Canvases & Miniatures

Volume 1

Off The Record

This book was begun in 1929 at the behest of Prof.. W.G Fraser . He must have noticed that I had been writing quite a bit of stuff as a student. Now that I had graduated with only part-time work as tutor in English, and oceans of time, I suddenly lost that pen. E stranged from the art of writing, I was fast developing another art:

the art of being a young-man-about-town. He must have thoroughly disapproved of it. I could not imagine any other reason for the astonishing step he took. He told me to write an autobiography!

Now, I had disappointed him by running away from the English Honours course in spite of all he had done to encourage me. In character he was not the encouraging type. Extremely perspicacious he was fond of knocking nonsense out of young heads. Extremely energetic himself he was not satisfied with the energy we exhibited. “Educating the unwilling young”, he used to complain. Without being stern he could be firm with us. Kind-hearted, yet he could make us suffer if a little dose of suffering was what we needed for the good of our character.

As a professor of English he was the target for young hopefuls with itching pens. He would find on his desk surreptitious offerings of poems, plays and other fond efforts at writing. Guessing whose hand had perpetrated which piece he would drop hints in the appropriate places. “Somebody should tell him that he should be better occupied than writing etc. etc.” In my case he seemed to have guessed that I was worse occupied otherwise than writing. Those were my wild days. His guess was pretty near. But he didn’t know the worst. When I ran away from his English Honours Class I ran away from home. I eloped with a girl. Here was my opportunity at last. In the form of an autobiography, I could now explain in extenso how I could not avoid disappointing him as I did. So I set to an

d rapidly completed one chapter after another. “Childhood” “Boy hood” “Youth, parts 1-6.” And then full stop. You see, I had reache d the end of my explanation. I had carried the story to the point w hen I had become a part-time tutor in English. I submitted the typ e-script to him and fled, as far down as Myeik. His letter came. Wit h characteristic candour he pointed out that what he wanted was not a book about me, but about Myanmar. “Turn the microscope away from “K”. Your life-time is only the frame work for a book on Myanmar. All that’s wanted is the eye on the object which is not r eally “K” but “K’s” horizons beginning with the Yomas and ending with the stratosphere. It is the period you could so well exhibit, ab out the twenties, when minds were beginning to move; the old tu nes ceasing to be worth collecting and the new notions being fou nd to have been implicit in the Myanmar situation all the time. Ce rtainly there would be friends and figures but they too would hav e to be in focus: not very important in themselves but very import ant as supports and milestones.”

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Streaming Face of Heavens Or Monsoon Scene

On the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of Independence jubilatio n is natural and fitting. After jubilation comes taking thought. The unremitting efforts of the Revolutionary Government and the Peo ple's Party both in political and economic spheres, despite sabota ge attempts by the enemies of the country, go rolling on with incr easing momentum. Hitches there are. Which revolutionary transiti on period has ever been without hitches? Perhaps a backward gla nce at the agricultural scene in presocialist Myanmar when landlo rds, native and foreign, mercilessly exploited the sons of the soil will reduce the prospect to its just proportions. In those days the r ural prospect was as becautiful as Nature could make it. It was on ly at the end when the fruits of agricultural labour were to be enjo yed that iniquity reared its head. This iniquity had been done awa y with by the Myanmar Way to Socialism. But let the scene unfold. ..

Monsoon Scene

For the thousands of acres of paddy fields in lower Myanmar t

he breaking of the Monsoon is like a "clarion o'er the dreaming ea rth," Interminable plains of burnt stubble baked by the sun for fou r months to the cracking point, deserted and idle, must now wake up. Almost half a nation answers the clarion call. From time imme morial rice cultivation has been a national occupation. It was the tradition of the Myanmar kings to inaugurate the realm's, annual endeavour with the 'Royal Ploughing Ceremony Lai htunmingala, i n which the king himself goes down to the nursery of the royal lan ds and: "Golden goad of Malaya cane uplifted He puts his foot on the ridge of the harrow And sets the peerless pair of oxen going: I nto the pyo-gin they hie,

Oh kingfisher in the sky,

Call down the rain;

Come down obtain!"

