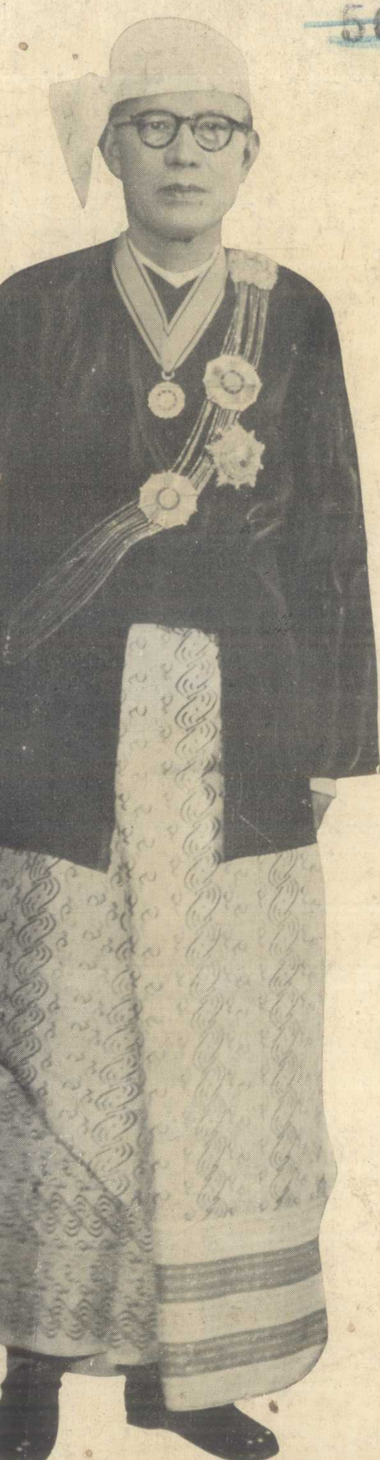

the autobiography of a president

MY BURMA

by

U BA U

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The Autobiography of a President

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With a Foreword by J. S. Furnivall

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MY BURMA

The Autobiography of a President

This book is dedicated

to

my parents

U Po Hla and Daw Daw Nyun

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He is a very sincere and real friend and lover of Burma and the Burmans. Throughout his official career in Burma, he worked with the Burmans and fought for the early attainment of their goal of self-determination.

To my friends, Mr. Leo C. Robertson, the Honorable Justice U Aung Khine and the Honorable Justice U Ba Thoung, I offer my sincere and heartfelt thanks for their encouragement, suggestions, and help. If not for them, this book would not have seen the light of day.

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FOREWORD

"It is a duty incumbent on upright and credible men of all ranks, who have performed anything noble or praiseworthy, to record, in their own writing, the events of their lives." Such, at least, was the opinion of Benvenuto Cellini. The author of the present work rose under British rule to be a judge of the High Court of Judicature in Burma and, among the Burmese judges in the latest days of British rule, he was the only one to have received the dignity of knighthood. When Burma attained independence, he became, as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the most authoritative guardian and guarantee for all the rights, inherited from British liberal traditions, which were conferred on the people under the Constitution and by law. Finally, by the unanimous vote of both Chambers of the Parliament in Joint Session, he was elected President of the Union, with precedence over all other persons throughout the Union, a position to which he has added further distinction by his judicious exercise of the powers and functions thereby conferred on him. Unquestionably, if we may accept the dictum of Benvenuto Cellini, it was his duty to relate the facts of his experience. One feature of his character which the story of his life reveals is a quiet determination to do his duty as he sees it, and this feature is further illustrated by the writing of this book. In view of the changes in Burma during his lifetime, in which he has personally taken no small part, such a record must necessarily be of historical importance. And the book must also find a place in the history of Burmese literature as almost the first essay by a Burman in the difficult art of autobiography.

