

# PORTRAIT OF THE LADY



Aung San Suu Kyi is revered for her dedication to her country. But, as film writer Rebecca Frayn has discovered, her passion is underpinned by an incredible love story

● I first became fascinated by Aung San Suu Kyi during a grim trip to Burma with my husband in 1991 – a country that has been ruled for 50 years by one of the world’s most brutal and secretive military regimes. Suu had then been under house arrest for two years, and people only dared refer to her indirectly as “the lady”, but it was clear she offered them palpable hope she might one day re-emerge from the shadows, like Aslan in Narnia.

From birth, Suu’s family name marked her out. Her father was the architect of Burma’s independence, General Aung San, who was assassinated in 1947, when she was only two, just six months before the end of British colonial rule. Suu was acutely aware of the mythology surrounding her father,

and of his unfinished political legacy. She was raised with a stern hand by her mother, Daw Khin Kyi, a diplomat who dispatched her daughter to Oxford to read philosophy, politics and economics. Ann Pasternak Slater, a fellow undergraduate, remembers Suu as a fish out of water: “Suu’s tight, trim *lungyi* and upright carriage, her firm moral convictions and inherited social grace contrasted sharply with the tatty dress and careless manners, vague liberalism and uncertain sexual morality of her English contemporaries... All my memories of her at that time have certain recurring elements: cleanliness, determination, curiosity, a fierce purity.”

In Britain, her unofficial guardians were Lord and Lady Gore-Booth, who had been

based in Burma and knew her mother well. It was through the Gore-Booths that she met Michael Aris, who was instantly smitten by this arrestingly beautiful girl dressed in a *lungyi* with a flower always in her hair.

When I first started the research for my screenplay, I found it very difficult to get any real sense of Michael, who died in 1999. In his rare film interviews, he seemed oddly formal and shy. So it was only when I met his identical twin, Anthony, that I had a great conceptual breakthrough. For into the room strode Michael’s living physical embodiment – and although everyone says Anthony is more humorous, I understood that Michael, too, must have been an extremely warm and rather eccentric man whose extraordinary devotion to Suu had been fired by a wildly romantic nature.

Michael proposed marriage immediately, but Suu (intent on pleasing her mother by marrying a Burmese) turned him down flat. It wasn’t until three years later when she >

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went to visit him in Bhutan, where he had been engaged as a tutor to the royal family, that he proposed again. This time she accepted, but with one caveat: if her people should ever need her, she would have to go. Michael unhesitatingly agreed.

Together, they made a striking couple. Michael was tall, blond and blue-eyed. He loved to smoke and drink. He was gregarious – holding forth in a rolling theatrical voice. Suu was tiny and dark-haired, teetotal and extremely reserved. In many ways, however, her six years in Britain had caught her midway between East and West. In Michael, she found a way of uniting her worlds.

In 1976, Michael was offered a junior research fellowship in Oxford, and he and Suu settled in leafy suburbia. For the next 16 years she sublimated any homesickness by becoming an exemplary wife and, when their two sons were born, a doting mother. She cooked beautifully and organised exquisite birthday parties for her sons. She ironed Michael's socks in defiance of her more feminist friends. One of her sisters-in-law describes finding Suu punctiliously planting a rose bush in the garden, alternately consulting three gardening books in order to ensure she performed the task to perfection. Another remembers her cooking Peking duck one Christmas and drafting the family in relays

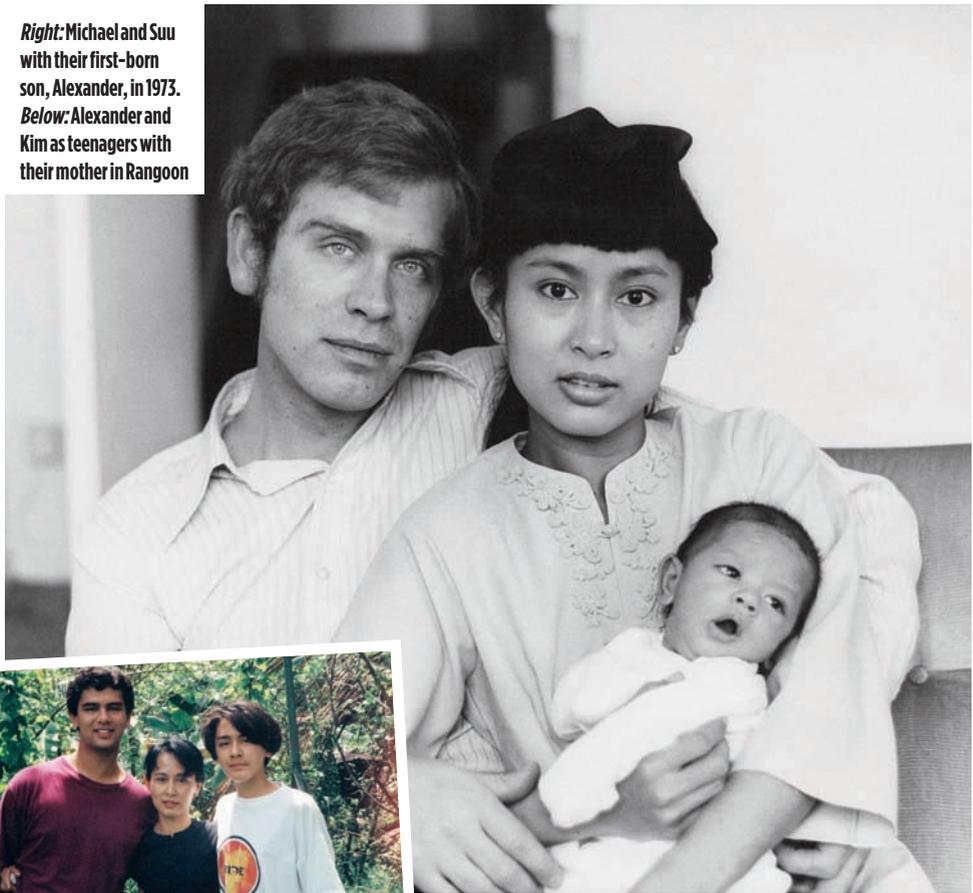
*“If I have any authority left at all as your loving husband, please be careful”*

