Twilight at Ava

The British Mission to the Burmese Court, 1855

A Traveler's Tale by Bill Greer

About the Author

Adventure travel expert Bill Greer is the founder of GORP.com, the early Internet era's leading community for outdoor and adventure travel, selected as one of the Top 50 sites on the web in 2000. More recently, he is the author of **The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan**, a novel of New Amsterdam that paints a real and bawdy portrait of Dutch life on the Hudson through the eyes of a sharp-tongued bride who comes among the first settlers. Visit Bill at **www.billsbrownstone.com.**

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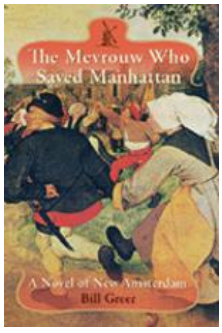

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The Irrawaddy River at Mandalay is a broad expanse of brown water. Set back from its banks, monuments and pagodas testify to the power of the Burmese empire that blossomed in the valley. The kings of Ava built a series of capitals in the surrounding plains, first at Ava itself, then across the river at Sagaing, upstream at Amarapoora, and finally when the other sites became symbols of tragedy and defeat, further upriver at Mandalay. From these cities, the Burmans conquered lands as far away as Cambodia, sacked the Siamese stronghold of Ayudhya, and resisted the early western powers seeking a foothold in the East. Wandering around the remains, the glory and arrogance of the Burmese dynasties come alive.

Life has no doubt changed along the river, but much of what one sees are anachronisms from the days of empire. Bamboo sheds line the shore as in earlier eras. The banks remain a center of village life, with the women gathering to wash clothes and bathe in the turgid brown flow. Bullocks haul teak up the steep banks. Small wooden boats transport goods and people, now mostly fueled by rusty outboard motors but occasionally pulled by men fastened into harnesses and struggling along paths paralleling the stream.

For centuries, travelers journeyed up the Irrawaddy to pay tribute to the Ava kings. Vassals from their Asian dominions brought silver trees. The Venetian Nicolo Di Conti made the trek overland to Burma before the European powers rounded the tip of Africa. He returned to Italy with tales of a river greater than the Ganges and of sacred White Elephants. The Portuguese arrived in the sixteenth century, entering the service of the kings as mercenaries and intriguing in Court politics. The Dutch, British, and French bowed at the monarchs' Golden Feet to solicit trading concessions.

But by the nineteenth century, Ava was entering its twilight and the British star was ascending. No longer would British envoys come as supplicants. . .

ARTHUR PHAYRE LEANED back from his desk and rubbed his eyes. The Governor-General's official instructions for his mission were spread out before him. At daybreak, he would sail from Rangoon on the 500-mile journey up the Irrawaddy River to the Court of Ava.

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Three years had passed since Commodore Lambert sailed into Rangoon harbor in 1852 and seized a ship of the Ava king, starting the second Burmese war. The fighting had lasted only a few months. By Christmas, the British had conquered and annexed lower Burma and Phayre had arrived in Rangoon as Commissioner of the province. Shortly after year-end, the king's brother deposed him and took the throne for himself. The new monarch, King Mindon, quickly sued for peace. Yet while the hostilities had ceased, the British had reached no conclusive agreement with his Court.

The pressures to complete a treaty were growing strong. The Home Authorities had directed that Ava be forced to recognize formally British supremacy over lower Burma, under the threat of complete subjugation if necessary. After all, the British empire was supposed to be a moneymaking venture for the East India Company, and it was investing a sizable sum in the territory. Until the situation with the Burmese stabilized, the trade on which the company depended for its customs revenues would not thrive. The merchant community was clamoring to exploit the native resources, particularly the valuable teak forests and ruby mines. The traders urged the government to open the country to British goods and end the extortion that the Burmese had been exacting for 30 years. Now the press was turning up the noise. The Calcutta papers reported rumors of revolution at Ava and even of attacks on the Commissioner himself. Phayre felt all eyes on him as he led this final attempt at negotiations.

Phayre picked up the demi-official letter he had just received from Lord Dalhousie, in which the Governor-General expressed his private thoughts on what he hoped the mission would accomplish. Dalhousie was an old India hand, nearing the end of his term leading the company from Calcutta. Phayre considered him a close friend and mentor and valued any advice he had to offer. "Whatever my private opinions as to its value, I beg you to strain every nerve to obtain even a simple Treaty of Amity if nothing more can be got," read the note, referring to the governor's skepticism that the Burmans could be induced to sign anything of substance. "Feel at liberty to revise the draft treaty if it will remove difficulties, but do not change its sense or involve us in any stipulations of

detail. Regarding ceremonies of reception, concede no marks of deference to the Court that prior envoys have avoided."

