

Zero Degrees shows how the idea of a Prime Meridian is pulled on one direction by material contingencies and political circumstance and in the other by astronomical observation. Debates had to balance practical consideration of daily life, the obligation to address the needs of navies and merchant ships with those of astronomers, and national prestige. Sometimes decisions were taken in the immediate aftermath of wars, rather than with reference to scientific abstractions. The long build-up to the Washington conference was fraught by competing claims because the “needs of practical navigation were not those of geography” (98).

The way in which we imagine the globe involves gradual shifts in spatial understanding. The Prime Meridian moves from the Ptolemaic limit or edge (of the known world) to a proposed beginning from which other lines will radiate. The world begins not only where you start from, but also where you stand. A “cartographic” meridian on a map, and the less common “observed” meridian (based on an astronomical calendar and essential for the development of navigation in the eighteenth century) are different classes of knowledge. Thus, the seeming neutrality of “zero degrees” posed many questions: Was the globe one or many? What is “neutrality” in the first place? To the French it meant a form of abstraction, to the British and Americans it had more to do with common measurements established by commercial practices and nautical routes.

Withers’s brilliant analysis of the Washington conference shows not only why but also how resolutions were achieved—usually by a process of systematic rejection of ideas rather than a comparative overview of them. Particularly, Withers shows us how small a part abstract scientific measurements played in the proceedings. Sandford Fleming, the Scottish-Canadian member of the British delegation to the Washington Conference (and one of many key players Withers scrupulously documents), hoped for a cosmopolitan solution that favored no nation but would instead “tend towards the general benefit of all mankind” (167). Fleming’s humanist gesture was rooted in his desire for the universal standardization of time. Here again Withers shows how the promotion of an abstract ideal can be rooted in practical considerations: Fleming was also a railway engineer.

Despite its long historical sweep and proliferation of detailed examples, the book is very clearly structured. It moves from classical geography to the later ramifications of the 1884 conference, teasing out the implications of assertions and decisions that went into the gradual internationalization of science and the acceptance and uses of universal time. The book will be of great interest not only to geographers but also to historians and literary scholars like myself (not least because en passant Withers properly thinks through and contextualizes those two phenomena so beloved by cultural historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the establishing of railway time and the anarchist Martial Bourdin’s plot to blow up the Greenwich Observatory). With a generous quota of detailed illustrations, it is hard to imagine a better, fuller or more coherent account of how modern time came to be.

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PHILIP WOODS. *Reporting the Retreat: War Correspondents in Burma*. London: Hurst & Company, 2017. Pp. 206. \$50.00 (cloth).
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In *Reporting the Retreat: War Correspondents in Burma*, Philip Woods has taken on the experiences of the twenty-six international correspondents who wrote about the Burma Retreat (the First Burma Campaign), which occurred in the first five months of 1942 as Japanese armies

crossed the southeastern borders of Burma and pushed British and Commonwealth forces north all the way to India. By contrast to the humiliating defeat of Singapore that February, in which 100,000 Allied troops were surrendered to a much smaller Japanese force, the retreat in Burma was militarily more of a Dunkirk in an Asian setting. Admittedly, for the civilians involved it was one of the great human tragedies of the war.

The prolonged nature of the retreat, both in terms of time and geographical space, provided significant room for correspondents to shape the narrative about what had occurred. Nevertheless, most historiography on the campaign has fixated on military memoirs by some of the legends who emerged from the war, including British Field Marshal William Slim, whose *Defeat into Victory* (1956) has probably played the biggest role in shaping public opinion on the war in Burma, or on the official histories produced in Britain in the 1950s and by the US Army (whose officers were also involved in this campaign, aiding China, and led by “Vinegar Joe” Stillwell) shortly afterwards. The depiction of the civilian experience was largely the reserve of personal accounts that had little impact on the main historiography until a recent book by Michael Leigh, *The Evacuation of Civilians from Burma* (2014), redirected attention to the role of the civilian evacuation officers and evacuees. Both military and civil administrative personnel involved in Burma at the time were highly critical of journalistic accounts, which were generally dismissed as sensationalist, inaccurate, or self-serving. Woods, who mobilizes Wilfred Burchett’s characterization of the journalistic accounts as the “first draft of history” (xvii–xx), insists on the value of this archive. He demonstrates that journalists struggled with a great range of obstacles that hindered their ability to report events accurately, including everything from being prevented access to the front to receiving pressure from editors to get their story out as quickly as possible, before their competitors—all this in addition to the inevitable practical problems of knowing what was happening in the midst of a fast-moving retreat over a great area. Newsreel cameramen (chapter 6) faced special constraints in this regard, given the technical necessities of their coverage, which sometimes required them to film reenactments of actions or training activities they then passed off as real battle coverage (89).

Woods’s introduction, conclusion, and nine chapters exhaustively reveal the nuances of journalistic reporting during the campaign. The topics he covers weave together points on which journalistic accounts intersect, such as depictions of the role played by the governor of Burma, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, in the retreat, and the context in which the journalists themselves arrived and worked. One of the more important topics that other researchers will want to note was the role of the Services Public Relations Organisation in January and February 1942 (Rangoon, the colonial capital, fell in the first week of March). This office played a significant role in censoring reporting on the campaign. Also of special interest will be the discussion of the publication of the account of one journalist, Alfred Wagg, as it was sympathetic to the civilian government’s role. The present volume is also one of the only studies of the retreat to focus attention on the role of women in any capacity. What may prove controversial is Woods’s assertion that journalistic claims of Burmese fifth column activities during the campaign were not exaggerated as claimed by the colonial government (109–11). The evidence is somewhat more debatable than Woods suggests, whether or not most Burmese were in fact unwilling to support the British defense.

Woods convincingly shows that once the context in which the journalists reported the retreat is properly considered, their accounts do have significant value for historical research. This value might have been increased had most journalists accompanied the refugees on the trek out of Burma, although a small number (six) did so and have left extremely valuable accounts. As Woods observes in his conclusion, these “correspondents were not just onlookers but participants” in this campaign (146). Their accounts should thus be treated as primary source materials like others, and while caution should be exerted and context considered, this is no more the case with these accounts than with any other kind of source material.

We are in the midst of a major turn in the historiography on the experience of World War II in South and Southeast Asia, as attention shifts increasingly from military accounts of the battlefield to the civil administrative and civilian experiences of the fighting. Some of this work has been done on Singapore's fall, including Ronald McCrum's recent book on the civilian administration's role in Singapore's defense (*The Men Who Lost Singapore*, 2017). Burma has been particularly important, however, in demonstrating the role that civilians played in the period and in shaping the global perceptions of events in this "forgotten" sector of World War II. The present volume has made an important contribution to this shift and will find a large audience not only in academia, but in the popular military history audience as well.

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