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Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Burma was among the most prosperous territories in the East. Yet since gaining independence in 1948, its economy has struggled. Burma's developmental failure has often been attributed to gross mismanagement of the economy by the military who took power in March 1962 but in this illuminating book, Ian Brown, one of the leading economic historians of Southeast Asia, provides a fresh examination of the country's economic past, setting that failure in the context of the colonial period. For the first time, a review of Burma's economic experience in the final decades of British rule is integrated with an analysis of its economy since independence, providing a detailed understanding of the complex origins of Burma's economic failure in the second half of the twentieth century. This is a compelling introduction to Burma's political and economic history for students in Southeast Asian history, development studies and political science.

IAN BROWN is a research professor in the economic history of Southeast Asia at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He has published extensively on the modern economic history of Southeast Asia, initially focusing on Thailand but, since the early 1990s, turning his attention to Burma.

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Andrew and Alasdair
their footsteps, once heard behind,
are now seen far ahead

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Note on names

In June 1989, the recently created State Law and Order Restoration Council decreed that the rendition into English of the official name of the country in Burmese script be changed from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar'. As the change was being imposed by a military government that many felt was illegitimate, opponents of the regime refused to accept this change and insisted on the continued use of 'Burma'. In this book, both terms are used without intended political implication: 'Burma' for the period prior to June 1989, 'Myanmar' for the subsequent period. As the country was called in English 'Burma' for most of the twentieth century, 'Burma' alone is used in the title. Similarly, 'Rangoon' is used for the main city before SLORC, but 'Yangon' thereafter.

The Burmese have no family names but only personal names, normally of one to four syllables. In different contexts, Burmese may also be given a designation: the most common are, for men, *U* (pronounced 'oo'), a term of respect that might be translated as 'Mr' or 'Uncle'; and the female equivalent, *Daw*, translated as 'Aunt'. Thus the name of the first prime minister of independent Burma, U Nu, is just Nu: the *U* is a term of respect.

With a number of the Burmese authors cited in this book, their name appears in their publications with a designation: thus U Tun Wai and U Thet Tun. With other Burmese authors, there is no designation: thus Maung Shein and Hla Myint. These two different formulations are retained here in the text and in the footnote references, but not in the bibliography, where designations are removed: thus U Tun Wai in the text and footnotes but Tun Wai in the bibliography.

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Acknowledgements

This book is built principally on a reading of the substantial body of specialist research that has been published on the modern economic history of Burma. My debt is clearly evident in the book's footnotes and in its long bibliography, but it remains appropriate that I acknowledge it here. Returning to that body of work to write this book has enhanced still further my appreciation of the considerable achievements of numerous individual writers on Burma, from the scholar-officials of the colonial decades – J. S. Furnivall remains a very substantial presence – through to the academic specialists writing today. To refer to any one group is perhaps unjust. But I have come to re-appreciate above all the achievements of a remarkable generation of Burmese economists from the immediate post-independence decade, and their work on Burma's economic history that was published in the 1950s and early 1960s – notably U Tun Wai, Maung Shein, and Aye Hlaing. And to those three names I would add, from the same period, Hugh Tinker, whose study of the first years of Burma's independence, first published in 1957 and running to four editions, remains a remarkable achievement and an invaluable source.

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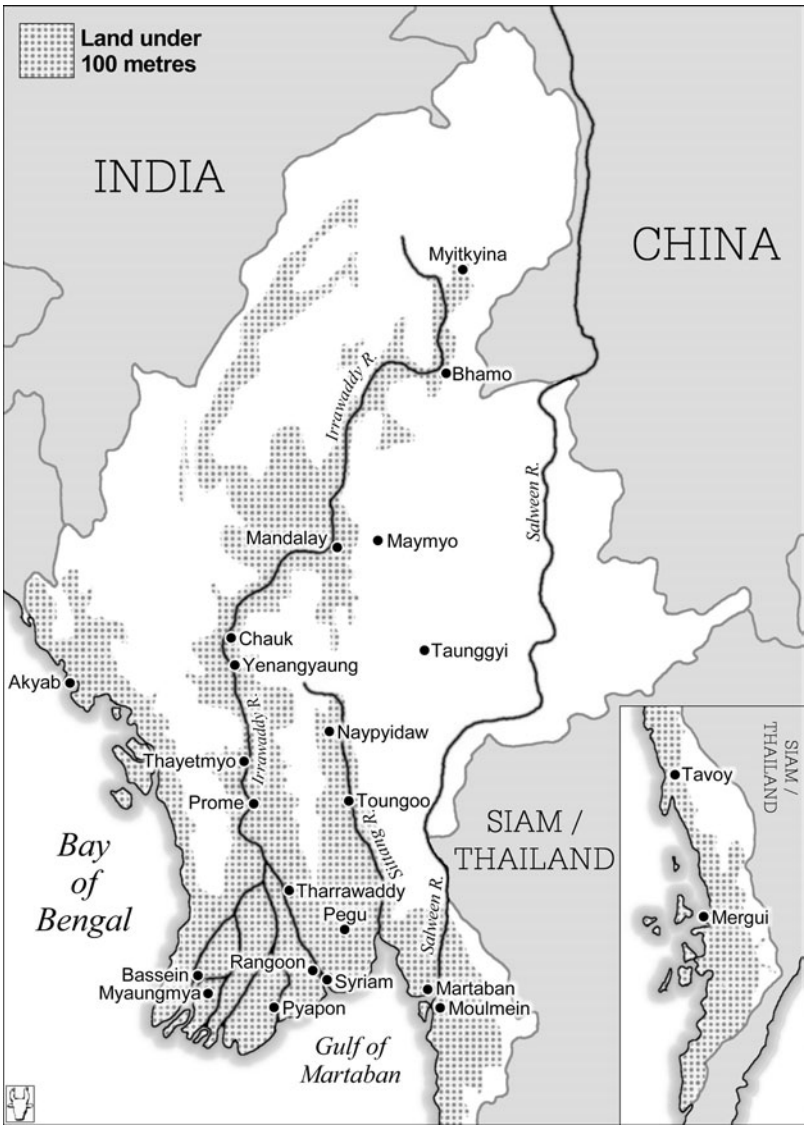

Map of Burma/Myanmar

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