Royal-Drum song

So, men in their millions girt up their loins. Agricultural imple ments are cleaned and made keen. The little bunds ga-zins (which make rice-growing Myanmar look from the air like an enormous ji g-saw puzzle) are repaired. They are about a foot and a half high and three feet broad. Their function is to retain the correct level o f water while paddy is growing.

Ploughing starts when the fields are water logged and the eart h softened by four to six inches of rain in the second half of May.

The landscape is dotted then with ploughmen each behind a pair of labouriously moving bullocks or buffaloes. They are preparing t he nursery fields pyo-gin where the seed-paddy myo-saba will be sown broadcast. The area of a nursery is about a tenth of the tota l area into which the seedlings will be transplanted.

The soil is turned roughly five inches deep with a wooden plou gh htai with an iron shoe, which is dragged by the bullocks round and round from the outer fringe of each plot inward antispiral-wis e kha-yu-pat. It takes about six hours to plough up a third of an a cre.

The clods left by the plough are worked down with a harrow o f padauk wood (Pterocarpus Macrocarpus) which is dragged over each plot about times till the decimated weeds and grasses are co vered with broken earth. Then a set-htun, a rotary implement wit h a geared wooden cylinder about four inches in diameter into wh ich five iron blades three inches deep are set lengthwise at five eq ual intervals is rolled over the plot meshing the cut up vegetable debris and soil. The debris is left to rot for three or four days unde r about six inches of water. All this takes a cultivator and his pair of bullocks about two months for an area of eight to ten acres.

If we happened to be in Thabyeyon at this season we knew for certain that uncle Shwe Ngo and his friends were not to be found in the village in daylight hours. Long before we woke up they had

set out with the bullocks and the implements. For the sake of the animals work had to be broken off htun-chut by ten in the mornin g. The bullocks were unyoked and led off to graze their full and lie up in the shade through the hot afternoon. By then morning meal for the ploughmen had been cooked. Children carried it from the village to the tields. Sometimes we volunteered. Uncle and party would be waiting for us at their favourite spot at the foot of a big pauk "Flame of the forest' tree, (Butea Frondosa). They would be covered with sweat and stockinged with mud. How they could eat ! Mountains of rice, I thought. Then they would start their plain te a party telling jokes or yarns while the stockings of wet mud dried slowly round the edges. We children turned our attention to the p addybirds beside the cattle or the doves in the trees. About four i n the evening work started again and we retuned to the village wi th lighter burdens. Their hard work and hefty appetite are alluded to in a Myanmar poem: "My lady wife, she skilleth well To find her man good cheer.

She gathers buds of brown roselle When buds do first appear.

She gets what puny fish she can, Too thin belike for scaling;

Puts bud and fish in earthen pan To cook for my regaling.

And with no oil or condiment

But water from the spring

She'll dish a curry would content The palate of a king.

As I come weary from the plough And cast my goad aside,

Sweet wifely bustle greets me now Sharp-set at even-tide

Her misty hair is falling free, Her little curls awry,

But she has millet rice for me And piles my platter high.

When I've emptied plate and pot And bulge about the girth,

I would not change a farmers lot For any lot on earth."

Translated from the Myanmar by 7A Stewart.

The soil is ready at last Water is let out of the nursery bed and the bed levelled with bamboos. Each acre of nursery will take abo ut ten baskets of seed paddy. First, seed-paddy is immersed in wa ter for twenty-four hours. Then it is allowed to germinate under c over of leaves or straw. The advantage of sowing after germinatio n is that the roots of the seedlings get better grip in the soil, and t hey do not get washed away by a heavy downpour. Three or four days after sowing, water is let in to a depth of nearly two inches. This depth is gradually increased as the seedlings grow. The limit i s six inches. In five or six weeks the seedlings attain a height of tw o feet or just under. They are then ready for transplanting in the r est of the area which has been undergoing the same processes of preparation as the nursery while the seedlings are growing. By the n it is August. The Monsoon is in full strength.

