

## TEXT AND CONTEXT: ANOTHER LOOK AT *BURMESE DAYS*

**Stephen L. Keck**  
National University of Singapore

Students of colonial Burma inevitably turn to *Burmese Days*. The frequent pedagogical use of George Orwell's (1903-1950) novel has meant that the text has become a part of the mythology of imperial experience not only for Burma, but for the British Empire as a whole.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is also possibly the most widely read book involving Southeast Asia. *Burmese Days* is often assigned to complement general service courses in world history, literature and political science. Since these classes aim to introduce students to liberal arts--less modestly referred to as 'the humanities'--they are basic staples of American university education. This means that thousands--if not tens of thousands--of students encounter the novel each year. In addition, *Burmese Days* is often assigned with texts such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Kipling's *Kim* in higher level courses which focus upon European imperialism or the British Empire. The novel's popularity, naturally, is not confined to the United States. While the number of British students who are forced to read Orwell cannot match the mass dragooning of freshmen and sophomores which takes place across the Atlantic, it is clear that in Britain *Burmese Days* remains as one of the essential novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With respect to Southeast Asia, it is also clear that a healthy number of Singapore undergraduates have read the novel before they matriculate; some even manage to encounter it during the course of study at the National University of Singapore. Finally, one has only to travel to in Myanmar to see that *Burmese Days* can be purchased along with postcards, bottled water, and poor quality lacquerware in tourist spots.

Orwell was more interested in portraying the systemic abuses of imperialism than capturing the social life of the region, but his novel has come to serve all of these functions. Even if he did not write to portray Burma or Southeast Asia, *Burmese Days* is still quite suitable for such enterprises. It is a nice length, comes in paper, stays in print and contains accounts of drunkenness, violence and sex, all of which hold the attention of undergraduates and vacation readers. Many of the main characters in the novel--Flory, U Po Kyin, Dr. Veraswami, (British editions renamed them U Po Sing

---

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (editors), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), 163.

and Dr. Murkhaswami),<sup>2</sup> Ellis, Ma Hla May, Mr. and Mrs Lackersteen, Maxwell, Verrall, Mr. Macgregor and Elizabeth--are memorable; no less striking is the way in which Orwell led his readers to view colonial Burma through the daily life of the Kyauktada Club. Orwell showed that this society was deeply divided along racial lines, with Europeans exploiting both the land and peoples of Burma, while finding that the cost of exile and isolation was to fight a continuous battle against despair. At the same time, there were clearly those (U Po Kyin and Dr. Veraswami) who both believed in and collaborated with colonial rule. While the novel is set around 1930, with the Saya San rebellion in the background, it offers a synchronic view of colonial realities: this is the way things have been and will be in the lives of these characters. *Burmese Days* derives its power from the intensity of the characters' relationships; the hints of change in Burma remain only hints.

Historians and other scholars employ *Burmese Days* as a means to explore some of the more important features of modern history--colonialism, the British Empire, racism and nationalism--because they affirm or support its depiction of the reality of a specific historical situation. The utility of fiction in the hands of the public is a large question and when it becomes crystallized around the study and teaching of history it is probably inevitable that a series of mimetic issues--here defined by accuracy, fairness and comprehensiveness--govern any attempt to adjudicate the viability of the text in question. Maung Htin Aung, in his famous article on Orwell, claimed that *Burmese Days* was a 'valuable historical document' because it "recorded vividly the tensions that prevailed in Burma, and the mutual suspicion, despair and disgust that crept into Anglo-Burmese relations as the direct result of the Government of India Act leaving out Burma from the course of its reforms."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Malcolm Muggeridge, who knew Orwell, evaluated *Burmese Days* as not offering a credible portrait of colonial life:

the description of the Europeans in their club, of their discussions about electing a 'native' to membership, their quarrels and their drunkenness and their outbursts of hysteria, is somehow unreal. ...I was myself living in India at the same period as Orwell was in Burma. It was my first visit there. I was teaching at an Indian college in Travancore, and occasionally used to visit a neighbouring town where there was a little community of English living rather the same sort of life as the European community in Kyauktada. It is, of course, perfectly true the general attitude towards Indians was arrogant, and sometimes brutal, and that a European who did not share this attitude was liable, like Flory, to find himself in an embarrassing situation....it is equally true that Orwell's picture is tremendously exaggerated.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Meyers (editor), *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston), 51.

