

**ROMANCE AND TRAGEDY IN BURMESE HISTORY: A
READING OF G. E. HARVEY'S *THE HISTORY OF
BURMA***

you [students of Burma], above all men, should look into the Mirror of the Past, to see its glories and its shames, and take guidance from its successes and its failures. In the beauty of old time you will find an ideal for the future.

G. E. Harvey 1919¹

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In 1919 G. E. Harvey delivered a speech to staff and students of Rangoon College. Entitled "The Writing of Burmese History," his lecture exhorted local students to look to the 'glories' and 'shames' of their past, for "in the beauty of old time you will find an ideal for the future."² Harvey encouraged the students to appreciate the "beauty" of their past, yet also to take guidance from their modern English education. In concluding his lecture he exhorted the students to write the history of their own people, stating: "It is for the younger generation with its superior mental training to justify its education, to help these men of an older generation and to take up the magnificent task of writing a fitting History of Burma."³

Six years later a history in a form consistent with Harvey's description was published under the title *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to March 1824 The Beginning of the English Conquest*.⁴ The author of this history, however, was not a local student who was inspired by Harvey's lecture, but rather Harvey himself. The *History of Burma* sets out to describe the histories, art and literature of the pre-colonial kingdoms in Burma. In this work Harvey combines the narratives of earlier European travellers to Burma with tales from the local chronicles, and evidence from the local inscriptions. Harvey's text is an academic account of

¹ Harvey 1919, 63.

² Ibid., 63-82.

³ Ibid., 79.

⁴ Harvey 1925 & 1967.

Burmese history, but it is also a highly literary and sometimes contradictory narrative.⁵ Harvey, in his introduction to the book, describes it as “a little pioneer work,” as much of the written evidence of pre-colonial Burma remains “untranslated or unprinted.”⁶ Yet this book, which was originally published in London in 1925, was not just a “little pioneer work,” it became one of the standard Burmese history texts in the late colonial period. In 1945, D. G. E. Hall in his preface to *Europe and Burma* recognised his debt to Harvey’s text: “Every student of Burmese History to-day must gratefully acknowledge his debt to G. E. Harvey’s *History of Burma*, with its brilliant suggestions, challenging guesses and solid spadework.”⁷

But questions arise about the importance of Harvey’s text today? Removed from the period of colonial expansion, how does one interpret this often difficult, but important colonial work. The process of colonisation in Burma, as in many other places, was not confined to the spheres of politics, administration and economics. The past was also appropriated and rearticulated in colonial institutions and publications, such as Harvey’s the *History of Burma*. There has, of course, been some reassessment of the colonial scholarship about Burma, by scholars including Michael Adas and U Than Tun.⁸ More recently Michael Aung-Thwin, in *Myth and History*, has stimulated academic interest in the British scholarship about Burma by challenging the British interpretation of five key events in early Burmese history.⁹ These important works have challenged the historical evidence, assumptions and, in some cases, myths present in colonial writing. These studies, however, do not unearth and analyse the underlying colonial approaches, themes and literary styles present in the colonial scholarship.

This reading, therefore, opens a new field of inquiry by investigating these elements of Harvey’s the *History of Burma*. The analysis is concerned with what Harvey tells us about Burmese kings, religious traditions and social conditions, but it focuses in particular on the ways the text draws from earlier interpretations of the Burmese past, and on European literary, historical and religious traditions.¹⁰ This reading focuses on the ways Harvey related personally to Burma, how he figured it as an idea and how he presented Burma’s past in his writing. The reading draws on academic debates about problems of language and signification. The ‘linguistic

⁵ From time to time the complex nature of the text is referred to in passing. Shelby Tucker, for example, describes the text briefly as a “difficult but scholarly survey of Burma’s pre-colonial history.” Tucker 2001, 243.

⁶ Harvey 1925 & 1967, xvii-xviii.

⁷ Hall 1945, v.

⁸ For example refer to Adas 1972, 175-192 and Than Tun 1970, 59-60.

⁹ Aung-Thwin 1988.

¹⁰ The aim here is not to establish the accuracy of Harvey’s interpretations of Burmese history, or to undertake a reading and reconstruction of the local sources he used to write the *History of Burma*.

turn,'¹¹ as these debates have been coined, has redirected the focus on language as not a purely transparent medium, but as a signal of "the manner in which the observer is constitutively implicated in the object of research."¹² As Mary Quilty argues in *Textual Empires*, "Experiences and retellings of the 'real' are always mediated and held within certain textual and ideological boundaries."¹³

The *History of Burma* is rich in literary analogies and metaphors, many of which can be associated with the period of British romanticism. As the British Empire expanded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British literary world was also engaged with new artistic and literary traditions loosely known as the period of romanticism.¹⁴ Romantic writers and poets, including William Blake, William Wordsworth and Byron, moved the focus of English literature beyond the realm of reason by embracing aesthetic notions, such as genius, beauty and fantasy.¹⁵ Literary critics, postmodern theorists and historians have undertaken extensive analysis of the associations between British romanticism and literary exoticism, primitivism and Orientalism, which can be detected in novels of the period.¹⁶ To my knowledge no study, however, has analysed the influence of these traditions on the writing of Burmese history. This article suggests that British literary traditions provided, in part, the discursive framework for Harvey to imagine the pre-colonial Burmese – the 'Other' – in such terms as the beautiful, exotic, sensual and mystical. The article focuses on the literary style of the *History of Burma* and Harvey's allusions to European mythology and history. This reading also investigates the central themes of unity and ethnicity within his text. Before examining these aspects of Harvey's text, however, we first need to understand a little more about the man himself, and environment in which he wrote about pre-colonial Burma.

G. E. Harvey: the Civil Servant and Historian

Geoffrey Eric Harvey arrived in Burma in 1912 at the age 25 to serve in the Indian Civil Service (I.C.S). As was common at the time, prior to arriving Harvey spent

¹¹ The 'linguistic turn' has many variants, and has been read and understood in many different ways. For example refer to the debate in *History and Theory* between Frank R. Andersmith and Perez Zagorin (Ankersmith 1989, 137-153; Zagorin 1990, 263-274; Ankersmith 1990, 275-296; Toews 1987, 879-907; and Appleby 1989, 1326-1332.

¹² LaCapra 2000, 22.

¹³ Quilty 1998, xvii-xviii.

¹⁴ In discussing the links between romanticism and colonialism it is important to emphasise that many of the British Romantics actually saw themselves as opposed to aspects of colonialism. For instance Coleridge and Southey campaigned against slavery and Blake wrote against it. Fulford & Kitson 1998, 11.