"Remember, I am not optimistic and will have no reproach for failure to secure a treaty," closed the letter. Phayre laughed humorlessly as he remembered the rebuke Henry Burney took when he returned from Ava in 1837, after what could only be considered a remarkably successful Residency at the Court. His friend might understand the odds he faced, but others would not be so forgiving. His career thus far had progressed rapidly. Since his first assignment in Tenasserim twenty years ago, he had become one of the company's preeminent experts in Burmese language and culture, and he had distinguished himself as an administrator. He had achieved much as Commissioner, laying out public works at Rangoon, organizing the militia, extending the telegraph throughout the province. But all that would be forgotten if he returned empty-handed.

He dipped his pen and began his reply to the governor. "I am hopeful for success, but I find it impossible to calculate beforehand how a Burmese will receive any proposition..."

KING MINDON GLANCED around the pavilion as he seated himself on the raised sofa. About one hundred people were present, all bending their chins to the ground when he entered. Although he knew his position was anything but secure, he was gratified that in two years on the throne, he had consolidated enough power that none dared openly oppose his policies.

The Armenian Makertich edged forward to announce that the British steamers had reached the capital of Amarapoora. He was the leading citizen of a sizable community descended from the Armenian merchants that had dominated Burma's gem trade since the sixteenth century. As the king's superintendent of foreigners, Makertich had been deputed to escort the mission upriver.

"Was Mr. Phayre pleased with the voyage?" asked the king. He had not met Phayre face to face, but he had gained considerable respect for his diplomacy and his understanding of Burmese affairs during the two years they had been negotiating.

"Everything proceeded as you instructed. The people honored the envoy in each district with feasts and entertainment. His party inspected whatever sights interested them, and spent several days viewing the petroleum wells at Yenangyoung and the temples at Pagan." Makertich hid his distaste for the English.

"Excellent."

The king summoned Mr. Camaretta to speak. The Portuguese had resided at Ava for thirty years, and had served the government well for many of those. Mindon had entrusted him with the preparations at the capital.

"The Residence is ready, Your Majesty. A celebration is planned for tomorrow when the mission occupies it."

"Good. When you meet Mr. Phayre, you must tell him that I am delighted he has arrived. Although it is not our custom to sign papers, we want nothing more than to preserve our friendship, and we will welcome all his countrymen who come to trade with us."

"He is very anxious for a treaty, Your Majesty. We might be able to use it to our advantage."

"We will see. Assure Mr. Phayre that following the official ceremonies, I shall receive him in private so we can talk openly."

The king nodded to Mr. Spears as he retired. Thomas Spears was a British merchant corresponding with Phayre about events at the Court. Although he had no official status, the king often found it convenient to treat him as if he were the British government's representative. Mindon was walking a fine line, trying to keep the English at bay and himself in power while he preserved the country's longstanding traditions. Spears was a valuable avenue for transmitting information, and misinformation. From today's audience, he would report the king's sincerity and hospitality, along with his

ambivalence about any formal agreement. Cunning diplomacy, never direct confrontation, offered the only hope of regaining any of Ava's lost domain.

PHAYRE WATCHED THE CITY of Amarapoora as a convoy of gilded war boats steered the steamers into a side channel of the Irrawaddy. The city spread out as a maze of bamboo cottages from the small craft crowding the riverbank. Brick walls rose in the background, enclosing the square mile that housed the king's palace, with its multi-storied teak roofs hidden behind the ramparts. Smaller wood buildings were scattered around, the dwellings of the Court's ministers and members of the royal family. These structures were simple. In contrast, the monasteries were elaborately gilded and carved. One of the junior ministers bragged that ten million people lived in the city and suburbs. Phayre estimated the number more like 90,000.

The boats docked at a wooden bridge crossing a lake one mile from the city. At one end, a dozen pagodas surrounded an enormous Buddha. The Commissioner declined the use of an elephant for the half-mile walk to the Residence where the mission was to stay. A few thousand soldiers were turned out to impress him. Phayre sized them up as a motley crew with antiquated weaponry and shabby ponies. The Residence looked passable, a compound with a large bungalow and a couple of smaller buildings for members of his entourage and sheds for the regimental escort. Phayre regretted the distance from the city that, with the Burmese soldiers posted around the compound, would isolate the British. But prior envoys were lodged in this area, and such precedents guided all Burmese actions. Objections would only sow distrust.

