



THE LADY AND THE PEACOCK

THE LIFE OF

AUNG SAN  
SUU KYI

PETER POPHAM

# CONTENTS

Cover  
About the Book  
Also by Peter Popham  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Epigraph  
List of Illustrations  
Map of Burma  
Prologue

## PART ONE: HER FATHER'S CHILD

## PART TWO: THE PEACOCK'S FAN

1. Late Call
2. Debut
3. Freedom and Slaughter
4. The Funeral
5. Open Road
6. Her Father's Blood
7. Defiance

## PART THREE: THE WIDE WORLD

1. Grief of a Child
2. The Gang of Five
3. An Oriental at St Hugh's
4. Choices
5. Superwoman

## PART FOUR: HEIRS TO THE KINGDOM

1. Alone
2. Landslide Victory
3. Long Live Holiness
4. The Peace Prize
5. Heroes and Traitors

## PART FIVE: THE ROAD MAP

1. Meeting Suu
2. Nightmare
3. The Saffron Revolution
4. The Peacock Effect

Afterword

Notes

Glossary

List of Names

Further Reading

Picture Section

Index

Acknowledgements

Copyright

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Peter Popham's major new biography of Aung San Suu Kyi draws upon previously untapped testimony and fresh revelations to tell the story of a woman whose bravery and determination have captivated people around the globe. Celebrated today as one of the world's greatest exponents of non-violent political defiance since Mahatma Gandhi, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize only four years after her first experience of politics.

In April 1988, Suu Kyi returned from Britain to Burma to nurse her sick mother but, within six months, found herself the unchallenged leader of the largest popular revolt in her country's history. When the party she co-founded won a landslide victory in Burma's first free elections for thirty years, she was already under house arrest and barred from taking office by the military junta.

Since then, 'The Lady' has set about transforming her country ethically as well as politically, displaying dazzling courage in the process. Under house arrest for 15 of the previous 20 years, she has come close to being killed by her political enemies and her commitment to peaceful revolution has come at extreme personal cost.

In November 2010, after fraudulent elections in which she played no part, Suu Kyi was again freed. She was greeted

by ecstatic crowds but only time will tell what role this remarkable woman will have in the future of her country.

By the same author:

*Tokyo: the City at the End of the World*

THE LADY  
AND THE PEACOCK

The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi



PETER POPHAM



LONDON · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND · JOHANNESBURG

*In memory of Michela Speranza Bezzi*



'I have never ceased to be moved by the sense of the world lying quiescent and vulnerable, waiting to be awakened by the light of the new day quivering just beyond the horizon.'

Aung San Suu Kyi, *Letters from Burma*

'If they answer not your call, walk alone. ...  
With the thunder-flame of pain ignite thine own heart,  
And let it burn alone.'

Rabindranath Tagore, 'Walk Alone'

'Oh this ruler of our kingdom, a pretty thing, a pretty little thing.'

Old lady in Po Chit Kon village, Kachin state,  
singing to her grandchild

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

## Map of Burma with inset of Rangoon

### BLACK AND WHITE PLATES

1. Aung San, his wife Ma Khin Kyi and their first baby, Aung San Oo.
2. Aung San, his wife Ma Khin Kyi and their three children, Aung San Oo, Aung San Lin and Aung San Suu Kyi.
3. A silkscreen of Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi's father (*Peter Popham*).
4. Aung San Suu Kyi with school friends in the cast of *Anthony and Cleopatra* (*courtesy of Malavika Karlekar*).
5. Tin Tin and Khin Myint, sisters who went to the same school in Rangoon as Suu and Ma Thanegi (*Peter Popham*).
6. St Hugh's College, Oxford, where Suu was a student (*Rachel Rawlings*).
7. Suu and Michael on their wedding day in London, 1 January 1972 (*courtesy of the Aris family/Getty Images*).
8. Michael Aris with his identical twin brother, Anthony (*courtesy of the Aris family/Getty Images*).
9. Suu and baby Alexander (*courtesy of the Aris family/Getty Images*).
10. Suu with Michael's siblings and brother-in-law, plus dog (*courtesy of the Aris family*).
11. Suu and Michael in Bhutan with their new puppy (*courtesy of the Aris family/Getty Images*).

