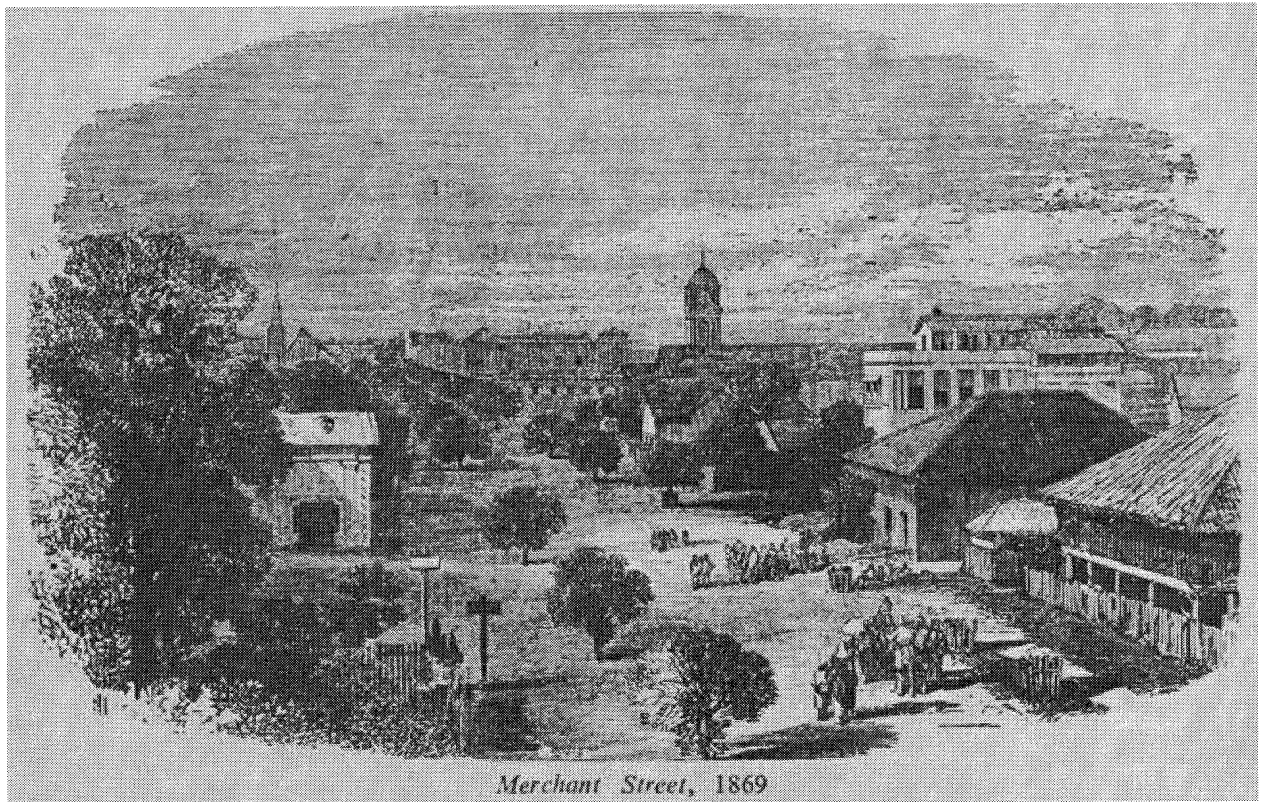

***BULLETIN OF THE
BURMA
STUDIES GROUP***



Old Rangoon

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Editor

May Kyi Win
Southeast Asia Collection
Northern Illinois University Libraries
DeKalb, IL 60115-2854
Tel: (815) 753-1809
Fax: (815) 753-2003
e-mail: mwin@niu.edu

Subscription Manager

Richard Cooler
The Center for Burma Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115-2854
Tel: (815) 753-0512
Fax: (815) 753-1651
e-mail: rcooler@niu.edu
<http://www.niu.edu/acad/burma/index.html>

Book Review Editor

Leedom Lefferts
Department of Anthropology
Drew University
Madison, NJ 07940-4000
Tel: (202) 547-4868
e-mail: lleffert@drew.edu

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BURMA STUDIES GROUP MEETING

The annual business meeting of the Burma Studies Group was held on Friday, March 13, 1999, from 9:00-11:00 p.m. at the Boston Marriott at Copley Place. F. K. Lehman, President, called the meeting to order. There was no set agenda. Elections were held for positions in which the incumbent's terms were expiring. F. K. Lehman was re-elected as President.

