

Book Review

“The Trouser People,” by Andrew Marshall

Andrew Marshall, *The Trouser People: A Story of Burma in the Shadow of the Empire* (U.K. title: *The Trouser People: A Quest for the Victorian Footballer Who Made Burma Play the Empire's Game*) (London: Penguin Books; Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002). Pp. xii + 308, bibliography, index, illustrations. \$26.00 (hardcover). ISBN 1-58243-120-5 (US), 0-670-89237-8 (UK).

N.B.: This review—authored by the *Global Game*—is forthcoming in *Soccer & Society*, and is used by permission. For additional background, see Beijing-based journalist **Ron Gluckman's** review, as well as the review in *Persimmon: Asian Literature, Arts, and Culture*. Marshall reports on Burma's Shan people in the 1 March 2004 issue of *Time Asia* (“[Guerrillas in the Mist](#)”) and on Burma generally on 26 April (“[Stone Age](#)”).

Football remains on the periphery of this chronicle of **Andrew Marshall's** travels through remotest Burma. Even as Marshall hitchhikes among the Palaung, Shan and Wa, ethnic groups clinging tenuously to their identities under a brutal military dictatorship, football emerges at odd points to relieve or to highlight further the ordinary Burmese citizen's glum existence. In one instance, Marshall tours a mountainous zone in Burma's East with a Shan guide:

"You see those football pitches down there?" asked **Sai Lek**, pointing into the valley. "They used to be paddy fields. The military ordered two villages to move away, and took all the land. Now the people have nothing." There was a match in progress, and we watched it in silence. "The soldiers play football very well," said Sai Lek drily. (203)

Marshall's primary objective is to retrace, in rough fashion, the missions of **Sir George Scott**, an agent of Britain's late-nineteenth-century colonial rule over Upper Burma. Scott's influence was exercised in courageous and sometimes comic forays into Burmese hinterlands, yet also in having introduced football to the Burmese in 1878. Appropriately, Marshall begins his in-country explorations at the Rangoon pitch where Scott first punted a ball in front of curious students at St. John's College. This part of Marshall's visit occurs during the [1998 World Cup finals](#), with makeshift football matches taking place on Rangoon streets and kids selling reproductions of the evening's fixture lists. As in other repressed societies, football matches in Burma serve as a release valve, in which citizens can express frustrations not tolerated in other contexts. Marshall discovers this while sitting with spectators at a cup tie involving the Burmese Ministry of Finance and Revenue and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Marshall's seatmates mock linesmen and players, and laughter and derision grow when a military officer makes trophy presentations:

Then a player called **Aung Moe Oo** came forward. He belonged to the much-loathed Defense Services team and was himself a military officer. A low, whooping sound rose menacingly from the terraces. It sounded to me as if the crowd were making monkey noises, but in fact they were saying a Burmese word over and over again, with increasing volume and venom. . . .

"Ayu, ayu, ayu, ayu, ayu . . ."

"Fool, fool, fool, fool, fool . . ." (116–17)

"Nobody in Burma cares about domestic football," Marshall told *The Irrawaddy*, a Thailand-based monthly that covers Burma and Asia, in April 2002. [Ed.: See [article reprint](#).] "Nobody thinks it's real football anymore." Throughout this history and travelogue, Marshall indeed emphasizes the surreal. Scott, trudging through jungle with Punjabi porters toting his camera equipment and other weighty effects during the so-called Wild Wa Expedition of 1893, defuses sticky situations with the head-hunting Wa by offering tea and jam. As he follows in Scott's footsteps, Marshall visits a town on the Sino-Burmese border that features transvestites ("ladyboys") dancing pornographically in front of elderly visitors from China's Yunnan Province.

Does Marshall succeed, then, in his quest for, as the U.K. subtitle states, "the Victorian footballer who made Burma play the empire's game"? Through ingenuity and daring, he does. The result is a conflicted portrait of Scott, an imperialist who nevertheless seemed to appreciate local traditions and who left behind an important legacy of diaries and books. As other Englishmen have done, Scott also left a game that could give expression, 125 years later, to a troubled society's yearning for freedom.

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