12. Suu, Michael and Alexander with Daw Khin Kyi (*courtesy of the Aris family/Getty Images*).
13. Suu with Hugh Richardson, Michael Aris's mentor in Tibetan studies (*courtesy of the Aris family/Getty Images*).
14. The Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon, outside which Suu gave her crucial debut speech.
15. A statue draped in gold inside the Shwedagon shrine (*Peter Popham*).
16. Pagan, Burma's most famous historical site (*Medioimages/Photodisc/Getty*).
17. A page from the campaign diary kept by Ma Thanegi, Suu's friend and companion.
18. Suu on 17 August 1995 with her friend and assistant, Ma Thanegi (*courtesy of Ma Thanegi*).
19. Suu, U Tin Oo and other members of the NLD's Central Executive Committee in early 1989 (*courtesy of the Aris family*).
20. Bertil Lintner, the veteran Swedish Burma-watcher based in Thailand, photographed in November 2010 in Chiangmai (*Peter Popham*).
21. Nita Yin Yin May, OBE: courageous information officer at the British Embassy and NLD activist imprisoned in 1989 (*Peter Popham*).
22. Suu's estranged elder brother Aung San Oo with his wife Lei Lei Nwe Thein in July 2007.
23. 54 University Avenue, Rangoon, the family home where Suu was detained for more than fifteen years (*STR/Stringer/AFP/Getty Images*).
24. Suu at the gates of her house, giving a speech.
25. General Ne Win, known as 'the Old Man' or 'Number One'.
26. Sein Lwin, 'the Butcher', who briefly replaced Ne Win as head of state in 1988.
27. General Than Shwe, who ruled Burma for eighteen years.

28. General Saw Maung, the ruling general purged in 1992 after he became mentally unstable.

29. Khin Nyunt as Prime Minister in 2004, shortly before he was purged.

30. General Maung Aye, who shared power with Than Shwe after Khin Nyunt was purged.

31. Nyo Ohn Myint: one of the first intellectuals to urge Suu to seize the opportunity to lead the democracy movement (*Peter Popham*).

32. U Win Tin, founder member of the NLD, during his nineteen years in jail.

33. The journalist, poet and political activist Maung Thaw Ka.

34. Suu and some of her 'boys', student members of the NLD who were her loyal bodyguards during campaign tours (*courtesy of the Aris family*).

35. Mountains and forest in Karen state, near the site of Manerplaw.

36. Suu with NLD co-founder U Kyi Maung (*Nic Dunlop/Panos Pictures*).

37. Landscape of lakes and hills in Karen state, near Thamanya (*Peter Popham*).

38. An image of Thamanya Sayadaw, the revered Buddhist teacher whom Suu visited (*Peter Popham*).

39. A video grab of Suu speaking at Monywa, hours before her attempted assassination (*Burma Campaign UK*).

40. Monks on the march in Rangoon, September 2007 (*Mizzima News Agency, Delhi*)

41. A monk covers his eyes against smoke during the uprising (*Burma Campaign UK*).

42. A painted portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi hanging in the kitchen of a house in Mandalay (*Mario Popham*).

43. John Yettaw, Suu's unbalanced intruder.

44. Suu meeting her son Kim at Mingaladon Airport, Rangoon during his visits to her in 2011.

45. Suu pictured in the NLD's Rangoon headquarters during her meeting with the author in March 2011 (*Mario Popham*).



## PROLOGUE

IN NOVEMBER 2010, Burma was preparing for its first elections in decades. Aung San Suu Kyi was in detention in her home, as she had been for the previous seven years.

Travelling across Rangoon six days before the poll, I had the luck to hail a taxi driver who spoke some English. I asked him, 'Are you going to vote?'

'No!' he said, 'I don't like it! It is a lie! They are lying to all the people, and all the world. They are very greedy! They don't know what democracy is ...' Later he said that his wife was going to vote and he was under pressure to do the same: she was afraid that if they didn't they might be killed.