Richard Cooler reminded the group that the next Burma Studies Colloquium would be held at Northern Illinois University in October of the year 2000, and that it was not too early to begin thinking about topics and panels. A program committee was elected: Sylvia Fraser-Lu (chair), Douglas Steele and May Kyi Win. An announcement of the Conference and a Call for Papers will be sent out as soon as possible. Richard Cooler serves as *ex officio*).

The Chair brought to our attention to a request from SEAC (our parent body in the AAS, the Southeast Asia Council) concerning the existence of Burmese expatriate communities in North America, with special reference to the effect of Burmese politics on the life of such communities. Our new member, Edie Bowles agreed to work with the Chair and others to co-ordinate preliminary data gathering on this matter. The information will be sent to Professor Hy Van Luong, for a panel being proposed for the 2000 AAS meetings on the effect of Home Politics on Southeast Asian expatriate communities in North America. (A preliminary compilation was provided to him several months after our meetings). The meeting was adjourned at 10:30 p.m.

OLD RANGOON: THE CAPITAL 100 YEARS AGO *Personal Reminiscences of An Englishman*

(Reprinted from "Our Monthly," a magazine of general literature October 1884 in *The Nation* (Rangoon, Burma) Supplement; Sunday October 22, 1961.)

Having lived, for over a quarter century in Burma and nearly all that time in Rangoon since the annexation of the Province, I had ample opportunities of observing the gradual growth of this now flourishing city, and the "various, and sweeping, changes which were from time to time effected, so great indeed, that after a short absence in the interior, in the years 1855-56, I could scarcely identify certain localities at first sight, with which, before that, I had been quite familiar!

To Captain Keighly, a Madras officer was entrusted the work of improvement and he, no doubt, having received a *carte blanche* as to expenditure of money carried it out with a lavish hand. But, looking back now, at the changes he had effected in one or two years and the magnitude of the undertaking, I venture to say, that given another Rangoon, under its then conditions, conquered, and taken possession of at the present day, our Engineers, to do what was done by poor Keighly (for he was, I think, rather shabbily treated a few years afterwards,) they would spend a great deal more money than he did, as in the case of the block of public offices, the water works.

RE-CONSTRUCTION:

However, to Rangoon, as I found it in 1853-54. It was in rapid course of reconstruction, it is true, but all the old Burmese land-marks were there still. The

town mainly consisted of two long streets, facing and close to the river bank, the posts of the first row of houses being submerged at high water! Of course, in a very short time brick buildings began to appear – notably, that one on the Strand, owned by the Crisp family, which was subsequently purchased by Government, and was for many years used as the Deputy Commissioner's Office and Treasury, (on the site of which now stands that elegant building, the "Telegraph and Post Offices") - but these were few and far between. But the very poor aspect of the Town, as it appeared from the deck of a ship entering the port may just be compare, to what, at the present day, a visitor sees on getting alongside the bank at the famous "Royal" city of Mandalay!

A tidal creek ran a long way up the present town, into which large boats, with their savoury cargoes of *Ngapee* and other delicious Burmese condiments entered, moored along the banks, and discharged their cargoes on the site of which now stands the "Pro-Cathedral"! and from where, at present stands the block of buildings, known as the "Law Courts," (save the mark!) and Messrs. Balthazar and Son's stores, up to the steps of that sacred shrine, the Soolay Pyah, which had then no brick wall round it, a long wooden, (bridge shall I call it?) rickety narrow pathway, supported on stout teakwood posts spanned a large mud swamp, over which, devout worshippers to that shrine, came and went, in large numbers, on high days and holidays. It is doubtless easy now for a thoughtful reader to guess *how* that huge oblong tank got to be planted in its S.W. corner in the present "Fytche Square" garden, for the tank is the remains of the old mud swamp, and was not made for the Square! But, more of this anon.