to blast the bird with a hair dryer to ensure the perfect glaze.

I can only guess what it cost her to sublimate the pilgrim spirit that was later to manifest itself with such remarkable consequences. Certainly, Burma was never far from her thoughts, and once her children went to school she began work on a short and somewhat idealised biography of her father. “She was destiny's child,” Peter Carey, a family friend, has written. “But with no very clear idea of where her destiny lay.”

Then one quiet evening in Oxford, in 1988, as Michael sat reading and the boys slept, Suu received a phone call to say that her mother had had a stroke. She began packing at once. I imagine her leaving anxious instructions, as mothers do, about how to run the house in her absence. I imagine her promising to come back, as soon as she could. In fact, she was never to return.

**Right: Michael and Suu with their first-born son, Alexander, in 1973. Below: Alexander and Kim as teenagers with their mother in Rangoon**



Suu's arrival coincided with a period of political upheaval. She moved straight into Rangoon General Hospital to care for her mother, where she found the hospital wards overflowing with students

who had been wounded by the military in a series of confrontations. By chance, Suu had arrived on the front line of a leaderless revolution. At once word spread. “General Aung San's daughter is here. She has returned from across the seas to help us in our hour of need.”

The school term ended in time for Michael and the boys to join Suu and watch the live broadcast in which, to astonishment, General Ne Win, a savage dictator, announced both his resignation and an election. Michael was there also when the delegation of academics came from Rangoon University to ask if Suu would head a new movement for democracy – saying that the people would unite behind her. Michael and Suu debated their request as the boys played, obliviously. “I shall not quickly forget the surge of hope and fear,” Michael wrote in the foreword to one of Suu's books. “The elation followed by near despair,

the prolonged gunfire in the streets and the doves cooing in the garden through it all.”

Only two months earlier, Suu had been a devoted homemaker – now she was spearheading a mass uprising against a regime of legendary brutality. As a historian, Michael was well aware they were part of history in the making. Among Lady Gore-Booth's great archive of letters, I came across a yellowing fax he wrote to his father during these turbulent few weeks. “We agonise constantly on where duty lies. I can see that for years to come it will be a question of trying to balance these responsibilities, of walking a tightrope, of deciding where priorities lie.”

The couple decided to send the boys back to boarding school in Britain. Two months later, soldiers arrived in the middle of the night to throw Michael out, too. Now he could only anxiously monitor the news from afar. In one of his letters to Suu, Michael wrote: “It's not much use my saying to you ‘be careful!’ – but please be very judicious in everything you do. If I have any authority left at all as your very loving husband, please listen to me. Please be as gentle with yourself as I would be if I were there. Please.” When she was placed under house arrest, his only comfort was that it at least reduced the risk of her being assassinated.

Michael at once started a campaign to establish her international profile, but he had to be discreet. The marriage that in >

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so many ways sustained her also caused problems – it was a propaganda gift to the military, who accused her of being part of a colonial plot to recapture Burma; her marriage to an interloper made her no better than a prostitute and her children half-breeds. In 1990, as the elections approached, the authorities disqualified Suu from putting her name forward, citing an obscure clause that prohibited anyone married to a foreigner from becoming president.

In Oxford, Michael was haunted by anxiety. He chain-smoked and took long walks to try to keep depression at bay. When Suu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 – the committee’s chair, Václav Havel, describing her as “an outstanding example of the power of the powerless” – Michael and the boys flew to Norway to accept the award on her behalf and Alexander, their eldest son, made the acceptance speech.

