



Jonathan Copeland

**Strolling down the
Streets of Old Rangoon**

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The History and the Buildings

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**What they said about
Strolling down the Streets of Old Rangoon, The History and
the Buildings**

Take a leisurely stroll through Old Rangoon and be mesmerized by the fin-de-siècle architecture—a unique time capsule of a bygone age.

San Tin Lun, Yangon writer and author of ten books, including *The Legendary Heroes of Myanmar*, *Ancient Myanmar Heroes*, and *Reading A George Orwell Novel in A Myanmar Teashop and Other Essays*

Follow in the footsteps of Somerset Maugham and Noël Coward: high tea at the Strand Hotel—five-star history at its best.

Ni Wayan Murni, owner of Murni's Warung, Murni's Warung Shop, Murni's Houses and Tamarind Spa, Ubud, Bali (www.murnis.com)

The highest number of colonial buildings in one square mile—a fascinating glimpse of a distant corner of the British Empire.

Audrey Pipe, Anglo-Burmese, resident of the United Kingdom

For Dr Bob Percival

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John Gielgud

Sir Hubert Elvin Rance

Assassination

Independence

Part 2: Colonial Buildings of Rangoon

The Secretariat, Now: Empty

St. Mary's Cathedral

Fytche Square, Now Maha Bandula Garden

City Hall

Rowe & Co., Now Aya Bank

Immanuel Baptist Church

The Burmese Favourite Department Store, Became the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (moved)

Central Fire Station

Central Telegraph Office

Rangoon Supreme or High Court

The Reserve Bank of India, Now the Stock Exchange

Oppenheimer & Co., Now Innwa Bank

Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Now Myanma Foreign Trade Bank

Armenian Apostolic Church of St. John the Baptist

Bibby Line

Rander House, Now Internal Revenue Department

Oriental Life Assurance, Now Indian Embassy

A. Scott & Co.

Sofaer's, Now Lokanat Gallery

Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, Now Inland Water Transport Board

Grindlays Bank, Now Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank

Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, Now Myanmar Economic Bank 2

General Post Office, Now Central Post Office

Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, Now Myanmar National Airlines

Accountant-General's Office, Now Yangon Divisional Court

Customs House

Police Commissioner's Building

The Strand Hotel

Rangoon General Hospital, Now Yangon General Hospital

Holy Trinity Cathedral

Scott Market, Now Bogyoke Aung San Market

New Excelsior Theatre, Now Closed

British and Foreign Bible Society, Now Myanmar Bible Society

Rangoon Central Railway Station, Now Yangon Central Railway Station

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PREFACE

I first went to Rangoon in 1981. It was called Rangoon then before the military government changed the name to Yangon in 1989. They also changed the name of the country to Myanmar, but most people preferred to use the old, poetic, evocative names, partly to make a political statement.

I was immediately struck by the time warp that the city was languishing in. Old-fashioned limousines cruised around the city. Old British fire engines languidly poked out from the old British Fire Station. It was as if time had stopped still at the very moment that the British had sailed away in 1948.

Since then I have become even more enchanted, but even more concerned by the endangered condition of the colonial buildings. Hence I determined to photograph thirty-five of my favourites and place them in their historical context, because each one of them has a fascinating story to tell and is best understood and appreciated as a milestone in the history of Rangoon.

On my last trip I was fortunate to be introduced by Dr Bob Percival to local author San Lin Tun, who has kindly written an Introduction. He has a cultured, perceptive, insider's view of one of the most interesting and intriguing cultures on the planet. I am working with him on more books on this fascinating city.

Jonathan Copeland
Rye, East Sussex
jonathan@murnis.com

INTRODUCTION

It is my great pleasure and honour to write an introduction for an author who has fallen in love with Yangon, which was previously known as Rangoon.

