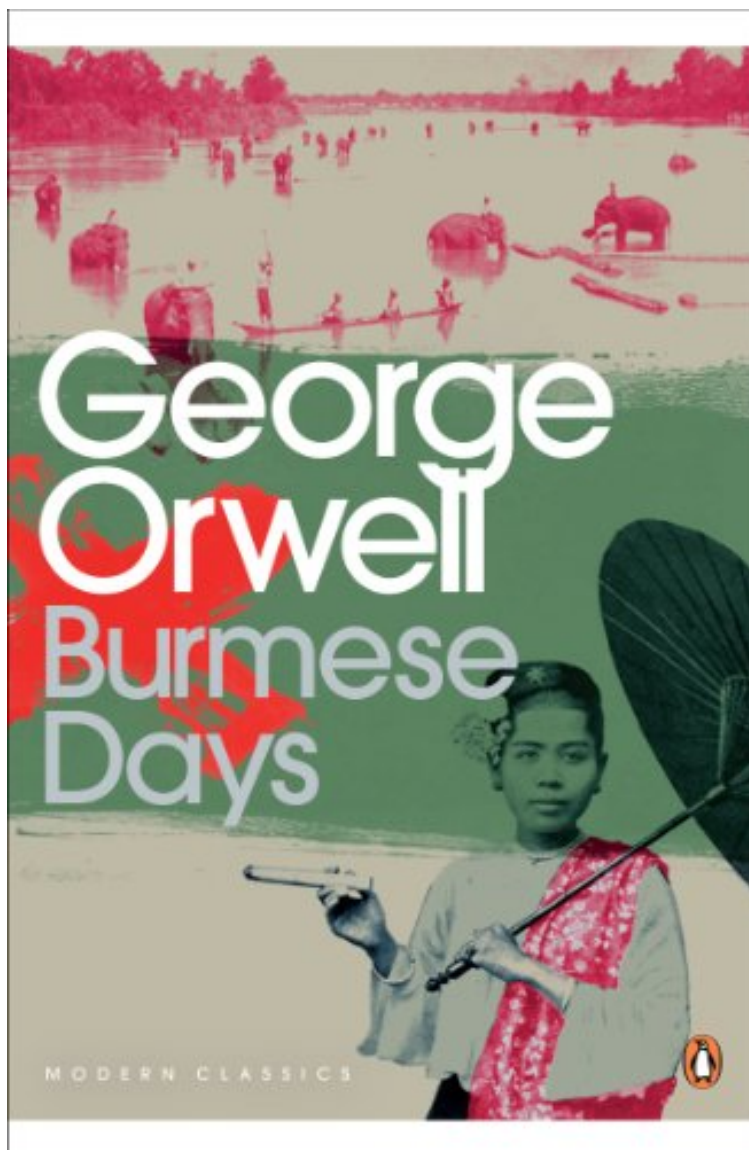


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Burmese Days



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSet in the days of the Empire, with the British ruling in Burma, *Burmese Days* describes both indigenous corruption and Imperial bigotry, when 'after all, natives were natives - interesting, no doubt, but finally only a "subject" people, an inferior people with black faces'. Against the prevailing orthodoxy, Flory, a white timber merchant, befriends Dr Veraswami, a black enthusiast for Empire. The doctor needs help. U Po Kyin, Sub-divisional Magistrate of Kyauktada, is plotting his downfall. The only thing that can save him is European patronage: membership of the hitherto all-white Club. While Flory prevaricates, beautiful Elizabeth Lackersteen arrives in Upper Burma from Paris. At last, after years of 'solitary hell', romance and marriage appear to offer Flory an escape from the 'lie' of the 'pukka sahib

pose'.comImagine crossing E.M. Forster with Jane Austen. Stir in a bit of socialist doctrine, a sprig of satire, strong Indian curry, and a couple quarts of good English gin and you get something close to the flavor of George Orwell's intensely readable and deftly plotted *Burmese Days*. In 1930, Kyauktada, Upper Burma, is one of the least auspicious postings in the ailing British Empire--and then the order comes that the European Club, previously for whites only, must elect one token native member. This edict brings out the worst in this woefully enclosed society, not to mention among the natives who would become the One. Orwell mines his own Anglo-Indian background to evoke both the suffocating heat and the stifling pettiness that are the central facts of colonial life: "Mr. MacGregor told his anecdote about Prome, which could be produced in almost any context. And then the conversation veered back to the old, never-palling subject--the insolence of the natives, the supineness of the Government, the dear dead days when the British Raj was the Raj and please give the bearer fifteen lashes. The topic was never let alone for long, partly because of Ellis's obsession. Besides, you could forgive the Europeans a great deal of their bitterness. Living and working among Orientals would try the temper of a saint." Protagonist James Flory is a timber merchant, whose facial birthmark serves as an outward expression of the ironic and left-leaning habits of mind that make him inwardly different from his coevals. Flory appreciates the local culture, has native allegiances, and detests the racist machinations of his fellow Club members. Alas, he doesn't always possess the moral courage, or the energy, to stand against them. His almost embarrassingly Anglophile friend, Dr. Veraswami, the highest-ranking native official, seems a shoo-in for Club membership, until Machiavellian magistrate U Po Kyin launches a campaign to discredit him that results, ultimately, in the loss not just of reputations but of lives. Whether to endorse Veraswami or to betray him becomes a kind of litmus test of Flory's character. Against this backdrop of politics and ethics, Orwell throws the shadow of romance. The arrival of the bobbed blonde, marriageable, and resolutely anti-intellectual Elizabeth Lackersteen not only casts Flory as hapless suitor but gives Orwell the chance to show that he's as astute a reporter of nuanced social interactions as he is of political intrigues. In fact, his combination of an astringently populist sensibility, dead-on observations of human behavior, formidable conjuring skills, and no-frills prose make for historical fiction that stands triumphantly outside of time. --Joyce Thompson

