

## PREFACE

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I PROMISED Mr. Harvey to write the Preface to his book on the History of Burma, and now that I have his typescript before me I fulfil my promise. It is well over fifty years since I first landed in Burma, when Thayetmyo and Toungoo were on the British frontier, when it used to take three weeks by boat to reach the latter from Rangoon, what time the bore in the Sittang served. It took one fourteen days to reach Thayetmyo from Rangoon up the Irrawaddy in the rains of 1871. Circumstances have changed the amenities of travel almost inconceivably since then. At that time the corners in the Irrawaddy stream were rounded by fastening hawsers on to trees on the bank and steaming round by degrees with their help, as the current was stronger at such spots than the horsepower of the river steamers.

It is now also approaching forty years, after a long absence in India after the Thayetmyo days, since I first saw Mandalay in the war of 1885 onwards. It had been well known to me by reading as a place of romance in the distance beyond the frontier, approachable only by the favoured few, and it was as to a land of romance that I approached it in the greatly improved means of travel reached by the middle eighties of the last century—finding my way through the miles of complicated streets from the river shore to the walled and moated city and the stockaded palace in its midst. For three years, April, 1887, to December, 1889, I was the first Cantonment Magistrate and the first Vice-President of the new Municipality—and to me it fell to dismantle the great city and change its features, within and without its walls, into the Cantonment of Mandalay. To commence also at the same

time the fashioning of the great modern provincial town of the British Indian Government variety out of what was virtually a mediæval Burmese capital was a work of absorbing interest and an unforgettable experience.

I was necessarily in close touch with the greater personalities of the King's régime and had to learn much of the recent history of his rule and his people, which created in my mind a strong desire to ascertain all that the scant leisure hours during my many duties permitted of their origin and earlier story. I have therefore long taken an absorbing interest in Burmese History and in all works which purport to teach it.

A great deal has been written on Burma, and there are valuable monographs on her history and anthropology. But of the two, it is history which has been the less studied till quite lately. The reason for this has been the difficulty of finding such material as exists—though there is a great deal of it—and rendering it intelligible. Of late years the Burma Research Society, founded in 1910, has begun to collect material of all kinds, and this book may be regarded as one of the first-fruits, for it is written by an office-bearer at the instance of one of the Society's founders, Monsieur Charles Duroiselle, who is himself responsible for much of the most enduring work that is being done on Burma and her archaeology.

Up to this year the only full length History of Burma, based on original sources, has been Sir Arthur Phayre's, which was published in 1883, but excellent as that great work is, much that was not available to him has naturally come to light since then; thus, he had not access to the inscriptions, or to Chinese sources.

In the length of time that circumstances of government service and health have made it necessary for Mr. Harvey to consume in bringing out the result of his many labours, Sir George Scott has also produced a general History of Burma, published this year under the title of *Burma from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. He has clearly consulted the authorities, and he has written his book with all the literary skill which

distinguishes his former writings. But I agree with his own statement in his preface "that parts of the narrative are flippant," and taken altogether it is a light book. It does not interfere with a work like that before me. There is plenty of room for both, and the student would do well to study Mr. Harvey after running over Sir George Scott, if he would dive seriously into Burmese history.

Mr. Harvey's book presents us with a mass of original work and incorporates the results of research up to the date of going to press. But it is something more than a work of scholarship; it is also a singularly sympathetic study of the peoples of Burma; it is a book written with the heart as well as with the head. I venture to stress this point, because I am old enough to remember the seamy side of native rule. Things which sound incredible to-day were commonplace under native rule two generations ago, yet anyone who records them now is dismissed as a hostile critic—so short is human memory, so rapid has been the growth of nationalist sentiment. Burmese, like all oriental, and indeed most general, history, is a sombre record, a fact that many modern Burmese "patriots," as those of other nations, are apt to forget; the tendency is to regard the past as a golden age, and even Thibaw now has his halo.

People who want tendentious writing will have to look elsewhere, for this book glazes over little. But the beauty of the ancient world is described with equal vividness. Thus, Mr. Harvey writes of the Pagān Dynasty: "The legacy of their fleeting sway enriched posterity for ever. It was they who made that sun-scorched wilderness, the solitary plain of Myingyān, to blossom forth into the architectural magnificence of Pagān. If they produced no nation-builder like Simon de Montfort, no lawgiver like Edward I, they unified Burma for more than two centuries, and that in itself was an achievement. But their rôle was æsthetic and religious rather than political. To them the world owes in great measure the preservation of Thēravāda Buddhism, one of the purest faiths mankind has ever known. Brahmanism had strangled it in the land of its birth. In Ceylon its

existence was threatened again and again. East of Burma it was not yet free from priestly corruptions. But the Kings of Burma never wavered, and at Pagān the stricken faith found a city of refuge. Vainglorious tyrants build themselves sepulchres, but none of these men has a tomb. . . . These men's magnificence went to glorify their religion, not to deck the tent wherein they camped during this transitory life." It is a kindly and just judgment.

