

# biblioasia

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## REDISCOVERING EMILY OF EMERALD HILL

# THE CAUSEWAY CENTENARY

To mark the 100th anniversary of the official opening of the Johor-Singapore Causeway on 28 June 1924, the National Library Board and National Heritage Board invite you to a range of commemorative events, comprising an exhibition, a dedicated website, and talks.

## VISIT

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## ENGAGE

Attend talks on 27 June, 4 July and 19 September 2024

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Image: National Museum of Singapore collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

## Director's Note

*Emily of Emerald Hill* by playwright Stella Kon has touched the hearts of thousands who have watched it performed on stage over the last 40 years. Even though it is one of Singapore's most popular plays, there is still much about it that many people don't know. Few people, for instance, know that Stella almost named the monodrama *Betty of Balmoral Road*.

This fact only came to light recently thanks to research done by academic Eriko Ogihara-Schuck who wrote about the play for this magazine. She was able to discover this, and other nuggets of information, because Stella had donated the older drafts of her play to the National Library in 1987. Eriko's article showing how *Betty of Balmoral Road* evolved into *Emily of Emerald Hill* amply demonstrates why it is vital for writers to donate their works to the National Library (hint, hint).

Resources available at the library (and the archives) enable us to rediscover things that have largely been forgotten. Everyone is familiar with the Causeway linking Singapore and Johor of course, and its infamous jams. But how many people know that the Causeway was built with a channel on the Malaysian side to allow small ships to pass through? An enormous bridge was erected over the channel that could be raised to allow ships to gain passage. To celebrate this year's 100th anniversary of the land link, see wonderful photos of this bridge (and channel) in our excerpt from a book about the Causeway, published by the National Archives of Singapore and the National Archives of Malaysia in 2011.

There are too many interesting stories in this issue for me to do all of them justice here. I would like to highlight just three others. Beloved by punters and popular with the ladies, Tan Teng Kee, more popularly known as Battling Key, was one of Singapore's earliest boxing stars. Alas, his story had a tragic ending, which researcher Abhishek Mehrotra vividly recounts in his fascinating piece on local boxing in the 1920s.

I'm also pleased that this issue delves into the life of Hajah Asfiah Haji Abdullah, a teacher who helped preserve Malay heritage by conducting classes on traditional crafts and writing a book on Malay cooking. An amazing woman who began teaching classes at the age of 10, she dedicated herself to keeping Malay traditions alive. Her story deserves to be better known and librarian Toffa Abdul Wahed's profile of her goes a long way in ensuring that Hajah Asfiah's memory lives on.

Finally, as this note is being written, Southeast Asia is experiencing a heatwave. You might then be interested to read about the history of ice-making in Singapore. Just imagine not being able to indulge in ice kacang or ice-cream, or going to a market and buying fish that hasn't been put on ice. The thought of living without ice is enough to send shivers down my spine.

Alicia Yeo  
Director  
National Library

## Editorial & Production

**Editor-in-Chief**  
Jimmy Yap

**Senior Editor**  
Veronica Chee

**Engagement Editor**  
Soh Gek Han

**Editor**  
Stephanie Pee

**BiblioAsia Reels  
Producer**  
Woo Pei Qi

**Contributors**  
Ang Seow Leng  
Goh Lee Kim  
Linda Lim  
Abhishek Mehrotra  
Eriko Ogihara-Schuck

Phan Ming Yen  
Seow Peck Ngiam  
Joanna Tan  
Toffa Abdul Wahed  
John van Wyhe

**Design and Print**  
Oxygen Studio Designs  
Pte Ltd

**Please direct all correspondence to**  
National Library Board  
100 Victoria Street #01-02  
National Library Building  
Singapore 188064  
Email: [ref@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:ref@nlb.gov.sg)  
Website: [www.nlb.gov.sg](http://www.nlb.gov.sg)

### On the cover

Peranakan artist Martin Loh's *Emily of Emerald Hill* featured on the programme of the play in 1996. *Collection of the Peranakan Museum.*

*BiblioAsia* is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. *BiblioAsia* is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, and government ministries and agencies. Members of the public can pick up the magazine at the National Library Building and public libraries. The online edition can be accessed with the QR code on the right.



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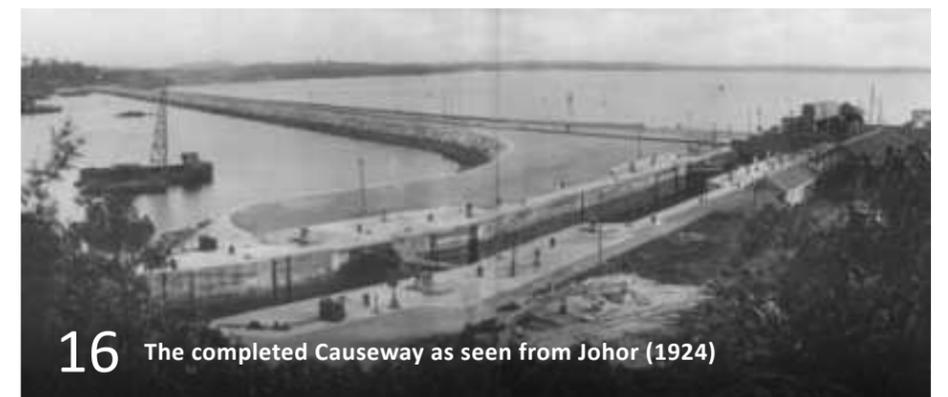
Image credits, clockwise from top left: Wild Rice; Jimmy Yap; Tessa Mitchell Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore; Times Books International; Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection, National Library, Singapore; Darwin Online



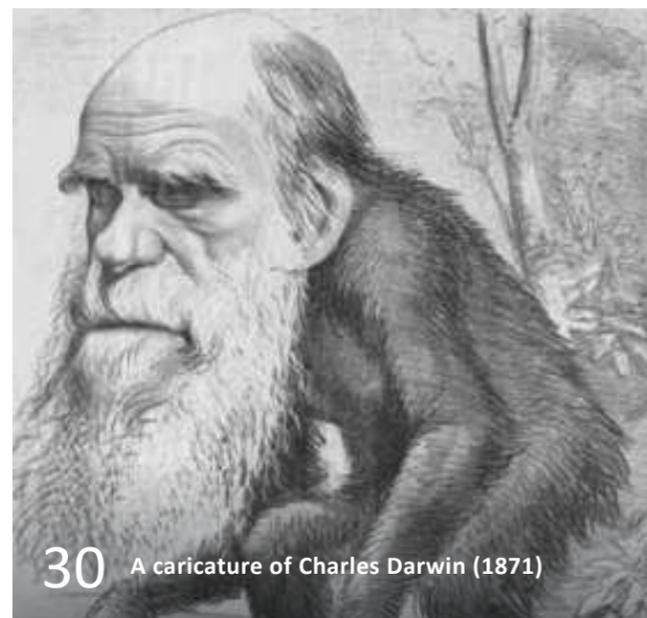
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# FROM BETTY OF BALMORAL ROAD TO EMILY OF EMERALD HILL

## A NEW LOOK AT STELLA KON'S CLASSIC PLAY

A study of early drafts of *Emily of Emerald Hill* reveals fascinating choices and paths not taken.

By Eriko Ogihara-Schuck

Singaporean actor Ivan Heng's performance of the titular matriarch in *Emily of Emerald Hill* in 2019. Courtesy of Wild Rice.

Dr Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, originally from Japan, is a lecturer in American Studies at TU Dortmund University in Germany. She is the author of *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences* (McFarland, 2014).

Over the last four decades, few Singaporean plays have occupied the imagination as much as Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Possibly the most frequently staged play in Singapore, the powerful script and the notable performances of the likes of Margaret Chan, Neo Swee Lin, Karen Tan, Laura Kee, Ivan Heng and others have inspired audiences to think about Peranakan culture and its place in the evolution of Singapore society.

While all this would suggest that the 90-minute monodrama is very well known, there are numerous aspects of *Emily* that few people are familiar with. Who knows, for example, that Kon had, at one point, planned to title the play *Betty of Balmoral Road*?

In an early version of the play, Kon also had a very different motivation in mind for a key moment, one that would cause Emily's world to collapse. However, she decided to rewrite that scene to avoid being too clichéd. Perhaps more importantly, Kon also added another event into the play to allow Emily to redeem herself in the eyes of the audience, a scene that did not exist in early drafts.

And while very much a Singaporean story – Emily Gan is, after all, a Peranakan matriarch living in the Peranakan enclave of Emerald Hill in Singapore – the play also owes much to Singapore's northern neighbour. Like many Singaporeans, *Emily* has links with Malaysia: playwright Stella Kon was living in Ipoh when she began writing the play, and indeed, *Emily* debuted in Malaysia.

The first-ever performance of the play took place in 1984 in Seremban, Negri Sembilan. This production by Five Arts Centre was directed by Malaysian teacher, theatre director and playwright Chin San Sooi with Leow Puay Tin as the first Emily. The play became so

beloved across the Causeway that Pearly Chua, who first began performing as Emily in 1990, has done so hundreds of times over the last three decades.

### Beginnings in Ipoh

Kon, who is Peranakan, spent her formative years at 117 Emerald Hill Road and had been exposed to theatre at an early age. She was inspired by her mother, Rosie Lim Guat Kheng, who was an amateur actress, and Kon's theatre-loving father Lim Kok Ann.<sup>1</sup> While studying at the University of Singapore (now National University of Singapore), Kon wrote a short play titled *Birds of a Feather* in 1966 which was staged by the university's students on an exchange trip to France.

Following her marriage and move to Ipoh in 1967, Kon began writing longer plays. In 1971, her double bill of two science-fiction plays, *A Breeding Pair*, was produced by the Ipoh Players, the resident theatre company of Ipoh's Anglo-Chinese School. Its director was Chin San Sooi.

Kon began writing *Emily of Emerald Hill* in Ipoh in 1982, and completed it in Britain when she moved there for the education of her two sons. The idea for the play originally came from Ong Su-Ming, one



(Above) Singaporean actress Margaret Chan in the 1985 production of *Emily of Emerald Hill* for the Singapore Drama Festival. It was directed by university lecturer Max Le Blond. Courtesy of Dr Margaret Chan.



(Left) *Emily of Emerald Hill* is set in a traditional Peranakan mansion based on Oberon at 117 Emerald Hill Road, home of Stella Kon's grandparents Seow Poh Leng and Polly Tan, c. 1930s–40s. The boy in the photo is one of their grandsons. Courtesy of Dr Patricia Lin.