All the fields are under water now. If there is too much rain ev

en the ga-sins will disappear under the water. I once saw nothing but a vast sheet of water all the way by train from Yangon to Bag o one August. In some places the rails themselves were submerge d and the train had to crawl. "July, August, rain and flood" goes a Myanmar saying. Now will commence that part of rice-growing wo rk which has given rise to the largest body of folk-songs in Myanm ar known as Kauk-saik or bon-gyi songs. The commencing day is a nnounced and labour hired by word of mouth, men to pull up the seedlings pyo-hnote, and women and girls to transplant them kau k-saik. Free meals have to be provided by the employer. It is merr y work. But I sometimes felt sorry to see the nurseries go. Stretch es of the loveliest green, greener, than emerald, millions of tender seedlings bending and rippling in the breeze is a sight for sore eye s. However, they are pulled up by hand, given a whack against the shin to free the roots of mud and then collected into bundles pyo-let of seven to eight hundred plants each. Transplanting an acre t akes up to six hundred such bundles. They are conveyed to the pr epared fields on men's shoulders or in boat-shaped sleds hle-doh drawn by oxen. Bevies of women and girl planters now take over. One hand holds the supply of seedlings pyo-phat, from it the othe r hand takes two or four seedlings each time and presses their roo ts down into the soft slush at regular intervals of about eight inch es. The leading planter si-gaung sets the pace and the line of sowi ng. It is back-breaking work ankle-deep in mud, knee-deep in wat

er. Long lines of planters working in concert naturally resort to oc cupational singing. The rhythm of the songs makes work less mon otonous and quicker. Some of the songs are even hilarious. He is a bold man who ventures near them to be out-numbered under s uch circumstances. But sometimes the men could bang up a bon-gyi drum party and then it was fun for all. There may even be rep artees in song: HE:How shall I steal You?

Your mother is a terror.

SHE:Set spear-heads on the stairs behind us: and let your swor d be rampant as you take me away.

HE: You must tell me

Your mother's chidings, all.

SHE: I don't care to tell.

Come south of the house and listen.

SHE: The white jasmin in my hair, 'tis another's.

HE: Go you with jasmin

Come not with me.

HE: From the Golden City. Bye every chance traveller I will sen d you a periwinkle bud.

SHE:Periwinkle buds sent by chance travellers I will not receiv e.

HE:The rays of the sun strike you And you droop at the end of the planting line.

SHE:Sweet-heart, hoist your blanket on a line and make shade .

SHE:When I come to plant the big plot the Lord Sun is hot.

Very well I'm a nun now, with this red lac tray on my head."

Buddhist nuns carry red or black lacquer trays on their heads i n which to collect contributions of rice from house to house.

SHE:The fold of your paso you let go and say, "Here, wipe your sweat with this." Thank you kindly. I'd rather let the sweat pour in drops than soil your paso.

Paso is a full-lenght lungyi or skirt for men one end of which is draped in front with some feet to spare.

SHE:We girls are off to transplant the seedings, Don't follow us please. You might get splashed with the mud, My pretty, my beau!

SHE:That man loitering there, He is a father of one. Look at his fine style, The spill of his hair-band!

Don't pretend to be elegible mister, The village won't have yo u!

And so on.

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Harvest Time

After transplanting till harvest time in December there is little t o do except regulating the water level, warding off pests and dise ases and frightening away the marauding animals. The transplant ed fields look scraggy at first; but when the plants are full-grown t hey are thick enough to keep down tares, standing four to five fee t high. The fields are green all over then, a deeper green than that of the nurseries. They take about three months to mature. During October and November the fields gradually turn yellow. As the gra in ripens the soil is allowed to dry.

Watch huts are put up now and scare-crows made as this is th e time when flights of sparrows, parakeets and other birds will sw oop down on the crops. Field watcher use catapult and bows, and also noise-making contrivances. Jingles or bamboo clappers are w orked by lines radiating from the watcher's hut.When the yellow r eaches the base of the ear already bent with the weight of the rip e grain it is time for reaping.

