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Early Australian Public Diplomacy Possible in Myanmar

Engaging in public diplomacy in another country necessarily involves judgments about mutual benefits arising from exposing the people of another country to the intellectual achievements or artistic accomplishments of the 'giving' country, weighed against the possibility of undertaking an activity that might be inappropriate, sensitive, or even offensive in terms of the culture of the 'receiving' country. Occasionally, it can mean promoting the values of systems that are opposed to those of the recipient country (as in the Soviet Union, for example). In post-2000 Yangon, several foreign governments sought to engage in 'traditional' public diplomacy: the highly organised and well-funded operations of the former US Information Agency and the British Council were the leading exponents of such programs, pursuing both sides of the template. But even less well-funded programs, from countries such as Japan, France, and others, increased their activity in this area post-2000 as it seemed that full-scale political transformation was still some time away, while a modest but encouraging degree of 'opening up' was under way under the otherwise authoritarian military regime. The nature of other countries' public diplomacy varied: Japan tended to prefer film festivals, which could be conducted as a commercial activity but targeted a wide community, and presumably went through normal censorship; some countries chose to organise 'in house' activities such as music recitals, which were not aimed at the wider Burmese community, and therefore would not attract interference from the authorities; the British and

the Americans gradually increased their English teaching activities, which covertly targeted political opposition members, but did not have an overt political purpose.

By its very nature, public diplomacy was an area where the embassy would run up against the regime's controls on freedom of expression. Any material that was published for public consumption, whether printed word or images, had to pass censorship controls; any public event not held within the confines of the embassy required permission from the authorities. These were not untried waters: other embassies and organisations had undertaken similar activities, or had to obtain official permission to carry out their public activities. But they obviously presented policy and organisational challenges, and there was a degree of unpredictability about the outcome. Potentially, the possibility of adverse media or negative public impact was greater than in a non-authoritarian environment.

When I arrived in Yangon in May 2000, the Australian Government was not really prepared for a shift away from its hitherto extremely low-profile range of activities. As a low-rated embassy in terms of its size and the cool political relationship with Myanmar, the Australian Embassy in Yangon generally did not figure in Canberra's plans or budgeting for public diplomacy activity. Indeed, before 2000 the embassy was not allocated any public diplomacy funds by DFAT. Realistically, there was not a lot of global or generic public diplomacy activity that would have been suitable for Myanmar. The embassy was mostly left to its own devices about what it wished to do, subject to informing DFAT in Canberra in advance (usually by simply including any proposed activity in the embassy's annual public diplomacy plan). Sometimes embassy 'support' might be no more than the ambassador offering to host an event at the embassy, using official entertainment allowance funds. Yet, some other countries that imposed sanctions had begun modest public diplomacy programs. So it was apparent that, even in a highly controlled environment such as Myanmar in the early 2000s, it would be possible to project a distinct, but genuine, Australian profile and to work with various stakeholders or proponents, while conforming with broader Australian Government directions and standards to maintain the integrity of the events or activities.

The Australian Embassy's limited experience with only a small number of lesser public diplomacy activities in the challenging but changing political environment of 2000–03 confirmed that the military regime's tentative signs of opening up could be translated into embassies carrying out more 'normal' diplomatic activities in Yangon, including public diplomacy events, despite the restrictions that applied on political activity, freedom of expression, and 'fraternisation' with ordinary Burmese people. This was contrary to many preconceptions that existed in Australia and the West, but was consistent with the experience of many other embassies in Yangon at that time.

Given the extremely modest resources available, it was very much a matter of 'making the best out of very little'. An effective way to promote Australian food and wine was at the annual Australia Day reception, where we were able to take advantage of the existing efficient 'supply chain' links from Australian suppliers to supermarkets, restaurants, and hotels in Myanmar, enabling us to organise impressive Australia-sourced catering for the reception at the Australian Club.

In addition, a few significant Australian occasions or events were marked by the Australian Embassy in Yangon between 2000 and 2003. In a variety of ways, these events inevitably involved some interaction with the military regime and its policies and practices, beyond what would be the case in countries without an authoritarian government. The main objective was to carry out these events in the way the Australian parties preferred; the main challenge was to judge how to go forward if the Myanmar authorities decided to amend or adjust the character of the event. The ultimate test was to assess whether or not it had been possible to preserve the 'integrity' of the event, and whether or not holding it had been worthwhile and meant achieving some progress for the Burmese people affected.