After quoting the early European visitors' accounts of Pegu in its days of power, which read so extravagantly to modern eyes, Mr. Harvey makes the following illuminating remarks: "These men saw the East in all her glory, such as we no longer see her. We have lost that vision and are the poorer. Yet we have lost it because we have grown richer. Our standards have altered. We no longer accept the pinchbeck and bone which even kings among our forbears were fain to wear as gold and ivory. Our Europe is no longer the little Christendom of Gothic times, living on the scanty produce of grey skies, trembling at every rumour of Saladin or the victorious Turk. She is sovran Europe who holds the East in fee and the whole world beside. We have come to know that all that glitters is not gold, but these first voyagers did not know it. They came from evil-smelling walled towns, where folk dwelt in kennels and died like flies of epidemics caused by their own insanitation. To men who lived in the cold and changed their clothes but once a year and went unwashed for months, the sunshine and the clean water, the children splashing all day in the creeks, the girls at the well, were one long delight. Ordure vanished quickly under the tropical sky, and instead of fetid narrow streets and overhanging houses, they saw the airy spaciousness of Pegu city in its heyday, and wide ways sweeping out of sight towards the four main gates. Men who had wrung a four-fold crop, at best, from the hard northern soil, saw a miracle in rice with its forty-fold out-turn, and in the mango a rare and refreshing fruit. They did not stray inland far from the capital, these simple sailormen. They saw little but the wealth, of a

kingdom heaped together on one man, the prince who peacocked it in his palace, and they took such vestures, such jewels, such pomp and circumstance, to be a type of the whole country."

Mr. Harvey ends a well-told account of the death of Alaung-payā (Alompra), during his last expedition to Ayuthia in Siam, with the burning words: "So he was buried with the ritual of the kings in the palace city [Shwebo] which once had been his lowly village, and the mourning of an entire people. They would never see his like again, the village headman who had made himself lord of Burma and received the homage not only of the tribes, but also of French and English captains kneeling to receive his orders in respectful silence. . . . He had reigned only eight years and was under forty-six when he died; but men are remembered by the years they use, not by the years they last."

Speaking of another great man of the past, Anawrahtā, the founder of the Pagān Dynasty, Mr. Harvey writes of the effects of Buddhism on Burma: "His chief monument, the Shwezigōn Pagoda, built in A.D. 1059 and still unfinished at his death, is a solid pagoda of the kind so common all over Burma. Yet it attracts worshippers daily, while finer temples built by his successors are deserted. Its popularity is due to the exceptional sanctity of the relics (Buddha's collarbone, his frontlet from Prome and his tooth from Ceylon), and to the shrines of the entire pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Nat'spirits, who, as it were, have come circling round in homage to these relics. If anyone doubts the debt Burma owes to Buddhism, or wishes to see what she would have been without it, let him wander here and contemplate these barbarous images of the heathen gods. Asked why he allowed them, Anawrahtā said: 'Men will not come for the sake of the new faith. Let them come for their old gods and gradually they will be won over.'" The local oral tradition which Mr. Harvey here quotes shows that a Buddhist leader was influenced by the same feelings as the early Christian missionaries in Europe. The images at the Shwezigōn Pagoda cannot, however, have been those of the

Thirty-Seven Nats as they now exist, as so many of them were living human beings long after Anawrahtā's date. The illustrations of my own collection of images and drawings of this order of Burmese supernatural beings (see *The Thirty-Seven Nats*, 1906) will also show how the all-pervading faith in the Buddhist religion in Burma has changed the old barbarous representation of the Nats into something that is noble in expression and beautiful in feeling.

The first successes of the village headman of Shwebo, Alaungpayā, are told with a swing, a raciness and an insight into the Burman character that make instructive reading: "The deficiency of the races of Indo-China in power of combination on a large scale is natural to people whose inherited instincts were formed in a country of great distances and bad communications. But when roused to enthusiasm they have shown considerable capacity for combined action. Among the Burmese the years 1752-7 are a model instance. Alaungpayā was not the only prominent man in Upper Burma. Independent attempts to form centres of resistance [to the Talaing invaders] had been made at Mōgaung in Myitkyinā district and Salin in Minbū district. Some of the leaders were men of better birth [than Alaungpayā], who had not to go back nine generations to claim royal blood. They were masterful men with considerable followings, who could have ruined the common cause by insisting on their rights. Not one of them did so, and the hereditary nobles ended by placing the territorial cadres at the disposal of Alaungpayā."

One more quotation and I have done with this particular point. Writing of the doings in 1823 during the days of Bāgyīdaw, "the Impossible" from the British point of view, Mr. Harvey remarks that the Assamese campaigns, "waged amid strange races and magnificent scenery, powerfully affected the imagination of the Burmese, as they swarmed through the passes, or floated for hundreds of miles down the Brahmaputra river on rafts. They marched with the tread of conquerors, and the earth seemed to tremble under their feet. The succession of victories confirmed the opinion they had of them-

selves and whetted their appetite for further conquest. Among the commanders who thus won fame was Mahābandūla," of whom much was heard in the first British war with Burma in 1824. Mr. Harvey's account of Mahābandūla is just and discriminating, and the following remark shows that in historical judgment he rises above racial feeling: "He was an imperialist of the most aggressive type, yet it is unjust to regard him as responsible for the war of 1824. He did, indeed, force it on, but in advocating it he was merely the mouthpiece of the entire people."

