

PHILIP WOODS:

Reporting the Retreat: War Correspondents in Burma.

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Despite their remoteness from the “home fronts”, developments in the Far Eastern theatres of the Second World War received considerable attention in the various public media of Britain and the United States. However, the people who produced the newspaper reports, photographs and moving pictures have largely remained in the shadows, except for the few who were named and famed – Harold Timperley, who wrote about the Nanjing Massacre in the *Manchester Guardian*, and John Hershey, who visited Hiroshima soon after the city’s destruction, are probably the two best-known cases. The majority, however, remained almost anonymous save for the odd reference in general works on war or its portrayal. These rare references in standard textbooks are moreover limited because of a lack of detail regarding the careers, living and working conditions or any assessment of their importance for both the contemporary reader/spectator and historians. Filling the gaps in all these areas is the central concern of Philip Woods’ pioneering study.

Woods’ choice to put the focus on one particular region and campaign (if the disastrous British retreat deserves to be called a campaign), viz. Burma in 1941–42, makes sense as the defence and eventual fall of the “impregnable fortress” Singapore had directed public attention in Britain and the US to the battlefields of the Far East. Consequently, numerous correspondents with pen, typewriter or camera were sent there, or went independently. In total Woods lists and introduces 26 of them, drawing mainly on their writings (including various unpublished materials such as diaries and notebooks) and, whenever available, on visual imagery as well. The biographic vignettes are woven into a chronological narrative running from the outbreak of the war in Asia in December 1941 to the ultimate evacuation of Burma by British and Allied troops in May–June 1942. The chapters also provide space for discussions of crucial topics and debates surrounding the work of the reporters, e.g. the lack of air defences at Rangoon, censorship and the correspondents’ relationship with the military and the army press officers.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the correspondents’ views of Burma, which then focuses in on their relationship with the Governor of Burma, Reginald Dorman-Smith (riled as “Doormat-Smith” by his critics). Chapters 3 and 4 address the working conditions prevailing in Burma, with chapter 3 reversing the gaze of the previous chapter to show how the correspondents were seen by the colonial officers. Correspondents producing photos (notably George Rodger) or making newsreel films (Alec Tozer and Maurice Ford from British Movietone News) have one chapter each dedicated to them. The reporters’ battle experiences are the subject of chapter 7, whilst chapter 8 looks at the way they wrote about the fate of the (mostly Indian) civilians who left the country in the face of the advancing Japanese. The final chapter returns to the debate about the responsibilities for the lack of the defence works, neglect of refugees, and ultimate loss of Burma through a different lens, using the correspondents’ later and therefore uncensored writings. An epilogue provides further information on their careers during the remainder of the war and after. Two of the reporters who had been in Burma, MacDonald and Munday, later lost their lives on the job, whilst another, Wilfred Burchett, came to further fame at the end of the war and after, when he first reported the radioactive fallout at Hiroshima and thereafter supported the communist camp during the Cold War.

If there is any tarnish on Woods’ book, it is probably the rather random and sometimes even distorted organization of its material. As said, the chapters attempt to blend

broader themes with biographic sketches while at the same time proceeding in a roughly chronological order. Occasionally, this approach fails to do justice to all three aims: there is no strict chronological narration of events, information on the protagonists remains fragmented, and identical themes (notably those that permeate the whole story, such as censorship or the perception of the Burmese nationalists) pop up on several occasions. Chapter 4 (“Organizing the war correspondents”), for instance, discusses the problems of censorship and “embedded reporting” (as we may call it now) but ends with a section on the two female reporters who briefly worked in Burma. The second, Clare Booth Luce – wife of the American publisher – gets only a single sentence at the very end, but re-appears in the following chapter, which is, according to its heading, supposed to deal with the photo-journalist George Rodger. That Rodger worked almost exclusively for Luce’s *Life* magazine can hardly justify the inclusion of Luce’s wife here. Another case is chapter 7 (“Reporting the battles”), which starts with a section on the Battle of Yenangyaung (strictly speaking, this would have been an instance of scorched-earth policy rather than a battle), continues with the issue of collateral damage, and finally talks about the sometimes difficult relationship between the Burmese nationalists and the British. This latter topic, which split opinions (p. 132), appears for the first time in chapter 1 and pops up throughout the book, would surely have deserved a more systematic and focussed treatment in a chapter of its own. The same could be said of another persistent theme in the book, censorship, references to which are also scattered across several chapters.

However, such suggestions on how to improve the structure of the work have the positive implication that there is more thematic depth than Woods is ready to tell. In bringing to light an amazing array of data concerning the journalists reporting from one of the crucial theatres of war in the East, Woods has gone beyond the published works of the day, examining diaries, letters and later writings as well. This comprehensive look at the people who made the news and provided the home front in the UK and the USA with information and analyses, indeed breaks new ground. The book not only forms an important addition to the literature on the situation in Burma in 1942, but is also a major contribution to our understanding of the ways in which news – in letters, picture or reel – was produced and transmitted to the home fronts. Woods’ study opens up an important and much-neglected aspect of the Second World War in the Far East, and it will hopefully trigger further investigations which could for instance look beyond Burma to allow for comparative approaches.

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AFRICA

MATTEO SALVADORE:

The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian–European Relations, 1402–1555.

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In a monograph that reads like a novel, Salvatore describes one-and-a-half centuries of Ethiopian–European encounters by following a dazzling number of characters –