Yangon was originally, in the early 11th century, a small fishing village called Dagon founded by the Mon, who dominated Lower Burma at that time. It was centred around the Shwedagon Pagoda. In 1755 King Alaungpaya conquered Dagon and renamed it 'Yangon'. Literally Yangon means 'End of Strife'. At that time, no one thought that Yangon would become a flourishing, cosmopolitan city with colonial and heritage buildings.

Rangoon is now a modern city with vibrant activities and attractions. The city was developed during British rule. They successfully changed a humid, swampy place into a thriving, modern one, which embraced everyone without any discrimination, no matter where they came from, either from the East or from the West.

That is one of the reasons why today you see many different religious edifices, such as pagodas, temples, churches, mosques, and synagogues, standing side by side, existing in close proximity to one another, harmoniously and peacefully.

Under the guidance of British engineer, Lieutenant Alexander Fraser, this marshy place unrecognizably and remarkably metamorphosed into one of the most beautiful cities in South-East Asia, maybe the world. Its residents enjoyed almost everything they fancied. There were wide roads, systematic streets, affordable apartment buildings, consumer friendly markets, grand government buildings, recreational places, playgrounds and parks.

Although damaged, Rangoon withstood the hostility of World World II and many colonial buildings in the downtown district survived to reveal their magnificent, well-constructed architecture and beauty for later generations. The author describes the aesthetic and architectural essence of many of these buildings.

In this book Jonathan Copeland elucidates the significant features of the city, including its chronological history as well as its outstanding colonial and heritage buildings. The author took the most amazing photographs of the city.

Like foreign authors, Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham, George Orwell, Pablo Neruda, Paul Theroux, Pico Iyer, and our good mutual friend, Australian author Bob Percival, he has tried to record the significance of this ever-growing city. I believe this book will give you all the information you need to know about this great city.

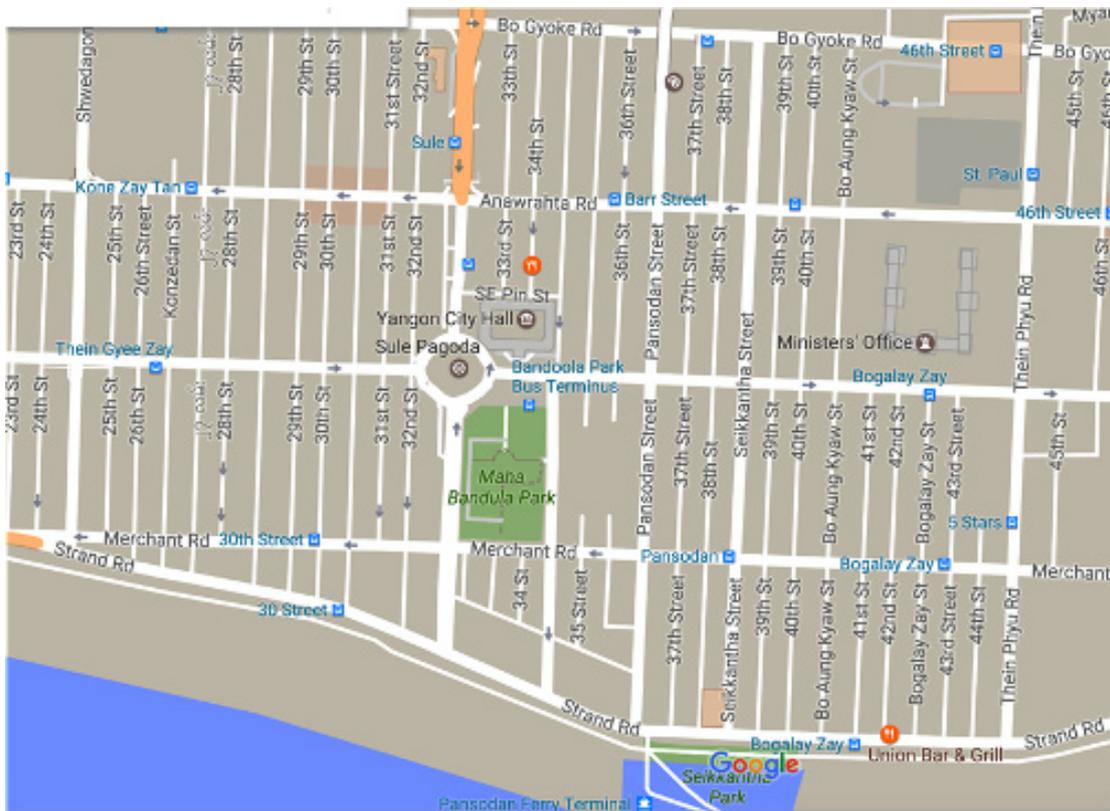
... and hopefully, you will also fall in love with it.