(Above) Family photograph of Seow Poh Leng and Polly Tan (Stella's grandmother) with their children, Rosie (later Mrs Lim Kok Ann and Stella Kon's mother) and Eugene, 1925–35. *Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Right) Stella Kon, the author of *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

of the leaders of the school's theatre company. On hearing Kon lament that the plays which had earlier won her the first prize at the Singapore Playwriting Competition had not yet been staged in Singapore because they needed a large cast, Ong suggested that she write a play with a single character.<sup>2</sup>

Ong told Kon about the American playwright William Luce's one-woman play, *The Belle of Amherst* (1976), based on the life of 19th-century poet Emily Dickinson.<sup>3</sup> Ong had seen this play during a visit to Boston, and she advised Kon to write a one-woman play about Ong's grandmother.<sup>4</sup>

### Two Different Versions

Kon then began work on what would eventually become *Emily of Emerald Hill*. The original title was *Betty of Balmoral Road*, with Betty being the name of Kon's aunt who actually did live on Balmoral Road in Singapore. But even at that early stage, the main character was inspired by Kon's grandmother Polly Tan, who lived on Emerald Hill Road. According



to Kon, Polly Tan was “the model for Emily – in character, but not in the events of her life”. Polly was “not an unwanted and abused child, her son did not kill himself”, and Kon had “never heard the slightest hint of trouble in her married life”. But Polly's “charm, her hospitality and generosity, her robust energy and love of life – the strength of a woman who returned to Singapore as a widow [after the Japanese Occupation]” – all went into *Emily*.<sup>5</sup>

By the time Kon started jotting down ideas for the play in 1981, she had changed the titular character's name to Emily while keeping Balmoral Road as the setting. Kon felt that the name Emily was more fitting than Betty given that the character was born in the 1910s. It was a pure coincidence that the name ended up being the same as the main character of *The Belle of Amherst*.<sup>6</sup>

Kon then completed the first draft, by which time it had been named *Portrait of a Nonya: A Monodrama*. At this stage, the play was still set in Balmoral Road. This draft shows other interesting differences compared to the final script of *Emily of Emerald Hill*. In *Emily*, her son Richard commits suicide in England after she forbids him from becoming an instructor at a horse-riding school. In *Portrait*, however, Richard takes his own life because she rejects his marriage with a “white woman”.<sup>7</sup> Later, Kon found this marriage scenario to be “a superficial, cheap cliché” and considered Richard's new dream of leading a life of his own choice as generating “a more meaningful conflict”.<sup>8</sup>

In *Emily*, the climax of the play is when Emily accepts her daughter's marriage to a white man in

the United States. This scene did not originally exist in *Portrait*. Kon added this episode to give Emily “a chance for her own redemption”.<sup>9</sup>

*Portrait* and *Emily* also have different opening scenes. *Portrait* begins with Emily visiting the market and the audience hearing Emily bawling offstage. “Ah Hoon! Ah Hoon! Open the door! Bring the basket! Call the driver! Tell him nonya besar wants to go to market!” Then she appears on stage and, addressing the audience, says: “Hei, Botak! What are you doing ah! What kind of fish you sent to me yesterday? All rotten ones lah! Yes! You want me to show you, all the ikan parang all stinking rotten lah! How to eat ah? You want my family all go to hospital die ah?”<sup>10</sup>

The final script, however, opens with Emily speaking to people on the phone, starting with her friend Susie. “Susie ah! Emily here ah. This afternoon I'm going to town, anything that you're needing? I've got the chicken you wanted from market; and I saw some good jackfruit, your children love it, so I bought one big one for you. What else you need?” Emily then calls the Adelphi Hotel and speaks “in an upper-class educated voice”.<sup>11</sup> In *Portrait*, a version of this scene was situated in the middle of Scene Two.<sup>12</sup>

(Below) A programme from the 1992 production of *Emily of Emerald Hill* at the Old Town Hall in Kuala Lumpur, performed by Malaysian actress Pearly Chua. *Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Stella Kon.*

(Right) Malaysian actress Leow Puay Tin's performance of *Emily of Emerald Hill* in 1987. *Courtesy of Leow Puay Tin.*



Kon created this new opening in order to bring the audience's immediate attention to Emily's linguistic code-switching and make them laugh.<sup>13</sup>

However, both *Portrait* and *Emily* have interesting parallels with *The Belle*. As in *The Belle*, the two versions are equally food-focused. In *The Belle*, Emily Dickinson's first line is: “This is my introduction. Black cake. My own special recipe.”<sup>14</sup> *Portrait* and *Emily* also open with a reference to food. Later in *The Belle*, Dickinson introduces the recipe of the black cake, and something similar happens in *Portrait* and *Emily*. In *Portrait*, there are short scenes of her servant cooking fish head curry and Emily explaining how to prepare coconut ice-cream.<sup>15</sup> In *Emily*, the fish head curry is deleted but coconut ice-cream is retained, and detailed instructions about how to cook the traditional Peranakan dish *babi buah keluak* are added.<sup>16</sup>

**By the time Kon started jotting down ideas for the play in 1981, she had changed the titular character's name to Emily while keeping Balmoral Road as the setting.**

*The Belle's* techniques are also visible in *Portrait* and *Emily*. In the opening scene of *Emily*, Emily converses with invisible characters on the telephone. This technique is also used in *The Belle*, for instance, in the scene when young Dickinson's father scolds her for staying up late, and she explains to him that she is writing poetry.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Kon had not watched *The Belle*. It was her own “solution” to let the main character converse with invisible characters.<sup>18</sup>



In the market scene, Emily breaks the fourth wall just as Dickinson does. At the very beginning, Dickinson turns the audience into fellow actors: by serving them a cake, she invites them as guests into her parlour.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Emily turns the audience into stall owners as she appears on an extension of the main stage, known as an “apron”,<sup>20</sup> and moves closer to her audience.

Like the telephone scene, this original opening scene also vividly shows Emily’s ability to switch between Singlish and Queen’s English, and to speak in Hokkien and Malay. After speaking with Botak in Singlish, Emily turns to Ah Soh who sells vegetables and asks: “[H]ow are you, gou cha [so early]? Ya I’m fine, family is fine, chin ho, chin ho [very good, very good].” Later, she enters Cold Storage and speaks in a “posh accent”: “Morning, Mr Chai! Have you got my baked ham? I ordered it yesterday – yes in my name, Mrs Gan Swee Kheng, have you got it there?”<sup>21</sup> But by additionally involving the audience in the play, this scene more powerfully illustrates both multiracial Singapore as well as Emily’s ability to straddle different worlds, a characteristic of the Peranakan Chinese.

**Even as *Emily* grew in cult status in Singapore, the same happened in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the play was first perceived as delving into a “relatively little known Malaysian sub-culture”**

### Premiere in Seremban

Almost from the beginning, *Emily of Emerald Hill* was recognised as an important work. Kon submitted the play to the 1983 Singapore National Playwriting Competition and won the first prize (for the third time). But the form of the play posed new challenges to the Singapore theatre community. In correspondence with me, Kon speculated that the hesitation was perhaps because the monodrama format was still relatively new to local theatre.<sup>22</sup>

In Kon’s absence (she had moved to Britain by then), her friend Ong Su-Ming again took the initiative. In April 1984, Ong showed the *Emily* script to her former ACS Ipoh colleague Chin San Sooi, who had earlier directed Kon’s *A Breeding Pair*.<sup>23</sup> This was because, among other things, Ong knew that Chin had innovatively staged a monologue play starring the up-and-coming actress Leow Puay Tin.<sup>24</sup>

Chin immediately saw the potential in *Emily* and quickly cast around for a producer and a sponsor while starting rehearsals with Leow.<sup>25</sup> On 17 November 1984, at the Cemara Club House in Seremban, Leow made *Emily* come alive on stage.<sup>26</sup> When the play was staged in Kuala Lumpur about two weeks later, it gained widespread coverage and triggered a reviewer to describe the production as

“scor[ing] another impressive credit” and a “superb effort”.<sup>27</sup> He also praised Leow for “captivat[ing] the audience with her near-immaculate nuances of the various periods of her life” and “inject[ing] a fresh enthusiasm into the character of Emily”.<sup>28</sup>

This Malaysian premiere was likely a major factor that prodded Singapore to finally stage *Emily* in 1985 at the Singapore Drama Festival. Malaysian director Krishen Jit commented that “Kon is better received in his country [Malaysia] than her own because her experimental methods go down better north of the Causeway”. In response, Singaporean playwright Robert Yeo, who was then chair of the Drama Advisory Committee at the Ministry of Community Development, denied that Singapore was not accepting enough of experimental theatre. “Singaporeans are just asking themselves whether they can produce Stella’s plays,” Yeo said. “I don’t think we are averse to experimental theatre at all.”<sup>29</sup>

Singaporean director Max Le Blond said he was immediately intrigued on reading the script.<sup>30</sup> Actress Margaret Chan was similarly smitten. “I liked it and said yes right after I read it. I memorised the script within two days.”<sup>31</sup> Chan’s performance mesmerised Kon. After watching it at the 1985 Singapore Drama

The programme of a production of *Emily of Emerald Hill* in 1996 by Singaporean actress Neo Swee Lin. The cover art for the programme features a watercolour painting by renowned Peranakan artist, Martin Loh. Collection of the Peranakan Museum. Gift of Stella Kon.



Singaporean actress Karen Tan playing the titular role in *Emily of Emerald Hill*, presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay as part of *The Studios: Fifty* in 2015. Photo by Tuckys Photography, courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.



Festival, Kon told the audience: “Margaret gave it flesh and breath and blood.” Later, she went backstage to congratulate Chan and told her: “I’m exhilarated, I’m over the moon.”<sup>32</sup>

### Achieving Cult Status

Even as *Emily* grew in cult status in Singapore, the same happened in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the play was first perceived as delving into a “relatively little known Malaysian sub-culture” (referring to Peranakan culture).<sup>33</sup> But it eventually came to exemplify Malaysia’s cultural diversity,<sup>34</sup> and earned “a special place in the annals of Malaysian theatre”<sup>35</sup> as Malaysia’s longest-running play.<sup>36</sup>

By 2002, Chin had staged *Emily* a hundred times (21 times with Leow Puay Tin) and the *Malay Mail* cheekily called the play an “obsession” and “a sheer waste of creative talent and energy to be specialised in the creative paranoia of one play”.<sup>37</sup> But Chin continued to stage it with Pearly Chua, who has since performed the role 214 times as at December 2023.<sup>38</sup> The versatile Chua has also performed the play in Mandarin which, according to her, is “more physically demanding because the language uses different sets of muscles in the mouth and throat compared with English”.<sup>39</sup>

Their fascination with the play is, of course, a crucial reason for its longevity. Chin calls the play a “gem whose beauty is its universality”,<sup>40</sup> and credits it for allowing the actor and the director to grow. “It has been a very personal development for myself. Through directing the play, I see more and more of certain things about the play, like life and values,” he said.<sup>41</sup> Chua feels the same: “It’s a challenging role certainly and although I have done it many times, it is something I find I can discover something new every time I approach it.”<sup>42</sup>

But audience demand is an important factor as well. After all, if no one buys tickets, no theatre company can afford to produce the play. “I stage the play every year because people ask me to do so,” Chin said.<sup>43</sup> Woo Yee Saik, who produced Chin’s *Emily* in 2002 in Georgetown, Penang, and would go on to produce four more *Emily* performances, said that he has met many people, both Peranakans and non-Peranakans, who told him that they have someone similar to Emily in their family – either their mother, grandmother or aunt.<sup>44</sup>

### My Personal Experience with *Emily*

I watched *Emily* live on stage for the first time in Kuala Lumpur in July 2023. Watching the play in person was a much more intense experience than watching the online videos (of Pearly Chua, Margaret Chan and Laura Kee). I remember most vividly the scene where Emily was meant to cry. Chua actually did not cry as the tears did not roll down her face. Instead, the tears just pooled in her eyes which made her eyes shine under the bright stage lights. To me, this was more poignant than if she had actually cried.

One of the attractions of the play is its ability to foster community bonding. I saw many Peranakan women among the audience wearing the sarong kebaya (an outfit made up of a sheer embroidered blouse paired with a batik sarong). The play definitely provided an opportunity for the Peranakans to come together and celebrate their culture and heritage.