The numerous Phoongyee Kyoungs, which as usual in a large Buddhist town, (as seen in

the interior to the present day,) were the best and most commodious wooden buildings available for public offices and other purposes, both civil and military, and were soon utilised for those purposes, both in Town and Cantonment. So that in a nest of fine large trees (most of them since cut down) about, and near the present Municipal Fire Engine *stae pon* in Dalhousie street, stood the first-English Post office, over which then presided Captain Crisp, (he had been an lid ship Captain prior to this,) and the post he held had been bestowed on him by Lord Dalhousie for his services in guiding the British army to the attack and storming of the Shway Dagon Pagoda, on its east side, which the Burmese were quite unprepared for. A record of the casualties which took place on that occasion, from sun stroke and the enemy's bullets, may be seen to this day, on the north-east corner of the upper platform of that Pagoda within an iron railed enclosure; which although thus constituted a "God's Acre", Burmese vandals have at times sadly desecrated. The last time I was there, I saw a notice posted up, signed by a Military Officer of rank, offering a money reward to all, and any one, who would give information as regards any future desecrations!

Parenthetically – I may here allude to the *fact* that this is no uncommon thing with the Burmese. If they can do these things under the 'ages' of the British '*raj*', what cannot they do in Upper Burma? I particularly remember the case of a Custom's travelling officer, who had died at Mandalay, on one of the trips of the steamer, and whose remains were consigned to the earth far away, eastward of the Town, and beyond the "Bund." Loving hands, and loving hearts, amongst the Engineers and Officers of the steamer on which he had died, were induced to try and perpetuate the memory of the

deceased on the spot where he had been buried. A very decent teak wood cross, with neatly carved inscription (the latter the work of a brother Custom's Office was ready the next trip, conveyed thither in a boat and firmly set up, only for them to find, on the following trip, that cross and all had disappeared, *probably for firewood!* Again, after my first visit to Bhamo in the year 1880, one of the "Fathers" of the Catholic church there became so attached to me, and I to him, that we enjoyed a mutual correspondence of more than a twelve month hereafter. Suddenly, his letters ceased and, after a month or two, I heard of his untimely death, from fever! There-upon I ordered a small stone tablet from Calcutta to be set up over his grave, and sent it to Bhamo for that purpose. But, in 1883, I found the tablet still encased in its straw binding and wooden case, under the old chapel school house, which the "Fathers" occupy, the reason assigned being that they knew if it was set up, *it would be as quickly pulled down by the Burmese!*

All this is not "Old Rangoon" how ever; so, to return to the subject let me after having already given a rough idea of the first English post office, try to describe the Mails and its carriers in those remote days.

We had then two old Government streamers, the "*Berenice*" and "*Arracan*," which were put on that service by the Government of India, and we were *supposed* to receive a fortnightly mail from Calcutta. Very often it occurred, however, that from a break-down, or other causes, we were only blest with a mail once a month! As soon as the anxiously looked-for mail steamer was signalled from the Pagoda in Cantonments there used to be *such* a commotion, both in Town and Cantonments! People in those days, looked to the Pagoda flagstaff for the *first* signal, for, without telegraphic communication with

Calcutta, one did not know, on which day the steamer had left Calcutta, and on which day (allowing for breakages & etc.,) she might be looked for, entering the Rangoon river! It was a *glorious* uncertainty, which made it all the *merrier*, I fancy, to many in those times who were just *feeling* their way in business matters, as regards the rice and paddy trade; which at this date, has been done to death, and its fate sealed, not only by over-speculation, but by completion from other places.

The old wooden Wharf used to be crowded with people on such occasions, anxious and eager to get "all the news." Indeed, at this period, the said Wharf was a veritable pleasure ground to the townspeople, for the bands of the European and native infantry Regiments used to "discourse" sweet music there, once or twice a week. On one occasion, three bands played together, under the direction of the German bandmaster of H.M. 84th Regiment in such style, as has not, I am sure, been since heard in Rangoon. But the old Wharf was subsequently burnt down to the water's edge, the charred remains of the outer posts of which were exposed at low tides for many a long day afterwards!

