

BROWSING THROUGH A TREASURE HOUSE:

The Literature of the Burma Campaign

By Gordon Graham

A fellow-veteran recently asked me if I could make a list of the fifty best books on the Burma Campaign. I replied that I could not trust myself to be impartial. My choices would reflect my experience. However, I could envisage lists on different parts of the campaign – the 1942 retreat, Arakan, the Chindits, Kohima, Imphal, the CBI theatre etc – each compiled by someone who had either participated or had consulted someone who had or had at least studied the literature in the context of the whole.

Nevertheless, my friend's suggestion prompted me to browse afresh through the bibliography of the Burma Campaign Memorial Library (located in the School of Oriental and African Studies). It comprises more than 1,000 titles. The earliest are eye-witness accounts, written while the war was still going on. In its aftermath there began a stream of memoirs, biographies, regimental and formation histories, official histories, fiction, even poetry. Hundreds of articles were published in journals and newspapers. Lectures were given. Diaries and letters were circulated. Overshadowed at the time, Burma 1942-1945 has come to be recognized as one of the great tragic dramas of history, when empires collided and thousands died. The literature is both cause and effect of this.

The Memorial Library is still growing. According to cumulative numbers, the peak year was 1945, when, fifty-four books were published. After 1946, when thirty-six books were published, the flow subsided. Only seven books about the Campaign were published in 1950.

Then the memoirs and histories began. The average in the 1950s was eleven, rising to eighteen in 1959. Bill Slim's great definitive work *Defeat into Victory* was published in 1956. In the 1960s fiction and regimental histories added new dimensions. In the '70s the flow

dwindled, reaching a low of four titles in 1977.

In 1979 an extraordinary resurgence began. There were more titles published in 1980s (*127) than in the '50s (113), and the '90s exceeded all of this outpouring may have been prompted by the fiftieth anniversary in 1995, much was probably also due to veterans' reaching their reflective years and deciding to record their memories, and to increasing interests of military historians. Forty four books on Burma were published in 1998. The end of the century was thus marked by an incredible crescendo. The Burma Campaign was discovered by new generations. For example, BBC correspondent Fergal Keane met by chance the son of veteran John Shipster, author of *The Mist Over the Ricefields*, from whom he learned about the Battle of Kohima. Keane's book on Kohima *Road of Bones* was published in 2010 as a result of this meeting.

The annual output abated in the 2000s to about ten books a year. The veterans' generation is passing. Historians are taking over. There is much still to be written, for example about the Japanese experience. There are hundreds of books in Japanese awaiting assessment by bilingual scholars in the cool light of history.

The existing literature is both a treasure house and a memorial in words to those who died, much of it written by soldiers who came home and lived their tomorrow for which their comrades gave their today.

Here is a sampling:

The Campaign as a whole

Slim's *Defeat into Victory* (1956) and Louis Allen's *Burma The Longest War* (1984) are the benchmarks of this category. A Burma veteran walked into his local bookshop the other day and offered the bookseller his copy of the paperback edition of *Defeat into Victory*. Sold for three shillings and six pence in 1958, its pages were faded and frayed. It was held together only by Scotch tape. I had been precious to him, and he thought someone else might like to have it.

There are no doubt tattered copies of many books from the immediate post-war era. The earliest was Frank Owen's *The Campaign in Burma*, published by HMSO in 1946. Some famous names appear in this category – Auchinleck, Wavell and Mountbatten - but only as authors of dispatches which they wrote for the *London Gazette*, documents of more interest today for the discretion with which they were written than for the light that they throw on events. By contrast, recently published titles such as Jon Latimer's *Burma The Forgotten War* (2005), Julian Thompson's *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War in Burma* (2008), or Robert Lyman's *Slim Master of War* (2007) are the fruits of perspective and research which were not available to earlier writers.

The Japanese Invasion

Covering the first half of 1942, this category ranges from correspondents' field dispatches such as *Bombs over Burma* and *Trek Back from Burma* to Ian Lyall Grant's authoritative work, published in 1999 with a Japanese co-author. Other accounts signal their contents dramatically in titles such as *Walkout with Stilwell in Burma*, *A Hell of a Licking*, *Muddy Exodus* or *The Underrated Enemy*. There are various graphic accounts, some unpublished, of the sufferings of refugees who had to walk out of Burma as the Japanese advanced.