He told me that he had a degree in Engineering from Insein Institute of Technology. So why, I asked him, was he driving a taxi?

'I am driving because I don't want to work for the government, because that means stealing. I want to work for my country and I want to do good. I don't want to steal! Money is not the important thing for our people. The important thing is to get democracy ...'

It was the strangest election I have ever come across. The party that had won the previous election by a country mile, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), would have been allowed to participate if it had recognised the new constitution and if it had been prepared

to expel Aung San Suu Kyi and all other members in detention or prison. As the party declined to do this, it was de-registered, becoming a non-party. The biggest party, which in the end won handily, had only been in existence for a few months: it was created by the simple trick of turning the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a regime-sponsored mass organisation to which all government employees are compelled to belong, into a party, the USDP. The other parties running included small split-offs from the NLD opposed to that party's decision not to run.

During the weeks of the election campaign, the mood in Rangoon was completely flat. There were no election meetings, no posters stuck up, no loudspeaker vans patrolling the streets blaring their parties' messages. The only indications that something out of the ordinary was under way were a few billboards for the USDP, and daily homilies in the regime's newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, urging people to vote.

'A voter can choose not to vote,' one such homily noted, 'but a person who is found guilty of inciting the people to boycott the election is liable for not more than one year's prison term or a fine of 100,000 kyats or both.'<sup>1</sup>

A cartoon in the paper showed a group of smiling citizens striding towards an arch inscribed 'Multi-party democracy general election'. Beyond was a modern city of glass and steel skyscrapers, captioned 'Peaceful, modern and developed democratic nation'. 'Join hands,' said one of the citizens, 'the goal is in sight.'

Another article in the same paper recalled that there had been an election twenty years before, whose result had not been honoured. 'The election was meaningless because it looks like runners starting for the race without having any goal, aim and rule. In other words, it looks like a walk taken by a blind person.[sic]'



Despite the references to the 1990 poll, all mention of Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues was rigorously excluded from all printed and broadcast material.

What actually distinguished the 1990 poll was the fact that the polling and the counting of votes were conducted reasonably fairly: that's why the NLD and its ethnic allies won 94 per cent of the seats.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the regime agonised for nearly twenty years over how to shake off the memory of that humiliation and somehow acquire legitimacy as rulers. This election was the way they finally chose to play it.

It was inconceivable that their proxies would win if the election was free and fair, so they did not want foreigners poking their noses in. Offers from abroad to monitor the polls were firmly rejected, as were visa applications by foreign journalists. I was admitted as a tourist, as on previous occasions.

The most flagrant way the poll was rigged was by regimented voting in advance: state employees and others were dragooned into voting en masse for the regime's proxy party.<sup>3</sup> 'We discussed how to take advance votes from members of thirty civil societies in Rangoon,' a USDP official told *Irrawaddy*, a news website run by Burmese journalists in exile.<sup>4</sup> Civil servants and members of regime-sponsored organisations including the Red Cross and the fire brigade were among those required to vote in advance. In this way getting out the vote - in many cases days in advance - became a quasi-military operation. In Rangoon constituencies where opposition candidates stood a chance of winning, pre-cooked ballots were poured in to ensure a favourable result. Two days after the poll, without giving any details, a senior USDP official was quoted by Agence France-Presse as saying, 'We have won about 80 per cent of the seats. We are glad.'<sup>5</sup>

By then I and several other undercover reporters had been expelled. I watched the next act of the drama in the office of the NLD-Liberated Areas (NLD-LA) in Mae Sot, on the Thailand-Burma border.<sup>6</sup>

Although Aung San Suu Kyi's eighteen-month detention sentence expired on Saturday 13th November, it was not clear until the last minute whether she would be released or not. But her party was optimistic: 'There is no legal basis for detaining her any longer,' said her lawyer.<sup>7</sup> Two days before, women members of the NLD had started cleaning the party's headquarters, which had been closed and shuttered for much of the time she was in detention, and repairing the air conditioners.

