

INTRODUCTION

“I want to tell you something about Burma, a country which, though one of the most interesting and beautiful in the world, is comparatively little known to the majority of people.”¹ So wrote the painter and illustrator Robert Talbot Kelly more than one hundred years ago, words that are as true today as they were then. Modern-day Burma, or the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, is still a most interesting and beautiful country, and really getting to know it is still a challenge. It is a notoriously complex country from the points of view of history, politics, culture, ethnicity, and linguistics. Ancient clichés such as mysterious, enchanting, bewitching, colorful, and intriguing are all truisms when applied to Burma, but the country’s complexity utterly defies lazy descriptions. The often daunting and confusing sociology of Burma is matched not only by an equally foreboding geography but also by an extraordinarily complex religious landscape.

Burma’s estimated total population of somewhere between fifty-four and sixty million people presents an intricate and overlapping patchwork (definitely *not* a so-called melting pot) of many different ethnic groups that, broadly speaking, each have their own traditional homeland area located within the national territory. While there is a long history of violence and internal conflict, it must not be assumed that the ethnic groups are all at war with one another; there is, in general, a high degree of mutual respect and solidarity among Burma’s constituent peoples. Some of these peoples are united by a common religion, and when this is not the case they are often

2 united at least by a common desire for self-determination and by shared experiences of oppression and hardship.² Few of the peoples of Burma are united by a common first language, though Burmese serves as a *lingua franca*, and many of Burma's people are at least bilingual or trilingual. This all adds to the wonder and complexity of Burma.

To Burma's multiplicity of ethnic groups, most with their own independence movements, historic alliances, and historic rivalries, is added the inevitable complexity of great religious diversity.³ Christians, though a minority, are more widely spread, more visible, and more vocal than many people would imagine. As is well known, British empire builders—first the military, then the civilians—took the Church of England with them wherever they went, including Burma. Privileged as they once were in many ways, Anglicans have only ever been the third-largest group among the Christian denominations in Burma, losing out to Baptists and Roman Catholics, who, for a variety of reasons, enjoyed more missionary success. Even with the might of the British Empire behind it, Anglicanism in Burma never vied, bullied, coerced, or conspired for first place among the denominations, and later generations of Anglicans have wondered why the colonial government did not do more to promote their church. It was destined to be a modest and unassuming church, begun as a simple extension of the one back home in Britain, which George Orwell, who spent six years in Burma, half-affectionately and half-sarcastically called “the poor, unoffending old Church of England.”⁴ It is no small credit to subsequent generations of Anglicans over the past two hundred years that their church is still to be found all over the country.

The present-day Anglican Church in Burma may sometimes be presumed to be a mere relic of the British Empire, a thing discarded and left behind by the departing colonists. It may be considered an oddity, an anomaly, a focal point for the nostalgia of a dwindling Anglophile clique—perhaps catering to the last surviving nonagenarian handful of former functionaries of the Raj and their descendants. But the reality is not nearly so bleak, arcane, or pathetic as this, and although it was indeed originally a church of empire, the Anglican Church in Burma, both before and since national independence in 1948, has enjoyed a rich history and identity all its own.⁵ This book sets out to explore what became of that “poor, unoffending” Victorian colonial church, to uncover its often surprising part in the dramatic history of the twentieth century, and to chart its survival in the face of suppression and persecution. This book aims to explain the Church's current role in a rapidly evolving regional and global Christianity

and a rapidly realigning global Anglicanism by carefully looking into the key issues and contexts involved. This book reveals that far from being a decaying relic of empire, the Anglican Church in Burma has found and continues to nourish its own unique and vibrant identity.

Contrasts run throughout every aspect of the Church's history. The bringers of the supposed salvation of British colonialism may have conveyed some lasting benefits to Burma; this is difficult to dispute. Among the most enduring of such benefits, culturally speaking, would be the high value placed on education and the virtue of expanding access to it. Another lasting benefit, practically speaking, would be the railways, which to this day interconnect the vast and daunting territory at a low cost to the passenger. But colonialism also institutionalized certain types of prejudice, condoned daily injustices, and forged deep inequalities. During the Second World War, triumph was wrested from adversity at enormous cost, and the hoped-for liberation of national independence also brought with it new lows of division, discrimination, and violence.

