

Introduction: The fall of Mandalay

Late in the afternoon, on 29 November 1885, King Thibaw of Burma appeared at the steps of his summer palace, holding the hand of his queen and half-sister Supayalat. The evening before, a British expeditionary force under the command of General Sir Harry Prendergast had entered Mandalay unopposed and had ordered the king's immediate and unconditional surrender. A request to remain in the city for another day had been rejected by General Prendergast and, instead, Thibaw was given a few more hours to collect his possessions and leave his kingdom forever. And so, after a brief interview with the gentleman from *The Times*, the last of the Konbaung monarchs abdicated his throne and began his journey into exile.

Thibaw and Supayalat were accompanied by their three young daughters and other close family, as well as by several ministers of state and an entourage of servants carrying trunks full of treasure and royal costumes. Riding in an ordinary ox-drawn carriage, they slowly made their way out though the Kyaw Moe gate to the south and then towards the steamer *Thooreah* anchored in the Irrawaddy river three miles away. Several hundred British soldiers, men of the 67th Hampshire Regiment, escorted the royal party as they emerged unceremoniously from the walled city and proceeded through the thick crowds of ordinary people who had gathered to watch. As Thibaw made his way past, the townspeople seemed only then to realise that he was being taken away. Thousands prostrated themselves on the ground alongside the road to the pier. Some cried out and several stones and clumps of earth were thrown at the scarlet-coated troops marching alongside the carriage.

Nearer the river, Supayalat called on a few of the British soldiers close at hand and then favoured one by granting him the privilege of lighting her royal cigar. When they finally reached the Irrawaddy after dark, Thibaw, a white umbrella of royalty held high over his head, walked across a narrow wooden plank and onto the waiting steamer, never to set foot on Burmese soil again. Aged 28, he would spend the remaining thirty years of his life as a state pensioner and prisoner just outside the town of Ratanagiri along western India's steamy Konkan coast.

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Thibaw's fate had been sealed several weeks before with a decision by the British Secretary of State for India, Lord Randolph Churchill, to occupy Mandalay. The British and the Burmese had already fought two wars, in 1824–6 and 1852–3, both resulting in decisive British victories. Assam, Manipur, Arakan and the Tennasserim were ceded to Calcutta after the first war, and the remainder of the Indian Ocean coastline was taken during the second. But the heartland of the Burmese kingdom, what the British called 'Ava' or 'Upper Burma', remained in the hands of an enfeebled Burmese monarchy, together with a collection of nearby Shan principalities. For twenty-five years, attempts were made by both sides, British India and Burma, to find a mutually agreeable system of bilateral relations. Treaties were signed which opened the country to European commerce and several embassies were exchanged.

But by the death of Thibaw's father, King Mindon, in 1878, many businessmen both in Rangoon and Calcutta were calling for the outright annexation of the remaining royal domains. Political unrest under Thibaw, allegations of frightful imprisonments and massacres of suspected opponents provided ammunition to the interventionist cause. Politicians and officials in Calcutta, Westminster and Whitehall also began considering intervention by the late 1870s. At a time when France was consolidating her hold over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, they feared increased French influence at the Court of Ava and eyed with suspicion the diplomatic missions of Burmese envoys to Paris and other European capitals. The Burmese had insisted on maintaining their independence in their foreign affairs, and the limits of British tolerance were soon breached.

The decision to employ military power in support of commerce and strategic concerns was certainly nothing unusual for Victorian Britain.¹ The Empire was enjoying a period of continued expansion, pushing forward colonial boundaries and enlarging spheres of influence across Africa and Asia. What were highly unusual, however, in the history of late-nineteenth-century imperialism, were the decisions taken by London and Calcutta in the aftermath of Thibaw's sudden exile. These decisions, taken primarily between December 1885 and February 1886, amounted to no-

¹ Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, London, 1972, pp. 132–7; Ronald Robinson, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, London, 1961.

thing less than a complete dismantling of existing institutions of political authority and the undermining of many established structures of social organisation. The monarchy, the nobility, royal agencies, the army, all disappeared, virtually overnight. In the countryside, local ruling families, many of whom had governed their charges for centuries, lost their positions as all hereditary status effectively came to an end. The political framework which had organised life in the Irrawaddy valley for at least three hundred years vanished under the weight of new colonial policies. 'Modern Burma' was born out of this transition.