These events included the Sydney Olympic Games, the 50th anniversary of the Qantas Kangaroo Route, the 50th anniversary of Australia–Burma diplomatic relations and the 60th anniversary of the Burma–Thailand Railway.

Australia Day

Events to mark Australia's national day are a high point in Australia's public diplomacy around the world, and it was little different in Yangon from 2000 to 2003, although local circumstances influenced the style and nature of the event. As in other countries, the Australian Embassy in Yangon sought to bring members of the Australian community together with local people, who were cooperating with Australia to celebrate Australian connections with Myanmar, with special Australian food and wine, and sometimes musical performances. The end of January is the coolest time of the year in Myanmar, with minimum temperatures around 19 degrees Celsius and maximums around 30 degrees Celsius, with almost no possibility of rain, so a wet weather plan was never needed. The setting for the Australia Day reception was the outdoor area of Australian Club within the grounds of the ambassador's residence, with special lighting for the occasion.

In Yangon by this time, the advent of Australian professionals in the hospitality sector and the arrival of quality Australia food products in the up-market City Mart supermarket chain in Yangon made it possible to stage quite an impressive Australia Day function at the ambassador's residence. Each year we sought to showcase something different and exotic in the way of Australian food, sharing the day with the Indian Embassy, whose national day falls on the same day. (Alcohol was not normally served at the Indian national day reception, so local practice was for invitees to attend the Indian receptions first and then proceed to the Australian reception.) In the early 2000s, Australian embassies across the world received a special budget allocation for the Australia Day reception, based on a plan submitted by each embassy in advance. This enabled the Yangon Embassy to put the catering arrangements for the reception out to competitive tender from a few of Yangon's better hotels. We had a small organising committee within the embassy, which included myself and my wife, who had considerable experience of such events from our times in Tokyo.

In Yangon in the early 2000s, while aiming to welcome a suitably high-level government representative — usually the foreign minister — senior representatives of the NLD also normally attended, although the two would not necessarily speak to one another. At this time, there were not many events at which both government representatives

and NLD representatives were present. The NLD was generally represented at Australia Day by Deputy Chairman Tin Oo, although the Chairman, U Aung Shwe, as a former Ambassador to Australia, would also attend, health permitting. (Aung San Suu Kyi did not attend, as this was not permitted by the Myanmar authorities until much later.) Another former Myanmar Ambassador to Australia who regularly attended our reception was Brigadier Maung Maung,¹ who was the long retired architect of the modern Burmese Army and who had been a key figure in the 'Caretaker Government' of 1958–60 under General Ne Win. While the military regime did not interfere overtly with the event, some government officials inevitably felt that they should not attend. But a reasonable cross-section of Yangon society mostly did attend. We never felt constrained in who we invited, or what we did at the event. Since we had no formal military-to-military relationship, we did not invite members of the Myanmar military, and so did not have numbers of Burmese in military uniform present. (A representative of the Australian Defence Attaché's Office from Bangkok who was accredited to Myanmar usually attended, but the senior defence attaché was normally required to attend the equivalent event in Bangkok.)

The social columns of the Australian-run *Myanmar Times* provided coverage of the embassy's Australia Day event for their own purposes.

Sydney Olympic Games 2000

Myanmar is a member of the Olympic movement and sent a small team of seven athletes to the Sydney Olympic Games in September 2000. As a matter of course, we invited the Myanmar team to a farewell party at the ambassador's residence. The games were also an opportunity to celebrate Australia's achievements. In this case, our embassy obviously had the benefit of a wealth of marketing and publicity material generated by the Sydney Olympics Committee and the federal and NSW state governments. One interesting aspect of this for

1 Brigadier Maung Maung paid a courtesy call on me at the embassy after my arrival in Yangon, which was exactly that — a courtesy call. Brigadier Maung Maung was quite elderly by this time, but he remained in reasonable health, while being somewhat eccentric. His two daughters had stayed on in Australia and were Australian citizens married to Australians. They returned to Yangon from time to time to keep in touch with their family.