Nearly 2,200 political prisoners remained locked up in Burma's jails, but shortly after 5 p.m. on the 13th November, Suu's seven and a half years of detention finally came to an end. At 5.15 p.m. on that day, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, 'Soldiers armed with rifles and tear-gas launchers pushed aside the barbed-wire barriers blocking University Avenue, and a swarm of supporters dashed the final hundred yards to the villa's gate. Twenty minutes later, a slight 65-year-old woman popped her head over her red spiked fence.'<sup>8</sup>

The crowd chanted 'Long Live Aung San Suu Kyi!' 'I'm very happy to see you!' she yelled, barely audible over the chanting. 'It's been a very long time since I've seen you.' Rangoon was a prison camp no more. 'Some people sobbed out loud, many shed tears and everybody shouted words of salutation and love,' *The Times* of London reported on the 14th November. 'For ten minutes Aung San Suu Kyi could do nothing but bathe in the acclaim of the crowd.'

The previous week an NLD veteran, one of the party's founders, released from prison after nineteen years, had told me, 'When I and others were released it was like watering a flower in a pot - the plant is getting fresh, that's

all. But when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is released it will be like the beginning of the monsoon, the whole countryside green and blooming.<sup>9</sup> And indeed for some days the mood was very much like that.

Burma's military regime had played its best card with great astuteness. In the cacophonous celebrations of the next days, which echoed around the world, the outrageous theft of the election a week before was completely forgotten.

PART ONE  
HER FATHER'S CHILD



AUNG SAN SUU KYI EMERGED FROM detention in November 2010 as radiant as a lily, as if she had just returned from a holiday. The generals had contrived the election, from which she had been barred, and made sure that their proxy party won. Her marginalisation was now official. But none of that made any difference: her gate was besieged by thousands of supporters, braving the fury of the regime, in the first scenes of mass happiness in Rangoon in more than eight years.

From the earliest days of her political life, Suu has been attacked by the regime as the 'poster girl' of the West. If that was a gross exaggeration in 1989, today it would be an understatement: she is by far the most famous woman politician in the world never to have held office, the most famous Burmese person since the late UN Secretary General U Thant, and, along with the Dalai Lama, the most feted exponent of non-violent political resistance since Mahatma Gandhi. She is a familiar figure to millions of people around the world who have no idea how to pronounce her name or where to place Burma on the world map.

But the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi did nothing out of the ordinary before becoming a political star - that she insisted on being described as a housewife - has led many people who should know better to underrate her.<sup>1</sup>

Thant Myint-U, grandson of U Thant, in his book *The River of Lost Footsteps*, casts Suu as little more than a footnote to a narrative dominated down the ages by ruthless military men.<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Charney, in his *History*

*of Modern Burma*, sees her as significant chiefly as the embodiment, for the regime, of the menace from abroad, rather than as a positive force for real change.<sup>3</sup> A previous biographer, Justin Wintle, comes to the eccentric conclusion that she herself is to blame for her fate. 'Aung San Suu Kyi has become the perfect hostage,' he writes. '... Kept in captivity in part brought about by her own intransigence, the songbird's freedom has a price that no one can, or any longer dares, pay. The latest apostle of non-violence is imprisoned by her creed.'<sup>4</sup>

To blame Suu for being locked up for so many years is perverse, like blaming Joan of Arc for being burned at the stake. Yet it is true that her imprisonment has in a sense been voluntary, and this is one of the things that explains her enduring and almost universal popularity with ordinary Burmese people.

Suu's detention was never strictly comparable to Nelson Mandela's twenty-seven years' imprisonment on Robben Island because, unlike Mandela, she was free to leave. At any time in her years of confinement between 1989 and 2009, she could have phoned her contact in the regime, packed a suitcase, said goodbye to her faithful housekeepers and companions, taken a taxi to the airport and flown away; but it would have been with the certainty, if she did, that her passport would have been cancelled and that she would never have been permitted to return. And by flying away to the safe and loving embrace of the outside world, she would have vindicated all the slurs of her enemies, and the worst apprehensions of her supporters.

