

INTRODUCTION

"THE best thing a Burman can wish for a good Englishman," the witty Shway Yoe wrote in 1882, "is that in some future existence, as a reward of good works, he may be born a Buddhist and if possible a Burman."

"It is a common belief," he also recorded, "that no one can speak Burmese well till he chews betel."

Shway Yoe—"Golden Honest" in Burmese—wrote of his beloved Burma with wit, compassion and a genial openness, matched only by his extraordinary grasp of the significant detail, whether he is commenting on the more suitable kinds of foundation-posts (male, female, neuter) on which a happy house may rest; on the extraordinary legal and religious freedom of the Burmese woman and the reasons for her preeminence in many a business situation; or on the tortures of those who, after an impious existence, instead of progressing along the Buddhist road to Nirvana are consigned to the States of Punishment.

The insouciance of the Burman, even in the face of such potential torments, his gracefulness and spirit, his life and indeed his notions themselves were put down by Shway Yoe with a sunniness and a sharpness of vision which have remained unmatched in the literature on Burma.

Herbert Hoover once called the Burmans the "only genuinely happy people in all of Asia." It is only in a felicitous work like Shway Yoe's that one finds a full and detailed documentation for President Hoover's equally felicitous characterization.

There are, to be sure, occasional statements expressing satisfaction at the superiority of the British flag and rule over the manner of governance which characterized the displaced Burmese kings. It is only in the face of this sort of opinion that one comes back to

the reality that Shway Yoe was not, after all, a delightful and erudite young Burman, but rather a delightful and erudite young Scotsman, one named, in fact, James—later Sir James—George Scott.

Adroitness and charm do not make up the whole story of Shway Yoe's reporting. More important is the vast, authentic and pleasurable detail with which this young public servant drew his picture, in what remains a unique description of the way in which the Burman lives his life and the values and patterns and motives that are the stuff of it.

Burma has, as everyone knows, undergone change since Scott, as a young man of thirty, published his record of how the Burman lives and thinks. The life in some significant respects has changed, and the notions, in violent collision with those of an alien and occupying British society, have been altered somewhat too. Yet the basic substance of the tough and resilient Burmese character has survived intact, and with it most of the notions and most of the life Shway Yoe described, only excepting those which he saw as already foredoomed—such things as the education monopoly of the monastery-schools, the childbirth rituals, or the wearing of the men's top-knot. The tattooing of the male body and the ear-boring ceremonies for girls, then universal customs, are described minutely. But Shway Yoe, unlike many a modern anthropologist, had the cogency to point out that such customs were not destined to remain very long—were, in fact, dying out. There was nothing static in the life around Shway Yoe, and there is nothing static in his descriptions of it. Above all, however, there still remains in this work the essential winsomeness of a handsome, sturdy, relaxed and graceful race, and in this respect, Shway Yoe saw true in 1882. His vision holds today.

Some may question the republication of a work by a "colonial" writer, but there is much justification for making it available anew. Part of this lies in the fact that James George Scott was not the ordinary colonial Britisher. In a sense, he was a forerunner of dedicated English friends of Burma like Maurice Collis and the late, great J. S. Furnivall. He was also an heir to the great British scholar-administrators—Yule, Phayre, Raffles, Crawford—who had preceded him in Burma and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Like these forebears and successors, Scott went beneath the surface of a Burman's refusal or acquiescence, attractiveness or

cussedness, activity and idleness. He explored deep into the motives which tradition and culture had created, the values from which action or inaction spring. "It needs something more," Shway Yoe observed, "than passing examinations and being a smart report-writer to govern the people well."

And what wealth of custom, order, piety, superstition, belief, ceremony, celebration, and ritual he found. Why will a servant not wake his master at the appointed hour? Because the Englishman's spirit may be away on a visit, and rousing the master while his body is vacant of soul could, at the very least, induce sickness and perhaps something worse. Little matter that the master will rage at not being awakened on time and accuse the servant of oversleeping.

Will a Sunday-born gentleman marry well with a lady born on Wednesday? Most assuredly not, and nothing but misfortune can come from the union of such an ill-assorted pair. The planets plainly portend evil for such a marriage, just as they can be relied upon to be benign for a Sunday-Tuesday match.