In recent years, the world has become aware of situations apparently devoid of hope emerging from Burma's Rakhine state, where the Rohingya ethnic group and others continue to face a dire human rights and humanitarian catastrophe. The crisis has provided a window onto the complex and confusing situation inside Burma and has facilitated a growing realization that the Rohingya case is just one of many cases of systematic state violence. This is in stark contrast to the declared democratic aspirations of recent elected governments and invites the conclusion that the military never truly relinquished power.⁶ This situation has not left the country's Christian population untouched, and the Church has been forced to craft both its own defense mechanisms and cautious responses to the surrounding persecutions. But clear answers and compact solutions are not readily available, so it is important to set correspondingly realistic expectations when investigating any one aspect of the country.

Being a Christian in Burma is not one single definable experience, of course. The population of Burma is composed of many different peoples, and Christians, though present among nearly all of these peoples, are not evenly distributed. Christians are most present, however, among peoples who have undeniably suffered the highest levels of oppression and discrimination. Both previous and current governments of Burma have presided over some of the most unconscionable and atrocious human rights violations and humanitarian crises.⁷ Anglicans as a specific body have never been openly branded as targets for special persecution solely on account of

4 being Anglican, but Anglicans have nearly always been present among the most persecuted peoples. However, to overidentify the Anglican Church with one people or to overidentify any one people with oppression would be a grave mistake. It can sometimes be difficult to ascertain whether Christians have been targeted for being Christians or for other ethnic or political reasons, and care must always be exercised when talking about generalizations. Human rights activists and observers have argued for the need to approach Burma holistically and see all the pieces of the interlocking patchwork as a whole. All the peoples of Burma, in fact, have been oppressed by the same regime(s), and they all aspire to the same basic ideals of peace, justice, freedom, and human rights.⁸

It used to be said that all the best writing about Burma was a hundred years out of date. This has been remedied in the first two decades of this century by a small number of dedicated authors who have embraced the challenge and controversy of Burma. Prominent among these authors, with his fearless dedication to exposing injustice, is Benedict Rogers. For Rogers, reporting on Burma is part of his wider commitment to human rights activism, illustrated by his involvement in the Christian Solidarity Worldwide organization. With a similarly well-informed sensitivity for the difficult issues involved, David Eimer's recent book *A Savage Dreamland: Journeys in Burma* portrays Burma and its people vividly. It is indeed about a hundred years, however, since the story of the Anglican Church in Burma has been properly brought up to date in book form. An inestimable wealth of archival material has been lost or deliberately destroyed in the multiple tragedies of the Second World War and the various large and small postwar anti-religious campaigns, combining with other adverse factors to leave a lamentably permanent void for the inquirer, researcher, and scholar. This constitutes the most obvious and glaring limitation to doing this type of research. It particularly means that much of the very early story of the Church in Burma throws up questions that, as far as we can know, are to remain in want of a conclusive answer. For instance, the exact course of negotiations and correspondence involved in organizing and establishing the first presence of the Church in Burma cannot be comprehensively traced.

Among the older available sources, of special interest are Bishop Jonathan Holt Titcomb's *Personal Recollections of British Burma and Its Church Mission Work* (1880), Rev. W. C. B. Purser's *Christian Missions in Burma* (1911), and Rev. Dr. John Ebenezer Marks's *Forty Years in Burma* (1917). These titles and others are now freely available in digital format online, the

nonprofit Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>) being the ideal place to start looking. A little later on, in the 1930s and 1940s, Bishop George A. West's several books added much to the record of day-to-day life in the Church, as did Rev. Canon A. T. Houghton's fascinating *Dense Jungle Green: The First Twelve Years of the B.C.M.S. Burma Mission* (1937). Details of all of these titles and many more can be found in the bibliography. I must also mention the full digitalized collection of editions of the journal of the Rangoon Diocesan Association (RDA)—called *Quarterly Paper* from 1897 to 1927 and *Burma News* from 1928 to 1970—which are all available online courtesy of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (the Burma/Myanmar Collection). To all of these remarkable authors, and for the preservation and availability of these wonderful resources, I owe a huge debt of gratitude.

