke questions relevant to our own. It is a well-illustrated and well-designed volume that provides space in which the reader is able to contemplate the primary sources that the author quotes extensively.

This is a dense and informative volume, which relies upon prior knowledge of the broader period and central figures whilst providing extensive detail on the texts with which it is immediately concerned. I will give an overview of its content before examining some of the issues provoked by Tiffin's book.

Java was a British colony for only five years. The seizure of Java, in 1811, was prompted by a desire to stop the French using Dutch ports to limit British shipping; by 1815, it was determined that, if the island was returned to Dutch control, the British could still access the waters surrounding the archipelago, and Java was returned to the Dutch in 1816. Thomas Stamford Raffles, administrator of the colony, wished to see it developed by the British. In 1815, he was recalled to London and began writing *The History of Java*, based on material gathered by fact-finding missions he had initiated; Tiffin writes that the book expresses 'his profound regret over the loss of the island.'³ Raffles was not, however, the only person writing about the region at this time, and Tiffin also compares his text to William Marsden's *The History of Sumatra, Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, With a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of That Island* (1783, with further editions in 1784 and 1811) and John Crawfurd's *History of the Indian Archipelago Containing an Account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions, and Commerce of its Inhabitants* (1820).⁴ These three books were broad surveys that dedicated substantial space to Buddhist and Hindu monuments in the areas they covered, and were sources that the aristocratic British public saw as authoritative.

Tiffin's central argument is not a surprising or unusual one, given the nature of the sources on which this study centres, but her tight focus and level of detail allows for a nuanced exploration of this argument. The argument is that Java's ruins operated as 'prompts to speculation' and that the resulting speculations tell us much more about Britain than they do about Java, their purported subject.⁵ Tiffin illuminates, through her exploration of this idea, that there was often inconsistency within texts; Raffles emphasised both the similarity and difference of Java from Great Britain, described it as 'both civilised and degenerate', and both praised and criticised the Javanese in *The History of Java*.⁶ Furthermore, those writing about Java were not always in consensus, but 'differed in their assessments of the aesthetic merits of the architectural remains, in the level of progress they attributed to the

³ Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins*, 16.

⁴ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra, Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, With a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of That Island*, London: William Marsden, 1783; John Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago Containing an Account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions, and Commerce of its Inhabitants*, 3 vols., Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820.

⁵ Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins*, 2.

⁶ Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins*, 6.

region's earlier civilisations, in the weight they placed on the various factors implicated in the decline of those civilisations, and even in the degree to which they believed the construction of the monuments was the initiative of the local inhabitants in the first place.⁷ Raffles, as the central figure in the book, was in opposition to the policy of both the British government and the East India Company, attempting to retrospectively justify his actions, and so his views on the ruins cannot be taken as representing *the* imperial perspective, but rather *an* imperial perspective.

Tiffin focuses on the ways in which words inform the reception of images, looking at the British literary culture that shaped the way in which the plates of *The History of Java* were read; illustrations, in the early nineteenth century, posed questions that were answered by text, and the book is framed in a similar way, with the first and second chapters exploring the images of Java's monuments while subsequent chapters inspect British explanations for their disrepair. Many of the drawings that formed the basis for the plates are by William Daniell, an established artist known for his aquatints of India, while others preparing sketches for the book were Dutch and British amateurs who drew as a means of indicating their social status in an environment without other indices.

In the early eighteenth century, British commentators had great trust in images. Realistic drawings were seen as adding veracity to text, and Tiffin quotes a commentator who believes writing 'takes on some colour from the opinion of the writer' while images in ink or pencil 'allow of no opinion' and 'are not liable to the missions of memory, or the misconceptions of fancy; whatever [the image] communicates is a transcript from nature.'⁸ Tiffin offers a number of explanations as to why images of ruins were valued in this way; in Europe, the development of archaeology was emphasising the value of images as tools for observation and communication, while those in Southeast Asia felt that information conveyed by local people, whether in text or in oral history, was not trustworthy, preferring the testimony of stones.

