

CONTEMPORARY BURMA

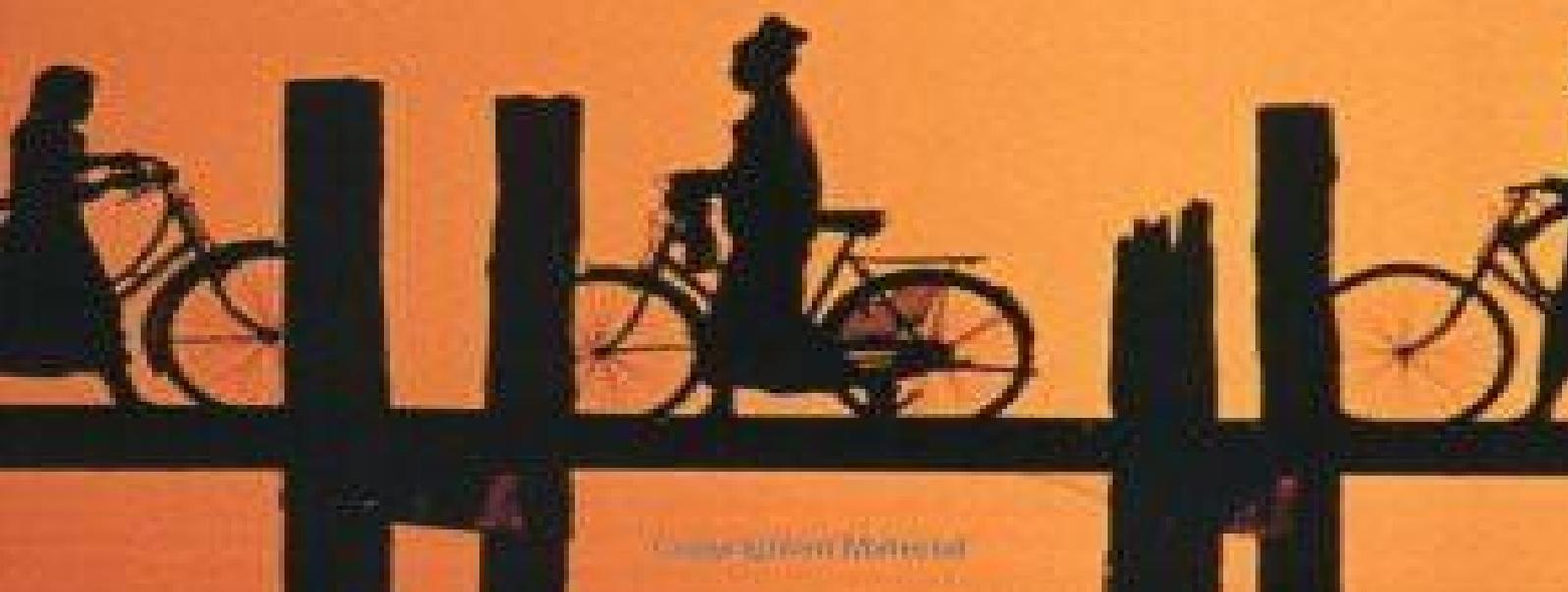
# THE RIVER OF LOST FOOTSTEPS

## A PERSONAL HISTORY OF BURMA

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD ON RECENT EVENTS

"A revelation . . . Represents by far the best introduction yet available to the modern history of Burma. Sad and poignant, intelligent and thought-provoking, *The River of Lost Footsteps* is a wonderfully well-written narrative." —WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

# THANT MYINT-U



CONTEMPORARY BURMA

# THE RIVER OF LOST FOOTSTEPS

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A PERSONAL HISTORY OF BURMA



THANT MYINT-U



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*To my son, Thurayn-Harri*

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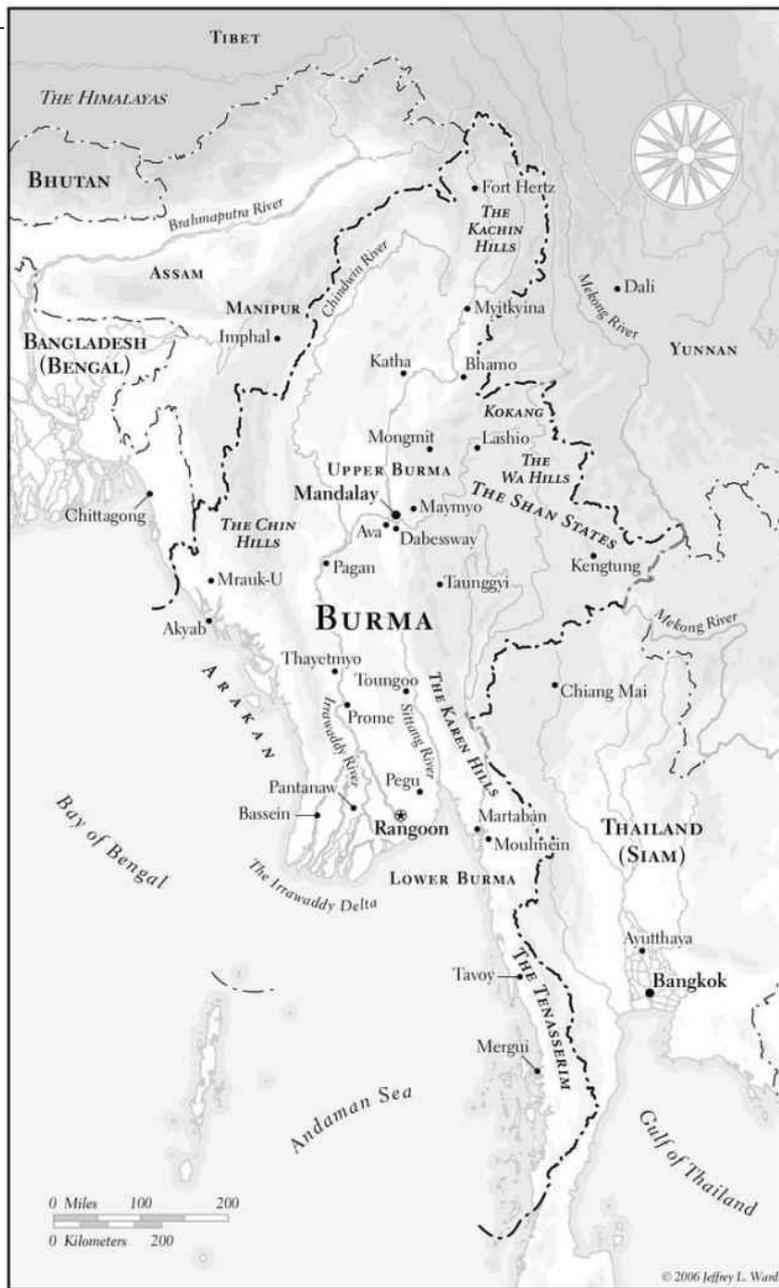
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# PREFACE



Just a few months after graduating from university in 1988, I found myself living uncomfortably but contentedly in a Burmese rebel base camp, a sometimes dusty and sometimes muddy sprawl of bamboo and thatch huts, the misty malarial rain forests of the Tenneserim hills in the near distance, and young, determined-looking men and women in emerald-green uniforms milling all around.