<sup>3</sup>Maung Htin Aung, "George Orwell and Burma," *Asian Affairs*, vol. 57 (New Series vol. 1) February, 1970, 19.

<sup>4</sup>Malcolm Muggeridge, *World Review* ( June 1950) in Jeffrey Meyers (editor), *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston, 1975), 55-56.

The very nature of fiction limits any attempt to critically assess the accuracy of a given novel, play or short story. Nonetheless, *Burmese Days* has been so widely read and therefore its ability to define a given reality must be interrogated.<sup>5</sup> Possibly the most widely-used method of examining texts is to place them into contexts. Textual interpretation, as such, depends upon the employment, definition, construction and articulation of contexts.<sup>6</sup> This paper will rely upon the examination of a number of specific contexts to analyze *Burmese Days*. To be more precise, it will exhibit the use of specific contexts--the critics' immediate reaction to *Burmese Days*, the work's status within the author's canon, the manner in which George Orwell has been understood by historians of the British Empire, biographical factors and, last, the novel's place in relation to British writing about Burma--in order to show that this last neglected context can indeed shed new light on the subject. It should be acknowledged that these contexts do not in any way exhaust the possible avenues open to scholarly investigation.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, this paper is also an attempt to display some of the methodological issues inherent in what might be called 'contextualism'. By employing a relatively small number of contexts--many of which might be regarded as paradigms for academic analysis--the discussion may well show both the strengths and limitations of the presupposition that texts can best be understood in context. This exercise proceeds on the assumption that texts do indeed 'fit' into contexts; but these contexts come into being only when we try to understand the text. That is, contexts do not exist in themselves, but are created and employed in order to serve a wide range of interpretative ends. Therefore, the debate about the autonomy of the text (especially 'major' or 'hegemonic' texts) and its surrounding context is misplaced; rather, the awareness that contexts are to be created leaves both the integrity of the text and the interpretative options for the scholar open. The example of *Burmese Days*, then, should raise a number of hermeneutical issues and suggest new avenues for textual interpretation.

For our immediate purposes, evaluating the accuracy or fairness of Orwell's novel will always remain open ended, but this discussion aims to help us better understand the novel's discursive status. By adding the previously unexplored (at least for students of Orwell) context of British writing about Burma, it becomes possible to regard *Burmese Days* in a new light. Accordingly, this paper will raise the possibility

---

<sup>5</sup> This is even more the case because Orwell's literary reputation has at least partly depended on his honesty. For example of this see: Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London, 1958), 287-294.

<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to directly address the status of contexts in the interpretation of texts. For a stimulating discussion of this and related problems see: Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts Contexts Language* (Ithaca, 1983) and James Tully (editor), *Meaning and Context Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> This discussion would have been better had it also employed "author-intention" as a critical (if problematic) context. However, both the lack of surviving sources and the spirited and complicated debate about the possibility of recovering the intentions of an author do not make this feasible.

that repositioning *Burmese Days* within the stream of discourse about Burma shows that while it was an important work of social criticism, it also bore the biases which some scholars prefer to label as 'orientalist.' Having said as much, it remains beyond the boundaries of this discussion to decide whether Orwell's novel warrants its mythological reputation.

### The immediate context: the initial critics

One of the most frequently deployed contexts involves the initial reception of a work because it illustrates the ways in which a text might have been understood for its intended audience. Orwell's novels were certainly no exception and, in fact, the novel's publication history and early reviews themselves serve to illustrate the intellectual vibrancy of both the 1930s and the period involving the Second World War. Unfortunately, this topic is itself worth at least an article, but there is space here to call attention to the fact that while *Burmese Days* has become a 'classic' which is widely read in many parts of the world, its immediate publication and reception was not without problems.