San Lin Tun
Yangon based writer

MAPS



Map of Burma



Map of Rangoon

PART 1

HISTORY OF RANGOON

Introduction

In 1852-3 the British razed the city of Yangon to the ground to build a new city called Rangoon. It is now the best-preserved colonial city in South-East Asia, and probably the world. As the city emerges from forty years of mainly self-imposed isolation, the impressive, massive, imperial buildings, the grandeur that was Rangoon, are now crumbling to pieces and under threat from developers, condominiums, shopping centres, hotels and lack of maintenance. Fortunately for the visitor the best examples of this remarkable colonial legacy are clustered together within easy walking distance in downtown Rangoon, and those are the ones that I will describe.

For a full appreciation of these architectural masterpieces it is necessary to understand them in their historical context. They reflect the mindset of the people commissioning them. These large buildings are symbols, which are making a bold, visual, political statement: we are successful, we are here and we are here to stay. The remarkable thing is that they appear to have been built in the belief that the Empire would last forever whereas, in fact, it would all be over within decades. What would they have done if they had known the future?

Prehistory

Rangoon's early history and age are a mystery. There are no reliable inscriptions. According to legend, Rangoon's most famous building, which is on Singuttara hill dominating the city, the imposing, glittering, elegant Shwedagon Pagoda, swathed in sixty tons of gold leaf, is 2,600 years old and it is said that the Sule Pagoda, not far away, is even older.

The story is that two Burmese merchants, Tapusa and Ballika, brothers from the area around Rangoon, were in North India when they met the Buddha shortly after his Enlightenment. They gave him rice cakes and honey and asked him for something to remind them of the meeting. He gave them

eight hairs from his head which they brought back to Rangoon. They stopped at the Sule Pagoda and continued on to the Shwedagon and buried the hairs deep within the Shwedagon.

But there were people in the area before the Shwedagon. Archaeological evidence shows that *Homo erectus* lived in the region as early as 750,000 years ago and *Homo sapiens* migrated from Africa about 11,000 BC. There was a Stone Age culture and they domesticated plants and animals and polished stone tools.

The Bronze Age began around 1500 BC when people turned copper into bronze, grew rice, and domesticated chickens and pigs. They were among the first people in the world to do so.

The Iron Age followed around 500 BC when iron-working settlements emerged in an area south of present-day Mandalay. Around 200 BC the Pyu people began to move into the upper Irrawaddy valley from present-day Yunnan in south China.

It is believed that Buddhists from Orissa on the east coast of India established a colony, or at least a trading post, in the area shortly after 180 BC but it is quite possible that Hindu merchants visited before that. It's also quite likely that the traffic was two way and the Burmese traded in India and brought ideas back. By the fourth century AD South India's conservative Theravada Buddhism was firmly established in the Irrawaddy Valley.

Alaungpaya

Alaungpaya (1714-1760), a former chief of a small village in Upper Burma, was the founder of the Konbaung Dynasty of Burma. He unified Burma and founded Rangoon in 1755. It was small then—the total area was about an eighth of a square mile and a couple of miles in circumference—surrounded by a solid teak stockade. There were gates in the stockade and outside was a ditch, so Rangoon was in effect a small island, which, because it was low lying, was often flooded. Houses were built on piles. The Sule Pagoda stood outside the town.

