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George Orwell and Burma

by Kathy Kozak

(Honors English 103)

The Assignment: Research a topic suggested by the themes and topics found in 1984. (Students invited to explore the literary, psychological, political, historic, religious, sociological, etc.)

Sometimes there are decisions that we make that define our lives in unexpected and important ways. These decisions are often made when we are too young to fully comprehend the impact they will have on our lives. When George Orwell was a young man he made such a decision. He decided not to pursue higher learning after he graduated from Eton in June, 1921, and chose instead to become a policeman for the British Empire (Bowker 72). His years spent in Burma were probably not as romantic as his young heart had hoped for, but they were undoubtedly an unexpected education that would color many of the words he would write throughout his life.

It was high noon in the British Empire when George Orwell was born in June, 1903. The Edwardian Age was a time of great prosperity for British citizens of certain classes (Ferguson 369). They took for granted their right of ownership over places and peoples. It would not have occurred to most Brits to question the right or wrong of conquering a country, stripping the land of its valuables, and treating the indigenous people as very cheap, less than human, labor. On the contrary, it was the “white man’s burden” to advance “civilization” around the globe (Ferguson 242).

The British Empire had steadily expanded from its humble beginnings as a small island country in the Sixteenth Century with no overseas land holdings. She started out by playing catch-up to Spain and Portugal, stealing from the thieves who were plundering the New World. Greed has always been a driving force of exploration. The British East India Company was chartered in 1600 to plunder in a more organized way (Commonwealth 3). The British bought, stole, colonized, and bullied their way around the world, ultimately acquiring over 25% of the world’s land surface and ruling over 25% of the world’s people (Ferguson 240). Niall Ferguson, in his book Empire, quoted Professor George M. Wrong, who wrote in 1909:

Britain controls today the destinies of some 350,000,000 alien people, unable as yet to govern themselves, and easy victim to rapine and injustice, unless a strong arm guards them. She is giving them a rule that has its faults, no doubt, but such, I would make bold to affirm, as no conquering state ever before gave to a dependent people. (xii)

There is much written speculation on George Orwell’s reasons for rejecting college and making the decision to become a part of the British raj. Jacintha Buddicom, his childhood friend during many school holidays, is sure that Orwell’s elderly father insisted he go into “Indian Civil” as he had done, in spite of Orwell “having his heart set on Oxford” (4). Peter Lewis

believes that Eric Blair, who chose the pen name George Orwell after his return from Burma, chucked college and decided to be a policeman as an open rebellion against the typical path of an Eton graduate (4). Biographer Gordon Bowker believes that Jacintha, who was two years older than Eric, rejected him romantically and he sought escape (71). Bowker also notes that Orwell/Blair's personal tutor for four years at Eton, Andrew Gow, did not recommend him for further schooling, calling him lazy and insolent (70). There is no doubt that joining the police was an unusual move for an Eton graduate, Eric was the first and probably the last to do so (Bowker 72). What he did, in effect, was to reject the pathway to the ruling class, or inner party, and become a member of the British raj, clearly a part of the outer party while one remained in England.

Although becoming an Imperial Policeman was a step down for an Eton graduate, it was an honorable decision, and probably mollified his father. Eric's father, Richard Blair, retired from a post as Sub-Deputy Opium Agent in the Indian Civil Service as a facilitator of the China opium trade (Lewis 32). Eric Blair's mother had grown up in Moulmein, Burma, and had family still living there (Bowker 10). Eric may have been intrigued by the descriptions and stories of Burma shared with him by his intelligent and charming mother, Ida. Burma could have been seen as an exciting and exotic choice, an appealing adventure.

After cramming for three months at the beginning of 1922, Orwell applied to join the Indian Imperial Police Force (Bowker 72). He was accepted in August, and sailed for Burma in October, 1922, his new title being Probationary Assistant Superintendent Blair (Bowker 73). This would place him in the colony of Burma at a time when many of the British colonial natives were straining against their fetters worldwide (Commonwealth 5). Burma was no exception.

