

***Burmese Days* revisited**

Photographs and text by

Julio Etchart

To coincide with the 75th anniversary of the publication of George Orwell's famous first novel, *Burmese Days*, I went to follow the thread of his story by documenting the original locations in present day Myanmar.

To retain the historical 'feeling' of the story, some of the photographs have been manipulated by giving them a sepia and pinhole camera treatment.

Orwell spent five years from 1922 to 1927 as a police officer in the Indian Imperial Police force in Burma (now Myanmar). Burma had become part of the British Empire during the nineteenth century as a province of British India. Among its exports, the country produced 75% of the world's teak from up-country forests. The destruction of the rain forest, started by the British, carries on at an alarming rate, though nowadays the main consumer is China, whose insatiable demand for raw materials fuels the deforestation of the countryside. I witnessed this at the harbour of the ancient city of Mandalay, immortalized by Kipling's famous poem, where I photographed the constant loading of huge beams of hardwoods unto boats of all sizes.

The Raj is long gone - the country achieved its independence in 1947 - but it has been subsequently substituted by one of the most vicious dictatorships on earth.

Orwell served in a number of locations throughout the country. It was Katha - the fictional district of Kyauktada - with its luxuriant vegetation, described by him with relish, that provided the physical setting for the novel.

It was his experience in this isolated outpost that inspired him to write the book, first published 75 years ago. It is a story about the waning days of the Raj before World War II and one of the greatest denunciations of imperialism ever written, and a powerful critique of the colonial mindset that underpinned the system.

Through John Flory, the central character, a timber merchant who appreciates Burmese culture and becomes disillusioned with the Empire, Orwell portrays the first stages of his own personal transformation from a colonial policeman to a radical thinker.

Most of the action took place around the old British Club, the then exclusive enclave at the centre of the Anglo-Indian expatriate community during the Raj. The building is now an agricultural co-operative and home to the current caretaker, Mr. U Tue Mg. He showed me around and took me to the old billiard room, now turned into a classroom, where local children learn Maths and English after school, and then to the adjacent tennis court, which is still in use...>>

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KATHA









CANDACRAIG

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TEIRI MYAING HOTEL

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