

HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF MYANMAR

Jan Becka. Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995. pp. xxii + 328. US\$47.50.

This is the fifteenth in the series of Asian Historical Dictionaries, and the sixth devoted to Southeast Asia. Like the others, it comprises a chronology, the dictionary proper (of 213 pages) to which the author provides a brief eight-page introduction, and a substantial bibliography (of 105 pages) divided into thirty-eight sections, also with a short introductory essay.

The dictionary contains more than five hundred entries, which are thoroughly cross-referenced. There is a guide to the name changes brought in by the present military regime (Burma to Myanmar, Rangoon to Yangon, the Irrawaddy river to the Ayeyarwady, etc.), and a list of abbreviations including most of the confusing collection of initials by which insurgent organisations are so often referred.

Becka, like most contributors to this series has stuck closely to the guidelines provided by the general editor. That is, he has provided a dictionary that concentrates on modern political history. References to the great conquering kings of Burmese history are given less space than politicians prominent in the independence struggle, or leaders of the various insurgencies.

This is not surprising. Like other dictionaries in this series, this one too is written not for experts on the country, but for undergraduate students who want quick, brief references to persons and places, institutions and organisations, encountered in their reading. As such it is thorough and comprehensive, and includes useful ethnic, cultural, and economic information.

As in any such dictionary one can point to curious inclusions and omissions. Thus there are no entries for the stone or bronze age or pre-history, or for epigraphy, or on the frontiers of Burma, always a vexed question in Southeast Asia. While there is an entry for the Dhammathat, the Buddhist influenced classical law codes, there is no entry for law and order, and nothing on corruption. There is a short entry on disease, but not one on health or medicine. And while there is a reference to the independence movement, there is not one on nationalism.

More surprising is the omission of any entry for opium (though there is one for the "Golden

Triangle"), or for the Red Flags or White Flags, the names by which the two factions of the Burmese communist movement were commonly referred. Not all the organisations for which abbreviations are given have their own entries. Finally, while some historians, including Luce and Furnivall, get entries, there is none for history or historiography.

Rice, the staple crop for the Burmese and for years a principal export, probably warrants a separate entry. But the same can hardly be said for other products such as bamboo, maize, cotton, pulses and beans, and sugar-cane. Also it is unclear why the Federal Republic of Germany should be singled out for an entry when none is given to France or Italy, with longer historical relations with Burma, or for Singapore or South Korea, both arguably more important to Burma today.

One wishes for additional information in some entries, including great kings such as Kyanzittha and modern Burmese leaders including Aung San, U Nu and Ne Win, the entries for whom reveal nothing but the bare bones of their careers. We are told very little about the ideology of the Burma Socialist Program Party, or what the Pyidawtha programme entailed, or on the development of the Burmese economy. The entry on population gives 1993 estimates, but nothing on the historical growth of population in Burma.

My final quibble has to do with the lack of any maps showing the extent of control of successive Burmese dynasties, and of any lists of kings or governors or prime ministers. Entries under the three Burmese dynasties list most kings, but not all, and lists as appendices would have been more accessible.

But the dictionary is a useful addition to the series, and these criticisms are minor. They are offered more by way of suggestions for improvement, if and when a second edition is forthcoming, than as damning indictments of a work that has taken time and dedication.

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