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THE RAILWAY MAN

ERIC LOMAX

'An extraordinary story... I turned the last page weeping tears of sorrow, pride and gratitude' JOHN McCARTHY



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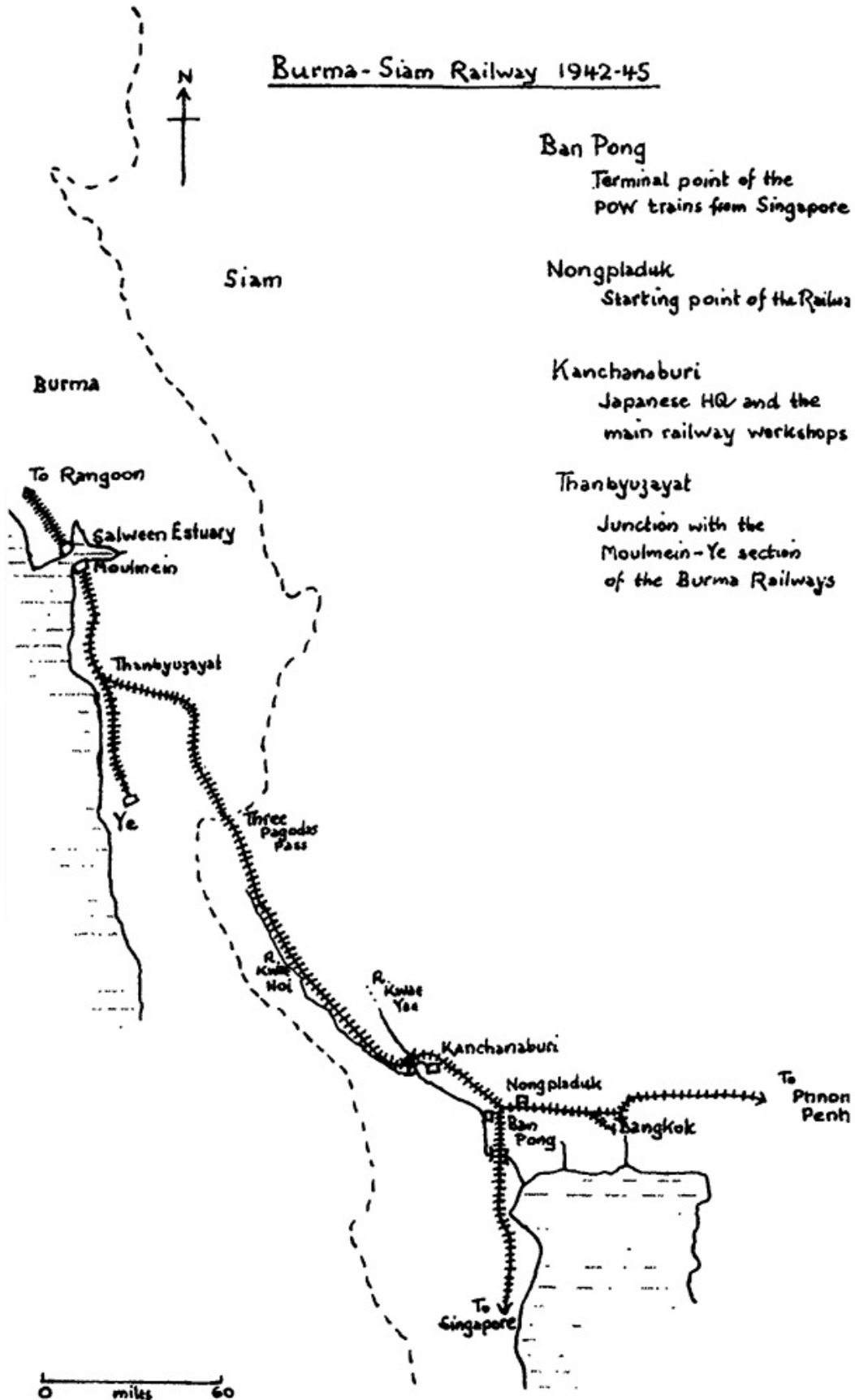
Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Eric Lomax was born in 1919. During the Second World War he was captured and tortured by the Japanese Army and forced to work on the notorious Burma-Siam railway. He met and forgave his torturer in 1995. Eric Lomax died in October 2012.

