(The following was originally published in London by Edward Stanford in 1886)

Extracts Related to Burma Drawn from *Standford's Compendium of Geography and Travel: Asia*

Augustus H. Keane
Edited by Sir Richard Temple

Hydrography

North of the Brahmaputra valley the eastern section of the Tibetan plateau seems certainly to be geologically continued eastwards far into Yunnan and Se-chuen. But in this little-known region, inhabited by the Mosso, Lolo, Si-fan, and other semi-independent aboriginal tribes, there are pressed together an extraordinary number of separate ridges, possibly produced by the action of running waters. Parallel with the Tant-la run several chains, mainly north and south, nearly at right angles with the Kuen-lun system, and these "Cross Ridges," as Blakiston calls them, penetrate far into Burma and Siam, where they form the Indo-Chinese mountain system. Their general direction is indicated by the course of the great rivers, some of which at all events take their rise on the Tibetan plateau, and which flow first north-east, parallel with the Tant-la and the other cross ridges on the Tibeto-Chinese frontier. All these rivers, amongst which must be included the Irawady, Salwin, and Mekhong, as well as the Yang-tse and Min, then trend gradually round to the south, flowing in this direction for hundreds of miles in the closest proximity. Nowhere else is there any instance of so many large streams flowing in independent parallel valleys, separated only by single ridges, without uniting into one general water system. All the large rivers which reach the coast between the Irawady and Yang-tse deltas, a distance of at least five thousand miles, are confined in their upper courses within the comparatively narrow tract which lies between the eastern tributaries of the Brahmaputra and the head-waters of the Hoang-ho. Margary, Gill, M'Carthy, Soltau, Szechenyi, and others who have recently traversed the ground between Yunnan and Upper Burma, all speak of the numerous river valleys running north and south which they had to cross between Lake Ta-li-fu and Bhamo. Justus Perthes' map (1881) of Szechenyi's route from Sayang to Bhamo, a distance of about 160 miles as the bird flies, lays down, besides numerous tributaries, no less than four main streams identified by that explorer as the Mekhong, Salwin, and the two great forks of the Irawady. The same phenomenon is described by Desgodins, whose route lay far to the north between Se-chuen and Tibet, and by A. K. (Pundit Krishna), who in 1882 also traversed the remarkable region of contiguous river valleys between the Yang-tse and the Brahmaputra.

Going eastwards, and keeping within the limits of Indo-China, first comes the Irawady itself with its two great and still unexplored head-streams, and its vast delta. Here it will be sufficient to add that the Abbé Desgodins and A. K. (Pundit Krishna) have finally disposed of the claim of the Irawady to be regarded as the continuation of the Tibetan San-po. During a three years' residence in the valley of the Upper Salwin, at a convenient place for studying the question, Desgodins ascertained that the two rivers could not possibly be connected, and that consequently the San-po must flow to the Brahmaputra.

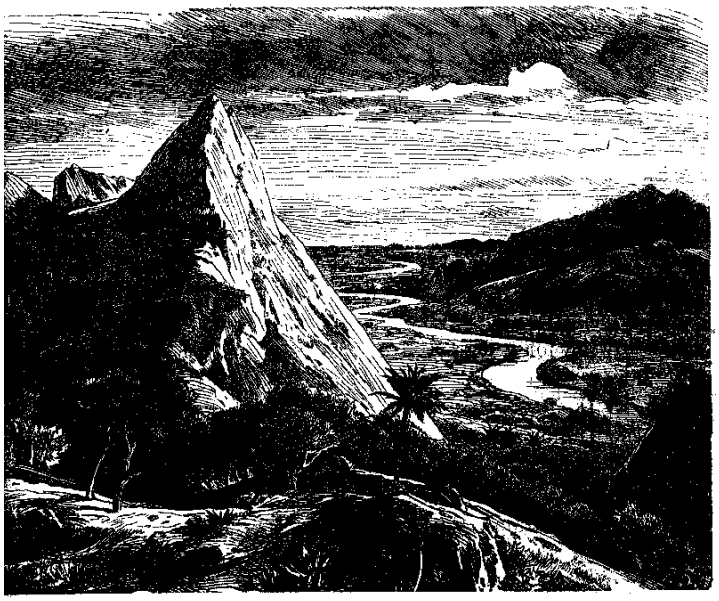
Parallel with the Irawady is the Salwin, whose upper course is the Lu-kiang, flowing from the Langtan or Gulong-sigong hills, on the Yunnan frontier. The Salwin flows thence first along the eastern frontier of Burma, and lower down between Pegu and Siam to its mouth in the Gulf of Martaban. It has a known but very imperfectly-explored course of at least 700 miles, during which it receives no large tributaries. Nor does it form a delta at its mouth, in this respect differing from most other great Asiatic rivers. It appears to be greatly obstructed by rapids, and is probably not navigable by large craft for more than 100 miles from its mouth.