The natural course for British policy-makers would have been to place another Burmese prince on the Konbaung throne and rule indirectly through a protected native court. Working through indigenous elites and institutions was a policy with which the British were certainly familiar. Even those who favoured annexation would likely have settled for the establishment of Thibaw's dominions as a new princely state of India. Senior civil servants had called for a protectorate rather than direct rule and even the Court of Ava seemed to believe that this would be the most likely outcome of a British victory. In Calcutta, a draft treaty had been prepared for the signature of the new 'Prince of Upper Burma'. The country would have become the largest and the richest of all the Indian princely states, the royal family and aristocracy would have remained intact, and the course of twentieth-century Burmese history would have taken an entirely different path.

But instead, by January 1886, the monarchy had been abolished altogether. Important members of the royal family were exiled to disparate places in India and many others were sent far to the south, to Tavoy and Moulmein, banned from returning home until the very end of British rule in 1948. Royal lands were seized, royal slaves and hereditary servants released from their obligations and a 'Prize Committee' divided palace possessions to be sent as gifts to notables at home in England and Ireland.

A series of further decisions and events then conspired to destroy the old nobility of Ava. The high officialdom had been composed of inter-related families, strictly organised according to relative status, the most senior of whom were often in turn closely related to the extended royal family. The majority of Thibaw's ministers seemed willing and even eager to assist in setting up a new administration, British-controlled, which would work through existing agencies of government. For several weeks, attempts were made to direct policy through the Hluttaw, the Council of

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State. Court grandees were reorganised under the overall supervision of Sir Charles Bernard, the chief political officer, and orders were sent to the various governors and garrison commanders up and down the valley. But this experiment soon failed and a purely British regime was established.

The nobility had lived in elaborate compounds near the royal palaces, within the walled city of Mandalay. In late 1886, their homes, which had been meticulously placed according to rank, were demolished, and the thousands of people who had made up court society, their servants and retainers, were forced to join the common population outside the great ramparts. The palace itself was turned into a British headquarters, the principal throne rooms serving as the 'Upper Burma Club' and the garrison chapel. Even worse for the nobility than the loss of their special residences was the destruction of the royal treasury. The treasury had contained all official records related to aristocratic family genealogy. They had been inscribed on palm-leaf manuscripts and were burned by drunken soldiers on the first night of the occupation. With their loss, claims to noble status could no longer be authenticated. Without a king, a court or ways of verifying aristocratic descent, the nobility as a separate class collapsed within a generation.

As puzzling as the reasons behind Britain's decision to abolish the Burmese monarchy and impose direct rule were the changes in local administration which were brought about by the new state. In many other parts of Britain's imperial realm, colonial administrators had tended to work through intermediary classes. Even where the British imposed formal control, they still, more often than not, chose to leave day-to-day government in the hands of local elites, landlords or tribal chiefs. In the Shan hills, a peripheral part of Thibaw's kingdom, this is what the British did. The hereditary chiefs or *sawbwa* were allowed considerable autonomy under the general supervision of a colonial superintendent. But in the Irrawaddy valley itself, the new state imposed bureaucratic control right down to the village level. From the village headmen, through the township officers up to the deputy commissioners and finally the Chief Commissioner, a wholly new framework of government rapidly supplanted existing institutions.

In the Irrawaddy valley, the counterpart of the Shan chiefs were the Burmese *myothugyi*, hereditary office-holders who ruled over small town-based polities of various sizes. They and other lesser office-holders and their families had comprised the gentry class which governed the country-

side under varying degrees of royal direction. Often titled and granted special sumptuary privileges, these men served as intermediaries between the distant Court of Ava and the thousands of villages and hamlets scattered across the lowlands. And yet British policy-makers, rather than attempting to co-opt their services into the new regime, deliberately shunted them aside. *Myothugyi* quickly lost their dominant position. What had been a complex hierarchy of local hereditary office dissolved into a sea of undifferentiated and salaried village headmanships.