The late morning hikes to lecture through the New England snow and slush, the long conversations over starchy dining hall meals, the spring garden parties, my friends off to medical school or their first jobs on Wall Street all seemed many worlds away. But at least for a little while I felt a sense of purpose, a sense that I was at the right place doing the right thing. Everything seemed exciting, the atmosphere always vibrant.

In August and September of that year, waves of antigovernment demonstrations had rocked Burma's military dictatorship to its very foundations. When the uprising was finally and violently crushed, thousands of university students, from Rangoon and elsewhere, trekked over the mountains and the jungles near the border with Thailand, attempting not to flee but to regroup and restart the abortive revolution. They hoped for American support and American arms. There were rumors that American Special Forces were on their way. Some said an American battleship was already anchored offshore in the balmy waters of the Andaman Sea.

Though I had largely grown up outside Burma, I wanted as much as anyone to see real and immediate change in a country that had been sealed off by an army dictatorship since before I was born, and I was happy to team up with others of similar conviction. But I was always against violent change, not so much on principle but because I didn't think it could work, and soon fell out with those who kept on an armed revolt. I spent nearly a year in Bangkok, trying to help Burmese refugees, and then moved to Washington, where I worked with Human Rights Watch and lobbied for more effective U.S. action. I believed that maximum pressure would yield results and advocated economic sanctions.

But then I had my doubts. I came to believe that using sanctions and boycotts to isolate further an already isolated government and society was counterproductive. I was no longer sure what the most appropriate answer was. And so I stopped lobbying, removed myself from the Burma scene, and began a career with the United Nations, then in its post-cold war heyday. I served for a few years in peacekeeping operations, first in Phnom Penh and then in Sarajevo, places even worse off than Burma, but where the international community would eventually take (at least in my mind) an altogether more complex and determined approach.

From Sarajevo I went back to university, this time for graduate work in modern history. I had always been interested in Burmese history, and I chose as my thesis topic the middle decades of Burma's nineteenth century, when the ancient kingdom teetered for a while on its last legs before being vanquished by the vigorous men of Victorian England. I was fascinated by this troubled period in Burma's past, when a Burmese government had tried to reform and failed, and by how this had helped determine the course of colonialism in the country. I began to think more about the ways in which Burma's past influenced the present.

This book is my account of Burma's past. It focuses on the recent past and includes stories from my own family. ~~Though the book is roughly chronological, we start somewhere near the middle, in the~~ autumn of 1885, when the last king at Mandalay sat nervously on the throne, when the London press relayed accounts of palace atrocities, demanding that something be done, and when British politicians plotted and planned how best to remedy, once and for all, the "Burma problem." It's not meant as a book for experts or primarily as a commentary on today's problems but as a guide to the Burmese past, an introduction to a country whose current problems are increasingly known but whose colorful and vibrant history is almost entirely forgotten.

Since 1988, Burma has emerged from the shadows to assume an unenviable place in the international community, as a pariah to the West and as a concern to almost everyone else. Once known, if at all, as an exotic Buddhist land with few of the worries of the twentieth century, it's now become a poster child for more nightmarish twenty-first-century ills, a failed or failing state, repressive and unable to cope with looming humanitarian challenges, a place whose long-enduring government seems mysteriously unwilling to cede power.

But I don't think this is the only way to think about Burma.

Burma has always stood along the highways of Asia, connecting China, India, Tibet, and the many and varied civilizations of Southeast Asia. Her history links to the history of all these lands and beyond. Who remembers that envoys from Rome's eastern provinces traveled through Burma to discover the markets of Han China? That in the sixteenth century Portuguese pirates, Japanese renegade samurai, and Persian princes jockeyed for power at the court of Arakan? Or the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–26, when the rockets and steamships of the East India Company battled the elephants and musketeers of the king of Ava?

And closer to today, when thinking of Burma, who remembers the legacies of a century of British colonialism, the devastations of the Second World War, the bloody civil war of the late 1940s, or the Chinese invasions of the early 1950s?

I wrote this book also with an eye to what the past might say about the present. Since the 1988 uprising, Burma has been the object of myriad good-faith efforts, by the United Nations, dozens of governments, hundreds of NGOs, and thousands of activists, all trying to promote democratic reform. But the net result has been disappointing at best and may very well have had the unintended consequence of further entrenching the status quo and holding back positive change. And, given the result, I think it is no coincidence that analysis of Burma has been singularly ahistorical, with few besides scholars of the country bothering to consider the actual origins of today's predicament. We fail to consider history at our peril, not only, I suspect, in the case of Burma, but in that of many other "crisis countries" around the world.



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# THE FALL OF THE KINGDOM

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The divinity most worshiped in Burma is precedence.

—*Captain Henry Yule, Mission to the Court of Av*

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He was anxious for the health of his wife and their unborn child. More than a few of the old courtiers had already advised him to flee to the villages of his ancestors. Others told him to give in. But his generals, severe in their lacquered helmets and green and magenta velvet coats, promised they would do their best to hold back the advance of the enemy; some even voiced confidence of final victory. They reminded him of the imposing fortifications that had been built up and down the valley, and of the royal steamships and smaller boats that would soon be scuttled to make the passage upriver as difficult as possible. Even the underwater explosives his young engineers had been busy developing would soon be ready for use. Too many soldiers were tied down fighting renegade princes in the eastern hills, but there were still enough men to put up a good fight.

The high crenellated walls of the royal city of Mandalay had been built in the days of his father for exactly this situation. The vermilion ramparts formed a perfect square and were each over a mile long, backed by massive earthworks and preceded by a wide and deep moat. If the invading army could be drawn into a long siege, he could direct a guerrilla operation from beyond the forests to the north.

The rains had just ended, and in the brilliant sunshine he could see his cavalry practicing in the muddy fields not far from the palace. But whatever his generals said, in his heart he knew that in the last analysis his little army was no match for the force assembling just three hundred miles to the south. But what was the alternative? Surrender? His more worldly ministers, men who had traveled to the West, told him to compromise, stall for time, open negotiations. He should avoid a military conflict at all costs and agree to all their demands if necessary. But did he trust them? There were rumors that the enemy would bring his elder half brother, now eight years in exile, and place him on the throne. The kingdom would become a protectorate. Perhaps this is what his noble advisers wanted.

His wife told him to stand firm and prepare for war.

General Sir Harry North Dalrymple Prendergast was born in India in 1834 to an Anglo-Irish family long familiar with service on the subcontinent. His father, Thomas Prendergast, had been a magistrate in Madras and after a long spell in India had retired to Cheltenham, gone blind, and then made a small fortune writing a series of trend-setting handbooks entitled *The Mastery of Languages or the Art of Speaking Foreign Tongues Idiomatically*.

Harry Prendergast himself was a distinguished soldier. During the Indian Mutiny he had fought with the Malwa Field Force. Ten years later he had taken part in the putative invasion of Abyssinia and was present when Lord Napier and his combined British and Indian army stormed and then destroyed Emperor Theodore's mountain fortress of Magdala. More recently he had become obsessed with the idea of himself commanding an invasion of Burma, personally leading reconnaissance runs near the long frontier. And now, after years of planning and bureaucratic scheming, his dream was coming true.