ExtraitFrom the Introduction by John CareyThe fame of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has eclipsed Orwell's novels of the 1930s. They tend to be thought of, if at all, as false starts attempts at a kind of fiction that he outgrew once he got into his stride. This is a mistake, and one that diminishes Orwell. For the 1930s novels are unique and compelling, and they have scenes and incidents striking enough to ensure he would be remembered had he written nothing else. (This is true even of the weakest, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, which is omitted from this volume because Orwell did not wish it to be reprinted.) What's more, these novels show his capacity for something that his later works lack namely, doubt. Each of them is a study in ambivalence. They subvert their own certainties and have room for alternative angles. In this respect they belong to the rich central tradition of European imaginative literature that upsets dogmas and questions fixed positions. By comparison, Orwell's later voice is characterized by assertive confidence, which generates its own kind of thrill, but does not encourage other ways of thinking.*

Burmese Days was written while he was still almost entirely unknown. It was his first novel and only his second book. *Down and Out in Paris and London*, his first, had come out in 1933. The American edition of *Burmese Days* appeared the following year, but his London publisher, Gollancz, needlessly fearing libel actions, delayed publication in Britain until 1935. Anyone who wants to know what the British Empire was like for those who ran it must read *Burmese Days*. It is far more informative in that regard than E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, because Forster was largely ignorant of what he wrote about, whereas Orwell's knowledge was extensive and firsthand. After leaving Eton he had joined the Indian Imperial Police and was sent to Burma, arriving there in November 1922. He passed the obligatory exams in Burmese and Hindustani with ease colleagues reported that he could converse 'in very high-flown Burmese' with the priests in local monasteries. By 1924, aged twenty-one, he was in charge of a police force covering a population of 200,000 (the Twante sub-division, not far from Rangoon), and two years later he was promoted to command the police in Moulmein, Burma's third largest city. His last posting was to Katha, a remote town in Upper Burma, on which Kyauktada in *Burmese Days* is very loosely based. Flory, the novel's central character, is stationed in Kyauktada, but he is by no means an Orwell self-portrait. His background is different ('a cheap, third-rate public school') and he is a timber-merchant, not a police officer. The 'hideous birthmark' on his face, which he is so ashamed of, asserts his difference. Like Orwell he feels trapped by imperialism, but he is incapable of breaking free, whereas Orwell resigned from the police in 1927 and sailed home, jobless and facing a life of poverty. The five years he had spent upholding an unjust power had

