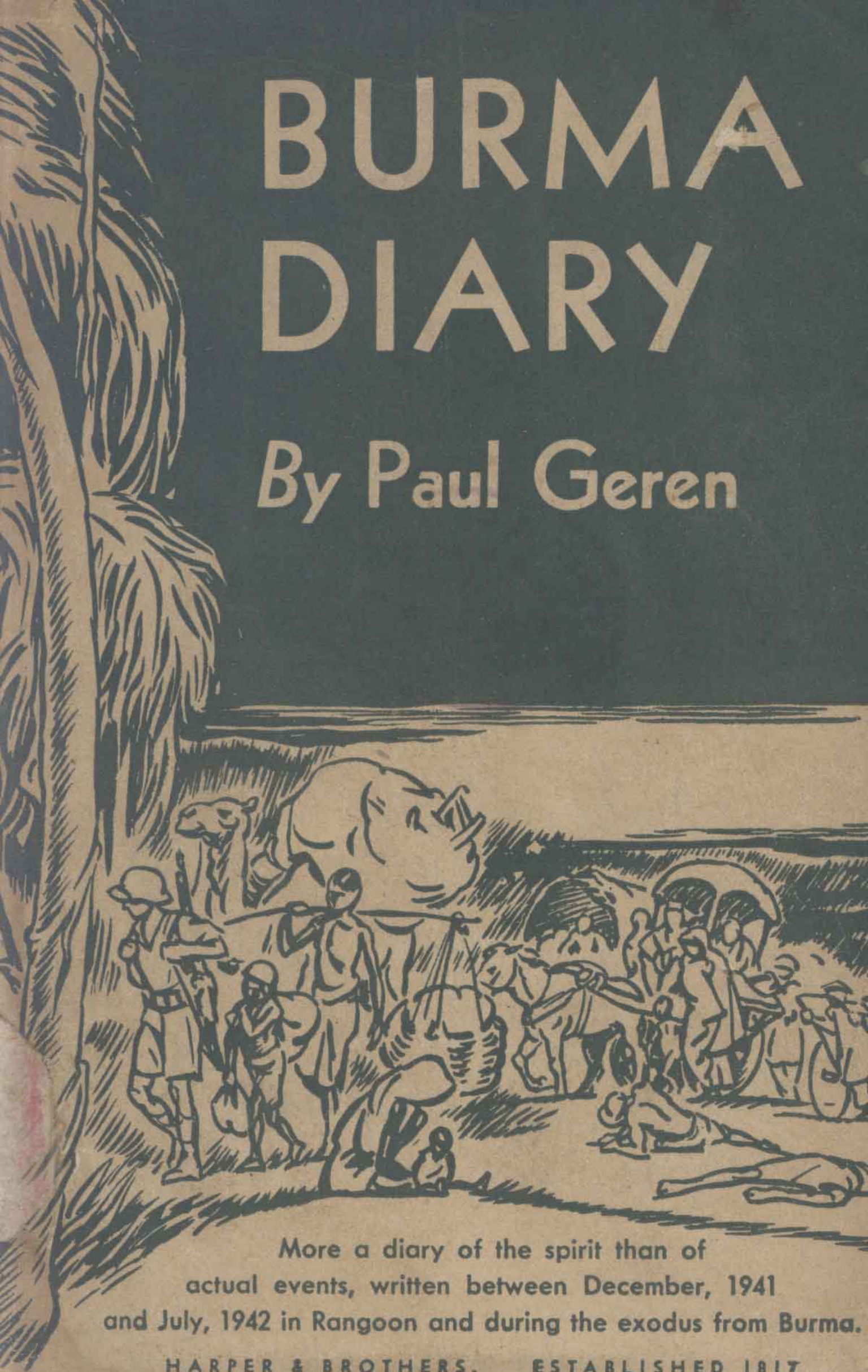


# BURMA DIARY

*By Paul Geren*



More a diary of the spirit than of  
actual events, written between December, 1941  
and July, 1942 in Rangoon and during the exodus from Burma.