His Burma Field Force consisted of ten thousand troops. It included three infantry brigades, one from the Bengal Army, one from the Madras Army, and a third brigade under the command of fellow Irishman Brigadier George Stuart White.<sup>2</sup> Sailing from Rangoon, Prendergast arrived in Madras toward the end of October, just as the various parts of his new army were busy getting ready along the glacis of Fort St. George. It was to be a textbook operation. Plans and preparations would follow the latest thinking in military science, and nothing was to be left to chance. Torrential rain swept across the docks, and hundreds of Indian coolies labored to load big wooden crates, each neatly packed with supplies for any eventuality, onto the tall ships moored off the Coromandel coast. On 1 November, as an enormous thunderstorm broke over the south Indian city, the governor of the Madras Presidency, the Honorable Grant Duff, hosted Prendergast and his senior officers to a lavish dinner in honor of the coming campaign. Everything was set.

Within days, Prendergast's fleet was gliding swiftly over the bluegreen waters of the Bay of Bengal past the mangrove swamps and jungle hamlets of the Irrawaddy Delta, reaching the frontiers of the inland kingdom on 6 November. Anchored and waiting along the banks of the river, the flotilla stretched nearly five miles long. Forty shiny new Maxim guns, the world's first machine guns, were lifted onto the steamship *Kathleen*. A few years ago their inventor, Hiram Maxim (later Sir Hiram Maxim) visited the Paris Electrical Exhibition and was told by a man he met there: "If you want to make a lot of money, invent something that will enable these Europeans to cut each other's throats with great facility." He relocated to London and went to work, proudly unveiling his product earlier that year. The Maxim guns had a belt that could continually feed ammunition. They could fire five hundred rounds a minute. This was their debut. Not yet on the battlefields of Flanders but to be first tried and tested on the road to Mandalay.

On 13 November a steamer belonging to the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company crossed the border from Burmese territory with news that eight thousand of the king's troops were massing at the Minhla fort just to the north. The same afternoon Prendergast received a telegram from the India Office in London: The Burmese reply to a British ultimatum had been unsatisfactory. Prendergast was ordered to invade at once.

Burma's watershed year, 1885, separating its past from its modern age, was also a year of considerable change and ferment around the world. For the first time in a long while, Great Britain was facing increasing competition overseas from other imperial and rising powers: the Germans, the French, the Russians, and even the Americans. The United States, then under the bachelor president Grover Cleveland, had yet to acquire many territories overseas, but was well on the way toward unparalleled economic power. By 1885 American railways stretched westward to the beaches of California, and the relentless demand for steel and oil were creating fortunes for the Rockefellers and the Carnegies. It was in 1885 that the phonograph was invented, American Telephone and Telegraph welcomed its first customers, and all nine stories of the world's first skyscraper were built in Chicago. It was also the year that the Statue of Liberty arrived in New York, together with tens of thousands of the country's first immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe.

In February 1885 the Congress of Berlin formally parceled out the continent of Africa among half a dozen European powers in a sort of gala opening to an imperialist age that would lead to a fifth of the world's landmass falling under colonial rule over the next thirty years. But this moment of uninhibited expansionist frenzy also contained within it the first seeds of imperialism's eventual demise. In Bombay in the last few weeks of the year, seventy or so Indian lawyers, educators, and journalists came together to set up the Indian National Congress, the organization that one day, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru, would help take Burma, as well as India, on the path to independence.

For England, 1885 started off quite badly. For months, the slowmotion fall of Khartoum had been reported graphically over the tabloids, and the death of General Charles "Chinese" Gordon in February had set off a wave of anger, much of it directed at the Liberal government of the country's long-standing prime minister, William Gladstone. General Gordon had won renown in the 1860s in China where he led the multinational "Ever-Victorious Army" on behalf of the emperor against the Taiping rebels. And in 1884, having had no clear policy on the growing mess in the Sudan, the Gladstone government sent General Gordon, hoping that he could deal single-handedly with the Mahdist rebellion or at least find a way to withdraw the besieged Anglo-Egyptian garrison.

But inasmuch as distant imperial wars grabbed the headlines, the real story for many was the increasingly polarized debate over Irish home rule. Both the Liberals and the opposition Conservatives were genuinely split on the question of Ireland's future, and recent violent unrest on the island led to new coercive measures. Charles Stewart Parnell, a politician and Protestant landowner, had become the undisputed leader of the Irish nationalist movement. And because the 1884 Reform Act had extended the vote to millions of new people, including agricultural workers in Ireland, Parnell was now a major force in Westminster politics, holding the balance of power between the two major parties. When the Liberal government fell over budget issues in June 1885, it was through the combined vote of the Conservatives and Parnell's Irish members of Parliament. A new Conservative ministry, under the earl of Salisbury, was to govern until general elections could be held. And in this new Conservative "caretaker" ministry the man who would direct India policy, and thus Burma policy as well, was Lord Randolph Churchill.

Churchill was the third son of the seventh duke of Marlborough and the father of Winston Churchill (then eleven years old). He had been educated at Eton and Merton College, Oxford, where he had been a prizewinning pugilist, and was a rising star in the Conservative Party. For the past five years he had been an important member of Parliament, targeting not only the Liberal government of Gladstone but

also his own Conservative front bench. By 1885 Churchill saw himself championing his own brand “progressive conservatism,” declaring his support for popular reforms and seeking to challenge the Liberals for the votes of the newly enfranchised working class. He also worked hard to win over Parnell. When Gladstone’s government was defeated, many in his party credited Churchill as the “organizer of victory.” As a reward, the new prime minister made him the secretary of state for India. He was thirty-six years old.

Over the summer, with elections several months away, Churchill decided to contest the radical stronghold of Birmingham. The early 1880s had seen bad economic times in many parts of Europe and there was a growing awareness of how poor England’s poor really were, in places like Birmingham, the smog-choked industrial cities of the north, and in London’s own East End, where Jack the Ripper would soon enjoy his fiendish murders. Churchill needed an issue. Something that would appeal to businessmen worried about shrinking profits and workers fearful of losing their jobs. Something that would promise better times and a return to prosperity.

Earlier that year the Scottish–South African explorer Archibald Colquhoun had made himself a household name. He had traversed through the unknown lands of western China and scampered along the jungle-covered middle stretches of the Mekong River. When he returned to London, he lectured widely and wrote two best-selling books: one was *English Policy in the Far East*, and the other was *Burma and the Burmans: Or, “The Best Unopened Market in the World.”*<sup>4</sup> He had one message: Anything that stood in the way of a revival of British commerce and industry, all that kept the working people of Birmingham and Leeds from a better future, was the despotic king of Burma. Remove the king, and Burma would become Britain’s best friend. And from Burma, the riches of China, and all that meant for British commerce and industry, would be there for the asking. One of those impressed was Randolph Churchill.

