

10. IN BURMA WITH NORMAN LEWIS (1908-2003), RANGOON, 1951

That was just about as late as the romance of its past was alive in Burma and other parts of Asia. Norman Lewis, distinguished travel writer and close friend (see below) said that in a quarter of a century all the romance would be gone. Development in its very nature has tended to destroy the traditional culture without establishing a modern one to replace it. Western influence has steamrollered over Asia, usually without enriching it significantly, yet making local cultures seem inferior. There are exceptions. Singapore, with its sturdy Chinese roots, has become a wealthy modern country without sacrificing its traditions.

On the other side came corruption arising from the incapacity of those affected by development to cope with the exigencies and follow the rules of a modern money economy. A trivial example: when a registered letter from abroad arrived for me in Jakarta I was required to pay a small bribe to the clerk behind the wicket before he would hand it over -- part of what Max Weber called "an informal system of fees" that was part of any contact between officialdom and the resident. When I expostulated on this being wrong to an Indonesian colleague I was told: "Wrong? He badly needs the money and it means nothing to you." Could that be a higher morality than our strait-laced observance of the rules?

So I did see the sights and hear the sounds of Kipling's East, George Orwell's East, the East of sacred pagodas covered with gold leaf, and of the great temple of Borobudur.

Early in the year 1951 I was on the plane headed for Rangoon, and so was Norman Lewis, a travel writer just getting into his career. He was going for travel and exploration; I, a minor bureaucrat, was on my way from Ottawa on loan for three months to help Burma take a census.

As the plane flew along, Norman regaled me with an endless series of stories, every one of them fascinating, especially those of his last trip, which was to Vietnam. He liked talking, and I liked listening to this exceptional fellow-traveler. We got off, and headed for the Strand Hotel, where, since there were few choices in Rangoon, we were both lodged. In that not well preserved relic of the colonial period recently ended I was to stay for my three months, he for an indefinite period. That was our base, from which we went looking for entertainment.

How did I, of all people, get to be chosen for this very desirable assignment? An elderly Burmese, who was a high Government official, had been sent to Ottawa to arrange for someone who could help take a census of Burma. I remember little about him, except that we got to be friends, and with a little encouragement from myself he designated me to the Canadian authorities as the person needed for the job. I also remember that he was building a house back in Rangoon, and wanted it to have a proper toilet with toilet seats. And when I saw him off at the airport in New York he was carrying in his arms two toilet seats too large to fit into this luggage.

Commercial entertainment was fourth rate, but there was a kind of community fair, with stage and actors speaking Burmese, of course, and that had no meaning for us. But every now and again the play was interrupted, and the most lively and graceful dancers took over--young ladies cavorting over the stage. That we could watch for hours, and on several occasions we drove to different parts of Rangoon in search of these performances. (I had a car as a perk of office; Norman moved about by public transport, and several times I was glad to be able to lend him my car and driver.)

I was always restless, a frustrated anthropologist looking for native life. But let Norman tell you about me--perhaps it was more than what I was conscious of. In his book, *Golden Earth* about his trip to Burma he said that I was

"... a rare eccentric in matters of travel, was moved in all things by a single principle--a determination to get as close to the country as possible. With this creditable purpose steadfastly in view, he frequently traveled about Rangoon, clinging to the platforms of crowded buses, and sometimes arriving back at the Strand Hotel in a kind of springless pony-trap of the kind used by peasants to bring vegetables to market. He was also learning Burmese, wore the national costume whenever he could find an excuse, and finally moved out of the hotel and went to live with a Burmese couple he had persuaded to take him as a paying guest."

The Burmese couple in question was U Soe Hlaing and Ma Kin Gyi, he then a young man with whom I worked on the census, she a pious Buddhist and homemaker. When I moved my stuff into his house, he told me something about the premises. The center of importance was a Buddhist shrine, at which prayers were said several times a day, especially by Ma Kin Gyi who was very pious. Buddhism was the religion as far as the outside world was concerned. But there was another shrine, hidden away in a back bedroom, to tree spirits (nats) whose worship was already ancient when Buddhism entered the country nearly 2500 years ago. Tree spirits were especially helpful for the practical questions of life, such as whether a certain day was propitious for starting a voyage.

There were two bedrooms in the house. In an allocation that seemed to U Soe Hlaing fair, I was given one by myself, and all the others--husband, wife, and four children--the other; I protested, but without effect. We all used the one bathroom, for which U Soe Hlaing apologized. He was especially apologetic about the women sharing it; in Burmese culture women are contaminating. And when they had their periods doubly so. A student of Freud sees that folklore as the ideological support for making women subordinate in all the affairs of life--a subject I never broached. The anthropologist I imagined myself to be (I did have one course in graduate school) does not explain his subjects to themselves--if the explanation is understood their value as

subjects is diminished. The observer would then be looking into a mirror that shows his own reflection.