¹⁵ Furst 1969, 14-19.

¹⁶ For example: Richardson & Hofkosh 1996; Fulford & Kitson 1998; and Richards 1993.

two years at Oxford University as I.C.S. probationer, where he was taught the methods and theories of colonial rule.¹⁷ The I.C.S., which was a small administrative elite, was ultimately responsible for overseeing all administrative activities in the 255 districts of British India. It is worth briefly examining the composition and ethos of the I.C.S. since it was this administrative corps that brought Harvey to Burma. In the nineteenth century, the I.C.S. also brought to Burma the generation of what we might call the first British historians of Burma, among them Sir James George Scott (Shway Yoe) and Arthur P. Phayre.¹⁸

By 1919 there were 1318 I.C.S. officers in control of all key posts of administration in British India. Only 123 of these officers were stationed in Burma.¹⁹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entry into the I.C.S. was usually limited to the upper classes of British society, with most securing a place in the I.C.S. after a public school education and following the completion of a high honours in the degree examinations at Oxford or Cambridge Universities.²⁰ British public schools often provided grounding for the teaching of the values and norms expected of servants of the British Raj, with I.C.S. officers being expected to conduct themselves in the best English gentlemanly manner.²¹ Simon Raven describes the early twentieth-century English gentleman as:

An agent of justice and effective action, having the fairness and the thoroughness to examine the facts and the integrity to act on his findings...[He had] much regard for the old loyalties – to country, kinsmen, to Church – and as a guardian of such institutions, and no less to assist him in his other duties, he saw fit to adopt a grave and somewhat aloof attitude of mind...[Rule and administration]...were among the many obligations on which his honour was based.²²

Courage, confidence and self-discipline were qualities that figured largely in popular images of the I.C.S. man, as well as loyalty to Britain and the Church.

¹⁷ It is interesting, though, that Harvey, who followed a conservative education path, came from a politically radical family, as his parents had been involved in both sides of the Anglo-Irish conflicts and also in the suffragette movement. Htin Aung 1975, 47.

¹⁸ Sir James Scott was a Scotsman and an official resident in the Shan States in Upper Burma, whose first and classic work *The Burman: His Life and Notions* (1882 & 1963), outlines the way Burmans thought and lived. In this work Scott also began to focus attention on the serious study of Burmese sources. The first detailed attempt to understand the chronicles in their own terms was Arthur P. Phayre's *History of Burma*. Published in London in 1883, this work was the first continuous history of Burma in a European language.

¹⁹ Hall 1960.

²⁰ Collis 1970, 13. Officers were recruited by competitive examination in London (and later in Allahabad). Ewing 1982, 43.

²¹ Potter 1986, 67.

²² Raven 1961, 58-59. Also quoted in Potter 1986, 72-73.

Public schools with “the unheated dormitories, cold baths, cross-country runs, rugby and tough discipline were meant to build courage and endurance.”²³

The lure of the orient, adventure, and good pay and pension were popularly seen as the main attractions of the I.C.S.²⁴ Late nineteenth century British literature often romanticised and glorified the ideal of the single I.C.S. officer riding around his district, distributing justice to the grateful and needy villagers. According to Ann Ewing the popular image of the I.C.S. officer saw them “settling law cases before breakfast, such a paragon apparently corrected land records before lunch, shot a tiger or two before dinner and wrote some Latin verse before taking a cold bath and retiring to a camp bed.”²⁵

In reality the life of an I.C.S. officer was often far from this idealised image, especially in British Burma. Burma was often at the bottom of most candidates’ requests for an I.C.S. post and was popularly viewed as the “backwater of British India.”²⁶ Up until 1937 Burma was part of both the Indian and British Empires and administrators in the province often found themselves as part of a long chain of command extending from London via Calcutta to Rangoon.²⁷ Some officials found the life of a civil servant in Burma isolating. Many, stuck in small provinces for years, felt cut off from people with a similar educational background. Maurice Collis described the lonely life of a civil servant in Burma:

His concern was all with the people in his jurisdiction. He grew fond of them, tried to be fair, toured the villages, listened on the bench to complaints and petitions, and became immersed in the details of administration, interesting work enough but not such as to furbish the brains which had enabled him to pass into the Indian Civil Service.²⁸

Some administrators accepted the dull life, believing it their mission to care for and instruct the backward Orientals, whilst others, including Collis, Scott and Phayre, and as we shall see Harvey, thrived on the challenge of learning about the people they were sent out to govern.

²³ Potter 1986, 74.

²⁴ There was a nineteenth century joke that the I.C.S. officers were good marriage material: They were worth “300 pounds dead or alive” and were assured a steady income and generous pension. Ewing 1982, 45.

²⁵ Ibid., 44.

²⁶ Piness 1983, 373.

²⁷ Ibid., 372.

²⁸ Collis 1970, 14. Collis was posted to Burma in 1912 until 1934. His experiences including those as chief magistrate of Rangoon and as the deputy commissioner of Akyab, formed the basis of a rich literary career. His novels, including *The Land of the Great Image* and *Siamese White*, richly describe the exotic Burmese, often in the context of Burmese myths and legends.

At first, Harvey was enthusiastic at being sent to what he viewed as a British paradise. Obviously well versed in Rudyard Kipling's poetry, Harvey recollected that:

When I was sent to Burma in 1912 everyone congratulated me on being sent to the happiest and most charming people in India, laughing fairskinned Mongolians, quite unspoilt, quite unlike the sullen seditious Indians. Kipling makes Burma the daughter, hailed England her mother.²⁹

During his service, Harvey was employed by the colonial government in various roles. He was the Revenue Secretary to the Government and Registrar of Cooperative Societies Upper Burma, and he was also employed in the Local Government (Ministry of Health).³⁰ In 1947, in a personal letter reflecting on his period of service, Harvey recollected most fondly the period when he was in charge of the frontier area, in the Northern Shan States. Here he was on the outskirts of the empire, preparing the way for the introduction of British rule over 'headhunter' ethnic Wa tribes.³¹

But, underneath his often idyllic view of Burma, nationalist sentiments were stirring, and Harvey was particularly stuck by the supposed change in Burmese attitudes to British rule after World War One. In the same 1919 lecture quoted above, Harvey also writes:

We administrators had imagined that because the Burmese smiled and bowed in our presence, therefore they had no aspirations: as if there were not, in every human society, men with pride and ambitions. We thought the Burman submissive and gentle – we were so busy with pressing daily administrative duties that we did not study the past, when the Burmese were a conquering race under their own kings and prided themselves on their cruelty. The atrocities which came as a complete surprise had been waiting under the surface all the time...³²

One of the ways Harvey sought to understand this change was to turn his attention to the study of Burmese history, and the period "when the Burmese were a conquering race." While on leave in Oxford in 1924 Harvey wrote the *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the English Conquest*.