I said the mail steamers used to be first signalled from the "Pagoda" in Cantonments, and that is quite correct, for across the old Pagoda, still standing there, a yard, or a couple of yards, were fixed (just below the "*Htee*"), and the look-out man there not only signalled mail steamers, but every description of craft, coming up to Rangoon, whether "ship," "barque," "schooner," or "junk" – and, it was not till Mr. Eden's time, that the present flagstaff made its appearance. It is somewhat a nice question to consider, viz: Why the Burmese did not complain to, or remonstrate with, Colonel Phayre and his immediate successor against the desecration their Pagoda had been put to, by being

converted into a flagstaff? Of course, the first sight of the mail steamer (or any other vessel) was caught from that height, and the signals were repeated on the town staff, whereas now, in our days of telegraphic communication, it is *vice versa*, for the Cantonment flagstaff takes its cue from the Town staff! People were only too glad to get their letters and papers at any time, in those days, to think of writing indignant letters to the "*Rangoon Chronicle*" as to the *lateness* of the arrival of the mail; for, in the first place, were not the Mail carriers *Government Steamers*! And in the second, who would have paid attention to any remonstrance made? Not long after this, came the "Burma Steam Navigation Company" the modest title, the present B.I.S.N. Company then assumed – with its two small steamers the famous "*Baltic*" and the "*Cape of Good Hope*" (guaranteed never to steam more than seven knots,) which took up the service for some length of time, and were a trifle more regular than their predecessors until they were ultimately "knocked on the head," the former somewhere off Diamond Island with Colonel Phayre as a passenger on board, and the latter by a collision in the Hooghly. Merely to think of the rapid growth of the B.I.S.N. Company, and the fine – I may say magnificent fleet of Steamers they now employ, as mail carriers, is synonymous with the rapid progress of Burma, to the chief port of which, they, as a private Company, were the first to carry the mails.

To linger however, over days of the Government mail boats, I remember in the year 1854 once having to escort an elderly gentleman with a family of grown up daughters to their residence in Cantonment, (the Cantonment then extending down to the present R. & I.V. (State) Railway line) on their arrival, as passengers by one of these

steamers. It was a miserable wet, cold, afternoon in September and the difficulty was to procure a conveyance of any kind to take them to the "kyoung," which was ready for them. In those times, a venturesome son of Britain had started a "Hotel" near the Strand, and he notified that he had "Gharries for hire"! The only vehicle I could get from him was a carriage, *minus* a door, and glad I was to get it; and into it I bundled the aforesaid passengers, O ye growlers of our present "*Municipal*" gharries, what would you have said to that gharry, had you seen it? And for the use of which *Three Rupees* had to be paid, for a distance of about half a mile!

About this time, in 1854, there came, by one of these steamers, two Mormon Elders, who, very soon afterwards, had every post and tree placarded, denoting their advent, as the "CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST," or "LATTER DAY SAINTS." They soon attracted a goodly number of the military non-commissioned officers of the European Regiments, artillery, and clerks in the employ of the military and Civil Offices scattered all about. At the house of a good natured Ordnance Conductor of the Bengal establishment, the Elders took firm root, and, thenceforth, his house became the meeting house for the "Latter Day Saints." This poor deluded man, not only threw up his Commission afterwards, but a Bakery which he had started, to follow the Elders to the great city of Utah, which was described to be flowing with milk and honey! With him went several time-expired men of the European regiment and artillery, and perhaps they are alive, and doing a good business in that City now, with half a dozen wives apiece. The meetings used to be attended by a number of clerks, attached to the various military offices in the Cantonment also, but although several were hard pressed, not a convert did

they get from the noble army of “Keraneedom,” who preferred to remain behind, and rough it out with the Rangoon mosquitoes.

