

BOOK REVIEWS

***On the Shadow Tracks: A Journey Through Occupied Myanmar.* By Clare Hammond. London, UK: Penguin Random House, 2023. Softcover: 355pp.**

Clare Hammond's *On the Shadow Tracks* is an outstanding book. The blurb calls it “part travelogue, part history”. It is both things, but also a profound insight into the nature of Myanmar's military state and a moving homage to the courage and inexhaustible generosity of the Burmese people.

A former online editor of Myanmar's groundbreaking *Frontier* magazine, Hammond uses a 3,000-mile journey around the country's dilapidated rail network to provide the spine for her narrative. It is a well-chosen device, which allows her to seamlessly link up stories that reveal the only real way the railway unites Myanmar's many disparate communities: via a common burden of oppression and exploitation by the regimes that built and use it.

The travelogue part of the book begins in Dawei in Myanmar's extreme southeast, and then follows the railway lines west and north in a clockwise direction around the network, before finally arriving at the country's capital. Naypyitaw was built as part of the military's apparatus of control, which is “what they wanted more than anything else” (p. 295). Hammond evocatively takes us into Myanmar's Irrawaddy Delta, to military-dominated Magway and to war-torn Rakhine, Kachin and the Northern and Southern Shan states. The tragedy and beauty of these places are rendered wonderfully in her often-poetic prose.

The journeys recorded took place before Myanmar's 2021 military coup, but an afterword provides a broad overview of the period since then. Hammond convincingly finds, in the military, a

lurking menace all too likely to engage in the horrors that would come after the coup, and which continue to this day.

Myanmar's five-year period of civilian rule under Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) between 2016 and 2021 is examined only in passing. At numerous points in the book, the NLD government is acknowledged for allowing stories that had not seen the light of day to be told openly, but the book says little about its policies on the railways. This is perhaps understandable; many significant figures in the NLD administration remain imprisoned (including Suu Kyi herself). However, it does mean the story of how the NLD pushed back against China's neo-colonialist designs on Myanmar, including new rail lines, is largely missed.

On the Shadow Tracks really shines when examining the grim realities of the construction of Myanmar's railways and the purposes for which they were built. Expanding upon a core 700-mile line linking Yangon to Mandalay built in the late nineteenth century, the British colonial authorities sought economic and strategic advantages to better extract rice, oil, teak, critical minerals, gemstones and other commodities. In the 1990s, Myanmar's military-run government expanded on the British rail map to extend the iron rails into borderlands that had been overlooked. Economic development was not their objective. As Hammond notes, the railway was "built to strengthen the military, helping it to produce weapons and transport them to other parts of the country where it would use them, not against a foreign enemy, but against its own people" (p. 93). As the subtitle of the book tells us, Myanmar's railways are the infrastructure of occupation, beyond whose edge the Burmese people attempt to live their lives, free from violence and oppression, and expecting nothing positive from the state.

Running like a thread through Hammond's narrative is the forced labour (in truth, modern slavery) used to construct Myanmar's rail lines. Such slavery was especially prevalent under military rule in the 1990s, but there is no question that it persists today. Hammond assembles some damning and heartbreaking testimonies from the victims of this. The often pointlessness of some railway development, with some sections simply abandoned, only adds to the sting of what the victims were forced to endure. One interviewee tells Hammond that for those forced to build them, Myanmar's railways should be thought of as a second "Death Railway"

(p. 33), whose horrors echoed those of its infamous forebear of the Second World War.

Corruption and epic incompetence are also companions in the story of Myanmar's railways. From Hammond's powerful interviews with retired generals and other officials, it is clear that almost everyone involved in building Myanmar's railroads is "on the take". Under Myanmar's generals, hundreds of millions of scarce dollars have gone missing, leaving little more than abandoned stations and zombie rail lines, while siphoning off scarce resources that could have been better spent on much-needed health, education and infrastructure.

Hammond recounts many spontaneous, simple acts of kindness by her Burmese travel companions and others she encountered along the way. Like all of us who write about Myanmar, she notes with regret that the current political circumstances do not allow proper thanks to Burmese friends, colleagues and these kind strangers. With one exception, she skilfully conveys the help she receives while keeping people safely anonymous.

To tell this story and embark on her journey, Hammond left her job at the *Myanmar Times*. Her colleagues "laughed and told me I was crazy" (p. 25). Nobody is laughing in Myanmar these days, but in the stories this book tells about the Burmese people, there is still reason for hope.

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