The *History of Burma*: Structure and Prose

²⁹ Harvey n. d.

³⁰ Harvey 1947.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Harvey n. d.

The *History of Burma* is divided into two sections. The first contains the chronological narrative of pre-colonial Burma up until the first Anglo-Burmese War of 1824. The second part includes extensive appendices with detailed discussion of historical events, myths, administrative life and primary sources.³³ Detailed genealogical tables of the chief kings of the Burmese dynasties are also included here.³⁴ Some of these appendices, such as the outline of the ‘Administration Conditions’ of the kingdoms, are just as significant to understanding pre-colonial Burma as parts of the main historical narrative, leaving one to question the underlying purpose of dividing the historical discussions between the narrative and the appendices.

Some explanation of this can be gleaned from Harvey’s 1919 lecture when, in attempting to inspire Burmese students to take up the task of writing their own history, he offered advice on how that history should be structured. It should be written, he said, in two parts:

The first part will be purely narrative. It should be written in splendid vigorous English, every sentence ringing out like a hammer-stroke: this will need the help of Englishmen. It should be dogmatic and clear: there should be no discussion of doubtful points...The second part will contain no narrative: it will consist solely of appendices and discussions on doubtful points.³⁵

In some parts of the first section of the *History of Burma* the text does read like an exotic novel, embellished with strange and overpowering adjectives, and in other places the prose is quite precise and confident. But, while the text is split between a chronological narrative and appendices, Harvey did not achieve his aim of a clear break in the two sections of the book and between the two levels of prose. In fact there are at least three levels of English at work throughout different parts of this text.

The *History of Burma* opens with an “Author’s Introduction,” in which Harvey outlines the sources for his history, his chief collaborators, and the aims and limitations of his work.³⁶ The prose in this section is straightforward and largely unembellished. In discussing the historical material on Burma, for example, he writes: “Hence after the eleventh century the chronology of Burmese chronicles

³³ The titles of these discussions include: “Inscriptions the Touchstone”; “Ancient Sites”; “Golden Land”; “Massacre of the Innocents”; “Burmese Irrigation”; “Ancestor Worship”; “The Temples and their Builders”; “Tooth and Invulnerables”; “The Catholic Mission”; and “Administrative Conditions.” Harvey 1925 & 1967, 307-363.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 364-372.

³⁵ Harvey 1919, 80.

³⁶ This introduction follows the preface written by Sir Richard Carnac Temple.

are reliable.”³⁷ There are a few dramatic phrases in this section – Harvey describes the Burmese chronicles as “written in the shadow of the throne”³⁸ – but these are the exception to the overwhelmingly factual and objective tone of his prose.

Harvey’s prose changes slightly in the first chapter of this text; in examining “Burma before 1044” the tone of the narrative takes a storytelling quality, as we are informed about the earliest attempts of the ‘medley of tribes’ to unify.³⁹ We learn of the “successive infiltrations” of these races, as “down from the north they came.”⁴⁰ Harvey describes the origins of these ethnic groups, the kingdoms they founded, and the ‘little shrines’ they built.⁴¹ The narrative gives an impression of certainty, expressed in such phrases as “after the fall of Prome its people migrated to Pagan”⁴² and “To an early chief at Pagan, Popa Sawrahan 613-40, is attributed the introduction of the present Burmese era.”⁴³ There are also instances when the prose is more colourful, especially when Harvey jumps forward to later periods of Burmese history. In describing the Kyaukky Onhmin near Pagan he compares it to the work of the “Talaing brick and shoddy which swamped Burma after the eleventh century.”⁴⁴

The second chapter of the text begins in a literary style very similar to the first chapter, as Harvey describes the life of King Anawrahta, the founder of the Pagan Kingdom. But the dualism of the title of this chapter, “the Kingdom of Pagan or the Dynasty of the Temple Builders 1044-1287” gives us some clue to the dramatic change that is about to take place in the literary style of the text. As the narrative of the history of the kings of Pagan progresses, and as we encounter the first of many long quotations from the *Hman-nam*, Harvey’s prose become more like an example of the “splendid vigorous English” he advocated in his 1919 lecture. For example, after quoting from a passage from the *Hman-nam*, illustrating the defeat of the city of Thaton by Anawrahta, Harvey describes the king and his forces as riding back to Pagan ‘in triumph’: “Like some great glittering snake the victorious host uncurled its long length and set out through the Delta creeks...”⁴⁵

From this point the text is imbued with examples of Harvey’s characteristic, rich adjectives and imagery. It is impossible to highlight them all, but a few include: “Kyanzittha and his men dazzled the people of Pegu by wonderous feats at practice among the cucumber beds...”; “...the Ananda, with its dazzling garb of white and its gilt spire glittering in the morning sun...”; and “The

³⁷ Harvey 1925 & 1967, xvi.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xix.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

long romance of Kyanzitha's life now drew to a close."⁴⁶ One of the most interesting literary devices Harvey uses in Chapter Two is to reconstruct the conversations of the past kings, and translate their words using an archaic form of English. When King Anawrahta first meets the Mon monk Shin Arahan, for example, he supposedly asks, " 'Master, of what race art thou? Whence comest thou? Whose doctrine dost thou follow?' "⁴⁷ Chapter Two finishes with the description of the end of the Pagan period, and it is here that the use of rich adjectives is best exemplified. Harvey writes about the end of this period, "amid the blood and flame of Tartar Terror." Terms used in this passage include 'sun-scorched,' 'magnificence,' 'purest,' 'stricken,' 'vainglorious,' 'splendour,' 'great,' etc.⁴⁸

In contrast, Chapter Three describes the subsequent period of 'Shan Domination,' and the period of disunity, in a prose more familiar to us from the first chapter. The emphasis of the first paragraph of Chapter Three is on telling the story of the "princelets who ruled the various parts of Upper and even of Lower Burma."⁴⁹ The matter-of-fact tone, with a few embellishments, leads the reader to believe that the prose has returned to the style of the first chapter. But it is not so simple, for as we read on there are incidents of, interwoven into this story telling prose, phrases reminiscent of Harvey's 'splendid vigorous English.' At the end of the second paragraph of Chapter Three, for example, Harvey writes about the effect of this disunity on the art, literature and religious practices:

Sacred literature languishes, and if pagodas continue to be built, most of them are of a sort which might just as well remain unbuilt, while even the best cannot be mentioned in the same breath as the temples of Pagan. When at length the darkness lifts, it is from the opposite direction to China that two rays of light appear...⁵⁰

The mixture of two levels of English present in the first few paragraphs of Chapter Three – that of storytelling and "splendid vigorous English" – continues throughout the rest of the chapters of the *History of Burma*. For instance in Chapter Three (a) Harvey tells the story of the career of King Thohanbwa (1527-43), whom he describes as a "full-blooded savage."⁵¹ In writing about the early western travellers to the region, in Chapter Four, Harvey emphasises the heroism of these explorers

⁴⁶ Ibid., 31, 40, 43.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 69-70.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 107.

who ventured “into uncharted seas which, to their belief, might at any moment swarm with dragons.”⁵²

It needs to be emphasised that while Harvey’s prose in these chapters embraces the ‘splendid vigorous English’ familiar from Chapter Two there are some important differences. Most noticeable is the change of style in the conversations that are reproduced in the text. For example, in describing Bayinnaung’s reaction to a message from the king during the battle at Prome in the sixteenth century Harvey wrote:

He [Bayinnaung] sent back an answer that he had already met and beaten the enemy. His attendant said ‘You have reported a victory before we have fought, the odds are against us, we shall probably lose, and think how the king will punish us!’ Bayinnaung answered ‘If we lose? Why then we die here, and who can punish dead men?’⁵³

The style here differs markedly from the archaic style Harvey used for conversations in his Chapter Two. Instead the prose takes on a contemporary feel, probably to underscore its context in the more modern period.

Harvey’s chronological narrative of the history of pre-colonial Burma concludes on page 307, and from this point the text is composed of appendices containing detailed notes about points of historical contention, and footnotes. In this part of the book Harvey appears to aspire to modern and ‘objective’ history. His tone loses its ringing certainty and the style returns to the straightforward and factual tone of the ‘Author’s Introduction.’ What is Harvey trying to achieve by using these different forms of English? The *History of Burma* is well known for its colourful prose and exotic quotations, yet quite clearly Harvey could write precise prose. One can only imagine the problems Burmese students of history in the first half of the twentieth century would have encountered in reading Harvey’s ‘splendid vigorous English.’ But Harvey did not intend to make the information in this text difficult, and interesting clues about his intention in using colourful prose can be found within the text, and also in his 1919 lecture.

In his 1919 lecture Harvey argues that British interest in Burmese history had been lacking, because writers have failed to capture the beauty of Burmese life in pre-colonial Burma. He claims: “People tell us Burma has no history. They tell us that her chronicles are not worthy reading, that everything is mere oriental despotism and vulgarity.”⁵⁴ Harvey does not elaborate on the identity of the ‘people’ he refers to, but later in this article he does offer further insight into their claims: “People tell us Burmese history is not worth the trouble, because, they say,

⁵² Ibid., 130.

⁵³ Ibid., 154-155.

⁵⁴ Harvey 1919, 67.

the text-books are full of nothing but this sort of thing: – ‘Anawrahta came to the throne in 1044.’”⁵⁵ It is unclear whether Harvey is directing his comments at Burmese language text-books, earlier British writing about Burma, or both. But it is apparent that he sought to challenge British claims which dismissed Burmese conceptions of the past.

Harvey’s 1919 comment about Burmese history textbooks also needs to be viewed in light of a new official interest in the culture and history of the people of Burma. In the 1917 official *Report of the Committee to Ascertain and Advise How the Imperial Idea May be Inculcated and Fostered in Schools and Colleges in Burma* the committee members expressed some interest in encouraging the study of Burmese history in the schools and colleges, as long as the vital focus remained on the British and imperial story.⁵⁶ But, the report also recognised the difficulty in such an undertaking was due to the “dearth” of suitable textbooks about Burmese history.⁵⁷ There is some indication that Harvey sought to fill this gap. A few years after the publication of the *History of Burma*, his text was abridged and republished in a form more suitable for the use as a school textbook, as G. E. Harvey’s *Outline of Burmese History*.⁵⁸

The Burmese, of course, did have their own form of history writing prior to the arrival of the British. In the *History of Burma*, Harvey’s attitude towards the local forms of writing is ambiguous. In his introduction he suggests that the “chronicles [are] abound in anachronisms,” and that they “tell little of general conditions.”⁵⁹ Yet Harvey was also drawn to the ‘romance’ and ‘magnificent material’ of Burmese history.⁶⁰ In this introduction he emphasises the importance of the chronicles for the study of Burmese history, and argues that it is impossible to read the chronicles “especially in conjunction with other native records, without acquiring considerable respect for them.”⁶¹ Harvey’s feeling for the chronicles is demonstrated in the long passages he quotes, and, most importantly, in the way he draws attention to them through the use of his ‘splendid vigorous English.’ These

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁶ This report, an initiative of Governor Sir Harcourt Butler, devised ways of encouraging the ‘Imperial Idea’ of “personal loyalty to the King-Emperor” amongst Burmese students. The Committee appointed to write this report, included: U May Oung, Barrister-at-Law, Rangoon; R.R. Brown, Esq., I.C.S., Register, Chief Court, Lower Burma; J.T. Best, Esq., Principal, St. John’s College, Rangoon; M. Hunter, Esq., C.I.E., Director of Public Instruction, Burma; and S.W. Cocks, Esq., I.E.S., Inspector of Schools, Pegu Circle, Rangoon. Other notable people who assisted the committee included: L.F. Taylor, Esq., I.E.S., Principal, Government Anglo-Vernacular School, Rangoon; J.S. Furnivall, Esq. I.C.S.; Maung Tin, Professor of Pali, Government College; J.A. Stewart, Esq., I.C.S.; J.M. Symns, Esq., I.E.S., Inspector of Schools, Mandalay Circle; and Dr. G.R.T. Ross, I.E.S. Government of Burma 1917, 6 & 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁸ Harvey 1926 & 1954.

⁵⁹ Harvey 1925 & 1967, xvii, xix.

⁶⁰ Harvey 1919, 77.