filled him with shame, and he was aware, he said, of 'an immense weight of guilt' he had to expiate. His attitude towards Burma and the Burmese was, however, not simple. They aroused rage and hatred as well as guilt. He writes of the 'sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere', and of 'the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance'. On at least one occasion he was stung into retaliation. While he was at Twante he was walking down the stairs at a suburban railway station when a playful schoolboy bumped into him and knocked him over. Recovering himself, he hit the boy across the back with a walking stick, whereupon a group of university students gathered round, protesting, and got into the train with him to continue their harangue. In *Burmese Days* it is Ellis, the rabid racist member of the all-white Club, who lashes out with his walking stick at a schoolboy who annoyed him. Ellis, however, hits the boy across the eyes and blinds him. It is as if Orwell is tacitly acknowledging the unthinking level to which anger had reduced him, and the horrible consequence his action could have had. Of all his tormentors the Buddhist priests were, he recalls, the worst, and 'got badly on my nerves'. The result of this continual aggravation was, he found, a sharp division in his own attitudes. With one part of his mind he thought of the British Raj as 'an unbreakable tyranny', but with another part 'I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts'. This ambivalence about the people he was placed in authority over permeates *Burmese Days*. Though the British residents in the novel are almost all despicable, the real villain the corrupt and murderous magistrate U Po Kyin, is Burmese, as is the other person whose malice precipitates the tragic ending, Flory's mistress Ma Hla May. Almost the only 'native' character who is not two-faced and treacherous is Flory's friend the Indian Dr Veraswami, and the reader's respect for him is undermined by his servile admiration for the Raj and his stupid insistence that 'pukka sahibs' are 'the salt of the earth' marks of a slave-mentality that make any real intimacy with Flory impossible. The scene (Chapter VIII) where Flory takes Elizabeth, the English girl he hopes to marry, to a traditional Burmese drama-cum-dance (a 'pwe') is brilliantly poised between alternative responses. The dirt, the noise, the closeness of the native and the 'feral reek' of their sweat all appal Elizabeth and she is disgusted by the suggestive contortions of the pwe-dancers which climax with the girl wriggling each of her buttocks independently in time to the music. All the while, Flory whispers an enthusiastic cultural commentary into her ear ('I knew this would interest you . . . what art, what centuries of culture you can see behind it!'). Eventually Elizabeth gets up and storms out, with Flory bleating apologies in her wake. It is impossible to find a 'right' response to this scene. We can see that Elizabeth is a shallow, prejudiced snob. But the dirt and smells are real, and it is perfectly natural for her to be disgusted by them. Orwell was himself repelled by dirt and regularly describes it with lingering fascination. Equally we can see that Flory is well-meaning, but also that he is a fool and a bore, blind to Elizabeth's feelings. All the scenes with Elizabeth and Flory have similar doubleness. The Eurasians, for example, whom Elizabeth snubs (in Chapter X), should not, we feel, be snubbed. Yet the way Orwell depicts their talk makes us acknowledge that they are ridiculous. Characters, like scenes, invite a mixed response. Even the venomous Ellis is, we are told, 'an intelligent man and an able servant of his firm'. His only flaw is that he is 'one of those Englishman common, unfortunately who should never be allowed to set foot in the East'. Verrall, the young cavalry officer who displaces Flory in Elizabeth's affection (and casts her off when he tires of her) is a miniature masterpiece of ambivalence. He is brutal, thick and callous the kind of rich young aristocrat who kicks the behinds of native servants if they displease him. But he lives 'as ascetically as a monk' to harden and train his body, and he looks upon the Europeans in Burma as 'boozing, womanizing, yellow-faced loafers'. In both these respects, as, probably, in his estimate of the native infantry regiments ('Christ, what God-forsaken swine!'), he bears some resemblance to Orwell. His youth, fitness and horsemanship command Flory's and our admiration. With his white buckskin topi and his gleaming polo boots he is 'as elegant as a picture'. His mount is 'a beautiful Arab, a mare, with proud neck and arching, plume-like tail; a lovely milk-white thing'. Above all, Verrall is fearless. The belligerent Ellis, whom no one else dares to cross, cringes and slinks away when Verrall looks him in the eye and calmly threatens to kick his behind. Much as we may hate or envy him, we are forced to see that Verrall has achieved a kind of perfection, and those who disparage Orwell's 1930s novels would do well to study this piece of character-drawing, which is Tolstoyan in its even-handedness. The novel's reaction to Burma's natural scenery also betrays ambivalence. It is lyrical, but aware of the cruel and the alien. In the first paragraph vulture circle high overhead, and what Flory sees in the last moment of his life is 'a tiny lizard, translucent like a creature of gelatine', stalking a moth. The scene where he proposes to Elizabeth is a poem in whiteness. The full moon flares 'like a white-hot coin', turning the branches of the frangipani tree into 'rods of silver', and crusting the earth 'like some dazzling salt'. Every leaf seems to bear 'a freight of solid light, like snow'. But

the scent from the frangipanis streams through the air 'like some intolerable compound out of a penny-in-the-slot-machine' and it sickens Flory: 'How that tree does stink, doesn't it? Beastly, tropical thing!' The most disturbing nature-scene is the hunt (Chapter XIV) and it, again, is two-sided, dividing the characters' feelings from ours. When Flory and Elizabeth go out shooting she for the first time in her life it proves the culmination of their love, bonding them as nothing has before. Excited, and admiring Flory's masculine skill with firearms, Elizabeth feels the urge to fling her arms around his neck and kiss him. Suddenly they find that they are kneeling face to face with a dead bird between them. 'With a shock they discovered that their hands, his right and her left were clasped tightly together. They had run to the place hand in hand without noticing it.' Yet what is for them a golden moment is for the reader monstrous. Flory's exultation over the 'little green corpses' of the pigeons is designed to make the gulf between his response and our impassibly wide: 'Look at it. Aren't they lovely things? . . . Just look at its breast-feathers, like a jewel.' he adds a kind of wry joke, 'It's murder to shoot them', which confirms our loathing. When news arrives that a leopard has been sighted, the hunters' glee and our sickening anticipation of the animal's likely fate make for almost unbearable reading. We want something to happen that will let it escape. But it does not, and Orwell chooses words that will sting our hearts as the dying creature scrambles through the undergrowth 'crying out with a snarling, sobbing noise, savage and pitiful'. If (to invoke Tolstoy again) we balance this scene (one of Orwell's most powerful) against the hunting scene in *War and Peace* (II, iv, 35), which reflects Tolstoy's own simple, zestful enjoyment of killing wildlife for fun, the comparison does not seem to come out in Tolstoy's favor.