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0521399203 - True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border

Jonathan Falla

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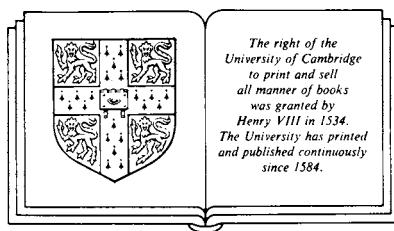
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True Love and Bartholomew

Rebels on the Burmese border

JONATHAN FALLA



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For Eh Doh and Zenobe

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Foreword

by Nigel Barley

The names of most areas of the world elicit a simple but powerful response in the minds of anthropologists. Each bears the burden of a particular specialisation. Australia ‘means’ art and kinship, Africa lineages, witchcraft and magic, India castes and religion. Largely this is because classic texts of the past have burned these associations into the heads of generations of students.

It is the misfortune of Burma to ‘mean’ politics. Students of anthropology cut their teeth on the politics of Burma, but a politics reduced to abstract systems that permit a sort of detached overview. There are no people in such systems, just a faceless interplay of forces and models that swing back and forth suspended in a sort of idealised time.

In *True Love and Bartholomew*, Jonathan Falla offers us the *human* face of political change in contemporary Burma, a behind-the-lines view of the Karen Free State. It is a place at once very real yet almost imaginary, a place unrecognised or rather wilfully forgotten by the outside world, a mountain enclave continuing a struggle with lowland Burma that is older than any of its people know. Used against the Burmese and Japanese then swiftly abandoned by the colonial British, ‘won’ for Christ by missionaries, the Karen are currently fighting for their identity and their very lives. This is not an adventure story, for the bloody battles with the Burmese, the rapes and tortures suffered at their hands are off-scene and merely rumble in the distance like stage thunder. We encounter them as memories or consequences. Nor are these Karen noble, uncorrupted hill tribesmen whose austere lives are an example of simple integrity to the spoiled children of the West. Like ourselves they are trying to find a way to make sense of their lives.

Riverside, where the book takes place, is a village of functionaries, of more or less displaced persons, where the seriousness of events is judged by their ability to disrupt administrative regularity. In a country of sarongs, it alternates between the white collars of modernism and the striped shirts of traditional identity. This adds

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to the unreality of the place for there is always something unreal about empires of paper and the way they can be used to create a substitute world, sustained by illocutionary force alone. Indeed, it is only the individuals here who seem real at all, since events impinge not with a bang but a dull reverberation of official responsibilities. Even the collective identity of the Karen seems mysterious and unfocussed with groups moving in and out of 'Karen-ness' according to shifting circumstance. Much of everyday life becomes a protracted attempt to define just what 'real' Karen means.

Time comes in here again, for Jonathan Falla's text somehow conveys that difference in the speed of time that marks off remote places, even if that remoteness consists of only a few hours' walk from the frenetic rush of urban life. People seem to move at a slower pace. Outlines are less sharp. The air is thicker and has a colour and resistance of its own. It is here that Bartholomew, True Love and the others with their fragrant names lead their lives and combine the political public rites of a national state with the family warmth of an Asian village. Their trials and triumphs speak to us in a way that is both earthy and deeply moving.

This is not a book of political polemic that pleads the Karen cause. Jonathan Falla, indeed, finds many aspects of the Karen revolution unpalatable. It is pervaded by a sense of sadness at the suffering and hopelessness of an unwinnable war and the bleak future of refugee Karen in an increasingly unfriendly Thailand. Yet it is not political argument that wins our sympathy but the representation of an appealing humanity in the round.

One of the conventional tests of an account of an alien culture is how much it all clicks and fits with no loose ends, its inevitability engineered in from the start. But we all know that life outside constructed ethnographies is not like that and *True Love and Bartholomew* has a rich sense of the incongruities and absurdities of the human lot. History, politics, arcana from the meaning of tattooing to the technology of vernacular architecture – all pass before us almost incidentally as in everyday experience. There is all the erudition that we find in more formal texts but with none of the pretension. What we are finally offered is a fresh and sharp view that is anthropological in the truest sense. It conveys to us the 'feel' of another way of life.