The Burmese eat with their fingers. I would have thought that was wholly unstructured. Not so. One makes a kind of spade with the fingers and hoists the food on the back of the thumb. Or else, depending on the consistency what is on one's plate one can make the food into a ball about an inch in diameter, and toss it into the mouth. This latter is what the Burmese favor. One's plate arrives with rice plus fish cut into small pieces and a certain amount of oil. One is expected to mix all this together into a homogeneous mass. Noting my incompetence in this mixing operation U Soe Hlaing showed me. He put his hands into my dish, and squeezing the material repeatedly through his fingers, got it into consistency that lent itself to making into the required 1-inch balls. You will believe me when I report that it was very very difficult for me to swallow that food so processed. But I did nonetheless--I didn't want to break rapport.

Again maintaining rapport was difficult when it came to eating nga pi. This is a dish made of small fish and with spices thrown in, all placed in a crock and left for about a month in the tropical sunshine. At the end of the month the whole has rotted down to a dark liquid, the flies are skimmed off the surface, and the nga pi is ready to be boiled up and consumed.

Norman saw the romance going out of the world, that we are the last generation to be able to see strange cultures in their unspoiled condition. The world is modernizing, Americanizing, the enchantment squeezed out. That is good sociology; Max Weber spoke of the disenchantment of the world in his own day. Like the alienation that marks the modern workman as contrasted with the old-style craftsman, it is the price we pay for high productivity. I wouldn't give up the productivity, but nonetheless the price we pay should be recognized.

In the 50 years since I was in Burma a certain part of this has come true. Notwithstanding the attempt to disguise it as "development", there are not a few countries, of which Burma is one, Indonesia another, in which the main feature of development is the scrapping of ancient traditions, a scrapping often made visible by sweaters and denims that replace ancient colorful costumes. If Burma has been spared some of this, it is at the high cost of a ruthless dictatorship that keeps it separate from the outside world.

Norman himself preferred to be alone. Once in London he took me to a cocktail party, and I could see that he was forcing himself to enjoy it. That is why I felt particularly flattered when he called me his oldest friend. I must have had something that made him feel comfortable.

He showed himself the born author in the joy he took in telling of his experiences in various parts of the world. That began in the Strand hotel, and I was a keen listener. I was fascinated both

by the content and the accent in which it was spoken. I would have described the accent as cockney. But what do I know about English accents?

Through Soe Hlaing I got to meet several interesting people. One (I have forgotten his name) was an astrologer, who could cast a horoscope and offered to do one for me. A horoscope works by the position of the stars at the moment a person is born. For that one needs to know just when he was born. I phoned my mother in Montreal, and all she could remember was that it was between 11 and 12 in the evening. But he needed to know the minute, without which he could do nothing. He played with the idea of casting for every five minutes over the hour, but in the end decided that this would not be valid. So I never got a horoscope.

I was also taken to an alchemist. His wife had insisted that he take those smells out of the kitchen, so we met in the back garden, the site of his operation of turning lead into gold. He had not achieved this so far, but he knew what to do. Everything centered on getting the lead hot enough, and that in turn depended on having a crucible that could stand the heat. So at the time I visited he was doing research on various materials that would resist heat. That is a genuine scientific problem, and chemistry apparently developed out of alchemy by such a route.

I had heard of geomancy, and wanted to meet a practitioner. This is the locating of the places where we pray, work and play, in such fashion that people will be in harmony with their environment. (The nearest we come is a surveyor--but our surveyor pays no attention to spiritual values.) I wanted to meet a geomancer who would give me training in this field, but never succeeded in finding a real professional like my alchemist and astrologer.

Burma was never peaceful after the British left, and at the time of our visit the country was in an uproar. The Karens in the northwest were especially difficult. But the Shan States of the northeast might have been peaceful enough to conduct a census, and the government asked me to go out and see. So I went. By plane of course--road or rail would have been much too dangerous--to Taungyi in the Shan States. I was received with the honors due a representative of the Government by the local Commissioner, who showed me to a room in his comfortable house.

My two days were spent driving around with a military escort and talking through an interpreter with some of the local residents. On the afternoon of the second day I went out to the airport for the return trip. There I found the plane at one end of what amounted to a grassy vacant lot that served as the local airport, but the engine wouldn't start. The pilot, who was the entire crew, was standing on some boards piled on a truck backed up to the plane, and just able to reach the engine, working away with a pair of pliers. By now it was dusk, and after dark the rebels would surely be active. Moreover the airport in Rangoon was unlighted, and could not be used in the dark. I was the only European among the dozen or so passengers, and began to wonder if I would

ever see my family again. However it was still not quite dark when the engine sputtered and then started; we quickly climbed aboard, and an hour later were in Rangoon.

At the Strand Hotel I found Norman, and for once was able to take the conversational initiative with my account of Taungyi.

In due course I completed my work, typed up a 30 page report to the Burmese Government, mostly saying that it was going to be quite impossible to take a census outside of Rangoon, and went home. Norman stayed on. I arrived back in Ottawa with various gifts, especially colorful Burmese costumes for Barbara and Robert.