Harvest time! This is the happiest time of the year for cultivato rs. The sight of acres and acres of golden paddy rip ening in the s

un fills their hearts with a sense of fulfilment. What matters if mos t of it will be carted away for the rich land owners who have never put in an appearance throughout the rainy months when the culti vators were toiling knee deep in water and mud? For the nonce, t here before their eyes are the fields of ripe paddy proclaiming to t he wide December sky the success of their labours. Whoever may ultimately benefit handsomely from the crop, it is they the cultiva tors, who have achieved it.

Labour for reaping is hired. All the able-bodied males of the vil lage seize the opportunity to earn two free meals a day and paym ent in grain for reaping thirtyfive or fifty sheaves per day. It is not without danger, though, the standing crop. To minimise the dang er they proceed like jungle beaters. The tenant with a length of ba mboo presses down the standing plants for easier handling. The r eapers set to with their sickles, to the handles of which are attach ed jingles to frighten the creatures. Some of them practise the sup erstitious custom of pelting ahead of them cicca fruits, which the snakes are supposed to dislike. None may trespass, not even bullo cks, in the line of their advance, because in that direction the sna kes, if any, are expected to flee, and any counter disturbance may turn the creatures back.

Before them stretch the standing crops, behind them the field of stubble dotted with sheaves of paddy kauk-hline left for a day t o dry.

By that time the threshing floors have been prepared in the vil lage or just outside. The process is similar to the preparation of k atcha tennis courts. First the earth s turned up, then broken down , then rolled to a hard, even surface after repeated wetting and dr ying in the sun.

To these threshing floors the dry sheaves are carted to be spre ad in a more or less circular heap about three feet high. They are now garbs, kauk-pyant. Threshing, talin-nai, is done by driving tw o or three pairs of muzzled oxen or buffaloes round and round till their tramping and treading have separated the grain from the ear . Then with long-handled forks, and sickles tied to bamboo poles, kaukswa, the garbs are turned over and shaken so that the grain f alls to the floor and the straw comes up; the tramping and the tur ning are repeated three or four times till almost all the grain have fallen on the floor, kauk-pyant-kya-byi. Then the straw is gathered off the floor, shaken, and carried away on bamboo stretchers to b e piled or stacked.

The paddy on the floor is still full of weeds and trash, which h ave to be raked over or scratched over with branches of thorny ziz iphus. Then the paddy is piled into convenient heaps for winnowi ng. On moon-light nights threshing is done till nearly midnight. Th en the children are allowed to play hide-and-seek nearby. Someti mes grownups also play games after work.

Winnowing, saba-hlaydai, is done either in the wind, or by fan ning. Northwind is not so reliable as the Monsoon and sometimes the winnowers have to whistle for it according to superstition. Hu ng from bamboo tripods is a wicker sieve which is shaken while a cataract of paddy is poured onto it. When there is no wind what t he villagers do is to stand round with wicker trays, sagaws, ready i n hand. A pot is placed in the middle upside down high enough to deflect the stream of falling paddy in all directions. While one of t hem pours it down on the pot those standing round it fan vigorou sly with the trays and thus separate the trash from the grain, saga w-waing-pyit-tai.

At last the paddy is ready for storing, payments, or barter. The golden heaps are there. Happy though they are for the time to see the heaps of potential wealthh which they have brought into bein g, in their hearts lurk misgivings as snakes lurk in the fields. How much of all this will remain after the landlord has carted away the lion's share?

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4th January 1948
(A Sketch From Life)

It was 4th January 1948, the happiest and busiest day of my lif e. No Myanmar born since 1885 who did not belong to the present generation could know that kind of happiness. As a matter of fact, the whole of the broadcasting staff (not large then) had been bus y since days ago what with connecting and testing lines between t he studio (Lowis Road, Golden Valley) and Government House, an d studio and Constituent Assembly in the Quadrangle of the Secre tariat, and rehearsals. We wore happily hard-worked and proud to be so because BBS had played its part in Myanmar's final struggle for freedom.