Two Woongyis, the most senior ministers who comprised the king's Royal Council, greeted him on the porch. "The king is as anxious for your comfort and convenience as if you were one of his own ministers," assured the Magwe Mingyi, the leader within the council of equals. Phayre knew him to be a shrewd character. While on the steamers yesterday, they had debated the Copernican theory of the solar system versus

the Buddhist cosmology. His interest in western knowledge extended to all areas of science, geography, and politics.

"In one week, I can convince you that the sun revolves around the central mountain. We are on an island to the south," the minister had boasted with typical Burmese arrogance.

In the evening, Phayre gathered his staff: Oldham the geologist, Forsyth the surgeon, Captain Rennie in charge of the regiment, Grant the artist, Tripe the photographer, and Yule the secretary.

"We have been received with unexpected courtesy," he advised them. The king must be anxious not to provoke us, although I have no doubt, others will try the usual insolent tricks. We must allow nothing that threatens our dignity.

"It may take weeks to negotiate the official reception. We must not waste that time. Remember this is not a party of pleasure. Keep your eyes and ears open on all matters allotted to you and make meticulous reports to Mr. Yule. If we come away with nothing else, we will collect invaluable intelligence."

PHAYRE MOTIONED for more champagne. Mr. Camaretta's tongue was becoming looser as the dinner proceeded. How fortunate that the king had summoned Makertich, removing his inhibiting influence from the table.

"I have known the king since he was a child. A kindly soul, completely opposite his brother." Camaretta referred to the prior monarch who had massacred his rivals and was known as the "cock-fighting king" for his debauchery. "I oversee the king's wardrobe and carry his sword during public appearances. Of course I must tread carefully. Officials take every opportunity to snipe at the confidence he places in me."

"And what of the crown prince," prompted Phayre. "Has he mellowed toward us?"

"A dull man. He no doubt still bears ill feelings to you, as do a few of the ministers, but he no longer dares show it. Since we suppressed last year's conspiracy to

restore the king's brother, all his potential allies are jailed. The populace holds the king in too high a regard for him to instigate any trouble now."

"Father Abbona called on me this morning." The Catholic missionary had told Phayre that the king was favorably disposed, but that he dreaded being asked to sign away territory or to permit a permanent Resident at his court.

"The king's pawn," chuckled Camaretta. "He is a great conduit of communication for the king, both to and from, but he is regarded as little more than a buffoon. The king has been amusing himself with the priest's antics toward the American Baptists. We had a good laugh when he demanded that these 'dangerous characters' be deported lest they stir up more trouble."

Camaretta paused, then redirected the topic. "So the king will want news from Europe. What is happening in the Crimea?"

"We expect to hear that Sebastopal has fallen any day," Phayre replied.

The British and their French allies had been besieging the Russian Black Sea port for several months, with little success. Phayre downplayed the losses, although he knew the king read translations of the India newspapers and would have learned of their setbacks.

"The reports are particularly encouraging from Bengal," he continued, "where the Santal tribe has been rioting. The revolt is virtually dead." He hoped this would dispel any notion that a minor Asian potentate could stand up to British might.

Phayre steered the conversation back to Burma. "Have you ventured into the countryside?"

"Mr. Spears, Father Abbona, and I had a wonderful trip to the Shouy Gan Yound Pagoda. The king provided elephants for the journey. Half the city turned out for the festival, to commemorate a Shan princess disappointed in love. The Queen Mother was the guest of honor. It is an amazing sight to see these royalty feted."

"We could see the tremendous progress in reconstructing the irrigation channels," Spears said from the other end of the table. He winked as Camaretta began to elaborate.

"Rice has been scarce for a couple of years now. The waterworks deteriorated when we got most of our rice shipped up from Pegu. The price is much higher now that you have taken over that area so we will start growing more of our own again. Grain and sugar cane are abundant. We will gladly supply you."

Phayre shook his head. "The price is exorbitant." He had agreed to a grain purchase when the king first took over as an additional guarantee of peace, but he had no intention of being robbed again. "We are much more interested in timber and minerals."

"As is everyone. The king is eager to have Mr. Oldham explore the coal veins. The ruby mines, they are another matter. We will gladly trade the stones, but I doubt you will be permitted to visit."

"I will avail myself of whatever traveling the king allows," the geologist spoke up. "He certainly needs advice to exploit these resources. Just look at the oil wells we surveyed - very primitive. He will get a good return if we take a look."

