



Was “Yadza” Really Ro(d)gers?

Gerry Abbott

Under the terms of the Treaty of Yandabo, which ended the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26, the Government of India sent Henry Burney to Burma as Resident Minister to the Court of Ava. Arriving at post in April 1830 he kept a journal in which, a few months later, he recorded the following:

August 12

I paid a visit this morning to an extraordinary character, an uncle of the King, named Mekkhra Mon tha or Prince of Mekkhra. He has been taught to read and understand English by the late Mr Rogers, and he evinces a very laudable desire of becoming acquainted with European science and literature.

(Tarling, ed.1995:59)

Burney goes on to say that he and his associates considered the Prince to be ‘certainly the most extraordinary man we have seen in this country’ in that he possessed an impressive English library, was already well informed in scientific matters, had translated extracts from Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* and – with the help of an American missionary – had well-nigh completed an English-Burmese dictionary.

According to Burney, then, the tutor credited with enabling the Prince to do all this was ‘the late Mr Rogers.’ But how did this intriguing English-born character come to be there, and who exactly was he? I raise the question because, while most of the information we have about Rogers is based on his own accounts of

his background, those accounts are not consistent. I shall therefore, working backwards from 1830, collate various pieces of information about him in an attempt to establish the truth about his past. We must first jump back four years.

In May 1826, a few months after the end of hostilities, the envoy John Crawfurd questioned a number of people who had been imprisoned by the Burmese government during the war, and obtained signed depositions from each of them (Crawfurd, 1834, vol II: 67ff). Those interviewed included a teak merchant named John Laird, a Scot; the Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson, an American; and Henry Gouger, an English merchant. On being questioned, Laird reported a discussion at the Court of Ava in 1824 between the King and Bandula, his General, about the possibility of conquering Bengal with the help of Indian and Chinese forces. He was asked at this point:

Q. Who was your interpreter on this occasion? – A. Mr. Rodgers, an Englishman, who has resided forty-one years in the country, and understands the language thoroughly.

Q. What observation did Mr. Rodgers make upon what transpired upon this occasion? – A. He said to me, "If the King takes the advice of these men, there will be a war with the English, and the country is gone." I said, "Why don't you advise his Majesty against it. He said, "If at this moment I were to speak a word on the subject, my head would be cut off." (Crawfurd II, Appendix:73)

From this brief exchange we conclude that Rogers arrived in Burma in 1783, was fluent in Burmese and had by 1824 risen to a position which gave him access to the King's ear except on matters such as those of national military importance. We can also see the delicacy and perilousness of his position.

Laird was also questioned about a Burmese minister who had been appointed as commander of the army after the death of Bandula. This man had for a few days been incarcerated as a fellow-prisoner, said Laird, and had promised Rogers that once released he would 'do something for our comfort.' But the European prisoners had later learned that the minister intended to massacre the prisoners.

Q. Are you of opinion that he intended to destroy you? – A. No: I never thought so, but I think it likely that he wished to destroy two of the party, Rodgers and Lanciego; who had, as officers of the Burman Government, thwarted him several times. (p.85)

Once again, we see the delicacy of Rogers’ position; but we also see the extent of his influence at Court.

Under questioning, the American missionary Judson said nothing about Rogers but did mention the Englishman's wife. He said that the Queen's brother had more than once ordered the execution of the prisoners, but that the governor had refused to comply without the consent of the King: “He hinted it to myself in prison, and told Mrs. Judson and the wife of Mr. Rodgers so, more explicitly” (p.114).

The deposition of Henry Gouger makes no mention of Rogers, but he had started making notes from which he would much later produce an account of his experiences. We now turn to his version of events. Despite the fact that his book was published so long after the events of 1826, Gouger's brother assures us in a Preface to the second edition (Gouger, 1862) that the book was based upon a printed pamphlet that was in turn based on Henry's original notes. It is a case, then, of *sauter pour mieux reculer*, and we can now jump back to Gouger's account of what happened a few months before he and Laird made their depositions.