⁶¹ Harvey 1925 & 1967, xix.

local sources, including inscriptions, the *Hman-nan*, and Burmese poetry, occupy the foreground of Harvey's narrative. It is not uncommon for quotations from the Burmese sources to cover whole pages and engulf Harvey's own account.⁶²

Indeed, it is when we encounter excerpts from the chronicles that Harvey's style becomes most embellished and 'vigorous.' Harvey offers some explanation of this in his 1919 lecture, when he suggests that passages from local sources should be translated into "suitable English."⁶³ In clarifying this point Harvey argues that the translations from the chronicles should be modelled on the style of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and translators of Burmese literature can gain much from reading Duff's "Literary History of Rome."⁶⁴ Harvey does not want to dismiss the importance of the local sources; he seeks, instead, to emphasise their historic and literary beauty in the only way that can fully convey their attributes to western readers by casting them in his own 'splendid vigorous English.'

Thus, the literary style of many of the translations from local sources in the *History of Burma* matches Harvey's own "splendid vigorous English." It is not clear whether Harvey knew Burmese well enough to provide all his own translations, especially those of the Burmese chronicles.⁶⁵ In the text Harvey cites the original Burmese chronicles, including the *Hman-nan*. Just two years prior to the publication of the *History of Burma*, G.H. Luce and Pe Maung Tin had published a translation of this chronicle, *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, in a similar form of archaic English to that used in Harvey's translations.⁶⁶ In comparing Harvey's quotations from the *Hman-nan* with Luce and Pe Maung Tin's translation there appear remarkable similarities in literary style and phrases used, but their translations are not completely identical.⁶⁷ While the issue over who exactly authored the *Hman-nam* translations in the *History of Burma* for the moment remains cloudy, it seems most likely that Harvey did provide some translations of local literature, and there is some evidence of an European literary style steeping into these translations.

In *Myth and History*, Michael Aung-Thwin re-reads some of the primary sources used by the colonial historians, and by doing so provides strong evidence to suggest that Harvey's literary style influenced his translation of a Burmese poem. In describing a fight between the three Shan brothers and the Chinese, Harvey cites the translation of a Burmese poem:

⁶² For example refer to *Ibid.*, 5-6, 8-9, 10, 14-15, 16-19.

⁶³ Harvey 1919, 80.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ He does in fact acknowledge the use of translations of the inscriptions provided by Charles Duroiselle. Harvey 1925 & 1967, xv.

⁶⁶ GPCKB 1960.

⁶⁷ For example compare Harvey's translations from the *Hman-nam* on pages 55, 60 & 61 with those of Luce and Pe Maung Tin's translation in GPCKB 1960, 140, 156 & 161.

The Chinks came down the passes
 Roaring boys, roaring;
 The rain of their arrows
 Pouring, boys, pouring⁶⁸

Aung-Thwin argues that the Burmese equivalent actually states:

The Taruk Came
 Many as can be
 Arrows Rained
 Many as can be⁶⁹

Aung-Thwin points out that this mistranslation changes the meaning of the poem, writing that:

There were no “boys,” “roaring,” “pouring,” “Chinks,” or “passes” in the Burmese version he himself [Harvey] provides, nor were the arrows referring to those of the Chinese but of the Burmese as the Chinese’ own record of the event reported....⁷⁰

Aung-Thwin points to the errors in Harvey’s translation, and their consequences for what he argues were colonial scholarly misconceptions about the period between 1287 and 1368.⁷¹

Aung-Thwin, however, does not elaborate on the topic which is of most interest here, the way in which Harvey’s translation also changes the tone of the poem. In this instance, Harvey’s translation appears reminiscent of English school-boy chants. It is unlikely that Harvey set out to intentionally mislead his readers, as beside his English translation he also provides the text of poem in original Burmese script. Rather, Harvey’s translation of the poem appears to be a further example of his desire to draw attention to the Burmese sources and make them attractive to an English readership.

The *History of Burma*: Working by analogy

Within the narrative of the *History of Burma* reference is often made to a range of European myths, historical events and religious traditions. In the concluding

⁶⁸ Harvey 1925 & 1967, 78.

⁶⁹ Aung-Thwin 1998, 108.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 93-120.

passage of Chapter Two, for example, Harvey celebrates the best aspects of the Pagan kingdom by comparing them with aspects of British history:

If they [the kings of Pagan] produced no nation-builder like Simon de Montfort, no lawgiver like Edward I., they united Burma for more than two centuries, and that in itself was an achievement. But their role was aesthetic and religious rather than political. To them the world owes in great measure the preservation of Theravada Buddhism, one of the purest faiths mankind has ever known...Those who doubt the reality of the populous city given up to the spiritual, should read the numberless inscriptions of the period, richly human and intensively devout; contemplate the sixteen square miles at Pagan, all dedicated to religion; contrast each separate brick from the depths of a great pile with the rubble of the Norman pillars; reflect that each temple was built not in generations but in months; remember how short was the period when Pagan was inhabited; think of the literary activities of the Kyaukky Onhmin; add to all of this our natural preconception of the conditions necessary to the production of the great religious art; and then say whether those campaigns for a tooth, those heart searchings over the loss of a white elephant, at which we smile, are not rather possessed of a significance as deep to men of the age as the quest of the Holy Grail had for Arthurian knights.⁷²

In this passage Harvey strives to make the Burmese past live, by directing his readers to all that is good about Burmese religious traditions. He glorifies the literary activities, temple building and religious arts of the Pagan Kingdom. Historical activities and images that may seem strange to the western educated reader, such as “those campaigns for a tooth, those heart searchings over the loss of a white elephant,” will not seem so out-of-place, Harvey argues, if we compare them to our own myths. Working by analogy Harvey places these aspects of pre-colonial Burma in a positive light by drawing parallels with the British historical imagination and, in particular, the Arthurian myths. He also compares Burmese practices with aspects of British history and historical figures, such as Simon de Montfort, Edward I, and the ‘Norman pillars.’ This passage answers Harvey’s 1919 call for a new account of Burmese history: “We want colour and lift, a connected account which will make Burmese history live again.”⁷³

Harvey’s tendency to draw on colourful European images is particularly evident when he describes pre-colonial Burmese religious traditions. In the *History of Burma* he interweaves descriptions of the history of Christianity with the development of Buddhism in Burma. He refers, for example, to the story of the

⁷² Harvey 1925 & 1967, 70.

