

## Burma/Myanmar: Bibliographic trends



There was a time when the small community of professional Burma-watchers in the West could claim with some confidence that they were conversant with most, if not all, the academic and non-scholarly literature about the country. That situation has changed and it is now very difficult, if not impossible, to keep fully abreast of the outpouring of publications devoted to Burma (or Myanmar, as it is now called).

There are a number of reasons for this.

After the Second World War, Burma was largely forgotten by the West. Except for events like Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 and Ne Win's military coup in 1962, it was rarely reported in the popular press. It featured in a few Hollywood movies, but they tended to hark back to the war. Even when the threat of communist 'subversion' in Southeast Asia began to attract

global attention, Burma's problems were not considered as important as those of states like Vietnam. It was not until the 1980s that the work of pioneering journalists like Bertil Lintner, writing in the old *Far Eastern Economic Review*, encouraged observers to look more closely at the country.[\[1\]](#)

Burma was also sadly neglected by the academic community. After the war, there were major studies by recognised figures like Frank Trager, John Cady, Godfrey Harvey, D.G.E. Hall and Dorothy Woodman. Later, the field came to be dominated by scholars like David Steinberg and Josef Silverstein. However, the number of serious Burma watchers in the West remained very small. Not many postgraduates saw the study of Burma as offering a worthwhile career. One consolation was that, by following the efforts of the few Burma specialists around, and newcomers like Robert Taylor, it was relatively easy for Burma-watchers to keep abreast of the relevant literature.

That situation changed after the 1988 uprising, when Burma was thrust into the world's headlines. Thanks in large part to the prominence of Aung San Suu Kyi, but also assisted by the efforts of a large activist community, Burma began to attract much greater attention from journalists, academics and officials. The avalanche of publications over the next 25 years encompassed a wide range of books, reports, articles and ephemera. In terms of quality, they were a very mixed bag. Together, however, they led to more resources being devoted to Burma studies in the West, leading in turn to a greater awareness of the country and a vigorous public debate about its many problems.[\[2\]](#)

Before 1988, there were few bibliographies devoted to Burma. Ironically, one of the best was being compiled by Patricia Herbert just as the uprising was taking place.[\[3\]](#) As a result, it could not do more than refer in passing to the expected surge in publications prompted by those dramatic events. In 2012, I conducted a survey of works produced in the 25 years or so after Herbert's book was written.[\[4\]](#) I confined myself to publications produced in the English language, and in hard copy, but even within those limitations I was able to compile a select checklist of 928 titles.

The works listed in that bibliography covered a wide range of subjects, and represented equally diverse views. There were not only academic works of different kinds, but guide books, memoirs, official reports, activist ephemera and novels. Some works were blatant political propaganda or racist tracts. There was no attempt at censorship. The eclectic approach adopted was dictated by a conviction that, only by being aware of all attitudes and opinions – both inside and outside Burma – could the international community appreciate the 'fiendishly complex' challenges facing modern Burma.[\[5\]](#)

A second edition of this bibliography is due out later this year. It remains selective, rather than comprehensive, but lists another 320 or so titles. Most of the new works were produced over the last three years. This remarkable output has reflected the continuing high level of interest in Burma, not only in official and academic circles, but also among the wider public. It is likely to be

maintained in 2015, when Burma's hybrid civilian-military government holds national elections and, in early 2016, chooses a new president. Whoever wins these competitions will determine the outcome of President Thein Sein's ambitious reform program, launched in 2011, and the future direction of Burma.

This latest survey of the literature has revealed a number of interesting trends. For example, since the first edition of the bibliography was released in 2012, there has not only been a steady flow of new publications about Burma, but also many older books and monographs with Burma-related themes have been revised or reissued. Also, several reputable publishers are now producing good quality, hard copy reprints of classic works. It is possible to find soft copies of many more online. These developments have made many books more accessible, helping to revive interest in Burma's history and culture, on which there is now some excellent studies.

As might be expected, given the focus of most journalists, activists and officials, much of the scholarly interest in Burma over the past few years has been related to the country's politics and economy, accounting for the large number of new works in those categories. This has included several edited books, with chapters provided by noted Burma watchers. In this regard, mention should be made of the ANU's Myanmar/Burma Update Conference series, which since 2000 has made a unique contribution to the field.<sup>[6]</sup> Also, the large number of postgraduates now working on Burma in Western countries has led to specialised studies on issues that, until relatively recently, had rarely been subject to close examination.