He tells us that he and another foreigner were released from prison on 16 February 1826, the other prisoners being left in chains. These included Laird (who ‘was paying the penalty of aspiring to become a titled Burmese nobleman’) and Rogers. Laird pressed Gouger to tell the victorious General Campbell that he preferred British nationality,

but poor old Rodgers was a difficult and deplorable case. He remembered how often in his chequered career his life had been in peril – how probable that it might be so again – he had a yearning, too, after his native country – but could he return there with safety? I saw the conflict going on within, and ventured – *relying on all the circumstances of his story to be correct* – to urge him to authorize me in naming his case

to the General, who would not fail to demand the surrender of his wife and family also. He hesitated some time, but to my sorrow finally declined, and ended his days in Burmah not long after.

(p.283, my italics)

As we have seen, by 1830 he was 'the late Mr.Rogers.' Although old and yearning to return to England, he had not considered that it would be safe to go back. Why so? And why did Gouger pause to consider that Rogers' story might *not* be correct?

Gouger tells us that when they were thrown into prison Rogers was 'bending under sixty-five years of an anxious life, but had an iron constitution' (p.183). He possessed 'a sturdy frame' (p.229) and, being 'as much native as English in his thoughts and habits, passed most of his idle hours in chatting with the convicts' (p.215). However, as Gouger was naturally curious about the old gentleman's background, Rogers gave him 'an outline of his history.' Gouger expresses it as nearly as possible in his own words:

In the year 1782 I was the fourth officer in one of the ships belonging to the East India Company, trading to Calcutta. On the outward voyage complaints were made by the crew of the bad quality of the salt provisions served out to them, and I had the misfortune to discover, when I was sent below to get up some fresh casks, that the chief officer was dishonestly feeding them with tainted meat which belonged to himself, intending to replace it by so many casks from the ship's stores. He was much exasperated when, on returning to the upper deck, I taxed him with the fraud. An altercation ensued, then blows. For this, being the junior officer, I was placed under arrest, from which I was not released when the ship anchored in the river Hooghly. I was allowed, however, to go on shore for exercise occasionally at Fultah, where there was a solitary tavern at which the officers used to regale themselves.

Here I hid myself until an opportunity offered of meeting my oppressor as he was walking alone in a garden behind the house. I then approached him with two of the ship's pistols, taxed him with his ill-usage, and demanded

satisfaction, offering him his choice of the pistols. This he refused, when, urged on by the desire of revenge, I attacked him with a Penang lawyer ["A thick cane, so called"], which I had provided for the purpose, intending only to inflict a severe chastisement; but each blow seemed to increase my fury, which, as my injuries arose to my mind, became quite ungovernable. At last I left him insensible, I feared, perhaps, dead. What was to be done? Return on board my ship I dared not, so I got into a dingy, and taking the flood-tide paid the men to pull me with all speed to Barrackpore, a place some miles above Calcutta, where the cadets who came out as passengers in the ship were quartered. I cast myself on their protection, which was readily granted, as the chief officer was by no means a favourite, and they knew the provocation I had received. Here I lay hidden by them for some weeks, and then, supplying me with money, they sent me forward to Chittagong, whence I made my way across the British frontier into Arracan, and eventually to Rangoon, where, in an unknown foreign country, I found a safe asylum. From that time I have never once quitted the Burman territory, though I might have done so with safety, as I heard afterwards that the man I had so unmercifully punished happily recovered, and made subsequent voyages in the service of the East India Company. (pp.68-70)

So, as Gouger went on to say, Rogers had for more than forty years lived as a fugitive, fearing that the Indian Government would catch up with him. He had married a Portuguese-Burmese woman and had a twelve-year-old son. There had been no communication with his family, but he had somehow discovered that he had a younger brother, a teacher of music at a town in Lincolnshire whom Gouger had actually met. I shall return to his life story later, but first we should briefly note the circumstances that led to the arrest of Rogers and the other foreigners.