Every Burman has his *saddi*, his palm-leaf horoscope cast in his infancy at the same time the astrologer confers upon him a name. On the occasion of every important decision—even, in modern days, decisions of state—the horoscope is cast anew, the planets studied and decisions made or postponed, action undertaken or put off. And no power on earth can make a Burman act in defiance of his stars. Shway Yoe finds in this some of the explanation for the "laziness" often observed in the Burman's make-up—which is only, in fact, a refusal to act until the stars are more propitious.

The Burman can not, after all, be demanded to act like an Englishman, an American, a Chinese or a Russian, for that matter; and many a foreign diplomat, missionary, businessman and administrator has come a cropper for overlooking the fact. More than one embassy in Rangoon has writhed in embarrassment after an intercultural *faux pas* based on innocent but unjustified assumptions of common and clear understanding in negotiations. More than one businessman has lost a contract because he stepped on a hidden but nonetheless sensitive corn. Many a missionary is remembered, generations later, with a slightly too jocular affection for an unforgettable, if hardly intended, homiletic gaffe. Too often, in seeking a Burman's cooperation, ignorance of what will and will not bring it about ends in total frustration of the best-

intentioned foreigner's effort, with the result that sometimes nasty myths are born and perpetuated about the Burman's character which are hardly justified.

Scott overcame this ignorance and at least made it possible for others, later on, to come to understand that they were not dealing with incomprehensible, and therefore inferior, people. If some of what he observes has ceased to be, much of it remains a vital bundle of factors in the Burman's life today, and today's visitor to Burma, to a sensitive and nationalistic Burma, overlooks these factors only at his own risk.

For too many years, Scott's insights have been available only to persistent seekers of British books out of print. In the United States, Scott is hardly known at all, even to those increasing many who should have memorized every chapter of *The Burman* before departing on assignment to Burma. There has been missing to these Americans, consequently, not only the invaluable information patiently found and most humanely set forth by Scott, but his example also.

James George Scott was born on Christmas day in 1851 in Dairic, a small town in Fifeshire not far west of Saint Andrews, the second son of a minister. His father died when Scott was about ten years old; three years later his mother took her sons to Stuttgart for three years, and there the boys went to school. Returning to Britain, Scott studied briefly at Edinburgh University, but his subsequent stay at Lincoln College, Oxford, was cut short by money difficulties arising from unwise management by an uncle. As a correspondent for *The Standard*, Scott went in 1875 to Perak, Malaya, and shortly thereafter to Burma where he obtained a post as a teacher in St. John's College under the well-known Anglican missionary and schoolmaster, Dr. John E. Marks. During the next few years he wrote articles in *The Rangoon Gazette* under the name of Shway Yoe. He was a correspondent for *The Daily News* for a while in 1879-1880 during a visit to Mandalay, still the capital of the independent Burmese monarchy, and he wrote sketches for the *St. James Gazette*, which were later to appear in *The Burman*. *The Burman* was published while Scott was back in London from 1881 to 1883 studying law for a time. Scott again turned eastward and early in 1884 he arrived as a correspondent in Tongking, the northern part of present-day Vietnam. Here the French had resumed a more aggressive policy toward the

court of Annam at Huế and their forces were engaged in campaigns against both Vietnamese and Chinese troops. His book *France and Tongking*, an account of the fighting which he had witnessed in 1884, of his impressions of the Vietnamese, and of his speculations regarding French intentions in Southeast Asia west of Vietnam, was published in London in 1885, seen through the press by his brother. He then returned to London where he succeeded in passing his examinations for the Bar. During his stay in London, a very brief British military campaign resulted in the annexation of independent Burma to the possessions of British-India on New Year's day 1886. Scott returned to Burma in April of that year to join the Burma Commission, an administrative cadre hastily formed to govern the suddenly expanded Province.

Scott remained in the service of the Commission until his retirement in 1910. The sphere of Scott's activities during his last twenty-five years in Burma was almost continuously the Shan States, where he was appointed Superintendent for the Northern Shan States in 1891 and Political Agent and Superintendent for the Southern Shan States in 1902, the post he occupied until his retirement. He was a member of the first and second Siam Boundary Commissions of 1889-1890 and 1890-1891, and served as chargé d'affaires in Bangkok in 1893 and 1894. For his contribution to the establishment of British rule in the Shan States he was made Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire in 1892 and in 1901 he was created Knight of the same Order.