There was widespread interest in abandoned monuments in the eighteenth century, and to be 'educated', at this time, meant to be familiar with classical Greece and Rome and to have undertaken a Grand Tour, visiting both ruins and galleries containing representations of ruins. Their pull, however, was not merely academic, but also affective; one commentator wrote that 'no one of the least sentiment or imagination can look back upon an old or ruined edifice without feeling sublime emotions.'⁹ Java's temples were mysterious, large and looming, with dark interiors; they were, Tiffin writes, 'perfectly in accord with the feelings of terror, darkness, solitude, vastness, unfamiliarity, power and magnificence that were the sublime's distinguishing attributes.' The language used by those describing them – words such as 'astonishment', 'veneration', 'delight', 'awe & terror' – imply a suspension of

⁷ Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins*, 6.

⁸ General Francis Jarry, cited in Archer, *British Drawings in the India Office Library*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1969, 6, and quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 42 – 43.

⁹ Unnamed author in *European Magazine*, 1795, cited in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 173, and quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 46.

critical faculties brought about by their grandeur.¹⁰ Tiffin quotes a wide range of European sources on the sublime, showing a close connection between this discourse and the monuments of Java.

These quotations include William Gilpin's comment that 'nature should be copied, as an author should be translated', which also offers insight into the ways in which the perception of Java's temples was transformed by their representation.¹¹ Translation is not a neutral act, and Tiffin shows that the space between the monuments, the preparatory sketches and the plates that illustrated *The History of Java* was similarly fraught. The reproductions in this book show that the changes made in engraving were subtle. The major difference, generally, is in light and shading, which heightens the suggestion of mystery and leads the images to conform with Burke's suggestion of the sublime as offering 'edifices [...] dark and gloomy.'¹² In one case, however, an engraver misunderstood an overgrown stepped roof to be a cupola, something Tiffin suggests may have been due to the use of models from the Middle East to clarify unknown architectural forms.

The sketches themselves, however, were shaped by the aesthetic choices of Daniell and others. The grandeur and danger of the world around the ruins is heightened, with volcanoes and jungles featuring frequently while agricultural landscapes are not depicted; figures, when they appear, stare idly at the monuments, engaged in nothing but the illustration of scale. Artists regularly make decisions about composition, and these are influenced by and influence culture more broadly. These images, showing ruins isolated in dramatic landscapes, prompted questions on how the monuments came to be abandoned, and it was their accompanying text that provided readers with possible answers, which in turn led the way to comparisons with Britain.

In 1740, George Turnbull had written in *Treatise on Ancient Painting* that 'the general or national Character of a People may be conjectured from the State of the Arts amongst them', and this viewpoint circulated widely in the following century.¹³ Commentators measured the work of Javanese sculptors through reference to European art. Colin Mackenzie praised the 'Unity, Proportion & Truth' found at Prambanan; the terms of his praise echo the central tenets of Greek aesthetic theory.¹⁴ There was not, however, consensus on which rubric to use; Crawford

¹⁰ Raffles, *The History of Java*, 5, 40, and Captain Godfrey Baker, *Java Antiquities 2/4. Extracts From the Private Journal of Captain G. Baker 19th Regt Bengal Infantry, of All Memoirs Made on the Spot Relative to the Collection of Antiquarian Drawings etc Made by Him in a Tour Thro' the Interior of Java in the Years 1815/16*, London: Royal Asiatic Society, f. 118, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 46.

¹¹ William Gilpin, *Two Essays: One, On The Author's Mode Of Executing Rough Studies; The Other, On The Principles On Which They Are Composed*, London: T Cadell and W Davies, 1804, 20, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 54.

¹² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759, 147, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 72.

¹³ George Turnbull, *Treatise on Ancient Painting*, 1740, cited in Francis Haskell, *History and its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, 218, and quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 88.

