

The Trouser People

A Story of Burma in the Shadow of the Empire

by Andrew Marshall

Reviewed by Cécile Collineau

When one travels to a destination, it is always a good idea to read a book either written by a local author or set in the locale, for it adds depth and colour to the trip. While some travellers to Myanmar (formerly Burma) might choose to read George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, I think Andrew Marshall's *The Trouser People* is an essential item to pack, especially when visiting this country's eastern, off-the-beaten-track Shan States.

The book follows the footsteps of Sir George Scott, who first came to Burma in the 1870s as a journalist and teacher and finished his career as Resident of the Shan States. An enlightened, erudite Victorian man, he roamed the hills of Burma for more than 30 years, leaving extensive writings on the lives of the Burmese, the Wa, Shan and other tribes.

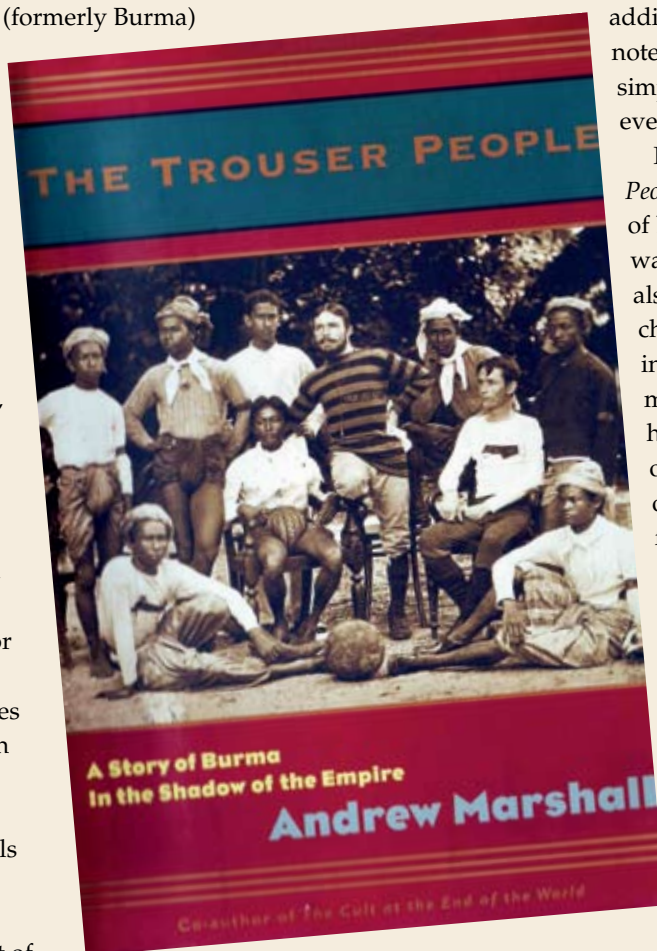
The first part of the title alludes to the British colonials who arrived in Burma in the early 19th century as part of their imperial expansion east of the Bay of Bengal (as well as to counterbalance the increasing influence of the French in the Indochina Peninsula). Only British men wore trousers while the local population wore *longyi* (known elsewhere in Asia as a *sarong*). Ironically, the only men wearing trousers in today's Burma are the uniformed soldiers.

The analogy between both groups does not stop here. The author describes in precise, gruesome detail accounts of the atrocities (torture, rape, pillage, mass murder) committed in the Shan States by both the British during their *pacification* of the area in the late 1800s to

early 1900s, and the Burmese dictatorship in power since 1962. "Burning villages was an accepted way of imposing imperial authority," writes Marshall about the behaviour, adding that Scott himself blandly noted during one campaign, "We simply wiped out the village and shot everyone we saw".

However, do not believe *The Trouser People* is a depressing description of Burma's plight. This travelogue was written by a journalist who is also British – a good combination of characteristics that ensures in-depth investigative work and great writing mixed with a wonderful sense of humour. I caught myself bursting out laughing on several occasions, once while reading about a local football game in which the action takes place both on the pitch (an encounter with an astonishingly high number of yellow and red cards) and in the stands (one of the last places for freedom of speech in Burma today). Another humorous passage describes the author's trip inside a car manned by "your classic Buddhist driver, one foot on the accelerator, the other one in the afterlife".

Interestingly, perhaps Scott's most enduring legacy in Burma today is football, now paradoxically more popular than cricket in this former bastion of the British Empire in Asia.



Cécile Collineau, a member of FOM since 2002, guides at the Peranakan Museum and the National Museum of Singapore. She never misses the monthly meetings of FOM's Wednesday book group.