To begin with, Orwell sought to follow the success of *Down and Out In Paris and London* (1933) which has been published to favorable reviews. However, Victor Gollancz, publisher of Left Book Club, initially rejected the novel because colonial officials feared that it would have a negative impact in India and Burma. However, Harper published the volume in New York in October 1934, leading Gollancz to change his mind and publish it the following year.<sup>8</sup>

The immediate 'reception' of the work did not in any way envisage the work's ultimate impact. Sean O'Faolain, the Irish novelist and biographer, reviewed Orwell's novel along with two other novels (*This Sweet Work* by D. M. Low and *Follow Thy Fair Sun* by Viola Meynell) and found that it was "very heavy-handed...Mr Orwell depicts the life of this misanthropic and unimpressive character. He gives incidentally so grim a picture of Burmese life that while one fervently hopes he has exaggerated, one feels that the outlines, at least, are true."<sup>9</sup> O'Faolain noted that the nasty picture which emerged from the pages of *Burmese Days* "hangs together too well---the sweat and the drink, the loneliness and the dry-rot, the birthmark and the misanthropy, the misanthropy and the anti-social ideas, the anti-social ideas and the ostracism."<sup>10</sup> The unsigned reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* also thought that Orwell had been heavy-handed. However, he/she noted that *Burmese Days* could hardly be considered typical of British writing about Burma:

*Burmese Days*, by George Orwell, is symptomatic of the reaction against conventional

<sup>8</sup>Jeffrey Meyers (editor), *George Orwell The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston, 1975), 8.

<sup>9</sup>Sean O'Faolain, *Spectator* (28 June 1935) in *George Orwell The Critical Heritage*, 50.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, 50-51.

portrayals of Burma as a land of tinkling temple bells, gentle charming Burmans, and strong, silent Englishmen. The scene is the Kyauktada District during the rebellion period, but there is nothing heroic about it. The English...are too aloof, the Burmese too abject...The jungle Burmese are attractive enough, but those of the town seem to consist mainly of pimps, professional witnesses, and corrupt magistrates.<sup>11</sup>

More important, the reviewer challenged the novel's claim to realism, by suggesting that the picture it portrayed of colonial Burma was not accurate. Instead, the situation was not as pessimistic as Orwell sought to make his readers believe:

The book has traces of power, and it is written with a pen steeped in gall. That gall is merited, for these people exist; but a little I see would have carried more conviction. The inaccuracies are no worse than in pleasant books which idealize the East--a Burmese husband does not talk with his wife as U Po Sing and his wife are made to talk...the author entirely ignored the newer type of Burman official, men of high character who resent the U Po Sings even more than we do. And when he writes of their English superiors, that few of them work as hard or intelligently as the postmaster of a provincial town, he shows that he can hardly have mixed with the men who really run the country.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, G.W. Stonier in *Fortnightly* found that it was a sound novel and one which recommended to all "who enjoy a lively hatred in fiction."<sup>13</sup>

### Canonical context: *Burmese Days* within the Orwell corpus

The very fact that *Burmese Days* is one of the pillars of the Orwell canon has ensured that the work remains subject to scholarly study. Students of Orwell encounter it along the road to *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936) *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1938), *Coming Up For Air* (1939), *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949) and the less well-known pieces. This means that debate about the novel's critical reputation is tied to its relationship with Orwell's subsequent literary production. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue these interconnections (e.g. Flory and Winston Smith), it remains useful to recognize that this set of contexts enables scholars to critically evaluate *Burmese Days* as a novel; it does not, however, really address the way in which the novel may represent history. In fact, it is possible that canonical contexts are dangerous because they provide the literary legitimation for the mythologizing of particular texts.

<sup>11</sup>*Times Literary Supplement* (18 July, 1935) in *George Orwell The Critical Heritage*, 51.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, 52.

<sup>13</sup>G. W. Stonier, *Fortnightly* (August 1935) in *George Orwell The Critical Heritage*, 53.

### Historical context: Orwell and the British Empire

Despite the fact that George Orwell clearly did not play a formative role in either the history of Burma or the British Empire, he has been regarded as significant. However, students of the history of the Empire have cited Orwell as evidence of crisis and imperial decline, linking both his career and writing to the growing disillusionment with British administration and policy which became increasingly evident after the First World War. *Burmese Days* is relevant because it provides a glimpse of what had been previously rare: imperial British dissent. Orwell inherited the legacy of W.S. Blunt, whose direct attacks upon British policy in Egypt, were at odds with many writers and intellectuals who celebrated the reality of Empire, by raising their voices in support of the Jubilees and durbars which were emblematic of imperial achievement.