When on 24 May 1824 news arrived that Rangoon had fallen to the British, Gouger, Laird and Rogers feared for their safety. According to Gouger:

With respect to Mr. Rodgers, the wily old gentleman knew his interest too well to wish to exchange a word with any of us.

He depended on his lifelong services, his complete naturalization as a Burmese subject, and hoped to save himself from shipwreck by steering with the art and skill acquired in his long experience (p.126).

As for Gouger himself, the Judsons persuaded him not to visit them any more so as to avoid any appearance of American complicity with the English. But the three British-born visitors were assumed to be spies, and it was not long before the missionaries Judson and Price joined them in confinement. In a long letter written soon after the war, Mrs. Judson explained why the Americans had also been arrested:

In examining the accounts of Mr. Gouger, it was found that Mr. Judson and Dr. Price had taken money of him to a considerable amount. Ignorant as were the Burmese of our mode of receiving money by orders on Bengal, this circumstance, to their suspicious minds, was a sufficient evidence that the missionaries were in the pay of the English, and very probably spies (Wayland, 1853: 271).

But we must return to Rogers. Apart from teaching the Mekkhara Prince to read English, how had he been occupied during his residence of forty years? Hall (1955: lxxiii) tells us that in 1802 he 'occupied an important position in the Burmese administration' and adds in a footnote that he became Shabandar (Collector) of Rangoon in 1809. In order to merit such appointments he must already have helped the Court in some way. In 1807 he had also helped Carey and Chater, two newly-arrived Baptist missionaries, to procure land for a mission-house. Hall says that the missionaries 'had nothing but good to say of Rogers,' who

regularly attended their services, and in January 1814, when Carey sailed for Calcutta, took his family and the Judsons into his own house as guests ... (Hall: lxxiv)

Judson's journal, however, indicates that by 1820 Rogers was out of the favour of the new emperor and had been deprived of his post:

January 26. We set out early in the morning, called on Mr.G., late collector of Rangoon, and on Mr. R., who was formerly collector, but is now out of favour (Wayland: 200).

Yet two years later, when Gouger was being introduced to King Bagyidaw in the new court at Ava, who was present?

His Majesty addressed a few words to someone in the ranks behind me, which, to my no small astonishment, elicited an address to me in clear, good English accent – "Are you, sir, an Englishman?"

Rogers was back in favour again.

He was a large, strongly-built man, slightly bent by age, attired after the fashion of the natives, already described – a long, ample silk cloth around the waist, a loose muslin jacket, tied with strings in front, covered his body, but did not conceal the white skin beneath, barelegged of course, and his long grey hair twisted into a knot at the crown, where it was confined by a strip of muslin. His long grey beard was so thinned, according to the native fashion, that that portion only which appertained to the middle part of the chin was preserved, and this being of a texture stiff as horse-hair wagged backwards and forwards in a most ludicrous manner whenever he attempted to speak. He spoke Burmese fluently, and might well have passed for a native, had not his fair complexion, his light-blue eyes, and prominent nose, of such shape and colour as I have never seen except among my own respected countrymen, unmistakably attested his origin. He was addressed as "Yadza" (the nearest approach the Burmese language admits to "Rodgers" ... (Gouger: 32-33)

Helping foreign missionaries down in Rangoon was no way to ingratiate himself with the King. So by what means might Rogers have managed to reinstate himself at Court? Of course, he was a useful interpreter; but he might have helped in a local military capacity. In his younger days, he told Gouger, he had served the

previous King by ruthlessly stamping out the piracy that was stifling trade on the Irrawaddy river.

“I picked out,” said the old gentleman, “a little army of the bravest men I could find, and let them loose upon the robbers wherever we came upon them, and, as the inhabitants were inclined to help me with information, I was pretty successful. We gave no quarter. Those who were taken alive we tied up to trees, and *used to paint a bull's-eye on their bodies for my men to fire at to improve their practice!*” (p.101, Gouger's italics).

