

The wisdom in the literature



Andrew Selth outlines why past generations' accumulated literary and scholarly work on Myanmar is at risk of being lost -- and what this might mean for the country's future.

There is an old Myanmar saying that 'wisdom is in the literature'.^[1] This was particularly the case before 1988, when the country was virtually closed to foreigners and fieldwork of any kind was very difficult. The Internet was still in its infancy and Myanmar-watchers of all kinds were heavily reliant on books, serials and other documentary sources, both to acquire information and to present their findings to a wider audience.

Access to Myanmar is now much easier and the past few decades have seen a flood of foreign officials, scholars and others intent on conducting primary research. As noted on *New Mandala*, this has contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of books, reports and articles written about the country. A new Griffith Asia Institute study lists over 1,800 monographs published in English alone, and in hard copy, over the past 25 years.^[2]

At the same time, however, there is an increasing danger that the accumulated knowledge of

earlier generations of Myanmar-watchers will become dispersed, if not actually lost.

In the past, it was common practice for the personal libraries of major figures in Myanmar studies to be purchased by institutions. The British Library, the University of London, Cornell University and Princeton University, among others, acquired large collections of books, manuscripts and ephemera from former officials, academics and others with close connections to Myanmar.^[3] Even before the country became fashionable in the West, there was a wish to preserve its scholarly and literary heritage.

Albeit at a slower pace, this practice continued into the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1974, for example, the South Asia Institute at the University of Heidelberg purchased the extensive Myanmar collection of Frank Trager, for many years a professor of international affairs at New York University, and a noted Southeast Asia specialist, who died in 1984. The German Research Council sponsored the acquisition of his collection on condition that it was catalogued and made available to the international scholarly community. It also prompted a major bibliographic project.^[4]

As early as 1963, the National Library of Australia (NLA) had expressed an interest in the collection of Gordon Luce, once considered the foremost European scholar on Myanmar. However, it was not until after Luce's death in 1979 that his family decided that the collection, including all his manuscripts and personal papers, should go to Canberra. Over 2000 books, pamphlets, maps and serials were purchased in 1980 and now form the Luce Collection at the NLA.^[5]

The Myanmar collections at Northern Illinois University have quadrupled since their inception in 1986, most recently with a bequest from the private collection of the diplomat and scholar Jerry Bennett.^[6] Among the more than 10,000 items relating to Myanmar, extensive bibliographic holdings are conserved in the Founders Memorial Library, including several donations of publications by the doyen of modern Myanmar studies, Georgetown University's David Steinberg.

More recently, however, institutions like national libraries, universities and research institutes seem to be reluctant to acquire such collections.

The reasons given for this change of heart vary between institutions, but usually start with a lack of funds. Even when personal libraries are offered as gifts, or are the subject of posthumous bequests, the question inevitably arises whether the receiving institution can pay for the costs of transporting, cataloguing and storing them. And that is quite apart from the problems of potential duplication, and the need to find additional shelf space.

Occasionally, there are specific factors behind the reluctance of libraries to accept large donations. For example, the library of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in

Washington DC is housed on the top floor of a multi-story building. The load-bearing capacity of the floor has been reached, which means that no new books can be added to the library's holdings unless the same number is removed.

At the Myanmar Update Conference held at the Australian National University (ANU) last month, this rather sad state of affairs was the subject of a side discussion between a small group of dedicated Myanmar-watchers. They shared a number of anecdotes.

According to one of those present, when the noted Myanmar scholar G.E. Harvey died in 1962, he made a bequest of his books and research materials to St Antony's College, Oxford. The books went into the greater Bodleian Library system and a small collection of correspondence stayed at St Antony's. Efforts have been made to curate the letters, but Harvey's other personal papers have never been catalogued, apparently because of a lack of funds. They are still stored in boxes.

In 2015, Matthew Walton of St Antony's College was approached by a housemate of Manuel Sarkisyanz, who died in March that year. She was contacting Southeast Asia specialists to see if there was any interest in acquiring the famous historian's extensive collection of books on the region. It included several hundred English language books on Myanmar and 470 books in the Myanmar language. Some of the latter were quite rare.