As noted before, the number of fine Hpoongee kyongs, found everywhere deserted after the bombardment, were soon taken possession of, and converted into Offices, Courts, and dwelling houses by Government officials, and in one of these, which stood exactly on the spot, where Fraser Street now crosses Pagoda road, the Magistrate’s Court was held, the second town Magistrate being Doctor Morton, a good kind hearted man, who suited the times, his predecessor in office Major Latter having been assassinated at Prome, while officiating as Deputy Commissioner. The Police were a weak body then, but a powerful muscular Irishman, one Peter Hopkins, was the “Head Constable” (we had no Inspectors in those days) and somehow he was a terror to all evil doers. The “heathen Chinese” hated him and he them, and how he managed to get through his work so well was something extraordinary; for if a fire occurred at Poozoondoung, he was there first, or if a Burman had stabbed his wife in a fit of jealousy at Poozoondoung, he was very soon there, and had him in handcuffs. It may truly be said of him, that he was ubiquitous. Peace be to the manes of poor “Peter”! - To an “old one,” he is still remembered by a wooden house he afterwards built in Merchant street with a fancifully carved flooring band all round, and which stands to this day.

The Court of the Commissioner of Pegu was held in a kyoung near the road, at the corner of the present “Commissioner’s” and “Pagoda”, roads and the Deputy Commissioner’s Courts and Offices and Treasury were held in a much larger “kyoung north of it, the site now inclosed by the High

School railings, and near to the group of Palmyra trees, which were mere pigmies in those days. Captain Sparks was then Deputy Commissioner (1854) and the incidence of British taxation went along smoothly. Captain Phayre had been called to take charge of Pegu, from Arakan, by Lord Dalhousie after the war and annexation of Pegu, in 1852. His appointment is summarily included in a paragraph of a despatch dated 1st December 1852:

“A letter of instructions should be addressed to Captain Phayre which should convey to him official information, that the Governor General in Council, having resolved to annex the province of Pegu to the British possessions in India, has been led by the confidence he had seen reasons to place in his ability, judgment, and experience as a Civil Officer, to appoint him to the important charge of the new Province.” So far, all went well, but one Moungh Shoay Goung (I retain the old style of spelling), a Burman of good family and of good repute, had unfortunately been selected by Captain Phayre to be the first “Akhoon Woon,” or revenue Collector, and as, of course this subordinate officer was directly under the orders of the Deputy Commissioner, Captain Sparks, he was held responsible, and suffered by it. This wily Burman, by a systematic course of swindlings, as regards the various taxes levied and paid into the Treasury, after building a large wooden house at the corner of China street, (whereabouts now stands a crockery bazaar,) giving no end of *Poays* and dances, and inviting the *elite* of Rangoon to them, came to be considered, “a regular brick.” He, however, suddenly vanished from Rangoon one fine morning, and a deficit of about a *lac and a half* of rupees was soon after discovered in the Treasury accounts, as to the collections he had made, and the payments into the Treasury. Captain

Sparks was thereupon, suspended from duty, most reluctantly no doubt, by his immediate superior, and the matter was reported to Government, who very soon after relegated Captain S. to military duty, and the Province lost sight of him, till some years afterwards, and no doubt after much correspondence, and the earnest backing up of Major Phayre, he returned to the Province, as "Judicial Deputy Commissioner."

Moung Shway Goung was next heard of as flourishing at the Burmese Capital, and it is fervently to be trusted that the king's ministers there squeezed some of his ill-gotten gains out of him! A dark deed was committed in connection with this event, which sent a thrill into the small European community then settled in Rangoon.

**Conference on Burma Studies
will be held
October 12-15, 2000
Center for Burma Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois**

Book Reviews

A Journalist, A General and an Army in Burma, U Thaung. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995. Pp. 136. (Also published in Japanese and Burmese.)