Burma is located on the Bay of Bengal, in the northern Indian Ocean. It is just west of Thailand, bordered on the north by China and the east by Bangladesh. India looms over the shoulder of Bangladesh. Burmese scholar Maung Htin Aung describes his country's early history, prior to the British invasion, as typical of Asia. The central region was agricultural, populated by mostly Buddhists, the majority of whom could read and write, and was ruled by a monarchy. He says they considered themselves one country though they had an indigenous population in the mountains around the central plain that would not have called the Burmese king their leader. Burma was protected on 3 sides by mountains and on the fourth by the sea, so the country was relatively stable (Htin Aung 1).

The jewel of Burma was and is the Shwedagon Pagoda, a golden wonder that might as well have had a neon sign on the top flashing, "take me, take me" to passing British ships. George Orwell, as he sailed into the docks of Rangoon, would have seen this gold-covered, jewel-encrusted Pagoda on one side of the mouth of the Irrawaddy River, and the British-owned Burmah Oil Refinery, chimneys belching black smoke, on the other (Bowker 77).

Burmese historian Maung Htin Aung describes the Empire's motives to conquer Burma this way:

.....the period of the first British intrusion in Burma coincided with the period of the British struggle to acquire and hold the island of Singapore. The East India Company already possessed Penang, and with the acquisition of Singapore in 1819 it became necessary to obtain possession of the Burmese coast to turn the Bay of Bengal into a British lake. (217)

After the first British defeat of the Burmese they allowed the King of Burma to stay on his Rangoon throne, but they took control of the governance of the country and much of the land. They also demanded one million pounds, a staggering sum, from the Burmese for war losses (Htin Aung 214). They were also forced to agree to a commercial treaty with the East India Company which gave the Brits control of all commerce (Htin Aung 214). The British Army was to stay in Rangoon until the second installment on the million pounds was made. Many Burmese contributed their savings to pay the British and the Burmese Queen turned over to them all her jewelry (Htin Aung 217). In 1853 there was a second Anglo-Burmese war, basically a ruse of the British to take control of the rich teak forests in the mountains and the rest of the Burmese coast (Htin Aung 227). In 1885, using a purported insult as an excuse, the British deposed the king of Burma and took over the rest of the country (Htin Aung 232).

The British view on these happenings is summed up by journalist and author Norma Bixler:

Rice and teak were the major exports; these together with internal revenue ranging from land taxes down to such minutiae as the taxes paid by indigenous distillers of salt enabled Burma to repay with surprising speed the costs of the third Burmese war. After 1891, the province more than paid its own way and a tidy surplus went each year to India. (51)

To add further insult to the Burmese people, Lord Dufferin declared Burma a province of India. Guerrilla warfare broke out immediately against the British occupation army, who declared them bandits to be killed on sight. Whole villages, thousands of people, including women and children, were executed. Peace ultimately prevailed after the royal family, most of the village headmen, and many of the guerillas and their families were dead at the hands of the British soldiers (Htin Aung 266). Between 1890 and 1920 there was a period of relative peace; the Burmese leadership had been destroyed.

Burma's largest export, rice, was controlled by the British, who set prices and costs. As Burma was now a province of India, the British allowed Indian bankers to make loans to Burmese rice farmers at exorbitant interest rates and many rice farmers lost their land. The British-owned Burma Oil Company, once the proud possession of Burmese royalty, owned, processed and shipped Burmese oil. The British-owned Bombay-Burmah Corporation had a monopoly on timber removal and exportation, and the British-owned Burma Corporation had a monopoly on metal extraction and exportation, which included silver, lead, tungsten and tin (Htin Aung 272). The period of time between the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1886 and the 1930's shows a growing economy on paper, but the vast bulk of all profits flowed out of Burma into the banks of the British Isles, and to a smaller extent, India (Htin Aung 273).

The Burmese were further insulted in 1917 when Britain needed the cooperation of India to help them fight in World War I. India was offered new freedoms of self-governance, but Burma was left out of the deal. They sent several delegations to protest this decision and in December of 1920 a university strike began which evolved into a country-wide anti-British strike (Htin Aung 283). Concessions were made and the strike was broken but the undercurrent of anger was present throughout the 1920's and would soon boil over again. In 1923 the British, in an attempt to quell the unrest caused by leaving Burma out of the concessions towards more self-governance that they had offered to India, granted Burma some small legislative authority (Bixler 52). There were at least three separate elections held, but there was too much well-earned

mistrust of the British by the Burmese, leading to very small voter participation. Elected Burmese were mostly viewed as ineffectual puppets by their constituents, and their decision-making power was very limited by their British “superiors” (Htin Aung 289). These are the simmering circumstances that Eric Blair encountered when he arrived in Rangoon, Burma, in November of 1922, at the age of 19, as a first class passenger aboard the SS Herefordshire (Bowker 75).