Community bonding also took place within the play between Emily and the audience as well as among the audience, and it left a deep impression on me. I was thrilled to see Emily suddenly approaching the audience during the market scene. In another scene, during the birthday party for Richard, the entire audience was invited to sing “Happy Birthday” to him. It was truly

The three Emilys in *Emily: The Musical* presented by Musical Theatre Ltd in May 2016 and directed by Sonny Lim with music by Desmond Moey. (From left) Karen Lim as old Emily, Melissa Wei-En Hecker as little Emily and April Kong as adult Emily. Image reproduced from the programme booklet of *Emily: The Musical*.



## NOTES

- 1 Correspondence with Stella Kon, 19 November 2023; Nureza Ahmad, "Stella Kon," in *Singapore Infopedia*. National Library Board Singapore. Article published 2018. Kon started writing plays while still in school. At age 8, she wrote her first play, *The Fisherman and the King*, while at Raffles Girls' School (RGS), which was later staged at the school. At age 12, her second play, *The Tragedy of Lo Mee Oh and Tzu Lee At*, a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*, was again performed in RGS. Kon is a descendant of Lim Boon Keng and Tan Tock Seng, who were her paternal great-grandfather and maternal great-great-grandfather respectively.
- 2 Stella Kon, oral history interview by Michelle Low, 9 August 2006, MP3 audio, Reel/Disc 22 of 36, National Archives of Singapore (accession no. 002996), 2:36–39.
- 3 Stella Kon, oral history interview, 9 August 2006, Reel/Disc 22 of 36, 3:03–16.
- 4 Stella Kon, oral history interview, 9 August 2006, Reel/Disc 22 of 36, 4:11–21.
- 5 Stella Kon, "Fact and Fiction in the Play," in *Emily of Emerald Hill: A One-Woman Play* (Singapore: Stella Kon Pte Ltd, 2017), 60–61. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING S822 KON)
- 6 Correspondence with Stella Kon, 3 December 2023.
- 7 Stella Kon, *Portrait of a Nonya: A Monodrama*, unpublished manuscript, 1980, 15. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS S822 KON)
- 8 Correspondence with Stella Kon, 18 March 2024.
- 9 Correspondence with Stella Kon, 18 March 2024.
- 10 Kon, *Portrait of a Nonya*, 3.
- 11 Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, 3.
- 12 Kon, *Portrait of a Nonya*, 7.
- 13 Correspondence with Stella Kon, 27 March 2024.
- 14 William Luce, *The Belle of Amherst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 2.
- 15 Kon, *Portrait of a Nonya*, 8, 17.
- 16 Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, 38–39.
- 17 Luce, *The Belle of Amherst*, 22–24.
- 18 Stella Kon, oral history interview, 9 August 2006, Reel/Disc 22 of 36, 3:23–54.
- 19 It was a "superb solution" on the part of William Luce to involve the audience in the play in this manner. Correspondence with Grant Hayter-Menzies, 3 April 2024. For the detailed episode about how Luce came up with this solution, see Grant Hayter-Menzies, *Staging Emily Dickinson: The History and Enduring Influence of William Luce's The Belle of Amherst*. Jefferson (NC: McFarland, 2023), 119–20.
- 20 Kon, *Portrait of a Nonya*, 3.
- 21 Kon, *Portrait of a Nonya*, 3–4.
- 22 Correspondence with Stella Kon, 20 March 2024.
- 23 Correspondence with Chin San Sooi, 5 December 2023; "Director's Chair," Stella Kon's Emily of Emerald Hill, <https://emilyemerald.tripod.com/directorsays.htm>.

amazing to feel that, by seeing Emily coming down to us and by singing for her son, I was being included in her huge multiracial and multicultural community.

Since 2024 is the 40th anniversary of Emily's debut on the stage, it is also perhaps a good time for me, and for audiences in Malaysia and Singapore, to send birthday wishes to Emily, both the character and the play. Happy birthday *Emily*! Here's to another 40 years! Or as the Peranakans would say at auspicious occasions: "*Panjang-panjang umur!* [Long life!]" ♦

In 1987, Stella Kon donated early drafts of her iconic play, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, to the National Library as well as a notebook in which she had jotted down some initial thoughts and ideas for the play. These include the very first draft titled *Portrait of a Nonya: A Monodrama* and the fourth draft, *Emily of Emerald Hill*. She followed up with another donation in 2015 of 39 manuscripts and typescripts of her other plays. These items can be viewed via walk-in requests at the Level 11 Information Counter of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Building, or upon prior reservation via the catalogue.

- 24 Correspondence with Ong Su-Ming, 13 November 2023. The play is *I Have Not Forgotten the Dumb*, a devised piece staged in 1981.
- 25 Correspondence with Chin San Sooi, 5 December 2023. A few years after staging Kon's *A Breeding Pair*, Chin impressed the German Embassy in Malaysia in 1974 by successfully staging German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in an innovatively minimalist style, using only 10 actors instead of the original 50. In *Lady White*, the very first play Chin wrote and directed in 1976, he creatively turned the audience into fellow actors by making an actor approach someone in the audience to read his fortune. His *Refugees: Images*, a critique of the Malaysian government's treatment of refugees, completed in 1980, was meant to become the first Malaysian musical but it was banned from being performed for two decades.
- 26 Correspondence with Chin San Sooi, 5 December 2023. The premiere was done in an ad hoc manner, with a temporary stage and electricity drawn from the main office for lighting and air-conditioning.
- 27 J.C. Forou, "A Story Told, a Cultural Sub-Type Vitalised," *New Straits Times*, 2 December 1984, 12. (From KLIK)
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- 40 Correspondence with Chin San Sooi, 27 December 2023.
- 41 "A Moment Please, San Sooi...," *New Sunday Times*, 1 December 2002, 10. (From KLIK)
- 42 "Emily of Emerald Hill to Be Restaged," *Malay Mail*, 30 November 1998, 1. (From KLIK)
- 43 Correspondence with Chin San Sooi, 15 July 2023.
- 44 Correspondence with Woo Yee Saik, 13 March 2024.

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# SENTOSA'S

As Singapore's cable car system commemorates 50 years of service, we look back at the journey of this iconic attraction that has brought joy to many a rider.

By Joanna Tan

## CABLE CARS AT 50

**B**ack in 1974, Singapore was a very different place. At the time, Benjamin Sheares was president, Changi Airport didn't exist, and colour TV was just getting started. That was what things were like when the first cable cars began operations here, shuttling people from Mount Faber to Sentosa.

To people back then, it must have seemed futuristic, to be suspended some 60 m in the air, travelling across the sea to get to a small island that, only three years before, had been known as Pulau Blakang Mati. Even if one discounted the novelty of the ride, the cable car offered something quite unique: an unmatched view.

"We have a magnificent natural harbour, one of the finest in the world," noted Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee when he officially opened the service on 15 February 1974. "A ride in a cable car – and I must not detain you longer than is necessary before you experience this for yourself – will provide the visitor with a magnificent

panorama of the harbour. It will, I hope, at the same time make Singaporeans more conscious and more proud of their city state, whose economic life blood flows through this great port of ours."<sup>1</sup>

After his speech, Goh and his wife rode in the bright yellow Cable Car No. 1 across the harbour to Sentosa and was all smiles as he looked down at the panoramic view below. At the end of the journey, he told the *Straits Times* that "he had enjoyed the ride very much and that it was as good as any he had taken abroad."<sup>2</sup>

Such was the novelty of the ride that his endorsement was probably unnecessary. The next day, when it opened to the public, more than 1,000 people jostled for the opportunity to get into a cable car cabin and

**Joanna Tan** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore, and works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection. Her responsibilities include collection management and content development as well as providing reference and research services.

Cable cars along the Mount Faber Line linking Mount Faber and Sentosa, c. 1975. These are the first-generation cars. The photo has been brightened from the original provided by the National Archives of Singapore. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*



Completed in 2015, the Sentosa Line serves passengers within Sentosa with three stations: Merlion Plaza, Imbiah Lookout and Siloso Point. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

ride it for the 8.5 minutes it took to get from Mount Faber to Sentosa.<sup>3</sup> They paid \$4 for a round trip.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of 1974, close to 750,000 people had taken a ride on it and long snaking queues around the cable car station were a common sight.<sup>5</sup> "Coming from a small town in Malaysia on a night train then, riding on the cable car was like an airplane ride for me back in the 1970s," recalled Chan Sook Han.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, things were not always smooth sailing. Irene Chee was one of those who took a ride on the new attraction the year it opened. She was then expecting her second child, and was accompanied by her parents, husband and three-year-old daughter. "I was enjoying the beautiful view when the cable car stopped suddenly," she recalled. "We didn't know what was happening and my mother started praying. After a while, which seemed like an eternity, the car started moving again." That was the first and last time that Chee, now a grandmother of six, set foot in the cable car.<sup>7</sup>

In the last 50 years, more than 60 million passengers have taken rides on the cable car. Besides playing host to visiting dignitaries and heads of state, the cable car has also been a venue for sky-high fine dining, Valentine's Day dinners and even marriage proposals.

### A Tourist Attraction

Interestingly, the cable car system owes its existence to the British military pullout from Singapore. Before the 1970s, Pulau Blakang Mati was used mainly as a British military base, though it was also home to a small population of non-military personnel.<sup>8</sup> In 1967, Britain's announcement that it would withdraw its troops from Singapore by the 1970s presented opportunities for the government to redevelop and repurpose the island for other uses.<sup>9</sup> The following year, the government approved the recommendation by the Urban Renewal Department (URD; today's Urban Redevelopment Authority) to turn the island into a tourist resort.<sup>10</sup>

As part of the planned transformation of the island, the URD conceived the cable car system as a

tourist attraction as well as a mode of transportation to and from Sentosa.<sup>11</sup> Officials visited Switzerland, Spain and Japan to obtain a working knowledge of the cable car systems in these countries.<sup>12</sup> In July 1970, Singapore Cable Car Private Limited (SCC) was incorporated to manage and operate the cable car service.<sup>13</sup> (SCC now comes under the management of Mount Faber Leisure Group Pte Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Sentosa Development Corporation.<sup>14</sup>)

### Building the Cable Car

The development of the 1.75-kilometre-long cable car system linking Mount Faber with Sentosa was awarded to Swiss company Von Roll at a contractual sum of \$2.94 million in August 1971. The initial plan was for the company to also erect the station buildings and supporting towers but it was deemed too costly, and a decision was made for these structures to be designed and constructed by local firms.<sup>15</sup>

Three stations were constructed: on Mount Faber, at Jardine Steps (now known as HarbourFront Tower 2) and on Sentosa island. Two supporting towers were also built to support the station buildings – one on Seah Im Road and the other on Pulau Selegu.<sup>16</sup> (Today, this island is no longer visible as together with Sarong Island, it was merged with Sentosa through a land reclamation project in the late 1970s.<sup>17</sup>) The cost of constructing the infrastructures and facilities for the system came up to about \$5.8 million.<sup>18</sup>

The cable car system was an immediate hit and within three years, it clocked more than 2.3 million riders. Besides tourists and Singaporeans from all walks of life, foreign dignitaries were also treated to a ride on the cable car. Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of British India, hopped into one in March 1974.<sup>19</sup>

Singapore's cable car was also featured on the popular TV series *Hawaii Five-O*. In an episode, which aired in 1979, Steve McGarrett, the main protagonist played by Jack Lord, is in hot pursuit of a villain, and this chase involved swinging precariously from the cable car wire.<sup>20</sup>



The *Eniwetok* after its collision with the cableway, 1983. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

## The Eniwetok Accident

For the first nine years, the system operated without any major incidents. But that streak of good fortune ended on Saturday, 29 January 1983. Shortly after 6 pm, the *Eniwetok*, an oil-drilling ship, broke free from its tugboats and drifted with the tide after unberthing from the nearby oil wharf in Keppel Harbour.