Churchill was not unfamiliar with recent events in Burma. He had visited India over the course of 1884–85 and would have read in the Indian papers stories about King Thibaw and his court at Mandalay. Thibaw received a lot of bad press. On the throne for less than seven years, he had succeeded his illustrious and much-loved father, King Mindon, in 1878. Though the truth was very different, in British eyes, or at least in the eyes of the European business community in India, he was a gin-soaked tyrant, together with his wicked wife cruelly oppressing his people, ignorant of the world, ruling through an incompetent and medieval court, oblivious of his people’s need for the sort of progress only a civilized government could provide.<sup>5</sup>

What was true was that the Burmese kingdom was experiencing growing instability. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Burma had been an aggressive imperial power itself, though on a fairly small scale. Its kings and war elephants and ancient artillery had marched from the Himalayas to the beaches of Phuket, overrunning the kingdom of Siam in the east and extending westward across Assam to the very borders of British Bengal. A long and bloody but definitive war between the Burmese and the British from 1824 to 1826 had brought a sudden halt to Burmese ambitions. A second war in 1852 led to the British occupation of the country’s entire coastline, and new British Burma was carved out of the old kingdom, with its administrative base at the port city of Rangoon.

After decades of tight British controls over the country’s trade, the impact of civil war in next-door China, and the disorders generated by frantic administrative reforms, the Court of Ava\* was a distant shadow of what it had been in its early-nineteenth-century heyday. The economy was in shambles, made worse by a recent drought and famine, part of worldwide climate changes related to the El Niño weather phenomena.<sup>6</sup> Refugees and economic migrants streamed across the frontier from the kingdom’s territory of “Upper Burma” into the relative security and prosperity of the British-held lands along the shore. The Burmese government seemed incapable of handling the multiple crises that it faced.

Years of British machinations had also produced a lively exiled opposition, and more than one of Thibaw's brothers were plotting to overthrow him from beyond the kingdom's borders. That Burma was a potentially rich country no one seemed to doubt, certainly not the increasingly vocal Scottish merchants in Rangoon, eager for unfettered access to the teak forests, oil wells, and ruby mines of the interior. What seemed even more tempting was the prospect of a back door to China's limited markets. Perhaps Burma was the answer to Birmingham's problems.

\*

Randolph Churchill could not simply propose war against an independent country, even a fairly inconsequential non-European one like Burma. Commercial gain could not be the only reason. There had to be a strategic interest involved, and luckily there was, supplied by the budding relationship between Paris and Mandalay. France in the mid-1880s was still smarting from its humiliating defeat at the hands of Otto von Bismarck's Prussian Empire and eager to prove its prowess abroad. Jules Ferry was premier of the Third Republic. Under his imperialist policies Paris began to expand its presence in what was to become French Indochina. Saigon was already in French hands. In June 1884, following a somewhat ignominious military campaign that featured more than one embarrassing setback, the Treaty of Hué formally established a protectorate over Annam and Tonkin and sealed French rule over all of what is today Vietnam. To those who wished direct access between British India and the imagined markets of China, this sudden outburst of French activity in Southeast Asia could not have been welcome. A line had to be drawn somewhere. From Vietnam, the French were pushing westward into Cambodia and the Lao principalities along the Mekong. Upper Burma would be next. French rule in Indochina was bad enough; French interference in Thibaw's kingdom could not be allowed.

It was not really the French who approached the Burmese but rather the Burmese who were keen to embrace the French. The holy grail of Burmese diplomacy was recognition by the European powers of an independent and sovereign state. Attempts to gain direct ties with Britain had failed as the Court of Ava was told time and again that Anglo-Burmese relations would be handled by the India government at Calcutta and not (in the manner of a truly sovereign state) by the Foreign Office in London. What the Burmese hoped was that by becoming friends with the French, they could at least raise the diplomatic cost to Britain of any future expansion at Mandalay's expense.

At the beginning of 1884 a new treaty was agreed between the Quay d'Orsay and a Burmese mission to Paris led by the *myoza*, or lord, of Myothit. There was to be no official alliance or military agreement, nor would a French political agent be stationed at Mandalay. There was nothing in the essentially commercial agreement about which London could really complain. But this did not stop the Calcutta press or the restless trading houses of Rangoon from spreading stories of secret French clauses. As the Burmese and the French were involved, surely there was more than met the eye.

\*

Many years later a story made the rounds that laid much of the blame for the fall of the kingdom on a requited love, between an up-and-coming Burmese scholar-official and a beautiful Eurasian maid of honor to the queen. The maid of honor was Mattie Calogreedy, later Mrs. Mattie Calogreedy Antranik, born in Mandalay to a Greek father and Burmese mother and one of the many young women of the Western Palace.<sup>7</sup> As a teenager she had fallen deeply in love with a Frenchman, an engineer in the employ of the king. The affair was well known, and Mattie Calogreedy hoped they would soon be engaged. But when this man, Pierre Bonvilain, returned from a sojourn in Paris with new French wife, she was humiliated and enraged. Not only that: she sought revenge, not just on her ex-lover but on the

entire French nation.

Conveniently for her, ~~there was someone she knew she could use, a Burmese official who had~~ unsuccessfully tried, perhaps a few times, to seduce her. His name was Naymyo Theiddi Kyawtin. He had been a state scholar in England and had accompanied the royal embassy to Queen Victoria in 1872. Fluent in English and French and with a taste for expensive whiskey, he was in 1885 a junior secretary to the Council of State with access to privileged papers. Mattie Calogreedy agreed to sleep with him, and he agreed to share with her a secret document. And this secret document, so the story goes, quickly fell into the nimble hands of the Italian spy Giovanni Andreino.

Giovanni Andreino was a former village blacksmith and onetime organ grinder from Naples who had come to Burma at the invitation of his brother, the Roman Catholic bishop. Ambitious and unscrupulous, within a few years he had made himself the center of much palace gossip, and his seeming familiarity with the ways of the Oriental court had led to three of the biggest British firms—Finlay Flemming, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, and the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company—appointing him their representative. Rome made him the Italian consul. And the British recruited him as their man in Mandalay.

The truth of the matter may never be known, but Andreino claimed to have a copy of a secret letter from Jules Ferry to the Burmese foreign minister, one that promised French arms, to be smuggled across the Mekong from Tonkin, in return for French monopolies over the king's fabled jade mines in the northern hills and much else besides. News of this "secret agreement" set off a whirlwind of Anglo-Saxon indignation. Lord Churchill had his rationale. So too did his friends on the editorial staff of the *London Times* who wrote, in September 1885, that the argument for an invasion of Burma was now "unimpeachable."

But Churchill had to be careful. The last thing he (or anyone else in the British government) wanted was a war with Burma that would lead unwittingly to a war with France. The threat of French expansion would provide the pretext for an invasion, but the British had to be sure that the French would not *actually* rally to Thibaw's defense. At this point, if the French had stood firm and said there was no secret deal or if they had intimated in any way that they sympathized with Burma's plight (and might lend Thibaw a hand), Churchill would likely have retreated. Instead, the French neither denied scheming nor suggested that they would lift a finger to save Burmese independence. The road to Mandalay was clear. Only the final piece remained: a proper *casus belli*.