This choice is something she has rarely discussed, probably because it touches on the most personal and painful aspects of the life she has lived since 1988 - on her decision effectively to renounce her role as a wife and mother. But the reality of this choice has also been used by

the regime to torture her. This became most brutally true in January 1999, four years after the end of her first spell of detention. The news arrived from Oxford that her husband, Michael, had been diagnosed with prostate cancer and did not have long to live. Despite this, and despite appeals from many well-placed friends including Prince Charles and Countess Mountbatten, the regime refused to grant him a visa to enable him to visit her. The intention was clear: to induce her to follow the dictates of her heart and fly home to his bedside, as nine years before she had flown to Rangoon to the bedside of her mother. Knowing she would never be let back in, she refused to do it. Those in Asia and elsewhere who regarded her as lacking in female warmth felt confirmed in their view. Barely three months later, Michael died.

Justin Wintle is therefore perhaps right to use the word 'intransigence' to describe Suu's attitude through her years of confinement. It would have been entirely human, completely understandable, if at some point she had given up and gone home. No one would have blamed her. She would have been hailed and feted everywhere she went. She could have spent precious weeks with her dying husband, and today would no doubt be dashing from conference to conference, banging the drum for Burmese democracy. What difference would it have made if the lights in number 54 University Avenue had gone out for good?

The answer is, a great deal of difference. For Suu's impact has been spiritual and emotional as much as political.

As the letters she wrote to Michael and her essays on Burma both before and after her return make clear, Suu was acutely aware of the suffering of her people long before she returned to live there: of the poverty forced on the inhabitants of this naturally rich land by the idiocy of its rulers, on the stunting of bodies and minds by criminal economic and social policies. When this privileged

expatriate flew to Rangoon in 1988 and found herself in the thick of the greatest popular uprising in the nation's history, something clicked. Her people's suffering was no longer something distant and academic: it was a cause she embraced, with the passion to change it. Choosing to form and lead the NLD and fight the election, she made a compact with her country: they were no longer separate, no longer divisible. The harder the regime tried to paint her as a foreign decadent, a puppet of the West, a bird of passage, a poster girl, the more fiercely she insisted that she was one with her countrymen.

It is this decision - a moral much more than a political decision, and one from which she has not deviated in more than twenty years, despite every attempt to blackmail her emotionally - which has earned her an unwavering place in the hearts of tens of millions of Burmese. She could have flown away, and she never did. That has created an unbreakable bond.

But there is far more to Suu's career than simple commitment, however vital that element is. Suu had been thinking hard for many years about what it meant to be the daughter of the man who negotiated Burma's independence. She had a profound desire to be a daughter worthy of him, to do something for her nation of which both she and he could be proud. The tragic first decades of Burma's history as an independent nation, its fragile democracy snuffed out by the army, brought home to her how hard it would be to bring her nation into the modern world without doing violence to its innermost values. In the years before 1988 she had devoted much time and research to that question. Suddenly, against all odds, she had the opportunity, and the duty, to resolve it. She has not yet succeeded. But that is not the same as to say that she has failed.



Aung San Suu Kyi was born on 19 June 1945 in the Irrawaddy delta, the second of three children, during the most tumultuous years in Burma's history. Her father, Aung San, was at the heart of the tumult. Rangoon, the capital, had just fallen to the Allies, and her pregnant mother had sought refuge from the fighting in the countryside.

Aung San was a boy from the provinces, shy, a poor speaker, with abrupt manners, and prone to long unexplained silences.<sup>5</sup> Short and wiry, with the sort of blankness of expression that leads Westerners to describe people from the East as inscrutable, he also had something special about him, a charisma. With a fiery temper and an iron will, he emerged at Rangoon University in the 1930s as one of the most ambitious and determined of the students dedicated to freeing Burma from the British.