The military expedition which had been charged solely with the occupation of Mandalay and the removal of King Thibaw thus became a permanent military occupation, one which dramatically changed the social and political organisation of the country and created a new colonial state and society. The explanation most often given for the abolition of the monarchy was that there was no suitable prince whom the British could place on the vacant throne.² The Nyaungyan Prince, an elder half-brother of Thibaw, had been living in Calcutta and had been the obvious choice for future king. But he had died only a few months before the outbreak of the war. Another senior member of the royal family was the Myingun Prince, but he had fled British territory, first for Pondicherry and then for Saigon, and was thought by the British to be much too close to the French to be considered as a possible puppet. Several other sons of Mindon had been killed in the political executions of the late 1870s. But despite this, many other possible candidates did exist. There was, in fact, no shortage of princely contenders, including, for example, the young Pyinmina Prince, who was finally considered as a possible king, but not until more than half a century later by very different masters, the Japanese.

While at least some explanation is usually offered for the abolition of the monarchy, little if anything is ever said about the destruction of the nobility or the undermining of local elite positions. Where the *myothugyi* and other gentry leaders are mentioned at all, historians have argued that they formed the backbone of anti-colonial resistance in the 1880s and were effectively wiped out as a class. But this does not agree with the records of the fighting which took place. Where local hereditary leaders did play a role, they are usually portrayed by contemporary British observers as supporting the new authorities. In most English-language

² See, for example, D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, London, 1955, p. 681; John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, Ithaca, 1958, p. 120.

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histories of this period, however, the nobility and gentry are not discussed at all.³

To a large extent this was the result of a reading of pre-annexation Burmese society which saw the political system as a sort of 'oriental despotism', a king ruling ruthlessly and absolutely over an otherwise egalitarian society.⁴ The nobility and the gentry were not recognised as distinct groups, and office-holders were simply seen as clients of the king, serving at his whim. Little was known about the elaborate hereditary structures which had developed over the preceding several hundred years, and few early colonial writers were concerned with the details of local social organisation. In addition, this image of a corrupt king ruling over a mismanaged but otherwise attractive and egalitarian Burmese society fitted well with British attempts to justify the imposition of direct rule.

But while these later historians focused exclusively on the removal of Thibaw and tended towards this simple image of pre-colonial Burmese society, the discussions of policy-makers at the time reveal a much broader set of considerations which moved events in their peculiar directions.

A key reason given at the time for the abolition of the monarchy was not that there lacked a suitable prince but that the Court of Ava was simply unable to fulfil the role of a local collaborator, and that successive kings and governments had shown themselves incapable of accommodating British interests, permitting free trade or keeping out unwanted rival European influences.⁵ This reason seems much closer to the truth. Despite a clear awareness by the late nineteenth century of its extremely weak international position, Mandalay had continued to resist British

³ See, for example, J.S. Furnival, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, Cambridge, 1948, pp. 70–4; D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, London, 1968, pp. 770–4; Ernest C.T. Chew, 'The Fall of the Burmese Kingdom in 1885: Review and Reconsideration', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (hereafter *JSEAS*), 10 (1979), 372–81; David Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of South East Asia*, Boulder, 1982; Michael Aung-Thwin, 'The British Pacification of Burma: Order Without Meaning', *JSEAS*, 16 (1985), 245–62; and the more recent Carl A. Trocki, 'Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (hereafter *CHSEA*), vol. II, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 119–20.

⁴ See, for example, Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, New York, 1967, pp. 266–9; H. Fielding-Hall, *The Soul of a People*, London, 1898, pp. 79–93.

⁵ See, for example, V.C. Scott O'Conner, *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*, London, 1907, p. 26.

efforts aimed at securing a stable 'informal empire' over Upper Burma. France and other continental states were courted by Mindon's and Thibaw's ministers, royal monopolies remained over key sectors of the economy, and even on issues of protocol the Burmese would not give in to British demands for greater accommodation.