Not nearly as good as ourselves, Phayre noted to himself.

"I'll see if I can convince him," Camaretta promised. "As for timber, there are many competing interests. Your countryman Mr. Grant has been up from Rangoon to arrange a monopoly on the king's teak. His man has floated one raft downriver already."

"I have heard." Phayre waited to see if he would continue.

"And you must have heard of the Frenchman D'Orgoni. He is negotiating on behalf of his Minister of Marine for a 12 million franc timber contract."

At least this Portuguese is forthright, thought Phayre. He feigned little interest in the French troublemaker, not wanting to attach any importance to his presence. "It is getting late. Let us finish the champagne."

An enlightening evening, he reflected. He would continue to cultivate this Portuguese. "To the king's health." He raised his glass.

"Indeed, to His Majesty. He will be pleased that you do him the honor."

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MAKERTICH WAITED FOR Sarkies Manook. His Armenian compatriot was bringing D'Orgoni so he could give him last minute instructions for his audience with the king. He had no more affection for France than England, but this Frenchman would serve as another useful tool in his effort to drive a wedge between the Burmese and the British. He did not seek a crack so wide that war resumed, but he would gladly disrupt an explicit political settlement that would bring more English swarming into the country.

His attempts thus far had met with mixed success. The king had rebuffed his offer to send one of his countrymen to open diplomatic relations with Russia, apparently believing that corresponding with their enemy would dangerously inflame the British. But Makertich had cast doubts in the king's mind about the need to accommodate this current mission's demands.

He spotted Manook weaving up the lane, evidently in his usual insobriety for this late in the evening. D'Orgoni followed.

"Tomorrow you must look your most regal," he advised after greeting the Frenchman. "The English are doing everything they can to diminish you. Wear your dress uniform."

Makertich knew the fantastic Zouave outfit would impress the Court and hopefully countermand the intimations that D'Orgoni had no authority from his Emperor. "The king is leaning toward sending his envoys with you to France. We must make him realize the benefits of such diplomacy."

"I plan to tell the king again how the Emperor sent me to the Crimea," the Frenchman replied. "How I saw first hand the British army in shambles. If we had not come to their aid, the Russians would have swept them into the sea."

"The king is no longer swayed by these stories of England's downfall. We have been claiming for years that the Russians will come swooping into India when the natives revolt, but he sees how the government is squashing the Santals. We must sow different seeds, build up the king's hopes."

"I will use my intimacy with the French court," D'Orgoni proposed. "The Emperor is very friendly with the English Queen and I am sure can be persuaded to intercede on the Burmans' behalf. Perhaps even convince the Queen to relinquish the territory her countrymen have captured."

"The king may actually believe that, as fantastic as it sounds. Also play the other side of that coin, cracks in the alliance."

"Of course. I will mention the rumors that our generals are not so happy fighting with the British. I have even heard that some have made overtures to the Russians."

"Excellent. If the king thinks that the British will remain distracted in Europe, he will see less need to agree to terms."

"Can we make any progress on my timber contract?"

Makertich smiled noncommittally. He would like to see commercial ties with anyone besides the British, and he would pocket a handsome fee for brokering this deal. But right now, politics were more important. "The king was pleased with the carpets you brought from France, a great sign of your country's wealth. I am sure he will build a trade in time. Be patient."

THE DAY FOR THE official reception had finally arrived. Phayre knew the ceremony would be all show, following the script that Henry Burney had described many years ago when he was Resident. Nonetheless, it was important that he use the day to reinforce British prestige and power. The two weeks spent negotiating the protocol had shown that these Burmans would still subject their guests to degrading acts whenever possible. The ministers had insisted that his regimental escort leave their guns behind. Phayre had countered with the Burman's own tactic, citing precedence: prior envoy's had been accompanied with arms.

He relented to the king's personal request that no umbrellas be raised to honor the Governor-General's letter. The members of the mission had debated the appropriate response when a minister offered to let them view various parades from the king's Royal

Courtyard, if only they removed their shoes on entering. Although Phayre was willing, the men objected that this would be an intolerable indignity. So he rejected the invitation, resolving to keep his boots on until he entered the Audience Hall itself.

This morning a half dozen ministers arrived to accompany them to the palace, each paired with a member of the mission. The procession formed in the western suburbs, led by a train of porters bearing the royal gifts. Her Majesty's 84th marched behind with bayonets fixed and band playing. Yule bore the Governor-General's letter on elephant back. He hoisted the Union Jack over it as Phayre had ordered.