Jonathan Falla went to the Karen as a Western-trained nurse to assess their medical needs yet he has a number of cultures on which to draw, the Jamaica of his birth, Indonesia where he studied

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traditional music and Uganda where he worked for OXFAM. He has previously published poetry and translations of Malay fiction as well as written on topics as diverse as travel, ethnomusicology, developmental politics and tropical health. Perhaps it is this that gives him that ability to move sympathetically and easily between worlds that readers will find in these pages.

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Down the long spine of hills that divides Thailand from Burma lies a string of independent states unrecognised by any government except each other's – and most certainly not by the government in Rangoon, against whom they are rebelling. These are the enclaves of Burma's insurgent ethnic minorities, the Kachin, Karen, Wa, Shan and others, together with the outlawed Burma Communist Party and, over on the western border with India, the Arakanese and Chin. The Burmese government says that it is currently facing thirty-three separate rebellions; some of these, notably those of the Communists and the Karen, have dragged on since the late 1940s – four decades of forest warfare.

Of all these insurgent peoples, the Karen have long held a special place in European and North American affections, since well before the present troubles began. This is partly because of dramatic successes by American Baptist Missionaries in the nineteenth century, giving rise to the idea of the Karen as a chosen people waiting to be liberated by the 'white younger brother' of their own prophecies. But there were other factors. The Karen have on several occasions fought and died in support of the British, most remarkably in the Second World War, when their suffering and resilience impressed their colonial masters. Besides which, visitors have rarely failed to be delighted by their generosity and openness, and to be surprised by their sheer numbers. Possibly 4 million people may be regarded as Karen (the estimates, and the criteria, vary widely).

Prior to 1986, I had never heard of them; among my friends and relations, only my anthropologist brother had. Britain soon forgot her wartime allies and the Karen could hardly believe the speed with which they were 'sold out' to their old enemies the Burmese, and the lack of interest in their fate since. Bemused by this neglect and betrayal, the Karen from time to time send off letters to the Queen and to Mrs Thatcher recalling past loyalty and requesting support. They receive no reply.

Meanwhile, the missionary fad has long since waned. As early

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as 1907 a report prepared for the University of Chicago thankfully noted 'a very marked decline in the cult of the Karen'.¹ The most recent general description of Karen society in Burma, by Harry Marshall, dates from 1922. Almost all the early descriptions were either by missionaries or by colonial civil servants. When post-war, independent Burma closed her doors to foreign researchers, most work on the Karen there ceased.

There are Karen in Thailand also; a flow of migrants and refugees from successive wars has built up their numbers over the last two centuries. Modern accounts have looked only at these Thai-Karen, who live as quietly and as unobtrusively as they can, hoping only to be accepted by Thai society and officials. But a major aspect of Karen life since the first records of them in the eighth century AD has been the almost constant, and frequently violent, confrontation with more powerful lowland peoples in Burma. Life is different in Burma, and it is the Burmese that they fight today. Their rebel state, which they call Kawthoolei, is entirely within the borders of Burma. Normally able to stay and work with Karen only in Thailand, contemporary writers can at best give only an embarrassed nod towards that crucial feature of Karen consciousness, the rebellion in Burma, while most journalists who cross the border have only a passing interest in the war as a cultural phenomenon. The Karen have been resisting and fighting the lowland states for a millennium or more. Oppressed they may be, but rebellion is a deeply embedded part of their very identity.

Kawthoolei is often translated as 'Flowerland', but the precise etymology of the name is debatable,² and flowers, at least in the usual colourful English sense of the word, are few and far between in the hill forests.

Although very dense, this is tropical rainforest only by the broadest classification. In fact, for several months of the year it is tinder dry. It is more accurately designated as Mixed Deciduous Forest, crowned by hardwood trees of spectacular height with, growing between and draped among them, ferns, low scrubby bushes, clumps of bamboo, vines and creepers, orchids and lianas. During the rains (May to October) there are a thousand shades of green but, as the forest dries out around Christmas, these begin to turn to olive greys, yellow and ochre. Every year, fires burn off much of the undergrowth, leaving the great hardwoods standing in blackened debris which does something to enrich the sand and muddy

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laterites of the topsoil. 'Teak forest', it is often called, but in our district, if there ever had been many *tectona grandis* to be seen, they were long since felled.

