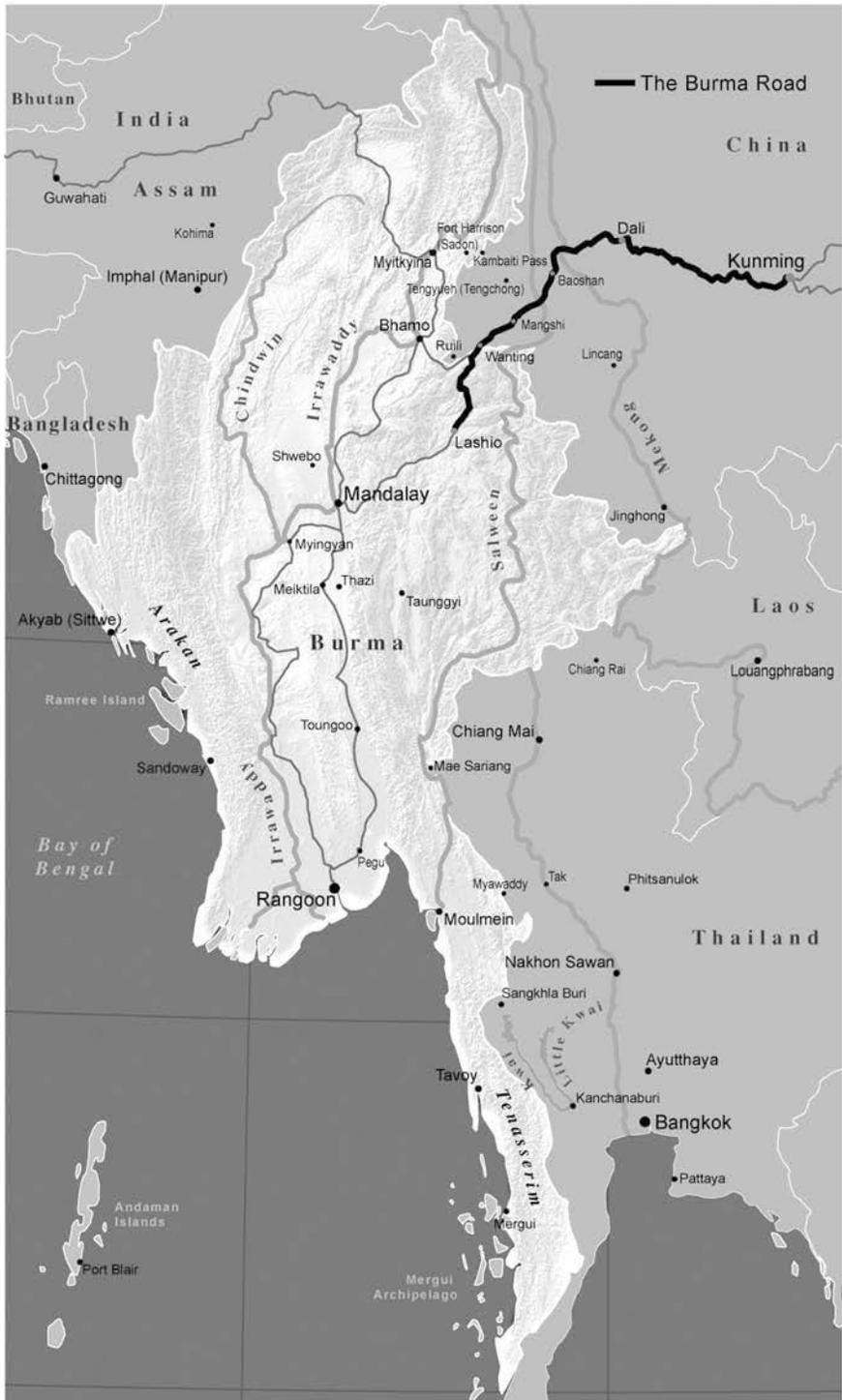


A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR OF BURMA



A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR OF  
**BURMA**

WENDY LAW-YONE

Foreword by David I. Steinberg

Columbia University Press  
NEW YORK



Columbia University Press  
*Publishers Since 1893*  
New York Chichester, West Sussex  
cup.columbia.edu  
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First published in the United Kingdom by  
Chatto & Windus as *Golden Parasol* in 2013.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Law-Yone, Wendy, author.

A daughter's memoir of Burma / Wendy Law-Yone ; foreword by David I. Steinberg.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-231-16936-3 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-231-53780-3 (e-book)

1. Law-Yone, Edward Michael, 1911–1980. 2. Newspaper editors—Burma—  
Biography. 3. Newspaper publishing—Burma—History—20th century. 4. Burma—  
History—1948—Personal narratives. I. Title.