The top of its derrick (the tower) collided with the cableway causing two cable cars, numbers 20 and 35, to dislodge and fall 55 metres into the waters below. Two other cars were stranded precariously over land while another two were suspended over water.

One of them, car number 26, was half-way across the harbour when the accident happened. The force of the collision shook the car violently and two adults and a 22-month-old toddler were flung out, leaving four more passengers in the cabin.<sup>21</sup> Seven people died as a result of the accident, but another 13 remained trapped in four cabins suspended in the air.

The rescue team, led by Colonel Lee Hsien Loong, Chief of Staff of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) (he would later become prime minister), weighed various options to reach the trapped passengers. These included the use of a fire brigade snorkel ladder for the cars over land and a floating crane for the two over water; deploying commandos to crawl along the cableway and attach pulleys to the cables to lower the passengers individually; and using military helicopters in a mid-air rescue. As the ladder and crane were not tall enough, the team rescue decided on the helicopters to lower winchmen into the cable cars to bring the passengers up. The commandos were the backup plan in case this option failed.<sup>22</sup>

The air rescue was carried out at around 12.45 am on 30 January from two Bell 212 helicopters. Each helicopter hovered above a cable car while an SAF winchman was lowered down from a winch to the car with trapped passengers.

The windy conditions and the downdraft from the helicopter's rotor blades made it hard for him to reach the cabin each time. However, once in, he quickly

strapped one passenger to himself with a harness before both were hauled up to the helicopter. This was repeated until all 13 stranded passengers were saved.<sup>23</sup> The mid-air rescue took about three hours and ended at around 3.45 am.

One of the pilots involved was Australian Geoffrey Ledger, 29, a flight lieutenant with the Royal Australian Navy who was in Singapore to train local air force personnel in search and rescue operations. "It was a dark, wet night, and it was some harrowing flying," recalled Ledger who had volunteered to participate in the rescue operation. "It was a torturous time, the only area I had as a

hover reference was one of the wires and listening to my winch operator telling me how close I was getting to the cables. My winchmen also had to pacify the survivors as they had been there for five to six hours completely not knowing what was going on. Some were badly injured. I could hear them screaming as we came close in the helicopters."<sup>24</sup>

The winchman in Ledger's helicopter was Selvanathan Selvarajoo, then a 21-year-old lance corporal. "I was swinging like a pendulum," he recalled. "My safety cable scraped against the cable car cable, causing sparks which scared the trapped passengers."<sup>25</sup>

The day after the collision, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew ordered a Commission of Inquiry into the causes leading to the tragedy. After a 55-day-hearing, the Commission submitted its report which cleared the SCC of responsibility but faulted a few other individuals, the Port of Singapore Authority, Keppel Shipyard, and the

ship's owner and management agent. The Commission also submitted recommendations to prevent similar occurrences. The new height restriction for vessels entering Keppel Harbour was reduced from 56.5 m to 52 m after the accident.<sup>26</sup>

After almost seven months of rigorous tests and repairs, the cable car service resumed operations on 15 August 1983.<sup>27</sup>

## Lofty Winds of Change

While the accident was a major tragedy, the cable car system was eventually able to regain public trust. By 1990s, the cable car service was straining to accommodate the high ridership which could see around 8,000 passengers on weekends and public holidays. To cope with demand, the cars were replaced with 81 roomier cabins at a cost of \$11 million in 1994. The system could now accommodate 1,400 passengers per hour, almost doubling the previous capacity.<sup>28</sup>

The system saw a major overhaul a decade and a half later. Between September 2009 and July 2010, the service was shut down and the old double-cable rope-way was replaced with a monocable one. In addition, it was raised to stand around 100 m above sea level. This accommodated the new fleet of 67 black-and-chrome cabins that were bigger, wheelchair-friendly and could take up to eight passengers each instead of the usual six.<sup>29</sup>

The opening of Resorts World Sentosa and Universal Studios in 2010 led to a spike in visitor numbers, prompting Sentosa Development Corporation to set up a cable car service that would run within the island between Merlion Plaza, Imbiah Lookout and Siloso Point. Officially opened on 14 July 2015, the 860-metre-long Sentosa Line can move some 1,600 people per hour in one direction with a waiting time of just 18 seconds.<sup>30</sup>

## Soaring to New Heights

In March 2024, seven futuristic-looking cabins were added to the existing fleet of 67 on the Mount Faber Line connecting Mount Faber and Sentosa. Called SkyOrb cabins, these have a transparent glass bottom and were made exclusively for Singapore.<sup>31</sup>

Over the last five decades, Sentosa's cable cars have established themselves as a familiar landmark to those who pass along Telok Blangah Road. Yet despite the familiarity, it is still a major draw, offering as it does, a unique perspective of the harbour and Singapore's coastline. The service's commitment to constant upgrading and improvement will undoubtedly enable these cable cars to continue soaring. ♦

Cable cars along the Mount Faber Line linking Mount Faber and Sentosa, 2024. Seen here are the new SkyOrb cabins and other cars dressed in the Pokémon motif. Photo by Jimmy Yap.



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# The Making of the Causeway

When the Causeway was built 100 years ago, it was the largest engineering project to be undertaken in Malaya. Building it required overcoming significant engineering challenges.

The official opening of the Causeway on 28 June 1924 was a historic event that marked the physical joining of Singapore with the Malay Peninsula, and indeed the rest of continental Asia. The lavish ceremony that took place was presided over by Laurence Nunns Guillemard, Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States (FMS), in the presence of Sultan Ibrahim of Johor. More than 400 guests – including Malay nobility, dignitaries and prominent government officials – from the FMS, Straits Settlements and Johor attended the event.<sup>1</sup>

Today, a hundred years later, the Causeway has become one of the busiest overland border crossings in the world, with 300,000 travellers daily.<sup>2</sup> It was the only physical link between Singapore and the Malay Peninsula

for almost three quarters of a century until the Second Link – connecting Tuas in Singapore to Tanjung Kupang in Gelang Patah, southwest Johor – opened in 1998.<sup>3</sup>

Before the Causeway existed, crossing the Straits of Johor was cumbersome. People here had to take the train to Woodlands on the Singapore-Kranji Railway, which had opened in 1903,<sup>4</sup> and then board one of two steam-powered ferry boats – aptly named *Singapore* and *Johore* – across the strait to Johor Bahru and vice versa.

Towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the train and ferry services were under increasing pressure to keep pace with the rapidly growing movement of people and goods across the Johor Strait. In 1909, “wagon-ferries” were introduced to help reduce congestion. Also known as train-ferries, these were barges specially outfitted with railway tracks, each

capable of transporting up to six train carriages by sea to connect with the railway lines at either end. They complemented the passenger ferry boats and, for the first time, allowed the seamless carriage of goods from ferry to railway without having to unload and load goods.

The wagon-ferries were so successful that demand for its services soon surpassed capacity. In addition to the volume of traffic, the escalating maintenance costs of the wagon-ferries raised concerns about their long-term viability. A better solution was needed.<sup>5</sup>

In 1917, W. Eyre Kenny, the director of public works for the FMS, suggested building a rubble causeway across the strait.<sup>6</sup> The idea quickly gained traction and the Causeway proposal won the support of Edward Lewis Brockman, Chief Secretary to the FMS, and Arthur Henderson Young, Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the FMS.

The British government appointed consultant engineers Messrs Coode, Matthews, Fitzmaurice & Wilson to prepare detailed plans for the Causeway, which were presented to the FMS, Straits Settlements and Johor governments in 1918. The Straits Settlements government formally approved the Causeway project the next year.<sup>7</sup> That same year, the Johor government also passed a law to authorise the construction of a causeway.



The opening ceremony of the Causeway on 28 June 1924 was presided over by Laurence Nunns Guillemard, Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States. On his left and facing him is Sultan Ibrahim of Johor with his left hand on the hilt of his sword. Courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia.

The consultant engineers proposed a rubble causeway about 18 m wide that would stretch just over a kilometre between the two territories. The raw materials for the rubble would come from granite quarries in nearby Pulau Ubin and Bukit Timah in Singapore.

Part of the engineering challenge in building the Causeway was that at the Johor end, it had a channel, also known as a lock, to allow local vessels to pass through. The



The completed Causeway from the Johor end, June 1924. The lock channel can be seen in the photo. Tessa Mitchell Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



The wagon-ferry jetty in Johor Bahru, August 1919. The hauling engine house or powerhouse on the left contained the winding machinery for hauling travellers to and from the wagon-ferries. Courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia.

lock, about 52 m long and 10 m wide at the gate, needed a double set of floodgates as the water flow between the channel would change direction with the tide. A rolling lift-bridge, a kind of drawbridge, was installed to carry the road and railway tracks over the lock. The moving part of the bridge alone weighed 570 tons and raising it took eight and a half minutes. In addition, a tunnel 3.5 m wide and 2.4 m high was built below the lock to allow waterpipes to be run to Singapore.<sup>8</sup>

Construction work began in 1919 and was completed in 1924. Thousands of workers were involved, and the project would eventually cost Johor, the Straits Settlements and the FMS an unprecedented 17 million Straits dollars.

In 2011, the National Archives of Malaysia and the National Archives of Singapore jointly published *The*

*Causeway*, a book about the history of the land bridge between the two countries. The following extract, mainly from chapter three of the book, details the construction challenges involved in building the Causeway.

### The Grand Plan – Engineering the Causeway (1919–23)

The Causeway project was technically challenging by the standards of its time and would be the largest engineering project in Malaya at the time. Construction would take an estimated four to five years, and would require the labour of over 2,000 workers as well millions of tons of stone and other building materials.<sup>9</sup>

Tidal studies were carried out in 1917, and design features were incorporated to limit changes in the water level at the Causeway to control possible damage to its structure and surroundings, as well as to manage the strength of the currents passing through its lock to allow for safe navigation.<sup>10</sup>

A detailed plan of the Causeway's construction site was prepared by Messrs Coode, Matthew, Fitzmaurice & Wilson in 1917, with recommendations to change the Causeway's orientation. The proposed Causeway would be 3,465 ft long (1,056 m) from bank to bank, with a width of 60 ft (18 m) sufficient to carry two lines of metre-gauge railway tracks, a 26-foot-wide (8 m) roadway, with space reserved for the laying of water mains at a later date.

The contract to construct the Causeway was awarded on 30 June 1919 to Messrs Topham, Jones & Railton Ltd. of London, a renowned engineering firm that had successfully carried out several major large-scale public projects in Singapore.

The company was behind the construction of two of colonial Singapore's most important dockyards – King's Dock at Keppel Harbour built in 1913, the largest dry dock in Asia, and the massive 24.5-acre Empire Dock at Tanjong Pagar Harbour completed in 1917, the largest wet dock in Singapore. The firm had also taken on major reconstruction work at the Tanjong Pagar wharves in 1917, to the commendation of the colonial government.<sup>11</sup> It thus had on hand

experienced engineers, workmen and the necessary tools and equipment for the job. A period of five years and three months was allowed for the completion of all related works.

Construction on the Causeway commenced in August 1919 in Johor Bahru, beginning with the excavation of the lock channel.<sup>12</sup> The governments involved decided to complete the lock first to minimise disruption to shipping during the rest of the construction. The lock was placed at the Johor end of the Causeway because it had more suitable approaches than the Woodlands side, and the approach would also cause less disruption to the existing ferry services.

