

A HISTORY OF MODERN BURMA

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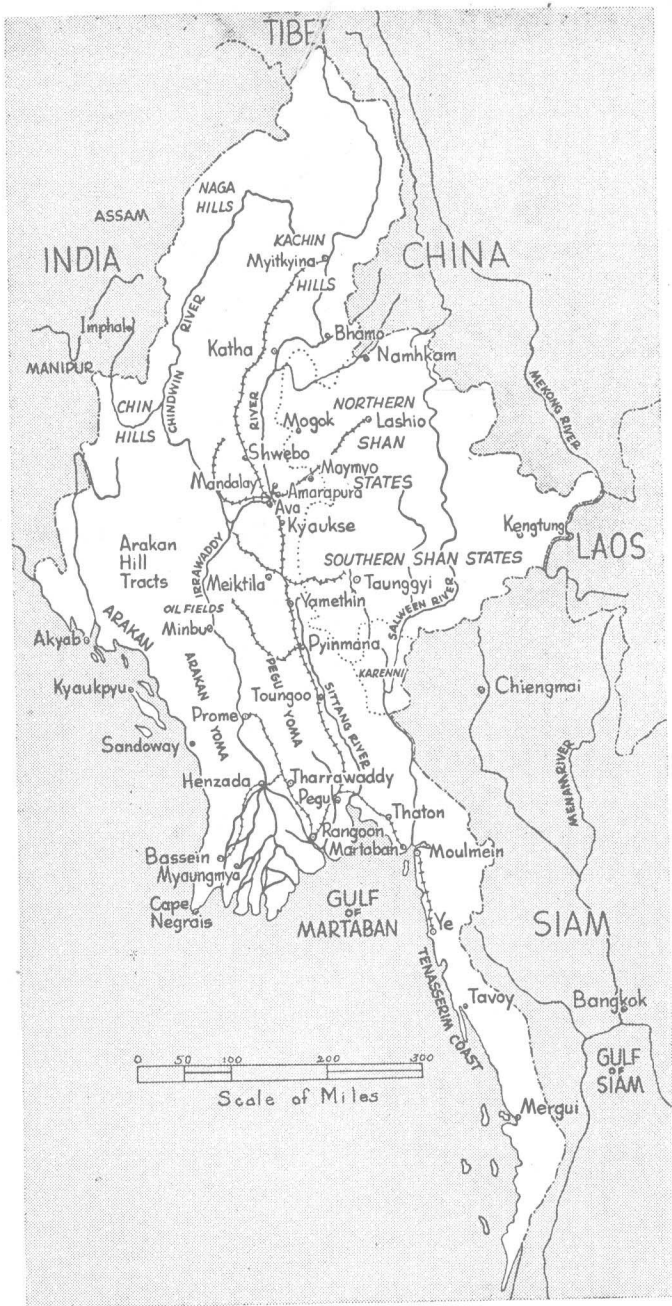
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Burma

Preface

EVENTS of World War II and of the years following thereafter have rendered obsolete virtually all earlier interpretations of the modern history of Burma. The new situation has completely invalidated the older perspective, which usually called for describing the quaint life and folkways of the Burmese people or for portraying the somewhat painful progress of economic and governmental modernization of the country under British rule. Several prewar British students of Burma, notably John S. Furnivall and Maurice Collis, sensed the importance of ascertaining what colonial "advancement" was doing to Burmese society and of counteracting, if possible, the causes of growing social demoralization and political unrest. But Collis was a literary man who dealt in episodes, and Furnivall wrote as an economic analyst and a critic of contemporaneous British policy. Neither attempted to present a systematic account of political developments. Even the American author, John L. Christian, refused to take seriously Burmese aspirations for self-rule and political independence. World War II and succeeding events have forced the acceptance of a new perspective of renaissance Burmese nationalism and have resulted in the re-emergence of independent Burma among the free nations of the world. Perhaps the required reorientation may be somewhat easier for an American student to achieve than for Britons who may have been too closely identified with the prewar point of view.

The purpose of this book is to set forth in a systematic way what

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happened politically to Burma and to the Burmese people during the last century and a half. In this context, the period of British rule becomes simply another episode, although a very memorable one, in an older national existence which has now reappeared as the tides of European imperialism have receded. Twentieth-century Burma can never return to the pattern of the eighteenth century, for both the country itself and its world relationships, political, economic, and cultural, have unalterably changed. But the inscrutable images of the Buddha and the imposing spire of the Shwe Dagon pagoda which saw the foreign armies come to Rangoon in 1824 have now witnessed their departure, and the new chapter of Burma's history must perforce have some relevance to the older one. The book will therefore describe at the outset the traditional institutions of old Burma, political, social, and cultural, and indicate how these were altered by British rule. The central theme will be the revival of the Burmese national spirit, beginning directly prior to and during World War I and coming into full discordant expression in the two decades following 1920. The concluding chapters will describe the effects of World War II and the circumstances under which Burma's political freedom was re-established. Enough attention will be given to peripheral factors, economic, social, and religious, to provide a meaningful context for the narrative of political events.