The author held three prominent positions during his career as a journalist in Burma. First, he worked his way up to Chief Editor of *The Burma Times*. In 1957, he left to form his own newspaper, *Mirror Daily*. Finally, after his imprisonment and the nationalization of that newspaper by the

Revolutionary Council, he became Supervisor of the Press, employed by the Ministry of Information of the same government that had jailed him for almost three years. In the latter position, his task was to review state newspapers and magazines for technical errors. He was also permitted to write columns for the state newspapers. While in this important position he managed to avoid internecine conflicts with both military and civilians who were seeking to have him arrested until August 1977, when he left Burma with his wife and four children. Interestingly enough, he states that he does not want to become a United States citizen because although "Burma may have turned its back on me... I cannot, will not, do the same to Burma".

This short book is in two major parts.

The first is a history of the newspapers of Burma from the time of British conquest through the author's departure from the country. Much of this background information of the late British period and the U Nu era is known to Burmaphiles. He recounts his struggle to overcome censorship, police searches (without cause), where they scattered the printing type over the floor delaying publication for days until it was retrieved and re-sorted, and politically induced lawsuits and mobs that sometimes made it impossible for his employees to publish the paper. U Nu assisted him in solving some of these problems.

He developed a strong journalistic perseverance for the scoop; a stomach for both public executions and carnage of civilians (a facet of civil war), as well as the courage to interview a politician about whom he had written an adverse article days before.

One amusing sidelight is his recitation of the attempts by the major Cold War powers and North Korea to subvert the

publication of books or newspaper advertisements which they regarded as favorable to their cause. Some of the Burmese publishers made very good incomes printing the minimum number of these publications required for deposit in the embassies without managing to complete the press run contracted for, thereby saving themselves thousands of kyats.

The second portion of the book consists of personal insights subsequent to deciding to publish his own newspaper. After ten years as an employee of *The Burma Times*, U Thaung organized a group of investors to inaugurate the *Mirror Daily*. He did not believe he could write freely as his old paper was dedicated to a crusade against communism.

The *Mirror Daily* was a great success. It reached a circulation of 55,000 readers, three times greater than its competitor. It was the first newspaper in Asia printed on an offset press imported from the United States. The author reports that all the other Burmese newspapers of the time, except three, including his, were either operated with a profit motive or a propaganda interest. Ironically, in view of his ultimate refuge in the United States, his newspaper was not popular with the American Embassy. Apparently he was equally unpopular with the Burmese Army, opposing the Burmese Economic Development Corporation, operated by the Army as a tax-exempt businesses for substantial profit.

The most intriguing section of the chapter on this era is U Thaung's remembrance of the creation of the caretaker government in 1958. He was present when a small black Fiat arrived at noon at the Prime Minister's residence. Three colonels (including Aung Gyi and Maung Maung, I believe) arranged for the resignation of U Nu

and the institution of the military government. If such an agreement had not been reached, the author writes, heavy artillery from the army camp were aimed precisely at the guard post where he awaited the results of the meeting.

Shortly after the institution of the caretaker regime, arrests of journalists began. Apparently U Thaung was on the list to be sent to the Coco Islands internment camp. He was saved from imprisonment by Colonel Aung Gyi.

The remainder of the book recounts the author's experiences with the Revolutionary Council and successive state socialist government. He had a long relationship with Ne Win extending from 1948 when he visited the army's military engagements with various insurgent forces. He encountered the general again at embassy parties, government functions, and horse races. Despite this, he was arrested as a "Western stooge". This sweep of journalists included his colleague Sein Win of *The Guardian*, the newspaper supported by the army. These arrests were part of the campaign by the Ne Win Government to eliminate the free press in Burma. First, the government levied excessive income taxes on the newspapers. Only through the intervention of Ba Nyein, the communist serving as an advisor to the Ministry of Finance, was *The Daily Mirror* permitted to pay the fine in installments. Next, the arrests of journalists commenced in March 1963. Unlike previous arrests, in which whatever crime was charged was tried before civilian courts, the Military Intelligence Service instituted these apprehensions. Next, the newspapers were nationalized. The *Mirror Daily* fell victim on September 1, 1964.