Since the lock would occupy the site of the pontoon landing stage for the passenger ferry launches at Johor Bahru station, it was necessary to first provide a new landing stage. The pontoon and connecting bridge were removed and reinstalled on 14 August 1919 at the new site, located clear of the works at the west end of the west wing-wall of the lock. For the convenience of train passengers, a temporary covered walkway was built between the railway station and the new site of the pontoon. This transfer was achieved without causing any interruption to passenger ferry traffic.

The quarry at Pulau Ubin, which was about 16 miles (26 km) away and had been opened in 1907 for the Singapore harbour-works, was reopened in 1919 to supply rubble and crushed stone for the Causeway. Four of the ten hopper barges ordered from England for the transport of stone from quarries in Singapore to the Causeway had been delivered during the year, along with one of two large steam tugs also ordered from England, which were designed to pull those barges. A smaller tug and a steam launch had also been purchased locally in 1919 to expedite the transportation of stone.

The 1919 Johor Annual Report proudly reported that work on the Causeway is "destined to connect Johor with Singapore by road and rail proceeds day and night".<sup>13</sup>

### Laying the Foundation Stone

In 1920, with work on the Causeway progressing satisfactorily, it was deemed proper to hold a ceremony to mark the laying of its foundation stone. Governor Laurence Nunns Guillemard and the chief secretary agreed to have the ceremony on 24 April 1920. It was to be conducted from on board the steam yacht *Sea Belle*, anchored in the middle of the Johor Strait. The occasion would also coincide with Guillemard's first official visit to Johor.

The Causeway's foundation laying ceremony took place amid an economic boom in British Malaya. International prices of Malaya's main exports, such as rubber and tin, had reached record levels in the first half of 1920 and the future looked bright.

However, a sudden unexpected worldwide economic depression hit in mid-1920, which severely affected Malaya's economy and lasted until the latter part of 1922. Thus, the bulk of the Causeway's



(Top) A close-up view of the Causeway's lock channel in use by small ships, c. 1925. It is in the open position. Lee Kip Lin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

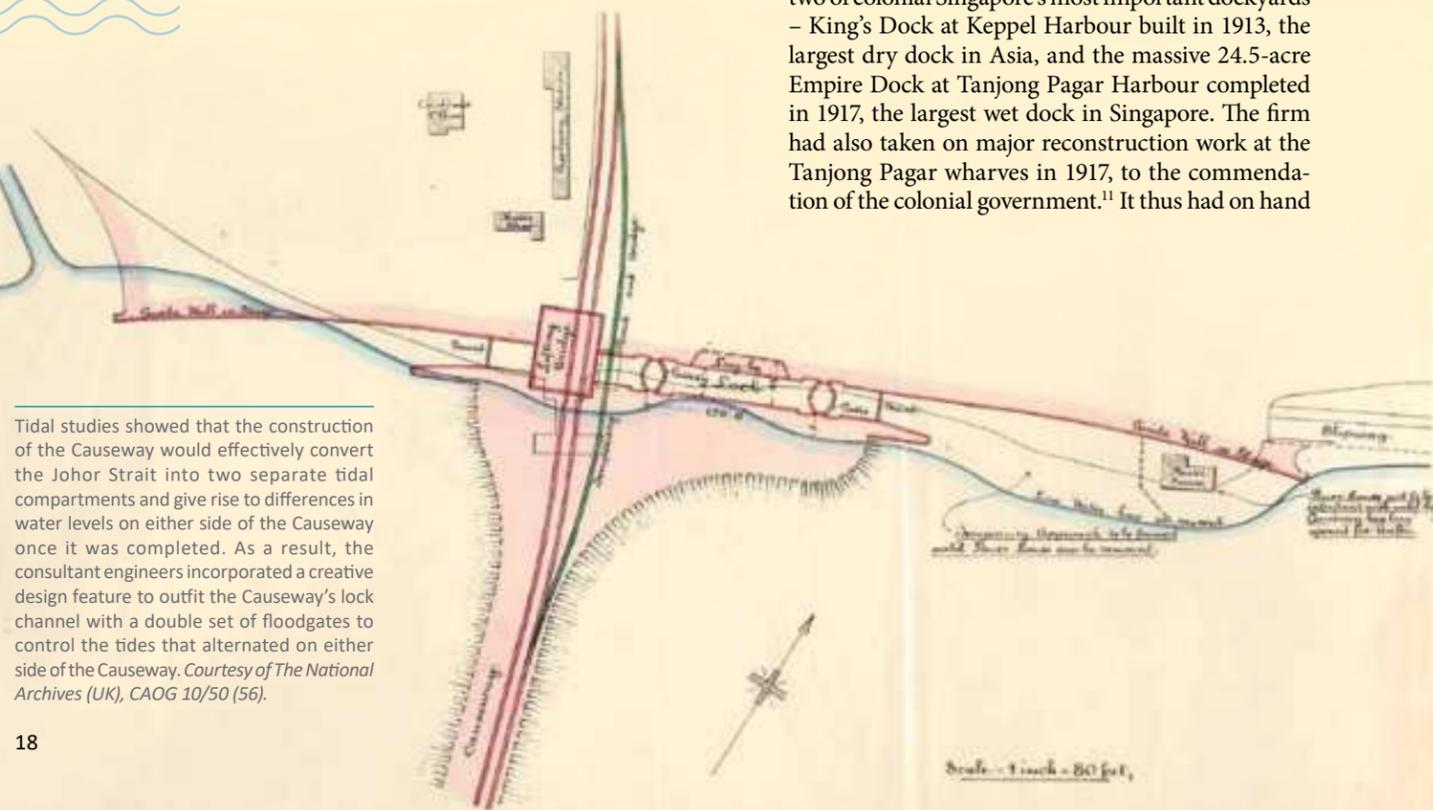
(Above) Construction of cofferdam (temporary enclosure for workers to work in a waterlogged environment) at the east end of the lock and concreting of apron in progress, June 1921. Both locals and Europeans worked together to complete the Causeway. Courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia.

construction took place in the midst of serious economic dislocation. Under the bleak economic conditions, the Causeway project came under increasing public scrutiny and criticism.

At around the same time, the British Admiralty raised objections to the dimensions of the lock channel, proposing that it be expanded to at least 400 ft (122 m) in length and 75 ft (23 m) in breadth – about double its originally planned size – to accommodate passage of large British warships. Although this suggestion was eventually dropped because of the engineering difficulties and hefty additional costs involved,<sup>14</sup> these two factors almost convinced the FMS and Straits Settlements governments to abandon the Causeway project.

By then, the construction of the lock at the Johor end was well advanced and the north wall of the lock was half completed. In addition, the first two lengths of the east and west wing-walls of the lock had been built, and the eastern portion of the watertight cofferdam enclosing the south wall of the lock was ready for closing, allowing workers to work on the lock in dry conditions.

In addition, output from the granite quarry on Pulau Ubin had improved significantly, and from February 1921 additional supplies started arriving from the Bukit Timah quarry. In June the same year,



Tidal studies showed that the construction of the Causeway would effectively convert the Johor Strait into two separate tidal compartments and give rise to differences in water levels on either side of the Causeway once it was completed. As a result, the consultant engineers incorporated a creative design feature to outfit the Causeway's lock channel with a double set of floodgates to control the tides that alternated on either side of the Causeway. Courtesy of The National Archives (UK), CAOG 10/50 (56).

the depositing of rubble commenced on the Johor side of the works, allowing the construction of the Causeway's superstructure to proceed from both sides of the strait. Some 2,337 men were engaged in the Causeway's construction that year.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of 1921, all excavation and concrete works had been completed on the lock, along with construction on most of its north wall. Good progress was also made on the lock's south wall, east wing-wall and on the installation of the lock's double set of floodgates. The first of the 5-foot-diameter (1.5 m) culverts was also completed at the Johor end, and groundwork commenced on the rolling lift-bridge.

By July 1922, rubble deposits on both sides of the Causeway had reduced the gap remaining in the superstructure to just 1,300 ft (396 m) at low tide. At this point, a coating of rubble was deposited over the gap to prevent any scouring of the bottom due to the increased velocity of currents in the narrowing channel. Work on the superstructure of the Causeway resumed after this precautionary measure had been taken.

On 1 January 1923, the lock was handed over to the Federated Malay States Railways (FMSR) to begin operations, and all shipping through the Johor Strait were subsequently diverted through the lock as the advanced stage of construction had made it increasingly hazardous for ships to navigate the strait. To prevent unauthorised entry of vessels, chain defences were placed at both ends of the lock. In addition, red and green navigation lights were placed on either side of the entrances to indicate whether the lock was closed or opened to traffic. It has been recorded that at least 30 vessels passed through the lock during the

first month of its operation and 13,513 craft passed through the lock in 1923. With the opening of the lock to traffic in January 1923, construction work on the Causeway's superstructure resumed.<sup>16</sup>

The installation of the rolling lift-bridge was completed in January 1923, and the channel between Johor and Singapore was sealed up on 1 June 1923.

### The Causeway Opens

The year 1923 was a milestone of sorts in the history of the Causeway. The Causeway was first opened to goods trains on 17 September 1923,<sup>17</sup> and the wagon-ferry service between Johor Bahru and Woodlands was withdrawn from that date. By this time, the wagon-ferries were running more than 11,000 trips a year with 7,777 trips recorded from 1 January to 16 September 1923, the final year of its operations.<sup>18</sup>

On 27 September 1923, the general manager of the FMSR sought the sanction of Sultan Ibrahim to open the Causeway and the railway for the public carriage of passengers from 1 October 1923. Approval was granted on 30 September 1923, followed by the publication of Gazette Notification No. 489 in the *Johore Government Gazette*.<sup>19</sup> On 1 October 1923, the passenger steam launch ferry service across the strait between Johor Bahru and Woodlands was withdrawn after over a decade of service.

The first passenger train across the Causeway was the night mail, which left Kuala Lumpur on 30 September 1923, arriving at Tank Road station at 7.41 am on 1 October. On board was none other than P.A. Anthony, the former general manager of FMSR.

The *Straits Times* described the first passenger train as “a big train, including twelve bogey carriages and forming an imposing display of rolling stock for the auspicious occasion”. And perhaps with a tinge of nostalgia, the *Straits Times* reporter added: “The ferry across the Straits is now a thing of the past, all trains crossing the Causeway.”<sup>20</sup> The daily schedule included a day mail and a night mail from both destinations. On 1 October 1923, the Johor Causeway Toll was also introduced for both passenger and goods traffic conveyed over the Causeway, replacing the earlier ferry charges.

The Causeway was officially completed on 11 June 1924. The final phase of the works included finishing touches to the east wing-wall of the lock, repainting the insides of the lock gates, cleaning and painting the capstans, fairleads and machinery pit covers, and grouting the joints of the pitching behind the



The lock channel at the Johor Bahru end of the Causeway showing the rolling lift-bridge in open position, level-crossing gates and the operating cabin, June 1924. The lift-bridge was electrically operated by a 35-horsepower motor but could also be manually operated. The level-crossing gates placed on both sides of the lock were mechanically operated and were controlled from the operating cabin. The speed limit in 1924 was 10 mph. Courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia.

View of the Bukit Timah quarry from the top showing the incline and arrangement of roads, January 1922. This quarry opened towards the end of 1921 and began supplying to the Woodlands end of the Causeway from January 1922 onwards. Courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia.