Historians of empire, then, have found Orwell to be valuable because he illustrates change more profound than that associated with the difference in generation; instead, his writing signifies an entirely new perspective. If late Victorian and Edwardian writers had conceptualized the empire and its policies--which in extreme cases now are all the more striking for their brutality--in terms of progress and the propagation of modernity amidst prosperity, Orwell emphasized the extent to which it could be considered the very agent of systemic exploitation. As a result, he could be cited as the type of figure whose ideas prefigure both the decline of imperial power and its ultimate collapse. Writing in the mid-1960s, A. P. Thornton understood Orwell to be a typical case of someone who reflected the public school ethos without believing in either the imperial idea or the imperial mission.<sup>14</sup> George Woodcock tied this picture to the Blair family as he argued in his *Who Killed the British Empire?* (1974) that Orwell is held up an example of someone who came from an Anglo-Indian family, but still ultimately rejected imperial service.<sup>15</sup> More important, his writings “epitomized the complex feelings of those young educated British who found they could no longer justify involvement in the mechanism of Empire”<sup>16</sup> Again, Orwell represented the growing criticism of the Empire on the eve of the Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

In his magisterial trilogy devoted to the rise and fall of the British Empire, James Morris regarded Orwell as an example of an imperial servant who no longer really believed in the system which he served. Furthermore, Orwell was an example of a “softened, perhaps weakened” imperialist.<sup>18</sup> With respect to the ways in which the British understood themselves in relation to the Empire Sonya O. Rose saw Orwell’s

---

<sup>14</sup>A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and its Enemies* (London, 1966), 314.

<sup>15</sup>George Woodcock, *Who Killed the British Empire?* (New York, 1974), 283.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, 279.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, 281.

<sup>18</sup>James Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets* (New York and London, 1978), 307.

significance to lie in his depiction of Britain as a land populated by decent ordinary people.<sup>19</sup> More recently, W.M. Roger Louis located Orwell along with E.M. Forster (*Passage to India*, 1924) as figures might be displayed as more than emblems of disbelief; their two novels “contributed to the anti-Empire spirit of the times.” In other words, Orwell was more than a representative figure, but someone who actively influenced the formation of public opinion.<sup>20</sup> The image of the alienated imperial servant was rendered even more iconic by Niall Fergusson’s *Empire* (2002). Orwell was included for his inability “play world policeman with a straight face.”<sup>21</sup>

### Biographical context: Orwell’s biographers

Orwell’s biographers<sup>22</sup> have tended to treat *Burmese Days* and “Shooting the Elephant” as the major primary sources for his life in Burma.<sup>23</sup> While students of Orwell’s life and work know a great deal about the last two decades of his life, they are comparatively less informed about the six years which the young Eric Blair served as a police officer in Burma. Nonetheless, given the immense interest in both authority which runs through his writings and the bitter tone of *Burmese Days* have ensured that his biographers would devote great energy in the attempt reconstruct his life and experience in Burma. While Orwell’s biographers faced a number of hurdles (including few surviving materials from his years in Asia) in presenting an accurate and sensitive portrait, they have been able to document that his life in Burma does not entirely match the experience of the characters in *Burmese Days*.

Eric Blair’s family background (his mother grew up in Moulmein) was probably the basis for his selection of service in Burma. We know that he arrived in Rangoon in November 1922 and that by April 1928 he would be living in Paris. Inside Burma, he was posted to Mandalay at the end of 1922 where he spent a year in the Police Training School. He then had a number of postings: to Myaungmya, Twante, Syriam, Insein, Moulmein and Katha. Orwell’s biographers have painted a picture of the young man as a loner: he does not appear to have made a powerful impression on his contemporaries.

<sup>19</sup>Sonya O. Rose, “Sex Citizenship and the Nation” in Catherine Hall (editor), *Cultures of Empire* (New York, 2000), 256-57.

<sup>20</sup>William Roger Louis, “Introduction” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Historiography* (v.5), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup>Niall Fergusson, *Empire* (London, 2002), p. 267.

<sup>22</sup>Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell* (London, 1972); Bernard Crick, *George Orwell A Life* (London, 1980) and Michael Shelden, *Orwell* (1991).