At some 1,500 kilometres north of the Equator, the seasons are well marked. In pre-monsoon April and May the heat is oppressive, but dry season nights can be bitter; Karen occasionally experience near-freezing temperatures in the northern hills. These hills rise to peaks of around 2,000 metres. The border landscape is marked on small-scale maps as a spine of an even, pale brown. The larger the scale, however, the more confused and broken are the ridges and river valleys. The jumble of near-identical green-clad slopes drives cartographers to a despairing confession: 'Contours impossible to reconcile'. Man-made landmarks are often easier to grasp; the villages, the little pockets of farmed colluvial flatland in the bends of the rivers, the slash-and-burn ricefields on the steep hill-sides, the scars of deforestation and of open-cast tin mining. But these are all very transient.

Prior to the Second World War, writers such as Reginald Le May, Maurice Collis and Reginald Campbell described these Thai-Burmese forests as infested with tigers, white rhinoceros and other perils. Little of that particular excitement survives. I never heard or saw anything of the tigers that patrolled the perimeters of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travellers' camps, snatching away their porters and their ponies. Nor had any Karen I met there. The villagers once sheltered from carnivores (and from each other) in longhouses enclosed in thick stockades – but no longer. Only the elderly Justice of our district, Harvest Moon, claimed to have met a black panther on a forest path in his youth: 'I pointed my umbrella at it like a rifle – then we both ran away.'

Dangers there still are, smaller-scale but unpleasant enough. Leeches and ticks gorge on you, but at least the resulting infections are merely local. The mosquitoes kill. This is one of the most malarial – and drug-resistant – areas of the world. Everyone has malaria. Even small children have abdomens packed with grotesquely distended spleens, the result of innumerable attacks.

But the forest has many pleasures also – the slow, magnificent hornbills beating high over the river, or the dozen species of kingfisher skimming across below. The wild parliaments of monkeys and the glimpsed mountain bears, the elegant green tree snakes and gabbling button-tailed drongo birds. They all provide wonderful company on forest walks, and fine eating afterwards. There is

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the strange explosive crack of bamboos splitting in the dry heat, and the sinister and spectacular forest fires that explode in high columns by day and creep in slow ranks across the hills by night. 'Flowerland' is no Arcady, but only to those who hate the livestock and the enclosure is it 'jungle'.

It is certainly not impenetrable. At the village of Riverside, where I mostly stayed, I was an easy fifteen km walk from the Thai border. Except in heavy rain, cars could get in and out readily. A Thai city was just three hours drive away. This was not a fearful wilderness in the back of beyond.

I spent most of the year from October 1986/7 in the Karen Free State of Kawthoolei. I had a variety of research interests, into music, into language and 'culture', and into public health, supported in this last by a small London-based charitable agency called Health Unlimited. This organisation offers 'care amidst conflict': that is, they try and assist civilian populations in areas cut off from government services by war or similar disruption. Our project was to survey the demography and disease patterns, the economics and the drug supplies in rebel territory, and then to investigate the viability of a village health-care scheme, working with Kawthoolei's Health and Welfare Department and starting out perhaps by training paramedics. I should stress that the opinions and ideas expressed in this book are my own, and not the responsibility of Health Unlimited.

All my visits were to one district of the rebel state; not the General Headquarters, but an area that had long been regarded as a quiet backwater of the war and was only now beginning to see sustained Burmese pressure. The society that I found here was typical neither of the 'traditional' Karen hilltribes – who may still be found in other areas of Burma and Thailand – nor even of Kawthoolei as a whole. It was, rather, a bizarre forest hybrid of tradition and revolution, with a powerful character of its own.

I lived in a family house and tried to speak the language; this book describes what I saw and learnt. It is not a travelogue, nor an adventure story; I was never involved in any fighting. Nor is it a history – although chapter two does give some account of how the Karen came to be in their present plight. It is, rather, a portrait of what appeared to me to be a very singular thing – a completely illegal and unrecognised nation state defended by only a few thousand armed men, which has yet been the home of thousands of families since well before I was born.

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In this state, most of the people have only ever known a condition of war. But the state has provided food for many, and the only health care, education and other services and infrastructure that they've ever known, and all from bamboo or roughsawn timber huts in the midst of a forest. All the machinery of government is there – an executive and an army, a judiciary and a foreign office, tax gatherers and teachers, doctors and nurses, agricultural, mining and forestry officers, Transport and Communications Departments, organisations of Youth and of Women, a prison service, a treasury and an established church. They have had forty years to get organised.