Natural and Political Divisions

At the beginning of the present century the Burmese empire was by far the largest and most powerful in Farther India. It occupied nearly the whole of the Irawady, Sitang, and Salwin basins, with a coast-line stretching for about 900 miles from the head of the Bay of Bengal to the Isthmus of Krah. Since then a series of disastrous wars with the English has caused the gradual loss of all the coast regions—Arakan, Pegu, and Tenasserim—which now constitute the flourishing province of British Burma. Thus entirely cut off from the sea, the country remained in a state of chronic trouble until the close of the year 1885, when King Thebaw, last of the native rulers, was dethroned, and the administration of Independent Burma taken over by the British authorities.

Within its present limits the late kingdom of Ava, as it was often called from one of its ephemeral capitals, is hemmed in on the north, west, and south-west by British Burma, on the north-east by the Chinese province of Yunnan, on the south-east by the kingdom of Siam. With an extreme length north and south of

about 500 miles and a mean breadth of 300 miles, it has a total area of about 190,000 square miles and a population of perhaps 4,000,000. It is divided into three distinct sections— Burma proper, between 24° 30′ and 18° 50′ N. latitude, inhabited by the pure Burmese people; North Burma, occupied by the Sing-fu and other semi-independent hill tribes; and the tributary Shan States to the east. All the Shan or Laos States stretch eastwards to the Mekhong valley; but those subject to Burma lie mainly between the 24th and 20th parallels and between 97° to 101° E. long.



VALLEY OF THE IRAWADY.

The Burmese rule, which was severely felt by the districts in the proximity of Mandalay, the present seat of government, became continually less oppressive as we proceed eastwards. In the north-east it was, so to say, overlapped by the Chinese authority, so that it was here often difficult to say where the one ceased and the other began. In some districts the triennial tribute due to the Burmese Court consisted of such trifles as gilded wax tapers, a little salt and tea, or perhaps a pair of embroidered shoes, a gold drinking-cup, a silver plume, or suchlike tinsel, and these presents were sent by several of the Shan districts both to China and Burmah. The dignity of "tsanwab" or "thabwa"—that is, feudal lord —is hereditary in all the ruling families, but the Burmese Court conferred the investiture on each successive lord, and designated the next heir. In the principalities, ruled jointly by the Chinese and Burmese, both suzerains generally came to an understanding in the choice of the next heir; but, in case of disagreement, two chiefs were appointed, and fought it out.

As in other Indo-Chinese States, the white elephant ranked in Burma next to royalty itself. This elephant had a palace to himself with a personal chamberlain and estates in the most fertile cotton districts, besides four gold umbrellas and a suite of thirty courtiers. At the same time the expression "white elephant" is extremely elastic, the colour being often of a dirty yellow, or even brown, if only a few light specks can be shown behind the ears, on the forehead or trunk.

Inhabitants

From the recent researches of Jenkins, Sladen, Forbes, and others, in North Burma, it appears that the Singfo and Kakhyens, hitherto regarded as two distinct races, are really one and the same people. Although split up into a great number of small tribes, they everywhere call themselves Singfo—that is, "men,"—and are always spoken of by the Burmese as Khyen or Kakhyen. This is again the same word as Karen, another form of Rakhaing, whence the province of Arakan takes its name. The Singfo claim to be the elder branch of the Burmese family, and although nominally subject to the "wun" or governor of Magong, they pay little heed to his mandates, and on all occasions show contempt and aversion for their "younger brothers" the civilised Burmese. They reach eastwards as far as Momein, and are generally regarded as a savage, unruly, and treacherous race. Major Sladen, however, found them friendly and intelligent, although extremely suspicious of strangers. They are active traders, and would willingly abandon their lawless and predatory habits, were. regular commercial relations established across their country between Assam and China. Their religion consists mainly in the worship of good and evil spirits ("nats"), to whom they offer sacrifices. Mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, the sun and moon themselves, are under the influence of these nats, who seem to be sometimes confounded with the spirits of the departed.

On the other hand, the civilised Burmese all profess Buddhism, which in Burma seems to have preserved itself freer than elsewhere from intruding divinities. Here also the monastic vows are more faithfully observed than in other Buddhist lands, and the bonzes have generally promoted the education of the people. A complete national system of public instruction has been developed, all youths being obliged by law to reside for three years in a "khyung" or religious house, where they minister to the "phungys" or priests, and are by them instructed in reading, writing, the elements of arithmetic and of religion. Hence a knowledge of letters is universal in Burma; and here also the women enjoy a remarkable degree of freedom.

BURMESE TYPES.