Readers in the United States, misled by the title of his office, may think that he has allowed himself to be overshadowed by the Prime Minister. But he does not, and could not, claim that as President he has tried to play the part of a Theodore or Franklin Roosevelt. For the Presidency of the Union of Burma was not designed on an American model. In effect, under section 63 of the Constitution, he can exercise none of his powers or functions except in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister; he is a constitutional ruler in the English sense. As President he has the three rights that Bagehot regarded as characteristic of the English monarchy: the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, and the right to warn. Section 124 of the Constitution requires the Prime Minister to "keep the President generally informed on all matters of domestic and international policy." This gives him a specific right to be consulted and implies the right to encourage and the right to warn. A head of the state, Bagehot suggests, should want no others. To what extent U Ba U has used these powers cannot be known because, under an express provision of the Constitution, such intimate conversations may not be divulged; but the fact that U Ba U has played his part behind the scenes must not be taken to imply that he has had no part to play. Doubtless he could relate many sensational stories of what has really been happening in Burma during the last few troubled and anxious years, but he does not attempt to attract readers by indiscreet disclosures.

One thing, however, is certain. He has clearly understood and has accepted in practice the limitations and functions of a constitutional ruler along English lines. Like myself, he enjoyed the privilege of education in the college which enjoys the unique distinction of having been expressly founded "for the study of Canon and Civil Law for the rule and advantage of the Commonwealth." Good Bishop Bateman could not foresee that his bequest would bear fruit "in states unborn and accents yet unknown," but one would like to think of him as the godfather-in-law from whom the future President of this new commonwealth of Burma derived his inspiration. It would seem, however, that U Ba U must have absorbed it unconsciously from his environment as, from his own account of his residence in that venerable institution, he was more assiduous in studying the racing calendar rather than the law. But this is merely one of many human touches that should make the account of his life interesting to a wider public than the narrow circle of those professionally concerned with politics or history.

To the European reader the book should most appeal as a presentment of life and thought in Burma. In England his relations with his parents would be unusual, and the account of his school days gives a picture very different from that of Tom Brown, Eric, or The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's, and no less different from that of Tom

Sawyer. The reactions of a sensitive stranger to the rebuffs and occasional encouragement that he received as a student in England, his encounters with professional colleagues and rivals, and his contacts with personages of importance and unimportance all contribute toward an insight into the Burmese way of life as seen by a Burman from within. So also do the frequent illustrations of the Burmese attitude toward omens and the supernatural which Europeans who have been long in Burma learn to understand even if they do not share it. And perhaps none of these strange happenings is so marvelous as the fact that this young student should have risen to be President of a republic yet unborn, a contingency against which the odds were very much longer than in any of the sporting chances which the author took so hardily in his unregenerate days. It may be well, however, to mention that since the attainment of independence Burmans are learning from a modern school of historians that they have enough to be proud of in the past without recourse to the fables and ultranationalist claims current among them when U Ba U was young, which he was then perhaps too ready to accept as good propaganda.

In conclusion, I should perhaps confess that I am puzzled why U Ba U, with his past record and his exalted position, should have asked me to write an introduction. Possibly this is a survival of the Victorian convention, to which he alludes, that no one should speak to any one unless he has been formally introduced. The story of his life has indeed a Victorian moral: it tells how laudable ambition, a keen sense of duty, and steady diligence have been crowned with success. Naturally this appeals to me, as I myself am a relic from the Victorian Age. Apart from that, I can only add that I have found his book both interesting and instructive, and I hope it will attract many readers, Burman and non-Burman.

J. S. Furnivall

Rangoon, October 14, 1956

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PARENTAGE

AS the Burmese are in a sense individualistic, they do not have family names like Western peoples. The result is that one cannot trace one's family back further than two or three generations.

I can thus, in the case of my paternal family, trace my ancestry up to my great-grandfather, U San Min. He was a *Myosa* of Henzada. *Myosa* meant an "eater of a town," an official who alone enjoyed the revenue derived from it. During the period when kings reigned in Burma, princes, princesses, and high officials were given towns for their maintenance. I know nothing more about my paternal ancestry. I remember U San Min well because my father used to mention his name often; beyond that, all he used to say was, "Do you know, son, our people were big people. They came from Upper Burma. Your grandfather and his elder brother had to run away to Lower Burma, though, because of bad times." My father did not explain why, nor did I ask him any questions about it or about our ancestry. It was only when I became President and thought my people should know something of my life that I tried to find out more about my family.

