

## Old Burma hands write on the ‘odd man out in Asia’

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*There are not many memoirs by diplomats who were posted to Myanmar, but of those published, Australians have contributed a large proportion.*

The recent release of former ambassador Trevor Wilson’s book, *Eyewitness to Early Reform in Myanmar*,<sup>1</sup> prompts a brief look at other diplomatic memoirs by Australians and, in particular, those written by officers posted to Australia’s embassy in Rangoon (now Yangon) since it opened in 1956.

Australia has a strong tradition of diplomatic memoirs. Many ambassadors and other officials have recorded their experiences and impressions of international events. Books by Walter Crocker, Alan Watt, Richard Woolcott, Alan Renouf and Peter Henderson spring to mind. The National Library of Australia (NLA) holds the papers of others and has recorded the reminiscences of many more as part of its oral history project.

Also, between 1988 and 1998, Griffith University’s Centre for the Study of Australia–Asia Relations (CSAAR) published 22 monographs under the collective title *Australians in Asia*. Edited by Hugh Dunn, they included diplomatic memoirs by Dunn himself, Keith Waller, John Rowland and Harold Marshall, among others. The series was a timely reminder of the contributions made by Australian officials to regional affairs.

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1 Trevor Wilson, *Eyewitness to Early Reform in Myanmar* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), .doi.org/10.22459/EERM.03.2016.

Until 1966, all female members of the Australian Foreign Service were forced to resign on getting married and none appears to have written a memoir. However, the partners of Australian diplomats have also contributed to the literature. In 1968, for example, Jean Spender wrote *Ambassador's Wife*, and in 2013 Rachel Miller (herself a 'diplomatic spouse') edited a collection of interviews entitled *Wife and Baggage to Follow*.<sup>2</sup>

Relatively few Australian diplomats or their partners, however, have published books about their postings to Burma (as the country was known before 1989).

The CSAAR series included memoirs by Francis Stuart, who visited Burma in 1947; Alf Parsons and Pierre Hutton, both of whom served there in the 1950s; and by Richard Gate, who was ambassador from 1980 to 1982. In 1991, Edwin Ride published a memoir that described his experiences as a junior officer in Rangoon in the mid 1960s and Richard Broinowski's autobiography included an account of life in Burma during the early 1970s.

Other former diplomats have given presentations or published papers<sup>3</sup> that throw light on their Burmese days. The memoirs of some—like Roy Fernandez (ambassador in Rangoon from 1968 to 1970), Garry Woodard (ambassador from 1973 to 1975) and Geoff Allen (ambassador from 1989 to 1993)—have been recorded by the NLA. A few old Burma hands, such as Garry Woodard, have also deposited their private papers in the NLA.

Rachel Miller's book includes a chapter by Pat Milne, whose husband, Frank, was twice posted to Burma, for the second term as Head of Mission, from 1983 to 1986.

The relative dearth of Burma memoirs is perhaps not surprising, given that Rangoon was for many years considered a minor diplomatic post. It was on the fringes of Australia's main areas of interest in the region. Also, as Alf Parsons wrote in 1998, Burma was the 'odd man out in

2 "Wife and Baggage to Follow": DFAT Launches a Social History of Women and Wives in Australia's Foreign Service', Public Diplomacy Activities (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 6 November 2013), [dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/public-diplomacy/programs-activities/pages/wife-and-baggage-to-follow-dfat-launches-a-social-history-of-women-and-wives-in-australias-foreign-service.aspx](http://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/public-diplomacy/programs-activities/pages/wife-and-baggage-to-follow-dfat-launches-a-social-history-of-women-and-wives-in-australias-foreign-service.aspx).

3 Andrew Selth, 'Burma after Forty Years: Still Unlike Any Land You Know', in *Griffith Review 68: Getting On*, edited by Ashley Hay, 26 April 2016, [griffithreview.com/articles/burma-after-forty-years/](http://griffithreview.com/articles/burma-after-forty-years/).

Asia'.<sup>4</sup> After General Ne Win's 1962 coup d'état, the country pursued the 'Burmese way to socialism'—a system characterised by economic autarky and a strictly neutral foreign policy.

