

Preface

This *Dictionary of 20th Century Myanmar Writers* is the first work of its kind in the English language. Although we have in Myanmar language about a dozen or so of biographical dictionaries of both classical and modern Myanmar authors, there is an urgent need of a reliable, standard Dictionary in English of the best modern Myanmar writers.

In recent years, our country has opened up to the world after about (55) years of military rule from 2nd March 1962. Transition to a freely elected, democratic, civilian rule under the leadership of Noble Peace Prize awardee Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy, began in April of 2016. Many foreign visitors are now coming to Myanmar as the country has become one of the top tourist destinations and also businessmen and investors from abroad.

Writings about Myanmar and Myanmar literature, poetry, novels and short stories, as well as informative articles and books on places of interest, ancient archaeological sites, works on Myanmar politics, culture, ethnic races, economic and social conditions, business opportunities and other aspects of modern Myanmar life and society are now being published. There are now also a number of translations of Myanmar Literature available in English. Censorship of books and all writings, in place for over half a century, has now been ended.

U Myo Thant (pen-name Maung Hsu Shin), my close colleague and friend of over 40 years, first thought of compiling a *Dictionary of 20th Century Myanmar writers* about 15 years ago. As the two of us had worked together on several literary projects, I agreed to serve as deputy of a small team that we formed to work on the compilation. My son, Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung, also became a member of the team, together with Daw Tin Tin Win (Senior Editor, Sarpay Beikman) and U Myint Kywe, well-known prize-winning writer and translator.

The compilation of this Dictionary was first begun in Myanmar language, around 2005. U Myo Thant and I agreed that we should first publish it in English, because there were no reference books for foreign readers who wanted to know about modern Myanmar writers and their most prominent works. We therefore, decided to apply for a grant from the Toyota Foundation, the main Japanese foundation that has been helping Myanmar writers and researchers for many decades.

The funding from Toyota Foundation was received later in 2005. The original team for this project consisted of: U Myo Thant (Maung Hsu Shin) as project leader, U Thaw Kaung, U Myint Kywe, Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung (co-ordinator) and Daw Tin Tin Win (Member-cum-Secretary).

The Aims and Objectives of this compilation project are:

- (1) To add a useful and effective reference book for scholars and writers in their research and studies, from both within Myanmar and from other countries.
- (2) To fulfill a gap in written resources on tracing and compiling of the development of modern literature in Myanmar for use by students, scholars and other readers from Myanmar and abroad.
- (3) To make a reference book recording individual works and critical appreciation of writers for readers and libraries.
- (4) To compile a source book for use in intercultural exchange between neighbouring and other countries.
- (5) To compile and preserve part of a body of dwindling sources about Myanmar writers, past and present.

The implementation of the project would consolidate the present incomplete and sketchy biographical sources in periodicals and some monographs, covering the designated time span of the past century.

The compilation, started in 2005, was first completed in Myanmar language around 2007. In 2005, I was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize (Academic Laureate). After the ceremony in Fukuoka I travelled to Osaka and Tokyo to give lectures on modern Myanmar literature. During my stay in Tokyo, I visited the Toyota Foundation headquarters and discussed some of the on-going Toyota funded projects in Myanmar including this project.

After the first compilation in Myanmar language was completed, U Myo Thant requested some well-known writers and researchers, proficient both in English and Myanmar, to translate different parts of the Biographical Dictionary. Among those who helped with the translation into English were:

- (1) Daw Kyan, eminent Myanmar Historian and life member of the Myanmar Language Commission. Winner of the National Life Achievement Award in Literature.
- (2) U Ba Than, retired Director General, translator and writer in English.
- (3) Other prominent writers like U Aye Cho (M.A), U Win Tun and others.
- (4) Some research assistants who helped with both the compilation and translation.

By 2009, the translation into English was complete and we were editing the text when the project leader, U Myo Thant, suddenly died on 2nd June of that year. He was born on 1st January 1932, so at the time of his death he was only 77. He had been an active leader in the Myanmar literary field, serving as Chief Editor and Director of Sarpay Beikman, the prestigious Palace (House or Institute) of Literature founded by our first Prime Minister, U Nu, and his Secretary and Director of Information, U Thant (later Secretary-General of the UN), in 1947, (20) years ago.

U Myo Thant even after retirement at age 60 in 1992, continued to serve at Sarpay Beikman as the Advisor and a Senior Consultant to the Ministry of Information. He was also, for many years, Secretary and later President of the Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association.

With his death I lost an admirable close friend and colleague. He was sorely missed as a stalwart leader of the Myanmar literary world.

After U Myo Thant passed away, the project was held in abeyance for about four years, until my son, Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung, was able to meet and discuss with Ms. Yumiko Himemoto-Hiraishi, who had for many years given full support and advice on Toyota Foundation projects in Myanmar.

U Myint Kywe, who was on the original team, also passed away. So Daw Tin Tin Win, Senior Editor at Sarpay Beikman and U Myo Thant's main able assistant, my son and myself, were left to restart the project in 2014.

In editing U Myo Thant's *Dictionary of 20th Century Myanmar Writers*, Daw Tin Tin Win gave full support. In checking the life of authors and putting in about (14) new entries we were assisted by U Myint Kyaing, one of my former Library Studies students, who had retired as Deputy Director General of the Historical Research Department. He used to be a librarian at Mandalay University and the Myanmar National Library and is very knowledgeable in the world of books, with many literary friends who are well-known Myanmar writers.

We were also helped, at various times, by Daw Su Su, retired acting Chief Librarian of the Universities Central Library. We also received assistance from Daw Khin Hnin Oo, retired Chief Librarian of Yangon University Library and U Than Ohn, retired Senior Librarian of the National Library and prize winning writer specializing on biographies of famous Myanmar personages including Buddhist monks. The final checking of the English translation was carried out by Daw Mu Mu (Rosebud Ho), retired Senior Teacher of the Diplomatic School in Yangon.

To all these helpers we are extremely grateful for their contributions.

This work will be of great use to scholars and other readers interested in Myanmar and modern Myanmar literature. It should become a useful Reference Work in Libraries in Myanmar and abroad.

Dr. Thaw Kaung
Retd. Chief Librarian, Universities Central Library.
Part-time member, Myanmar Historical Commission
and Chairman of the Myanmar National Literary
Awards Selection Committee.

1st Sept. 2017