I am not an apologist for Kawthoolei. There are many aspects of the rebellion that I cannot like, and I have persuasive friends who argue that they should have given up this particular fight long ago and sought some political accommodation within the Union of Burma. But, as the Burmese Army closes in, their choices are horribly limited and many of them simply don't know what to do. Like decent people anywhere, most Karen just wish that the war would go away. In the meantime, their villages are being burnt, their men shot and their women raped. Large numbers of them find themselves in that deadest of ends, a Thai refugee camp. The Karen cannot win their war. As the last of their self-determination is whittled away, there is for me a poignant urgency in writing about the brief period when they have actually attempted what historians and archaeologists deny in their past, but their stories claim they once possessed – a state of their own.

A note on language, and proper names: Kawthoolei is a polyglot place. Many Karen rebels are Rangoon-educated, many preserve strong links with the British. Apart from several distinct varieties of the Karen language, English and Burmese are both widely spoken with widely differing degrees of proficiency. The same speaker may, in mixed company, switch rapidly between all these. My own conversations were similarly jumbled. My friend True Love spoke fluent English, so that is what we used together. Bartholomew spoke no English, and with him I spoke Sgaw Karen. Great Lake, William and others came anywhere between the two, and our conversations were a happy macaronic babble. It would be impossible for me to imitate all these variations or to indicate every degree of translation taking place, and so I'm afraid the reader must accept a possibly rather bland uniformity of English rendition of the conversations.

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A number of songs and rhymes are quoted. With one or two obvious exceptions, these were all originally in Karen and noted or tape-recorded by me. Any English translations given are my own, as assisted by True Love and other friends. Copies of the recordings are now with the British Institute of Recorded Sound (National Sound Archive) at 29 Exhibition Road, London SW7.

Karen proper names are as linguistically confused as is the language of daily speech. A Karen may carry a whole clutch of names including one Burmese, one English, one formal Karen name and a nickname too. Karen give their children nicknames (wrote Harry Marshall: 1922, p. 170) in order to disguise their love. A name implying parental contempt – Stinkpot, Rottenfish or the like – fools malevolent spirits into thinking that the parents cannot be harmed by an attack on the children.

The English name might have no particular connection with the Karen or Burmese. It is often biblical in character – James, Moses, Ruth – but equally it might be Frank or Daphne. Sometimes the English is a literal translation of a Karen or Burmese name (True Love, for example) but others are just approximations of sound: thus, a man with the Burmese name Lin Naing is also known as Lionel.

There are no rules at all as to which name a person is commonly known by. Thus I might find myself talking with three young men known locally as Kan Gyi (a Burmese name), Wah Paw (Karen) and Wilfred. There are numerous instances of this in the following chapters. I have usually altered names for the sake of privacy, but have not tried to unscramble the characteristic mix. For place names, I have usually given a simple English approximation to the Karen original. As these are people's homes in a dangerous and politically sensitive area, I cannot specify the precise location.

Karen script is based on Burmese, and is quite unlike our own. As a result there are wide variations in spelling when Karen is rendered into English. Kawthoolei, for example, may be spelt Kaw Thu Lay or Kawthule. For the sake of clarity and consistency I have taken one spelling and stuck to it. This has occasionally meant altering the spellings given by other authors in quotations.

Even as I prepared this book for press, one name has been changed by government dictum, that of Burma itself, which in mid 1989 was declared to be now called the Union of Myanmar. This is apparently a revival of a pre-colonial title. It is rather as though Westminster were to announce that Britain is now called Albion.

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I fully acknowledge the right of any country to call itself whatever it may wish, and perhaps in some future edition of this book we might change Burma to Myanmar throughout. But, for the present, I'm afraid Myanmar means nothing to me, and I have not used it.

*Strathdon, Aberdeenshire
1988*

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Extracts from R. P. Winter's report on the Karen are quoted with permission from the United States Committee for Refugees. Some of the material in chapter seventeen first appeared in a different form in the *Minnesota Review*.

It goes without saying that I could not have worked without the 'cooperation' of the Karen people. What that word cannot convey is the extraordinary open-house hospitality and helpfulness extended to me by all sorts, from Karen National Liberation Army officers to the humblest of forest farmers and their children. I cannot begin to name them all, but True Love, Great Lake and Bartholomew stand out as generous informants. I hope I have done them some sort of justice.



Map of Burma (Myanmar)