DS530.53.L39L39 2013

070.4'10922—dc23

[B]

2013047244



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

This book is printed on paper with recycled content.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Jacket Design: Chang Jae Lee

Jacket Image: Bagan, Burma © Kevin Maloney/Aurora Photos/Corbis

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*for John*



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# Foreword

Edward Law-Yone was one of a kind. He straddled multiple worlds, crossed cultural lines, moved through governmental and diplomatic circles with a sense of assurance and belonging, and yet was often in opposition to both the left and the right, while seeming on intimate terms with all factions. His name was synonymous with *The Nation*, the controversial and irreverent, but highly respected, English-language newspaper he published and edited. Through sheer force of personality, backed by his newspaper's powerful voice, he swayed ministers, generals, and entire governments.

I first met Edward Law-Yone in 1958, when I was in Rangoon with the Asia Foundation. Already something of a legend, Ed (as he was known to his friends) impressed me with his combination of charm, ferocity, and absolute confidence. When my foundation offered to pay for a national survey to determine who read his newspaper, Ed declined. "Everyone of importance reads *The Nation*," he responded. And he was correct. I cannot recall anyone else in Asia who exerted such influence for someone in his position.

*The Nation* was not without its critics. The active left wing, prominent in that period, was a strong opponent, often charging that Ed maintained connections with U.S. intelligence services, having worked with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. But Ed established his political independence and was firmly nationalistic, chastising the United States for various policy errors while also criticizing the left for its more egregious mistakes. He was well known beyond Burma's borders, especially after winning the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1959 for journalism and literature.

The current reputation of Burma, now Myanmar, as the longest military dominated state in the world (1962–2011) obscures its civilian origins. Some sentimentalists, appalled by nearly fifty years of arbitrary and repressive military rule, look back nostalgically at the civilian period following independence in 1948 as an ideal democratic era. No such golden age ever existed, although an ineffective type of pluralism and democratic rule was evident.

Too few of us are left who remember the political dysfunction of that period, when foreign journalists posted to Burma would sometimes refer to the government as the “Rangoon regime,” since so much of the country was either under insurgent threat or in insurgent hands. Internal tensions were many, some fomented by the Cold War’s influence. In Rangoon, a Soviet Union diplomat tried to defect and failed. The Chinese refused to speak with Westerners at the ubiquitous cocktail parties, but they brought in song and dance troops for performances to extol Chairman Mao and proclaim that the East was Red. Per U.S. policy, American diplomats were not allowed to attend. Western foreigners were under verbal attack in much of the press, and were often suspected of collusion with various international political ploys.

Yet Westerners were actually scarce in a city as big as Rangoon; one rarely saw any if one wandered downtown. True, there were a few residual economic advisors—a truncated diplomatic corps, the usual handful of missionaries, and a couple of nonprofit foundation types. I remember a Danish teak merchant, a Polish professor in exile, a West German chemical sales rep, and an American airline executive. We ex-pats could all be accommodated in a single largish room, and often felt we were marginalized. We congregated too much among ourselves, feeding on and regurgitating the many rumors that flourished on the social grapevine. Due to the threat of insurgents and/or bandits, travel “up-country” could only be undertaken by the diplomatic community with official Burmese approval. There was an air of dislocation and constant tension that came to the fore only when we boarded the plane to Bangkok. Perhaps we were the international equivalent of “waifs and strays,” the name of the orphanage run by

the philanthropist Daw Tee Tee Luce, another Burmese Magsaysay-award winner. Her husband Gordon Luce, renowned British scholar of ancient Burmese history, held soirees where he played Bach on his phonograph and eruditely commented on it, while the howling monsoon winds and torrential rain increased our feeling of isolation. In our drinking and partying habits, we were probably closer to an incipient Noel Coward play rather than to a dour Joseph Conrad novel.

What saved us from complete social and cultural insularity was a relatively small community of internationalized Burmese. They were our anchor in the uncharted, murky waters of Burmese politics. They became our friends—talking, drinking, gossiping with us, accompanying us on our risky up-country travels. Some had been trained or employed abroad, others had sojourned overseas, and most had been educated in elite foreign private schools, as had Ed. For many of us transients, these friendships were lasting and important. In Thailand—a nation more politically stable but less open on a social level—comparable human connections were not so easily achieved during the same era.

That era ended abruptly in 1962, when General Ne Win brought in radical ideological and administrative changes under his military-controlled BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party). Singularly autocratic and mercurial, Ne Win set about nationalizing all private businesses and jailing the intelligentsia and nonmilitary establishment. *The Nation* was closed. Ed was among those imprisoned—in his case, for five years. The legal system was destroyed, the rule of law discarded. Though the civilian-ruled state had employed antidemocratic legislation dating back to the colonial period in order to pursue specific political ends and frustrate any opposition, the rule of whim under Ne Win's military government was palpably different. It was far more intrusive and complete. Our Burmese friends became fearful of any contact with Westerners—a sad but understandable predicament. In the new climate of xenophobia, any “Westernized” Burmese, indeed any Burmese seen to sympathize with nefarious foreign influences, was under constant threat. For us foreigners, it meant even greater isolation.