Myanmar was the case of the Sports Minister, Brigadier-General Aye Myint, being allowed to attend in spite of Australian travel bans on members of the Myanmar military regime. (Aye Myint resigned from the army to stand for election for the government Union Social and Development Party in November 2010, and was appointed Minister of Science and Technology in President Thein Sein's first cabinet in 2011, before being appointed Minister of Industry in 2012, and then Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Security in 2014.)²

Fiftieth anniversary of Qantas's Kangaroo Route, 2001

Whose idea was it to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Qantas's Kangaroo Route from London to Sydney by staging an air race of small planes in 2002 over the route? An assortment of more than 40 aircrafts from all over the world left the UK on 11 March 2001 at the start of a 22,000 km journey to Australia, stopping at many countries that became well-known stopover points on the original 'Kangaroo Route' between England and Australia. Stopover and transit points included France, Greece, Crete, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Timor, finally making their first Australian landfall at Darwin. The 'Kangaroo Route' originally included Yangon, but it was a very long time since Qantas had stopped over regularly in Yangon.

The Myanmar Government gave all-out support for this event, presumably conscious that its handling of the stopover in Yangon would be compared with others along the route, and also presumably also because it saw the air race as a recognition of Myanmar's rightful place. They would also have calculated that a successful (accident-free) stopover, even if only 12 hours in duration, could generate considerable positive publicity. Most of the arrangements for the stopover were handled by the air race organisers directly with the Myanmar civil aviation authorities. The Australian Embassy was primarily involved in the 'hospitality' arrangements for the pilots at the Inya Lake Hotel. However, the extent of the Myanmar Government's

2 According to ALTSEAN's Regime Watch. See www.altsean.org/Research/Regime%20Watch/Executive/Cabinet.php.

supporting arrangement were unexpected: Deputy Minister for Transport Brigadier-General Kyaw Myint was stationed in the air traffic control tower overseeing aircraft landing activity for most of the time; Foreign Minister U Win Aung and Transport Minister Hla Myint Swe, a higher ranking general, greeted the aircraft on arrival; and the government newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, carried a prominent factual story on the stopover the following day.³

The stopover at Yangon was accomplished safely and successfully, and without incident. Despite fears that the crossing of the Bay of Bengal involved risks for such small planes with minimal navigation systems, no casualties occurred during the transit of Myanmar, and no consular problems arose from the participants for the Australian Embassy in Yangon. The Myanmar Government's support, neither solicited nor anticipated, contributed considerably to this outcome. But embassy staff had to invest a great deal of time and effort into the exercise, and were gratified by the satisfactory outcome. It was not clear whether the larrikin actions of some of the pilots — landing on beaches, roads, etc. — were known to the authorities at the time. But if they did know about these relatively harmless incidents through their normal military intelligence networks, they were politely tight-lipped.

The air race certainly gained great publicity for Australia, although the Myanmar transit, among so many stopovers during the race, was probably not a stand-out event. Quite a lot of responsibility was carried by the Australian diplomatic posts involved, but whether this was fully appreciated by the organisers or by the Australian Government is not certain. It was written up enthusiastically by the *Myanmar Times* more than once.

Fiftieth anniversary of Australia–Burma diplomatic relations, 2002

In May 1952, an Australian diplomatic office was opened in Yangon for the first time, just over three years after Burma gained its independence, and Australia's relationships with Burma began.

3 See 'Yangon Landing for Air Race', *New Light of Myanmar*, 13 November 2000; and 'Aircraft in Sydney Air Race 2001 Stop Over at Yangon International Airport', *New Light of Myanmar*, 27 March 2001.

The fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations was thus marked in May 2002. DFAT would normally mark significant anniversaries of bilateral relations in some way or other, such as when the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations was reached, but relations with Burma (now Myanmar) in 2002 under a 'despised' military regime was not an appropriate cause for lavish celebration. I do not recall receiving any instructions from Canberra in connection with this anniversary.⁴

In the embassy, however, we did do the bare minimum, feeling that it was inappropriate to ignore the occasion altogether. Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs U Khin Maung Win kindly agreed to be guest of honour at a small reception in the embassy, which also marked the refurbishment of the embassy. Having been in the same fairly prestigious location next to the Strand Hotel for most of the period, but having just recently been refurbished — even if on a very modest scale — the Australian Embassy was a widely recognised presence. The Australian-owned and managed *Myanmar Times* loyally reported the event on its front page. My recollection is that the very brief report we sent to DFAT on the event drew little or no response from Canberra.