Before his retirement Scott wrote two more books about Burma. *Burma as It Was, as It Is, and as It Will Be* was issued in 1886 shortly after the annexation and was intended to take advantage of the interest aroused by that event. He brought out, in 1906, *Burma, a Handbook of Practical Information*, which included contributions by others and was published twice again. In 1901 the government of Burma put out the five volume *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States* as an official publication, and although he had to share credit on the title-page with another, it appears to have been almost entirely the work of Scott. Though it is, next to *The Burman*, Scott's most substantial book, it is now of interest chiefly as an historical source and as a reference work, the stolid pages of which the author was only occasionally able to enliven with his genial writing.

Scott continued writing articles and books in the last quarter

century of his life, some of them in collaboration with his third wife, Grace E. Mitton. *Burma and Beyond*, 1932, was intended to do for the other peoples of Burma what *The Burman* did for the major ethnic group, the Burmans, but it is a poor reflection of the earlier book. Only once during these years did Scott return to Burma. He undertook, some time in 1919, to survey for a private company the possibilities of large-scale cotton growing in Burma. Sir James George Scott died at his home at Grafton, in Sussex, in April 1935, in his eighty-fourth year.

Scott's accounts of Burmese practices and ceremonies are based on his direct observation and experience. *The Burman, His Life and Notions* is the record of Scott's acquaintance with Burma at a time when he was still relatively new to Asia, and when he was in a favored position to learn about the country and its people. Few other writers about Burma have been able to occupy such a vantage point, and he himself was not able to regain it during the rest of his lengthy career. The schoolmaster's post which he first occupied obviously provided great opportunities to one who, like Scott, was endowed with the energy and curiosity to improve them. Scott taught in a missionary school, but it is difficult to think of him as a missionary. There is no evidence in his own writings, or in his biography, which indicates he had any attachment to a Christian communion in thought or membership.

If it seems doubtful that Scott can be classed with the evangelists in Burma, there is no question of his being equally independent of the governing and trading communities of Rangoon. What his feelings about his fellows were is unclear, but he was too intimately associated with the indigenous population to suit most of his European compatriots. The book makes virtually no comment upon officials, but Scott does permit himself some critical remarks about sharp practices of European firms in the rice trade. Despite all this, the younger generation of Britishers in Rangoon, according to the contemporary English-language press, did seem to have accepted him without great qualms.

As a teacher and as a player of football, which he is said to have done a good deal to popularize, Scott must have become friends with a number of young Burmans and with their parents. Scott certainly never lacked for opportunities to meet Burmans and to come to know them. These occasions would be all the more deeply appreciated for Scott's knowing the Burmese language.

Scott's account of a boat race is set at Myanaung, on the Irrawaddy north of the Delta, and he refers to other towns in Lower Burma, but the impression arises that Scott's acquaintance with Burma was most intensely concentrated in Rangoon and its environs. For some months, a couple of years before *The Burman* appeared, he visited Mandalay, but in view of the feelings of a reigning monarch there toward the British at the time, it seems unlikely that Scott could have achieved an intimacy with up-country Burmans comparable to that which he apparently enjoyed with the folk in Rangoon. His observations in that still independent kingdom (which the British were soon to annex), aside from those of court institutions, added little but quantity to what he had already accumulated in the south.

In addition to what he could learn from life, Scott was also in those early years reading what observers and recorders preceding him had written, men like Adolf Bastian, Bishop Paul Bigandet, C. J. F. S. Forbes, Albert Fytche, Father Vincenzo Sangermano, and others. It is interesting that Scott should mention Bastian, the German pioneer anthropologist and traveler in Southeast Asia in the early 1860's, who for some curious reason is almost never cited by writers on Burma. Perhaps the answer for this neglect is simply the language barrier, no obstacle to Scott with his early German schooling. Scott also shows an acquaintance with certain books known even now to traditionally-educated Burmans, the religious *Mingala Thok* and *Poyeykyi*, the secular *Lawkaniti* and *Deikton*, and others.

In the end, however, what counts is Scott's distillation of his own experience and observations, perhaps the most important element in the enduring quality of *The Burman*. Never again, despite a quarter century more in the country, did Scott have the same opportunity to study another culture in Burma. His service in the Shan States was as an official, aloof and busy, dealing with many different peoples.

