Representations of River Travel in Burma: 1890–1914

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Sir George Scott, the dominant figure in the intellectual world of colonial Burma, once noted that there had been “very many books about Burma”. He thought of these writings as varied as some were “mere picture-books with letterpress thrown in, like the flour that is required to keep plum pudding together” and, in addition, other books were “perilously like popularized encyclopaedias” and that many were produced by “fine-weather tourists”.¹ Scott recognized that the writing about Burma was diverse and uneven, and he did not worry about the literature’s role in helping to fashion a colonial mindset. However, Scott wrote from the best perspectives of scholarship, seeking to recognize the merits of those books which accurately captured the complicated realities of Burma. Scott understood well enough that much of the literature about Burma was neither systematic nor comprehensive; indeed much of it was based upon direct experience, anecdote and even prejudices. Nonetheless, this body of literature, which has not been the subject of sustained academic investigation, appears to be of greater value than Scott may have believed. This paper will explore a small portion of this rich and varied literature to display the way in which select British travel writers used their experiences with transportation in Burma — especially inland water transport — to present a much larger set of understandings about the country and its peoples. At the same time, the careers of diverse and colourful figures such as Sir Richard Burton, David Livingstone and John Hanning Speke virtually assured that the subject of travel would become emblematic in historical representations of imperial experience.

This discussion takes the position that despite the attention given to prominent travellers, the study of its attendant literature has not yet been adequately investigated by historians.² This paper, then, aims to help address this problem by highlighting the works of several writers who were active in Burma on the eve of the World War I. This generation of Burma’s history saw the final stages of British colonization, the subsequent creation and expansion of institutions which helped to define the realities of imperial life and the further integration of the colony (as one of the world’s leading rice-exporters) into the global marketplace.

For our purposes, attention shall be concentrated upon the travel literature written by three figures: Mrs E.A. Hart, author of Picturesque Burma:
Past and Present (London, 1897) and Mrs Powell-Brown who published A Year on the Irrawaddy (1911) and Scott O’Connor whose The Silken East (1904) and Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma (1907) remain undervalued works of British travel writing. Scholars engaged in colonial and post-colonial studies will recognize that imperial discourse could take many forms: Hart, Powell-Brown and O’Connor hardly exhaust British travel writing about Burma, but their works make useful studies because they are representative of broad patterns of imperial discourse. Yet, they are unique as each figure brought to Burma a distinct perspective which is interesting all by itself. As we will see, while their individual differences are illuminating, recovering the perspectives which they shared is even more important because it enables us to better understand the varied nature of British perceptions of Burma.

Examining Mrs Ernest Hart’s Picturesque Burma, Mrs Powell-Brown’s A Year on the Irrawaddy and Scott O’Connor’s The Silken East, then, will illustrate that British writers relied on the subject of river transportation to make Burma comprehensible to their audience. As we will see, for these writers it was not enough to represent the Irrawaddy and other rivers, but to describe and analyse the ways in which life in the country was manifested by the difficulty of travelling in it. In fact, the picture which should emerge here is that these authors downplayed both the hazards and inconveniences of river travel and the emerging alternative of the railroad to create a series of images which might render Burma as mythic. Finally, these works should remind us that imperial literature was remarkably diverse: nonetheless, while these writers chose their subject for reasons which were unique to each, they managed, collectively, to present a portrait of transportation along Burma’s rivers which should be remembered for its consistency.

Travel in Burma

Even though Burma went through a period of massive economic growth, travel could still be considered problematic. While rail lines were being developed in some areas, most land travel was still along roads and pathways. In many places roads were poor or non-existent, making water travel the most reliable way to traverse various parts of the country. As we will see, travel along Burma’s waterways did boom during the decades which followed the Third Anglo-Burmese War, but it still proved difficult, if not, dangerous. Changing river conditions meant that groundings were commonplace. Steamers such as the Taping was immobilized for nine months in 1912, while the crew of the Momein had to wait for almost an entire year in 1919. Even worse, in 1904 a cotton fire burned out the main-line paddle steamer Yomah while a disastrous fire destroyed the Kashmir (and its two flats) on its maiden voyage six years later. Travel was easiest during