

An Englishman's First Impressions of Burma

An Illustrated Talk
by

Dr Miles Ellis

In 1897 a young, 23-year old, woman called Beth Ellis travelled to Burma on her own to visit her elder sister, who was married to a member of the Indian Civil Service based in Burma. Beth spent six months in a small town called Remyo in the hills not far from Mandalay which the British Raj had decided to develop as their summer capital. While she was there a gentleman at a dinner party asked if she was planning to write a book about her visit and when she said that she was not he asked "what then will you do with your life?" So she decided to write a book, entitled "An English Girl's First Impressions of Burmah", which has subsequently been described as one of the most amusing travel books ever written – and is still in print, as well as being available in multiple electronic book formats. It also started a successful career as a romantic historical novelist which was brought to an abrupt end by her death in child-birth in 1913 at the age of only 38.

Beth Ellis was my great-aunt, and ever since I first read her book I have wanted to visit Burma. In 2013 I was finally able to do so and to discover for myself a country which both Beth and Rudyard Kipling fell in love with. My talk illustrates this beautiful country and its people, which has barely changed since Beth was there 115 years ago, but is now on the verge of major changes as it re-enters the wider world after many years of military dictatorship. It is not a travelogue, although it covers many of the most popular 'sights' in Burma, but is rather my impressions of the country, its people and their culture, and how these have changed since my great-aunt recorded her own impressions at the end of the 19th century.

My fee for the talk will go to help the children in the small village of Ye Ngan East in the Meikhtila area of central Burma where I am sponsoring a young girl called Pa Pa Win through ActionAid's Child Sponsorship scheme.

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