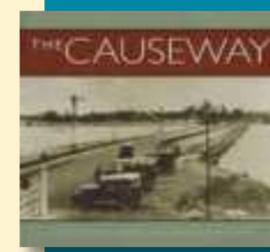


east end of the lock. The roadway was completed except for a small portion at the Woodlands end, which was deferred until the railway track was moved to its final position — the second railway track had not been laid yet at the time of the opening. The crossing gates were handed over to the Railway Department in June.

The successful completion of the Causeway three months ahead of the stipulated date was a creditable reflection on the diligence, expertise and experience of the engineers and contractors. Credit is also due to the staff and labourers, who worked in temperatures that could reach 89 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit (27 to 32 degrees Celsius) and who also bore with rainy spells that accounted for an average loss of two working days a month.

The Causeway's opening in June 1924 was a historic milestone in Singapore-Malaya relations. More

than a physical link, the opening of the Causeway was a fitting symbol of the close ties and shared history that bound both territories together. This abiding connection would remain long after Malaya – later Malaysia – and Singapore had become separate independent nations. ♦

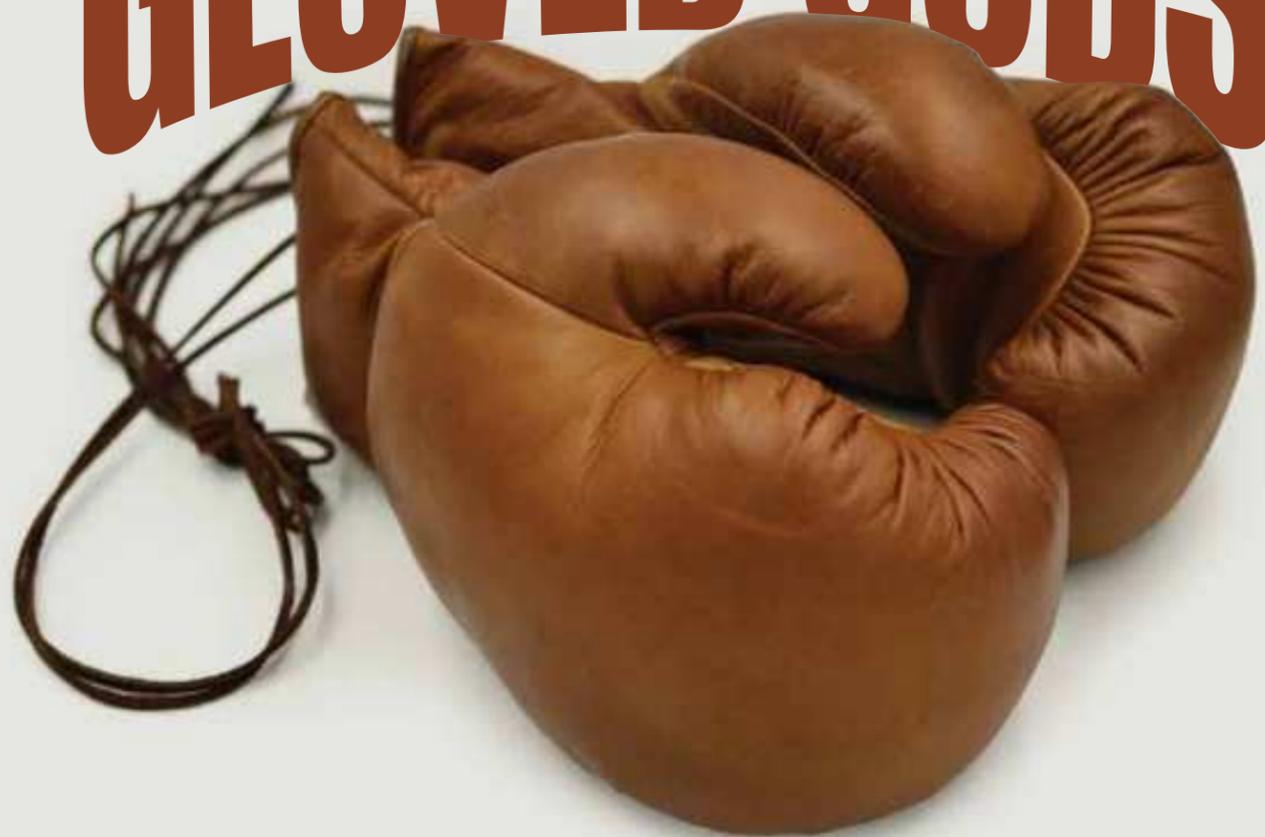


This is an edited extract from *The Causeway* (2011), jointly published by the National Archives of Malaysia and the National Archives of Singapore. The book is available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and for loan at selected public libraries (call nos.: RSING 388.132095957 CAU and SING 388.132095957 CAU).

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# GLOVED GODS



## BATTLING KEY, YEO CHOON SONG AND THE ROARING 20s OF SINGAPORE BOXING



In the aftermath of World War I, the “noble art” became wildly popular in Singapore thanks to two Straits Chinese who took on all-comers, including each other.

By **Abhishek Mehrotra**

On 15 July 1896, an advertisement in the *Straits Times Maritime Journal and General News* invited readers in Singapore to witness what it promised would be a marvellous exhibition of boxing by “The Wonder of the Age – Peter Jackson”.<sup>1</sup>

This would normally not have caught the attention of this 21st-century researcher had it not been for a singular fact: Peter Jackson was a boxing kangaroo. It had arrived in Singapore from Fremantle, Western Australia, on the steamship *Sultan* in June.<sup>2</sup>

It would take another quarter of a century before human beings replaced sparring marsupials in newspaper ads and the public imagination.

### Beginnings of Professional Boxing

When World War I ended in 1919, Singapore had a restless population of migrant Chinese labourers thirsting for some cheap entertainment. Gradually, the island started to gain popularity as a stopover for travelling exhibitions and circuses. According to at least one source, it was “Colonel” Frank Fillis of the famed Fillis circus who started the trend in 1921 with a hastily organised “flyweight championship of Malaya” after ticket sales for the circus started to flag. The fight between two locals, Fred de Souza (also known as the Red Warren) and Kong Ah Yong, raked in over \$4,000.<sup>3</sup>

In another source, it was the brothers Edwin and Stewart Tait who first brought boxing to these shores.<sup>4</sup>

The Taites, Americans from Tacoma in Washington state, were entertainment moguls with business interests on either side of the Pacific. Their main base of operations in Southeast Asia was the Philippines – then a US colony – where they owned five carnivals and assisted in the running of the Manila racecourse.<sup>5</sup>

More than anything though, the brothers loved boxing.

In 1920, the Taites brought a travelling circus to Singapore, and in an apparently spur-of-the-moment decision, constructed a makeshift

boxing ring to host exhibition bouts after the evening’s main entertainments were done.<sup>6</sup> The first few fights were between Filipino circus workers. As interest grew and larger crowds started gathering, the brothers invited daring onlookers to fight them.<sup>7</sup>

This humble beginning was the taproot from which sprang the heady, golden years of boxing in Singapore.

The sport held a peculiar fascination for the locals. Unlike cricket, tennis or swimming – which were mostly confined to exclusive upper-class clubs for the affluent – boxing belonged “to the greater mayhem and disorder of the streets”.<sup>8</sup>

It also lent itself to betting. In a remarkably short span of time, boxing bouts took their place alongside cards and dominoes as a favoured betting avenue. Boxers became cult figures.

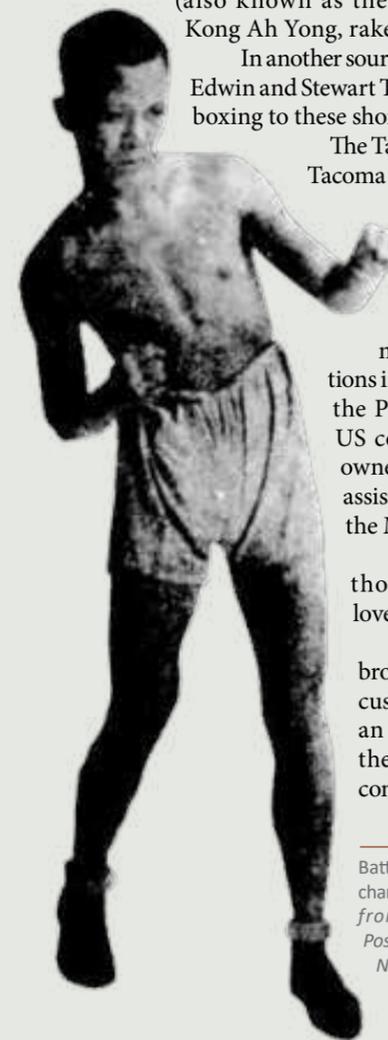
### Pulling No Punches

The first local hero was an unlikely one – a Straits Chinese named Tan Teng Kee. Born in 1898 to a respected family whose head was a *sinseh* (traditional Chinese physician), Tan had attended the venerable St Joseph’s Institution – a natural stepping stone to a “respectable” white-collar profession.<sup>9</sup> To the family’s shock though, Tan decided to don boxing gloves. His *nom de guerre*: Battling Key.

The circumstances leading up to Battling Key’s decision are lost to history. What is known is that by August 1921, only a year after boxing had come to Singapore, he was facing off against a certain C. Oehlers in the final of the colony’s amateur lightweight championship at the packed Palladium Theatre (site of the Orchard Gateway today).<sup>10</sup>

The *Straits Times* was on hand to record the events of that fine August evening. “About halfway through the second [round], Oehlers rushed, wide open and Teng Kee, quick to seize the opportunity, met him with a right upper cut. It was a peach of a punch, landing well on the point and with force behind it, and Oehlers went down and out. There are distinct possibilities in Teng Kee. A lad who learns how to place a punch like that practically by instinct might go far with proper handling.”<sup>11</sup> Battling Key had won the match in the only knockout of the evening.

On the back of this triumph came a trio of fights in 1922 that showed just how far Battling Key had come. The first was against Johnny Carvalho, a fierce hitter from across the strait who was dubbed the “Johore Tiger” for his ferocity. In the first go, in April that year, Singapore’s star man outpointed Carvalho



Battling Key, the lightweight champion. Image reproduced from *Malayan Saturday Post*, 30 July 1927, 32. (From *NewspaperSG*).

**Abhishek Mehrotra** is a researcher and writer whose interests include media and society in colonial Singapore, urban toponymy and post-independence India. He is working on his first book – a biography of T.N. Seshan, one of India’s most prominent bureaucrats. The book, commissioned by HarperCollins, is slated for release in 2025. Abhishek is a former Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow (2021–22).

LATEST ADVERTISEMENTS.

**THE BIG FIGHT.**

Motor-bus owners willing to carry passengers to the big fight

**"BATTLING KEY"**

vs.

**JOHNNY CARVALHO**

On Aug. 3, are requested to communicate, giving route, with

**Col. FITZGERALD,**

for the Stadium Boxing Syndicate,  
c/o The Mansion,  
Oxley Rise.

The match between Battling Key and Johnny Carvalho on 3 August 1922 was over in 105 seconds, with Key emerging victorious. Image reproduced from *Malaya Tribune*, 21 July 1922, 8. (From *NewspaperSG*).

over six rounds. Carvalho evened the score a mere two months later, battling to a win in 10 rounds in front of a mesmerised crowd at the Victoria Theatre. On 3 August, the duo met one final time in front of a capacity crowd almost sick with anticipation.<sup>12</sup>

The duel was over in 105 seconds.