\*

As if on cue, the Burmese provided a timely provocation. On 12 August the Burmese Council of State imposed a large fine of over a hundred thousand rupees on the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. A provincial governor had charged that the Scottish company, based in Rangoon, had been illegally exporting timber from Upper Burma without paying the proper royalties. The governor had imposed a fine, the company had appealed, and Mandalay had now upheld the provincial decision. The company offered to open its books. The British commissioner in Rangoon suggested impartial arbitration. But the Court of Ava would not be moved, and the London Chamber of Commerce petitioned Lord Churchill either to annex Upper Burma or at least to establish a protectorate over the irksome kingdom. Whoever was in the right (and corrupt Burmese officials were likely to blame), the timing could not have been better for Lord Churchill.

On 22 October an ultimatum was sent by steamship to the Court of Ava, setting a deadline of 1 November with the following demands: (1) The fine should go to arbitration; (2) a British Resident should be received at Mandalay with "a proper guard of honour and a steamer" and should have full access to the king without having to submit "to any humiliating ceremony" (meaning, primarily, the

he should not have to take off his shoes indoors, as was the Burmese custom); and (3) the Burmese would in the future exercise their external relations only in accordance with the advice of the government of India “as is now done by the Amir of Afghanistan.” The last was effectively a demand that the country relinquish its sovereignty. For good measure, the ultimatum also called on the Burmese to open up a trade route with China for British firms.

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The king and his ministers knew they had no good choices. Most knew their defenses were in a sorry state. The underwater explosives would not be laid in time. And the preparations to sink the king's steamers and create a blockade along the middle Irrawaddy were not yet complete. There were several European trainers and advisers, but they were a mixed lot, adventurers like Joseph Henri de Fiacre, the son of a colonel in Napoleon's Cuirassier Regiment, who had served for an Indian prince, then for the British, before finding a home in Thibaw's army. But staring at the ultimatum, they couldn't bring themselves to surrender Burma's independence. They drafted a reply that accepted all the British demands except that one. Instead, apparently hoping for a compromise formula, they proposed that Britain, France, and Germany jointly decide Burma's status.

They understood that war was coming but canceled any moves toward a general mobilization. No one had any illusions about the outcome. They would do their best with what they had, and the rest was left to fate. Command of the kingdom's defenses was entrusted to the lord of Salay. Three columns were mustered: the Lower Irrawaddy Column, under the cavalry general Mingyi Thiri Maha Zeyya Kyawdin, recently returned from campaigning along the Chinese border; the Great Valley Column, under a colonel of the Cachar Horse Regiment, Mingyi Minkaung Mindin Raza; and the Toungoo Column, under the colonel of the Shwaylan Infantry Regiment, Mingyi Maha Minkaung Nawrata.

But this would be no grand army like the armies of the king's ancestors that had waged their own wars of aggression against Siam and Assam or had defended the country against China many decades ago. Too many battalions were far away in the Shan hills fighting to reclaim lost principalities or putting down rebellions in the border towns upriver. At best, Salay would be able to muster fifteen thousand regular soldiers to meet the English invasion.

*On the road to Mandalay,  
Where the old Flotilla lay,  
With our sick beneath the awnings when we went to Mandalay!*

In the days before the war began, ordinary townspeople from nearby Thayetmyo used to come around to the riverfront to see for themselves the impressive steamships and khaki-clad soldiers of Sir Harry Prendergast's Burma Expeditionary Force. Thayetmyo (the name means “mango-town”) was a small district capital of around ten thousand people and the home of a growing and profitable silverwork industry. Its citizens had lived for over thirty years under British rule, and the sight of uniformed Europeans, Sikhs, and Punjabi Muslims was nothing particularly new. But what caused considerable excitement was a sight no one expected: a Burmese prince, in full court costume, sitting in a large chair on the prow of one of the steamers. All around were attendants in the white silk jackets of the royal palace, some kneeling before him. Some thought it was the *mintha*, or prince, of Myingun, an older brother of Thibaw's who had led an abortive rebellion many years before and was rumored to be in Bangkok. Others were sure it was the prince of Nyaungyan, another exiled prince, thought to be in Calcutta. And so the speculation gained ground, and people were calmed. The British would only play

a new king on the throne. Yes, Thibaw would be overthrown, but the kingdom and the monarch would be safe. Perhaps it was all for the better.

It was that week that Maung Pein, a student at the Government School in Rangoon, was home on holiday. He was descended from a line of local chiefs, and several of his ancestors had served at the Court of Ava. Hearing about the prince, Maung Pein and his father decided to go down to the river and see what they could. They were joined in their evening stroll by a Burmese official, Naymyo Thi Kyawtin Nawrata, who had received orders the night before not to resist the British advance.

Curious, and fluent in English, the young schoolboy talked his way past the various sentries and sauntered up to the steamship, only to find himself face-to-face not with a prince of Ava but with Maung Ba Than, a former student at his school and now a junior clerk at the chief commissioner's office in Rangoon. It was a ruse! He ran back to tell his father and the Burmese official about the impostor. They tried to send a telegraph to Mandalay, but the telegraph line had been cut. And so along the invasion route, ordinary people would be convinced that a new prince of the blood would soon be on the throne.<sup>8</sup>

When the first British steamships, the *Irrawaddy* and *Kathleen*, crossed the frontier at first sunlight on 14 November, there were no massed Burmese positions to meet them, only invisible rifle fire from the low hills overlooking the river. General Prendergast understood Lord Churchill's desire to see Mandalay occupied by the beginning of polls on 25 November, but he wanted to be careful and also remembered his instructions to avoid bloody conflict. Many of his men were already lying ill from dysentery and fever even before any actual fighting had begun.

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The first and only real battle of the war was at its very start, just after the flotilla had set sail and a few miles north of the frontier.<sup>9</sup> The Burmese garrison was under the command of the son-in-law of Thibaw's war minister, the *myoza* of Taingdar. The British were led by Brigadier George White, later to achieve considerable fame at the defense of Ladysmith during the Boer War. The first fort was overrun almost effortlessly, but the second, on the opposite bank, was taken only after fierce fighting. At least a hundred Burmese soldiers died in the battle. On the British side, the casualties were much lighter: three Indian soldiers and a young English officer, Lieutenant Dury, a promising former schoolmate of Rudyard Kipling's whom the poet later remembered: "The Crammer's boast, the Squadron's pride, Shot like a rabbit in a ride!"

The vigor of the Burmese resistance had surprised Prendergast. He was determined to proceed step by step. Fortunately for him he could now rely on detailed drawings of Burmese forts and other defensive positions left behind at the captured forts by two Italians, Captain Camotto and Captain Molinari. These two erstwhile officers had been hired by the Burmese government, in a moment of panic and apparently less than astute judgment, as military advisers. During the heat of battle the duo had ignominiously taken flight, leaving behind all their papers, including the drawings.

For the British the remainder of the war was, to use a more recent expression, a cakewalk. The Burmese had concentrated their forces about a hundred miles to the north of the frontier, just beyond the vast medieval ruins at Pagan. On 23 November two companies of the Liverpool Regiment and four companies of Bengal infantry landed along the eastern banks of the Irrawaddy and pushed toward the fort at Myingyan. But there was to be no real resistance, only a few small skirmishes. In the distance the British could see the mounted Burmese general, the lord of Salay, peering down at them from an escarpment, surrounded by his men in their red, white, and magenta coats. Many of the officers among them had vermilion umbrellas, a mark of minor nobility, held over their heads. Salay had decided not to fight, and instead he and his army withdrew, away from the river and into the low forests to the

east. He telegraphed Mandalay later that day to say that Myingyan had fallen and only the great fortifications near Ava lay between the British and Mandalay.