Orwell was immediately shipped north, a 14-hour train ride, to the Police Training School inside Fort Dufferin in Mandalay. Mandalay was the former royal capital city of the last Burmese King, Thebaw, and the current British administrative capital of Upper Burma (Bowker 78). Fort Dufferin was formerly the palace built for King Thebaw. Orwell was not impressed with Mandalay, calling it, “rather a disagreeable town---it is dusty and intolerably hot, and it is said to have five main products all beginning with P, namely pagodas, pariahs, pigs, priests, and prostitutes...” (Burmese Days 283). Tension was even higher than usual in Mandalay when Orwell arrived. Only a month before a Buddhist monk had cut off the nose of an Imperial Policeman during a riot (Gross 21).

Orwell began a year’s worth of training at the school with two other recruits (Bowker 79). He hunted, read a lot, and often kept to himself. He also learned to speak Burmese fluently (Gross 29). Gordon Bowker, in his very thorough study of Orwell, details every outpost Orwell passed through: Orwell’s first posting was only a month in duration, from November to December, 1923, to the hill station of Maymyo, 42 miles northeast of Mandalay by rail. Over the next three and a half years he was posted to the stations of Insein and Myaungmya and Twante that were near the relatively cosmopolitan city of Rangoon, a place where a man could eat at Anglo restaurants and buy the British newspapers, as well as peruse the latest English books. He shot an elephant while stationed in Moulmein in 1926, the girlhood home of his mother. He served in Katha, which is 800 miles north of Burma at the end of the Burma Railroad, near some of the teak forests of Burma (Bowker 83-94). What all these places have in common, what would have been impossible for Orwell to ignore, was the constant demand on him that he must always wear the mask of the pukka sahib and the knowledge that most of the Burmese thought he was a thief and a bully, just as they thought of his compatriots. George Orwell left Burma in July, 1927, and never returned.

Perhaps Orwell entered into his Burma experience looking for a way to rebel against normal expectations, or maybe he was simply looking for adventure. Whatever the reason for his unusual decision, the four and a half years he spent in Burma gave him a fairly unique perspective among writers. As Orwell tells us in The Road to Wigan Pier, published in 1934, “Moreover, in the police you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters and there is an appreciable difference between doing dirty work and merely profiting by it” (145). To take it a step further, without the understanding that Orwell gained by experiencing first hand what it felt like to be an enforcer of the British raj, he may not have taken the next step toward his personal enlightenment, living poor in Paris and London. If Orwell had decided to stay in England, in essence continuing in his position at the bottom of the middle class, he would be comparable to a member of the “Outer Party” of Nineteen Eighty-Four; his experience of power would be limited. In Burma, as a part of the tiny percentage of the white ruling class, he magically stepped into the “Inner Party” and gradually became disgusted by it. His “political awakening” changed him into an anti-authoritarian champion of the “downtrodden” (Newsinger 3). Orwell makes this perfectly clear in his book, The Road to Wigan Pier:

I was in the Indian Police five years, and by the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving with a bitterness which I probably cannot make clear. In the free air of England that kind of thing is not fully intelligible. In order to hate imperialism you have got to be a part of it.....But it is not possible to be part of such a system without recognizing it as an unjustifiable tyranny. (144)

As a policeman of superior intellect Orwell gradually came to see the damage being done to Burma and the Burmese by his countrymen in the name of English superiority and greed. He knew his countrymen had stolen and profited from Burmese oil, metals, jewels, teak and rice. He could easily observe that the Burmese were allowed to do only the most menial tasks within business and the government. He saw that the final injustice was the yearly collection of taxes that enriched British coffers half a world away. It's probable that Orwell helped break a tax strike that peaked in 1924 by confiscating property, arresting people (Newsinger 2). Orwell writes in Burmese Days about a small, manufactured, village rebellion of seven Burmese that ends in the shooting of one of them by one of the Brits. Two members of the family of the dead Burmese retaliate, slicing Maxwell, the perpetrator, to ribbons with their *dahs* (237). Orwell shows us the impact this has on the remaining tiny British population, who responds with tremendous rage and fear. Orwell tells us, "Eight hundred people, possibly, are murdered every year in Burma; they matter nothing; but the murder of a white man is a monstrosity, a sacrilege" (238). If this is a real event that happened under Orwell's jurisdiction, he would have been the policeman that arrested the murderers, or at least, as he tells us, a reasonable facsimile of the murderers (256).