Along with all the other issues to consider when studying Burma is the question of the name—is it Myanmar or Burma? The official name of the country, according to the current political administration, is Myanmar. The renaming of Burma as Myanmar in 1989, and of Rangoon as Yangon, without consulting the populace, remains a controversial topic.⁹ Alongside this move came the amended spellings of numerous cities, towns, rivers, and street names in a sweeping (and some would argue belated) rejection of the spellings and pronunciations introduced by the British. Although seen by many as political opportunism without a mandate, both the decision to rename the country and the name Myanmar itself have their defenders and detractors in all walks of Burmese life. One camp maintains that “Myanmar” is not a new name at all but just a more faithful spelling of the country's “old” name—better than the British transliteration “Burma”—and that it reflects the true Burmese pronunciation more accurately.¹⁰ It can be near impossible for Western, Anglophone ears to perceive any commonality between the two spellings, but this relationship between a B and an M is not unique; a similar effort is needed to connect “Bombay” and “Mumbai,” the old and new spellings of the great Indian city. The British name Burma is said by some to evoke the long history of colonial subjugation, while the name Myanmar is defended as being intrinsically correct, historically accurate, and universally acceptable.¹¹ The name “Myanmar” purports to mean “land of many peoples,” though its etymology, as well as the concept's sincerity and desirability, is widely contested. It is not the aim of this book to resolve or much less add to this controversy; the use of the name Burma rather than Myanmar here reflects the fact that for most of this story that was the name used, and it is therefore the name used by the institutions,

6 organizations, political entities, and people in the story. For consistency with the contemporary texts and documents used, therefore, Burma, Rangoon, and the old names and spellings of locations in Burma have been employed, except, of course, where post-1989 documents and texts refer to Myanmar.

When it comes to the story of the Anglicans of Burma, it may be true that written sources are ancient and scarce, but history has not stood still for the Church. This will be especially clear to those readers who have been following developments in the Anglican Communion at the world level. In recent years the Church of the Province of Myanmar (CPM), to give it its official name since the changes of 1989, has reached a worldwide audience as one of the voices vigorously debating the future of global Anglicanism, with much to say about the orientation of global Christianity in general.¹² That voice has begun to be heard loudly and clearly, well out of proportion with this Church's small size. It has joined the chorus of radical, challenging, and even rebellious voices coming from the global south of the world, as one of the cornerstones of GAFCON, the Global Anglican Future Conference. GAFCON is a conservative movement within worldwide Anglicanism calling for a return to Bible-based orthodoxy, out of concern for what it sees as the Anglican Communion leadership's attempts to meet the world halfway and adapt to liberal secular values. In its slightly less than two-hundred-year history, the Anglican Church in Burma has thus gone from a collection of scattered outposts and a handful of wandering missionaries to being a significant player in the campaign to preserve orthodox Anglicanism. Some would call it a bastion of a conservative brand of Christianity that is arguably ancient history in Anglicanism's country of origin, from which, ironically, it was exported to Burma in the first place.

The future of the Church in Burma is therefore not only open-ended and somewhat difficult to predict but is being made on a daily basis in ongoing debates and developing regional and international relationships. The issues are far from trivial, and they go to the heart of organized global Christianity and what it will mean to be a twenty-first-century Christian. The coming years will prompt many types of reflection for a developing country like Burma. Against the backdrop of multiform challenges and realizations brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, in 2020 the Church in Burma celebrated fifty years as an autonomous provincial and primatial Church, and in just three years' time the Church will celebrate two hundred years of Anglican presence in Burma. Despite evident difficulties, there is no better time to encourage further study in this area, and with the support, openness, and optimism of the current Church leadership, there is much

scope for future scholarship from both inside and outside Burma. As far as the history is concerned, there are many valid and appealing reasons to delve into this fascinating story. This book reconstructs the two-hundred-year history from archival materials but also benefits from new field research with fresh perspectives from the ground. It draws on the insights and viewpoints of Anglicans from many different backgrounds who have graciously welcomed me into their midst and patiently answered my interminable questions, and the end product is humbly dedicated to all of them. The story of the Anglican Church in Burma is a crucial aid to a complete understanding of World Christianity in general and Christianity in South-east Asia in particular.