Ne Win had replaced a competent civilian bureaucracy with an inexperienced military on whose loyalty he could depend on but whose abilities were not up to their responsibilities. For a socialist economy, this was blatantly unproductive. The resulting poverty and desperation under the mismanaged and repressive military rule led to increased ethnic and political rebellions throughout the country and across the border in Thailand.

In 1969, when former Prime Minister U Nu managed to flee to India and eventually to Thailand, Ed—who had also succeeded in leaving Burma with his family—was already waiting in Bangkok to help launch a campaign to oust Ne Win. Ed took over the foreign and public relations arm of the opposition movement, a position for which he was aptly suited.

In spite of considerable external financial support, supposedly from foreign businesses aiming for concessions under a restored civilian government, the effort failed. Eventually, U Nu was allowed to return to Rangoon. He spent his declining years editing Buddhist scriptures at the World Peace Pagoda, where I spent an hour with him reminiscing on old times in the early 1990s. Ed left Asia for the United States, where several of his children had already gone ahead, and spent his last years in exile reading, writing, and fishing. He died in 1980, and thus was spared the terrible events of the failed people's revolution of 1988 and the score of repressive years of direct military rule that followed.

Having left Burma myself in 1962, unceremoniously booted out along with my colleagues in the Western nonprofit community, I was able to renew my friendship with Ed in Bangkok. This was at an optimistic moment—when U Nu's forces had raised funds for what was planned to be a major offensive against the Ne Win regime. We met again several more times, after Ed and his wife Eleanor moved to Washington D.C.

It was in D.C. that Ed gave me a copy of the memoirs that he had shared with his family. As an intimate, unvarnished account of much of the politics and many of the personalities of an anguished period in Burmese history, it struck me as a document that should be published. Given Ed's propensity to be acerbic when he wanted, however, I

suggested a legal review for so volatile a manuscript. Several decades on, the manuscript has finally been given an airing, through the agency of his daughter Wendy's book.

Using her copy of Ed's recollections for parts of her own memoir, Wendy has crafted an engaging and indeed illuminating portrait of her father and her country. *A Daughter's Memoir of Burma* has an encompassing span that reaches beyond Burma to China, Thailand, and the United States. It is partly a fond family reminiscence by a gifted author, very much worth reading for that purpose alone. It is also, however, a reflection on a different era in the history of Burma, now Myanmar—and, with Ed's contributions, a primary source of the period. For Ed was not just an obscure observer; he was a player as well. His ancestry in China's Yunnan Province, his education at an English-language school in Mandalay, his rise as publisher and editor of *The Nation*, his role in the bid to help bring back civilian rule to Burma, and finally his exile in the United States—all can be read as a microcosm of the vagaries of modern Burma.

Wendy Law-Yone's accomplishments as a novelist are self-evident. Her first novel, *The Coffin Tree*, is as subtle as it is evocative, and one that should be read by those interested in both literature and the Burma problem. Her second book, *Irrawaddy Tango*, is darker but also reflects a different aspect of Burmese society. *The Road to Wanting*, set on the border of Burma and China, is a disquieting fictional window on human trafficking. Now, in her first nonfiction work, Wendy captures the multiple fortunes and misfortunes that have shaped Burma to this day. The excellent result stands alone outside of any borders—beyond Burma, beyond Myanmar, even beyond the region.

It is an honor to write this brief foreword and a pleasure to revisit the personalities, histories, and landscapes remembered by this multifaceted memoir.

David I. Steinberg  
Bethesda, Maryland



A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR OF BURMA



## Prologue



The bomb went off at two in the morning, kicking me out of a deep sleep. I caught the tail end of the blast and felt the windows flinch. ‘Is it an earthquake?’ I heard myself ask. John was up in a flash, pulling back the curtains, peering through the plate-glass window of our second-storey room – out into the blank stillness of Rangoon after hours. ‘That’s no earthquake,’ he muttered, climbing back into bed. The next minute he was fast asleep.

It was a bomb, then; it had to be. In my semi-conscious state, I found this reassuring. A bomb on my first night back made perfect sense. I had come home, it told me, to a world unchanged, a world left behind half a century ago.

Yet it was rumours of change, expectations of change, that had lured me back. Word was that Burma, my long-forbidden homeland, was starting to let down its guard a little, to open its doors a crack. Aung San Suu Kyi, pro-democracy leader and pre-eminent political prisoner, had at last been set free. There was talk of an amnesty for *all* political prisoners. Talk, too, of peace agreements between the military regime and the armies of the ethnic minorities; of disengagement from the economic clutches of China and re-engagement with America and other capitalist countries. There was talk of a Burmese Spring.