This is not to say that Orwell was ready to embrace the Burmese people. He had a gift for learning languages and he spent more time than was probably seemly in Buddhist temples and villages absorbing the local cultures (Bowker 79). In Orwell's first novel, Burmese Days, Flory, who is Orwell, takes Elizabeth, the girl he hopes to court, to a Burmese *pwe*. He describes this village theater as "a cross between a historical drama and a revue" (101). He wrongly thinks Elizabeth is interested and gushes:

In some way that I can't define to you, the whole life and spirit of Burma is summed up in the way that girl twists her arms. When you see her you can see the rice fields, the villages under the teak trees, the pagodas, the priests in their yellow robes, the buffaloes swimming the rivers in the early morning, Thibaw's palace. (103)

Orwell demonstrates curiosity and interest in the culture of Burma, but as an observer, not a participant. He can also appreciate their beauty, "(he was) shapely and even beautiful in his grossness; for the Burmese do not sag and bulge like white men, but grow fat symmetrically, like fruits swelling" (5). Orwell shows us in Burmese Days the lazy servants, the petty bureaucrats, the devilish Buddhist monks, the uppity students, the conniving whores, and the easily quelled rioters that make up the population of Burma in his eyes. If Orwell had any real friends among the Burmese, there is scant evidence of it in his writing.

Orwell was an easy target for Burmese dissent, in a police uniform and at 6'2" he would tower over the average Burmese (Bowker 73). The Burmese were unhappy subjects of the Empire in the 1920's, and although they were sufficiently subdued for the most part, there were incidents that Orwell describes, such as deliberate tripping on the soccer field, cat calls and

laughter, being spat on, and the stares of insultingly grinning youths in the streets and on the trains, calling the Buddhist monks “the worst of all” (3). The descriptions George Orwell gives us of Anglo/ Burmese relations in the short story, Shooting an Elephant, are also very clear. “All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible” (4). He begins his story, “In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people---the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was the sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter” (3). His position in Burma would prevent him from being anything other than an enemy by any Burmese whose opinion he could respect.

In 1946 Orwell corresponds with a female writer whose book, The Story of Burma, he reviews. He writes, “Did you ever read my novel about Burma (*Burmese Days*)? I dare say it’s unfair in some ways and inaccurate in some details, but much of it is simply reporting of what I have seen” (Orwell, Collected Essays 114). This is a precious quote to those who seek knowledge of both the state of Burma and the state of Orwell’s mind in Burma. There is a good chance that Flory’s despair was Orwell’s as well, and we are very glad Orwell decided to go home. The crux of Flory’s miserable life is that he is in complete sympathy with the Burmese but completely unwilling to disobey the strictures of the pukka sahib. These words of anguish from Burmese Days will echo in his book Nineteen Eighty-Four:

It is a stifling, stultifying world in which to live. It is a world in which every word and every thought is censored.....Free speech is unthinkable. All other kinds of freedom are permitted. You are free to be a drunkard, an idler, a coward, a backbiter, a fornicator; but you are not free to think for yourself. Your opinion on every subject of any conceivable importance is dictated for you by the pukka sahibs’ code. (69)

Orwell’s job, his sworn duty, was to keep the Burmese people trapped firmly beneath the foot of all the pukka sahibs that had come from England to steal the bounty of Burma and subjugate her people. Orwell had come to know that he had to leave Burma or he would become Flory, bitter, disillusioned, old before his time. He understood the tremendous damage to the human spirit that happens to the man who holds the whip. This time in Burma was critical to the man who became the author of Nineteen Eighty-Four. He needed to become a piece of the dark heart of the British Empire so that he could show us the desperation of both Winston and O’Brien in a way that felt fantastic, yet possible. He needed to be a policeman in Burma to become George Orwell.

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