A major difficulty, and advantage, arises from the fact that the dependable sources covering Burmese-British relations are almost entirely in English. The relevant historical chronicles prepared by the Burmese Court down to 1885 were often designed not to record actual happenings but to salve royal prestige. The English sources include an enormous mass of undigested manuscript and printed material deposited in the Library Archives of the India Office in London and available at present only to 1901. More easily accessible are the published *Debates* and *Sessional Papers* of the British Parliament, plus the special studies and minutes of hearings developed in connection with successive British reform programs. To these must be added the English versions of numerous special investigations authorized from time to time by the Rangoon authorities plus the voluminous annual departmental reports and legislative proceedings of the Burma Government. Finally must be considered the scores of private memoirs, monographs, and travel accounts, both official and nonofficial in origin, extending over the century and a half under consideration.

The principal problem in interpreting Burma's history since 1800

arises from the one-sided character of these English-language sources, which inevitably portray the foreigners' version of events and reflect basic assumptions often at variance with the Burmese point of view. Both detachment and imagination are required in dealing with them. One is reminded of the dilemma of Plato's man in the cave who was capable of observing only shadows cast on the interior wall by passers-by. Clearly Burmese attitudes and motivation constitute the essential context for any account of basic political developments within the country. It is also difficult to attempt to explain and understand without seeming to justify or condemn.

Under the circumstances, any current historical interpretation can be regarded at best as only approximately correct and at present manifestly far from complete. A definitive account, even from the viewpoint of the English sources alone, will have to await the accessibility of the London archives since 1901 and the assimilation in a series of monographs of an immense mass of archival data going back to 1885. To this would have to be added in time the contributions of trained Burmese scholars dealing with their own sources and points of view. But a start has to be made in utilizing the sources which are at hand. A pioneer work, if carefully documented, can afford a valuable working base from which others later can fill in gaps and make necessary adjustments and reinterpretations.

My interest in the history of Burma dates from a short-term appointment, from 1935 to 1938, as Lecturer in History at Judson College, then part of Rangoon University. Subsequent assignments in Washington from 1943 to 1949 in the Office of Strategic Services and the Department of State made me keenly aware of the urgent need for a systematic political history of Burma. This study was begun in serious fashion in 1952, when I was serving as Visiting Professor of History in connection with Cornell's Southeast Asia Program. Materials available at the Library of Congress and in the archives of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society at New York were examined with the assistance of a summer's grant-in-aid from the Social Science Research Council. The completion of the study was made possible through a 1955-1956 Fulbright Research grant in Burma, coupled with a Guggenheim Foundation award. The latter made possible a month's additional study in London en route home from Rangoon.

The voluntary undertaking of so arduous an assignment cannot be explained on the basis of sheer scholarly enthusiasm or personal curiosity. It stems in some measure at least from an interest developed in

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Burma's varied peoples during the course of two decades and from a kind of vicarious concern for the political future of that country now free to work out its destiny. Burma needs to appraise itself quite as much as outsiders need to understand Burma. The country casts a kind of spell over its friends which they cannot break if they would. An insistent inner compulsion obliged me to undertake the task. The Burmese might say that the *nat* spirits drove me to it.

I have tried to present a detached and understanding account with a minimum of partisanship. Readers will recognize, I am sure, that the actors in the drama, both British and Burmese, frequently faced limited alternative choices; they were caught in the maelstrom of circumstances. Not all the admirable characters were included among the "nationalist patriots," and not all the selfish exploiters and demagogues were within the ranks of the "imperialist" foreigners. In any case, the picture of what happened is now far clearer to me than it was when I embarked upon the undertaking.

The author tenders his thanks to Longmans, Green & Co. for permission to quote from *A Civil Servant in Burma* by Sir Herbert Thirkell White, to Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., for a quotation from *The Loyal Karens of Burma* by Donald Mackenzie Smeaton, and to U Thant of Burma for a quotation from an article by him in *New Burma* (1939).

A special word of thanks is due to a number of Burmese scholar friends at Rangoon University who read virtually the entire manuscript, especially to Professor U Kyaw Thet of the History Department and to the late U Kaung of the Historical Commission of the Union of Burma. Responsibility is mine for all factual data and for their interpretation as well. Finally, my thanks are due to a fellow Fulbrighter, Mrs. Johannna Gibson, for her loyal co-operation in preparing the typed manuscript.

JOHN F. CADY

Athens, Ohio
May 1957

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⌘ *Part One* ⌘

OLD BURMA AND
ITS DISAPPEARANCE

I

The Government of Old Burma

KINGSHIP and governmental authority in eighteenth-century Burma stemmed from basic political and religious sanctions originating centuries earlier in ancient India. The standard India pattern of royalty had been borrowed by Burma's Pagan dynasty (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) either directly from India or from the conquered Mon Court at its Thaton capital in Lower Burma. The system was reproduced successively by Upper Burma's Thai rulers during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and again by the revived Burman Toungoo dynasty in the latter half of the 1500's. When the country was unified by the Burmans for the third time in the mid-eighteenth century by King Alaungpaya, himself a mere township headman of Moksobo (Shwebo), a labored effort was apparently made to revive all the traditional regalia of the court as well as other customary means of authenticating royal power. This traditional basis of divine kingship on the Indian model was finally destroyed in 1885 when the British Government erased the Burma Kingdom from the map. It is doubtful that it can ever be revived. But one of the reasons for the impaired authority of the newly resurrected Union of Burma republican government is that the visible trappings and the religious sanctions traditionally associated in Burma with royal authority are not currently in evidence.

An awareness of the political institutions of old Burma is important in its own right and also as contributing to the understanding of the