

Exploring the changes in the Burmese Landscape in Andrew Marshall's '*The Trouser People*'

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In its exploration of Burma, modern day Myanmar, from Pre-colonial expeditions, to the British Administration in the country, right through to its modern plight with a Military Dictatorship; *The Trouser People* shows that the use of the land by both the vestiture's of state and the local people have dramatically changed. Andrew Marshall's expedition and his close comparison to the man he seeks to re-trace the footsteps of, the explorer Sir J. George Scott, allow us to chart, in some detail, the struggles of the various tribes and ethnicities which occupy Myanmar's northern region's and their ever-deepening struggle to defend themselves, their territories and their way of life. Myanmar as an economic and diverse place has been stunted and destroyed by the attitudes towards land as a tool for the state, whatever form that state takes. This has ultimately led to the devastation of the landscape and the continued blasé attitude towards its care and importance. Marshall sets out why he thinks this is the case, what has caused this current attitude and what is currently effecting the mindset that might otherwise cause these attitudes to change.

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Focusing mainly on the most rural parts of Myanmar, it is clear that the nation has gone from Scott's clumsy description of a 'rag-bag of races',¹ through persecution by the British Regime and still today with Marshall's own first-hand account of modern 'ethnic terror' and the 'all-out assault on the Shan and minority people'.² In this novel we see the changes that have taken place over hundreds of years of Imperial Rule, war and the ongoing struggle to sustain the fragile eco-system in the country as it navigates crippling poverty.

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Marshall gives us a clear sign of the impacts of industrialisation with his description when compared with Scott's, of the Wa hills in the north-west of the country. Scott's initial note of the region was straight forward, 'no cultivation and no industry worthy of name'.³ This gives us a clear sign of what Scott's intentions were in the region, a clear display of how he was seeking to firstly discover if any great industry existed and, if not, if any could be established here. 'Paddy is the usual crop grown in the hills-rice fashion...no one ever has surplus to sell'⁴ he notes. However, when Marshall retraces his steps some 130 years later, he presents the clear contrast which has occurred over time, acknowledging 'Hilltops which would in Scott's time have been covered with jungle, were treeless and sown with rice and opium poppies, the result of industrious civilisation'⁵. In fact Scott recognised at the time the effects that the new British administration would have on the people, writing about the village 'as the railway now penetrates to them there will no doubt come an end to everything except the name, which may hang on'.⁶ There are several factors introduced by Marshall that has lead to this horrifying change in the landscape, and some equally shocking consequences that he explores.

¹ Sir J. George Scott, *Burma and Beyond*, (London: Grayson and Grayson, 1932), P. 6

² Andrew Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, (Bangkok: River Books, 2012) p. 139

³ Scott, *Burma and Beyond*, P.187

⁴ Scott, *Burma and Beyond*, P.95

⁵ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, Pg199

⁶ Sir J. George Scott, *Burma: A Handbook*, (London: Grayson and Grayson, 1911), P.47

The opium poppies are a prime example of this. Introduced to the territory by both the British and Chinese, their use and production by the tribes decimated them as Scott went on to acknowledge when he returned some years later once British rule had properly taken hold. 'Thirty years ago, the Selung [a tribe] numbered between 3 and 4 thousand. They seem to be dying out and the arrack and opium sold [to] them by traders no doubt hastened their disappearance'⁷. Marshall too acknowledged the disastrous effects of the drug upon the land of the tribes, stating that the worst sight to many visitors was 'the wretched poverty of those who harvested the opium'⁸. Marshall here tells us of how the opium trade introduced to the region has led to little but misery and hardship.

Marshall further his concerns by showing us that the issue is only set to worsen. He identifies this opium and heroin trade as 'Burma's only growth industry and the military regime rely heavily upon its money to keep themselves going'.⁹ This recognition of the threat to the land, not only being an issue faced previously but as an ongoing factor, is a clear example of how the Myanmar's natural make up has changed and continues to be threatened a great deal. Throughout the book, Marshall alludes to the drugs trade as the only

thing propping up the dictatorship that rules the country. Its significance can't be overstated and the lengths the state goes to keep it going are boundless. As quoted in the previous section, the abject poverty and virtual slavery the local populace is kept in is barbaric, but this is also coupled with thoughtless environmental policies which are also devastating the country. The damming of the Salween River is a prime example. The river was dammed in order to provide a source of hydroelectric power for the region, the convenient side effect being it also supplied an ample water source for the large opium farms maintained by the state in the Wa hills. Marshall shows the implications of its construction, noting 'the reservoir created has essentially split the Shan State in two, covering an area once occupied happily by many communities, once more banished to the hills'¹⁰. There is no doubt at all that as well as the mass displacement of people, there must similarly have been a vast displacement of wildlife and the natural impact of this would have been significant.

The final notable changing of the landscape in Marshall's novel is in the impacts of conflict. 'Following the withdrawal of the British Empire' he notes, 'Burma has known little more than the fierce throng of armed conflict between political ideologies,

⁷ Scott, *Burma: A Handbook*, P.143

⁸ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.114

⁹ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.175

¹⁰ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.154

religions and even refugee statuses'¹¹. Long controlled, as previously mentioned, by a military Junta, Myanmar has seen one of the longest running civil wars in modern history. The State though will stop at nothing to harm those it believes to be in direct conflict with their own ideas and power. Marshall notes that this includes the burning of large swathes of jungle and settlements believed to be harbouring their enemies. He gives the figure from Amnesty international, stating that 'since 1998 over 300,000 people have been displaced and more than 7000 square miles of forest burned to the ground'¹². It is therefore irrefutable that the civil war in the country, which has sadly devastated it on several levels, has directly led to the destruction of habitats and precious jungle. In conjunction with this, there is the use of land as a way of raising funds for various war efforts. As previously discussed, opium and opium farming props up the Burmese Government in its war of terror, but opposing factions also have a need to raise funds in order to fight and too have very limited ways in which they can do this. Large swathes of land have been deforested for the purposes of making way for cattle grazing, rice paddies, cotton and tobacco plants. While not able to verify this first hand, Marshall does speak of how 'photographs smuggled out of the Shan State show

¹¹ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.14

¹² Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.138

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 camps and shanty towns, hacked into jungle clearings, with large swathes of people made to work in the surrounding fields for the PLA [People's Liberation Army]'¹³. This is another clear sign of how the conflict is both directly and indirectly decimating the landscape.

It is clear then from the contrasting displays and attitudes from the Pre-colonial to the post-colonial writers in the country, that the destruction of land for profit and individual gain continues relentlessly. It is also clear to that this is due, almost in full, to issues which were presented by the British Administration of the country. As mentioned, their efforts to industrialise and modernise the country were the first harbingers of the climate disaster that was about to take place, which was only eclipsed by the terrible state they left in country in when Burma finally gained independence. Given this situation, it is plain to see the a military dictatorship was nothing short of inevitable and it is people who suffer. Myanmar continues to suffer the negative effects too of climate change, experiencing 'one of the worst cyclones in recorded history in South-East Asia' which in turn 'lead to the deaths of some 1700 people and the displacing of approximately half a million more'¹⁴. It must therefore be concluded that there has been almost no effort, either by the state

¹³ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.137

¹⁴ Marshall, *The Trouser People: Burma in the shadows of the Empire*, p.279

or any party vying to overthrow it, to protect the delicate eco-system in Myanmar and it must be inevitable that the situation will continue to deteriorate for generations to come.

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