There is one criticism which it would not be difficult to level at this book in places. At times it reads almost like a jumble, in which the wood cannot be seen for the trees. That is not the fault of Mr. Harvey but of his subject. Except when Burma has happened to come under the rule of one man or of one dynasty, or say under two or three definitely separable rulers whose careers can be clearly followed, its history is a jumble very difficult to disentangle. It has in fact been the prey for centuries at a time of small tribes, or even cliques, ruling over small areas, always fighting and for ever getting the better of each other alternately. It is a disheartening matter for the historian to try and give a clear view of the various happenings under such circumstances. The hierarchy of the Thirty-Seven Nats is closely connected with personages of historical consequence, and I soon found, in trying to trace out the stories in historical sequence, how difficult it was to fix the place in history of the individuals concerned. Much of Burmese history is necessarily the relation of the small doings of princelings and mere raiders, and yet if the story of the country is to be rightly presented it must be all told. But it cannot help being confused to the rapid reader, and anyone wishing to understand history in such conditions must in fact be patient and careful.

But however insignificant these local ambitions, fights and victories were in the world's view, they were mighty happenings to the inhabitants of Burma. The war with the Chinese in the thirteenth century was to the great Emperor of China an

affair with a small people beyond his boundaries—a matter to be left to the discretion of one of the officers on his frontiers. To the Burmese, however, it was a struggle between two mighty peoples, to be recorded with the same attention to the actual facts and the same perception of proportion that they subsequently bestowed on their fights of the same description with the great British Empire.

The Burmese nevertheless have always been happy tellers of tales. Their capacity for relating a story well is remarkable and makes their historical records enticing reading, apart from their high or low value as history. Many a page of the *Hmannan* or *Glass Palace Chronicle* is a delight to peruse, and the same may be said of almost any other Burmese Chronicle one may consult—the narrative is so vividly and so humanly told. Mr. Harvey has been therefore wise in drawing largely on the legends of Burmese history and so made his work more thoroughly of the soil than would otherwise have been possible. The story, for instance, of the end of Narathihapate, the last king of the Pagān dynasty—the Tarōkpye Min, the king that fled from the Chinese—as quoted from the *Glass Palace Chronicle* in this book—is told with the fascinating skill and power of the born story-teller.

The happenings in most history are so frequently horrible that one often wonders how life could have been tolerable. Much greater is the wonder as to how so much that is beautiful in art, that is wonderful in philosophy and noble in religion, could have come into existence. Burma is no exception. Much that happened there has been terrible, and simple devastation went on for long periods together so constantly and so completely as to constitute a nightmare.

Such periods are to be found in all Eastern history and in Western history as well, and yet philosophy, religion and the arts of peace have flourished exceedingly. How was it? Anyone who has experience of street riots knows that the trouble is confined to the streets in which it occurs. Life in the rest of the town—even in a street or two away from the riot and outside it—passes on quietly as usual. So it is



with war. In the area actually concerned it is terrifying, all-absorbing and destructive of every amenity. Elsewhere the countries concerned are affected, of course, but private life goes on quietly in much the usual way, and when communications are long or difficult it is not affected at all. So the poet can write, the philosopher can think and study, the priest can preach, and the artist work, just as they have always done. Thus it was possible for the great philosopher-historian Al-Birūnī and the equally great poet-historian Firdūsi to produce their world-renowned works at the court of such a raider and restless warrior as Mahmūd of Ghaznī. It is in fact a mistake to suppose that because a man has been a cruel invader and conqueror, he was therefore a man of low intellectual attainments and cared nothing for the arts and the higher living. Timūr Lang (Tamerlane) was anything but an illiterate man caring nothing for the beautiful things of life, for all his shocking sack of Delhi and many other similar deeds. So it was in Burma. The greater rulers, cruel as they frequently were, were mighty builders, and under them the arts and religion flourished. Under such men there were constant periods of general peace. When the country was divided up among petty local fighters, however complete the anarchy supervening in one locality, there was peace in another at the same time. Like all other countries, Burma has always been a good place for the top dog to dwell in, but even he has had his bad times as well: a condition that is apparently inseparable from human life.

Anyone who has worked, like myself, in the same field, will quickly realise the labour which has gone to the making of these few hundred pages. It has involved ransacking Chinese and Portuguese records, Dutch and English State Papers, and working through native Burmese material of which much is unprinted and in defective languages. How valuable such research can be the transcript *verbatim* of the Chinese General Staff Report on the invasion of Burma in 1765-9, in the days when Hsinbyūshin sat on the throne of 'Alaungpayā, is a strong instance. Often it is the very virtue of a piece of historical research that leads to its overthrow by those who come

after, but whether Mr. Harvey's conclusions endure or not—and I think that they are generally sound—his book will form a starting-point for searchers of the coming generation. It has blazed a way through the jungle so that others may build the road. The great feature of the book is the flood of light it throws on the still many dark places of Burmese history. It constitutes distinctly a step forward in our knowledge of the subject.

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