Fortunately Scott was able to take a relatively detached attitude toward his experiences. His status outside the three major European communities in Rangoon of officials, businessmen, and missionaries, and his confining his subject to the Burmans alone gave him freedom to view them directly, and not through colored alien spectacles. The result is a book which more than any other by a foreigner succeeds in presenting the Burmese way of life with

out patronizing, without criticism, without romanticising, without attempted justification. Scott had little interest in the quaint as such. He does not pine for the good old days, nor did he urge the Burman to reform his ways. Scott is content to transmit the sense of being a Burman day by day, the pleasures of work, play, and sociability in village Burma.

The Burman still has a relevance for understanding contemporary Burma. Many details in the picture of the people and society are almost as fresh and clear as when Scott painted them. Where they are fading, it behooves later scholars to describe the reasons and the trends.

Scott's references to ingrained religious practices, whether derived from sacred Buddhist writings or from the folk religion of spirits which persists all over the world as a subsoil beneath the great religions, are perennially valid. In almost no society has religion been displaced by other ways of viewing the world and man's place in it. This has been particularly true in Burma.

Mi Mi Khaing has pointed out, in the preface to the recent American edition of her book, *Burmese Family*, that Burmese culture has been less vulnerable to the acids of modernization than that of many other Asian peoples. This immunity arises out of the identity of the prevailing religion with emerging national awareness and in the absence in Burma of well-defined and firmly maintained distinctions of social rank based upon income, occupation, or sex.

The most striking changes in Burma since Scott's day are nevertheless those consequent upon the process of modernization or westernization. Such influences spread out, like water on a blotter, from a few points, usually from the ports and certain inland trading and business centers, such as Rangoon, Moulmein, and Mandalay. Gradually the foreign goods, the foreign education and the foreign ideas imparted therein seep to the villages. Little by little village boys go to the cities for the education, the jobs, the money, and the foreign wares. The process was slow under the foreign colonial government committed to the principles of laissez-faire, as J. S. Furnivall complained; and it has remained gradual even under national governments explicitly committed to the process of change at a faster rate. The Burma of which Scott wrote was preponderantly a rural society, and today most of the population are still either farmers or first-generation immi-

grants to town.

The Burman is important as a document, a record of a way of life prevailing over eighty years ago, yet the book should be appreciated as more than that. Scott described a society upon which the modern world has since made few demands for extreme change, and his description emphasizes the central aspects of the culture, such as religion, family, upbringing, which have long resisted significant change.

Scott employs many Burmese words and phrases in his writing. Fortunately, most of them are defined when used, though not always at first occurrence. A very few remain not wholly obvious when one has come to the end of the book. Scott provides a copious index as an aid. He generally prefers the Burmese pronunciation of names of Indian origin, which are so much a part of the Buddhist heritage. Thus, for example, *Athawka* is for *Asoka*, *Wini* is for *Vinaya*, and so on. Here Shway Yoe is in keeping with modern Burmese folk iconography.

In his preface to the first edition of *The Burman* in 1882, Scott says that eighteen of the sixty-four chapters first appeared in the *St. James Gazette*, an evening paper which made its debut on May 31, 1880. Some unsigned notes in the *St. James Gazette* in the autumn of 1880 have the ring of Scott's style. The first of the forerunners of *The Burman*, signed, like the book, Shway Yoe, appears to be the later Chapter LIII, "Ministers of State," which appeared on June 6, 1881. About half of the *Gazette* essays were taken over into the book virtually unchanged; the others were either reworked or considerably added to. In the preface to the second edition of 1895 only such minor changes were made in the original text as were necessary to take notice of the overturn of the old kingdom. The revision made in 1909 concerned changes relating to British rule of all Burma and to a few references, somewhat irrelevant, to Shan practices. None of these revisions added much either in sense or number of words. Thus *The Burman* is now substantially as Shway Yoe wrote it eighty years ago.

Burma is often recalled by those who have lived there as foreigners as a most hospitable and warmly receptive country. All the Burmese who live in it, whether they be Shans, Karens, Kachins, or the predominant ethnic group which gave its name to the country, the Burmans, receive the stranger according to age-old

laws of hospitality. The sensitive stranger, like Shway Yoe, senses and observes these laws and is forever welcome. For those with slightly more calloused sensibilities, Shway Yoe is an excellent guide, companion and mentor to the foreigner who would truly know, understand and enjoy the incomparable Burmans and their land.

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