¹⁴ Cited in Annabel Teh Gallop, *Early Views of Indonesia: Drawings From the British Library*, London: British Library, 1995, 25, and quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 94.

wrote that ‘neither grandeur nor sublimity’ might be found there, borrowing from the language of Romanticism to frame his criticism of the buildings as too heavy and too small.¹⁵

These ways of looking stem from European traditions, but also contributed to the discourse that maintained power through the idea of European superiority. Raffles used the ruins as evidence of Java’s place in a hierarchy, writing that the ruins were ‘striking and obvious proofs [...] of Java to be considered at one period far advanced in civilisation.’¹⁶ Crawford characterised the Javanese, on the basis of the ruins, as the ‘most civilised’ of those living on the archipelago, but was suspicious of the idea that these attested to ‘an antecedent state of high civilisation and improvement’, labelling this ‘forged by the national vanity of the Javanese.’¹⁷ Marsden, similarly, was suspicious. His text did, however, echo the assumptions of decline made elsewhere, commenting that ‘they seem rather to be sinking into obscurity, though with opportunities of improvement, than emerging.’¹⁸ The opportunities to which Marsden refers, of course, are those associated with British control.

Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) also played a major role in the interpretation of ruins as political, shifting the scale from that of meditations on individual mortality to treatises on the fates of entire civilisations.¹⁹ In this discourse, the ruin serves as a physical counterpart to an abstract theory, and operates almost to poeticise political theory, extending its reach through an appeal to aesthetic tastes. This can be seen in Gibbon’s claim that ‘it was among the ruins of the Capitol that [he] first conceived’ his book; an earlier draft, Tiffin notes, placed him elsewhere, in a church that was not ruined, but rather built from materials salvaged from classical structures.²⁰ The word ‘Fall’, in the title of the book, has a definite physicality to it, serving to evoke a sense of crumbling architecture before the reader opens the book. This emphasis echoed ideas found in the poetry of the Comte de Volney and Percy Bysshe Shelley; the latter, in *Queen Mab* (1813), used Palmyra as a site for reflecting upon the impermanence of societies, writing that the ‘ruined palaces’ provided ‘an awful warning: soon/oblivion will steal silently/the remnant of its fame.’²¹

Tiffin’s consideration of Southeast Asian ruins and the gothic is among the highlights of the book, linking the idea of fear as a component of the sublime with an examination of the role of natural fecundity in evoking mood. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in 1782, wrote that he needed ‘torrents, rocks, firs, dark woods,

¹⁵ John Crawford, *Asiatick Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal, for Enquiring Into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia*, London: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1820, 357 – 358, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 94.

¹⁶ Raffles, *The History of Java*, vol. 1, 165, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 96.

¹⁷ Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 2, Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820, 297 quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 97.

¹⁸ Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*, 207, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 96.

¹⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols, London: Penguin Books, 1995.

²⁰ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, vol.3, 1085, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 113.

²¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab A Philosophical Poem, With Notes*, London: R. Carlile, 1823, vol. 2, ll. 109-20, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 115.

mountains, steep roads to climb or descend, abysses beside me to make me afraid.'²² Tiffin offers examples of passages in which description of Southeast Asia reads as similar to the European gothic, imbued with gloom and awe. Godfrey P. Baker, describing his journey to survey the temples, wrote of the 'forest thick and impervious; the growth & witness of unknown ages [...] damp, dark & silent desolation.'²³ James Wathen, visiting a waterfall at Penang, felt 'a kind of superstitious horror', and James Johnson's description of the same waterfall suggests a possible explanation for this. Johnson wrote that the trees 'almost excluded the day', which was spent on a 'steep, rugged, and narrow' path that led to a sudden clearing and the 'bason into which the water tumbles [...] bounded on each side with craggy precipices' where the 'harsh notes of birds' can be heard.²⁴

Johnson's evocation of the waterfall reads almost like a proto-Edwardian ghost story, with light through trees like the light through the high windows of a church, the difficulty of the journey registering as a narrator's arrival in a desolate town at nightfall, and the cackle of a bird, above, like the laugh of an unknown menace in the shadowed clerestory. In both cases, the language evokes a sense of isolation that translates into fear, and the spectacle of the revelation is a testament to something beyond the power of man. Tiffin's extensive placement of descriptions of Southeast Asia alongside quotes from well-known European texts reveals both the cultural construction of this region and the degree to which Southeast Asia was not necessarily very different from Europe.