A strong murmur came from the Burmese officials. "This was not agreed to. You must take down the flag before we go further," one insisted.

"To the contrary, I cannot move without it," Phayre bluffed. "I shall return to the Residence while you secure instructions."

The minister wrung his hands. He was boxed in.

"I will relieve you of any responsibility," Phayre proposed. "Let us proceed."

They reached the palace at noon. The ministers took off their sandals at the gate and bowed their heads to the ground.

"Here we show our respects to the Palace," one remarked, signaling Phayre to imitate the obeisance. "Will you do the same?"

Not so easy to repay me for my little impertinence with the flag, Phayre thought bemusedly. He would not remove his shoes a step too soon. "No, it is not our custom." He made a mental note to lecture the minister for this effrontery.

They passed through a gilded colonnade into the Audience Hall. Phayre surveyed the room as they waited for the king. The ministers, the royal family, the king's sons squatted below an elevated platform, the throne. After 20 minutes, music began and all groveled lower when the king appeared. The little princes tumbled over one another like fallen books. Phayre doffed his hat, sizing King Mindon up as a portly fellow with refined features and an intelligent expression. Not so the queen, who looked silly in a close cropped cap shaped like an inverted rhinoceros horn.

When the attendants had arranged the royal regalia, Brahmin priests began the ceremony with a choral chant. The Chief Justice dedicated offerings from His Majesty to the capital's pagodas. Phayre presented the Governor-General's letter on a golden salaver. An official read it aloud, along with a list of the presents. Then another put forth the questions prescribed by Burmese custom, inquiring into the health of the English ruler and the prosperity of her country. Phayre replied with reference to Bengal to ensure the Burmans knew Lord Dalhousie was paying his respects, not the Queen herself. They had tried before to equate their king with the British monarch and he would have none of that.

The king bestowed presents, including a ruby ring and gold cup for Phayre, then departed. The audience had been brief, although Phayre returned to the Residence quite late, having been obliged to view the king's white elephant.

Yule complimented him that evening.

"Yes, a remarkable display of barbaresque splendor," he replied. "I am satisfied nothing derogatory to our dignity occurred, even in the eyes of these Burmese. At last the preliminaries are concluded and we can get to serious business."

KING MINDON LISTENED as Phayre enumerated the benefits that a treaty would bring his domain. Finally, this second audience would provide an opportunity to size up the British envoy with an extemporaneous exchange. He was clearly a clever man, solicitous without being unctuous, and frank and articulate.

"All the great western nations, the English, the French, and others hold that when there is friendship between nations, it is proper to cement it by a written treaty," Phayre argued. "Our peoples will see this testament and stop their quarrels. The merchants will increase their trade."

Pressing the usual points, thought the king. Well, that played into his strategy. He had several themes to raise his adversary's hopes yet signal that he had many considerations to balance. Time was his ally. While he sucked western knowledge into his kingdom, he was also building links with the British that would make force more and

more costly for them. As long as he could avoid a crisis that gave his adversaries a pretext for military action, his position could only improve.

"I have always shown how friendly I am to the English," King Mindon responded. "Did I not withdraw my troops as soon as I ascended the throne? Did I not release your compatriots that my brother imprisoned during the war? With our friendship so complete, what more can be wanting?"

"Without a treaty, the English ruler can have little confidence in your friendship. We cannot permit warlike stores to pass. If an agreement is concluded, we can provide you with gunpowder."

A promise or a veiled threat? The king must inform Spears that he had no need for such goods. Ample supplies were already smuggled in.

"You are wise and well-disposed, Mr. Phayre, and have commenced well. Let your middle and end be as good, for there must be mutual advantage. If I should sanction a treaty discreditable to me, I should lose my place in history." He enjoyed playing on this vanity of how he would be memorialized in the chronicles. It was almost as effective as invoking the threat of his rivals if he acceded to British demands.

"Now, tell me what news you have. Will you be able to take Sebastopol?" It always paid to remind these arrogant westerners that he did not live isolated in his palace.

"Certainly, Your Majesty. No nation can stand against us. The Russians must submit."

"Are you at peace with the other nations of Europe?"

"We are, Your Majesty."

"I am glad to hear it. I am averse to war. I would like to communicate with those countries. But no relations with any at war with you." He knew the British would be jealous of other contacts, particularly with the French, allied in Europe but competing in the remoter corners of their empires.

"I have heard of a man in the gun foundry in Calcutta who will take service with me," King Mindon added. "Is there any objection?"

