The Making of Modern Burma

Burma has often been portrayed as a timeless place, a country of egalitarian Buddhist villages, ruled successively by autocratic kings, British colonialists and, most recently, a military dictatorship. The Making of Modern Burma argues instead that many aspects of Burmese society today, from the borders of the state to the social structure of the countryside to the very notion of a Burmese or Burman identity, are largely the creations of the nineteenth century, a period of great change, away from the Ava-based polity of early modern times, and towards the ‘British Burma’ of the 1900s. The book provides a sophisticated and much-needed account of the period, and as such will be an important resource for policy-makers and students as a basis for understanding contemporary politics and the challenges of the modern state. It will also be read by historians interested in the British colonial expansion of the nineteenth century.

Thant Myint-U is Humanitarian Affairs Officer at the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations, New York. His publications include Knowledge and Multilateral Interventions published by Chatham House in 2000.
The Making of Modern Burma

Thant Myint-U
Contents

Acknowledgements [vii]

Introduction: The fall of Mandalay [1]

1 Kings and distant wars [12]

2 The Irrawaddy valley in the early nineteenth century [24]

3 The Court of Ava [53]

4 Empire and identity [79]

5 The grand reforms of King Mindon [104]

6 Revolt and the coming of British rule [130]

7 Reformists and royalists at the court of King Thibaw [154]

8 War and occupation [186]

9 A colonial society [219]

Conclusion: The making of modern Burma [245]

Bibliography [255]

Index [272]
Acknowledgements

Most of this book was written in the period 1995–98, while I was a Research Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and I would like to thank the Master and Fellows of the college for their support. Professor Victor Lieberman, Professor James Scott, Professor Michael Aung Thwin, Dr Anil Seal, Dr Tim Harper, Dr Ian Brown, Dr Patrick Tuck, Miss Elizabeth Sellwood and Mrs Zunetta Liddell all read parts of the manuscript at different stages and I am grateful for all their comments and criticisms. I would also like to thank Mrs Patricia Herbert of the British Library, Dr John Okell of London University and Dr Lionel Carter of the Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge University for their expert help. In Burma, I am indebted for the assistance and advice of Dr Than Tun, U Than Htut, U Thaw Kaung, U Maung Maung Tin, and to HRH Prince Htek Tin Taw Hpaya. The late Dr Michael Aris generously spent many memorable afternoons with me in Oxford discussing Tibetan and Burmese religion, language and history. My special thanks, however, are to my former Ph.D. supervisor Professor C.A. Bayly. I could not have asked for a better supervisor, and I am deeply grateful to him for all his kind and invaluable support over the years. This book is dedicated to my parents.