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The Kinwun Mingyi was a survivor. Now in his sixties, slight and grayhaired and with a thick, bushy mustache, he had spent the last thirty years at the Court of Ava, surviving two reigns and many rebellions. A scholar of law and jurisprudence, the Kinwun\* had risen through the ranks of the palace establishment through his cunning and fine drafting skills, finally making his name as a diplomat and as the head of the Burmese king's mission to Queen Victoria in 1872. His trip was only a qualified success, but his diary of the long travel to London and back, written for the entertainment of the court ladies, was a literary hit. For the mission he was raised to the rank of secretary of state and on his return showered with new titles and noble styles.

What was difficult for him to convey in his diary was the extent to which his experiences in the world outside Burma, and especially in late Victorian England, had changed forever his assessment of what was possible and what was not in his country's relations with the greatest industrial and military power of the day. He had been taken up and down the length and breadth of the British Isles and had seen firsthand the sources of the empire's strength and skill.

When the last king, Mindon, had died, in 1878, the Kinwun formed a coalition with various factions at court and placed the twenty-one-year-old Thibaw on the throne. He hoped that Thibaw would be a weak king or at least one open to his ideas for change. The Kinwun and other reform-minded grandees, many of whom had been schooled in Europe in the 1860s and 1870s, knew that time was running out against them. Only radical reform would save their kingdom. But he had not counted on the rigor of the royalist reaction, and most of their plans had come to nothing. The last few years had been ones of intense disappointment.

But what to do now that the English were almost at the gates of the palace? Military resistance seemed out of the question. For the Kinwun, that which was utterly unthinkable to many at court—accepting a British protectorate—was far from unacceptable. He had tried hard as a diplomat to win British recognition for Burma as an independent state and failed. But perhaps a protectorate would in the end bring stability and then progress, and this was all that Prendergast and his ships and his machine guns had come to do. The Kinwun knew the exiled princes well. If the British had come to place one on the throne, that was not the worst scenario. But would Thibaw give up without a fight?

\*

When the telegram reached the palace saying that the English had sailed past Pagan, the king had begun to assume the worst. The governor of the Mandalay area, the lord of Yindaw, suggested that Thibaw retreat into the Shan hills, to the town later known as Maymyo. The minister in charge of relations with China suggested an escape by road, to the southeast and across the border into Yunnan. Thibaw weighed these options but thought that if he had to leave, he would prefer to retire to Shwepyithar, his ancestral home. If things went badly, he could flee even farther north and eventually reach Chinese territory through the mountain chieftainships of Wuntho and Mogaung.

He ordered his minister for war, the lord of Taingdar, to ready fifty elephants, fitted out with the king's howdahs. Everyone was told to be prepared to leave: government officials of all ranks, the court ladies of the court, his elite Natshin-yway bodyguard, made up of specially chosen men over six feet in height, the hundreds of servants and retainers, royal sword bearers and umbrella carriers, as well as his two little daughters (his only son had died of smallpox as a baby) and his wife and queen.

But others told him that running away would do no good. They reminded him of the lessons history. As soon as he was away from the palace, they warned, his prestige would diminish, and once king lost his prestige, “he is left with nothing but his umbrella.” What about the French? They had signed a treaty of friendship. So had the Germans and the Italians. Were these good for nothing? His ambassador in Paris could not be reached, as the British had severed their communications with Rangoon. But on 23 November the Kinwun submitted a report stating that the French agent in Mandalay, M. Frédéric Haas, had come to tell him that the English would soon arrive and that His Majesty must grant them whatever they demanded. The Kinwun tried to reassure the nervous king, promising Thibaw that he would stay with him and protect him “from whatever grief or danger might come near him, not waiting in anxiety, but in brave acceptance of what was to come.”

\*

Prendergast’s Field Force pushed on and within two days reached the great bend in the Irrawaddy River, here over a mile wide, where the Burmese had constructed three fortifications, one by the old royal city of Ava and two others on the opposite bank. The garrison at Ava was commanded by the lord of Myothit, a minister in the government and the diplomat who had led the embassy to France and signed a treaty at the Palais de l’Élysée only a couple of years before.

In the dark wooden halls of the palace, those who counseled surrender rather than flight and resistance finally gained the upper hand. Within a day Prendergast’s guns would be within firing range of Mandalay town. A robust defense could be organized, but it seemed unlikely that anything other than a British victory was possible at this point. Perhaps the British would agree to a conditional surrender. The grandees at court must have known that their king’s fate was sealed, but perhaps their own interests and the interests of their class and their country could still be protected.

By late November the weather in Upper Burma is nearly always perfect, with cool nights and warm days of cloudless blue skies. Brigadier White, standing on deck as the *Kathleen* came within sight of Ava, wrote that “the sun was pouring a flood of golden light on the last hours of Burmese independence.”

That afternoon the Burmese steamer *Yadana Yimun* appeared, flying the peacock flag of the Court of Ava as well as the white flag of surrender. In tow was a gilded royal barge with forty-four rowers carrying two emissaries of the king, the lords of Kyauk-myaung and Wetmasut. The emissaries, both wearing enormous floppy sun hats, asked for an armistice and time to satisfy London’s demands. Prendergast, though giving them a friendly welcome, rejected the possibility of any armistice but said that if Thibaw surrendered himself, his army, and Mandalay, and if the Europeans in Mandalay were found “unharmful in person and in property,” then the king’s life would be spared. No other guarantee could be given. He gave the envoys a deadline of 4:00 a.m. on 27 November, about a day and a half away.<sup>11</sup>

The early-morning deadline came and went, but at 10:00 a.m. the envoys finally reappeared with word of surrender from Thibaw. The British noticed that the Burmese had blocked the river just above Ava by sinking a steamer and various smaller boats, filling them with sand and stones. The Burmese forces in the area were ordered to lay down their arms, but the lord of Myothit (the fort commander) refused to accept the authenticity of Kyauk-myaung’s message and insisted on a direct order from his king. Kyauk-myaung was a Sorbonne-educated reformist and known to have long advised accommodation with London. Only when a telegraph in Burmese Morse code was received at Ava, signed by Thibaw himself, did Myothit agree to stand down. His men then melted away into the surrounding villages, leaving behind piles of Martini rifles. Myothit himself stayed and wept as he

saw the steamships slowly make their way the ten miles to the royal city itself.