And while this poor record of collaboration had pushed many colonial policy-makers in the direction of annexation, it was the situation in the countryside during the first few months of the British occupation which settled the issue. The British knew that the area around Mandalay had been plagued for several years by banditry. But it was only during attempts to work through Thibaw's former ministers, and the royal agencies which they were supposed to control, that the extent to which law and order had broken down throughout the kingdom became clear. The writ of court mandarins no longer extended far beyond the city walls and a few garrisoned towns along the Irrawaddy. Their position had already been weak and the blow to their legitimacy resulting from the king's surrender and exile had been fatal. Governors and other provincial officials were fleeing their posts and bands of armed men up to several thousand strong held sway across the valley. By April 1886, the bandit gangs were joined by others, including men of the old royal army, Buddhist monks and even a few displaced nobles and princes. What had been a continuation of the banditry under Thibaw became an organised countryside resistance against the new colonial regime, with calls by new royal pretenders to protect 'Buddhism and tradition' and drive the English 'infidels' into the sea.

The response of the Marquess of Dufferin, Viceroy of India, and his Burma-based subordinates was to 'pacify' the countryside through a campaign of violent suppression. Tens of thousands of villagers were forcefully relocated and suspected rebel sympathisers were summarily executed as the British army took the offensive. Over the next year, 40,000 British and Indian troops were poured into the old kingdom and harsh measures against civilians continued. Gradually, the colonial authorities gained the upper hand and, when the dust had cleared, very little of the old regime was left. The colonial state was born as a military occupation.

But this interpretation of the events surrounding the fall of Mandalay invites a whole new set of questions: why, for example, were existing political structures so brittle? And what underlay the considerable resistance to British rule? Why did the Court of Ava not become a better

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‘collaborator’ and preserve a degree of autonomy, if not nominal independence, as did nearby states such as Nepal, Afghanistan or Siam?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions and to explore more generally a much neglected chapter in southern Asian and in British colonial history: the long transition in the Irrawaddy valley away from the Ava-based imperial polity of the early nineteenth century and towards the British Burma of the early twentieth.

The English-language historiography of this period is almost entirely confined to specialist monographs or to chapters in more general histories of ‘Burma’. These chapters are either found at the very end of books on ‘Burma before the British’, or at the very beginning of books on ‘modern Burma’. Scholarly works which are set entirely within the nineteenth century have all focused on specific themes, nearly all related to Anglo-Burmese diplomatic relations or war.⁶ The reaction of successive royal regimes to European expansion and other contemporary challenges, in particular the reformist programmes of Mindon and Thibaw, are thus never placed in a broader historical context. Attempts by Mandalay in the period 1853–85 to modernise administration are dismissed as well-meaning but insignificant.⁷ Attention is focused on the gradual consolidation of British rule in the south, and the annexation of 1885 is seen almost as an inevitable final episode in the growth of British Indian power across the Irrawaddy basin.

Burmese-language historiography is not very different. While the Burmese court is predictably portrayed in a kinder light, the focus remains the same. The possibility of political and social change over the course of the nineteenth century is similarly ignored. Within the study of local history, much greater interest is always paid to the time of the Pagan and the early Toungoo monarchs, than to what is seen as the sad and ignoble decades preceding alien occupation.

⁶ For example, Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1852–1948*, The Hague, 1965; Oliver Pollack, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Westport, 1979; Charles Keeton, *King Theebaw and the Ecological Rape of Burma: The Political and Commercial Struggle between British India and French Indochina in Burma 1878–1886*, Delhi, 1974.

⁷ For example, Furnival, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, esp. pp. 73–4; G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma from the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 – The Beginning of the English Conquest*, London, 1925; Cady, *History of Modern Burma*, esp. pp. 141–4; Frank Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Republic: A Historical and Political Analysis*, London, 1966, esp. p. 38; Joseph Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, Ithaca, 1977, esp. pp. 11–12.

