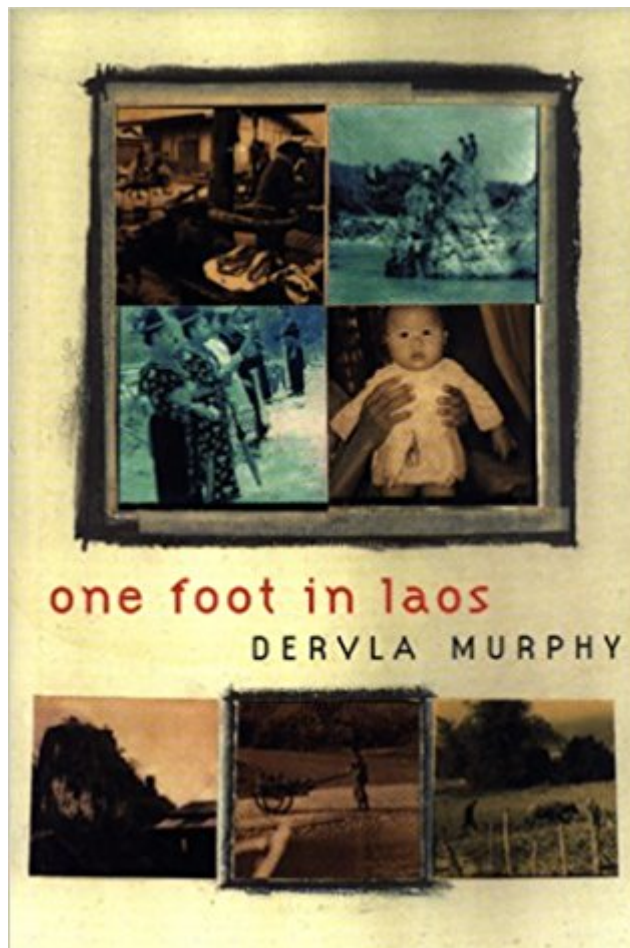


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One Foot In Laos



Synopsis

Nestled between Vietnam to the east, Myanmar and China to the north, Thailand to the west and Cambodia to the south, Laos has long suffered from the depredations of its larger neighbors. But the biggest bully in its history was the United States which, starting in 1964, carried on a "secret war" against Laos. By the time of the ceasefire in February 1973, Laos had become the most heavily bombed nation in the history of the world. When renowned travel writer Dervla Murphy went to Laos in 1997, she discovered a country that had only just opened its borders to the West. What she found was a country where the people-kind, gentle, welcoming-more than compensate for everything that can go wrong. But she also discovered that the persisting problems bequeathed by its recent past are tragic and other problems threaten its immediate future. A series of chance meetings left her with a profound sense of a beautiful country and a unique culture threatened-once again-by the extreme pressures of the modern world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dervla Murphy was born in Ireland, where she still lives. Since 1964 she has been regularly publishing accounts of her journeys by bicycle or on foot, in the remoter areas of four continents.

Published in 1999, after an intrepid lone tour of Laos by the author - a charismatic 60-something lady on a bike. From the temples and colonial architecture of the capital, up into remote mountains and tiny villages where foreigners are a rarity; Ms Murphy chronicles her journey, from the amusing to the picturesque. This is, however, a serious book, focussing at length on USA's 'Secret war' and

the vast numbers of live bombs still making much land unusable; on covert American co-operation with the opium producers; and on modern day 'development' of the country by such benevolent-sounding organisations as the United Nations Development Programme, and the horrific results of attempts to forcibly westernize a traditional society. I have to say that my eyes have been greatly opened by Ms Murphy's expose of such matters. A very informative read.

The author has a keen eye, is curious and knows how to share her emotions through her words. Her travelogues are always informative, and this is no exception. I have read it after my own trip to Laos and enjoyed it because she helped me see things, even retrospectively, that I had not seen, and also provided confirmation for what I did see and notice. She goes out of her way to find how people live, to get off the beaten track, to meet those whom tourists avoid and spares no effort to do so, giving up every comfort and even safety. I have done a little of what she has done, so I can admire the effort. I do find she is too uncritical of the regime and her openly declared far left ideological bias is evident in every paragraph. I don't share it, but that does not bother me. We all have our prejudices and she has hers. I still think the travelogue part of the book is highly valuable, even unique. As for political and economic issues there are many other sources one can find and draw one's own conclusions. She also makes frequent references to a few academic studies of Laos, but neglects many others. Perhaps she chose those that fit her theories best. In any case, again, she is free to choose her sources, and this is not an academic book, so her selectivity did not bother me. I have of course read other books on Laos to enrich my own opinions.

Once I was able to get beyond Dervla Murphy's annoying bashing of the United States and the capitalist system, and her romanticizing of the noble savage, her travelogue provided, in the least, a good bench-mark of how rapidly Laos is changing. At best, her book was thought-provoking in that it made me question the benefits of development, and made me appreciate the resilience of a nation that not too long ago was ravaged by war and continues to suffer from its effects. In addition, the book had rare moments of insight that conveyed the unique Laotian culture. Her anti-US sentiments were so ridiculous and pervasive that I had to attribute them to the rantings of a curmudgeonly, old lady who had drunk one too many BeerLao. Having recently travelled through northern Laos, you could sense the change and growth brought on by tourism. The changes appear to be primarily physical. In contrast to the book the towns may look different, and have more restaurants, accommodations, and internet cafes, but the culture described by Dervla still appears to be intact. I can not put in words, but I noticed and felt distinct, yet subtle differences between Thailand, Laos

and Cambodia. At times, when she was not ranting about US imperialism and the negative effects of development, Dervla was able to convey this uniqueness.

Dervla Murphy, a dauntless sixtysomething woman from Ireland, decides to explore Laos on foot. Although she begins in Vientiane, Murphy quickly gets off the beaten path and visits areas inaccessible by road. At one point, she injures her foot (hence the book's name) and resorts to a bicycle, while at other times she uses bus, boat, and an airplane. I found this to be the most disappointing of Murphy's books. Normally, what brings travel narratives to life is the conversation between the traveller and the locals. But there's relatively little of that here, since Murphy doesn't have a common language with these people. The author instead fills innumerable pages with her political musings. She hates Americans, who she describes as 'consistently evil,' and reminds the reader of this every few pages. Americans are hardly heroes in the history of Laos, but 'beating a dead horse' is the apt idiom here. She sees the Pathet Lao, in contrast, as the angels of Laotian history, and their abuses of human rights are excused or glossed over. She explains how low-level government employees were incarcerated in 're-education camps' for years, but does intellectual somersaults to explain it away as resembling a summer camp. Murphy also falls into the trap of idealizing third-world poverty. She sees such things as electricity and paved roads as a cancer upon society, and sings the praises of subsistence agriculture. This is ironic considering that Murphy's homeland, Ireland, wasn't exactly a utopia in its subsistence-agriculture era, yet she would gleefully freeze the Laotians in that stage of development if she could. All in all, this book is a sad let-down from a writer whose earlier work comprises so many memorable travel narratives.

read this book and immediately wrote the publisher as to how poor written it was. i have lived in laos and my wife is lao and we could write a book on what is wrong with this book.comments on history wrong , lao word usage wrong, saw things in one day we have never seen, wonder if same country, laced with her political ideas of war between us and vietnam, very pro communist in all things thought book...that part would be ok if but she givesw the impression that hte people of laos are pro communist and like their government, nothing could be further from the truth...all everyone does is complain about corruption in government...as i say we could write on book on this...i have read every book i can find on lao and own many..this is the only one that isn't worth reading..thank you..

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