Burma-Siam Railway 1942-45



FOR
ELIZABETH SUTHERLAND LOMAX
(1877–1942)

AND HER GRANDCHILDREN, LINDA,
ERIC AND CHARMAINE,
WHO NEVER KNEW THE STORY.

AND FOR MY WIFE PATTI
WITHOUT WHOSE SUPPORT
THE STORY WOULD NEVER
HAVE BEEN TOLD.

This book owes an immeasurable debt to the creativity and skill of Neil Belton. His invaluable contribution to the final text far exceeded the usual relationship between author and publisher. It is true to say that without his help I would not have been able to give final form to so much that I have reflected on for the past fifty years.

Eric Lomax

THE RAILWAY MAN

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I am alive, and was dead ... Write therefore the things which thou hast seen.

Revelation, I, vv. 18–19

CHAPTER ONE

I HAVE A PAINTING in the hallway of my house in Berwick-upon-Tweed, by the Scottish artist Duncan Mackellar. It is a large work set in St Enoch Station in Glasgow on a dusty summer evening in the 1880s. A woman in late middle age, dressed in dark and modest clothes and carrying a parasol, is standing tense and distraught, looking out beyond us, oblivious of any other presence. Behind her the high smoke-grimed glass and wrought-iron walls of the station rise up. She is gazing off the edge of the platform at a vanishing train, so that we see her through the eyes of a receding traveller, and she has the flat restrained face of a person who has learned to swallow grief. Her sudden loneliness is captured as she strains to keep an image of her child, or so we assume, who is on the train heading for the emigrant ship or a colonial war – India, Afghanistan, the Gold Coast.

Although it is a conventional image, it is genuinely moving. I have always loved it. Railway stations have always attracted me, not just because trains are there, but because they are also ambivalent places, echoing with completed journeys and shrill with the melancholy noises of departure. Mackellar's painting is about the inevitability of separation, the cost of journeying. And we have never created any sound so evocative of separation as the whistle of a steam locomotive, that high note of inhuman relief as vaporized water is blown off and meets the cold air.

Once in the 1970s I went to St Enoch and stood on the platform at the spot that Mackellar's painting creates for the viewer, and the back of the great shed, like an enormous Victorian conservatory, seemed hardly to have changed. The station was not yet quite disused and silent, though a few years later it was destroyed, like so many of the other steam cathedrals. That age is gone now, finally, but the reality of grief, and the consequences of grief, of which Mackellar caught something in his painting, are not so easily banished.

The passion for trains and railways is, I have been told, incurable. I have also learned that there is no cure for torture. These two afflictions have been intimately linked in the course of my life, and yet through some chance combination of luck and grace I have survived them both. But it took me nearly fifty years to surmount the consequences of torture.

* * *

I was born in 1919, the year the World War formally ended, the year that Alcock and Brown drifted down out of the rain over the Atlantic and landed their frail bomber in an Irish bog. I remember being told about this feat of aeronautical engineering and skill at a very young age, and thinking about the two intrepid pilots as I was walked along the grey promenade of the seafront at Joppa, to the east of Edinburgh. 'Joppa' is the name of the biblical town where Jonah went when he was fleeing God, and from which he took ship. I discovered soon enough, though it was a long time before space on that scale meant much to me, that this sea was a sheltered inlet, the Firth of Forth, and that even though the distant Fife shore could only be seen in fine weather there were worse seas out there behind the fog and wind.

John Lomax, my father, was a quiet, disciplined, serious man who knew what was best for his wife and child and was unused to taking no for an answer in his own house. Until the age of fourteen he worked for a pawnbroker in Stockport, on the fringe of industrial Manchester, and then in 1893 somehow got into the Post Office, an institution he stayed in until his retirement almost half a century later. He started as a 'telegraph messenger', the most junior post then available and even lower than the entry grade which he would choose for me when I was sixteen. By the time I was born he was a middle-grade civil servant, a manager of staff in the Edinburgh General Post Office, a stable and trusted official.

My father moved to Edinburgh, a city of politics, law and services in 1909, but all his life remained a child of the industrial revolution, full of vivid memories of coal, smoke, smog and steam power, of great mill engines and railway locomotives and the Manchester Ship Canal. It is hard to explain to young people born in countries that have almost forgotten heavy manufacturing just how awe-inspiring the very processes that shaped our lives could be; for my father, and for me later, great machines were not fearful or distressing but things to be celebrated, as fascinating as the natural world, creatures made by men.