"Teng Kee left his corner with a rush when the gong sounded, and Carvalho was evidently taken by surprise at the swiftness of his opponent's tactics... [Teng Kee] was out to win without giving Carvalho a chance. He scored almost immediately, before the Johore man had much time to realise what was happening, with a right to the face... landed a right swing well to the side of the jaw. Carvalho went down and there was a roar from all parts of the building. Half way through the count he rose upon one knee, and seemed to make an effort to rise. He failed to do and Teng Kee was immediately lifted to the shoulders of his seconds and chaired round the ring to the accompaniment of a perfect storm of applause."<sup>13</sup>

Battling Key was now without doubt the best lightweight in Singapore's young boxing history. Sensing his vast earning potential, his shrewd manager – a man called J.F. Pestana – convinced him to turn professional within months of the historic Palladium triumph.<sup>14</sup>

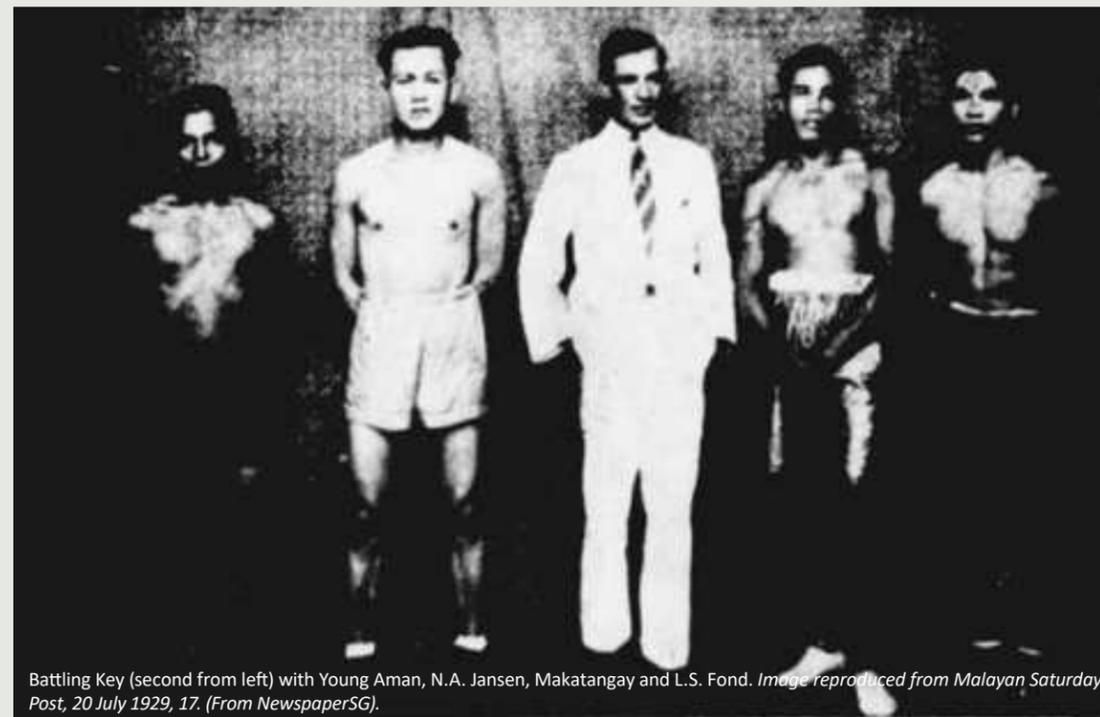
By 1922, Pestana and his charge could demand up to \$2,000 purses (the minimum guaranteed sum for a boxer, irrespective of the outcome) for a single fight.<sup>15</sup> It was just as well, for Singapore's first boxing star had a reputation for spending money as fast as he earned it. Handsome, well dressed and oozing machismo – when his family and friends voiced their disapproval of his career choice, he reportedly said: "I love boxing and I am prepared to die fighting in the ring" – Key was the first boxing, and probably the first sports, megastar in Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

Crowds would often follow Key whenever he emerged on the streets and reports from the time indicate he was one of the few fighters whose popularity transcended gender. Many youths were inspired to take on the sport seriously because of him. In later years, he endeared himself even more to his followers by appearing in charity matches.<sup>17</sup>

In October 1923, two months after it was inaugurated, New World amusement park hosted its biggest event. Battling Key, by now the undisputed lightweight champion of all of Malaya, was up against Young Pelky (real name Lope Tenorio; he would later rank within the top five junior lightweights in the US), a tall, slim Filipino who "carried a punch like a mule's kick" in a 10-round blockbuster.<sup>18</sup>

The atmosphere was electric. Ticket prices for ringside seats around the open-air arena had been hiked from the standard \$5 to \$10 (and even resold for \$20 and more) and yet not a single one was unoccupied. Around them, a crowd of 6,000 shifted restlessly as dusk fell on the mid-October day. Powerful lamps

New World amusement park opened on 1 August 1923. The match between Battling Key and Young Pelky was held there two months later. David Turner Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Battling Key (second from left) with Young Aman, N.A. Jansen, Makatangay and L.S. Fond. Image reproduced from *Malayan Saturday Post*, 20 July 1929, 17. (From *NewspaperSG*).

from all four corners set the ring aglow. The local man strode out first, to a massive roar. Young Pelky, a showman himself, took his time – walking leisurely and chatting with friends in the crowd – before making his way to the ring.<sup>19</sup>

As soon as the bell went, the fight began. "Every-one who saw it will admit that it was a good go. There was no science about it," reported the *Straits Times*. "Each man went for all he was worth, swung wildly and at times missed by feet; still it was the kind of thing which kept the crowd interested."<sup>20</sup>

The first few rounds were evenly matched before Pelky's cannons started finding their mark. A punch to the throat towards the end of the sixth round sent Battling Key staggering to his corner. In the seventh, Pelky got his man thrice; in each instance, the blow slammed his opponent to the ground. Twice, Key got up. On the third he was saved by the bell indicating the round was over.<sup>21</sup>

Lesser men may have thrown in the towel, but the battered Key returned for the eighth round. It took four more thunderous blows from Pelky, including one square on the jaw, before the local hero hit the floor and stayed there. The Filipino had won but the *Straits Times* noted that "the courage with which Key stuck it to the end made him the popular hero."<sup>22</sup> Later reports claimed that the many Chinese women who had come to witness their idol left the arena weeping.<sup>23</sup>

### Promoting Boxing

Soon, a semblance of structure began to take shape around the sport. Up-and-coming fighters would be pitted against each other on weeknight matches, which

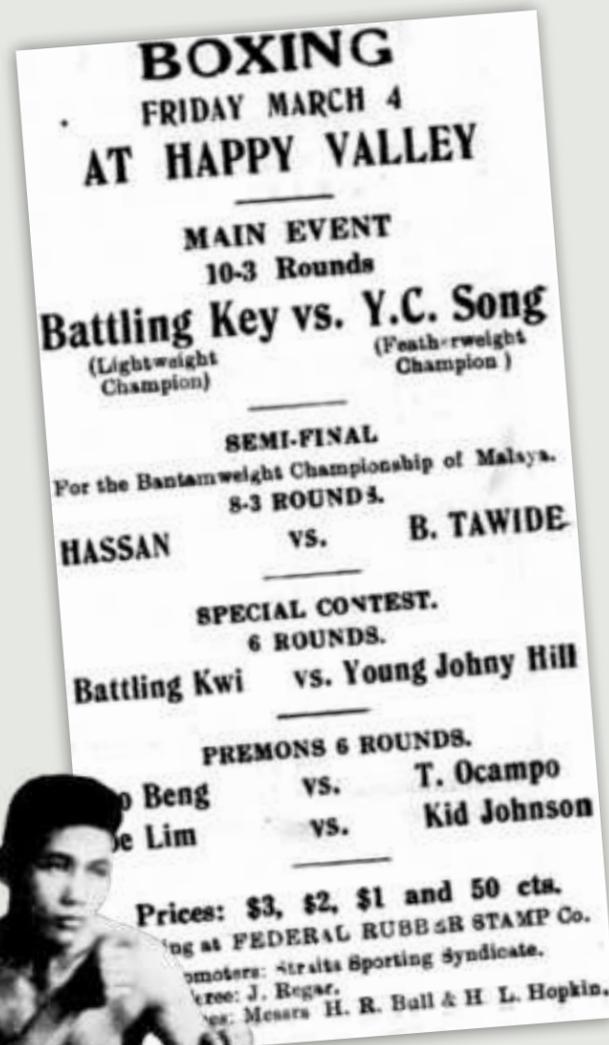
were presumably cheaper than the seats on Friday or Saturday nights. For boxing managers, always on the lookout for new talent, these were fantastic scouting opportunities. The most promising fighters were first upgraded to weekend support acts – engaging in preliminary fights to warm the crowd up. Those who did well would eventually become the main acts themselves, the ones who brought the crowd traipsing through the doors of Happy Valley (an older open-air arena on Anson Road) or New World.

Even though the boxers brought in the money, it was the managers and promoters who wielded the power. Vitality, the promoters – businessmen with a keen eye for profit – had to be willing to put up the money that would pay for the boxers' purse (and travel plus accommodation if one or both were coming in from overseas), newspaper advertisements and printed flyers to drum up hype, and entertainment tax if applicable. Chairs for spectators had to be rented, and referees, poster boys and handbill distributors had to be paid.<sup>24</sup>

These were just the *official* expenses.

To ensure favourable and wide-ranging press coverage, "donations" were sometimes made to the sports writers' club or a similar organisation.

After the various fees and commissions had been decided, and suitable palms greased, the promoter(s) were reliant solely on ticket sales to turn over a profit. Despite these challenges, some individuals – businessmen presumably – were bullish enough to form boxing syndicates to cash in on the sport's burgeoning popularity. For instance, an entity called the Stadium Boxing Syndicate organised and promoted the Key versus Carvalho fight in 1922.<sup>25</sup> Another one, called



(Above) An advertisement for the first match between Battling Key and Yeo Choon Song (Y.C. Song) on 4 March 1927. Image reproduced from *Malaya Tribune*, 3 March 1927, 7. (From NewspaperSG).

(Left) Yeo Choon Song (Y.C. Song), the featherweight champion. Image reproduced from *Malayan Saturday Post*, 30 July 1927, 32. (From NewspaperSG).

the Straits Boxing Syndicate, bought exclusive rights to hold all fights at the Happy Valley arena.<sup>26</sup>

Little is known about the group apart from the fact that it was formed sometime in late 1923 or early 1924, when Battling Key was at the height of his powers. It became the dominant boxing promoter in Singapore – organising numerous bouts pitting the premier local boxer against some of the biggest names in the region – mostly Filipinos. The key, pun intended, was having a home-grown hero who could put up a good show. The result was secondary.

And so they came to fight the Singapore boxers. Cowboy Reyes, Battling Guillermo, Young Pelky, The Johore Tiger, Kid Apache and Speedy Dado – men with big reputations and monikers that leapt out from the promotional posters plastered all over the city. Mostly, they fought in sold out arenas as the redoubtable Key drew spectators in droves.