In their character the Burmese have much in common with the Chinese. They possess a considerable degree of intelligence and independence, and are shrewd and enterprising, although somewhat indolent. Free from the spirit of caste and national prejudices, they readily acknowledge the superiority of the Europeans, and are eager to learn from them. While extremely tolerant, or rather indifferent, to other religious sects, they remain steadfastly attached to their own tenets. Owing to local maladministration there was a constant migration from Independent to British Burma, until the events of 1885.

The Shans and Laos, who are essentially one race under two names, stand in much the same relation to the Siamese proper that the Talaings and Kakhyens do to the Burmese. Their domain occupies the whole of North Siam and a portion of East Burma, whence it stretches along the Salwin valley far into Yunnan, and down the Mekhong River to the frontier of Cambodia. Their allegiance is thus divided between Burma, China, and Siam. But their ethnical and linguistic affinities are entirely with the Siamese proper, all being so many closely related members of the Tai—that is, "Free" or "Noble" race—which seems to have occupied the Yang-tse basin before the arrival of the Chinese in that region. By the Chinese they were partly absorbed, partly driven southwards to their present homes in Yunnan and Further India. Here many, especially of the Laos tribes, have become intermingled with, and often assimilated to, the Kha, as they collectively call the aboriginal wild tribes of the peninsula.

Topography

As might be expected, the few large towns of Burma all lie in the Irawady valley, which is distinguished both for its picturesque scenery and great fertility. Here is Mandalay, one of the many places to which the seat of government had in recent times been shifted, partly in consequence of revolutions or changes of dynasty, partly through superstitious motives or royal whims. Ava, which had been the capital since 1364, gave place about 1740 to Mutshob, which yielded in 1782 to Amarapura. In 1819 the Court returned to Ava, whence it again passed in 1837 to Amarapura, and in 1857 to Mandalay, where it has since remained. This place lies a few miles above Amarapura, on the same side of the Irawady. The houses on the river and in the suburbs are of the usual Burmese type—frail structures of bamboo and matting erected on piles sunken the mud. They are generally small and packed closely together, and their materials are inflammable. Consequently fires once breaking out become extremely disastrous. The main streets are lined mostly with brick houses, but even here the bricks are merely attached to the wooden framework. A pretty effect is presented by the Chinese shops, which are often two stories high. In every direction the eye lights on gilded or painted pagodas, temples, and "Khyungs," or cloisters with schools attached. The city is encircled by a stout brick wall, with a ditch crossed by one or two rude bridges. Here was the scene of the horrible butcheries which accompanied the accession of the late King Thebaw in 1879. Mandalay was occupied by the British under General Prendergast on November 28, 1885.

On the Upper Irawady lies the important station of Bhamo, in 24° 15′ N. at the junction of the Tapeng. This is the starting point of caravans proceeding eastwards to Yunnan, and should a regular overland trade be established between British India and West China, Bhamo must from its position become one of the great emporiums of the East. At present it is a small stockaded town with a few hundred houses, occupied chiefly by Chinese and Shan traders, with a few Burmese officials.

Highways of Communication

In Further India there are nowhere any regular roads, and most of the trade routes follow the course of the great rivers and their affluents. Thus travellers and explorers wishing to penetrate from the west into China, ascend the Irawady to Bhamo, where they follow the caravan route up the Tapeng River valley through the Kakhyen highlands to Manwyne and so

on to Momien on the Yunnan frontier. This route has been frequently traveled in recent times, and is now reported by the Rev. Mr. Soltau (1881) to be safer than at any former period.

Administration

The Burmese Government was a pure despotism, his majesty of "the Golden Feet," ruling as an absolute monarch. Even the British Envoys were required to appear barefooted (The great "Shoe Question," which never was settled, is fully discussed in Col. Laurie's new work on Ashé Pyee; or, The Superior Country, London, 1882) in the presence of these despots, whose chief characteristics have too often been cruelty, licentiousness, and arrogance. Hence while court etiquette was rigidly maintained, the progress of the country was retarded by the policy of its rulers. Anarchy and decay were the prevailing features of the regions subject to the influence of the central government, while the more remote Shan States enjoyed a comparative degree of peace and immunity. The resources of the land were also further drained by the steady migration of the more intelligent and wealthier classes, who were glad to find a refuge in the neighbouring province of British Burma.

Statistics

	Area in square miles	Population
Burma	190,000	? 5,000,000
British Burma	88,000	3,011,000

Chief Towns

Mandalay	100,000
Bhamo	5, 000

Approximate Population According to Races [for the mainland as a whole]

Tibeto-Burmese	
Burmese	4,750,000
Kakhyens	250,000
Tai Family	
Shans	1,500,000
Siamese	2,000,000
Laos	1,500,000
Tongkinese & Cochin-Chinese	20,000,000
Moi, Kha, or Penom	
Wild Tribes	? 500,000
Chinese	2,000,000
Malays	1,000,000
Negritos	?