Dr Walton advised librarians at St Antony's and the Bodleian of this potential treasure trove, but was told the standard collection protocol was for libraries at Oxford to accept new collections only if they were accompanied by gifts to pay for the costs of cataloguing and maintenance. In the event, Professor Sarkisyanz's house in Mexico was sold and title to all of the books it contained was transferred to the new owners. It is not known what they did with them, or where this remarkable collection of Myanmar works ended up.

Another member of the group offered a similar story. David Pfanner, an anthropologist who conducted field work in Myanmar in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and was attached to the Johns Hopkins Centre in Yangon, left a collection of Myanmar-related publications to the ANU.^[7] The university library accepted the bequest but it was some time before it could be made available to staff and students. The main reason for the delay was a lack of funds to hire a Myanmar-speaking librarian able to catalogue them.

An Australian present at this discussion recounted his experience. He said that he had approached a number of local institutions, with a view to leaving them his own library of Myanmar-related books and other publications – probably the largest private collection of such works in Australia. However, he was repeatedly told that, due to a shortage of funds and lack of shelf space it was very difficult to accept such a bequest. A few libraries were prepared, however, to pick out individual works to fill gaps in their own holdings.

Increasingly, Western libraries are turning to digital means to access books and serials. This is

cheaper, easier to manage and more popular with students and the wider public. Not all Myanmar-related works can be digitised, of course, but online research is rapidly replacing the old practice of looking through hard copies of books and journals. There is also a movement to rationalise the Asian studies holdings of major libraries in Australia so that their resources (and related costs) can be better shared between institutions.^[8]

One possible solution canvassed by the group at the Update Conference was the donation of private collections of Myanmar-related publications to libraries and universities in Myanmar itself. For decades, these institutions have been starved of resources and are desperately short of teaching materials. Also, when Myanmar was under military rule, some private collections were destroyed, and official collections pruned of politically sensitive works, for fear of attracting unwelcome attention from the authorities.

Shipping books and other research materials to Myanmar was certainly an option, but institutions there also lacked the funds needed properly to house such collections and to protect them from damage or loss.

Whatever the reason for the current state of affairs, it needs to be understood that these private libraries are sometimes unique. In most cases, they have been painstakingly compiled over decades. Many include items not easily found elsewhere – either in hard copy or online. It would be a tragedy for future Myanmar studies if such specialised collections were broken up and their contents scattered because no institution could give them a home, or no philanthropists could be found to help libraries do so.

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End notes

[1] I am indebted to John Badgley, Sally Burdon, Amelia McKenzie, David Steinberg, Sean Turnell and Matthew Walton, among others, for their help with this article. However, I am responsible for its content.

[2] Andrew Selth, *Burma (Myanmar) Since the 1988 Uprising: A Select Bibliography*, 3rd edition (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, forthcoming).

[3] See, for example, Patricia Herbert, 'The Making of a Collection: Burmese Manuscripts in the British Library', *British Library Journal*, Vol.15, No.1, Spring 1989, pp.59-70, at <https://www.bl.uk/eblj/1989articles/pdf/article5.pdf>

[4] Schwertner, S.M., 'Burma/Myanmar Bibliographic Project: A Collection of Publications in West-European Languages for Preparation a Burma/Myanmar Bibliography', *Xasia Repository*, at <http://crossasia-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/254/>

[5] Andrew Gosling, 'Burma and Beyond', *National Library of Australia News*, October 1996, pp.3-5, at <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/131760/20120120-0944/www.nla.gov.au/pub/nlanews/1996/oct96/story-1.pdf>.

[6] Northern Illinois University, 'Centre for Burma Studies: Collections', at <http://www.burma.niu.edu/burma/collections/index.shtml>

[7] Charlotte Galloway, 'Researching Burma: The Australian National University Library', *TAASA Review*, (The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia), Vol.21, No.3, September 2012, pp.18-19, at http://www.taasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Review_21_3_2012_September.pdf.

[8] Amy Chan, 'National approach urged to develop Asia-related collection', *Asian Currents*, 22 February 2016, at <http://asaa.asn.au/national-approach-urged-develop-asia-related-collection/>