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*By*  
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1. Rangoon, *December, 1941*

**T**HIS morning the first bombs fell on Rangoon. Before they fell, life thronged the streets of the city. Her market places were filled with Indians faithful to their duties. (She is more an Indian than a Burmese city.) There were dock workers and rickshaw men, worn of hand by the shafts, worn of foot by the paving stones, messengers, coolies awaiting any work that might be offered. First an air-raid siren, a filling of the air with planes, attacking and defending, a rain of bombs, and fifteen hundred people, mostly these Indian workers, trapped in the streets, are dead.

Twenty minutes in the dimension of time have just encompassed a thousand years in the dimension of hope and fear. Twenty minutes have seen more people die than did the heaviest all-night raid on London.

It is an exceedingly disturbing thought to contemplate what unequal progress understanding has made at different levels. The men in the streets can see the airplanes, and hear them, and they can feel any bomb shrapnel that hits them, never doubt that. Their sensory perception of bombs and planes is well-nigh perfect. But they do not perceive what is the nature of the weapons and what they must do in the best service of their own safety. They perceive only dimly now, fleeing Rangoon as Lot fled Sodom. When the people do not know at what figure to assess a terrible truth, their credulity will make it more terrible still. Some members of an ambulance unit tell me that they saw a baby killed by his parents and friends just before an air raid on a Chinese town. It was their way of hushing his crying. The terrible omniscience of those men in the bombers! Surely they could hear the hapless wail of the child and would know where to drop bombs on the people. It was one of those grotesque occasions in history which the people thought called for the sacrifice of a child.

There is an even more grave disproportion in the progress of understanding than this. The weapons



and the type of warfare that burst in Rangoon today were developed, for the most part, in the West. How swiftly and well the Japanese have learned, we saw. The people in the streets learned in the final way that a man who has swallowed poison learns its efficacy. It is a lesson they did not ask for and will not have another day of life ever to apply.

## II. Rangoon, *Christmas Eve, 1941*

**Y**ESTERDAY we were bombed and it will happen again tomorrow. The Japanese are promising a "Christmas present for the white people" over the Bangkok radio. Christmas can be occasion for much mockery. One need not believe in Christmas to manufacture and sell toys for its celebration.

Whatever came yesterday, and whatever will come tomorrow, tonight we sang Christmas carols. We were a motley choir, begotten of a day between air raids, so widely apart in size, in mind, in social status, and so variously gifted with song that one had to chuckle if ever he stood apart to make appraisal of us.

One of the carolers was an Austrian Jewess. It seems that this war always comes to its frightful worst when it confronts a Jew. She had escaped from Austria and had set up a little school in Rangoon.

In yesterday's raid a bomb exploded next to her house, burned it with all her things, and left her greatly shocked. All through the singing she was crying softly.

This was the place and the thing for her and for all of us. Christmas carols are as excellent bits of defiance as we could have found to throw into the teeth of despair. And despair was pressing hard upon us.

If it seems farcical to be singing about the Prince of Peace in a time like this, consider alternatives. A man could become cynical, could hopelessly despair, but, if he did, nothing would have been accomplished. If our choice is to be forlorn on rational grounds or hopeful on grounds whose case is not conclusive logically, it ought not to be a hard decision to make. It is the best part of rationality, even, to care more for hope than for the relentless logic with which war follows war.

III. Rangoon,  
*Christmas Day, 1941*



**W**E HAVE dug our air-raid ditches, and many alerts have taught us the way to them. We put bamboo poles across the ditches, a sheet of tin across the bamboo, and a layer of earth on top. It is rather naïve to fortify against bombs with bamboo. Almost everything is done with bamboo here. Living and dying with it, we turn to it in this crisis. As we philosophized while building, "It is protection against anything but a direct hit, and nothing is protection against that."

We prepared two ditches, since one of regulation size would not contain both us and our Indian cook with his family. Cook he is—but his name is Rajah, as if he ruled an Indian state. There is no mistaking the religion to which the generation of his sons and daughters belongs. The list of their names reads like a roll call of Bible characters: Paul, the eldest son, Peter the next, Margaret Mary, the girl (I suppose this double name was a way of accommodating the



scarcity of girls to the abundance of possible Biblical names) and the youngest is Moses.