U Soe Hlaing did not write to me after I left, but Ma Kin Kyi, his wife, did write. When Soe Hlaing retired he became a Buddhist monk, donned the yellow robe, and carried his begging bowl from market place to market place. He simply disappeared socially and was out of touch with family and friends, just as though dead. His children grew up, and one of them, Ni Po, made a rather mean livelihood as a tourist guide. Ma Kin Kyi wrote me, asking whether I could find a job for Ni Po in Canada and help him to immigrate. I had to reply that I was in no position to do this.

Over the succeeding years Norman proved hospitable indeed. One time when Beatrice was with me he entertained us for a week in his centrally located apartment on Baker Street, just opposite the Selfridge Provision Store, and around the corner from Selfridge's Department Store. We were just a couple of streets from 22A Baker Street.

Neither of us will ever forget going up to the roof above Norman's apartment for a barbecue. It was raining, and Norman was cooking a paella with one hand while holding an umbrella with the other. On another occasion I was alone, and he put me up in a comfortable bedroom. In an adjoining room, connected by a door left ajar, was a presentable young lady who had been introduced to me as a friend. I have no idea how far the hospitality was intended to go, but I closed the door and went to sleep alone. Just another opportunity lost.

The following material from his biography gives an idea of the intensity of his life in the active years. It also shows his sympathy for the native peoples trampled and forgotten in the West. Genocide in Brazil revealed to the world the systematic robbing and murder of the native people by the officials whose job it was to protect them. Published in the Sunday Times in 1968 it aroused outrage everywhere, and led to change in the Brazilian law related to the treatment of Indians. The Volcanoes Above Us shows Central America in revolt; no fair-minded person can read that book without feeling strong sympathy and admiration for the Indians.

Over the 51 years between our first meeting and now I have seen Norman many times. In the last few years his home has been in the village of Harpenden, in Essex, and there, says his biographer "he has lived with wife Lesley and his children in introspective, almost monastic calm".

For the past two or three years Norman has not been well. His hearing went (it was impossible for me to have a phone conversation with him), and then his brain started to go.

We had the news of Norman's death, announced on July 25, 2003 in the New York Times under the heading of "Norman Lewis, 95, known for exotic travels." He described the world he saw before the proliferation of Club Med and McDonalds. As a professional literary traveler he was unsurpassed, being able to write about the back of a bus, Cyril Connolly observed, and make it interesting.

"He journeyed to exotic, even sinister, places, and conveyed their nature in a subtle style of detached irony as he successively transported the reader to from Indochina to India, Indonesia, and Burma, Latin America to Spain and Sicily."

The London Telegraph of Sunday 27 July 2003 carried a long article on Norman Lewis that can be read on the Web:

"Norman Lewis, who died yesterday at Saffron Walden aged 95, was perhaps the best, and certainly the most underrated, English travel writer of the 20th century.

"He was particularly drawn to traditional societies on the cusp of radical, often violent change, a phenomenon that gathered pace during his lifetime and of which he became the recording angel.

"Three books in which he captured age-old ways of life under siege have already become classics: *A Dragon Apparent* (1951) is the finest record of Indo-China before the devastation wrought by the Vietnam War; *Golden Earth* (1952) relates his adventures in a turbulent Burma; and the elegiac *Voices of the Old Sea* (1984) tells of his years in a Spanish fishing village after the war, just before tourism changed the Mediterranean coastline forever.

"His toothbrush moustache gave Lewis the air of an inoffensive school handyman rather than that of an inquisitive travel writer, and he prided himself on this necessary ability to blend unnoticed into exotic surroundings. Yet for one so self-effacing, he had a knack of gathering about him the extraordinary, testified to in the autobiographical *Jackdaw Cake* (1985, revised 1994 as *I Came, I Saw*), his description of his eccentric upbringing and his subsequent wartime service.

“Accordingly, he initially wrote to preserve experiences that were fading in his memory, though he adopted a more overtly political stance after 1968 when, for the Sunday Times, he uncovered the genocide being practised on Brazil's Indians by the government agency assigned to protect them.

"Lewis considered the ensuing article, which prompted the foundation of the charity Survival International, the most worthwhile of all his endeavours. The obliteration of many of the societies he had seen led him to believe that "in the face of such calamities it is not possible to keep silent, to remain a perpetual spectator".

This change of heart supplied his later writing with controlled passion and gave him new reasons to travel. These he stated towards the end of his life in a credo born of righteous anger: "I am looking for the people who have always been there, and belong to the places they live. The others I do not wish to see."

At the time I met Norman he was getting to the peak of his fame. Read what Auberon Waugh says of his Golden Earth, reporting on what he saw in Burma-some of which I also saw, but just didn't have the talent to describe:

"An extraordinarily enjoyable book by any standards....Norman Lewis remains the best travel writer alive"

As in the case of Burma, about 1952 the government of Indonesia wanted (among other experts this time) a statistician who had worked on population, and I was designated and stayed in Indonesia for a year. That was a great time; it was three years after the Dutch had formally left, the country was not yet rotted by corruption and not yet overrun by tourists.

Have the 50 or so years of "development" that have passed since left it better or worse? That is a question I do not dare to answer. The following segment traces a part of that time.