U Nu of Burma

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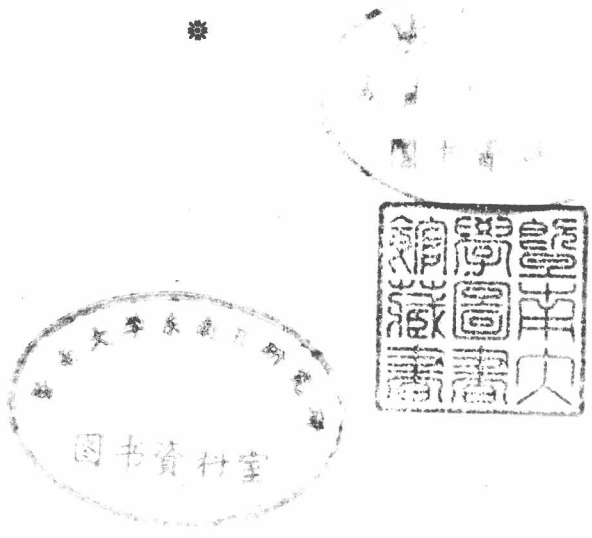

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U NU OF BURMA

To

RENA, MARIE, *and* MARGARET,

three devoted aunts

PREFACE

This is an account of a man in political life—a living man and one on whom history's pages have yet to close. This study was started when U Nu was out of office in 1959, and the research on it largely completed by the time he returned to power in 1960. U Nu left office again, involuntarily, in March 1962, literally days before the completion of the first draft of this book. When I visited Burma again in mid-1962 Nu was under detention, and it was said that he might be held prisoner until his legal parliamentary mandate expired in 1964. This sequence of events surely suggests caution in anticipating the future direction of Burma's political movement.

U Nu himself met with me in 1959–60, but this is by no means an authorized study. Nu was very helpful—as were other Burmese political figures, whose names are listed at the end of this book. Gratitude is expressed also to the U.S. Educational Foundation in Burma (Fulbright Program), the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, the University of Illinois Research Board, and St. Antony's College, Oxford, for financial and other assistance. The Defense Services Historical Research Institute, Rangoon, generously made its facilities available. Professor Fred von der Mehden of the University of Wisconsin offered much helpful advice during the year we and our families spent together in Burma. I am particularly grateful to those who read all or part of this book in manuscript form: Dr. Hugh Tinker of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, and Professors John Cady of Ohio University, Josef Silverstein of Wesleyan University, Frank Trager of New York University, Lucian W. Pye of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, William C. Johnstone of the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, and Rupert Emerson of Harvard University. Dr. Hla Pe of the School of Oriental and African

Studies, U Thaw Kaung, Mr. Stanford Chain, and Daw Khin Khin Kha of the University of Rangoon, Daw Mya Thein, formerly of the U.S. Educational Foundation (Burma), Daw Khin Than Yin, U Wan Nyunt, and Mr. John Okell provided valuable translation assistance. U Htun Myaing, who headed the U.S. Educational Foundation (Burma) during 1959–60, rendered countless services then and subsequently. Daw Khin May Yi of the Foundation was also very helpful. I also received valuable assistance from numerous librarians in and outside Burma and from the staff and students of the Graduate Program of International Relations and the Department of History and Political Science at the University of Rangoon. Professor Tai Hung-chao, formerly my graduate assistant at the University of Illinois and now a member of the Department of Political Science at Wayne State University, helped me considerably, too. Miss Elaine Lasky of Stanford University Press should be thanked for her editorial work on the text of this book. Mrs. Catherine VonRiesen typed the manuscript with great patience. I remain, however, responsible for all errors of fact or judgment.

I should also like to thank Macmillan and Company Ltd., London, and St Martin's Press, New York, for permission to quote from Thakin Nu, *Burma under the Japanese,* and The Guardian Ltd., Rangoon, for permission to quote from Nu's *Man, the Wolf of Man.* I am indebted to Gordon N. Converse for the frontispiece, and to Wide World Photos, Inc., for the other photographs, except those at the top and bottom of the first page of the insert.

Finally, I should like especially to acknowledge the support and understanding of my wife Ruth and my son John during the time I spent working on this study. All three of us became very fond of Burma, and, if this is evident despite my attempt at objectivity, I hope that it adds to rather than detracts from the value of this book.

R. B.

University of Illinois
June 1963

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PART ONE

PRELUDE TO PROMINENCE

ONE

SATURDAY'S CHILD

FOR TWENTY YEARS after the completion of the British conquest in 1886, Burma was politically quiescent. But nationalism was stirring below the surface. In 1906, a year after Japan's victory over Russia showed Asia that the European powers were not invincible, a group of Burmese university students founded the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA). The days of colonialism were numbered.