<sup>23</sup>Future biographers of Orwell will always labour under the burden caused by the politics of the first biographies. Sonia Orwell was unhappy with the collective work of Peter Stansky and William Abrahams and later Bernard Crick. For more on this topic see: Sonia Orwell, letter to *Times Literary Supplement* (13 October 1972) and Michael Shelden, *Orwell*, 6-10.

The most famous exception, of course, is Maung Htin Aung's memory of and articles about Orwell in Burma. However, more attention, much of it speculative, has been devoted to attempting to ascertain why Burma was so difficult for Blair. For instance, one line of enquiry has assumed that his experience as a police officer was purely negative; some have speculated that newly-minted Etonian suffered from being bullied by a bigoted superior. However, recent research has shown that in three of the districts in which Blair served he had three Burmese superiors: U Ba Thin, U Ba and U Maung Maung. These men were among the first to be admitted into the ranks of the Imperial Police and they were probably insecure about their positions; in other words, they hardly make candidates to be bullying the green Blair.<sup>24</sup> While it may be difficult--if not impossible--to discover if Blair had been bullied, it is also clear that he was given positions which could not be considered unimportant.<sup>25</sup> For example, after leaving Moulmein he was posted to Katha, where he served as headquarters assistant. The size of the district had the effect of making this an important position. Since Katha was a large district, it meant that his superior often traveled, leaving Orwell in charge of the headquarters.

Given Orwell's writings, it is understandable that his biographers have looked at Flory as the best source for clues about his experiences in Burma. Consequently, they have portrayed the young Eric Blair as someone who was a loner, alienated from 'the Club' and all that it entailed; they have wondered about his relationships with women and following the path set by Flory whether he had significant interaction with prostitutes. At the same time, the biographers have even more interested in tracing his intellectual and professional development. The alienating experience of serving the Empire in Burma is regarded as a necessary step in the growth of Orwell's critical perspective. To put the matter simply, in Burma the author of *Animal Farm* and *1984* is only Eric Blair; he would, however, return to Europe much closer to becoming George Orwell.

However, what the biographers have collectively shown is that Eric Blair was a shy, socially awkward police officer, making him closer, in some respects, to Maxwell, the "fresh-coloured blond youth of not more than twenty-five or six" and who was "very young for the post he held"<sup>26</sup> rather than Flory. To make more of this speculative point, it might not be too much to argue that there are at least two Blairs in *Burmese Days*; the first is Maxwell (who is killed), who represents Blair's direct, immediate experience of Burma; the second, is indeed Flory, as the protagonist of the novel suggests what Blair might have become had he not returned to Britain.

Nonetheless, the biographical context makes reading *Burmese Days* appear as a memoir about an embittering experience. It has the effect of textualizing the subject, shrinking the difference between the text and life of the author. In other words, it allows the text to define the lived reality signified by the context. Since much of

---

<sup>24</sup>Michael Shelden, *Orwell*, 101-102.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 118.

<sup>26</sup>George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, 21.

Orwell's critical reputation has been linked to his "frankness", the life and text have become fused. In effect, to understand *Burmese Days*, then, requires the assimilation of life to novel; the text has invited the creation of a context.

**Newly created context: British writing about Burma**

We have seen that analyzing *Burmese Days* within the contexts of the book's critical reception, its place in the Orwell canon, the novel's historical setting in the British Empire, and the author's life have enabled us to locate the text. *Burmese Days*, as such, appears as a reflection of Orwell's growing disenchantment with Empire; it also stands as a roadmark on his way to becoming an 'author'. While these contexts are central to textual interpretation, they are not exhaustive. Orwell scholars, for example, have not really addressed the ways in which Orwell's writings about Burma fit into the larger pattern of British writing about the subject. This is actually a larger subject, one which can be divided into different periods, matching not only the pattern of British colonization and domination, but also connected with larger imperial trends. For example, travel writers such as V.C. Scott O' Connor, Mrs. Earnest Hart, and R. Talbot Kelly all regarded Burma in light of what they perceived to be the positive features of imperial rule. Seeking to communicate their affection for Burma and its peoples, they at once proclaimed that the Burman canvass to be 'picturesque'; they implied as well that the country's active history was now safely behind it, as the future lay with modernization under imperial rule. In effect, these writers portrayed the Burmans as picturesque and appealing, but passive.