U Pu Gale, the late veteran Myanmar reporter wrote about an i ncident during the Panglong Confernce concerning BBS. Even bef ore the arrival of Bogyoke Aung Sasn and Mr. Bottomley at Panglo ng the Shan, Kaching and Chin delegates on 6 th February 1947 re solved on union with Myanmar. This news was sent by telegram w ith the authority of the Shan Chiefe Council to BBS on the 7th and was broadcast on that very evening. It caused a furore among the imperialist section in Yangon. "It couldn't be true," "It must be a

made-up story to queer our pitch," ect. The Assistant Director of P ublic Relations, Mr. Benton rushed to the broadcasting statiion an d examined the Telegram as well as the Director. Not content with that he made enquiries at the source, the wireless telecommunica tions station at Panglong specially set up to cover the conference. The news was confirmed. And Mr. Benton subsided.

It was said in the office of the Director of Public Relations that the BBS was an AFPFL radio. The then Telecome Department und er Col. Scott held the reins of the technical section of the BBS and did its best to influence the technical staff; but, except for two wh o deserted BBS, all the members of the technical staff were behin d Bogyoke Aung San like the rest of the nation. The ingenuity of t he experience-trained technicians put right technical faults as fast as they occurred, even major ones. The BBS was never completely off the air any day since it started.

The day before he left for London Bogyoke Aung San called m e to his office and described to me for nearly an hour how we sho uld whip up mass support for the negotiations in London with a cr escendo of strategic broadcasts. In the words of an English captai n, "The Director continually fed the progarmme staff with articles from. The Myanmar Review and translations from various sources all in support of Myanmar's fight for freedom earning reproofs fro m the Director of public relations who warned BBS not to be a par tisan." As if Myanmar Broadcasting could help being a partisan in

Myanmar's fight for freedom.

But it so happened that I was still wearing the uniform of his B ritannic Majesty's Army in Myanmar which was due to be demobb ed in a month or so with leave pay and gratuity. I could not wait t ill then. I had to go straight to the military secretary Mr. Bickford a nd tell him frankly that unless I was demobbed as soon as possibl e my position, owing divided loyalties, was untenable. I could not wait for the usual procedure and I would be grateful if he could g et me demobbed as soon as possible. His response was immediat e. We had been good friends but I understood his instantaneous a lacrity. He had his own feelings for his country as I had for mine. Nevertheless I was grateful to him for providing me with a clear c onseience which was worth more than any pay or gratuity.

The entry in my diary for 4th. January 1948 was laconic. "Up a t 3 a.m. To studio. To constituent Assembly. To Government Hous e. To H.M.S. Birmingham. Evening, my folksong presentation at th e G.H." That was all. If I don't recall these presents from my mem ory now, I may recall them never. By 3 a.m. the old transmitters a t Yegu were getting warmed up for the direct broadcast of the pro ceedings in the Constituent Assembly in the Quadrangle of the old secretariat. The broadcast went off smoothly. I only shuddered at the noise of the conch-shell blowing by the ponnas which sounde d like the squealing of pigs. What I listened to with most critical at tention was the National Anthem newly in use in the newly indepe

ndent Union of Myanmar.

As director of broadcasting and a member of the national flag, national seal, and national anthem committee of the constituent Assembly I was rather concerned about the National anthem. Eve n subsequent to its adoption I had to worry about the harmonic p art of it which was beyond me. For the purpose of the Independen ce ceremonies we had to be content with a simple plano score by my protege miss Stella Ba Gyaw. She hammered it out in record ti me at the request of Hon. U Tin Tut so that the marine band of hi s Birmingham could score it and play it in the ceremonies which were due to start at the Government House later in the morning. The proceedings in the Quadrangle of the Secretariat had started at 4:20 a.m. We stood through it in drizzling rain I remember. Whe n I got back to Golden valley it was early morning. The newspaper boys were on their delivery rounds. One such was going round the valley singing away happily, "Kaba Makye, Myanmar pye" and ridi ng his bicycle in a crazy fashion all over the empty road. He too w as celebrating Myanmar's Independence in his own spontaneous f ashion; and oddly enough this happy crazy picture of him remains clearly fixed in my memory while the other more important detail s of the momentous celebrations gradually faded. Now how did h e know so well the words and tune of this newly establishd Natio nal Anthem? The reasons are as follows.