"None that I know of. He would be permitted to come if he wanted."

"Good. These things will seal our friendship. I am interested in someone to take charge of the mines also. Has the stone-teacher seen the coal?" The king referred to Oldham the geologist.

"He has. We appreciate your offer to deliver it to our steamers."

"You are most welcome. Now let me order refreshment. When you wish to see me again, inform the minister. Remember, ponder what I have said of our mutual advantage."

King Mindon retired satisfied with the interview. The Englishman would surely see that they had been having the same discourse for two years now. And it will continue for as many more as I can prolong it, the king chuckled.

PHAYRE SHOOK HIS head at this latest outrageous request from the king. Since the first private audience, if dozens of attendees could be called that, the king had sent an unending stream of messages. Simple favors at first, could he take the king's steamer back to Rangoon for repair? Then more disturbing news. The king did not now want muskets, a remark referring to Phayre's offer of gunpowder and clearly intended to signal his aversion to a treaty. More recently a question that revealed how naively optimistic the king could be. If the people in lower Burma revolted against the British, was a treaty expected to keep him from voicing support? Phayre marveled at how the king could entertain such hopes.

Now Spears had again delivered a request to allow the king to send royal presents and pilgrims to the pagodas in British territory. The British had been refusing permission annually since the annexation. It sounded innocent enough, but the pilgrimage would in fact be portrayed as a triumphal procession of the king's ministers through the whole length of the country. Nothing could better raise the natives' spirits and thwart British control. Some of Phayre's colleagues even thought the pilgrimage was a subterfuge to

support an insurrection. A similar request last year had been timed to coincide with a conspiracy to seize government buildings in Rangoon.

Phayre had now abandoned hope of negotiating with the king directly. The king had indicated that Phayre should discuss the treaty only with himself, not his ministers, but in hindsight that appeared to be only a delaying tactic. Two further audiences had produced no results, just lectures on literature and history designed to diminish any significance of a treaty - or else to demonstrate Burmese superiority. At one point, the king had claimed his parrots could read, while the inferior British birds could only speak. He even had the cheek to recite a parable intended to rationalize why all British-held territory should be restored to his kingdom.

Phayre had of course responded to all requests that he could oblige none until a treaty was in hand. He was now prepared to bring matters to a head directly with the Magwe Mingyi. If any of the king's ministers could get some action, it would be he. The minister had invited him to breakfast. He carried a draft agreement in his pocket.

After the meal was completed over discussion ranging from the solar system to the map of Europe, Phayre asked his host to clear the room. Several officials remained behind, including his nemesis Makertich, but he decided to plow ahead anyway.

"I was dispatched by the Governor General to cement our friendship with a treaty. I need not point out how desirable a treaty between two nations is, as this is a universally accepted maxim. I have considered His Majesty's advice that an agreement must be calculated for our mutual advantage and here is an agreement that will benefit both countries." He handed the draft to an attendant, who read it aloud.

"But His Majesty meant that you should represent his position to the English ruler," replied the minister, "then return to us to discuss a treaty."

Phayre would not be put off again. "I can give no reason that the king does not consent to a treaty now. I shall have to inform the Governor General that he wants no agreement."

"That is not His Majesty's meaning at all. He simply does not want a treaty suddenly. You know he has good feelings to the British government."

"I have expressly informed the king that a treaty is absolutely necessary according to our western ideas. Saying 'I am friendly' without accepting our offer is friendship of the lips only, not the heart and mind. What is the meaning of our withholding gunpowder and muskets but that we can only feel distrust without a treaty?"

"But do you mean if we do not sign a treaty you will go to war?" the minister bridled.

Phayre had pushed as hard as he dared. "Certainly not. But rumors are constantly spreading of your army preparing to attack us, and of us doing evil to you. Our mission coming up here in two steamers was magnified into a huge convoy on its way to invade. A treaty will stop these wild tales."

He had a head of steam now. "Foreign merchants will not bring their capital until they see an agreement. This treaty I am offering is for the advantage of us both. You will get none better. All civilized nations who desire to be friendly have treaties. The Governor General has concluded them with the Emir of Afghanistan and King of Siam."

"Here our ideas differ from each other as much as they do about the form of the earth," replied the minister. "But I will see what can be done. Let us meet again on Monday."