And falling on the ears of Burmese exiles like a siren song was talk of clemency. In the 17 August 2011 issue of the government newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, President Thein Sein had as good as encouraged ‘Myanmar citizens living abroad for some reasons’ to return home.

I was one of those prodigal citizens curious to test the new benevolence. And the beginning of 2012, a leap year, seemed an auspicious moment.

The prospect of change is always unsettling, even when change augurs improvement. Even more unsettling was the notion that I wouldn't be able to tell change when I saw it. I had left Burma in 1967, aged twenty. Only once since then had I been back – for a brief visit in 2001. Now, ten years on, would I even know old from new, familiar from different?

The first big difference was plain to see right inside the terminal of Mingaladon airport. Back in 2001, soldiers with sub-machine guns and skulking military intelligence agents clearly ruled the roost. Now there wasn't a khaki uniform in sight, and every single immigration officer at the head of every long line of foreign passport holders was a woman.

A brisk officer riffled the pages of my American passport with the ease of a card sharp shuffling a deck. She perked up when I answered a routine question in Burmese. 'Oh, so Auntie still speaks Burmese!' She cast a glance over my shoulder, to where John was standing. 'Your husband?' I nodded.

'American?'

'No, British.'

'Been to Burma before?'

'No, this is his first time.' But why was she interrogating me, and not him?

She must have read my thoughts. 'I only ask,' she said with a smart double bang of her stamp, 'because of the religious festivals. There are quite a few this season. Take him to some of the upcountry ones, why don't you. He'll be most amused.' On my last visit, a team of po-faced apparatchiks had spent a good half-hour scrutinising my passport and grilling me on the motives behind my return.

At the reception desk of the downtown Panorama Hotel a bevy of young women were filling in forms and logbooks in rapid but beautifully legible roman script. They worked their calculators and phones

with one hand, flipped through papers with the other, and issued tart reminders to their male colleagues – smiling lads who hovered about the lobby – to get the lead out and *move* it. Was Burma being run by women now? I wondered. What other transformations had passed me by?

It was only hours later, when the explosion went off, that I was rid of the nagging twinges of doubt and displacement. All the cobwebs in my head were blown away, it seemed, by the blast. In my hypnopompic state – that psychic no-man’s-land between sleeping and waking – clarity reigned. For the first time since landing I knew exactly where I was. I was back on solid ground – the ground of the distant past with its old certainties.

It’s New Year’s Eve, our second day in Burma, and I’m on a mission. Tomorrow we head upcountry – there’s a lot of ground to cover in our sixteen-day tour – but before we leave the city I’m determined to set eyes on a particular vestige of my childhood. I just hope it’s still standing. It was there the last time I looked, ten years ago. I know it was there just two months ago: I have pictures taken by a friend to prove it. But even there the changes are apparent. What those pictures show, apart from a brick facade splotted with green mould, is an accretion of rubble along the front of the building in question. Not a promising sign, but one must hope.

We set out from our hotel on Pansodan Street and walk to the next intersection at Bogyoke Aung San Street. There, a right turn leads straight up the steps to Kyauktada, the stone bridge for which this township is named, or straight down the front entrance of RUBY, the Pepto-Bismol-pink mini-mall, where crowds swarm in to pick through the cornucopia of ‘made in Thailand’ clothing, Korean rice cookers, Chinese alarm clocks, Indonesian bamboo backscratchers, Japanese food preserves and other imported luxuries.

We turn left – a bit of a detour, but we want to see something of this commercial quarter. Crouched on dwarf stools along the pavements are food vendors with trays of roasted corn and bushels of glistening plums, with kettles of hot stews and platters of cold noodles,

shredded vegetables and meat. On the opposite side of our covered walkway are kiosks selling umbrellas, sandals, handbags, packaged snacks. The poster-plastered walls of the old cinema halls – the Shwe Gon, the Myoma, the Su Htoo Pan – are showing their age and then some.

Curious about what's playing, I approach a box-office window. 'I don't want a ticket,' I inform the ticket sellers, a pair of budding starlets, 'I just want to know what's showing.'

The girls are puzzled. *Showing?*

'Yes. Showing. Which movie is showing, can you tell me?' Have I got the term right? I wonder. I used the colloquial Burmese word for movie, i.e. *biskoke* (for 'bioscope'). Perhaps that's outdated. '*Yokeshin*,' I explain. Living image. Film.

The girls exchange frowns; they shake their heads.

*Yokeshin! Yokeshin!* I repeat loudly. If they still can't understand, they must be hard of hearing. Then I happen to glance at the sign above the booth. MONEY EXCHANGE, it says very clearly, in both English and Burmese.

