



From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey

Pascal Khoo Thwe

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Winner of the 2002 Kiriya Prize in Nonfiction

In 1988 Dr John Casey, a Cambridge don visiting Burma, was told of a waiter in Mandalay with a passion for the works of James Joyce. Intrigued by this unlikely story, he visited the restaurant, where he met Pascal Khoo Thwe. The encounter was to change both their lives.

Pascal grew up as a member of the tiny, remote Kayan Padaung tribe, famous for their 'giraffenecked' women. The Padaung practiced a combination of ancient animist and Buddhist customs mixed with the Catholicism introduced by Italian missionaries. There was a dream culture, a world in which ancestors were worshipped and ghosts were a constant presence. Pascal was the first member of his community ever to study English at university. But in Burma, English books were rare, and independent thought was discouraged. Photocopies of the few approved texts would be passed from student to student, while tuition consisted of lecturers reciting essays that the students learned by rote.

Within a few months of his chance meeting with Dr Casey, Pascal's world lay in ruins. Successive economic crises brought about by Burma's military dictatorship meant he had to give up his studies. The regime's repression grew more brutal, and Pascal's student-lover, who had become involved in the movement for democracy, was arrested, raped and finally murdered by the armed forces. Pascal fled to the jungle, becoming a guerrilla fighter in the life-or-death struggle against the government and seeing many of his friends and comrades die in battle. At a moment of desperation, he remembered the Englishman he had met in Mandalay and wrote him a letter, with little expectation of ever receiving a reply.

Miraculously, the letter reached its destination on the other side of the world. Not only that, it would lead to Pascal's being rescued from the jungle and enrolling to study English at Cambridge University, the first Burmese tribesman ever to do so.

From the Land of Green Ghosts is the autobiographical tale of a remarkable triumph of hope over despair, and of an encounter between two very different worlds. Hauntingly and poetically written, it unforgettably evokes the realities of life in modern-day Burma and one young man's long journey to freedom despite almost unimaginable odds.

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