Since this paper will introduce British writing as a new context for the study of *Burmese Days*, it will focus upon writing which came after the First World War. Since Orwell's ability to understand Burma can best be measured against writings which were published at roughly the same time, *Burmese Days* will be contrasted largely with select works of Maurice Collis, a figure well known to students of colonial Burma, but hardly familiar to those who have built careers by interpreting novels such as *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Students of Orwell have instead focused upon his relationship to either contemporary British writers who wrote about interwar Britain (another context) or in the attempt to situate his work they have analyzed his works against some the giants of Britain's literary pantheon. Unfortunately, Orwell's works have never been compared with either the general theme of British writing about Burma or the particular example of Collis.

Collis, of course, wrote widely about both Burma and Southeast Asia. *Trials in Burma* (1938) and *Into Hidden Burma* (1953) are two autobiographical works which he devoted to his experience in Burma; like Orwell's novel, these volumes contain a fairly vivid picture of colonial society around 1930. In addition, like Orwell who wrote from Britain, Collis also wrote retrospectively in 1937, after he had left Burma. To be sure, their situations were different. Orwell wrote as a novelist, keen to depict the worst features of colonial rule, but Collis who served as a judge, reflected

on controversial decisions which he had himself made. *Trials in Burma*, then, had two meanings, referring at once to some of the specific cases which Collis had tried and also the psychological toll which they had exacted upon him.

The works of both authors are inviting to the historian because each displays a detailed portrait of life under colonial rule. Taken together, *Burmese Days* and *Trials in Burma* and *Into Hidden Burma* exhibit a series of situations in which the British administration was at best uneven and at worst exploitative. Orwell's review of *Trials in Burma* emphasized that the book's value was the way it showed that the machinery of colonial government exacted a difficult cost on those who operated its parts:

This is an unpretentious book, but it brings out with unusual clearness the dilemma that faces every official in an empire like our own...every British magistrate in India is in a false position when he has to try a case in which European and native interests clash. In theory he is administering an impartial system of justice; in practice he is part of a huge machine which exists to protect British interests, and he has often got to choose between sacrificing his integrity and damaging his career. ...Mr Collis grasps the essential situation clearly enough; he recognizes that the Burman has profited very little from the huge wealth that has been extracted from his country, and that the hopeless rebellion of 1931 had genuine grievances behind it. But he is also a good imperialist, it was precisely his concern for the good name of English justice that got him into hot water with his fellow countrymen on more than one occasion.<sup>27</sup>

It is also clear that the image of colonial Burma which emerges from the pages of Collis and Orwell was of a society which was fractured by racial tensions. Neither picture of Burma under colonial rule contained any of the redeeming forces of modernization which O'Connor, Hart and Kelley could easily--almost absent-mindedly--link to imperial rule. Nonetheless, Collis attempted to face the future with guarded confidence.

Points of contact aside, the texts are significant for their different representations of colonial Burma. Orwell's Burma was a ghastly place; Collis' vision was far more balanced as he did allow his readers the opportunity to see several sides of Burma. Collis might even be faulted for his piety about what he believed to be the emerging successes of British colonialism. For instance, in *Into Hidden Burma* he described the cultural and intellectual circles in which G. H Luce and the painter Ba Nyan interacted:

Ba Nyan lived next door to Luce in one of the roads on the south side of the Old Racecourse, a residential quarter where each house stood in a garden. Not far away was Mrs Hla Oung, an Arakanese lady, elderly and a widow, well off and a patron of the arts. Kenneth Ward, the painter, has his studio and rooms in her house. A Cambridge man and Professor of Physics at the Rangoon College, he had taken up

---

<sup>27</sup>George Orwell, *Listener* (9 March 1939) in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell vol.1* (London, 1970), Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, editors, 340-41.

painting as a private resource and devoted all his spare time to it. His landscapes with figures were the best that had been done of Burma up to that date....there was also E.G.N. Kinch, a schoolmaster and boy scout leader, who besides being a friend of Luce's, and much liked by the young Burmese who gathered round him, was one of Ba Nyan's earliest admirers.<sup>28</sup>

Collis' portraits of other Burmans, Shans and Indians is almost as affectionate as it was for Ba Nyan, but he did not deny that British racism was a huge obstacle for Luce and others. Luce's interactions did not "soften the heart of the clubmen" and "when Sir Reginald Craddock called Luce pro-Burman, he was expressing, without undue malice, a contemporary British opinion, cruel and silly as it is now seen to have been."<sup>29</sup> Yet, in contrast to *Burmese Days*, Collis allowed his readers to see a range of positive Burman characters. At the same time, he was more sensitive to Burma's place within the Indian Empire, recording some of the realities faced by the Simon Commission and by the local Indian reaction to the visit of Sen Gupta, who was mayor of Calcutta and prominent politician in India. More important, the shadow of Gandhi hangs over *Trials in Burma*, but it is absent in Orwell's novel.