'What was that all about?' John wants to know as I slink away, but I'm not ready to be laughed at so early in the day. 'Never mind. A minor misunderstanding. Oh, look at all the Aung San Suu Kyi key chains!'

They're everywhere we turn. Not just key chains but calendars, posters, magazines, face towels, banners, wall hangings – all emblazoned with that world-famous visage. Less than a year ago, the public display of a single image of The Lady would have been anathema to the military regime, meriting a jail sentence. Now it's up on the walls of restaurants and tea shops; it's down on the pavements, strewn across plastic groundsheets, side by side with old IT textbooks, battered paperback fiction in Burmese and English, Japanese comics, German manuals for long obsolete appliances . . .

Here it is, hot off the press, proof positive that change is forthcoming: a poster of Aung San Suu Kyi arm in arm with Hillary Clinton, whose momentous visit to Burma took place just last month. And here's a portrait to end all family portraits: Aung San Suu Kyi with her famous father, General Aung San. It's not one of the black-and-

white photos showing her as a toddler in his arms, in the year of his assassination. No, in this convincing colour portrait, the 66-year-old daughter and her 32-year-old father are seated side by side, brought together by Photoshop magic. A perplexing image indeed, reminding me of the old riddle in which a man points to a portrait and says, 'This man's father is my father's son,' leaving us to work out who the person in the portrait is.

Enough of our downtown wander; time to circle back. We take a left on Maha Bandoola Garden Street, then another left on Anawrahta Road. Ah, here we are – turning the corner onto 40th Street . . .

Bad news – just as I feared. They're tearing up the road! We're treading on a still-tacky concrete surface, with sand and cement bags lining the edges. The air is thick with the dust of demolition. Maybe I'm too late; maybe there's nothing left to see up ahead. I'm tempted to sprint forward and find out for certain. But at the same time I can't resist dawdling. This, after all, is the downtown street of my childhood – this row of small businesses, shabby shops and crowded flats.

It's heartening in a way to see how little has changed; how obligingly *intact* things have remained since my last visit – since my childhood days, come to that. Faded shop signs in their hand-lettered fonts. Balconies with green slime coating their carved stone brackets. Laundry lines spanning windows with missing panes. Swags of electrical wires spanning the street. The only truly new addition is the satellite dish. But even these protuberances have an organic feel, flourishing along the tops and sides of buildings like the bushes and trees muscling their way through the cracked masonry of private homes and historic landmarks alike.

Maybe the fresh concrete is misleading, and there's no cause for panic. Lulled by the familiar dilapidation, I walk on – almost past my destination. But here it is suddenly, right in front of me: no. 290 40th Street.

No wonder I nearly overlooked it: the whole thing has gone grey. Ghost grey since my friend photographed it just two months ago. The old red brick with its verdigris stains, the cement front steps, the wires and cables strung across the walls – the entire facade from top to bottom has been covered with a chalky grey undercoat. Without



*The Nation* building, October 2011 (left) & December 2011 (right).

Courtesy of Guy Slater.

the number plate, I would never have recognised the building. Not only has it been stripped of its character, it's been stripped of every sign of life. The windows are boarded up, the front doors padlocked. And here too the road is being repaved, all the way to the edges of the building's foundation.

I cross over to the opposite side for a better perspective, unaware that I'm lurking at the entrance to someone's flat. Behind me, the expanded metal doors judder apart. 'Oh, pardon me . . .' I jump aside. 'I was just looking . . .'

Squeezed into the crack of the partly opened gate are a couple who look to be in their sixties. The man, Chinese, is sporting a cheerful batik shirt but looks profoundly sleep-deprived. His eyes are red-rimmed and puffy; his smile is tired. The Burmese woman (his wife, I assume) is white-haired, but *her* eyes have a wistful, youthful shine. They regard me quizzically, straying now and then to John, who is still on the other side of the street photographing no. 290.

'I was just looking at that building,' I explain. 'It used to be my father's office.'

The man's eyebrows go up. 'Your *father's* office?'

'Yes. *The Nation* newspaper.'

'And your father was . . .'

'The editor.'

'*The Nation* editor? You don't mean U Law-Yone?'

'I do. Did you know him?'

'Not personally, no. But as a boy I used to stand here and watch all the comings and goings across the street. So many important people driving up in their cars, one dignitary after another. I saw your father often, of course. But never to speak to.'

'That would have been – when?'

'Let me think. My parents moved to this building in the late fifties, about four or five years before . . . um, U Law-Yone . . .'

' . . . was thrown in jail?'

The man nods, averting his eyes, but his wife leans forward, a tender look in her eyes. 'Do you know Plymouth?' she asks me, but the question is really meant for John, who has stopped taking pictures to introduce himself.

John says, 'Plymouth? In England? Yes, I do.'