More generally, both English and Burmese scholarship tends to assume a fairly static and passive Burmese society. The nineteenth century is viewed in terms of a political transition from Burmese to British rule over an otherwise stable 'Burma'. If one were to remove the recent Indian immigrants and the occasional European trader, civil servant or soldier, the Burma of, say, the 1920s was not thought to have been very different from the Burma of a century before. Both colonial and nationalist writers saw an undifferentiated and unchanging rural landscape of egalitarian Buddhist villages and assumed little had ever been otherwise.

At an even broader level, there is hardly any questioning of 'Burma' or the 'Burmese' as a stable category. The boundaries of post-1885 Burma are viewed as 'more or less' the same as the boundaries of the various royal polities over the previous thousand years. The 'Burmese' themselves, following their immigration from some distant snowy homeland are seen as being the predominant people around which history revolves. The 'Shan', 'Mon' and 'Karen' were always 'minorities', their relative power waxing and waning over periods of 'Shan dominion' or the Burmese–Mon 'civil wars'. With British rule there then follows the 'unnatural' administrative attachment of Burma to 'India proper'.

A number of recent works on the early modern history of the Irrawaddy valley have helped to much better illuminate local society and political institutions in the hundred years or so prior to the first Anglo-Burmese War. Seminal works by Victor Lieberman, William Koenig, Than Tun and others have given us a much clearer picture of the world of the Restored Toungoo and early Konbaung kings.⁸ The challenge thus remains to bridge from this world to the world of contemporary Burma and offer some explanations of the changes and continuities which took place.

Through this book, I will argue the following points: firstly, that the period 1853–85 was in fact a period of sustained innovation and attempts at adaptation to rapidly changing local and global conditions. The Ava (or Mandalay) based polity, reduced to its core territory through military

⁸ Especially Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Circles: Anarchy and Conquest c. 1580–1760*, Princeton, 1984; Victor Lieberman, 'Secular Trends in Burmese Economic History, c. 1350–1830, and their Implications for State Formation', *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter MAS), 25 (1991), 1–31; William Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819: Politics, Administration and Social Organisation in the Early Konbaung Period*, Ann Arbor, 1990; Than Tun, *Essays on the History and Buddhism of Burma*, Edinburgh, 1988.

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defeats, was fully aware of the need to refashion state structures and find a place within the emergent international system.

Secondly, these policies failed, as a result of several internal and external factors, to achieve their prime objective of creating an independent and modern Burmese state. These included the loss of the Irrawaddy delta to British India, the imposition of British commercial treaties which limited state involvement in the economy, the effects of the 1870s world depression, the effects of the Panthay revolt in Yunnan and contemporaneous crises in China, and the chronic political instability at home related to the ever present threat of British intervention.

Thirdly, the net result of the interplay among British imperial policies, the reaction of Ava to changing circumstances and a host of other local and global factors was the creation of a peculiarly unrooted colonial regime, one which started (and ended) as a military occupation with little popular support. The interplay of these various actors and processes also led to significant social change. Just as new landed elites emerged under the old regime, colonial policies largely undermined their position and created a much more homogeneous and egalitarian social order.

Fourthly, local reaction to British expansion and other challenges was itself conditioned by the region's recent history, including a long era of imperial conquest from an Irrawaddy valley core and the development of patriotic sentiment tied to the Ava polity and the related 'Burmese' or Myanma identity. On the opposite side, Calcutta's policies were framed within the context of Indian interests and strategies and saw the Burmese kingdom with reference to Indian experiences, knowledge and objectives.

Finally, the end of the century witnessed the birth of Burma as we still know it today. The territorial limits of the country, the notion of who is Burmese and who is not, key social and political structures, all find their origins in this period surrounding the fall of Mandalay.

The nineteenth century in the areas in and around modern Burma is an interesting but largely unexplored episode in both British imperial and regional history. The century witnessed the gradual displacement, in the Irrawaddy, Brahmaputra and Salween river basins, of the once expansive authority of the Court of Ava by the authority of an equally aggressive British Indian state. It also witnessed quite vigorous attempts by the Court of Ava to construct a modern though territorially more modest state under the shadow of colonial encroachments. And finally the century saw the development of a strong patriotic sentiment centred on the rump Ava