But why should the King have turned to Rogers for such help? Possibly because Rogers took great care, as he admitted to Gouger, to build up a reputation of infallibility. He allowed it to be thought, for example, that he possessed astrological powers. As an expected eclipse of the sun approached, a fierce argument about its time of arrival sprang up in Court between the disliked Brahmins and many of the courtiers. The dispute went on until the King decreed that the wrong party should be made to stand up to their necks in a nearby horse-pond and turned to Rogers.

“What do you say, Yadza? Are the Brahmins right or wrong?”
 “Now,” said Mr.Rodgers, “if I had only had the wisdom to say that I was an unlearned man, and knew nothing of these matters, all would have been right; but, fired with the ambition of being thought a learned man, I replied, ‘I have not made the calculation, your Majesty.’ ‘Oh! then you can calculate eclipses?’ ‘Yes, your Majesty, after a fashion.’ ‘Then go home instantly, and let me know what you say to-morrow’ (p. 99).

Rogers went home, consulted the *Bengal Almanack*, corrected for the longitude and presented the result to the King. Many a courtier paid the price of standing up to the neck in the pond. “But I,” said Rogers, “had acquired a character that taxed all my ingenuity to support, and from that time, ... took especial care ... never to be without a copy of the *Bengal Annual Almanack*” (ibid).

The impression emerging from Rogers’ own accounts of himself to Gouger is that the renegade was shrewd, resourceful and quick-

witted but too apt to paint himself in a good light in his various anecdotes – perhaps, even, prone to embroidering over the truth. One wonders, for instance, whether he was practising a policy of being all things to all men when, back in January 1820, he told Judson a story about a Burman convert to Catholicism whose nephew reported this to the Court and who refused to obey the King's order to recant. The nephew had his uncle imprisoned and tortured, beaten with an iron implement from the feet up to the chest. Reporting Rogers' own account of the torture, Judson recorded in his journal that 'Mr.R. was one of those that stood by and gave money to the executioners, to induce them to strike gently' (Wayland: 206). It may have been so, but in recording a report of a conversation Rogers had with the King back in 1802, Symes was careful to say: "Mr. Rogers, according to his own account, *not implicitly to be trusted*, took much trouble to undeceive him ..." (Hall: 179-180, my italics). Symes also reported that the Burmese considered Rogers an expert lawyer, and that by making himself a vassal of the Prince of Prome (the King's second son) he was 'exempted from arrest for debt' (Hall, 1955: 173).

The character of Rogers, then, is difficult to assess. Although he was clearly a man of great ability, he was viewed very differently by a series of envoys. Whereas Cox (1797) championed him, Symes (1802) distrusted him and by his third mission Canning (1811) had taken a violent dislike to him and in reporting Rogers' previous history was careful to use the phrase 'by his own account' (see Hall, 1955: lxxiii). By 1826, as we have seen, even the sympathetic Gouger seemed to be doubting the old man's veracity. It is perhaps to be expected, though, that a renegade Englishman trying to make a living in a distant country ruled by a succession of dangerous tyrants should on some occasions be economical with the truth and on others overemphasise his own importance. Also, as a fugitive Rogers would have needed to cover his tracks to throw the English off the scent. To do this, he could have lied about the year of his arrival, the name of his ship, his own name and rank, and indeed the whole story of his flight. How much of this story, then, are we able to confirm today?

Let us start with the date of his desertion. Symes in 1802 says that this was 'about 20 years ago;' Canning in 1812 says that Rogers had been 'resident 30 years;' and Rogers himself gives the year 1782. Since these dates are all consistent, we turn to the ship

that Rogers said he had sailed in. Both Symes and Canning reported Rogers' claim that this ship had been the *Worcester*, so let us assume it was so. A study of Hardy (1813) confirms that the Honourable East India Company did indeed have a ship of that name, a vessel of 723 tons, and that she sailed at least as far as the Bay of Bengal. The register shows that the HCS *Worcester* sailed from England in March 1779, but on this occasion she returned in February 1781; and besides, none of the four officers was called Rogers. It was her next sailing which fits our time-scale: she sailed on 6 February 1782 (Hardy: 94) and probably did not anchor in the Hooghly until about seven months later, arrivals normally being timed to coincide with the onset of the cool season. But again, none of the officers on this voyage bore the name Rogers, and the *Worcester* did not sail in the following season, 1783-84.