Economically, the years after 1886 were dynamic years in Burma. The delta region of lower Burma was rapidly transformed in appearance and importance by the extension of wet rice farming. Cultivators and moneylenders alike rushed to what had formerly been wastelands. The Burmese economy, previously self-sufficient, became dependent on exports—various minerals and timber as well as rice.

The delta district of Myaungmya, where the Irrawaddy River splits into many mouths, was mainly jungle until the early 1890's. Its population, which was only 85,000 in 1881, jumped to more than 185,000 by 1891 and to over 278,000 a decade later. The village of Wakema, situated on the Irrawaddy about fifty miles from the provincial capital of Rangoon, was not officially a town according to the 1901 census, but it grew enough in the next decade to be recorded as a "new town," with a population of 7,031, in 1911. It was in this community of some twelve hundred bamboo dwellings that a first son was born on May 25, 1907, to U San Htun and his wife, Daw Saw Khin, Burmans* both, whose occupation was selling supplies to *pongyis* (Buddhist monks).

Saturday-born first children are supposed to be quarrelsome, and

* Burmans, the predominant ethnic group in Burma, comprise nearly 75 per cent of the total population. Other important ethnic groups are Karens (7 per cent), Shans (6 per cent), Indians, Hindu and Muslim (4 per cent), Kachins (2 per cent), Chins (2 per cent), and Chinese (2 per cent).

hence, after consultation with local astrologers, U San Htun and Daw Saw Khin chose the antidotal name of Nu, meaning "gentle" or "soft," in order to propitiate the *nats,* or spirits.

Since a Saturday first-born might bring about the separation or even the death of its parents, Maung* Nu's grandmother prevailed upon an aunt, Daw Gyi, to buy the boy from his mother for a small sum and make him her own son in order to confuse the *nats,* who might otherwise perpetrate trouble.[1] This was in some ways a token arrangement only, since Daw Gyi, her husband, and Maung Nu's real parents lived together in the same household.

The town of Wakema in which Maung Nu grew up was the administrative center of Wakema township and the largest town in Myaungmya district. Located in rich rice country, it was independent of the outside world for its requirements during much of the year. With the harvest, however, came the broker, the shipper, and the peddler, and contact was re-established with the world beyond Wakema. At this time of year traveling Burmese folk-opera troupes visited the town, and Maung Nu's father, a fine singer, was sometimes asked to perform with them.

Wet rice farming was the chief occupation in Wakema. Of the 139,000 acres of land under cultivation in the township, over 132,000 were devoted to rice. Tenancy was widespread in Myaungmya district, and Nu's uncle, U Shwe Gon, a major landowner, let a large portion of his land. Nu's aunt was also quite wealthy in her own right, having won a large sum of money in a British sweepstakes lottery.[2]

The first decade of Nu's life appears to have been normal, happy, and seemingly richer as a consequence of the birth of a second son to his parents, their only other child. Born a year after Nu, the brother, whom Nu found a most enjoyable companion, was called Oo.

Although Nu's parents were pious, he did not have a notably religious upbringing. He and Oo entered a monastery as novitiates before they were ten;[3] they also took lessons in Buddhism from *pongyis* and visited famous pagodas with their parents. But these activities were expected of all Buddhist boys in Burma, and seem to have been perfunctory for Nu. Indeed, contrary to the strict injunctions of Burmese

* The first element of all Burmese names, both male and female, is a prefix indicating age or status. A boy is "Maung," a young man "Ko," and an older or important man "U." "Ma" is the prefix for a young woman's name, and "Daw" for that of an older woman or one of distinct accomplishment or social status. The boundaries between these prefixes are not firm.

Buddhism, the boy developed a taste for alcohol at the age of nine, and by the age of twelve was a confirmed drunkard.[4] He has described this phase of his life in a third-person autobiographical preface to his novel titled *Man, the Wolf of Man.*

> In his native town the nickname of "Tate Sanetha," "Saturday-born street Arab," was well known to everybody. The owner of this unsavory appellation was a nine-year-old boy, bad beyond his years. Already he was a boon companion of drunkards. By the age of twelve he was a heavy drinker. Often, as a sequel to his drinking bouts, his stupefied little body might be seen carried home on somebody's shoulder. His father, deeply ashamed and hopeless of reclaiming him, could only banish him to live as he would in a paddy godown outside the town. The boy brewed his own liquor there.[5]

His fellow drunkards were mostly men many years his senior, who impressed him with their swaggering manner. He took pride in doing things other boys his age did not dare to do. The fact that his uncle and adopted mother—and his real mother, too—tended to spoil him also probably contributed to the youth's shortcomings;[6] Nu himself has said that he was "a pampered boy."[7] His father and other members of the household tried to win Nu from his drinking, but to no avail.

At last, however, he came to his senses.