For the next five years, Suu remained under house arrest, with only her radio for company. Sometimes letters and parcels from home got through. But when the military published photographs of the things she had been sent – a lipstick, a Jane Fonda workout tape – in order to humiliate her, she

my happiest memories of our many years of marriage”. During the long periods when Michael had no idea whether Suu was even alive, he relied on reports from passers-by who sometimes heard the sound of her piano drifting from the house. When the humidity eventually destroyed the piano, even this fragile reassurance was lost to him.

In 1995, a military official unexpectedly arrived to announce that Suu was at liberty again. She might have been forgiven for deciding to call it a day. But after six years of intense inner contemplation, the woman who emerged was now fully politicised, and simply took up where she had left off. Michael and the boys were given visas and came to see her. When Suu saw Kim she was astonished to see he had grown into a young man. She might have passed him in the street, she said.

The first question many women ask when they hear Suu’s story is how she could have left her children. Her younger son, Kim, has said simply that she did what she had to do. In writing about her, I wanted to explore the collision between duty and family, not to judge. Suu has never been drawn on the subject, though she has conceded that her

separation had now become an explicit ultimatum: her family or her country.

Suu was distraught. Yet she recalled this period with a characteristic lack of sentiment in a recent interview with Radio 4’s Eddie Mair. When he pressed her on whether she wrestled with this decision, she said: “Michael knew what I would have to do, and he helped me make the decision and to make that decision final. His support was very important but I can’t say it was crucial, as I probably would have chosen duty anyway. But he acted in a way that was totally selfless.”

When Suu realised she would never see Michael again, she put on a dress of his favourite colour, tied a rose in her hair and went to the British embassy where she recorded a farewell film. In it she speaks of their wonderful sons and of her undying love for him. Barely able to contain her emotion, she tells him that his love for her has been her mainstay. Suu’s farewell film arrived in Oxford two days after Michael’s death, just as his visa finally arrived. Her statement to the press was succinct but unusually heartfelt. “I am so fortunate to have such a wonderful husband. A husband who has always given me the understanding I needed. Nothing can take that away from me.”

*The Lady*, a film directed by Luc Besson, will be released after Christmas. We were halfway through the film’s shoot in Thailand when we learnt that Suu Kyi’s second bout of house imprisonment had again been lifted. The cast downed tools to hold a celebratory party, at which the fictional Suu (Michelle Yeoh) and the fictional Michael (David Thewlis) watched the real Suu on CNN and toasted her new found freedom.

Typically, Suu has always resisted any romanticising of her story. When a journalist put it to her in the weeks that followed Michael’s death that the story of her marriage had all the makings of a Greek tragedy, she gave him short shrift. She reminded him she had made a choice.

There’s no denying that, for some, this choice overturns core assumptions about where a wife’s loyalty should lie. It was the opportunity to engage with the complexity of this choice, and the way in which Suu has challenged stereotypical notions of how a woman should behave, that was the very thing that most fascinated me. Hollywood likes its heroines to be sugar-coated but, as the journalist Fergal Keane said to me in the early days of my research, the brave film should show her core of steel – and I very much hope that we have succeeded. ■

*“The Lady” will be released in January*

## *“I kept a strict timetable. Self-discipline was important while I was on my own”*

refused to accept any more letters from home. She sustained herself by learning how to meditate, studying Buddhism and reading Mandela and Gandhi from books that were smuggled into her home. “I kept a very strict timetable. Partly because I thought self-discipline was very important while I was on my own, and partly because I didn’t want to waste my time. And it may sound very strange but at the end of each day I felt I needed more time. There were so many things I’d set myself to do.”

It was certainly a unique kind of imprisonment, since at any time she could have asked to be driven to the airport and flown back to her family. Her brother-in-law, Adrian, told me the military would have rolled out the red carpet for her if she had ever made such a request. But there is no evidence Suu ever contemplated such a thing, and Michael certainly never once seems to have considered reneging on the deal they had struck. Hoping he might persuade her to go home, the military granted Michael two visits during that period. These were snatched, intense times, the first of which he described as “among

darkest hours were when she feared the boys might be needing her. And when asked after her release about the effects on her family, Suu said: “Michael was a very good father. Once he was no longer there, things were not as easy as they might have been.”

Michael was in Oxford when he learnt he had terminal cancer. Doctors told him he had only a few months in which to put his affairs in order and he at once applied for a visa to take his final leave of his wife. He made more than 30 applications as his strength dwindled, but the military ignored them. Suu would call Michael from the British embassy but their conversations were often cut off in mid-flow. President Clinton wrote letters appealing to the military to relent; Norway pledged a plane with specialist medical equipment; and the Dalai Lama offered the services of his own doctor to accompany him. Yet the authorities would not relent.

Finally, a military official came to see Suu: of course, she could say goodbye, he said, but to do so she would have to return to Oxford. The implicit choice that must have haunted her throughout those 10 years of marital