Collis' treatment of the trial of an Englishman accused of murdering his servant would have fit into *Burmese Days*. In Orwell's hands it would have been the occasion to exhibit the institutional power behind British injustice (the Englishman could not be found guilty). Orwell probably would have tied the formal proceedings of the trial to drunken discussions to of the unsympathetic characters at the Kyauktada Club. Collis also pointed to the peer pressure which he faced in trying to reach a decision. However, his narrative diverges from the unambiguous assault upon colonial society in that he wanted to show that there was, in fact, a mechanism for justice—however imperfect—which was available to the Burmese. More important, in Orwell's novel the Burmans who do appear in court are represented from a cynical perspective: they have been 'bought' or 'framed.' The main action, in any event, takes place outside of the law: in the club, the Church (where Flory is humiliated) and in the public unrest which follows Ellis' assault upon a Burmese student.

Moreover, the way in which Orwell and Collis represent public unrest is also vastly different. In *Burmese Days* there are two big events: the riot which the police eventually quell and the rumored peasant uprising which is actually the work of U Po Kyin. Rather than tie the novel to the Saya San rebellion, Orwell chose to connect it the machinations of U Po Kyin, ultimately reflecting his desire for greater inclusion into the system of colonial administration by becoming a member of the Club. As Maung Htin Aung observed, the riot is easily broken up and in "Shooting the Elephant" Orwell had complained that the Burmans did not have strength to raise a riot.<sup>30</sup> The Burmans, then, are able to riot against Ellis' act of rage, but they are not

<sup>28</sup>Maurice Collis, *Into Hidden Burma* (London, 1953), 44-45.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 44.

<sup>30</sup>Maung Htin Aung, "George Orwell and Burma" *Asian Affairs* vol. 57 (New Series vol.1), February,

credited with the agency of challenging British rule itself.

*Trials in Burma* reveals a very different picture by recording a riot in Rangoon in which the Burmans targeted Indians. Not only does Collis provide some sense of the fear and confusion which served to define the event, but he also admits that the British were quite aware of the fact that colonial rule was fragile. Far more than *Burmese Days*, Collis' book allows the reader to sense the vulnerability of the Empire. Orwell is hardly as interested in any type of Burman point of view. For example, with echoes of some of the more deplorable passages from "Shooting the Elephant" Orwell captured the mood of the Club:

the conversation veered back to the old, never-palling subject--the insolence of the natives, the supineness of the Government, the dear dead days when the British Raj was the British Raj and please give the bearer fifteen lashes....Living and working among Orientals would try the temper of a saint. And all of them, the officials particularly, knew what it was to be baited and insulted. Almost every day, when Westfield or Macgregor or even Maxwell went down the street, the High School boys, with their, young yellow faces--faces smooth as gold coins, full of that maddening contempt that sits so naturally on the Mongolian face--sneered at them as they went past, sometimes hooted after them with hyena-like laughter. The life of the Anglo-Indian officials is not all jam. In comfortless camps, in sweltering offices, in gloomy dakhungalows smelling of dust and earth-oil, they earn, perhaps, the right to be a little disagreeable.<sup>31</sup>

The point here is not that student activism had emerged at the newly-founded University of Rangoon, but that colonial officers had utter contempt for the indigenous population. To put this in perspective, one of the major differences in the two author's representations of Burma under Britain is that Collis' memoirs credited the Burmans with a much greater ability to reshape their society. In effect, he understood them to be significant agents within the colonial world.

