

Book Review: Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma by Richard Cockett

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In Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma, Richard Cockett provides readers with a beautifully written overview of the nation's history from the colonial era to more recent experiences of civil war and authoritarian government. Sonia J. Weiser highly recommends this detailed and humane book both to those newly encountering the country as well as those looking to further immerse themselves in understanding its complexities.

***Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma*. Richard Cockett. Yale University Press. 2015.**

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On 6 April 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi was presented as the first State Counsellor of Burma, an event that marked the latest of the changes towards becoming a more democratic country that have been under way since 2011. Creating this position specifically for the most widely known political prisoner of Burma and leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) sent a strong message to the international community that the old military dictatorship was no more. It is against this backdrop of transformation that Richard Cockett, former South-East Asia correspondent for *The Economist*, has published *Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma*. Praised as 'the best accessible introduction and overview of contemporary Myanmar', Cockett's book provides the reader with a beautifully written overview of Burmese history since the colonial era that began in the early nineteenth century, explaining how Burma descended into decades of civil war and authoritarian government.

Anyone concerning oneself with Burma – these days also called Myanmar – is confronted with a quite unusual issue: what to call the country. In 1989, the ruling military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in an attempt at 'Burmanisation'. Arguing that 'Myanmar' was not only more inclusive of different ethnic groups, but also, more importantly, a clear rejection of the colonial yoke, the regime imposed this name change on the population without further consultation. Cockett very correctly discusses the politics around the name of Burma/Myanmar in the preface and the third chapter of the book. He explains how non-Burman ethnic groups reject the name Myanmar as a sign of political protest against the regime and also because it simply does not reflect their languages correctly. Hence, in recognition of their objections, Cooke uses the term Burma throughout the book.

As with any historical discussion of a post-colonial state, Burmese history cannot be understood without reflection on its colonial past and, more specifically, the influence of British rule on inter-ethnic relations. Cockett's first chapter takes the reader on a journey back to nineteenth-century Burma, beginning with a beautiful description of the Shwegadon Pagoda, the most famous symbol of Buddhism in the country, allowing the reader to imagine what British explorers must have seen when they arrived shortly before the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824. Cockett continues this poetic style of writing throughout the book, which makes *Blood, Dreams and Gold* a delightful read.

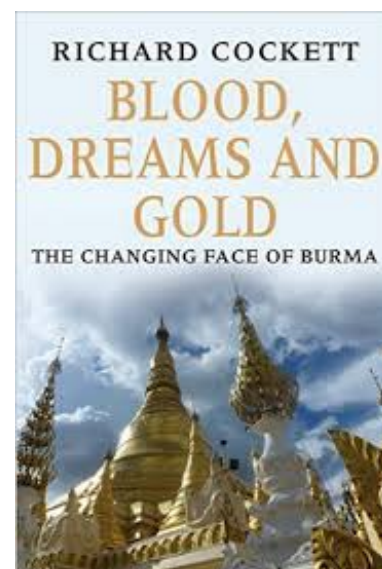




Image Credit: Sunset Over Bagan (Myanmar 2013) (Paul Arps CC BY 2.0)

What is truly admirable is that while offering a very gripping account of Burmese history, the author manages to stay unbiased in his observations. As such, he lets individuals that lived through certain periods come to voice, either by citing their writings or by interviewing them directly. This fills the pages of the book with life, and makes the turbulent happenings of Burma under colonial rule, and especially during its war of independence, very relatable.

Partiality is also avoided through the focus on how Burmese history has been experienced by different ethnic groups. With 135 officially recognised ethnic groups that can be divided into eight 'major national ethnic races', inter-ethnic relations have always carried high importance for the history of Burma, becoming even more crucial during the colonial era when the British colonialists supported Indian and Chinese immigration into Burma. Cockett therefore dedicates a large section of the book to a discussion of the 'plural society' of Burma, a term coined by the most important historian of its colonial era, John Sydenham Furnivall. Of Burma in 1948, he stated that 'there is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit'.