Sixtieth anniversary of the Burma–Thailand Railway, 2003

A more moving event was the special service the Australian Embassy organised for the World War II prisoners of war who returned to Myanmar on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Burma–Thailand Railway in May 2003. As this trip was not an officially supported event, it was entirely organised through private channels, with little or no involvement from the Department of Veterans' Affairs.⁵ The Burma terminus of the railway, Thanbyuzayat, has been accessible for many years, but until recently it had not been possible for visitors

4 Perhaps reflecting the extent Australia's diplomatic history is coloured by the Commonwealth and the Cold War, Burma also receives only the briefest of mentions in the official departmental history of Australian engagement with Asia, *Facing North*. The only references are in Peter Gifford's chapter 'The Cold War Across Asia', in Goldsworthy, David (ed.), *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001, pp. 172, 175.

5 In the words of the Minister for Veteran Affairs, in another context, Burma 'is not a country with which the Department has any dealings'. Letter from Minister for Veterans' Affairs Dana Vale to Trevor Wilson, 11 September 2003.

to travel even a short distance down the WWII railway track, because of clashes that occurred as part of the continuing insurgency in the area. As in Thailand, the WWII railway track had been taken up, and the only signs of it are the trackbeds, embankments, and some bridges. Although only around 200 km by road from the capital Yangon, travel to Thanbyuzayat is not easy. Nowadays, foreign visitors to the railway usually hire a vehicle (mini-bus or four-wheel drive) in Yangon for the trip to Thanbyuzayat, a drive of at least eight hours, quite a tiring journey for the elderly former POWs.⁶ Construction of a new bridge across the Salween River (and extension of the railway line from Yangon) to Mawlamyaing in 2004 made the trip shorter and slightly more comfortable.

Through communication with the Australian organisers of the POWs' pilgrimage many months ahead of the visit, the Australian Embassy in Yangon organised a special tribute to the POWs in the form of a special service at the Commonwealth War Cemetery at Thanbyuzayat on 1 May 2003.⁷ Several of the POWs were returning to Burma for the first time since their imprisonment, including Dr Rowley Richards, by then 82 years old and a remarkably dignified and disciplined figure.⁸ Representatives of Myanmar groups showed their respect by attending, including the military regime's 'mayor' of Thanbyuzayat, the retired professor of history from Mawlamyaing University, and representatives from other POW country embassies (US, UK, and the Netherlands, but not Japan or Thailand). A representative from the opposition New Mon State Party was probably present as well. A Burmese Anglican priest from Mawlamyaing, Rev. Sonny Movin, conducted the religious aspects of the service. For local Myanmar people, it was quite a moving occasion, as their own remembering of this history has not been very consistent or open, and it is still not known how many Burmese labourers died on the railway.

6 See Michelle Gorman's article 'Travelling a Track of Sad Memories', *Myanmar Times*, 24 December 2001 – 6 January 2002, Vol. 5, No. 95–96.

7 The Australian Embassy did not seek SPDC approval to hold this event, but out of courtesy notified the Foreign Ministry of our intentions, not expecting any problems as ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day (11 November) were already celebrated annually.

8 His personal account of his wartime experiences was published soon after this anniversary as *A Doctor's War*, Sydney: Harper-Collins, 2005.

In Australia, this particular anniversary was not marked by any significant events or initiatives.⁹ The Department of Veterans' Affairs published a memorial monograph to mark the 60th anniversary, *Australians on the Burma–Thailand Railway*.¹⁰ However, in mid-2002 no official messages from Australia were received — or needed. At this time, prisoners of war generally did not get much recognition in the Australian Government's war commemoration activities, so no official activity was planned to mark the 60th anniversary of the railway. More attention might have been accorded the occasion in Thailand, which was much more accessible and had developed good facilities to celebrate the famous railway project. The ceremony at the Thanbyuzayat cemetery in May 2003 was very positively written up in the Australian prisoner of war magazine, *Barbed Wire and Bamboo*.¹¹

In subsequent years, in Australia, Myanmar, and Japan, greater attention was focused on the Burma–Thailand Railway prisoner of war experiences.¹²

Generic public diplomacy challenges (or opportunities)

Kunwinjku Aboriginal art exhibition

The one notable exception in regular public diplomacy was a relatively small but stunning exhibition of Arnhem Land Aboriginal art, *Seasons of the Kunwinjku*, which the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade curated and was taking around Asia and Africa. The Australian Embassy in Yangon arranged for the paintings from West Arnhem Land to be exhibited in the Sedona Hotel in Yangon in 2002. The SPDC

9 The Department of Veterans' Affairs in Canberra did maintain a website on the anniversary. See trove.nla.gov.au/work/29881891?selectedversion=NBD44466515.