My father, my uncle (the late U Po Mya, a trustee of the Shwedagon Pagoda), and my aunt, the late Daw Daw Shin, had told me that we had some relations living in Myingyan. Therefore, when I became President, I asked Thray Sithu U Ba Maung, K.S.M., T.D.M., the retired Inspector-General of Police, to make inquiries about them. I soon came into contact with U Ba Kyaw, T.P.S., proprietor of the *Aungdawmu Press,* Myingyan. Through him I met Daw Gyan of Zeyathein Quarter, Myingyan. Though I had never seen her, I had heard about her. She knew all my people. Before the war, whenever she came to Rangoon she stayed in my uncle's house. She claimed to be a granddaughter of Daw Thee, a younger sister of my paternal grandfather, U Ya Po. Although she had lost some of the papers and records left by her grandparents during the last world war, she was able to give me a full account of my ancestry. I could not at first make up my mind whether to publish it or not because I myself could not vouch for the truth of it. I had only Daw Gyan's word. But as her story was consequential, connective, and substantial, the friends whom I consulted advised me to publish it for what it is worth. I also now feel that I owe my children and their descendants Daw Gyan's account of our ancestry.

My great-grandfather, U San Min, *Myosa* of Henzada, was one of the two sons of Henzada Princess. His younger brother was U Shwe Wa. Henzada Princess and her elder sister, Padaung Princess, were princesses of royal blood. Just before he died, King Bodawpaya enjoined the Crown Prince to marry Padaung Princess and make her his chief queen. But when the Crown Prince ascended the throne as Bagyidaw, he married a commoner named Me Nu, later known as Nan-ma-daw Me Nu, and she became his favorite queen. With the help of her brother Minthagyi, she practically ruled the country. Because of Bodawpaya's injunction Nan-ma-daw Me Nu disliked and feared Padaung Princess. As soon as she got an opportunity, she put Padaung Princess to death, and later, Henzada Princess. She would have done the same to U San Min and U Shwe Wa if Sayadaw U Mala of Myingyan had not intervened and saved them. Sayadaw U Mala kept the two brothers in his *kyaung* (monastery) and taught them how to read and write. They were then in their teens. Nobody knew what happened to their father. Taungdawe Bo (General) Maung Maung Pyu.

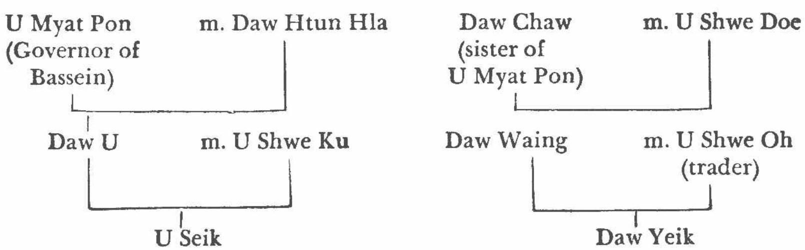
When Tharrawaddy Min succeeded his brother Bagyidaw on the throne, he put Nan-ma-daw Me Nu and her brother Minthagyi to death and took charge of the two brothers, U San Min and U Shwe Wa. He made them novices along with a hundred other boys. When they left the priesthood, he appointed U San Min as the *Myosa* of Henzada and U Shwe Wa as the *Myosa* of Pazawa; the title of *Ne-myo-ze-ya Thiri Mingala* was conferred on both. The two brothers evidently had a quiet and uneventful time during the reign of Tharrawaddy Min and his successor, Pagan Min.

There is no record of when U San Min died, but it is clear that he was no longer alive when Mindon Min ascended the throne. Mindon Min married Shinbyumashin, a daughter of Nan-ma-daw

Me Nu, and made her his favorite queen. No sooner was she firmly settled on the throne than she started giving trouble to all those closely related to Padaung Princess and Henzada Princess. That was why my grandfather, U Ya Po, and his elder brother, U Yo, had to flee disguised as *koyin* (monks) to Lower Burma.