On August 20, 1964, U Thaung was arrested. Ultimately, he served almost three years in the infamous Insein Jail. He was

perceptive enough that, on his arrest but before his detention, he left a letter directed to Ne Win pleading his case. That letter was delivered and Ne Win afforded him additional privileges in the penitentiary, including serving his sentence in a relatively open ward with supplements to the prison diet. Yet, he was deprived of writing and reading materials except for Buddhist texts (while incarcerated he became a born-again Buddhist); for the first eighteen months of his imprisonment he was forbidden to communicate with fellow inmate-journalists. He details much of the numbing routine of life behind bars, e.g., the sound of the twisting and banging of the double locks on each set of doors to the various cells is particularly evocative.

After three years, Ne Win arbitrarily released him in the same matter he had been so detained without trial. In the meantime, his newspaper had been nationalized and he had been turned from a rich man into a pauper. Immediately after being freed, he was summoned to meet the then General and head of government. The following colloquy ensued:

“The General greeted me with the question, “Did anyone strike you?”

“No one touched me in prison.” I assured him that there had been no torture, no interrogation, no one even asked me the name of my father for identification purposes.

‘He seemed to be pleased with my answer and said, “I told my boys to keep you real nice. Sometimes I cannot trust them, they have treated people badly against my instruction. If someone treated you badly tell me exactly. Don’t be afraid. I will take action, if you were handled badly. I received the letter you wrote on the day of the arrest. I was trying to pull you out earlier, but I could not do that for reasons. I

had to act according to political considerations.”

‘He talked to me about the political climate in the ruling machinery, “It’s hard to control my boys, the problem is that they don’t do exactly what they are told to do. I cannot control them in detail,” he said.

‘Then he asked, “What do you want to do now?”

“My mother and father are in their seventies now. I want to go and see them.”

“Yes. Yes. I know that. They are at your native place in Pagan. Go and see them real quick. Parents always like to see their children. How do you want to go there?”

“I will drive.”

“You might need something to offer to your parents, my ADC will help you with this.”

‘(An envelope containing a brand-new 500-kyat note was offered to me.)

“Do you have any plans after your visit to your folks?”

“I have none. I don’t know what to do. You know I have nothing left which would permit me to do anything.”

“I want you to take care of the state newspapers. The Information Minister will contact you about your duties” (p.98).

In addition to his government position throughout the remainder of his stay in Burma, annual compensation checks were paid to him and his fellow investors in *The Times Daily* from 1977, after a thirteen year delay following nationalization.

Furthermore, he became a syndicated columnist for the four largest papers in Burma. Hence ironically, he exercised more power under the military government than he had enjoyed while U Nu was Prime Minister. Ultimately he became Deputy Director of the Press, reporting to a naval officer. He survived both press censorship and intra-

office machinations designed to have him discharged and his job taken by those conspiring against him, by carefully writing down every direct order given to him so that if there were resulting consequences which displeased the military government, he could always report that he had simply followed orders. While serving as an official of the censored press, he employed the technique of commencing all his essays with a statement of sincere support for the party and government policies. Only at the end of the article would he request changes or suggest that certain practices be abandoned.

One example of arbitrary military rule was the discharge of a Chief Editor of *Myawaddy Magazine* simply because the editor had married a novelist. The latter had written fiction detailing the suffering of daughters at the hands of an ugly stepmother. However, at the time of its publication, Ne Win had recently married again and it was rumored there were conflicts between his current wife and daughters from a previous marriage.

The book closes with a humorous account of the transformation of the military government into the Burma Socialist Program Party and the promulgation of the 1974 Constitution. All the military officers devolved into civilians overnight, donning colorful headgear (*gaungbaungs*) and *longyis*.

The author makes two main contributions to our knowledge of modern Burma. First, he adds to our understanding of the functioning of the Burmese press during and after democracy in that country. Second, he supplements what relatively little information we in the West have concerning the decision-making processes of the military government, especially Ne Win and his major deputies of that time, Aung Gyi, Maung Maung, and Thein Pe. It is a relatively minor

cavil to comment that in some instances the author rehashes, in later portions, what he has explored in earlier pages. Perhaps, the details should have been added the first time the subject was brought up, for example, the circumstances surrounding the reason for the author's imprisonment.

Paul Sarno
New York City

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