⁷³ Harvey 1919, 80.

coming of the Buddha to Burma as “on the level with Joseph of Arimathea’s planting of the Glastonbury Thon.”⁷⁴ Shin Araham, the Mon monk who helped to introduce the Buddhist texts to the people of Pagan, is described as “the apostle,” who “burned to evangelise the heathen land of Upper Burma.”⁷⁵

While the text points to similarities between British and Burmese religious history, it also suggests areas of difference. Harvey, for example, writes that:

None of the temples at Pagan took more than a few years to build...[but]...The Gothic cathedrals took generations...The Gothic cathedrals are the work of the seething democracy of the mediaeval cities. The temples of Pagan symbolise the might of a great despotism, and they were built by the forced labour of villagers torn in thousands from their husbandry. Yet though they grumbled the people [of Pagan] would not have had it otherwise. The dynasty appealed to their imagination, and the age they lived in was an age of religious enthusiasm.⁷⁶

In this passage there is an unevenness in Harvey’s description of the temples of Pagan. They are seen in a negative light, especially when compared to European cathedrals, but they are not completely dismissed, because of the important meanings they had for the people of Pagan. Like the Gothic cathedrals, Pagan, with its temples, reflected a sense of unity and “expressed the collective spirit of the age.”⁷⁷ The images used in this passage swing between empathy for the ‘imagination’ and ‘religious enthusiasm’ of the people of Pagan, and a gloomy account of the ‘great despotism’ of their rulers.

In contrast to the long passage quoted at the beginning of this section, this description highlights a range of inconsistencies and changing attitudes towards the Burmese past within the *History of Burma*. While Harvey aims to make the good aspects of the Burmese past ‘live,’ his text actually contains many negative images and attitudes, especially towards the Burmese kings. In his introduction Harvey sets out to write a different history of Burma from those that have come before him.

It is difficult to see the history of Burma in its true colour and orientation, because the material is lacking. Weakness is the predominant feature of central government in the East, and in Burma most of our material is that

⁷⁴ Harvey 1925 & 1967, 308. In lecture about the writing of Burmese history Harvey states: “There is thus a curious parallel between Buddhism and Christianity; each is one of the purest faiths the world has ever seen, and each has produced its opposite in the form of obscene heresies – just as Buddhism has the Ari, so Christianity had the Black Mass and the Bulgars.” Harvey 1919, 65.

⁷⁵ Harvey 1925 & 1967, 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

of the central government; hence the story told in this book is sombre. But it is less depressing than that of many eastern countries, and it would not be depressing at all if only we could get out of the palace and among the people. It is a people which must sometimes have wondered whether its government did not emanate from a vampire rather than a king, and yet it never lost its buoyancy or missed its hold on the essentials of civilisation. The clergy may have been recluses, but they not only lived beautiful lives: they fearlessly maintain the Law of Mercy. When greater races bound the feet or veiled the face of their women, or doubted if she had a soul, the Burmese held her free and enthroned her as chieftainess and queen.⁷⁸

There is much happening in this passage that needs to be teased out. Firstly, Harvey gives his reader a very different impression of the Burmese historical records than that given by earlier British writers of Burmese history. Sir James Scott (Shway Yoe) 1882 book *The Burman*, for example, described Burma as possessing a ‘very voluminous history,’ most of which could be dismissed as ‘pure romance.’⁷⁹ Scott argued that this ‘romance’ in the historical records had an undesirable effect on the people of Burma, since it encouraged them to believe in the absolute authority of their rulers. Harvey, on the other hand, argues that there was a ‘dearth’ of Burmese historical accounts, especially those which can tell us about the social conditions in pre-colonial Burma. He suggests that the dominant view of the “sombre” history of the kings was not due to any romantic tenor in the historical records, but rather, because most of the Burmese historical records came from a ‘weak’ central government. Unlike Scott, Harvey seeks to write against this ‘sombre’ history of the kings by emphasising the ‘romantic’ aspects of pre-colonial Burma. As argued, Harvey attempts to achieve this through his use of ‘splendid, vigorous English.’ He also tries to elevate aspects of the Burmese past through the use of European analogies.

The use of European analogies, in particular to describe the local rulers, is also present in other accounts of Southeast Asia, and has a much earlier foundation. William Marsden, an eighteenth century historian of Sumatra, for example, described the authority of the Minangkabau kings in these terms: “Their authority, in short, resembles not a little of the sovereign pontiffs of Rome during the latter centuries, founded as it is in the superstition of remote ages; holding terrors over the weak, and condemned by the stronger powers.”⁸⁰ In this passage Marsden draws on a familiar European institution to reinforce his image of the ‘superstition’ and ‘terrors’ of the Minangkabau kings.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid., xx.

⁷⁹ Scott 1882 & 1963, 435.

⁸⁰ Marsden 1986, 336, quoted in Drakard 1999, 4.

⁸¹ Drakard 1999, 4.

But Harvey is actually drawing on European analogies in a quite different way from earlier writers such as Mardsen. Rather than using European analogies to criticise Asian institutions, Harvey uses European and other Asian analogies in an attempt to elevate Burmese history. There is a sense, evident in the last two lines of the passage from Harvey quoted above, that in working by analogy Harvey is trying to say that his Burma is better than other countries. Using the example of Burmese women, he argues that in pre-colonial Burma women had guaranteed rights that were denied in the West, East and Islamic World.

The *History of Burma*: The “Unification of Burma”

Underlying Harvey’s other, sometimes complex, preoccupations in the *History of Burma* is the question of judgement. In his unpublished reflections on Harvey after his death, G.H. Luce offers an interesting insight into Harvey’s approach to Burmese history. “As a lover of Burma,” Luce writes, “but also a moralist...he regarded the writing of history as no mere intellectual exercise, but as the best practical means of pointing the way to Heaven, and also as a touchstone of his own sense of truth, goodness and beauty.”⁸² Luce believed that Harvey “felt it is his duty, not merely to record them [the local sources], but also pass judgement on the record.”⁸³

This is consistent with Harvey’s 1919 lecture where he sought to make an integrated moral judgement on the pre-colonial past. As he explains, for history to make sense, one must try to find meaning in the form of a single guiding principle. That principle, in Harvey’s mind, is unity:

that is the meaning of Burmese history: the Unification of Burma, the Unification of the Race. That was the Dream of all the ages, that was the Vision, the Dream of Anawrahta and Bayin Naung and Alaungpaya. That was the Dream of the good and great men who ruled Burma...The ideal history of Burma must trace the development of this unity; it must be written round this unity; it must shew how, though the Ages, over a long and bitter path, Burma struggled up to Unity, up into the Light.⁸⁴

The central argument in the *History of Burma* follows this approach, and emphasises the struggle to unify the races in pre-colonial Burma, their progress and decline through time, and thus the efforts to unify the Burmese nation. Interestingly, too, as the passage above suggests, Harvey did not by any means see

⁸² Luce n. d.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Harvey 1919, 81.

all the kings as 'despotic'; there were, he states, "good and great men who ruled Burma." But, ultimately, he concludes that even the 'good' efforts of such kings as Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya were unsuccessful in maintaining the unity of the kingdom.