At that time Lower Burma was already in the possession of the British, and they were doing remarkably well in the rice trade in Bassein. One of the foremost rice firms in Bassein at that time was Messrs. Bulloch Brothers and Company, Limited, and U Ya Po joined the firm as the senior head broker. He was provided with quarters in the mill compound. His elder brother, U Yo, joined another firm, also as a head broker. U Ya Po married Daw Lay, a daughter of U Yauk and Daw Ke. U Yauk was a *Ye-Twin Wun* (Admiral of the fleet) at Ava during Bagyidaw's reign. As he did not get along well with Queen Nan-ma-daw Me Nu, he had to run away with his family to Pantanaw, where he stayed for the rest of his life. His daughter Daw Lay and U Ya Po had several children: the first was my aunt, Daw Shin, and the second was my father, U Po Hla. My father married Daw Nyun, one of several daughters of Daw Yeik and U Seik. The latter was a second-grade (now called higher grade) pleader, an Honorary Magistrate, a Municipal Committee member, and a Trustee of the Shwemottaw Pagoda—one of the foremost citizens of Bassein in his day. He was a son of U Shwe Ku and Daw U, grandson (on his mother's side) of U Myat Pon (the Governor of Bassein) and Daw Htun Hla. U Seik's wife, Daw Yeik, was his cousin, a daughter of U Shwe Oh and Daw Waing. Daw Waing's mother was Daw Chaw, the Governor's sister; and her father, U Shwe Doe, was *Sayaygyi* of Bassein (Assistant to the Governor).

GENEALOGY



There is not much to write about my paternal grandfather, U Ya Po, and his elder brother, U Yo. U Ya Po was one of the leading citizens of Bassein. He was simple and pious, and consequently highly respected. His elder brother, U Yo, was high-spirited and adventurous. Besides working as a paddy broker to a European rice-milling firm, U Yo traded in general merchandise with Calcutta and had a fleet of junks (*kuttoos*).

No voyage to Calcutta was ever undertaken during the monsoon, but one day during the monsoon a vulture—which according to Burmese belief is a bird of bad omen—rested on a mast of a *kuttoo*. When U Yo saw that, he said, "*Shwehintha* (a golden plover—a bird of good omen) is now resting on a mast of my *kuttoo*. I am now in luck's way. I must set out on my voyage."

So saying, he loaded his *kuttoos* with merchandise and set out for Calcutta in spite of the advice, warnings, and entreaties of his family and friends. Not only did nothing happen, but he got to Calcutta in record time. As Burmese goods were scarce at that moment, they fetched good prices. The result was that my grandfather's elder brother made an enormous profit.

On one occasion U Yo had an attack of appendicitis and called in a surgeon. The surgeon said that an operation was necessary and that chloroform would be the anesthetic. U Yo refused to take it, and asked the surgeon to operate on him straightaway. The surgeon did. U Yo bore the pain without a flinch.

My maternal grandfather, U Seik, liked company. He always had about ten or fifteen hangers-on with him wherever he went, and he supported them. He had a very successful career at the bar. His income in terms of the value of money in those days was enormous, but he did not save much. When he died, he left just enough for his children to live on comfortably.

My maternal grandmother, Daw Yeik, was a simple and devoted wife. Her whole life was devoted to looking after her children and grandchildren.

My mother and father were what I might call perfect and ideal parents. My father was a devoted and affectionate husband and father. He joined the Commissioner's Office in Bassein soon after leaving school. After a few years he became a *Myook* (an officer in charge of a township). By dint of hard work, integrity, and honesty, he rose rapidly until he became a Deputy Commissioner in or about 1918. At that time he was one of the two or three Burmans appointed Deputy Commissioner out of a total of about forty; the rest were all Englishmen. He was loaded with honors before his retirement. He was made a Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire (C.I.E.); he was the recipient of a gold chain (K.S.M.), the highest Burmese honor, and of a gold medal (A.T.M.). When he retired at the age of fifty-seven, he stood for election from Bassein to the House of Representatives. That was in 1921, and the election was the first held in Burma. My father was elected. After serving one term, he did not stand again. When Burma was separated from India in 1936, the new Government of Burma Act introduced a bicameral legislature, consisting of a Senate and a House of Representatives. My father was nominated to the Senate by the Governor, and he was the Vice-President of that body until the outbreak of the war. When my father died in 1950, he was eighty-six.