10 John Moreman, *Australians on the Burma–Thailand Railway 1942–43*, Canberra: Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2003.

11 An account of their trip, written from the perspective of POWs, and authored by Terry Beaton, was published as 'Burma Remembered: An Incredible Experience' in the July/August 2003 issue of *Barbed Wire and Bamboo*.

12 The Australian War Memorial subsequently created a special website in association with a POW exhibition. See www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stoloneyears/ww2/japan/burmatahai/. In 2005, Palgrave Macmillan published *Railwaymen in the War: Tales by Japanese Railway Soldiers in Burma*, by Kazuo Tamayama, the first Japanese account in English.

Deputy Minister for Culture, U Soe Nyunt, a famous poet and writer, and one of the few civilians in Myanmar's Cabinet, kindly opened the exhibition for us.

The 'official' description of the paintings probably does justice to them.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is proud to present the art exhibition 'Seasons of the Kunwinjku' by artists from the Kunwinjku clans of West Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. This collection of contemporary Indigenous Australian art reflects the stylistic techniques that have been employed by the people for over 50,000 years.

The collection of 13 paintings and 13 photographs tells the traditional stories of the Kunwinjku clans' ancestors. While many stories relate to the Dreamtime, the time of creation, the exhibition also provides an insight into Indigenous culture and the collective knowledge about the seasonal cycles of West Arnhem Land.

The exhibition was purchased by the department in 1994 from the Hogarth Galleries Aboriginal Art Centre, Sydney, and continues to enjoy a successful international touring program. Altogether, the exhibition travelled to many cities around the world, including Bangkok, Shanghai, Singapore, Tokyo, Seoul, Dhaka, Karachi, Mexico City, Manila, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Maracaibo, Bogota, Wellington, Harare, Nairobi, Port Louis, Pretoria, Lagos, Rome, Ottawa, and Port Moresby.¹³

Some Burmese said this was the first time they had ever seen Aboriginal art. It was not possible to verify whether other Aboriginal art exhibitions were ever held in Myanmar; they possibly were, but many years earlier, and few if any Burmese recalled them. In any event, to stage such an exhibition in a country interested in art, and with a very diverse culture, was both appropriate and worthwhile. The Myanmar Government's censors said they had to inspect the paintings to confirm that they were suitable for public exhibition, as they did for all public showings. I doubt that I mentioned this to Canberra, since there had been no serious suggestion that the Myanmar authorities would object to the exhibition (and, in any event, the Deputy Minister for Culture had already agreed to open the exhibition).

13 See the media release on the DFAT website at dfat.gov.au/news/media-releases/Pages/seasons-of-the-kunwinjku-aboriginal-art-from-west-arnhem-land.aspx.

***Splendours of Arakan* book launch, 2001**

One of the embassy's modest public diplomacy initiatives during this period was to organise a book launch for Dr Pamela Gutman of Sydney University, whose *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan* was published by Orchid Press, Bangkok, in 2001.¹⁴ Pamela had been my contemporary at ANU in the mid-1960s, and gone on to become one of the world's foremost experts on the middle period of Burmese history. A frequent visitor to Burma during the previous 20 years, Dr Gutman was present at the launch at the ambassador's residence, and was grateful for a chance to acknowledge the superb publication in the company of her many Burmese friends and colleagues who had assisted her in what was her life's work. Not least of these was her photographer friend Zaw Min Yu, a Yangon resident whose unique images grace the book. We were able to assemble a number of Dr Gutman's Burmese academic friends and collaborators at the launch. Being held at the ambassador's residence, the launch was a private event for which regime approval was neither needed nor sought.

Burma–Thailand Railway photographic exhibition, 2003

Another locally inspired event was the exhibition of photos of the Burma–Thailand Railway from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The photographs were merely exhibition-size copies of black-and-white photographs in the Australian War Memorial's collection, reproduced in larger format and framed simply after their arrival in Yangon. The photographs were later donated to the small 'Death Railway Museum' in Thanbyuzayat, which until then had photographs mainly from Japanese sources. The Department of Veterans' Affairs had also published a memorial monograph to mark the 60th anniversary, *Australians on the Burma–Thailand Railway 1942–43*.¹⁵ The embassy arranged to obtain bulk copies of this publication from

14 Pamela Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan*, Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001. For tributes about the book, see books.google.com.au/books/about/Burma_s_lost_kingdoms.html?id=YXJuAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y. Pamela Gutman died in Sydney in early 2015. The author's obituary for her was carried by the ANU blog site, *New Mandala*: asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/?s=Gutman.