Like the "Star-spangled Banner" our National Anthem was not

specially composed. The words and tune of an earlier patriotic so ng was adapted by the committee. Three adaptations were playe d to the selection committee in the presence of the Defence Minis ter at the BBS studio, and the choice made, on 10th September 19 47. The original name was Dobama Thakhin the highly patriotic so ng of the Dobama Asiayone the organisation of non-self-seeking y oung and honest Thakhin who had no patience with the older typ e of politicians. The authors (words by Thakhin Ba Thaung and tu ne by Thakhin Tin or YMB Saya Tin) were members of this Party. T hakn Ba Thaung is a wizard with the Myanmar words. (I believe h e is the most adroit translater into Myanmar.) He doparted boldly from the old spellings and usage of literary Myanmar and produce d a libretto that not only was patriotic but also sounded patriotic. The tune was martial enough in the chorus part. In the words of Z agadaungza, "The dentals of the Lyric beat like drums and the lab ials pound like marching feet." It was this chorus part which was adapted for the National Anthem.

I believe the history of the Dobama movement is soon to be p ublished. Of the Dobama song the first rehearsal or rather the tea ching of it to the University students was at Thaton Hall on 19th J uly 1930. The next day, 20th it was sung in unison on the platform of the Shwedagon pagoda by the student community belonging t o the Dobama Asiayone. Attempts were made during and before t he Japanese occupation to compose a better National Anthem. B

ut Dobama ong's popularity could not be beaten. It was on the lif e of the younger generation for 18 year already. Only slight chang es were made in the adaptation. Still, it had to be sung in unison because Myanmar music, being melodic, had no partsinging, no h armony; and yet Independent Myanmar had to put the Anthem on an international basis. In 1947 we sent a piano score to sir Malcol m Sargent who asked for a full score. The Bandmaster of HMS Bir mingham wrote the first score for the full military band. John Jen kins of the British Council and it. Commander Charles Brandler, le ader of the U.S. Navy band wrote arrangements for the organ and the full navy band respectively. The Ministry of Culture was seekin g of Informaiton director score of the Anthem. So in 1959 the Mini stry of Informaiton director BBS to arrange for a complete set of p arts in notation for all the instruments of a full military band to be written down and enough copies of them together with copies of gramophone recordes of the National Anthem to be printed for th e Government to distribute to all embassies and hold in stock besi des in the BBS.

It should be pointed out here that Maelzel's Metronome marks to indicate the speed at which the music should be played were n ot given (not usual nowadays) as the speed could be known from the gramophone record. But it did sometimes happen that the mu sic was played at too fast or too slow a speed and suffered the co nsequences. In 1962 I save the M.M. Mark to the Additional Directo

r of BBS with the advice that it should be rubber-stamped on top of the printed scores. However, to my ears our National Anthem n ever sounded so sweet as when that newsboy riding his bicycle cr azily in Golden Valley sang it that early morning of 4th January 19 48.

"Dawn the prospect and the promise of a new day. The twinkli ng stars that kept their merry vigil the whole night through grow pale and fade away. A moment of deep darkness, and the rosy str eak in the East gaining power, the Iustre spreads followed by the break of day. The mist still hange in a thin screen on the was awa ke and bestirring itself long ere the break of dawn. For people had dreamt of, died for, worked for, prayed for, the day of the fulfilme nt of their hopes and aspirations, the awaited day for over half a c entury."

Thue rhapsodises the Independence Celebrations brochure. It was good to be alive on a day like that. It was good to know that kind of happinese. But one's thoughts would go to the departed p atriots, from the resistence leaders of the annexation 1885-1895, t hrough successive stages of political struggle, right up to the Mass Movement which swept Myanmar forward to freedom in a final w ave of united upheaval. Most particularly one's thoughts went to beloved Bogyoke Aung San and the Martyrs who laid down their li ves with him. One wished they were alive at that hour. Idiotically one imagined that they were there, all of them since the days of t

he 'pacification', they were there in spirit smiling affectionately at that happy newsboy singng at the top of his voice, however inade quately, the National Anthem as he rode his bicycle crazily all ove r the road in Golden Valley.

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