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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ HISTORICAL

Twilight of the White Rajahs

Alex Ling
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Borneo's last colonial rulers are portrayed as a lusty lot in this exposé of a little-known story set in a remote, exotic land.

The "White Rajahs," who ruled Sarawak on the north shore of Borneo, were a colorful and randy lot, as portrayed by Alex Ling in this second in his series novelizing this peculiar British colonial dynasty. While much of the book focuses on the minutiae of bureaucrats wrangling over the fate of what would become a crown colony in 1946, Ling has livened it up with rather torrid, if at times unintentionally funny, sex. Most of that involves one Gerald McBryan, whose roguish antics and selfish schemes drive the plot of this historical novel.

"An Edmund Burke; an Errol Flynn; a Machiavelli—all in one," as Ling describes him, McBryan is at the center of the rather nasty political infighting that swirls about the Brooke family that presides over Sarawak in the heyday of the empire. An "incorrigible dreamer" who saw himself as "the white rajah of a pan-Islamic empire," McBryan was a real person. While he may indeed have been the "satyr" Ling portrays him as, McBryan's sexual antics and bedside banter do spice up the story, even if while in the midst of passion he does utter some embarrassingly awful lines like, "Oh God, those breasts of yours could kill a whole battalion."

Twilight of the White Rajahs is often interesting and even at times amusing—and not just because of the descriptive sex scenes or the things men and women, high-born or low, exclaim during bouts of lovemaking. McBryan's vaunting ambitions, the dreams of Ranee Sylvia Brooke, who would rather be a star in Hollywood than the queen of Sarawak, and the schemes of her petulant playboy nephew to succeed to the throne all make for good drama and a good read. That it is mostly true and takes part in the years leading up to, during, and shortly after the Japanese invasion in World War II makes the work almost as interesting as the exotic land in which the story is set.

The fifty-one chapters cover three distinct eras. The first part takes up about half of the novel and focuses on McBryan and his sexual adventures and political machinations. At first lively and well paced, the story then gets mired in the constitutional and legal wrangling over what will become of Sarawak should the White Rajahs step down.

Part two, which concerns the Japanese occupation, is all too brief, perhaps because Ling found it painful to write more about the "House of Torture" that is still "haunted by thousands of screaming souls." That is unfortunate, for in these chapters, Ling hints at and gives readers a small taste of the poignant drama and high adventure that was Sarawak during World War II. Ling writes through it quickly, only to spend far too many pages and too much energy on the least interesting part of his story—the petty postwar squabbling among bureaucrats and spoiled playboys who care little for the aspirations of the people whose fate they barter for money and status.

Twilight of the White Rajahs has much to recommend it—not least of all its function as an exposé of a little-known story about a remote and exotic land.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (October 8, 2013)

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