The Arakan

Almost half of the thirty-one titles in this category record the achievements and travails of West African troops, some reflecting the belief of their officers that their record was undervalued at the time. Their most notable protagonist is John Hamilton, whose book *War Bush* was published in 2001. There are very few accounts of the ill-fated 1943 Arakan campaign, the best being Robert Lyman's chapter in his book *The Generals* on General Irwin. Of the books about the successful 1944 campaign, the best are probably Patrick Turnbull's *Battle of the Box* (1979)

and Arthur Swinson's *Success in the Arakan* (1968).

Assam, Manipur and the advance into Burma

The battles of Kohima and Imphal in 1944 were the turning point of the entire campaign, and the fifty-three titles listed do this justice. The list includes such classics as Ian Lyall Grant's *The Turning Point* (1993), Ursula Graham Bower's *Naga Path* (1954), Arthur Campbell's *The Siege* (1957), Lucas Phillips's *Springboard to Victory* (1966), David Rooney's *Burma Victory* (1992), and Arthur Swinson's *Kohima* (1968). These and most of the other titles were written by participants, but the epic and tragic story of the Japanese invasion of India and their defeat has attracted a new generation of histories, including John Colvin *No Ordinary Men* (1995), Les Edwards's *Kohima* (2008), Fergal Keane's *Road of Bones* (2010) and Robert Lyman's *Japan's Last Bid* [Osprey title?] (yet to be published). Unlike the earlier books, this new wave has a lot to say about the Japanese.

With the exception of Slim, the top commanders (Mountbatten, Giffard, Scoones, Stopford, Leese) left no records. One Brigadier (Victor Hawkins, who commanded the 5th Brigade of Second Division) wrote his own account. It survives as an unpublished typescript. Among the best accounts by serving soldiers are the two books by David Atkins (*The Reluctant Major* and *The Forgotten Major* - 1986 and 1989); also Rex King-Clark's *The Battle for Kohima* (1995); and Harry Seaman's *The Battle for Sangshak* (1989).

North Burma

What was known as the CBI (China-Burma-India) theatre was essentially Stilwell's command, and consisted of Chinese and American troops, from the latter of whom have come most of the sixty-two titles listed. *The Stilwell Papers*, edited by Theodore H White (1949) reveal both his brilliance and his bitterness, knowledge of which are indispensable to an understanding of this theatre of war. Two illuminating works are Barbara Tuchman's *Stilwell and the American*

Experience in China (1977) and Charlton Ogburn's *The Marauders* (1959).

Stilwell, like Wingate, was a controversial figure. Neither wrote books, but both were the subjects of numerous biographies. *Vinegar Joe's War* by Nathan Prefer (2000) sounds attractive. The CBI bibliography is notable for its dramatic titles to tempt the reader, eg *Still Time to Die*, *Wrath in Burma*, *Chancy War*, *Shots Fired in Anger*, *Who Stole My Mule?* and *Confusion Beyond Imagination*. The CBI Theatre still awaits the cool eyes of historians.

The Chindits

Chindit veterans have been prolific. The thirty-five titles describing the expeditions in 1943 and 1944 are mostly written by those who were there. They have a good story to tell and an eccentric and controversial leader who lends himself to posthumous biographies of which there are at least five. Leonard Mosley's *Gideon Goes to War* (1955) was the first. Christopher Sykes's *Orde Wingate* (1959) is a more substantial work. The best-known accounts of the expeditions are by Michael Calvert (three books) and Bernard Fergusson whose *Beyond the Chindwin* (1945) and *The Wild Green Earth* (1946) are classics. Most of the Chindit books are personal stories of courage and suffering. Shelford Bidwell's *The Chindit War* (1979) is an overall account.

Clandestine Operations

The twenty-nine titles under this heading cover mainly V Force and Z Force, networks of pre-war Burma hands who remained at their posts behind Japanese lines. There are also numerous accounts of the guerrilla warfare waged by the hill tribes – Karens, Chins and Kachins. There are many tales of individual courage, notably Ian Morrison's *Grandfather Longlegs* (1947). Ian Fellowes-Gordon's *Amiable Assassins* (1957) and Sir Geoffrey Evans's *The Johnnies* (1964) are two moving accounts of the parts played by the hill tribes in the allied victory.

Civilian Burma

There are sixty-eight books about what happened in Burma just before, during and after the Japanese occupation. The authors are either Burmese or old Burma hands or British citizens trapped by the war, several of whom, such as Maureen Baird-Murray (*A World Overturned* – 1997) and Hilda Corpe (*Prisoner Beyond the Chindwin* – 1955) are women. Among Burmese authors is Thakin U Nu, who was prime minister when he wrote *Burma Under the Japanese* in 1954. Some of the titles are political, notably Hugh Tinker's *Burma: the Struggle for Independence 1944 to 1948*. Anyone who read all seventy-six books in this category would have a good knowledge of Burma as it had been ruled by the British, was ruled during the campaign by the Japanese, and attained post-war independence which sowed the seeds of the military dictatorship under which the country is now suffering.

