Observer Review: The Trouser People By Andrew Marshall Essay, Research Paper

When the Empire was caught with its trousers downThe Trouser People: The quest for the Victorian footballer who made Burma play the Empire’s gameAndrew MarshallViking ?14.99, pp320The English and their sport. In the nineteenth century, things were relatively simple. The English would invent a game and a second son as intrepid as he was unemployable would be dispatched to a distant place to teach the locals the basic rules. Within months, the novices would be comfortably defeating the colonialists at their own game and the second son, keeping his chin up, would depart to colonise a neighbouring country in search of a new opponent.Everyone was happy. The English merrily pinked in their maps and put their defeats down to bad management. Their subjects may have been irked by the wholesale pillage of all their natural resources but took consolation from an unbroken run of sporting success.The English mistake was to keep on playing in the twentieth century. An intuitive dad knows when to stop playing sport against his son, but the English didn’t have the wit to cry off from international competition, clutching their hamstrings and muttering about twinges. Instead, they blundered from defeat to defeat, their one success coming in 1966, a success about which so much has been made that it can never be repeated, for an almighty alliance of publishers and television executives are so over-burdened with nostalgia projects that they would be compelled to spend huge sums to prevent England reaching a final, let alone winning one.The above is relevant because Andrew Marshall’s book is subtitled ‘The quest for the Victorian footballer who made Burma play the Empire’s game’. It is irrelevant because the book contains only half-a-dozen mentions of ‘the Empire’s game’. The publishers, stuck with a bog-standard 300-page travel book on Burma, have taken the commercially wise, if arguably disingenuous step of selling it as ‘a football book’ on the basis of a match report on pp29-30 (result: Putsoes 2, Trousers 1) and the fact that Marshall rechristens his guide book ‘the Gazza’.No matter; under usual circumstances, a book on Burma should be more illuminating than yet another one on football. But travel stories are dependent on who is doing the telling, and reading Marshall is like being locked in a youth hostel vaguely near Vienna with a new age Canadian who has taken a long vacation in Europe to ponder over the many options open to him in the still fluid dotcom industry back home in Ottawa.’Ironies’ are ‘bitter’, ‘admiration’ is ’sneaking’ and the ‘obvious’ is ‘blinding’. And that’s only the prologue. A depressing piece of writing includes a description of Sir George Scott, the Victorian adventurer whose steps Marshall trudgingly follows, as ‘a kind of Victorian-era New Lad largeing it through the imperial hinterlands’.The ‘New Lad’ and the ‘largeing’ are giveaways. Marshall, his copious ‘thanks’ inform us, has written for the mid-market men’s magazines. His book reads like a very extended feature in one of those products, the one the editor and marketing men can point to when trying to con people that it’s not all tits and celebs.As with such articles, so with the book. How one longs to read of a financial transaction with a taxi driver which is straightforward; ‘a local hooch’ which is very passable though not particularly strong; a travel ‘writer’ who does not patronise tourists. A rather noble breed who have paid their own way and have no intention of publishing their holiday tales.The format, too, is tired – retracing the steps of a previous traveller – but this proves to be the book’s saving grace. Scott, who helped to establish British colonial rule in Burma, proves to be an engaging fellow who writes well. ‘Mandalay is a vastly less interesting place than it used to be. The pigs have all been eaten up… there are no agreeable scallywags. The Palace, instead of being tawdrily magnificent, smells horribly of bats.’ The Wa women are ‘unabashed, unhaberdashed, unheeding… the language [they] spoke was at first that of the frog, a sort of Brekkekkekkexkoax, but this was elaborated in time into modern Wa.’Their headhunting habit is explained away thus: ‘Heads are not lopped off for mere wantonness, but as a sort of auto-da-fé, or at any rate on mistaken agricultural theories.’ The passages by him and about him are unfailingly interesting.As for the bits in between… only at the end did I come across a picture of Marshall on the flyleaf. Startlingly, he’s the spit of the Fast Show character Carl Hooper who presents the programme That’s Amazing, where very little amazing ever happens. It cannot be doubted that Marshall, in his bid to ‘out-Scott Scott’, has been brave to travel to the less charted parts of Burma, and he is at all times worthy. But nothing very amazing happens.