My mother, who was then eighty-two, survived him. She was a model mother. She bore eight sons and one daughter. The daughter and one of the sons died in infancy; the rest grew up to the age of maturity, and then four sons died. The remaining sons are Captain Ba Hpu, U Mya Bu, and myself. Captain Ba Hpu was one of the four Burmans to be given King's Commission soon after the cessation of the First World War. He remained in the Army until he became a captain and then resigned. He is now practicing law in Rangoon. The other brother, U Mya Bu, is also a lawyer, and practices in Bassein.

CHILDHOOD

THE first childhood incident I remember was going to school. I was then about five years of age. My maternal grandfather, U Seik, was very keen on my going to school. He insisted that I must be sent to a vernacular school which was only a few doors away from our house. I went for a day or two, but then refused to go any more. My grandfather took hold of me by the feet and pretended to throw me headfirst into a big tub of water. I was terribly frightened and promised that I would go to school regularly. I never played truant again.

After I had started school, my father was posted as *Myook* to Ngaputaw, about thirty or forty miles away from the sea. Malaria was then prevalent in that area. My father went there first and a few months later my mother and I followed him. As there was no steamer service between Bassein and Ngaputaw, we went in a big country boat. We left Bassein early in the morning and arrived at Ngaputaw in the afternoon. Ngaputaw was not and still is not a town in the proper sense of the word. It is a big village. My father was kept in Ngaputaw for only a few months, and then he was transferred to Danubyu as Township Officer.

Danubyu was in those days a very prosperous town. The people were very hospitable and friendly. Though I was very young, I felt very happy indeed. One of our neighbors was a fishery-lessee. He used to bring dried fish back from his fishery, and when I went to see him, he would bake it and give it to me. I found it very delicious.

One night my mother fell ill with, I believe, colic. The household was awakened. I went and sat near her. A little while later I said that I wanted a drink of water, and a servant took me to the next room, where drinking water was kept. As I drank a cup of water, I looked out through a window at a flowering tree just opposite the window. I saw a huge black man sitting on one of its branches; he was headless and armless. It was a ghost. When I saw him, I simply ran to my mother's room, crying at the top of my voice. For several months I was so nervous that I was placed under medical treatment. I took fright whenever I saw a shadow or heard a loud voice.

While I was being treated, my father was transferred to Mogok as Subdivisional Officer. He could not refuse the transfer, as he had been promoted over the heads of several senior officers. In those days the highest appointment open to a Burman officer was a subdivisional officership, with a starting pay of 300 rupees a month. As Mogok is right in the northern Shan State and was said to be malarious, my father sent my mother and the children to Bassein to live with my maternal grandparents.

A few months later, my father was transferred to Tagaung, the capital of the first Burmese kingdom. It is on the Irrawaddy River, and about midway between Bhamo, a frontier town near China, and Mandalay. We joined him after a few months and lived in a Government house which was built quite close to the old city wall. We found no traces of ancient civilization. Everything was in ruin. The town itself was not a town but a grown-up village. It had a few hundred houses with bamboo walling and thatched roofing. The people were extremely poor, and were without regular employment. Their main source of income was from fisheries and the supply of fuel to the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. The place was extremely malarious. My younger brother, Maung Ba Kyu, who was then about three or four years of age, and I fell ill one day with very high fever. My brother had fits now and then. We were attended by a Punjabi doctor who was attached to a military police unit. Though I was only about seven years of age, I could see that the doctor was almost useless. How we got rid of our fever, I do not know.

We could not attend school while we were in Tagaung because the only proper school was monastic. We spent most of the time playing in the compound by ourselves. The place was full of snakes, but they were not supposed to be killed. If one was killed, several snakes turned up very mysteriously and suddenly, and the killer of the snake could hardly escape them. The legend was that one of the queens who ruled Tagaung had a *naga* (king-serpent) as her paramour. The *naga* came to the Queen's