The Gurkhas

Reference to Gurkha regiments occurs in many books about the Burma campaign. The fact that there are nineteen books exclusively devoted to the exploits and histories of Gurkha regiments is a testimony to the loyalty and admiration which they inspired in the officers who commanded them and transmitted their feelings into personal stories and history. Two of the books are by a Gurkha officer who became a professional writer – John Masters whose *Bugles and a Tiger* (1956) and *The Road Past Mandalay* (1961) relate his experiences as a Gurkha officer. A curio in the Gurkha list is Scot Gilmore's *A Connecticut Yankee in the 8th Gurkha Rifles*. The most famous Gurkha officer/author is of course Bill Slim.

Unit and Formation Histories

Pride of regiment is an important factor both in withstanding defeat and achieving victory. In the Burma campaign, unit commanders had an exceptional degree of local discretion. This gave birth to no fewer than 113 histories of regiments, units, services and formations featuring

the Burma campaign. Unfortunately, such histories tend to be read only by those who served in a formation or unit or regiment, which is a pity since together they form a mosaic of the whole campaign. A sample of titles, juxtaposed in the bibliography only because their authors' names begin with the letter "H", illustrates the richness and variety of this special genre of war literature:

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Year</u>
John Hallam	History of the Lancashire Fusiliers 1935-1945	1993
Gerald Hanley	11 th East African Division in the Kabaw Valley 1944	1946
Peter Hart	At the Sharp End: from Le Paradis to Kohima 2 nd Bn the Royal Norfolk Regiment	1998
Norman Havers	March On (Second Bn The Dorsets)	1992
A H W Haywood	The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force	1964
John Hill	China Dragons: A Rifle Company at War (2 nd Bn Royal Berkshires)	1991
Harry Homer	No Tigers in the Jungle (The RAF Regiment in Burma)	

Many of the regiments no longer exist. The literature is their monument.

Biographies

Of the fifty biographies listed, five leading figures in the Burma Campaign account for thirty-one – Wingate twelve, Mountbatten seven, Slim five, Wavell five, Stilwell two.

Biographers write with more freedom when their subjects are dead, and if they have been controversial, that is a bonus. Rob Lyman's *The Generals*, published in 2007, broke new ground by juxtaposing biographies of the Japanese commanders with the British, and also by

including assessments of British generals such as Hutton, Smyth and Irwin, who were less than successful.

Personal Narratives

These 131 titles are in a sense the heart of the matter – individual stories about facing death, overcoming fear and embracing survival. Very few of these autobiographical stories are by professional writers. They are written from the heart, sometimes as a cathartic, sometimes to circulate privately to family and friends. Many of them reveal that the authors are searching for meaning. A high proportion were written long after the events they describe. George Macdonald Fraser, one of the few Burma veterans who became professional writers, recorded in his *Quartered Safe Out Here*, his experiences with the Border Regiment in the 17th Indian Division, in 1992. John Shipster's *Mist Over The Rice Fields* was published in 2000. The veterans' generation is dying. What they wrote is their monument in words which will last as long as the memorials on which their dead comrades' names are engraved. They are the ones who went home and were moved to tell the stories of those who did not.

Medical Services

It is hard to think of a theatre of war where medical services faced a greater challenge. In the early phases of the campaign disease took more men out of action than wounds. Evacuation of casualties from jungle battlefields was a Herculean task. Fortunately for the memory of posterity, a good number of doctors and nurses who served in the Burma Campaign have recorded their experiences. Of the twenty-six books about the medical services, nine are by nurses. The best-known medical author is Gordon Seagrave, whose books on the life of a Burma surgeon are a testament to his skill and courage. By definition, many of the books are infused with humanity, and some with humour. Leslie Wilson's *A Son of the Raj* (1996) and William Ashford-Brown's *Cold Hands* are examples. For serious study of the subject, there are

four official tomes, one British, one American and two Indian, totally more than 3,000 pages.

The Indian National Army

The writings on the Indian National Army (thirty-nine titles) have one thing in common with those of the Chindits - both are built round the personalities of legendary leaders, both of whom were killed in air crashes. Eleven of the thirty-nine INA books are about Subhas Chandra Bose. The INA became a cult in Bengal after the war. Most of the books are by Indian authors, and celebrate the career of the INA from its foundation in 1942 until the end of the war as a contribution to the cause of Indian independence. There are three books on the list which aim to place the INA in the neutral light of history - Hugh Toye's *Springing Tiger* (1959), Gerard Corr's *The War of the Springing Tigers* (1975) and Leonard Gordon's *Brothers Against the Raj* (1990).

