

***Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma.* By Richard Cockett. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015. Hardcover: 275pp.**

*Blood, Dreams and Gold* is a history of modern Burma/Myanmar, a primer on the country's political and economic present, and a guide for thinking about its likely future. Timely, accessible, critical and insightful, it is the best of all the recent monographs on Myanmar. Richard Cockett was the Southeast Asia correspondent for the *The Economist* from 2010 to 2014, and the book has that breezy self-confidence, yet seriousness of purpose, of that newspaper. Accordingly, it is a very agreeable read.

About half of *Blood, Dreams and Gold* is an account of the country's modern history. Beginning at the dawn of the colonial era, and the incorporation of Burma into the British empire as a consequence of (Randolph) "Churchill's great adventure", the book acknowledges the "bad hand" dealt by British colonialists, while asserting that independent Burma's subsequent decline was nevertheless home-grown, an act of "self-immolation" (p. xi).

A motif running throughout the book is the country's ethnic diversity, too often the domain of conflict, exploitation, bitter relations and cynical wedge politics, but at times also a story of promise, hope, and of a country with the "remnants of what used to be one of the most cosmopolitan societies in the world" (p. 16). These remnants include the decaying grandeur of Yangon's old colonial buildings, the physical manifestation of the commercial diversity left by the British. As Cockett notes, this commercial cosmopolitanism was derided by the famed colonial official, anthropologist and later adviser to the government of independent Burma, J.S. Furnivall, as a "plural society". A largely positive label nowadays, Furnivall's meaning was of a society in which individuals "do not combine", but:

Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side but separately ... (p. 25).

In contrast to Furnivall's (antediluvian) analysis, Cockett posits that Burma's ethnic diversity was the sinew of its past economic strength, and he details the way in which the suppression of this diversity

brought about the country's economic undoing. The 1962 coup that installed General Ne Win brought with it the nationalization of much of the private enterprise in Burma, beginning with that owned by foreigners. Receiving the most publicity in this period, then and later, were the seizures of the great imperial enterprises such as the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, Burmah Oil, the European exchange banks and trading houses. Less noticed outside Burma was the nationalization of hundreds of thousands of South Asian, Chinese and other businesses that constituted the "silver threads of commerce that had bound the region's commercial communities together" (p. 57). According to Cockett, it was "no coincidence that Burma's precipitate economic decline occurred after the expulsion of the foreigners" (p. 57).

Burma's turn towards autarky in 1962 was accompanied by an ideology (the "Burma way to socialism") which pulled the economy down further. Cockett pulls no punches here, labelling the programme an "incoherent mish-mash of undigested, out-of-date political and economic bunkum that had already proved disastrous everywhere else it had been tried" (p. 54).

With respect to Myanmar's recent (partial) transformation since the ascent of President Thein Sein and his government, Cockett is both sympathetic and unsparing. Noting the many reforms that have taken place since this government was installed in 2011, he suggests not the least important being simply the acknowledgement "for the first time ... that things had gone badly wrong in Burma, and that many people did not support the government" (p. 205). As to the motivation for the reforms, Cockett writes of his "mystification", but in the end prioritizes two likely triggers. The first is posited on the understanding that while Myanmar's military rulers were in no sense wanting to bring democracy nor deal with its local champions, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), they did want to revitalize the economy. As the author explains it (p. 212):

... democracy was seen as a means to an economic end rather than a virtue in its own right. The reformers felt obliged to deal with the NLD only in exchange for money, investment and Western technical expertise ... to the Burmese military mind, democracy must be disciplined; it had to serve a very limited purpose — economic recovery — and little more.

Myanmar's external relations are taken up in a chapter with the evocative title "A New Great Game", and it is here that Cockett

advances an “external” trigger for Thein Sein’s reforms — to wit, the “glaring inequality” between Myanmar and China, and the junta’s desire to get out from under the latter’s suffocating embrace. Cockett is very effective in detailing how China overplayed its hand in Myanmar in the space guaranteed them by Western sanctions. Ham-fisted in the way common to authoritarian regimes, China “had mistaken government cooperation for public acquiescence” and, as a consequence, “completely missed the resentment building towards their presence in Burma” (p. 219).

*Blood, Dreams and Gold* is sound and insightful on all the big issues, but (naturally) it is not without its quirks. The book probably overstates the amount of genuine rural reform undertaken by Thein Sein’s government (it has been minimal), while a section that celebrates a particularly controversial Myanmar NGO, Myanmar Egress, in crafting a middle path towards democracy almost certainly exaggerates their contribution. The historical sections of *Blood, Dreams and Gold* are exceptionally good in providing context for Burma’s fall, but perhaps more emphasis could have been given to the country’s underestimated years of parliamentary democracy (roughly 1948–62) as a guide to what might happen next.

Cockett concludes *Blood, Dreams and Gold* by returning to the problems and possibilities offered by Myanmar’s plural society. Writing of the hope that the country might rediscover the silken threads of commerce via which its myriad of ethnicities bound the country to the world, he finds “it is easy to imagine another society emerging from the detritus of the old, better, stronger and wealthier than before” (p. 254). Realizing such a vision will, however, require “enormous political courage” (p. 254).

The elections of November 2015, and the overwhelming victory of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, took place just after *Blood, Dreams and Gold* was published. After many false dawns, the political courage Cockett hopes for may well have arrived. Only time will tell.

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