While *Burmese Days* is remembered as one of Orwell's major novels, his reputation rests primarily with his treatment of European political and social problems. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Coming Up For Air*, *Homage to Catalonia*, *Animal Farm*, and *1984* all address problems which became manifest in Europe between the World Wars. In fact, his literary reputation has depended upon his capacity to record the ways in which these turbulent events were played out in the lives of ordinary men and women. Therefore, Orwell's achievement has been to try to enable his readers to understand mass poverty, the appeal of fascism, the indifference of intellectuals to suffering and the impact of totalitarianism upon people, who were simply trying to 'get-on' with their lives.

In contrast, Collis wrote largely with Southeast Asia, especially Burma, in mind. He belongs to a tradition of British writing about Burma. That is, that Collis'

---

1970, 26.

<sup>31</sup>George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, 31-32.

work might be grouped with the likes of Scott O'Connor, Talbot Kelley, Mrs. Earnest Hart and Sir George Scott all who had lived in Burma and sought to portray the land and its peoples in sympathetic terms. With respect to the travel writers, these men and women sought to make their British and North American audiences see Burma as safely 'picturesque'. Burma was exotic, interesting, but its people were now safely governed by British rule. In so doing, they often made them picturesque, but passive.

Using this context, British writing about Burma, to view Orwell's text shows that he also tended to regard the Burmans as relatively passive or, at best, with indifference. Orwell's Burmans are less active in pursuit of their own destiny than they are in *Trials in Burma*. Ironically, at least in this sense it is Collis that breaks away from the tradition of British writing about Burma more than Orwell does. With his emphasis on the flawed and wicked character of British administration, Orwell de-emphasized the agency of the Burmans. In so doing, he replicated the very opposite of what he hated: the sunny portrayals of colonial Burma which were common among British travel writers who wrote about the country during the high tide of the 'new imperialism.' Collis, who sought to represent some of the virtues of British rule, managed to display the Burmans as more active agents, who would one day control their own destiny. *Burmese Days*, then, appears to be a text which points away from its immediate historical and geographical context to the political problems which had engulfed Europe.

### Conclusion

These different representations of Burma suggest that Orwell's novel fits into a broader pattern of British writing about the country. As we have seen, with exception of U Po Kyin, *Burmese Days* tended to downplay the agency of the Burmans. U Po Kyin--arguably the most memorable character in the novel--comes across as much brighter than his British rulers. He is secretive, evil and his behaviour crosses the boundaries which define acceptable sexual practices. However, his plans exist to work within the Leviathan; in fact, raising the peasant rebellion had nothing do with Burma's attempts to achieve self-government, but existed to further his self-aggrandizement. Between the often remote and relatively insignificant Burmans and the Machiavellian U Po Kyin, Orwell was able to portray the human abuses produced by imperialism. The real thrust of *Burmese Days*, after all, was not the attempt to fully capture the social realities of life in Burma; rather it was to show how British rule protected and promoted the systematic exploitation of the land and its peoples. In effect, *Burmese Days* is a political tract which is shaped by political and cultural criticism.

Yet, despite the fact that the book is often assigned along with those of Said, it is fair to ask whether it remains an 'orientalist' text. With its emphasis on the cunning of U Po Kyin and ultimate unknowable character of the Burmans Orwell's novel

repeats the constructions of stereotypes which scholars have come to associate with 'orientalism.' To be sure, Orwell did not write to create categories of difference or to promote racial hierarchies, but his novel has the effect of supporting some of these patterns of discourse. Burma, both the land and its peoples, remains as 'the other'; the main emphasis is on the presentation of the generic evils associated with imperialism.

Given the complexity of these issues, it would be a mistake to understand this paper to be a cautionary tale about the utilization of contexts. After all, 'orientalism' can itself be regarded as an essential part of any historical or literary context. The historical reconstruction of colonialism in Burma as well as the range of indigenous responses to it, can benefit from the deployment of both traditional scholarly contexts and the creation new avenues of academic enquiry. Having noted as much, this discussion should suggest that the attempt to reduce a text to a social context is vastly more difficult procedure than some might imagine. More important, it should also be clear that scholars have much to gain by regarding contexts as helpful tools, rather than entities in themselves. These problems cannot be resolved by easily, but it seems safe to say that the interpretation of texts can benefit from a re-examination of the employment of contexts. In short, taking another look at *Burmese Days* means seeing that it is a text for which we have yet to exhaust its contexts.