After the alert sounded and before the bombs began to fall, I went by their shelter to "make assurance double sure." They were all in. Rajah was holding Moses, and Moses was holding their little black dog. The animal had sensed the peril from the siren and from the family's frightened haste. His tail was between his legs, and his head was tucked down against his chest. He was doing for a dog just what Moses was doing for a boy. This ducking of the head seems to be a natural reaction to the expectation that something will fall from above. The dog seemed glad to be in Moses' arms who was in Rajah's arms who was in God's arms since so much love was there.

iv. Mong Tung, Southern Shan States, Burma,  
*March 8, 1942*

I AM driving an ambulance for the Chinese soldiers who have come to Burma to fight. Now I have left the ambulance behind to come four days' march through dense jungle to help set up a hospital station for a Chinese regiment posted on the Thai border. I have found a friend. His name is Maio, a twenty-three-year-old Chinese university student, sec-

retary to the Chinese officer commanding the troops here.

The other night some of us were invited to have stew at a camp in the middle of the jungle. Our hosts were a party of British guerrillas—all young men about college age. Every man among them had a story which told like a novel. They had been at Dunkirk, Crete, Egypt, Libya; one had a bullet hole through his pants in the last raid, one had escaped out of German hands; one had been the captor of Max Schmeling in Crete; and all were participants in raids like those of Francis Marion in our revolutionary war during which they would attack an enemy force of much greater size, create havoc, destroy supplies, and as suddenly flee as they had attacked.

The captain of the group, brave, sophisticated, cruel, expounded to us his plan for a postwar world—no room in it for Germany and Japan; he made that very clear. Later Maio and I talked alone. Taking his cue from the speech we had heard, Maio asked how I would address a company of soldiers under my charge when I sent them into battle. I said that I did not know and that I was glad I did not have that job, though I realized this was too easy an evasion of the issue. I turned the question back on him. He would say, "Men, love your enemies. But drive them from your homes which they have wrongfully taken.—This would be sufficient," he said with a certainty which must have come down in direct line from Confucius.

I do not know whether this would be sufficient for all who are charged with winning the war. But I contend that Maio's speech must be taken seriously. Maio has a right to be taken seriously. Maio has a right to be heard. His home was among the first to fall to the Japanese nearly five years ago. He has not heard a word from his family since that time. He started walking then, and he has covered eight thousand miles, putting his feet down and picking them up again, all chargeable to the Japanese account.

If some must hate in order to fight, I suppose they must hate. If some can love their enemies, yet fight them and not be overcome by the incongruity, by all means let them love. Whatever hearts can be saved from hatred, and by whatever paradoxes, let it be done.

v. Pyinmana,  
Burma,  
*March 27, 1942*



Now we are on the front which the Chinese are holding against the Japanese. Camouflaged with branches of mountain trees, our trucks came down out of the mountains of the Southern Shan States onto this plain. How many times "great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill" has come in this war. When we hit the plain it was parching in the first month of the hot season and the sixth month of the dry season. The hot wind and sun baked the leaves serving as our camouflage, and later, when we stopped in a village, a forlorn bullock came up and gratefully chewed off the one remaining green leaf on my truck.

We arrived on a Saturday night at nine. For three hours we worked setting up the operating theater. At three o'clock that morning the cases began to come

from the front. They were bleeding and groaning. Some had fresh wounds; others had wounds as old as thirty-six hours. The only way any of us here could endure the sight of so much agony was to act, act, act. I gave them water to drink. When I read in the New Testament, "Whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name . . ." I supposed it was one of those passages meaningful and beautiful for its poetry but impossible of any literal fulfillment in our time. You do not get many opportunities to offer people cups of water. They have their own. And even when you do, it is a very routine convenience—nothing you associate with the name of Christ.

Actually, much of the New Testament has taken on a relevance at the practical bread and water level of life. This is due partly to the war and partly to the East. In this time and in this place I have learned a new reverence for water. In the fighting, men who have been told to drink nothing but boiled water are driven by the heat and their maddening thirst to turn up any filthy pottery jar found in a deserted native hut for the dregs it may contain.