The drama of Java's jungles was, however, heavily politicised. One image, reproduced in this book, shows a structure entirely crushed by a tree, which grows above it as if elaborately balanced on the stones. Mackenzie wrote that a banyan tree might 'destroy the whole.'²⁵ Again, Tiffin links this to European theories of climate; Montesquieu and Chardin were among those who saw Northern Europe as offering 'few vices, many virtues, and a great share of frankness and sincerity' while warmer climates sapped strength, making people 'disastrously impressionable.'²⁶ This was explained by the growth of plants in tropical climates, presented as dangerously quick, such that food was abundant and inhabitants did not need to exert effort. Raffles wrote that 'the peasantry of Java, easily procuring the necessaries of life,

²² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953, 167, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 121.

²³ Baker, *Java Antiquities* 2/4, ff 12 – 14, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 122.

²⁴ James Johnson, *The Oriental Voyager; or Descriptive Sketches and Cursory Remarks on a Voyage to India and China, in His Majesty's Ship 'Caroline' Performed in the Years 1803 – 4 – 5 – 6. Interspersed with Extracts From the Best Modern Voyages and Travels. The Whole Intended to Exhibit a Topographical and Picturesque Sketch of All the Principal Places Which are Annually or Occasionally Visited by Our East India and China Fleets. The Routes To and From India, Illustrated by the Tracks of His Majesty's Ships 'Caroline' and 'Medusa' Correctly Set Off on a Chart, Extending From the British Isles to Canton*, London: James Asperne, 1807, 119 – 20, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 123.

²⁵ Mackenzie, 'Narrative of a Journey to Examine the Remains of an Ancient City and Temples at Brambana, in the Island of Java', *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies*, July 1816, 352, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 120.

²⁶ Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, London: F. Wingrave et al, 1793, 167, 165, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 123 – 124.

seldom aim at improvement.²⁷ Climate, too, was linked to the ruins. Crawford believed the construction and ruin of Java's monuments was because heat could stimulate development but could not maintain it, while Raffles speculated that 'more enlightened strangers' may have come to Java because of the warm climate and built the monuments before leaving.²⁸

The British commentators examined by Tiffin are constantly hypothesising, ruminating on an array of explanations for the way in which they saw Java, attempting to reconcile their belief in British superiority with the existence of admirable monuments. The island's shift in dominant religion is also offered to justify this conclusion, and Tiffin notes that images of mosques or tombs of Java's Muslim saints were almost never included in British publications. Hindu and Buddhist beliefs elsewhere, however, were similarly criticised. Java's political structures were also criticised, characterised by the British as despotic and erratic, governed by passions rather than reason. In Britain, the right of the monarchy to hereditary privilege went largely unquestioned, and leaders such as Raffles did not scrutinise their own systems; they criticised Javanese ceremony, however, as luxurious and excessive without considering the ways in which British ritual also served as a confirmation of the social order. Instead, Britain's commercial prosperity was seen as evidence of social progress, following the argument made by Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) that free trade was an advanced form of civilisation that led to freedom and security, uniting societies to their mutual improvement.²⁹ Dutch trade was seen as monopolistic, so this argument served both to position Britain as superior to both local and other European rulers. Raffles, additionally, saw the Dutch neglect of the ruins as evidence that they were not fit to control Java, characterising them as 'incurious' and positioning his own government as more holistic.³⁰

Tiffin's conclusion is that responses to Southeast Asia's ruins are 'variations on a theme', reflecting British thought across a range of aesthetic, moral and political questions, and that the most vocal commentator was Raffles, who wrote *The History of Java* as a retrospective argument in support of his administrative choices and the value of Java to the British Empire.³¹ *The History of Java* sold well in 1817, but less so when it was rereleased in 1830, by which point the founding of Singapore was seen as Raffles' greatest achievement. Sophia Raffles, in a memoir about her husband, published in the same year, included an image of Singapore, reproduced in *Southeast Asia in Ruins*, which is very different to those of the monuments fallen into disrepair.³² The ruins looked toward the past, suggesting a greatness that Britain might repair; the image of Singapore, however, positions the

²⁷ Raffles, *The History of Java*, vol. 1, 109, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 126.