~~The Burmese remember that the entire evening, from around seven o'clock until dawn the next day the sky was filled with thousands of shooting stars and meteors, falling in all directions, appearing and disappearing as people wondered what these clear omens could mean. These were actually the Andromedids in one of the greatest meteor storms of recent times, seen all over the world. Those learned in astrology prophesied that the country and the Buddhist religion would soon meet hard times.~~

General Prendergast landed at Mandalay at one in the afternoon on 28 November. This was to be a day famous in Burmese history and in the Burmese calendar is remembered as the eighth day of the waning moon of Tasaungmon or Sagittarius. At three o'clock his political officer, Sir Edward Sladen on horseback, approached the southern gates together with a small armed escort. Crowds had begun to gather along the avenues leading from the river to the city walls. Sladen was a former British Resident at Mandalay and spoke Burmese. Just then a minister came charging up on a caparisoned elephant and pleaded that troops not yet be sent into the palace precincts. Sladen left a note for Prendergast at the gate asking to give him some time and then went in alone.<sup>12</sup>

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Edward Sladen climbed up the whitewashed stone steps and into the dark and thickly carpeted inner rooms of the palace. Escorted by the Kinwun, he walked quickly to where the king was sitting together with his wife and his mother-in-law, the queen mother. Thibaw received him and at first spoke nervously, asking the Englishman if he remembered their earlier meetings. And then, mustering up as much courage as possible, he looked at the Englishman and said, "in a very formal and impressive manner: 'I surrender myself and my country to you.'" Thibaw asked for a day or two to prepare for leaving and said that in the meantime he would stay not in the main palace but in the summerhouse nearby. He told the political officer of his worries for Supayalat, now over seven months pregnant. But Sladen would not agree and gave him only until the morning, promising that until then the British troops would not enter the palace. With this Sladen turned and left.

Soon it was dark, and in the dark the palace descended into chaos. The old certainties of palace life and discipline dissolved with the knowledge of the coming foreign occupation. Some reacted with shock. For most the haziness of what lay ahead meant that they had to grab what they could and position themselves as best as possible for what was to come. A new king? Or rule by the English? Something few could imagine? Prendergast had ordered that no men were to enter or leave the palace but he did not mention women, and overnight dozens, perhaps hundreds of ordinary women came through the western gates and seized anything of value they could find. The king's bodyguards deserted him. And all but seventeen of the three hundred maids of honor fled, also carrying all the valuables they could.

Thibaw was by now beside himself with fear, certain that at any minute soldiers would break into his apartment and kill him on the spot. When Sladen arrived the next morning, he saw that the king and queen were practically alone and unattended and that overnight Thibaw had collected what he could of the gold vessels used by Burmese sovereigns on state occasions, the heirlooms of his family and dynasty, and these were in a little pile on one side of the room. Sladen had come with a guard of the Sixty-seventh South Hampshire Regiment. Thibaw wasn't frightened of the English soldiers, but when one of the officers' servants, a black man, came in carrying something for the officer, "Thibaw was much disturbed, and asked if he was the executioner."<sup>13</sup>

General Prendergast himself appeared at noon, and Sladen informed him that the king was ready to receive him. The great wooden gates flung open, and the pith-helmeted troops marched in, halting at the steps to the main hall and forming a line with ranks facing inward and with fixed bayonets. The

Burmese ministers of state came next, led by the Kinwun and the lord of Taingdar. All walked past the teak-pillared throne rooms and the smaller salons and halls, rooms filled with French mirrors, Persian rugs, and glass mosaics, finally descending a flight of wooden stairs and into a back garden. Here under the shade of tall palm trees was the summerhouse, with a paved walkway and gas lamps in the front and a little artificial pond to the side.

Thibaw sat petrified on the verandah, the royal women behind him also clearly frightened, their eyes wandering back and forth from Sladen to Prendergast to the bayonets of the black-booted soldiers. An unseasonable drizzle had just ended, and the sun shone only intermittently through the clouds. Prendergast bowed once, and Thibaw's ministers, in their long dark velvet coats, prostrated themselves before their sovereign for the last time on the cold wet earth.

There was to be no ceremonial procession. Instead Thibaw and his young family, together with a train of servants, were led toward a few ordinary bullock carts waiting just outside the palace enclosure. They then left through the southern Kyaw Moe (Conspicuous Sky) gate, over the lily-filled moat, escorted by the men of the Sixty-seventh Foot. The captain of the king's artillery, the lord of Mabai, and the privy treasurer, the lord of Paukmyaing, followed behind, bringing with them the royal insignia. The lords of Wetmasut and Pindalay, ministers of the inner court, placed two white umbrellas, symbols of royalty, over Thibaw's ramshackle wooden carriage.

By now large crowds of ordinary people had gathered along the avenues leading from the walls of the city and to the Govinda wharf, some three miles away. As their king passed them by, men, women, and children instinctively knelt on the ground. Many were weeping. Some cried out at the uniformed Englishmen surrounding the captive family, and a few stones and clumps of earth were thrown at the party slowly wound its way through the progressively denser crowds. Thibaw remained silent throughout the journey, but Supayalat nervously called out to the young soldiers, several of whom rushed forward to light her proffered cigar.

It was dusk by the time they reached the river. A small wooden plank connected the bank to the *Thooreah* steamer. With his attendants holding a tall white umbrella over his head, and a crush of English, Burmese, and Indian onlookers all around, the twenty-eight-year-old Thibaw walked onto the ship, never to see Mandalay or Burma again.

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# THE DAY AFTER

The people of this country have not, as was by some expected, welcomed us as delivered from tyranny.

—Secretary for Upper Burma to the Chief Commissioner<sup>14</sup>

In the end the Burma War was neither necessary nor particularly helpful to Randolph Churchill and the Conservative Party. On 21 November, as Prendergast's fleet was sailing north toward the temple at Pagan, Charles Parnell had issued a statement denouncing Gladstone and calling on all Irishmen in England to vote for the Tories. The result was a close election, with a large Irish bloc holding the balance. The polls had opened on 25 November, when Prendergast was still moored near Aungmye. Mandalay's actual surrender took place not on the eve of the polls, as Churchill had hoped, but in the days of helter-skelter party politics that followed. Parnell joined a Conservative government under Salisbury and then later changed his mind and helped bring Gladstone back to power. Churchill himself became Chancellor of the Exchequer before leaving the political scene altogether a year later. No one really cared about Burma by that point. An interview with Thibaw on the morning of his departure appeared in *The Times*, and a few colorful descriptions of Burma and the war appeared in *The Illustrated London News*, but not much else. Few sensed the bloodshed that was to come.

The war had started without a plan in place for its aftermath. Much like what would happen in the Iraq War 120 years later (and several colonial ventures in between), Churchill and others who had advocated a policy of "regime change" had assumed only the best: that with the removal of the top leadership, there would remain in place an administration with which the victors could work and that it would be on the whole a cheap war, a decapitation that would lead to a new and more pliable government and little need for an elaborate strategy of occupation. But also like the Iraq War of the twenty-first century, the bestcase scenario never materialized.

The most obvious plan was to place another prince of the same Konbaung dynasty on the vacant throne as a sort of British puppet. What was left of the Burmese kingdom, Upper Burma, would have become either a protectorate, like Nepal, or an Indian princely state, like Hyderabad or Kashmir. The new "prince of Upper Burma" would have lived and ruled under the guidance of a British Resident, and the ways and aesthetics of the court may have been reformed to better fit English notions of proper Oriental monarchy. Thibaw's successors may even have become fabulously rich and joined their Indian peers at the racetracks of Ascot or the gaming tables of Monte Carlo.