Cockett goes on to recount how this 'plural society' has left its mark on the present by describing how the streets of the capital Yangon are still largely divided along ethnicity and, accordingly, occupation. This is not only due to the fact that occupations were at the time largely chosen by ethnic group, but much more so because the colonial administration of Yangon specifically allocated land to different religious and ethnic groups. That a romantic view of a plural society, filled with different ethnicities living peacefully side-by-side, is not reflective of reality becomes clearer when Cockett proceeds to describe how non-Burmese minorities such as Indians and Chinese were forcefully driven out of the country after Burma gained independence from British rule in 1948. The dilemma of inter-ethnic conflict runs through the book like a red thread, and is picked up again in the last chapter in which Cockett reflects on the potential of democratic change and peaceful coexistence for the ethnically and culturally diverse population of modern-day Burma.

That the imposition of a plural society has directly impacted the violent episodes of the present is particularly visible in the bloody [attacks on Rohingya Muslims in 2012](#). However, Cockett makes sure not to paint a picture of an inherently conflictive nature to these inter-ethnic relations. Throughout the book, he instead describes the ways in which the separation between ethnic groups was artificially created by the military dictatorship through legislation

regulating inter-ethnic relations, such as marriage, aimed at the goal of the complete 'Burmanisation' of the society. Yet, although he dedicates the whole of Chapter Three to discussion of this process, Cockett unfortunately fails to provide a clear description of what he means when referring to 'Burmanisation'. Generally, we can understand this as the attempt of the military regime to recreate the Burman kingdoms and 'reimagine Burma as if much of the country's recent history had never happened'.

Cockett's aim of being fair and balanced in his account of Burmese history is a refreshing change from more black-and-white tales of 'military dictatorship' vs 'democratic liberation', although he remains careful not to support the military regime in any way. It also shines through when he discusses the NLD. Instead of turning the spotlight solely on its most widely known representative, Aung San Suu Kyi, Cockett makes sure to recount the tales of other key figures, such as the co-founder of the NLD and one of the longest-serving political prisoners in the world, Win Tin, whom he calls 'the conscience of Burma's political opposition'.

However, while Cockett's book is beautifully written and gives space to the different ideas and developments relevant to Burmese history since the colonial era, it also comes with the significant downside that the author gets sidetracked quite easily. For example, he describes how the expulsion of the Indian population of Burma after independence was quite similar to the experience of Indian minorities in other countries, such as Uganda. While such a comparison is valid and important to mention, Cockett gets lost in an unhelpfully long description of the fate of Indians in Uganda. Similarly, when discussing Aung San Suu Kyi, Cockett describes the family of the NLD leader in great detail. While clearly very interesting, these lengthy descriptions may distract the reader from the main storyline and render the book somewhat hard to read.

Cockett ends the book with a realistic assessment of the chances of substantive democratic change in Burma, and remains hesitant in his predictions. In an article for *Foreign Policy* in November 2015, he praised the potential for democratic change; however, he also recommended that one should not set expectations too high as 'however well-conducted these elections are, [they won't mark the sort of transformational moment many expect](#)'. As the book only brushes on this topic briefly, a student interested in further reading could look into why the election and subsequent appointment of Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor may not bring about expected results. Furthermore, it may be interesting to explore the impact that the latest elections have had on inter-ethnic relations, particularly with regards to the Rohingya Muslim population.

Overall, *Blood, Dreams and Gold* is a highly recommendable introduction to the history of Burma for readers that are new to this fascinating country as well for those wishing to immerse themselves further by reading this delightfully detailed book. In particular, the many accounts of the experiences of individuals over the past decades render the book not only an interesting account of recent Burmese history, but also, more importantly, highly relatable and humane.

Sonia J. Wieser is a graduate in MSc International Relations from the LSE and holds a BA in Political Science and Communication Studies from the University of Zurich. She is particularly interested in Russian foreign and security policy and its consequences, feminism and gender studies and the linkages of technology with international relations. [Read more by Sonia J. Wieser](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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