²⁸ Raffles, *The History of Java*, vol. 1, 58, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 130.

²⁹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols., London: Methuen, 1950.

³⁰ Unknown author, review of *The History of Java*, *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* 24, Dec. 1817, 585, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 184.

³¹ Tiffin, 2016, 204.

³² Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, London: John Murray, 1830.

viewer above an expanding city, offering a vision of the future that is, as Tiffin phrases it, 'as limitless as the horizon.'³³



One of the strengths of *Southeast Asia in Ruins: Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century* is the degree to which it provokes further thought. Tiffin draws out many interesting links across a range of areas and locales whilst retaining a tight focus on British relationships with images of Javanese ruins. Her work, however, raises a set of interesting questions that warrant further exploration, and there are times when the richness and complexity of the material under discussion is such that it merits more analysis than can be provided in the book's limited space. It would be interesting to see the ideas in this book tested for their broader relevance, and the problems provoked by that, discussed, but it would also be beneficial, in some areas, to have greater nuance and specificity.

Tiffin initially situates her study in relation to Edward Saïd's excavation of language and power, and the themes and methods with which Saïd's work is concerned are often those that Tiffin examines. Tiffin also acknowledges her theoretical debt to the work of Linda Nochlin, who played a pivotal role in expanding Saïd's analysis to the visual realm, and to WJT Mitchell's idea that landscapes are more 'medium of cultural expression' than artistic genre, constructed to impress ideas of the natural upon audiences.³⁴ One surprising omission is the work of David Arnold, who has looked at 'tropicality' as a discourse that operates in a similar manner to Orientalism, though with greater emphasis on climate and plant life; this idea would further strengthen some of Tiffin's observations on these areas, which played a central role in British perceptions of Java.³⁵

After the introduction, however, Tiffin does not discuss twentieth or twenty-first century theorists, instead focusing on those preceding and contemporaneous with Raffles. The links between the theoretical discussion in the introduction, as a result, could be further unpacked in relation to the material under discussion, and particularly the idea of ruins as images. Saïd's work is primarily concerned with language as a means of enacting and naturalising power, but images appeal in a different manner, and the process of unpicking images – conducted as it is in words – involves translation alongside analysis. Images are effective, often, because they go beyond language, making arguments in different ways, sometimes appealing to

³³ Tiffin, 2016, 213.

³⁴ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; Edward Saïd, *The Word, The Text and the Critic*, London: Vintage, 1983; Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1993; Linda Nochlin, 'The Imaginary Orient', *Art in America*, May 183, 118 – 131, 187 – 191; Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society*, New York: Harper and Row, 1989; WJT Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 9 – 10.

³⁵ David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, Oxford, England, and Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996; David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Travelling Gaze: India, Landscape and Science, 1806 – 1856*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006.

emotions that are in tension with rational thought, and often succeeding precisely because their audience does not have the requisite tools to unpack an image.

The idea of the author as somebody who is not objective, but rather shaped by their position, is key to postcolonial theory, though it is emphasised differently by various theorists; both Saïd and Nochlin describe the way in which the invisibility of the author or painter contributes to the idea that they describing, rather than constructing, a world. If the depiction of another place is shaped by one's own context, it is worth considering why it is that this subject captures Tiffin's attention today, and the ways in which her position impacts upon the shape of her study. Tiffin's personal position and interests are undeclared, and Tiffin's position as an art historian is similarly unexplored. The academic tradition in which this book operates is descended from the mode in which Raffles, and others, worked, but the issue of academic history's own biases goes unexplored, creating a sense – at least for this reader – that there are, perhaps, ways in which the work undoes itself. The idea of historians as impartial observers who ought not acknowledge themselves persists in some corners of the field, but it is a slightly jarring choice in a book that focuses heavily on the degree to which texts and images are shaped by one's own position and a book that exposes the weakness of intellectual discourse historically. The navigation of one's own position and the examination of one's own potential biases are not easy, and it may not be possible to reckon with one's own relationship to overarching structures such as empire, but the absence of the author's explicit presence in this text deserves some attention; Tiffin's claim in the introduction that the absence of the British presence in images of ruins contributed to their claims of authority, alongside her attention to the ways in which texts construct perceptions of place and politics, does serve to call her own approach into question as it dismantles those she examines.³⁶

