

## Personal View

Time stolen in fleeting visits is time remembered. The bitter chill of an Edinburgh wind cut deep in the early evening. I was about to remark that "June was never like this" but I reserved judgment, as fatigue induced by a flight of 13 000 miles dims the faculties. A night's sleep went some way to restoring the spirit and blunted the cold, which I reassessed benevolently as brisk. It was good to be back but where were those I once knew? Grey faces against a grey landscape; it was indeed a bleak June.

Thirty-six hours passed as in a dream. The flight south was uncomfortable, more because of the cost than lack of space. London had changed. The accommodation, while serviceable, was grubby and the smell of the dining room quenched any appetite. I fancied that Doris would see me right but Doris had gone, and with her the character of the little pub where I occasionally exchanged a word with elderly custodians from the British Museum. The snug was jammed with rising executives served by suave young men bordering on the camp. What would Doris have said? Or husband, Fred, "who went upstairs five years ago and has not been down since, poor bugger."

\* \* \*

The capital in summer was not for me. The veneer of London medicine was badly cracked in places; worse, few saw the need for restoration. An enforced sojourn near Slough (so aptly named) was soon forgotten as first the Alps, then Asia Minor, and, later, Burma slipped beneath the starboard window. I was back, Chao Phraya, Wat Arun, and the north. The noises and smells of the street quickened the senses until fatigue won and thoughts of Europe were almost erased.

The bus left at 9 30 am and reached Chiang Rai five hours later, where I transferred to a dilapidated vehicle bound for Chiang Khong. I rejoiced that I had sufficient wit to ask the air hostess to write my destination in Thai, for, as the hours rolled by and passengers were shed with cheerful shouts, I became aware of being the only "farang" in the gathering night. Anxiety and curiosity grew together as we negotiated sandbagged emplacements manned by armed troops and we came to a sudden halt in total darkness—this was Chiang Khong. There were no comforting lights and no Europeans. I trailed the remaining passengers who trudged in one direction until I found myself in a narrow street, sparsely lit, aware that all eyes were on me. I sought directions in halting Thai before continuing my eerie walk in dank blackness. Suddenly a Welsh voice rang out, "Who's there?" I was face to face with the redoubtable Miss Jones.

The village might have been in Wales or in one of those parts of Scotland where unmarried ladies may still not publicly entertain a man for fear of wagging tongues. "There's a room for you at the local hotel," she said, "It's not much. Breakfast here at six? Take these." She thrust a couple of mosquito coils and a bottle of boiled water into my hands, the audience was over.

I retraced my steps ashamed of my earlier fear. I looked up, there were stars in a sky that had previously been black. Lights flickered near the Wat, drums began to beat, cymbals crashed. It was Wan Khao Phansa, "the day of entering Lent."

The days that followed were crowded with fleeting impressions, of myriads of butterflies exploding into colour when the sun broke through after the rain, the quick pad of sharp-eyed Meo as they descended from their villages to the bustling market in the predawn glow, the eddies of the Mekong, and the camps. Miss Jones provided the transport, a small Japanese motor bike of limited capacity, and we set off along the river. The villagers smiled and clapped, we shared their mirth but it was short lived. The camp held upwards of 7000 in thatched wattle huts. The immediate impact was of order and cleanliness. Mud floors were dry and shiny with no litter. Some kept hens, and pigs were not uncommon. The land was well drained with monsoon ditches, but you need only experience a brief tropical downpour to imagine the hellish conditions that would result from the sustained rainstorms that were imminent.

The hospital hut was full. Two, sometimes three, to a pallet, infants and children too weak to cry, tenderly cared for by family or friends. A few received intravenous solutions without benefit of electrolyte determinations. The doctor was in another camp and medicine was practised through interpreters, because many of his patients were hill-tribe people, Meo, Yao, Lao, and others who had crossed the river. There were few reports in the press of this exodus that had gathered momentum over the years. While the plight of the boat people occupied the media for a few weeks, you rarely saw reports of the overland refugees in the north and north-east. There were families rent by political beliefs, families separated by death or relocation, and ancient, small tribal societies in process of destruction.

I was singled out. Many thought that I was an American, Australian, or Frenchman from "the Board" on a visit to "choose" refugees. Of course, the best qualified were favoured, the skilled, the healthy, those who spoke English. The goal was the United States. I learnt the meaning of "immigrant" and "refugee" and sensed the abject horror of it all. We were joined at lunch next day by two young Chinese ministers from Hong Kong and the preprandial grace included a supplication that I might find salvation. The Chinese was an astute observer and must have read much into my facial expressions and prolonged silence. I had again lost my appetite and the shreds of what was once a steadfast religious faith.

\* \* \*

Miss Jones retired after a distinguished career of more than 30 years' devotion to Christian endeavour. I made the journey again this year but to the north-east. Refugees were again in the news with reports that some harboured *Schistosoma*. It was the rainy season and the provincial hospital was attempting to deal with the Thai variant of dengue. The paediatric wards were full, two or more to a cot, stained with altered blood. There was an unusual silence.

The newspapers and journals carry advertisements for staff in oil-rich countries and report foreign dissatisfaction with the high price of private care in London. I am left in wonderment.

ALISTAIR G C RENWICK

Auckland, New Zealand

Professor of biochemistry