



The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma

By Thant Myint-U

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For nearly two decades Western governments and a growing activist community have been frustrated in their attempts to bring about a freer and more democratic Burma—through sanctions and tourist boycotts—only to see an apparent slide toward even harsher dictatorship. But what do we really know about Burma and its history? And what can Burma's past tell us about the present and even its future?

In *The River of Lost Footsteps*, Thant Myint-U tells the story of modern Burma, in part through a telling of his own family's history, in an interwoven narrative that is by turns lyrical, dramatic, and appalling. His maternal grandfather, U Thant, rose from being the schoolmaster of a small town in the Irrawaddy Delta to become the UN secretary-general in the 1960s. And on his father's side, the author is descended from a long line of courtiers who served at Burma's Court of Ava for nearly two centuries. Through their stories and others, he portrays Burma's rise and decline in the modern world, from the time of Portuguese pirates and renegade Mughal princes through the decades of British colonialism, the devastation of World War II, and a sixty-year civil war that continues today and is the longest-running war anywhere in the world.

The River of Lost Footsteps is a work both personal and global, a distinctive contribution that makes Burma accessible and enthralling.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Analysis of Burma has been "singularly ahistorical," Thant Myint-U (*The Making of Modern Burma*), a senior officer at the U.N., observes. With an eye to what the past might say about Burma's present status as a country in crisis, Thant Myint-U examines the legacy of imperialism, war and invasion. Recounting in a well-crafted narrative the colorful histories of Burmese dynastic empires from ancient times to the 18th century, Thant Myint-U then focuses on how, during the 19th century, the Burmese kingdom of Ava fought and lost a series of border wars with the British East India Company, culminating in a treaty that marked the beginning of Burma's loss of independence. Considering the country's longstanding global isolation in the context of its geographic and cultural singularity, Thant Myint-U interweaves his own family's history, writing extensively about his maternal grandfather, U Thant, who rose from humble origins to become secretary-general of the U.N. in the 1960s. Profiling 20th-century Burmese leaders such as Aung San, U Nu and Nobel Peace Prize-winning activist Aung San Suu Kyi, Thant Myint-U beautifully captures the complex identity of a little-understood country, concluding with a trenchant analysis of Burma's current predicament under an oppressive regime. (Dec.)

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From [Booklist](#)

An international pariah for the past four decades, Burma has seen its profile, though not its military government's reputation, rise higher in recent years because of the saga of Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Thant contributes welcome context to her plight under house arrest, as well as to Burma's, writ large with this history. It reaches into ancient mists, establishing the origins of Burmese national traditions (in terms of revered places, admired kings, and Buddhism), and commences concretely with three wars that culminated in Britain's colonization of the country in 1885. Administratively part of British India, Burma regained some autonomy in the 1930s, but its nationalists, according to Thant, were inclined toward ideological extremism, with baleful effects: the founder of the military regime, Ne Win, sided with the Japanese invaders in World War II and in 1962 imposed a form of nationalistic socialism that suffocated the economy and isolated the country from the world community. This readable, reflective history will support revived interest in Burma. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

"[B]rilliant . . . *The River of Lost Footsteps* is a balanced, thorough, and serious history, but it is also a polemic, firm in its view that the current international campaign--pursuing 'this policy of isolating one of the most isolated countries in the world'--is moving in the wrong direction." ?*New Yorker*

"Mr. Thant eloquently and mournfully recites the dismal history of the last half century and, in analyzing the country's nascent democracy movement, holds out only the slimmest of hopes for a better future. It will not come through economic and diplomatic sanctions, of that he is convinced. Trade and more engagement, especially more tourism, might let in badly needed light and air. But trying to topple the regime by isolating it would, he argues, be disastrous." ?*William Grimes, The New York Times*

"Thant Myint-U's narrative is full of rich details and colorful characters like Bayinnaung, a 16th-century king who led a mighty elephant corps into battle, defeating neighboring Siam . . . If it could somehow be set on a different course, Thant Myint-U suggests, Burma could once again become an important player in Asia."

?Joshua Kurlantzick, *The Washington Monthly*

“Fascinating . . . [Thant] gives us both the savory details and the cruelties of colonialism, as well as a rare for feel for palace intrigue. In the process, he suggests that isolation is in fact just what the military regime feeds on. It's in its blood.” ?Pico Iyer, *Time*

“Vivid and well-told history.... With wide interest in Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and others opposing the ruling generals, this warrants attention.” ?Kirkus Reviews

“Profiling 20th-century Burmese leaders such as Aung San, U Nu and Nobel Peace Prize-winning activist Aung San Suu Kyi, Thant Myint-U beautifully captures the complex identity of a little-understood country, concluding with a trenchant analysis of Burma's current predicament under an oppressive regime.”
?Publishers Weekly

“The best introduction yet available to the modern history of Burma. Sad and poignant, intelligent and thought-provoking.” ?William Dalrymple

“A balanced, fascinating, sometimes humorous account of nation-building.” ?Rory Stewart, *author of The Places in Between and The Prince of the Marshes*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Thomas Fleischmann:

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Lela Koehn:

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