Southeast Asia in Ruins highlights, through constant reference to and quotation of rhetorical justifications for claims of British superiority, the limits of rational argument, and in this it calls into question many things, including academic discourse. The claims that Tiffin evaluates were constructed in order to back up an existing belief in European superiority. Tiffin writes of the way in which the British justified their pleasure in mountains through theories of the picturesque and the sublime whilst dismissing the preferences of those from Southeast Asia as grounded in superstition. The Javanese also wrote strikingly similar poetry about their encounters with these monuments, though Tiffin does not explain their motivations. The rhetoric of the writers that Tiffin examines is a reminder of the emptiness of most claims to objectivity, but also a reminder to question all claims to understanding.

³⁶ The same claim could be made, of course, about this review; I have not made my own relationship to the study of ruins and empire, or to the tradition I am examining, particularly clear. I am sure my own approach is shaped by my background as an art historian educated in Australian and British institutions that prioritize European traditions and by my own study of French images of Angkor Wat, which later in the nineteenth century took similar form to those Tiffin examines in this book, with similar discourse surrounding them. I am sure my own approach is shaped by other factors, also, and I do not have a clear answer as to how these questions of subjectivity can be resolved.

The central figures in this book could also be more fully drawn; Thomas Stamford Raffles remains a figure in shadow. Tiffin identifies Raffles' personal feelings of loss as central to *The History of Java* in the introduction, but the specifics of Raffles' position, which might illuminate this reading of the book, do not emerge until the final chapter, and then conjure more questions than they answer. Tiffin alternates between characterising Raffles as an anomaly amongst administrators and reminding the reader that he 'was, after all, [...] an agent of British imperial expansion.'³⁷ Raffles was not, however, simply a bureaucrat; he was an agent actively involved in determining the nature and reach of the British Empire, and his motivations deserve greater scrutiny. Tiffin writes, in the conclusion, that *The History of Java* was directed entirely toward 'justifying both his policies in Java and his advocacy for retaining the island', but it is not clear whether Raffles' advocacy for Java was driven primarily by genuine belief in the island's value to Britain or by a desire to further his own career.³⁸ Raffles' voice is present throughout the volume in the form of quotations from the text, but his motivations do not fully take shape.

It is also not completely clear why Raffles chose to represent Java primarily through architectural monuments. Tiffin's argument that Raffles was more an administrator than a connoisseur, and that his attention to the ruins was driven by an awareness of their political power, leads to questions as to why ruins, rather than resources, might have been seen as particularly valuable in 1817, following Java's handover. Tiffin makes clear that these images were in keeping with the zeitgeist of the eighteenth century, but also notes that in the early nineteenth century those in Britain began to look forward, away from ruins, and suggests that the images of *The History of Java* speak to Raffles' personal sense of loss, his 'bitter and profound regret' at the loss of Java and his own career.³⁹ This is an exciting argument, but further attention could be devoted to material supporting it.

The motivations of other individuals and groups also raise questions. Those that Raffles employed to survey the island of Java, including Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Mackenzie, a military engineer, and Dr Thomas Horsfield, an American physician and amateur naturalist, had very different backgrounds that one might expect shaped their approaches. Tiffin writes early in the book that *The History of Java* was 'available to the literate British public', displayed at the Royal Academy and at a range of sites associated with the East India Company.⁴⁰ Those who came to look at the book would likely have read the books Tiffin ascribes to such a class, but their visual literacy is not as fully detailed.

The images that *Southeast Asia in Ruins* circles were effective, in part, because those looking at them had little access to other representations of the colonies, and because *The History of Java* was seen as authoritative. Tiffin quotes a number of sources testifying to trust in images over text. Given this, it would be useful to read more on the ways in which people were taught to approach both images and the colonies themselves, complementing the detailed information on the ways in which this class were educated into the appreciation of European ruins. Tiffin writes that

³⁷ Tiffin, 2016, 194.

