

SEALS XVIII Abstract

Title of paper: MacNabb's Lai Orthography

Subfield: Phonology or Orthography

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MacNabb's Lai Orthography

D. J. C. MacNabb's *Handbook of the Haka or Baungshe Dialect of the Chin Language* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1891) is the first attempt to describe the Lai language. Considering that the British gained control of Upper Burma in 1885 and the effective pacification of the Chin and Lushai Hills dates from 1896, it is a rather remarkable work.

The intended purpose of the *Handbook* was 'to bring the acquisition of a useful knowledge of this language within the reach of all officers either Military or Civil in the Chin Hills.' It consists primarily of 31 lessons each containing a vocabulary illustrated by sentences. Aside from a few notes in the Introduction, there is no explicit discussion of pronunciation, and the grammar consists of short lists of sentences in various tenses and moods, or interrogation and negation. This is supplemented by a 'conjugation' of the verb *ding* 'drink' and a collected vocabulary.

MacNabb does not describe how he learned the language or established an orthography other than: 'the system of spelling I have used in this book is the Government system of transliteration as far as I have found it possible to follow it.' This paper will examine MacNabb's Lai orthography in comparison with that in use today. Among the phenomena of Lai phonology which he represents inconsistently or not at all are: aspiration, voiceless sonorants (in initial position), the glottal stop and glottalized sonorants (in final position) and retroflex stops. This not to mention vowel length and tone, which are not represented in current orthography either.