

# THREE VIEWS OF BURMA

TOWARD the end of last year, a Canadian journalist, David Martin, met in a London hotel the now interned Prime Minister of Burma, U Saw. A day or two later, he met and interviewed Mr. L. S. Amery, Secretary of State for Burma. Now "The Listener" has interviewed a New Zealander recently returned from Rangoon. Each of these men gives a different view of the problems of Burma, and we present their opinions without comment. For Mr. Martin's interviews, we are indebted to a recent issue of "New Statesman"

## 1. Interview with U Saw

THE Prime Minister of Burma is young — in fact, at 40, he is the youngest Prime Minister in the world. In appearance, he is amazingly like what you would expect a Prime Minister of Burma to be like: he is of medium height, with a corpulent rotundity that is in utter harmony with his round, smiling, Burmese features. His English is no more than fair, but what he lacks in syntax and vocabulary, he makes up for in expressiveness. U Saw is reputed to be one of the best orators in the Burmese Parliament. In his bearing he is extremely friendly and democratic.

Before U Saw became Premier, he was the editor of *The Sun*, most influential paper in Burma. He is the leader of the Myochit Party (Myochit literally means "Lover of the Race"), which, with 36 seats, is the largest group in the Burmese Legislature.

My first question dealt with the purpose of the Prime Minister's visit. U Saw agreed that it was true, that he had come to England in an endeavour to obtain a definite promise of Dominion status. He told me of the high hopes the Atlantic Charter had encouraged, and of how bitterly disappointed they had been by Mr. Churchill's declaration of September 9.

"I know how the argument is advanced that a country with Burma's brief experience in constitutional government is hardly equipped for Dominion status. Yet, on all counts, the Burmese Legislature has made an impressive showing since its inception in 1937. The sole subjects which are reserved by the Governor are Defence and Foreign Affairs."

I asked U Saw whether it was true that there was much pro-Japanese sentiment in Burma.

"The attitude of my Government towards Japan," U Saw told me, "is expressed in the fact that Burma has followed the lead of Britain and the United States in virtually abrogating its trade with Japan. Don't forget that Japan used to account for about 20 per cent of our total foreign trade. She took a large part of our rice crop and nine-tenths of our cotton."

"There is a small section of Burmese opinion which believes that to aid Britain win the war means to aid Britain to keep us in subjection. This opinion is represented in Parliament by the Freedom Bloc—but many of the leaders of this bloc, including Ba Maw, the former Premier, are now in jail. There is another section, which, while it cherishes no love for the Japanese, feels

that if it is Burma's destiny to remain a subject nation, then it might be better to be governed by a nation that is of the same blood and of the same religion. But by and large, the Burmese people prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't know."

U Saw derided the suggestion that Burma was so rent by divisional differences that it would be dangerous to vest authority in a central Government. "The differences between the Burmese proper and the Shans, the Karens, the Kachins, and the Chinese are certainly of no more serious an order than the differences between the Englishmen, the Scotsmen, the Welshmen and the Northern Irish. We share a common culture and a common religion. In addition to the fact that our languages are related, Burmese is the *lingua Franca* of the country. The attitude of the Burmese majority to the indigenous minorities has been one of complete tolerance."

"The British Government has informed the Indian people that they must settle their internal differences before they can hope for Dominion status. If it were to make such an offer to Burma, we would say 'Good!' because we are confident that, given the prospect of full self-government, we can easily achieve an agreement with our native minorities."

My final question to U Saw was whether a definite promise of Dominion status would result in an increased war effort on Burma's part. At no point in the conversation was U Saw more categorical. "If the Burmese people were convinced that they were fighting for their own freedom as well as for that of the rest of the world, then there would be no question about it—Burma's war effort would be increased four-fold."

## 2. Interview with Mr. Amery

THE day after U Saw's departure from London, David Martin was received by Mr. Amery. Here is his account of the interview:

"I appreciate and sympathise with the national aspirations of the Burmese people," Mr. Amery told me. "And I can also understand that there should exist a widespread sympathy for these aspirations in America. From a distance, the problem seems relatively simple. In reality, it is extraordinarily complex. We must take into account not only all possible international contingencies, but also the internal situation of Burma. While it is true that sectional differences in Burma are fortunately not as acute as they are in India, it is also true, for example, that at the Round Table

Conference the Shan leaders were opposed to control by a central Burmese Government."

"Under all these circumstances, the Government did not feel justified in giving an unconditional pledge which might only result in serious misunderstanding. We have informed U Saw that it is our desire to assist Burma to achieve Dominion status at the earliest possible date, and that to this end we favour calling a conference on Burma's status as soon as the war is over. U Saw, on the other hand, asked us to tie ourselves down to the declaration that, after the termination of the war, Burma would automatically be accorded Dominion status, subject only to temporary reservations of Defence and Foreign Affairs. The difference between us is one of form and not of purpose. What the Burmese advocates of an immediate categorical statement fail to realise is that no member of the British Commonwealth has achieved Dominion status as a result of a dated promise delivered beforehand; they have achieved Dominion status rather as a result of a process of natural growth. That our assurances to Burma are made in all good faith is attested to by the remarkable degree of autonomy which Burma has achieved since its reconstitution as a separate unit of the Empire in 1937."

Mr. Amery confirmed my information that in the course of the discussion U Saw had offered to give Britain a certain measure of control over military and foreign affairs for a temporary period after Dominion status came into effect. I asked him whether such a compromise would not be satisfactory to the British Government.

"The offer in no way affected the general tenor of our conversations," Mr. Amery informed me. "We felt that the complexities of the situation, nationally and internationally, prevented us from specifying a definite date. We hope that U Saw believes that, despite the unavoidably general form in which it is couched, Britain will honour her assurance to Burma."

## 3. Interview with a New Zealander

A NEW ZEALANDER who has returned to the Dominion after spending several years in Rangoon, confessed last week in an interview with *The Listener* that he had no hope of any happy future for Burma until Whitehall gave up the attempt to rule the country democratically. Asiatic politicians, he said, have their own ideas on democracy. They know what graft and corruption and squeeze and



U SAW

"What you would expect a Prime Minister of Burma to be like"

plunder mean, but "Burma for the Burmese," like any other nationalist slogan if it is ever really applied, will be just a wider opportunity for certain families to enrich themselves and all their relatives at the expense of those who are not powerful enough to do the same thing themselves. That excellent book *Oliver Wiswell*, by Kenneth Roberts, shows the process in 18th century America. They would begin first on the "foreigners"—Europeans, Indians, and Chinese—but everybody would suffer, as everybody does now suffer to some extent, who could not turn the tables and begin squeezing them.

It did not surprise him in the least, he said, that the British were getting little assistance from the local inhabitants in their efforts to stop the Japanese. The Burmans had no love for the British, and laughed at British protestations of faith in them. They had, in fact, no faith in any foreign power, but they disliked most those with whom they had been most closely associated, and the British Government had been foolish enough for years to allow the Japanese to corrupt them by radio. They disliked the Indians because the Indians lived among them as competitors and came among them as soldiers. They hated the Chinese because China had poured armies into Burma in the past and might at any time do so again. They preferred the Japanese to the British because the British were among them and the Japanese, so far, were not.

Until these facts were recognised, he insisted; it would be impossible to see events in Burma in anything like a true perspective. Most of the news cabled from Rangoon had as much resemblance to the truth as a Maori in a top hat has to the truth about New Zealand. The significant things were just not reported, partly because they were unpleasant things like rioting and murder, and partly because politicians were as determined in London as in Rangoon not to call a spade whatever it resembled to those who had to use it.