The woman's face lights up. 'We have a son in Plymouth,' her husband explains, and for a minute his groggy smile lifts in a proud grin. 'But you want to know about the building.'

I ask how long it has been boarded up.

'Long,' says the man. 'Quite long. For a while it was a government printing office, but for most of the time it's been lying empty.'

'Who owns it now, do you know?'

'The government of course. But they've got plans to restore it, we've heard. They finally did something about the big crack in the front, up there in the left-hand corner. A tree was growing out of it. It was splitting the wall.'

'They have two children,' the wife interjects.

'Who?'

'My son and his wife. In Plymouth. Shall we give you their address, in case you're ever in Plymouth?'

We exchange business cards. Theirs is laminated, with the Plymouth

address of their son on one side, their own names and address on the other. They're still squeezed into the narrow opening, each clutching their side of the metal grille. Perhaps visits from people like us are an everyday occurrence, now that the country is opening up. Perhaps they're tired of all the traffic, and that's why neither of them shows the slightest inclination to crack the gate open a tad wider, to take a step forward, or to invite us in.

'Do you know what happened to the old printing presses they confiscated when they closed down *The Nation*?' I ask.

'Not sure,' replies the husband, 'but I heard one of them was taken over by the *Myanmar Times*.'

'And where is the *Myanmar Times*?'

'Where?' The man *almost* steps over the threshold to show me. 'There! See there? Just behind that building you're looking at.'

The *Myanmar Times* is the leading English-language news weekly, founded in 2000 by an Australian entrepreneur and a Burmese partner with close ties to the government. Once seen as a sophisticated mouth-piece for the military regime, the paper now exercises a degree of editorial independence denied its competitors, chief among them the *New Light of Myanmar*, the official English-language daily.

Over the years I have seen many issues of the *Myanmar Times*. I have followed the ups and downs of its original founders, both jailed in the course of power struggles among various adversaries and advocates in the government. I have read about the paper's takeover by a private media company, and its move to a new location. But I never knew that this is where it moved to: this white art deco building on Bo Aung Gyaw Street, back to back with our old *Nation*.

But now that I'm on the doorstep, it seems highly unlikely that one of my father's old printing presses has ended up *here*. The *Myanmar Times* is a slick twenty-first-century publication – slick by Burmese standards, anyway. What possible function could an ancient flatbed press with a million moving parts serve on these premises, except possibly as a showroom relic?

I remember as a child wandering into *The Nation*'s printing room, on nights when I was allowed to stay up late at my father's office. I

remember the uneasy thrill of watching one of those monster machines in action, wheels turning, levers pumping, cylinders spinning, trays shuttling back and forth. Alarm bells rang and rang, unheeded, while a river of newsprint went streaking past, spewing out printed sheets that required urgent folding and stacking. The floor buzzed, it shook, it sent a steady shock up through my feet, all the way to my fingernails. The roar was so deafening that the pressmen only spoke in sign language. I could never bear it for very long: I had to get out of the way, before I too was sucked up, chewed up, and spat out as pulp by that insatiable, unstoppable giant.

Now of course I'd give anything to set eyes on such a dear old relic, a throwback to the dark ages of hot lead, when *The Nation* was in its prime. 'Then go in and ask,' says John, motioning me towards the security guard at the front desk.

The guard looks, well, guarded, as I explain my interest in the building. In my nervousness I go into unnecessary detail about a newspaper that no longer exists, and the presses that produced it. He cuts me off before I can finish. 'Just a moment,' he says, and mutters into the mouthpiece of a phone with his back to us. Then he informs us that someone will be down soon, and invites us to wait.

There is nowhere to sit in the lobby, so we stand by the front entrance (another half-open expanding metal gate). I am staring absently at the street, thinking of what to say to the summoned employee, who may or may not allow me a look at an antiquated printing press, when something tells me I've stood here before, viewing the street from this very spot.

I'm trying to put my finger on what it is that seems so familiar, so *recent*, when it comes to me in a vivid *mise en scène*. There, out on the street, the aftermath of a bomb blast is played out in slow, silent motion. Glass shards spray the air. Chunks of metal and masonry hit the ground, bouncing soundlessly among the litter of paper and rags and broken furniture pieces. Smoke swirls thickly over the debris, then clears to reveal two bodies lying on the ground, their khaki uniforms in shreds. Taking the pulse of one, then the other, is a young man who quickly whips off the shirt and vest he's wearing and strips them into bandages.

‘Do you know what I’ve just realised?’ I’m about to tell John about my epiphany when the individual we’ve been waiting for materialises, introducing himself as a reporter for the *Myanmar Times*. How can he help?