So I gave water to drink in the name of Christ. I did not say it. I did not know the proper Chinese words, and had no confidence that the wounded soldiers would know it even if I did. But it was not really the language barrier which kept me from pronouncing a sentence over each cup. Whoever received

it might think this kindness a special type of kindness not akin to all the rest of love. He might think it an act of love which had some conditions or obligations besides the ones that he needed water and I had it to give.

Nevertheless, I tried to give it in the name of Christ, knowing how unessential any inscription was to such a gift. This was to give it in the name of Christ, to say not aloud, but silently, "O Christ, thou wast plunged into a pool of all man's suffering and sin. These who suffer, suffer not alone. Thou hast suffered. Bless the water, O Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Succor the spirit of this man who drinks it, great Comforter. And accept the praise of him who gives it that he has been, like the cup, a vessel between man's need and thy compassion, thou everlasting God. Amen."

#### vi. Pyinmana, *March 30, 1942*

I CAN live the day, but the night is hard to bear. The fires, the thunder of the guns, and the continuous, foreboding rumble of the trucks, moving, moving, moving, taking soldiers down, bringing soldiers back—these things are disquieting enough in the day. At night they have a new and more fearful



quality. This is because the night enshrouds them. In it they find their befitting color.

The Japanese bomb this town with a regularity which leaves no room for surprises. You marvel that after the place has seemingly been reduced to ashes every new bombing starts the desolate ash bin to burning again. In the day the flames rise up and lick the smoke they have belched. We speculate about the wind as boys who fly kites, but our speculation is more grave. The question is whether the wind will blow the flames into this house which we use as an operation theater and burn it before we can move the patients out. At night things are not so honest and in the open. The fire smoulders and throws up into the sky a weird, eerie glow. It is that shade of gray-yellow which is the most ominous of colors. Swarming in this admixture of light and darkness, billions of particles of ashes and dust stir like restless atoms.

When a wounded man groans in the day, I go to him, see what I can do, mutter something that I hope he will understand for sympathy. When the night comes to throw a cloak about his groans, that is the time I answer groan with groan and affirm that our plight is as hopeless as it seems.

The darkness is my enemy. The irresistibility with which it puts the case for despair tells me that despair is the child of darkness. As I trust the day and not the

night, I will trust hope and not despair. "If our hopes are dupes, our fears may be liars." Because there is so much power for turning fears to liars with it, I say it: Our fears have lied, but the hopes are true.

vii. Pyinmana, *March 31, 1942*

**I**T IS life the war is hounding, and with thoroughness and system it sets on all who have life, men and animals. Tonight as I was tediously making my way in a jeep through the debris that clutters the streets of this town, I came across an old pack-of-bones, cur dog, smelling among the ashes for food. He was troubled, hungry, furtive. His master with all the other townspeople had run. Some loyalty to the old home, more durable than his master's, made him stay behind.

In Rangoon it was the cows among animals who were suffering. In the East, cows make themselves very much at home in the cities: They jostle with the crowds in Calcutta, engage in friendly shoulder-shoving with the people along the narrow paths of Lahore, and chew their cud with tranquillity in the center of the Public Treasury of Gauhati. I doubt if the news that their fellow kine are seldom seen on the streets of New York would disturb them much

or change their way of living. Because they were in the streets when the Rangoon bombings came, standing there and chewing on unperturbed while the people scurried for shelter, many of them were hit. The shrapnel tore holes in their stomachs and through them the intestines fell and dragged. They stood about, not chewing their cud any longer, but looking wronged, questioning, voicing a distressed lowing now and then.

On the way out of Rangoon many families were starting the journey to India in the company of their water buffalo. Their thin black hair and their affinity for mudholes makes them seem as much hog as cow. They are grim enough in ordinary times. Now that they were hot, dusty, and starved, they looked still more grim. Men and animals pushed each other about with as much good will as a trying situation would permit. They had learned one another's company before this. Boundary lines between house and cowshed are not very circumspectly drawn in the Orient. In winter, the two buffalo are sometimes taken into the one-room village house along with the six children. All of this enabled their masters and them to confront this adversity as one family of men and animals