The *History of Burma* begins by suggesting that this 'dream' had its origins in the ancient tribes, including the Mon, Pyu and Thet, who migrated into the region of the Irrawaddy valley. The text describes them as "illiterate animist tribes with little political organisation," who "came down from the north...tribe after tribe of hungry yellow men with the dust of the world upon their feet, seeking food and warmth in tiny homesteads."⁸⁵ The origins of the people of Burma, who came out of the "merging with local tribes" is the main concern of Harvey's first chapter.⁸⁶ Here he depicts the ethnic groups in opposition to each other, arguing that the "civilising influences were strongest round the coast and in the Delta" and predominately in the areas of the Mon.⁸⁷

By 1044 the Burmese had united under the Kingdom of Pagan, which Harvey describes as "the Dynasty of the Temple Builders." In describing the dedication by King Kyanzittha of the great Ananda temple, he writes:

Kyanzittha, riding a white horse at the head of a great procession of monks and people, dedicated the temple in 1090. With its tender beauty, its wealth of sculpture, its mingling of races and languages, the Ananda shows forth the kingship's undivided sway over the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy and the Talaings of the Delta, in the days when Pagan was a religious centre far and wide, and men came even from India to worship at her shrines.⁸⁸

This passage suggests that during the Pagan period the country was progressing. In imagery designed to resonate with European readers, the king rides into this scene on his 'white horse.' The Ananda temple itself is used as a metaphor for the "mingling" of the races, the kings' power and the rich religious landscape. It is in his descriptions of this period of Burmese history that we sample the heights of Harvey's 'splendid vigorous English.'

This progress was short-lived however. According to the *History of Burma* the building of the great temples of Pagan lasted for three centuries. Then, in the thirteenth century, tragedy struck. The 'blood' and 'flame'⁸⁹ of the Mongol invasion in 1277 shattered the kingdom of Pagan, and from this point Harvey's narrative describes Burmese history as a continuing cycle of unity and fragmentation. Incidents of war, injustice, murder and rebellion dominate the

⁸⁵ Harvey 1925 & 1967, 3-4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

narrative. The great heroes of these times, including King Bayinnaung and King Alaungpaya, only briefly unified the country, as the heights of the Pagan kingdom were never again achieved.

In his 1919 lecture Harvey illustrated this theme of unity and disunity by directing his audience to a series of maps, which highlighted the early migrations, unification and decentralisation of the tribes of Burma.⁹⁰ The point is further emphasised by the labels accompanying the maps: 'The Dawn,' 'Progress,' and 'Regress.' These maps are reminiscent of early twentieth century maps of the British Empire, on which areas shaded pink illustrated the unity and dominance of the British Empire across the globe. In this case colour was used to represent the different tribes of Burma. Harvey, familiar with nineteenth century scientific positivism, believed that observation, in this case of the maps, was one way of finding meaning in Burmese history. As he suggests, "they shew that Burma's constant aspiration was towards unity, and that she failed to fulfill her early promise because this unity was always eluding her grasp."⁹¹ The same maps are included, without their labels, in the *History of Burma*. Harvey's point was that the struggle for unity in Burmese history involved the efforts of the various races of Burma to accept their differences and learn to progress together. The periods of unity in Burmese history, when the maps of Burma glow with one dominant colour, show the successes of this racial struggle.

Harvey's description of the ethnic people of Burma suggests that they were in constant competition with each other, and often in open warfare. At times one group dominated, for example, in the Pagan period when the Burmans were able to unify the country. This peace, however, was short-lived as the countryside was taken over by the 'swarming of the Shans.'⁹² But Harvey does not merely place the people of Burma in a Darwinian form of competition with each other. Harvey also made frequent judgements about the stage of civilisation each race had attained, suggesting that the art, literature and religion of Pagan demonstrated the civilised state of the Burmans, compared with other ethnic groups. In his text Burman rule at Pagan is contrasted sharply with their successors, the Shan:

The Shans, having dwelt so long in isolated valleys, seem to have inherited centrifugal instincts, and for the next two centuries Burma was the victim of separatist tendencies.⁹³

The description of Shan migrations, warfare and disorder in the countryside, in the *History of Burma*, implies that the Shan were more uncivilised than the Burmans, and that unity, as much as art and literature, was an index of racial superiority.

⁹⁰ Harvey 1919, 65, 66, 70, 71,73.

⁹¹ Ibid., 81.

⁹² Harvey 1925 & 1967, 74.

⁹³ Harvey 1925 & 1967, 79.

This emphasis on racial difference allows Harvey to concentrate on 'watersheds,' and facilitates his theme of progress and decline, which also has the effect of compartmentalising Burmese history into a neat chronological framework. Harvey's chapters progress from "Burma before 1044," to the "Kingdom of Pagan 1044-1287," "Shan Dominion 1287-1531," the "Toungoo Dynasty 1531-1752" and the "Alaungpaya Dynasty 1752-1824." This chronological framework of Burmese history is not new to English-language histories about Burma, as it was also employed by Arthur Phayre in his *History of Burma* (1883).⁹⁴ What is different about Harvey's work is the impression he creates of the tragic nature of Burmese history. For him the Burmese people with their continuing and unsuccessful struggles to unify are objects of pity: "There is something intensely saddening about Burmese history. It began so finely and ended so feebly."⁹⁵

Unity and the question of judgment

Harvey's theme of unity in the *History of Burma* is very different from nineteenth century accounts of Burma. This point is illustrated in a note in the appendix of the *History of Burma* where Harvey reviews comments by earlier writers on the 'despotic' kings of Burma.⁹⁶ Harvey's purpose is to review administrative conditions in the kingdom, and he comments on the consistency of his sources, despite the fact that they differed in nationality, class and "mental outlook." It is working from these sources that Harvey produced one of his most famous passages, in which he describes the 'golden court' as 'largely tinsel.'⁹⁷

The court was the most stupid and conceited imaginable, and did not contain a single man of common understanding; or if there were such he was afraid to show it, for the government was a sanguinary despotism.⁹⁸

But, as Harvey's note to the text makes plain, these are not Harvey's words, neither is this his own judgement of the Burmese kings. Instead Harvey's footnotes direct the reader to where this description originates. Sonnerat and H. Gougher, in their nineteenth century accounts both describe the court as 'stupid.' Crawford and H.H. Wilson make the statement that the court lacked a "single man of common

⁹⁴ Phayre 1883 & 1967.