Gone is my plea for a glimpse of an old printing press. ‘I have just realised,’ I blurt out, ‘that *this* is where my father got his start as a newspaperman. Right here. Yes, in this very building, back when it was the *New Times of Burma*. He used to work here, before he set up his newspaper in the building behind this one. It was his boss, Tin Tut, who was assassinated out on the street right there. Tin Tut was the former foreign minister. Someone threw a grenade at his car. My father came running from his office out back, and found his bodyguards still lying on the ground . . .’

The reporter, round-faced, round-eyed, looks like a teenager but is probably in his thirties. He nods sympathetically. ‘Please come upstairs and meet the English-language editor,’ he says. ‘He’ll be pleased to show you around.’

On our way up the staircase with its slightly treacherous open treads, I turn to the young man. ‘Sorry. I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Wendy Law-Yone.’

‘I know,’ he says quietly. ‘I’ve read your articles. Online.’

The newsroom upstairs turns out to be a stylish loft conversion: steel columns, glass walls separating the editors’ offices, recessed lights in the high ceilings. Industrial shades hang over bright blue cubicles, each equipped with a desktop PC. Most of the consoles are superannuated models with bulging backs, but everything else looks new, not least the large abstract paintings – exuberant cocktails of hot and cold hues that decorate the upper walls of exposed brick. No sign of any flatbed presses.

The English-language editor on duty is American. Thirty-ish, athletic, he’s wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and looks like he’s just come in from a long bike ride. Which he has, he tells me. It’s supposed to be his day off, but he’s been called in on account of breaking news.

I explain my interest in the *Myanmar Times* building. Both the

Burmese reporter and the American editor nod knowingly at the mention of *The Nation*, even though it ceased to exist before they were born. They seem genuinely interested in the story of its founding. So as they walk me through the newsroom, inviting me to look around and take all the pictures I want, I give them a tour of my own, pointing out hidden connections between this building and the one at the back: physical connections like a now sealed-off door to a common passageway, as well as other, less tangible linkages.



Dad as a young editor & publisher

It was 1948, the year of Burma's independence. A century of British rule had ended. The task of nation-building was just beginning. My father, Ed Law-Yone, was looking for a job.

Dad had worked in transportation for most of his adult life – first with the Burma Railways, then, during the war, as an officer in charge of the city's evacuation when the Japanese air strikes on Rangoon began. At war's end, after a stint with the American OSS (the Office

of Strategic Services was the wartime predecessor of the CIA), he joined the newly formed Road Transport Board, as Chief Traffic Superintendent. But he didn't want to remain in transportation all his life; he was ready for something different.

In the course of his transportation career my father had had to deal with all sorts of personalities, many of them foreign nationals. This qualified him, he believed, for a career in international diplomacy. He went to call on an old wartime acquaintance, then a senior civil servant in the colonial government. The man was now foreign minister. Tin Tut was his name.

The minister greeted him warmly. 'You couldn't have timed it better, dear boy,' he said. 'In fact, you're the answer to a maiden's prayer.' Tin Tut's colloquial English was to be expected. Among other distinctions, he was the first Burmese to pass the rigorous Indian Civil Service exams.

Tin Tut had a dilemma on his hands. A cabinet minister wasn't supposed to be editing a newspaper as a sideline, but he, the foreign minister, was having to do just that. He had been looking for someone to take over the *New Times of Burma* and relieve him of the conflict of interest.

This wasn't the job my father had in mind. He knew nothing about editing. Before the war, he had contributed a few articles to magazines like *Blackwood's* in London, to the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, and to the *Rangoon Times*, but that was the extent of his experience in publishing. 'You know nothing about diplomacy, yet you were prepared to have a fling at it,' Tin Tut pointed out. 'Editing is just common sense.'

A compromise was reached: Dad would sign on as acting editor for three months, giving the minister time to find a suitable job for him in the Foreign Office, as well as a replacement for the editor's position. But when three months went by and no mention was made of the promised diplomatic posting, it fell to Dad to bring up the subject.

Tin Tut was blunt. 'Forget about diplomacy,' he advised. 'You're not cut out to be a diplomat. But you do have a good future as a

newspaperman.' Stay, he said, and Dad's salary would be doubled . . .

Before he could finish, Dad reached for a blank sheet of paper on the desk between them, wrote out his resignation and signed it with a flourish. Then he picked up his hat and walked out – validating Tin Tut's judgement about his lack of diplomatic skills.

When his temper had cooled, Dad thought things over. Well, maybe Tin Tut had done him a favour. He now knew all about running a newspaper, and newspapers, it had to be said, were fun. Running his own newspaper might be even more fun. He'd just have to start one. And for that he needed space.

Rangoon after the devastation of the Second World War was not quite a Coventry or a Dresden, but the damages sustained were worse than in any other British colonial capital. Pounded by Japanese and Allied bombs, the city was still a mess of rubble and wreckage. With hordes of refugees and squatters in search of housing, space – any kind of space – was at a premium. But the answer to Dad's prayers was right at his doorstep. He discovered that the landlords of the *New Times*, the paper he had just quit, owned the empty building at the back, on 40th Street. He asked if he could take a look at it.