The government of India had been keeping one of Thibaw's half brothers, the prince of Nyaunggyan, on standby for several years in Calcutta for just such an eventuality. Many had assumed that he was the figure seen on the prow of one of Prendergast's ships, and this may have led to the easy surrender. But he had actually died just weeks before, something kept top secret so as not to undermine the ruse. But there were other options, including the young prince of Pyinmana, a teenager who could easily have been shaped into the sort of ruler the later Victorian empire wanted and expected.

The second option was simple annexation. No more king and no more royal family. All of Thibaw's possessions would have come ultimately under the authority of a British chief commissioner or governor. Under both schemes, some or all of the old administration could have remained, both the

institutions of the Court of Ava and more than a few of its turbaned and helmeted officialdom. Either way, there would have been no more external interference, from the French or anyone else, and stability and trade would have been ensured under a British Raj.

But it soon dawned on even the most optimistic empire builders that in invading Burma, the British had waded into a very messy situation. The central assumption of Whitehall's Burma policy, to the extent that there was one, was that a swift and simple change at the top would lead to quick submission and the rapid return of normal government. This was now proven horribly wrong.

Things didn't start off too badly. Heat, bugs, and unfamiliar foods took their toll, but Mandalay was far from an inhospitable place to live. There were the familiar rituals and practices of a late nineteenth-century colonial victory. Photographs were taken of British officers and their Indian subordinates against new and exotic backgrounds. Medals and promotions were discussed. A prize committee decided which treasures and artworks to send to whom in England and Ireland and what to sell for the government of India. Queen Victoria received Thibaw's best crown, and the prince and princess of Wales two carved ivory tusks and a gold figure of the Buddha. The larger rooms of the palace were converted with little redecoration into an Anglican chapel and a somewhat makeshift Upper Burma Club, complete with billiard table and a passable bar.

There were also some early attempts to address Burmese sensitivities, to win hearts and minds, but these were often inadequate or wrongly conceived. Within days of Thibaw's departure, his white elephant, symbol of the country's sovereignty, appropriately gave up the ghost. Though a proper cremation with court Brahmins was permitted, the dead animal was then unceremoniously dragged, in full view of a shocked public, out of the palace gates. For the Burmese the elephant had been something extraordinary, bordering on the divine, and was treated with extreme respect and care. Dragging the king's own corpse along the street would probably not have provoked any greater indignation or feeling.

By Christmas initial luck and good cheer had turned to worry bordering on panic. Within the defunct Court of Ava the British faced growing resentment and outright hostility, while in the countryside roving bands of armed men more directly challenged the new order. Thibaw's army had scurried away, many carrying their swords and rifles. Parts of the valley had long been plagued by gangs of bandits, and these now seemed to find common cause with the ex-soldiers returning to their home villages and hamlets. British patrols were ambushed and attacked by a largely invisible army with no apparent leadership. Again, as in Iraq much later, the questions were asked: Were the remnants of the old regime? Extremists of some sort? Or criminals taking advantage of the change in government? No one had any idea.

There were a few officials of the old government willing to help the British, but only in the most cursory manner. Many gathered their belongings and left Mandalay altogether. Harry Prendergast, a political officer, had hoped to work with Thibaw's most senior minister, the Kinwun. But he had been chosen, perhaps in part out of a guilty conscience, to accompany the former king part of the way to his exile in India. The next most senior minister was the lord of Taingdar. He was known as a committed Anglophobe, and the British eventually found reason to arrest him and pack him off to India as well. For a few weeks the royal officers who were left were reorganized and placed under the overall supervision of a British civilian, Sir Charles Bernard. But the orders they sent up and down the Irrawaddy to the king's governors and garrison commanders seemed to have little effect as a full-fledged insurgency began to take shape.

Left to deal with the growing mess was the not particularly imaginative Irishman Frederick Temple Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, the earl of Dufferin and baron of Clondeboyne, the owner of large estates in the north of County Down and more recently the viceroy of India. Educated at Eton and Christ Church, Dufferin had a long and distinguished record of imperial and diplomatic service. He

was governor-general of Canada and ambassador, first to Russia and then to the Ottoman Empire. He was a Whig but also an aristocrat and landowner.<sup>15</sup> After his predecessor Lord Ripon's exciting and controversial tenure, the queen told Dufferin not to be too independent in his thinking, and Dufferin was happy to comply.

And Dufferin, despite any misgivings he may have had (and despite the more articulate misgivings of his senior officials), had acquiesced to Churchill's strong lead and not stood in the way of a war with Burma. But now that Churchill had moved on to bigger things, it was Lord Dufferin who was left responsible for determining Burma's postwar future.

*No more the Royal Umbrella,  
No more the Royal Palace,  
And the Royal City, no more  
This is indeed an Age of Nothingness  
It would be better if we were dead*  
—The abbot of Zibani Monastery<sup>16</sup>

For the people of Mandalay the days and weeks after the king's departure would remain etched in their minds forever. Fifty years later, on the eve of the Second World War, the nationalist leader Thakin Kodaw Hmaing remembered how as a child he had witnessed the British soldiers escorting Thibaw and his family through the dusty streets of the city. For the ten thousand Buddhist monks who lived in and around the capital, occupation by a non-Buddhist power was almost impossible to comprehend. Mandalay was the center of religious life in Burma, and the king acted as patron to dozens of monasteries and monastic colleges around the city and in nearby towns. All of a sudden their patron was gone, and an entire system of higher education and religious training collapsed almost overnight.

For the officials of the Court of Ava, their hopes of a light occupation and the installation of a new prince were quickly fading. When it became clear that the British had no intention of leaving and were instead inclined to abolish the monarchy altogether, many of Thibaw's senior officials, led by the Kinwun, banded together and made a formal request to the viceroy: establish a constitutional monarchy or relieve us entirely of our remaining responsibilities. They wanted full authority, under the guidance of a British political officer and with a figurehead prince. This, they said, could work and order could be quickly reestablished. But they couldn't be expected to function as things were with no say over the administration of the capital and only limited authority in the countryside. They were neither here nor there. They wanted a decision.

Outside Mandalay the nobility and the gentry class, which had governed the countryside for centuries, responded in different ways. Some chose submission. They included senior military officers, like the colonel of the Yandana Theinga cavalry, a man of much influence in the north, who sided with the conquerors and was appointed in charge of his township.

Others, like the lord of Yamethin, were less willing to give in. He had been an officer in the household guards and had been posted as a garrison commander in the Shan uplands. He now led his Kindah regiment down from the hills and into the forests around Yamethin to harass British positions. His distant relative the *sawbwa*, or prince, of Wuntho in the far north also decided to resist, gathering around him the chiefs of Katha and Kyatpyin for the coming fight. Just to the south of Mandalay, the chief of Mekkaya, head of one of the oldest aristocratic lineages in the country, organized his men against the occupiers, ambushing the young men from Tyneside and South Wales as they ambled through the tall elephant grass and across fields of cotton and paddy. Other rebels included notorious bandits of long standing, like Hla-U in the lower Chindwin Valley and Yan Nyun in the badlands of the middle Irrawaddy. Now wearing a patriotic guise, they enjoyed a new lease on their popularity and

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