Burma was an imperial afterthought for Britain, annexed in three stages during the nineteenth century after one of the last Burmese kings had infuriated them by launching attacks on Bengal, the oldest and at the time the richest and most important part of the Indian empire. Annexing Burma was also an effective way to erect a bulwark against further French expansion in Indo-China. But it was never central to British designs in the way that India had become: it was ruled from India as an appendix, and few British administrators took the trouble to try to make sense of Burmese history, philosophy or psychology in the way generations of Bengal-based East India Company officers had done with India. The British simply brought the country to heel, in the most brutally straightforward manner they could, by abolishing the monarchy and sending the last king and his queen into exile. They opened up to foreign enterprises opportunities to extract timber, to mine gems and silver and to drill for oil, and allowed Indian and Chinese businessmen and labourers to flood in.

The process of being annexed and digested by a colonial power was acutely humiliating for every country that experienced it. Nonetheless, in many parts of the British Empire, as the foreigners introduced systems and ideas that improved living standards for many, more and more middle-class and ruling-class subjects would become, to a greater or lesser degree, complicit with the rulers. The pain of subjugation softened with the passing of generations, as the native elite was absorbed into the 'steel frame' of the empire, the bureaucratic superstructure that kept the whole enterprise ticking over. That helps to explain why, in some quarters, one can still find nostalgia for the Raj, right across the subcontinent.

But the Burmese experience was very different.<sup>6</sup> It started very late: lower Burma, centred on Rangoon, was seized during the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, and was rapidly de-natured as the British threw open the gates. Within a couple of decades Burmese residents found themselves a minority in their own city, bystanders to its transformation. In the north, Burmese kings still ruled: a tradition sanctified, guided and held in check by the *sangha*, the organisation of Buddhist monks which had underpinned the nation's spiritual and political life since the eleventh century, retaining that role through innumerable wars and several changes of dynasty.

But in 1885 the British finished the job, storming Mandalay, the last seat of the kings, sacking the palace, burning much of the ancient library and sending King Thibaw and his queen Supayalat into exile in western India. They brought the whole kingdom into the Indian system, governing it from the Viceroy's palace in Calcutta, and supplementing or replacing the local rulers who had been the king's allies with British administrators. They brought in tens of thousands of troops to suppress the rebellions

that kept breaking out, until the Pax Britannica prevailed across the country.

But by the time Burma had been subdued, the Indians across the border were themselves becoming restless. The Indian National Congress had been founded in 1885, the year the Burmese monarchy was abolished, and rapidly became the focus for Indian hopes of self-government. The First World War weakened the empire dramatically. The arrival of Mohandas Gandhi from South Africa gave Congress a leader of unique charisma and creativity, and the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in 1919 brought home the fact that British rule was a confidence trick, with hundreds of millions of Indians kept in check by a threat of force that the few thousand British in residence could never carry out effectively.

Across the Naga Hills, the Burmese drank the fresh ignominy of being colonial subjects to colonial subjects. Peasants tilling the paddy fields were trapped into debt by the Indian moneylenders who fanned out across the country. In Rangoon, foreign shopkeepers and businessmen grew rich exploiting the naïve natives. With the abolition of the monarchy, things fell apart. In lower Burma the British had refused to accept the authority of the *thathanabaing*, the senior monk authorised by the king to maintain the discipline and guide the teachings of the country's hundreds of thousands of monks, and in his absence local Buddhist *sanghas* lost their direction.<sup>7</sup> Then, sixty years later, King Thibaw was exiled and the monarchy destroyed. It was the coup de grâce.

The first nationalist stirrings in Burma came out of Buddhism and the Buddhist clergy. Traditionally, soon after dawn each morning, in every town and village in the land, monks in their maroon robes would tramp in file through the lanes, their big lacquer bowls extended for alms. They were the potent local symbols of a moral, theological and

political system that had governed people's lives throughout Burmese history and which, according to their belief system, gave them their best hope of nirvana. The monks enshrined and sanctified the authority of the Buddhist king, and the people, by giving the monks alms, and by inscribing their own sons in the monastery when they were 'big enough to scare away the crows', gained spiritual merit which was obtainable in no other way.<sup>8</sup>

Now all this was smashed and ruined. It was worse than mere humiliation: the nation had lost its compass. In response, the Young Men's Buddhist Association or YMBA, in imitation of the YMCA, was established. It was a critical first step, less in defying the British than in asserting or reinventing an order that resonated with traditional Burmese beliefs. The most significant figure to emerge from this, in the feverish years after the First World War, was U Ottama: a learned Buddhist monk, who had also travelled around Asia and come back with the news that far-away Japan, another Buddhist country and one that had succeeded in repelling invaders and remaining independent, had actually beaten the Russians, a full-fledged European power, in war.