³⁸ Tiffin, 2016, 205.

³⁹ Tiffin, 2016, 211.

⁴⁰ Tiffin, 2016, 3.

this way of framing Southeast Asia rendered Java ‘entirely knowable’, but it is unclear whether these images were an introduction to, an extension or a contradiction of what was previously known or believed about the region.⁴¹

The ideas and issues with which *Southeast Asia in Ruins* is centrally engaged did not end with the loss of Java, the death of Raffles, or even with British decolonisation. While Tiffin does not take the thoughts provoked by this book beyond the period on which she is immediately concentrating, many resonate today. The degree to which readings of these images were shaped by a lack of visual literacy and a lack of access to a range of views of other cultures is a reminder, in a period when government support is declining, of the importance of both art history and global studies. Tiffin quotes one commentator who writes that drawings ‘are not liable to the missions of memory, or the misconceptions of fancy;’ an idea that has shifted and persisted, sometimes perniciously, as new technologies have simultaneously facilitated increasingly realistic and increasingly constructed portrayals of the world.⁴² William Marshall’s 1795 comment that the sublime ‘cannot be dwelt on with indifference, by an eye unhabituated to its effects, and a mind possessing the least sensibility’ reads not only as a commentary on these images of ruins, but also as an insight into the way in which aesthetic grandeur can lead to the suspension of critical faculties, with implications elsewhere.⁴³ Tiffin’s tracing of the role of archaeology and distrust of written texts from outside Europe in the rising significance of images and architecture as sources, too, provokes interesting considerations on the way in which audiences approach visual sources today. Arguments about connections between trade and the state of civilisations are also similar to those that circulate today, and the tension between optimism and pessimism suggested by discourses of progress and ruin are echoed today in the range of attitudes concerning the planet’s future. Tiffin does not look outside the period on which she focuses, but the image of the eighteenth century presented in this book manages, without explicitly referencing it, to speak to the ways in which we make sense of the world in our own time.

Tiffin’s work is part of a valuable academic trend that examines ways in which similarity, rather than difference, played a central role in cultures of empire, and which reads the history of British presence in non-Western countries through the European reference points by which it was defined rather than as something outside and other. These comments are not intended to suggest that *Southeast Asia in Ruins* is not a valuable text for the study of European conceptions of Southeast Asia; it is to Tiffin’s credit that this book provokes such a range of directions for further thought. It would be immensely difficult, if not impossible, to give the same level of scrutiny to the broader place of colonial ruins in history and contemporary thought

⁴¹ Tiffin, 2016, 5.

⁴² Thomas Daniell and William Daniell, *Oriental Scenery: Twenty Four Views in Hindoostan Drawn and Engraved by Thomas Daniell*, London: Thomas Daniell, 1795, unpaginated, quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 42 – 43.

⁴³ Cited in Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 276, and quoted in Tiffin, 2016, 47.

that Tiffin gives to the images and text of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and this task is beyond the scope of this focused volume.

It is, however, ruins and their continued appeal that animates *Southeast Asia in Ruins*, and ruins remain sites onto which we project our ideas. Borobudur and Prambanan remain popular, as do the Parthenon and the Colosseum. There has been a proliferation of images, in recent years, showing ruins of colonial and industrial sites. The explanation for this broader preoccupation, which spans continents and centuries, remains as mysterious as an image presented without context. It may be, perhaps, that the ruin, poised as it is between the complete and the completely absent, is a provocation to dream. It could be, as in the eighteenth century, that the ruin is a question we feel compelled to answer, even as those answers reveal, instead of the past, the contingencies of history.

Anna Blair is a PhD Candidate in History of Art and Architecture at the University of Cambridge, working on colonial spaces and concepts of modernity in interwar Paris. She won the Warren Trust Award for Architectural Writing in 2017 and has previously worked at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

anna.kate.blair@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)