Bodawpaya

Alaungpaya's fourth son, King Bodawpaya (1745-1819), who was the founder of the Third Burmese Empire, encouraged foreign merchants,

especially Armenians, Parsees and Indian Muslims to settle in Rangoon, the country's main port. Import and export trade was carried out mostly by Armenians. They were probably the most important foreign residents. The Armenians had their own church near the river, built in 1766 by Gregory Avas, where its plain wooden spire was visible from afar. In December 1850 the church was razed to the ground by a catastrophic fire that swept across the whole of the city.

Europeans, Portuguese, French and English, settled in Rangoon and became very rich. Chinese merchants came from Fukien, Canton and the Straits of Malacca and also did very well. Burma was famous for its teak exports, especially ships' masts or planks. Teak was greatly esteemed for shipbuilding in Calcutta and Madras, and all their supplies came from Burma. Traders paid for it in silver and gold, but the Burmese Government forbade the export of silver and gold. That led to the development of shipbuilding by the British in Rangoon. Imports from India to Burma also increased and the British also always had at the back of their minds trade through Rangoon overland to China, a dream that lasted a hundred years.

The East India Company were concerned about the French who had an agent in Rangoon and therefore more influence than the Company. The concern increased when war broke out with France in 1793. The English did not want a French settlement in Rangoon, which could be used as a base to attack Calcutta and the Company's shipping.

Missionaries

The British East India Company did not want missionaries in India, so the missionaries went to Rangoon. European and American missionaries were not invited to Burma, but they went nevertheless, and built churches and schools. Two English Baptists founded a mission in 1807, but it failed. In 1814 American Baptists Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) and his wife arrived. More joined them. The Burmese accepted them, but they did not understand why they were there, that they were there to convert them. They thought they were like the Armenians or Portuguese Catholics.

British East India Company

There are reports that Rangoon was gloomy, shabby and dirty in the early 1800s, but it was about to become a lot more so, as war with the British loomed. The Burmese were on the point of coming face to face with the might of the British East India Company's army, formed to protect its vast trading interests in India, in the first of three wars in a century, which would change the country for ever.

King Bodawpaya, an expansionist monarch, was ambitiously extending his territory and moving westward towards Arakan on the eastern frontier of Bengal. His Burmese forces entered Arakan and captured modern Manipur in 1813, and neighbouring Assam in 1817-19. They were now right on the border of Bengal, a dangerous place to be, as they were threatening the Company.

Bagyidaw

King Bodawpaya died in 1819. His grandson and successor King Bagyidaw (1784-1846) put down British instigated rebellions in Manipur in 1819. He exterminated the Ahom court in Assam and installed a Burmese military governor-general in 1821. There were cross border encroachments on both sides, British and Burmese. The atmosphere was increasingly tense.

In September 1823 Burma occupied Shalpur Island near Chittagong, which the East India Company claimed. It gave the British a *casus belli*. The real reason for the war, however, was to expand Bengal's sphere of influence and create new markets for British manufacturing.

The First Anglo-Burmese War

Lord William Amherst, the Governor-General of Fort William, declared war on 5 March 1824 and dispatched a naval force of over 10,000 men (5,000 British soldiers and over 5,000 Indian sepoys) from Fort William in Bengal and Fort St. George in Madras up the mouth of the Rangoon River. The initial objective was to seize the commercial port of Rangoon, which had a population of about 20,000 people. It was then much smaller than nowadays and comprised just the area around the present-day Strand Hotel and British Embassy. The only brick buildings were the Armenian and Portuguese churches and the Customs House. The Sule Pagoda was about a mile from

the river and the Shwedagon was about five miles inland. The Burmese were totally unready for war and deserted the place, burning everything they could as they left. The British took the Rangoon area easily, right up to the Shwedagon Pagoda, without a fight, within twenty minutes.