The War at Sea

Burma was a land war, except for operations on the Arakan coast. Amphibious operations were extraordinarily difficult against a coastline dominated by jungle and mangrove swamps, and limited by a shortage of landing craft. Accordingly, the list of books on naval operations consists of only twelve titles, four of which deal only incidentally with the Burma theatre.

The War in the Air

By contrast the RAF and the USAAF were a major force in the war and made victory possible. They pioneered air supply in the field and evacuation of casualties in small aircraft. The second Chindit expedition was made possible only by the use of gliders towed behind transport aircraft. The air delivery of war materials from Assam to China involved incredible organization, planning and courage. Transport planes over "The Hump" were lost at an average rate of more than one per day. The achievements of the air war are amply documented in 112 books of

which one author (Norman Franks) wrote five. Some of the RAF squadrons, notably 194 Squadron (*The Friendly Firm*), formed strong fellowships which lasted into the 21st century. Aircrews had more time to write than those who fought on the ground. Whatever the reason, there is no sector of the war in Burma which is more comprehensively represented in its literature. Like the legendary American Flying Tigers, who started their war in Burma before moving to China, many of the authors had devised romantic titles for their memoirs, eg *The Flying Carpet Salesman*, *Silently into the Midst of Things*, *The Tattered Eagle*, *Fire by Order*, *Chasing After Danger*, and (of course) *Forgotten Skies*.

Fiction

Equally profuse, though few of the writers served in Burma, is the field of fiction – 110 titles. Few of the authors served in Burma, but many found it a dramatic setting for tales of the imagination. Among novelists who wrote about Burma are Brian Aldiss, who did serve in Burma, (*A Soldier Erect*, 1974); H E Bates (*The Purple Plain*, 1947) and (*The Jacaranda Tree*, 1949); Russell Braddon (*End of a Hate*, 1958); Tom Chamales (*Never So Few*, 1957); Nevil Shute (*The Chequer Board*, 1947); and preeminently Paul Scott, whose *Raj Quartet* has the war in Burma as a backdrop. Scott also wrote two Burma-based novels – *Johnny Sahib* (1979) and *The Mark of the Warrior* (1979). Melvyn Bragg's *The Soldier's Return* concerns the life of a Burma veteran after the war. The earliest novel written in wartime Burma was by Pearl Buck (*The Good Earth*). Entitled *The Promise*, it tells the sad story of a Chinese conscript who found himself fighting the Japanese in Burma.

The Japanese story

Few Japanese have written about Burma in English, and of the 500 books written in Japanese only one or two have been translated. This is a trove that waits to be unlocked by bilingual scholars. Three books, all short, written in English by Japanese are Yuji Aida's *Prisoner of the*

British; Michio Takeyama's *Harp of Burma*; and Izumiya Tatsuro's *The Minami Organ*. Gerald Hanley wrote an imaginative story about a Japanese soldier in his *See You in Yasukuni* (1969). Other writings in English are fragmentary, except for a unique collection by John Nunneley in collaboration with Japanese veteran Kazuo Tamayama of tales by Japanese Soldiers on the Burma Campaign (2000). Starting with Louis Allen's *The Longest War*, military historians, including Robert Lyman and Fergal Keane, have explored the lives of the Japanese generals who conducted the war in Burma. Books juxtaposing the experiences of Japanese and allied soldiers who fought against each other remain to be written. There are 300 titles about the war in Burma in Japanese in the Burma Campaign Memorial Library.

Miscellany

There remains a substantial volume of printed publications which are not books – journals, newsletters, poetry, essays, newspaper articles. A major component is the complete archive of *DEKHO* from its Volume 1 Number 1 (1951). Also in this disparate category are oddments like tear sheets from comics, lecture notes, cartoons, brochures, language phrase books, and picture books. Among treasures are the letters home by Clive Branson, a young British communist who made contact with his Indian counterparts before being killed in the Arakan, and the stories, poems and letters to his wife of Alun Lewis, a revered Welsh writer, also killed in the Arakan. One can also read the text of Bill Slim's radio talks and lectures from 1947 to 1957 and a short poem about Kohima written in his later life by a private soldier of limited education. He left it with instructions to his widow that it should be sung to the tune of Red River Valley.