No. 290 40th Street was a bomb-damaged husk, and it stank. Outside, it reeked of open sewage and rotting garbage. Inside, it reeked of manure. The Japanese, it seemed, had stabled their horses in the building during their occupation. But the price was right – it relieved the owners of the burden of repairs. Still, my father wondered whether it was a good thing to be quartered so close to his old employer. Practicality won out, however, and he signed on the dotted line.

Now that he had his newspaper office, all he needed was his newspaper. For that money was required – and money he didn't have. But he did have jewels – rather, his wife did. My mother, like most Burmese women of her generation, had been tucking away bits and pieces for The Future. That Future, they agreed, was upon them.

Dad took the jewellery, wrapped in a handkerchief, to a pawnbroker, who put a value of Rs 4,300 on the total. Next he took the bundle to a Ceylonese businessman whom he knew slightly, and disclosed the amount of the pawnbroker's valuation, saying he did not wish to

pawn; he wished to sell. Without undoing the knot in the handkerchief, the businessman wrote out a cheque for Rs 5,000.

Mum had contributed her life savings as capital. To this she added her kitchen table, a sturdy teakwood affair that settled nicely on the compost floor of the former stable. There was no electricity in the building – there was no electricity in most of the city – but a hurricane lantern and a portable typewriter with a missing ‘e’ completed the office equipment. In this way, with no printing machine, no newsprint, no type, no ink – and no roof – the first edition of *The Nation* was produced. The printing was done on credit, on the same flatbed owned by the old *Rangoon Gazette*, who also printed the *New Times of Burma*.

The rift with Tin Tut was soon water under the bridge. Tin Tut, in any case, had resigned as foreign minister and was now brigadier of the Burma Auxiliary Force, one of the government paramilitary groups fighting the rebel forces that threatened Rangoon soon after independence. As foreign minister, Tin Tut had always kept a loaded gun on his desk, which Dad would carefully point away from himself before sitting down to a meeting. Brigadier Tin Tut now had full-time bodyguards: two Gurkha soldiers with sten guns who trailed him everywhere he went.

Meanwhile, proximity to the alma mater, the *New Times of Burma*, was turning out to have its advantages. Dad would waylay the newspaper boys when they came in with the daily vernacular papers, and steal a glance at the headlines. He would then walk twenty blocks (the *Gazette* phone came in handy for longer distances) to check out the lead stories, rush back to rewrite them, and feed the copy to the *Gazette* composing room post-haste. After that it was back to the kitchen/office table to hammer out the daily columns under various noms de plume and, last of all, the leader for the day.

By three o’clock in the afternoon, *The Nation* was out on the streets.

One evening in late September 1948, a terrific blast shook the rafters of Dad’s new office. He dashed to the connecting bathroom door that led to the rear entrance of the *New Times*, but finding it locked from the inside, he went round the block, stopping to listen to various eyewitness accounts of what had happened.

He reached the front entrance just in time to see Tin Tut's private car disappearing down the road. The only soul in sight was the forlorn figure of Mr Webb, the Anglo-Burmese printer of the *Gazette*. The old man was standing in the middle of the street and had to be shaken by the shoulders before he would speak.

'He's still alive,' was all he could say.

'Who? What happened?'

'He was alive. He said to me, "Webb, send me home." But he sounded weak, ever so weak.' Webb was in tears now. Dad pieced together that Tin Tut had been seriously wounded by a Mills bomb, and was on his way to hospital.

Rushing into the *New Times* office, he found the staff incoherent, moaning and cowering. He telephoned Tin Tut's daughter, telling her as calmly as possible what to expect. He forgot he was no longer editor of the *New Times*, and began barking out orders, trying to bring everyone back to their senses.

He later learned that the official vehicle bearing Tin Tut into which the bomb had been tossed was a Fordson station wagon with a metal screen between the front and rear seats. This had saved the driver's life, but Tin Tut and one of the two guards riding with him in the rear took the full force of the blast. Tin Tut's legs were badly burned, and his jawbone was shattered by shrapnel.

Both guards had been carried out of the car into the *New Times* building and were now lying on the cement floor. While waiting for the ambulance, Dad went from one to the other, binding the worst of the bleeding with strips he'd torn off from the shirt he was wearing. Later, he learned that only one of the guards had survived. Tin Tut reached the hospital in a coma but never recovered consciousness. Nor were his murderer, or murderers, ever found.

Tin Tut had set my father on the path to newspaper publishing. Now it was Tin Tut's assassination that put his newspaper on the map. *The Nation* bested the other papers – the *New Times* included – with his eyewitness exclusive. Circulation shot up. Dad's paper was on its way.