By the 1920s, under huge pressure from Gandhi and the Congress, Britain had conceded to India important measures of self-government, and the nationalist agitators in Rangoon, advised and cajoled by Indian radicals who had slipped over from Bengal, found that, although their movement was young and raw compared to India's, they had the wind in their sails. By the time Aung San arrived at Rangoon University from his home in the little central Burmese town of Natmawk in 1932, independence no longer seemed an impossible dream. But the more the British conceded, the more impatient the nationalists both of India and Burma became to win full independence.

With his gauche manner, his up-country origins and his clumsy English, Aung San struggled to make an impact among the metropolitan elite of the capital's university. But those who jeered at his contributions to the Students' Union debates and implored him to stop trying to speak English and stick to Burmese, soon learned that this difficult, angular young man had formidable determination. He wouldn't give up a challenge - trying to speak English, for example - until he had actually mastered it. Gradually he emerged as one of the leaders of a group of revolutionary nationalists at the university. Their ideology was hazy, leaning towards socialism and communism but with a deep commitment to Buddhism as well.

They took to calling themselves the 'Thakins': the word means lord and master, roughly equivalent to 'Sahib' in India. After conquering Burma the arrogant British had appropriated the title. Now these Burmese upstarts were demanding it back. They 'proclaimed the birthright of the Burmese to be their own masters', as Suu wrote in a sketch of her father's life; the title 'gave their names a touch of pugnacious nationalism'.<sup>9</sup>

Aung San and his friends were developing the courage to claw back what the invaders had stolen, beginning with pride and self-respect. He was in Rangoon for the momentous events of 1938 (year 1300 in the Burmese calendar, so known subsequently as the 'Revolution of 1300'). Despite the fact that the British had already conceded a great deal, separating Burma from India and allowing the country, like India itself, to be ruled by an elected governing council under the supervision of the British governor, agitation for full independence reached its peak in that year, with peasants and oil industry workers striking and joining the students in demonstrations in Rangoon. During one baton charge to disperse the protesters, a student demonstrator was killed.

Schools across the country struck in protest, communal riots broke out between Burmans and Indian Muslims, seventeen protesters died under police fire during protests in Mandalay and the government of Prime Minister Ba Maw collapsed.<sup>10</sup>

Then the Second World War broke out in Europe, and while Gandhi in India launched his 'Quit India Movement', demanding that the British leave at once, and Subhas Chandra Bose in Calcutta began secretly training his Indian National Army, Aung San and the other Thakins decided to look east.

Ever since U Ottama had returned from his wanderings, spreading the word about the achievements of the Japanese against the Russians, the Burmese nationalists had been open to the possibility that liberation might come from that direction. Aung San was no Gandhian: he accepted that Burma would be unlikely to gain its freedom without fighting for it. And in August 1940 he and one other Thakin comrade took the boldest step of their lives when they secretly flew out of the country, to Amoy in China, now Xiamen, in Fujian province.

Their apparent intention was to make contact with Chinese insurgents, either Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang or Mao Zedong's Communists - anyone with the wherewithal to help them evict the British. But Fujian was already in the hands of the expanding Japanese. And when a Japanese secret agent based in Rangoon, Keiji Suzuki, learned of the two Burmese Thakins roaming the city's streets, he arranged for them to be befriended by his co-nationals. In November 1940 they were flown to Tokyo, where Suzuki himself took them in hand.

It was Aung San's first experience of the world beyond Burma's borders, and he was impressed. Despite misgivings about the authoritarian brutality of Japanese militarism - and his prudish horror when Suzuki offered to