⁹⁵ Harvey 1919, 74.

⁹⁶ This five page note about 'Administrative Conditions' on pp. 356-361 refers to a section of Harvey's text outlining the "Talaing outbreak at Rangoon in 1783," 267.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 359.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 361.

understanding” in their works. Harvey also cites Mrs. Judson’s 1823 book as the source for the statement “the government was a sanguinary despotism.”⁹⁹

Harvey was, in fact, looking for something very different in Burmese history, from that of the images of the ‘tinsel’ court and the ‘despotic’ kings present in the earlier colonial writing. This is especially evident in the introduction to his text, where Harvey wonders if:

Perhaps some better equipped writer will tell this story and portray the life of which we catch glimpses in many an old song. When he appears, much that is ugly will recede into the background; at present it clogs the foreground.¹⁰⁰

The story Harvey refers to in this passage, which can only be caught in such ‘glimpses’ from ‘an old song,’ is that of the lives of the people who lived under the rule of the kings. In the *History of Burma* he attempts to give some impression of this different story of pre-colonial Burma. But, as this passage suggests, Harvey also feels the need to apologise to his reader, as by his own admission he can not overcome the impression of the earlier British accounts of the Burmese kings, and also the images in the local chronicles. In addition, this excerpt gives an insight into the importance Harvey places on the historical narrative when writing about Burma’s history. He argues that this story of the ‘life’ of the people of pre-colonial Burma will only become apparent when there appears a ‘better equipped writer,’ who has the ability to capture the essence of this story.

As argued above, the use of earlier accounts of the Burmese kings is especially apparent in Harvey’s note on the ‘Administrative Conditions’ of the Burmese court. At the same time, though, Harvey’s own view of the administrative conditions does appear in this section, but only, I would argue, in the last paragraph of this five page note. This is the sole paragraph in which there are no footnotes referring to other writers. It begins by contributing a different picture of administration to that provided by his sources. Harvey refers to the ‘remote areas’ of the country, where the “men breathed more freely, [and] the good qualities of the Burmese people asserted themselves.” Indeed, Harvey appears to be explaining the circumstances in which the kings found themselves and in which they were lead into despotism.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Harvey’s citations for this passage are: Sonnerat, *Voyage aux Indes Orientales et à la Chine*, publ. at Paris 1806, 20; H. Gouger, *Personal Narrative of Two Years’ Imprisonment in Burmah* (London: Murray, 1860), 329; Crawford, *Journal of An Embassy*, vol. II app 125; H.H. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War With an Introductory Sketch of the Events of War and an Appendix* (Calcutta: Government Press, 1827), 237; and Mrs Judson, *An Account of the American Baptist Mission to the Burman Empire* (London: Butterworth, 1823), 5 *et passim*.

¹⁰⁰ Harvey 1925 & 1967, xx-xxi.

But the terrible conditions described above obtained, probably throughout the historic period, along the beaten track, e.g. Bhamo, the capital, and Rangoon; and as these were the most important places in the country, the national life was polluted at the source. The great kings were despotic and cruel because they were grappling with a task which was beyond their capacity. The people were taxed but they were not governed, for the kings had not the organisation to deal with a large area covering the Irrawaddy valley, the Shan states, and sometimes Arakan and Tenasserim as well. The function of government is to govern, but it was difficult to govern when so much of their attention was spent on maintaining themselves in power against endemic rebellion.¹⁰¹

The importance of this passage lies in the explanation in which Harvey offers his readers for the ‘despotic’ and ‘cruel’ nature of the Burmese kings. He points to the inherently difficult task the kings faced in trying to govern and even to organise the ‘large area’ of Burma, which encompassed such racially diverse areas as the Irrawaddy valley and the Shan states. In this excerpt Harvey implies that the kings were ‘despotic’ because they had to spend much of their efforts on protecting themselves against ‘endemic rebellion.’

Harvey’s interpretation of the Burmese past

Harvey’s *History of Burma* established a new way for thinking about Burma’s pre-colonial past, one which emphasised the ‘beauty’ of the Burmese historical records and the struggle for ethnic unity. Harvey sought to challenge earlier British assessments of Burma, whilst also, at the same time, drawing upon those ideas. Unlike earlier nineteenth century British authors, Harvey did not dismiss the Burmese historical records, rather he celebrated them. Through the use of ‘splendid vigorous English’ and European analogies, Harvey knowingly presented a highly romantic picture of pre-colonial Burma. He also, at times, sought to write an objective and modern style of history. By his own admission, though, earlier European accounts of the ‘despotic’ and ‘cruel’ kings also filter into this romantic and objective view, and ‘clogs the foreground.’

The main argument of the *History of Burma*, however, does not rest upon the romance of Burmese history, or on the earlier British judgement of the ‘despotic’ kings. Rather, the narrative of the text is structured around the theme of the unity and disunity of the Burmese kingdoms. This theme is linked in Harvey’s account to what he clearly sees as the most successful and beautiful period in Burmese history, the Pagan Kingdom. The heights of ethnic unity in Burma,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 361.

Harvey argued, were achieved during the time of the Pagan kings. But the unity of this period, according to Harvey, was never again restored. After Pagan there were new dynasties, rulers succeeded one another, and murder, war and ethnic rebellion all took place, but these occurred, in Harvey's text, within the pattern of unity and fragmentation of the people of Burma. This problem, Harvey argued, of unifying Burma, was still present in the nineteenth century, when inter-ethnic wars undermined the establishment of a 'good administration.' In describing the early administration of the Konbaung Kings he wrote:

Their ideas remained in the nineteenth century what they had been in the ninth. To build pagodas, to collect daughters from tributary chiefs, to sally forth on slave raids, to make wars for white elephants – these conceptions had had their day, and a monarchy which failed to get beyond them was doomed.¹⁰²

Thus, according to Harvey's view of the Burmese past, the pre-colonial kings failed to progress and to overcome disunity. Even though their historical records contained such 'beauty,' in the end the Burmese kings were always 'doomed' by their own history.

¹⁰² Ibid., 249.

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