MAKERTICH WATCHED WITH delight as the Magwe Mingyi informed Phayre that the king refused to sign a treaty. Yesterday's council with the king and his senior ministers had swung the tide. Several advisors had been lobbying for a treaty, but when the king said firmly that he would stand against them because he alone was responsible for the honor of the kingdom, they practically fell over one another to assure him that his proposal for a simple letter to the Governor-General would be as satisfactory.

"A letter is no substitute," Phayre was now saying. "It will do nothing to give the people confidence that peace is established and will not be broken."

Makertich marveled at the envoy's patience as he recited all the arguments one last time. It must be all the more infuriating for him knowing that the Magwe Mingyi

himself would gladly sign were the king not adamant, thought the Armenian. And all the more satisfying for me to witness personally the fruition of my efforts to frustrate this mission. With the king prepared to send D'Orgoni to France with his official representatives, and with himself freshly appointed to oversee border disputes with the British, Makertich was astonished at how well events were turning out.

"Very well, I wish to leave on Monday next," Phayre said abruptly.

"I will arrange an audience of leave with the king," replied the minister. "And remember, I entreat you to do everything in your power to preserve the peace, as I shall for as long as I live."

Phayre frowned, despite the assurances he returned. Makertich kept his face impassive, but in his mind he grinned from ear to ear.

PHAYRE LAUGHED AS Yule recounted the escapades he and Oldham had enjoyed on their exploration upriver from the capital.

"Our guide Bo detoured us all over the countryside when we wanted to see the marble quarries, but we foiled him and got there. Then he insisted we visit the Oungmeng cave, where he led us crawling through a smoky tunnel covered with bat-droppings to view a few small Buddhas. The locals had never seen Englishmen before, and we made quite an impression coming out shrouded with dung and coughing up soot."

Phayre appreciated his secretary's stories, a pleasant diversion from writing to the Governor-General. But he could delay informing his superior of the disappointments no longer.

"I regret that the mission has failed to conclude a treaty," he began the letter after Yule departed, wishing to get the bad news out quickly. "Despite the counsels of his ministers, the king is personally averse to a formal agreement and continues to use every excuse to avoid signing. He still has the naiveté to hope we might actually restore territory to him, but I remained blind to any such innuendoes."

This failure will create a clamor among the jackals in Parliament and their mouthpieces in the press, he thought gloomily. They will have a field day, even though our relations with Ava are as secure as ever. He would hurry Yule along to compile the results of the mission, hoping the publication of accomplishments would quiet the rabble.

On reflection, Phayre felt himself satisfied with how much the mission had learned. Oldham was already preparing a treatise on the geology of the Upper Irrawaddy, which would surely allow them to exploit the country's resources in the years ahead, either directly or through trade. The geography had been well mapped. Any subsequent military actions would benefit, as would merchants as they began traveling further into the interior. Yule knew how to turn a story. He would regale his readers with lively anecdotes, which coupled with the many drawings Grant had composed, would build interest in Burma.

Phayre was glad Lord Dalhousie would be visiting Rangoon shortly after he arrived downriver himself. His friend's company was a rare treat, not to mention he could better judge his true reactions face to face. They would need to plot a careful strategy for the months ahead, one focused on their British adversaries as much as on the Burmese. Things were not really so bleak despite this immediate disappointment. With a careful campaign that emphasized the progress building up Rangoon, the developing trade, and the at least informal stability with the king's government, perhaps they could silence the critics. And perhaps in the end he would earn the decorations he had been aspiring to for so many years in the East.

THE KING WATCHED Makertich bow his head and back away. As fine an obeisance as if his blood were Burmese, he observed, and he intrigues as well as any of the wily officials in my court. But his loyalties are mixed, and the time has come to clip his wings. First to dispense with his stooly D'Orgoni. His usefulness as a thorn to the British is spent. Then to send Makertich down to the border, where he will have a nice district to preserve his status but his energy will be dissipated on frontier squabbles.

The king turned his mind to the bigger picture. Maneuvering with the British had gained him invaluable time. But how to use that time was his real challenge. He reigned over a feudal empire that could not endure. He had only a few years to modernize the state, or colonization would be inevitable. The foundation was his own prestige, strengthened greatly by this successful diplomacy. Now he must build an administrative bureaucracy, update the legal code, revamp the revenue system. Only then could he break the personal fiefdoms that dominated the country and transfer power to the next generation, who would lead the fight to maintain the nation's independence.

POSTSCRIPT

Although failing to conclude a formal treaty, Arthur Phayre and King Mindon launched a decade of friendly and productive relations between British Burma and the Kingdom of Ava. Both were reasonable men, recognizing the "mutual advantage" that their countries would accrue from increasing intercourse, and each was willing to conciliate at the appropriate times.