Until this year, Australian memoirs about Burma were confined to the 'democratic era' (1948–62) or the period under General Ne Win, who ruled for 26 years. None covered the 'new' Myanmar, which began to take shape after the abortive 1988 prodemocracy uprising and the rise of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This gap has now been filled, at least in part, by Trevor Wilson's memoir, which focuses on the period 2000–03.

All these authors commented on political and social developments in Burma, but few did so in any detail. Not only did the country stagnate under Ne Win, but so, too, did its relations with Australia. One exception is Wilson's more focused account of his three-year posting, by which time the local political scene was starting to change, posing fresh challenges for those responsible for managing the bilateral relationship.

Most of these memoirs are notable for their accounts of daily life in a country that, after 1962, seemed frozen in time. This encouraged descriptions of Burma's natural beauty, its lack of modern amenities, the difficulty of getting things done and colourful local personalities. Given the exotic nature of the posting and the lack of major diplomatic initiatives, amusing anecdotes tended to be given more space than serious analysis.<sup>5</sup>

That said, most of these memoirs do throw some light on Australian policy towards Burma/Myanmar from officials directly involved in its development and implementation—areas where contemporary scholarship is largely absent. For example, as Trevor Wilson points out in his book, under foreign minister Alexander Downer, Australia adopted a different approach than most other Western countries, by supporting human rights training for Burmese officials.

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4 Alf Parsons, *South East Asian Days*, Australians in Asia Paper No.22 (Brisbane: Centre for the Study of Australia–Asia Relations, Griffith University, April 1988), p.30.

5 See, for example, Andrew Selth, 'The Rats of Rangoon', *New Mandala*, 29 March 2016, [asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/03/29/the-rats-of-rangoon/](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/03/29/the-rats-of-rangoon/).

Also, such memoirs help reveal the inner workings of a Western diplomatic mission in Burma and its relationships with the home country, the receiving government and local society. Over the years, Australian officers have provided insights on a wide range of contemporary issues of a kind that are often difficult to find elsewhere. This includes frank observations about key personalities. From his personal contacts with her, for example, Wilson writes that Aung San Suu Kyi is an impressive figure but ‘very conscious of her own importance’ and ‘prickly to deal with’.

Australian memoirs of Burma are all the more interesting for the fact that few other foreign diplomats posted there seem to have recorded their experiences. One exception is Aleksandr Kaznacheev’s *Inside a Soviet Embassy*, about his time in Rangoon during the late 1950s, before he defected to the US.<sup>6</sup> Another is Takashi Suzuki’s Japanese-language memoir, *A Country Called Burma: Its History and Memoir*, about his posting to Burma as Tokyo’s envoy from 1971 to 1974. Also, Preet Malik has just published *My Myanmar Years*, covering his posting as Indian ambassador from 1990 to 1992.

A rare example of a Burma memoir written by a foreign diplomat’s wife is *Five Years in a Forgotten Land* by Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, whose husband was the resident UNICEF representative from 1984 to 1989. Also, the NLA is not alone in recording the memories of Rangoon veterans. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, for example, has interviewed nearly 40 US officials who served in Burma between 1947 and 1998.<sup>7</sup>

The Canadian academic George Egerton once noted that memoirs ‘have but a brief flowering in the attention of the public and popular media, finding resurrection, if ever, only as sources in the hands of curious historians’.<sup>8</sup> Be that as it may, over the past 30 years or so, Australian accounts of diplomatic postings to Burma/Myanmar have provided useful and entertaining snapshots of a country that has long been the subject of myths and misconceptions.

6 Matthew N. Caslon, ‘Book Review of Inside a Soviet Embassy by Aleksandr Kaznacheev’, *Studies Archives Indexes*, Vol.7, No.3 (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 2007), [www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol7no3/html/v07i3a12p\\_0001.htm](http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol7no3/html/v07i3a12p_0001.htm).

7 *Burma: Country Reader*, Country and Subject Reader Series (Arlington, VA: Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training), [adst.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Burma-Myanmar.pdf](http://adst.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Burma-Myanmar.pdf).

8 George Egerton (ed.), *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1994).

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