Very well, let us scan the register for the name Rogers. This looks more promising, since we find three officers of that name. But old Samuel Rogers was an experienced Captain, and was still commanding a ship, the *Osterley*, in 1786. A John Rogers is listed as number two mate aboard the *Locko*, which sailed in 1781. A John Rogers also appears as number four mate aboard the *Earl Talbot*, which sailed in 1782. As the *Locko* was still at sea when the *Earl Talbot* sailed, they cannot be the same man. But both of these men went on further voyages for years, one of them becoming a captain. The fact that neither of them was 'our' Rogers suggests that "Yadza" had lied about his name, perhaps even choosing to be Rogers because he knew there were at least three men of that name serving on the Company's ships in eastern waters.

What about his rank? Under the captain – or commander, as the skipper was usually called – there were four officers known as 'mates.' Symes (1802:73) simply refers to Rogers as 'a mate,' Canning (1812) calls him 'second mate' and Gouger says he was 'the fourth officer'. Once again, Rogers seems to have lied to one or other or all three of these fellow countrymen.

Since the most consistent part of his story concerns the date 1782 and the name of the ship, let us see what officers were on board the *Worcester* at that time. The register (Hardy: 94) shows:

Capt. John Cook
1 John Hall

- 2John Gerrard
- 3 William Robson
- 4Joseph Wheelwright

Could Rogers have been one of these? Certainly not the captain or the first two mates, all of whom according to the register continued to sail the high seas long after. However, it is interesting that, while many of the junior officers' names on other ships continue to appear in later sailings, often with a higher rank, those of the third and fourth mate of the *Worcester* disappear from the register after 1782. Rogers might have been one of these two. Robson might well have chosen the similar-sounding 'Rogers' as an alias; on the other hand, he is listed in Hardy's index, while the fourth mate Wheelwright is not. Was he struck off for being a renegade?

Abandoning such conjectures, we should look again at Rogers' dramatic tale as told to Gouger. The dishonesty of the first mate in issuing tainted meat, the bout of fisticuffs and Rogers' consequent arrest – these incidents are credible, though we should note that he paints himself as the champion of the underdogs, the crew and the passengers. It is what follows that taxes our credulity. Allowed to go ashore for exercise, he suddenly appears in a tavern garden armed with two loaded ship's pistols and a heavy cane. How on earth he has managed to acquire and conceal these while under arrest he does not tell us. Settling matters by means of a duel is the gentlemanly thing to do, and that is what Rogers *by his own account* proposes. But the first mate is ungentlemanly in showing cowardice, so Rogers beats him senseless without anyone stopping him, and makes good his escape upriver to Barrackpore, about fifteen miles upstream. [Canning (1812) has him going to Chinsurah, another fifteen miles or so inland – another inconsistency.] In Barrackpore, the cadets who have come out as passengers on the *Worcester* are so grateful to him that they risk punishment by hiding him for 'some weeks.' In all that time he is not discovered, and the grateful cadets give him enough money to get to the Burma frontier. And of course, the first mate of the *Worcester* recovers and sails the seas again, so everything ends happily.

How should we think of Rogers? We know that he was kind to missionaries, taught a Prince to read English, considered himself more Burmese than English and was a useful interpreter at the

Court of Ava. How much of the rest of his history to believe remains a problem because it comes almost entirely from his own mouth. Yet Gouger claimed to have met the younger brother of “Yadza” (presumably named Ro(d)gers) in Lincolnshire later on. Perhaps the old man’s name really was Rogers after all. In the absence of further evidence, it seems that “Yadza” foxed not only his contemporaries but also anyone trying to find out more about him today.

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