Another factor has been the dramatic surge in foreign visitors to Burma, up from an estimated 310,000 in 2010 to more than 3,000,000 in 2014.<sup>[7]</sup> This has prompted the production of a large number of works which are designed to cater mainly to tourists, businessmen and armchair travellers. They have included guide books, cookbooks, collections of photographs, and personal accounts of visits to the country. There is also a growing trickle of novels set in Burma or with Burma-related themes. The quality of these works has tended to be highly variable but, in different ways and at different levels, they all help fill niches in a market that still seems to be expanding.

Since 1988, a number of gaps in the literature have been filled. However, there are still some notable omissions, particularly in the area of Burma's foreign contacts. For example, there is still no definitive history of US-Burma relations, nor a detailed account of the growth of Christianity in Burma. There is also a shortage of serious studies of Burma's role in the competition between China and India, its membership of ASEAN and its place in the wider strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific. That said, there are several works currently in press or being written which will help satisfy the needs of Burma watchers in some key areas.

Just to whet the appetite of observers and bibliophiles, let me name just a few of these works, spanning the broad spectrum of modern Burma studies. This year, we should see the release of John Grehan and Martin Mace's two collections of original Second World War despatches, Robert Taylor's long awaited biography of General Ne Win, an edited collection by Renaud Egretreau and

Francois Robinne entitled *Myanmar in Transition*, Nick Cheesman's erudite study *Opposing the Rule of Law*, Ellen Wiles' comprehensive survey of literary life in Burma, and *Buddhist Art in Myanmar* by the eminent cultural historians Sylvia Fraser-Lu and Donald Stadtner.

It is also worth noting that there has been a revival of interest in foreign books within Burma itself.<sup>[8]</sup> Under the former military government a wide range of works in the English language were blacklisted (as were, of course, a great many publications in Burmese). Often, the reasons for the bans were not clear, as was the case for example with *Love and Sunshine in the East*, an obscure novel written in 1930 by Janet Aldis. The intent behind other bans was more obvious, as in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi's three books on modern Burmese politics, and Bertil Lintner's graphic account of the 1988 uprising.

Under President Thein Sein's more relaxed administration, however, English language versions of these and other banned books are being imported into Burma. Many are freely available from local bookshops and street vendors. For those Burmese with Internet access, others can be read on-line. In 2013, an international literary festival was held in Rangoon, at which many formerly banned books were openly on sale.<sup>[9]</sup> It also attracted Burmese authors whose works had once been censored. The festival was repeated in Mandalay in 2014 and will be held again in Rangoon this year.

At the same time, there has been a revival in the translation of foreign books into the Burmese language. This has included some blacklisted books, notably copies of works by Aung San Suu Kyi. Another foreign work which has been translated and released in Burma is Robert Taylor's ground-breaking study *The State in Myanmar*. There are also Burmese versions of David Steinberg's popular *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* and Bertil Lintner's *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*. In 2012, a translation of George Orwell's novel *Burmese Days*, which was banned by the former military regime, even won a national literary award.<sup>[10]</sup>

There is of course a wealth of material written about Burma that does not fall into these categories, such as articles in journals and magazines, soft copy publications, and works written in languages other than English. Since 1988, for example, scholarly interest in Burma has grown in Western Europe and there are now numerous works of note published in European languages. Another growth area has been reports posted online by governments and international organisations, covering such issues as political developments in Burma, its economic problems and human rights record.

In the Asia-Pacific, several regional countries – not least Australia – host institutions or communities of scholars and students which study developments in Burma closely, and produce high quality publications of various kinds. They have held numerous international conferences or workshops, many of which have resulted in reports or edited books. Inside Burma itself, scholars and others are rediscovering the freedom to publish on a wide range of subjects, both in English and the local languages. Significantly, there is a growing number of memoirs and biographies of

important public figures.

In all these ways, the Burma literature scene is now a vibrant one, reflecting the dynamic state of modern Burma studies. There is every indication that, as the country continues to evolve and grow, so will the demand for fresh and original publications, of all kinds. In these circumstances, there should be no shortage of material for future bibliographies.

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## References

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[4] Andrew Selth, *Burma (Myanmar) Since the 1988 Uprising: A Select Bibliography* (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2012). See also Nicholas Farrelly, 'Andrew Selth's Bibliography', *New Mandala*, 10 October 2012, at <http://www.newmandala.org/2012/10/10/andrew-selths-burma-bibliography/>

[5] This phrase was coined by Timothy Garton Ash in 'Beauty and the Beast in Burma', *New York Review of Books*, 25 May 2000.

[6] See 'Myanmar/Burma Conference Publications' at <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/asiapacific-region/myanmarburma-update/conference-publications>

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