



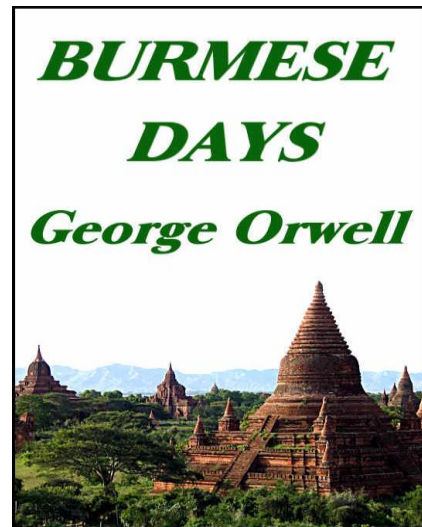
Book Review

Orwell, George. (1934). *Burmese days*. New York:

Harper & Brothers. 316 p.

By Louis Royal*

January 2012



Among the novels of George Orwell, one of special interest regarding the history of Southeast Asia is “*Burmese Days*”, 1934. This novel is of historical interest as a documentation of the period of time when the independence movements in India and Burma were

becoming prominent. These independence movements went on to free India and Burma from the colonial rule of the British Empire in 1947 and 1948 respectively. But the novel is far more than that since it documents the earliest origins of an incisive political mind against the various manifestations of totalitarianism. The abhorrence of totalitarianism, as later evoked by George Orwell in “*Animal Farm*” and “*1984*”, began in Burma.

From an elite English education acquired at Eton, Eric Blair (later to become the writer, George Orwell) embarked on his fateful experience of education in the world as one of the few British officers in the Indian Imperial Police, an organization which reinforced the Army dominated British imperialism of Burma. Blair’s choice of Burma was based on family. His mother, though French educated, was born in Burma. His maternal grandmother still lived in Burma, a member of an enterprising lumbar export family business located in Moulmein.

*Lecturer, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University



five years in Burma as a member of the Indian Imperial Police exposed, Eric Blair to the brutal reality of cultural domination, exploitation and prejudice, was engendered by the British occupation.

Burmese Days later emerged as the first fictional novel by George Orwell, the chosen pen name of Eric Blair. The novel portrays the experiences of a lumbar merchant, John Flory, in upper Burma, in the fictional town of Kyauktada. The story encompasses the memories and observations of Flory regarding various officials and entrepreneurs of the British. As well, Flory manifests his own character flaws, most evidenced by his extreme loneliness, a result of his refusal to adhere to the norms and mores expected of a British expatriate in this remote outpost. By his own admission, Flory has lived 10 years of loneliness and degeneracy with dependence on alcoholic binges, smoking and a variety of local women.

In several ways John Flory is distinctly different from the other European expatriates at Kyauktada. He has an openness and acceptance of the native people and their cultural differences. Among these, an Indian Hindu doctor, Dr Veraswami, has become his closest friend. In several discussions, Flory and the doctor are in general agreement in their criticism of British imperial rule and its effects of accentuating and perpetuating the class distinctions and racial barriers between the British oppressors and the Burmese natives. This is explicitly manifested in Dr. Veraswami's attempt to gain a membership into the exclusive British "Club" in Kyauktada. But Flory's failure to support his one true friend also reveals his hypocrisy and flawed nature.

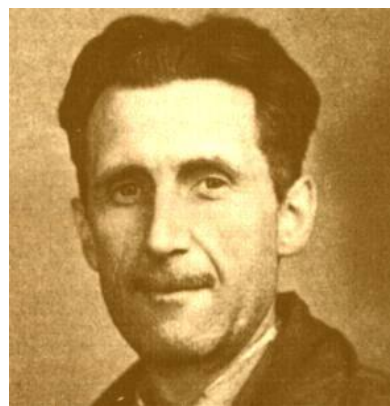
At one point, an emergence from Flory's loneliness and isolation seems possible. His somewhat idealistic, romantic, but inevitably unrealistic fantasies come to the fore when a visiting English girl arrives on an extended visit with her aunt and uncle in Kyauktada. Miss Elisabeth Lackersteen also seek the security of marriage. Her initial introduction to Flory



suggests that the relationship might lead to that outcome. Flory becomes immediately infatuated with this rather average woman not so much for her innate beauty or intelligence but for the societal implications of what a marital union would mean for Flory: his ascendancy from a “bachelor life” to that of a more acceptable and normal life of a married man. However, in an ironic twist of fate, Flory’s previous life of debauchery emerges. His previous dalliance with a Burmese mistress brutally destroys his dreams. His former mistress, Ma Hla May, arrives uninvited at the church where all the British expatriates have gathered, including the British girl. His former mistress demands for money and marriage, ending forever Flory’s dreams of a new life.

Flory’s lifelong self deprecation is metaphorically portrayed by a hideous wine stained facial birthmark. The novel portrays Flory as an individual wallowing in self pity, with an overall depressive tone, perhaps mimicking Orwell’s own feelings as a member of the Indian Imperial Police in a remote outpost. Flory’s utter failure in his quest for a normal life concludes the novel with an inevitable outcome, his suicide.

“*Burmese Days*” was George Orwell’s first truly fictional novel (1934) though it was preceded by the publication of a narrative documentary of his time in London and Paris, “*Down and Out in Paris and London*” (1933). “*Burmese Days*” clearly documents Orwell’s basic social and political stand against British imperialism, later to expand to a criticism of all forms of totalitarianism. In fact, as the Indian Imperial policeman, Eric Blair or



Orwell spent five years of his youth in Burma, involved in work as a relatively low level administrator and enforcer at various outposts in this distant land of the British Empire. This



obligated him to support policies of empire with which he did not really agree. His experiences in Burma changed Eric Blair. For it was in Burma that Eric Blair acquired the social and political abhorrence of totalitarianism, which later emerged in the political writings of George Orwell, his chosen pen name.

Orwell's time in Burma and his views of empire are further expressed in two short stories based on his Burmese experience, "A Hanging" (1931) and "Shooting an Elephant" (1936). The political position against totalitarianism, established in Burma, became a lifelong driving force for the political writer, George Orwell, culminating in his later novels critical of oppression, "*Animal Farm*" and "*1984*".

"*Burmese Days*" clearly has echoes of E.M. Forester's "*Passage to India*" (1924). Both novels contain protagonists receptive to the local culture. Both have befriended a morally upright but obsequious Indian physician, and both novels feature a visiting English woman manifesting somewhat questionable motives and aspirations. Most notably, both novels demonstrate the inevitable presence of racial and ethnic discrimination, documenting an era of British colonial domination in southern Asia.

The novel "*Burmese Days*" is perhaps the most striking of Orwell's novels in its descriptive language, documenting flora and fauna and the exotic environment of Burma in the 1920's. But it is also remarkable as one of his earliest novels, which provides insights into Orwell's origins as a political writer.