> At the age of eighteen something deep down inside him suddenly changed. . . . Beauty in things claimed his heart. A cool moonlight night, a verdant prospect, pretty women, sweet music began to move him profoundly. Whenever he was so moved by things of beauty he wanted to be alone with his joy. Such joy is known only to those who have experienced it. Disturbed from such a state the unfortunate devotee of beauty was distraught. That was why he could not suffer anyone to disturb him.[8]

The youthful Nu had a "secret talisman"—a photograph of a Burmese bride-to-be cut from an English-language newspaper. By his own admission, it had an extraordinary influence on him. "It inspired him with thoughts, he wanted to do good deeds, champion the weak, subdue the oppressors, like a knight of chivalry."[9] Resolved to reform, he set himself tasks like forgoing a meal or two and sitting in the sun for an hour. His shortcomings diminished within the year, "and the scorn of others lessened."[10] He later credited his reform in part to the growing influence of Buddhism. Buddhism gave him "a new sense of values," stemming from "an urge for the fulfillment of *paramis,*" or Buddhist ideals.[11]

Moved by such influences, Maung Nu stopped his drinking in his eighteenth year after taking a vow of abstinence for a period of five years. He kept this vow for seven years, but resumed drinking at the age of twenty-five before finally giving it up altogether when he was twenty-seven. Subsequently, he avoided even medicines containing alcohol.

Nu was by no means altogether irresponsible in his early teens, however. Even at that time he was strongly moved by the inequity of British rule, and he took responsibility for instructing younger students in the "national school" established in Wakema as a result of the nation-wide student boycott of 1920.

His political sentiments had their roots in the influence of his father. Limited in formal education, U San Htun was an intelligent local politician, an early member of the YMBA, and later a Wakema leader of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), the first avowedly political nationalist organization in the country.[12] He was, by all accounts, an impressive man—physically handsome and a capable public speaker. Although he was only a small-town trader and not wealthy, his personality seems to have qualified him for membership in the local elite, no small accomplishment in comparatively well-off Wakema.[13] Moreover, he was a man of some vision. His intense patriotism did not prevent him from admiring the high standards of a British education, and he had come to regret his own inability to read English (though he could read and write Burmese). Anti-British though he was, he sent Nu to a government school.[14]

Nu's mother, Daw Saw Khin, was a simple, pious woman. She was illiterate but appreciated, too, the value of education, and sacrificed in many ways to aid the schooling of both Nu and Oo. She was not stern, and influenced her sons "more by example than by precept."[15]

Nu was a somewhat sickly child but grew into a physically fit young man and a good athlete. He was fond of singing and dancing and remained so in his adult years despite the austerity of other aspects of his life. Like most children, he had his share of accidents, including one in which he nearly drowned in the river near his home. He grew up, in short, like many another Burmese boy—except for his drinking and, more important, his early introduction to politics and nationalism.

This early world of Maung Nu was to leave its indelible imprint on a boy whose name meant "gentleness," but who was not destined to live in gentle times.

The Young Men's Buddhist Association, with which U San Htun was associated, played an important role in the development of Bur-

mese nationalism, but until 1917 its activities were only indirectly political. In that year Britain's announcement of a policy of gradual development of self-governing institutions for India was greeted with joy by Burmese nationalists, who interpreted the policy as applicable to Burma as a province of India. But their hopes were dashed when the Government of India Act, ultimately introduced in the British Parliament in 1919, applied only to India proper. This sequence of events jolted Burma politically, and in 1920 the YMBA resolved to convert itself into the decidedly political GCBA.[16]

The British subsequently capitulated to Burmese demands, and governmental reforms comparable to those introduced in India were inaugurated in Burma in 1923. The flames of nationalism had been vigorously fanned, however, and the first nationwide expression of Burmese nationalist sentiment, the student boycott of 1920, had already taken place. Nu has said of it, "The most important early influence shaping my life in a political sense was the 1920 boycott. . . . I became politically conscious, as it were, overnight. I was then thirteen years old. The cries for freedom—freedom from [the] British yoke—thrilled me."[17]

The spark that touched off the school strike of 1920 was Britain's University Act of 1920, which elevated Rangoon College to university status. Burmese nationalists objected that the proposed higher (and more restrictive) standards would adversely affect their drive for self-government by limiting the number of University students and thus the size of the emerging nationalist elite, and that Britain sought to keep Burma a colony by controlling the educational system. The result was a nationwide anti-British protest of unparalleled dimensions, which led to the establishment of "national schools," schools designed to provide an education that was Burmese in orientation and to demonstrate the competence of the Burmese to educate their children.

At the time the strike broke out Maung Nu was a student in the Fifth Standard* of the Wakema Anglo-Vernacular Government School. Like the other students at the school, and thousands more throughout the country, he joined the boycott. When the year-long strike ended, Nu enrolled at the new national school in Wakema, where "the political spark ignited in my breast by the boycott movement gradually developed into a flame."[18]

The Wakema national school, which was housed in a monastery,

* Before the Second World War there were three levels of schools in Burma: primary (ages 6–10), middle (11–14), and high (15–18). The Fifth Standard is the first year of middle school.