The British, led by General Archibald Campbell, were themselves unprepared to be besieged in Rangoon for almost eight months, suffering sporadic Burmese attacks, famines and epidemics. Sleeping in the monsoon rain, thousands of them got malaria, scurvy, dysentery and other tropical diseases. Hungry tigers emerged from the jungle and attacked humans and cattle alike. They were not expecting to be marooned in Rangoon with no transport or food, all of which the Burmese removed as they left.

There were several battles. In November 1824 Madras sent reinforcements and a new military weapon: the Congreve rocket. While they were being besieged in Rangoon, the British and Indians ransacked most of the Buddhist shrines and pagodas looking for silver and gold Buddha images, which could be melted down and sold in Calcutta. They sacrilegiously billeted themselves in the Shwedagon Pagoda, the most revered site in Burma, and tried to bore into the base of the pagoda in search of hidden treasure but fortunately they failed.

Muslim soldiers from the British Indian Army took a delight in breaking off the heads of Buddha images, just like the Taliban or IS. Thousands of valuable manuscripts were lost. They stole Bodawpaya's great bell and tried to transport it to Calcutta but the raft keeled over and dropped the bell in the Rangoon River where it was later rescued by local people and returned to the pagoda. Only about ten large pagodas survived the vandalism.

The Burmese had many successes. The British also had victories, such as at Tenasserim. They carried away great booty, including a state carriage from Tavoy, decorated with 20,000 gems, worth an enormous £12,500, to Calcutta, where it was bought and shipped to London to be exhibited at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly in 1825.

The commander in chief of the Burmese army was Maha Bandula, then in his early forties, who commanded 10,000 men, 500 horses and numerous elephants. Bandula was killed by a British mortar shell in Danubyu, a small town to the west of Rangoon, on 1 April 1825. He had been walking around the fort in full regalia, under a glittering golden umbrella, to boost his troop's

morale, and was an easy target for British guns. His death was a tremendous blow to morale, the very opposite of what he intended. General Archibald Campbell got his Rajastani armoured boots, which are today in the Royal Armouries Museum in the Tower of London. One of the five major roads in Rangoon is now named after him.

The war ended up being two years long, the longest and most expensive in British Indian history. It resulted in a decisive victory for the British, largely because the Burmese, who although very brave and courageous, had antiquated weapons that were no match for modern British firepower. 15,000 British and Indian soldiers died and probably more on the Burmese side. The cost of the war was a ruinous £5,000,000 or about £10 billion in today's money (roughly US\$18.5 billion). It contributed to a severe economic crisis in India.

Yandabo Treaty

On 24 February 1826 the Burmese signed the humiliating Yandabo Treaty, which ceded Arakan, Manipur and Tenasserim to the British. Burma gave up claims to Assam and Cachar. The Burmese were forced to receive a British Resident at the Court of Ava and pay a crippling indemnity of £1,000,000 in four instalments, nearly the whole royal treasury. The first instalment was paid immediately in gold and silver bullion, the second instalment was to be settled within the first 100 days after signing the treaty, and the rest within two years. Until the indemnity was paid, the British held and occupied Rangoon. It was all very traumatic.

Temporary military rule was imposed on Rangoon and the city was rebuilt. Trade and markets resumed, but not like before. The British Army left on 9 December 1826, when the second instalment was finally paid and handed the region back to a new Burmese Governor, who had absolute powers. Lieutenant Rawlinson was left behind as the Company's agent to collect the remaining instalments and protect commerce.

It wasn't known then, but it was the beginning of the end of Burmese independence. The British would wage two more wars against the Burmese in 1852 and 1885, annex Burma in 1885 and abolish the monarchy. It would become an extension of India, not even run from London.