Lord Dalhousie praised the mission as eminently successful in reciprocating friendly feelings and confirming amicable relations. But as Phayre foresaw, others were less sanguine. The Home Authorities rejected the Governor-General's recommendation of a commendation for him on the grounds that no treaty was concluded. Only after Dalhousie returned to England and lobbied for a year did Phayre receive his knighthood. His career did not languish, however. He remained as Commissioner in Burma until 1866, presiding over the development of Rangoon and its environs and the amalgamation of Pegu, Arakan, and Tenasserim into a single province of India.

King Mindon proved to be a great reformer. He replaced the country's feudal system, in which princes were entitled to "eat" the revenues from districts they controlled, with a central bureaucracy paid regular salaries and a progressive income tax. Regular steamship service and stringing of telegraph lines integrated the regions of the kingdom. The economy developed through the construction of factories, the hiring of European technicians and managers, and the stimulation of rice production. To revitalize the Buddhism on which so much of Burmese culture depended, the king organized the Fifth Great Synod, the first worldwide congregation of the monkshood in almost two thousand years.

But the peace depended largely on the personalities of these two men. When Phayre left Burma in 1866, relations deteriorated. British merchants pushed further and further

north, both to exploit the Burmese resources and in hopes of opening a back-door trade with China. As they demanded ever-increasing commercial concessions, the king lost whatever faith he had in British goodwill and intentions. His overtures to other European powers, coming when France was asserting her authority in Indochina, only heightened the tensions. When a bloody succession struggle followed Mindon's death in 1878, the British dispatched troops to Ava. Although this crisis passed, it foreshadowed what was coming. By 1885, relations were so bad that the British delivered a humiliating ultimatum. The Burmans refused to yield, and the stage was set for war. The British quickly occupied the capital, now at Mandalay, and at the new year, annexed the remainder of Burma to its Indian empire. Not until World War II ended would another generation of Burmese lead their nation back to independence.

A Note on Sources

"Twilight at Ava" is based on three primary sources.

Yule, Henry. Narrative of the Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855. London: Oxford University Press. 1968.
Yule served as the secretary to the mission. His narrative is the official account, originally published in London by Smith, Elder and Co., in 1858. This report records the official diplomacy, at times with detailed transcriptions of meetings between Phayre and King Mindon or his ministers. Yule included much of the unofficial interaction with players at the court, both Burmese and foreign. The narrative also describes the observations of the mission's staff on Burmese geography, geology, culture and religion.

Phayre, Arthur. "Private Journal of Arthur Phayre, 1 September to 22 October, 1855."
The private journal maintained by Phayre during the mission is included in the Oxford University Press edition of Yule's narrative. In it, Phayre recorded his daily activities and thoughts, his informal meetings during his stay at Ava and his official audiences with the king and his ministers, in some cases transcribing the discussions from memory.

Hall, D. G. E., ed. The Dalhousie-Phayre Correspondence, 1852-1856. London: Humphrey Ilford. 1932.
The Dalhousie-Phayre Correspondence contains letters between the two men from the time Phayre was appointed Commissioner at Rangoon to his return downstream from the mission. It also includes correspondence over this period between Phayre and Thomas Spears. Although Spears held no official position, he served as the British informant regarding events at King Mindon's court.

The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

by Bill Greer

"A very authentic ring … like etchings by Van Ostade and Steen."

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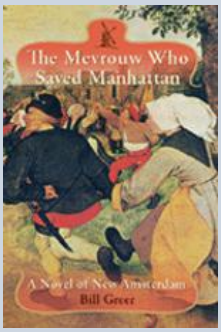
A Novel of New Amsterdam



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About the Author

Bill Greer has spent much of his working life in the heart of New Amsterdam. He is a Trustee and Treasurer of the New Netherland Institute, a membership organization supporting research and education in Dutch-American history. Visit him at www.BillsBrownstone.com for more on Mevrouw's world and old New York and to read an excerpt of fifty pages from The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan.

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Reviews

From de Halve Maen, Journal of the Holland Society of New York

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From Historical Novels Review

"Bill Greer has deftly blended fact and fiction in his humorous tale The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan … The characters are rowdy, raunchy, loveable, and sometimes despicable, but thoroughly believable … This is a thoroughly delightful story that brings the Dutch colonies to life. The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan is heartily recommended with or without a tankard of beer, not ale, to accompany it."

Manhattan View Press, New York

2009

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