15 John Moreman, *Australians on the Burma–Thailand Railway 1942–43*, Canberra: Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2003.

the Department of Veterans' Affairs to have on hand at the exhibition, and the Myanmar Government had no objections to these being distributed. The exhibition was staged at the Yangon Inya Lake Hotel, whose manager at the time was personally interested in the story of the railway. It was significant that the Australian Embassy was able to sell copies of the Australian official account of the railway at this exhibition, since few Burmese knew much about Burma's involvement in World War II, which has long been suppressed by post-independence nationalistic and anti-colonial Burmese governments. There was no attempt whatsoever by the censorship authorities to censor the publication, or to obstruct its dissemination, since it obviously had no political relevance for contemporary Myanmar.

To stage any public event in Myanmar at this time, it was necessary to obtain the permission of the censorship authorities in the Ministry of Home Affairs. There was no evidence of any previous public exhibition of material about the foreign prisoners of war on the Burma–Thailand Railway being held in Myanmar since World War II. So it was by no means certain that permission would be forthcoming, especially given the distorted anti-British view of World War II promoted in the Defence Ministry's own museum. But, thankfully — and perhaps as a sign of things to come much later — in the end, in granting its permission, the ministry merely asked for all references to 'Burma' in captions for photographs to be changed to 'Myanmar/Burma', which in the circumstances was quite a reasonable request. So while this exhibition was very modest in scale and content, it was nevertheless the first public showing in Myanmar of any material about the role that foreign prisoners of war had played in the construction of this railway inside Burma, which tended to be one part of World War II history that the military regime normally preferred not to acknowledge publicly. In other words, this was another sign of opening up and 'normalisation'.

Under the Thein Sein reforms after 2011, permission to open the old railway route to visitors was granted, and Professor Joan Beaumont, an ANU scholar who had worked on museums on the Thai side of the railway, was given permission to visit Three Pagodas Pass in January 2013. I learnt subsequently that plans are under discussion to reopen a new museum about the railway in Thanbyuzayat, possibly as a Mon State project. Arguably, there is a consistent pattern of official interest in the history of the railway, although it has certainly not always

enjoyed high priority in Yangon. Some aspects of the way tourism has developed around the railway in Thailand may not be so appealing to more conservative Myanmar taste, but it would not be surprising if this whole area became much more a destination for local as well as overseas visitors. Australian (and British) travel companies specialising in war commemorations had for many years been organising small groups to visit Thanbyuzayat without problems, but they were never allowed to revisit the railway track beyond Wegale, which is only a few kilometres from Thanbyuzayat.

Opera in the Strand Hotel, 2001

A more traditional event organised entirely by the embassy was a recital by Australian soprano Joanna Cole, who approached the embassy in 2001 about the possibility of giving a concert in Yangon. Ms Cole was planning to be travelling in Southeast Asia, and she was interested in visiting Myanmar. As she was paying for her own travel, the costs for the embassy of arranging a recital for her were minimal, so we readily agreed, even though at that stage we had never heard of her.¹⁶ Other Western embassies in Yangon occasionally staged concerts as part of their public diplomacy efforts, so a recital of operatic arias was not impossible to imagine; it had just never been done before, or at least in recent times. The Australian Embassy had never attempted such an ambitious public event in Yangon, and there were no counterpart Burmese classical music organisations — no orchestra, no opera troupe — as Burmese performing arts focused entirely on Burmese classical genres. Neither the Australian nor Myanmar governments had any objections to the idea of the concert.

The recital was staged on 8 October 2001 as a free concert in the prestigious Strand Hotel, located, as it happens, next door to the embassy, and which was at that point celebrating its centenary. Joanna Cole chose her own program, which included arias sung in other settings by none other than Joan Sutherland. The embassy did not presume to pass judgment on the suitability of items for the recital, nor did the Myanmar Government. We tried to invite as many local artists as we could find, but they were not numerous, as Western

¹⁶ See her CV at wp.morethanopera.com/artists/.

classical music, and opera in particular, had not been much encouraged under the cultural chauvinism of Ne Win's time. The *Myanmar Times* generously provided prominent coverage of the occasion.¹⁷

17 'Diva Hits a High Note for Double Centenary', *Myanmar Times*, 15–21 October 2001, Vol. 5, No. 85.

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