

[ORIGINAL DRAFT, FORTHCOMING (C) 2016 MICHAEL W. CHARNEY]

STEPHEN L. KECK. *British Burma in the New Century, 1895-1918*. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 230pp. + x. Notes, bibliography, index. \$79.99 (cloth).

Stephen Keck, Professor of History at Emirates Diplomatic Academy (United Arab Emirates), is an old hand at colonial Burma (today Myanmar) and has travelled both the country and the main archives related to the period in Britain, Singapore, and the country itself. The extent of his research is revealed in one of the best books on the country this year and one of the only books on this particular topic in Burma's history. Many of Burma's colonial scholars tend to focus on the interwar era or, to a lesser extent, on Mandalay. Historians have often been drawn to the attractive story of anti-colonialism, armed resistance, and full-fledged nationalism and their own accounts often begin there. As a result, colonial Burma's history is just as often misunderstood as a story only of nationalism and resistance and not one that was also rich with engagement, learning (by British and Burmese alike), and change. Perhaps this is why the period between the conquest and World War I is mainly un- or lightly-touched historiographical ground so far as imperial historiography on Burma is concerned. Area studies scholars have been kinder on the country and there are a number of works by area studies scholars and national historians covering topics on everything from Buddhist lay organisations to the introduction of Western medicine.

Keck sets out to excavate broader ground. He seeks to locate Burma intellectually within the empire and to do the same for the empire in Burma not as a stage on the path to something else (like independence) but as an imaginary, what he calls "new century Burma" something worthy of examination in its own right. As this is an intellectual history, the main figures in Keck's book are those who wrote about Burma during the period, such as travel writers, missionaries, satirists, and the group of writers who loved and lived in the country and are called by Keck "Burmaphiles" (18). British writers constructed their own imaginaries of the country. To capture these constructions of Burma, Keck draws upon Arjun Appadurai's notion of scapes to mobilize the concept of Burmascape. British writers who tried to make sense of Burma combined images, narratives, and conceptual vocabulary that formed their own Burmascape, which Keck also understands as a modality of power. The Burmascape intersected with the gathering of official data to produce an "unofficial but officially informed perspective," but leaving beyond its scope a genuine appreciation of the actual importance of the now fallen monarchy in the country, the importance of Buddhism, and the aspirations of the Burmese now entering schools (16). But whatever its limitations, Keck asserts, British Burma must be reckoned with; it was a homogenizing force that produced a modern Burma and to understand why Burma has emerged the way that it has, we need to be better acquainted with the writings that both narrated and documented this country for the empire and the world.

The book has seven substantive chapters aside from the introduction and conclusion and in each Keck explores a different area of British engagement with Burma and production of knowledge or imaginings about it. These chapters deal with seminal colonial encounters in the country and lend themselves to broader and comparative imperial investigations across the empire, but national historians will find these chapters useful starting points for their own forays. The various topics covered include Burma's geography, its governance, interpreting the end of "Traditional Burma," the translation of Buddhism, depictions of country and city, the country's huge ethnic diversity, and dacoity and dissent. Almost always, British thinking about Burma did not keep pace with actual developments among the Burmese but insofar as British authors and officials were able to capture in their writings a great deal of change between 1895 and 1918, they

“carried freight for a range of policymakers” (195), regarding what they thought mattered at the time. Even today, their knowledge base about the country “has yet to be surpassed” (195). The last lines of *British Burma in the New Century, 1895-1918* make it clear that Keck has issued a call to bring colonial writings back into the historiographical discussion of the country. Certainly, Keck’s warning that to disregard what he readily admits is “colonial knowledge” is “to reject some of the most detailed information about Burma which has ever been collected” is necessary admonishment for a field (Burma Studies) that still too frequently rejects colonial sources out of hand without understanding the same kinds of limitations (and opportunities) in indigenous sources.

Keck is fully aware that his period is not the only one with Burmascapes, although he sees a full discussion of these as outside the scope of his book. For example, Keck identifies three particular moments in colonial knowledge on the country: the period of discovery (late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century); the years in which “old Burma” remained part of the discourse on change in the country, encompassing the periodization of his book, and 1918 to 1948, defined by “dislocation and disillusionment” (74). Although Keck occasionally refers to the relationship between a particular trope of his period and its resonance in writing by British writers of Burma during this third period, including the likes of J.S. Furnivall, George Orwell, and Maurice Collis, the references are tantalisingly brief. Perhaps Keck will take this last task up in a second book.

This is an important study, well researched, erudite in its observations and responsible in its conclusions. The book is also timely, for military rule has (partly) ended and as the country continues to move into a new era, post-2010, there is new space to compare constructions of Burma, such as military-rule Burma, both how critics and supporters alike wrote about the country. Keck’s book provides a useful template for this approach. Fortunately, the book has tackled a complicated subject without sacrificing accessibility and it will have no difficulty being applied to both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Keck’s main audience though will be two groups of researchers, those working on the country itself (not only for the colonial period) and the larger group of imperial historians who now have a very reliable case study of one British Burma.

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