Even as boxing flourished in the colony, a nagging doubt crept into promoters' minds. After Battling Key, who? As one *Straits Times* correspondent noted in January 1927, "Boxing booms when there is a local champion, and in a place like this, it is important from the promoters' point of view that the champion should be Chinese."<sup>27</sup>

### Battle of the Champions

Luckily for the promoters, even as Battling Key was thrilling audiences, yet another strapping Straits Chinese fighter was biding his time. Legend has it that Yeo Choon Song (known as Y.C. Song in the press), a boxing-besotted teenager like many of his contemporaries, was in the audience for an evening of bouts at Happy Valley when he remarked to his friends: "I think I can beat most of those boxers."<sup>28</sup>

As luck would have it, one of Yeo's friends was acquainted with boxing manager Tan Ngee Yong and took Yeo to meet Tan at River Valley Road the very next morning. Within a year, Tan and his burly Straits Chinese protege had become a crack team. In 1924, when he was all of 18, Yeo went on a tear – winning 20 fights in a row and becoming known for his fearlessness backed with quick, accurate punches with the right-hand, a wallop on the left and a solid defence.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next few years, Yeo became a regular fixture on the boxing circuit, moving from four rounds to eight and beyond, from relatively low-key weekdays to glittering weekends. However, Yeo really shot to fame when he knocked out Filipino legend, the veteran Cowboy Reyes, in January 1927 with a left hook to the body that almost sent Reyes "back to the Philippines".<sup>30</sup>

It was a blow that resounded across the colony, loud enough for the Straits Sporting Syndicate (it is not known if the Straits Boxing Syndicate had changed its name or if this was a separate entity) to sit up and take notice. If they could bring Battling Key and Yeo into the ring, a hefty paycheck was all but guaranteed.

Key had, of course, spent the previous years taking on all-comers in Singapore and overseas. In 1925, he had wrested the Malayan lightweight title back by beating the Kuala Lumpur champion Vincent Pereira, before winning audiences the region over with his indomitable performances in Manila, Hong Kong, Saigon and Bangkok.<sup>31</sup>

The promoters moved quickly. Battling Key would fight Yeo on 4 March 1927 at the Happy Valley arena for the featherweight championship title of Malaya. A better script could not have been written. For the first time in Singapore's boxing history, two

local Chinese were providing the main event. One a pioneering legend; the other hammering on the door to greatness. Tickets were set at \$3, \$2, \$1 and 50 cents, with the *Malaya Tribune* predicting a "crush at the box office".<sup>32</sup>

The night's festivities got off to a promising start when Singapore's Young Hassan beat Filipino Bagani Tawide in one of the preliminary fights to become Malaya's bantamweight champion. Soon, Battling Key and Yeo emerged – both in supremely fit condition – for 10 rounds of three minutes each.<sup>33</sup>

Key went on the attack from the beginning, but Yeo nimbly side-stepped most of the jabs. Things got more frenetic in the second, with both men landing a few exploratory punches without delivering the knockout blow. By the third round, the crowd was in full voice – Yeo's supporters especially making their presence felt by keeping up a continuous din. Inside the ring too, the drama escalated. After a punch by Key found its mark, Yeo complained to the referee about his opponent's gloves. "[H]e probably thought the Key had a horse shoe stuffed in them," wrote a local wit the next day. The official, though, allowed the fight to continue after a brief examination of the mitts, and an enraged Key went after his younger opponent with renewed gusto.<sup>34</sup>

It was a mistake. Yeo was simply too quick, and Key's exertions started to take a toll. By the fifth round Key had slowed down considerably, and the crowd, punch-drunk on the action, now roared for the 21-year-old to finish off the veteran. In the eighth round, Yeo got his chance and pummelled Key with numerous blows to the head until it seemed like all that was left was the coup de grace. Key, though, summoned his famed powers of resilience to mount a final fightback – a flurry of fists to Yeo's face, delivered with such ferocity that one of them cut Yeo's left eyebrow "to the bone". Soon, the challenger was covered in blood.<sup>35</sup> The referee was forced to award the fight to Key, even though Yeo had had the better of the exchanges.

It had been a dramatic evening, but the anti-climactic end meant there was immense desire among the public, promoters and the two boxers for a rematch.

It is a pity that no photos or ephemera exist from the second encounter between Yeo and Key held on 12 August 1927 at the same arena. Both men entered the ring sporting a plaster above the left eye – Yeo protecting his old injury, and Key a recent one sustained while training for this fight. The fight followed a similar pattern to the first. Yeo was too quick for the older man, and seemed to be running away with the encounter, especially once Key's left eye swelled completely shut in the seventh round. In the eighth, the two butted heads with such ferocity that Yeo's old cut tore open – but this time the referee allowed the fight to continue. By the tenth and final round, the result was foregone.<sup>36</sup> Yeo had won hands down.

A third, deciding encounter took place 14 months later, on 5 October 1928 – this time at Singapore's

premier venue, the New World stadium. Newspapers hyped up the animosity between the two, going back to the time Yeo had complained about Key's gloves during the duo's first encounter the previous year.<sup>37</sup>

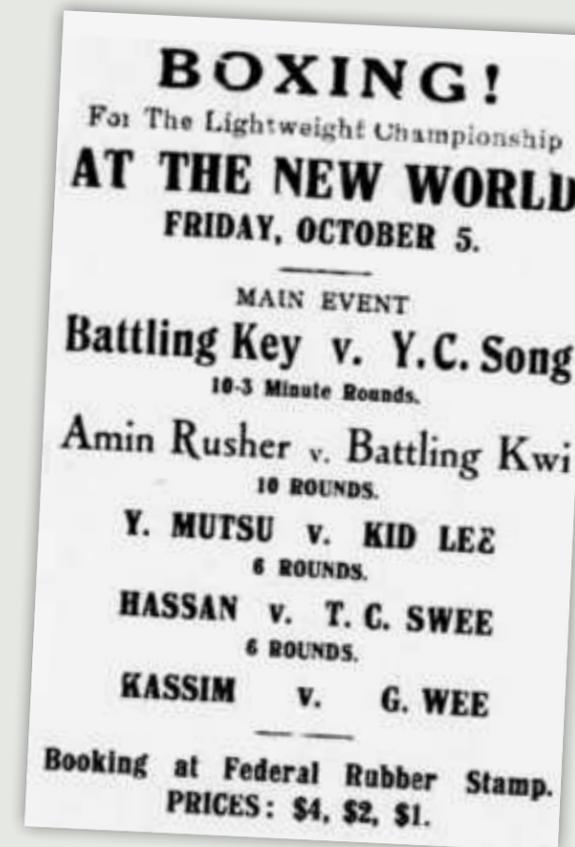
"Followers of boxing can rest assured of an exciting fight, for neither of the pair has any love for the other," wrote the *Malaya Tribune*. "In other words, it will be a grudge fight." Key even baited his younger opponent, saying he hoped Yeo would actually fight and "not turn the ring into a race track".<sup>38</sup>

In truth though, Key was the underdog. He was 30 years old, and years of punishment in the ring had taken their toll. Even though Yeo was nursing an injury to the left hand sustained in a recent bout, he was the clear favourite.

"The veteran was painfully slow," mourned a reporter with the *Straits Times*, "and Song easily blocked his efforts to score, while again Key showed that he has claims to the title of 'world's champion shock-absorber'". "Left-hand, left-right, the punches landed on Key's jaw, and the crowd marvelled that he can take so much and still keep going."<sup>39</sup>

Key lasted the entire 10 rounds, hanging on in the hopes of landing a miraculous punch that would knock Yeo out cold. It never came. At the end, Singapore's most beloved boxer was bruised, battered and beaten into submission by a formidable successor – an outcome as inevitable as it was sad.

An advertisement for the third match between Battling Key and Yeo Choon Song (Y.C. Song) on 5 October 1928. Image reproduced from *Malaya Tribune*, 4 October 1928, 12. (From NewspaperSG).





Battling Key died on 20 March 1935 after a match with Jimmy Nelson of Kuala Lumpur. Image reproduced from "Battling Key Dies After Contest," *Malaya Tribune*, 20 March 1935, 12. (From NewspaperSG).

"Those who remembered him as he once was, however, thought regretfully of the 'Battler' who was remarkably fast and certainly the best lightweight produced locally," was how the *Straits Times* captured the evening's mood. Yeo, having beaten Cowboy Reyes and Key in short order, was now both the featherweight and lightweight champion of Malaya.<sup>40</sup>

### The Golden Age of Boxing

The Key-Yeo fights gave an enormous boost to boxing in Singapore, setting the stage for the 1930s, a decade that many would go on to describe as the "golden age of boxing". In 1930, one of Singapore's earliest sports magazines – *The Sportsman* – was launched with boxing's popularity reflected in the enormous space devoted to it.<sup>41</sup> Schoolboys who could not afford tickets to fights collected and exchanged posters. Some even cut out photos of their favourite boxers from newspaper articles to create entire albums. In 1931, another entertainment venue, Great World, was established with regular, well-attended fight nights.<sup>42</sup>

For the two men who had done so much for the sport though, the end was long drawn. After establishing himself as the best

local boxer, Yeo struggled with injuries – one to his dominant left hand proving particularly nettlesome. In 1931, when he was only 25, Yeo announced his retirement due to "personal reasons", having only fought a handful of bouts since that historic evening in 1928 (by defeating Battling Key), when the world had appeared to be in his grasp.<sup>43</sup>

Two years later, Yeo reappeared in the ring and carried on until 1935, when his final fight against the middling Al Nichlos ended in a draw.<sup>44</sup> As far as written records are concerned, Yeo seemed to have dropped

off the pages of history. A retrospective look at his career in 1947 bemoaned the fact that "had he come under the wing of an experienced trainer-manager", he might have become as famous as the man he had dethroned in 1928.<sup>45</sup> Yeo's disappearance was characteristically understated: even during his fighting days, he had never been the most colourful of characters, letting his fists to do all the talking.

Battling Key, on the other hand, simply refused to give up boxing even after his losses to Yeo had made it clear his best days were behind him. Promoters were wary of backing an ageing fighter and in the 1930s, Key was reduced to traipsing round with a scrapbook under his arm, pleading with his former acquaintances in the boxing fraternity to give him another chance. Eventually, the Singapore Boxing Board of Control – formed sometime in the early 1930s to ensure boxer safety – banned him from fighting in the colony on account of his health.<sup>46</sup>

Still adamant, Key was "determined to try and come back". He found some backers in Seremban where, in late 1934, he twice fought an obscure opponent called Young Felix and won both. The fights were modest affairs and after the latter, Key was robbed of even his paltry \$30 purse on the way back to Singapore. "Once the idol of Malayan boxing and used to handling thousands of dollars!" lamented a contemporary observer.<sup>47</sup>

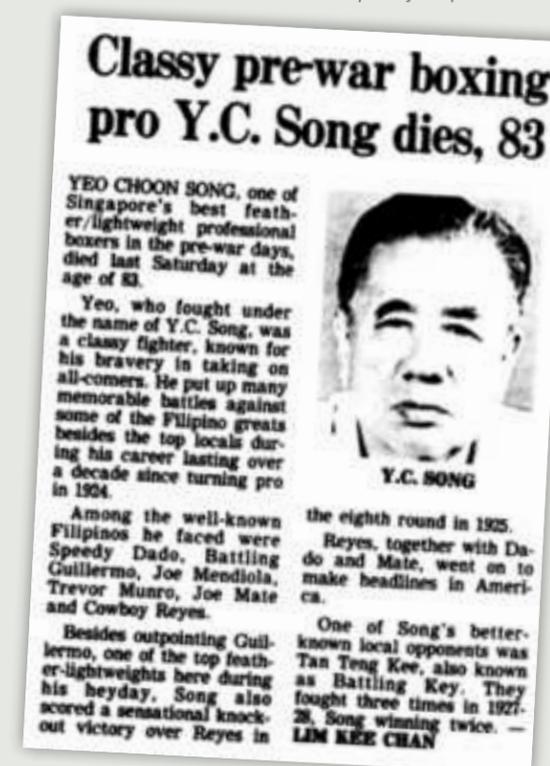
Unfortunately, a match on 19 March 1935 was Key's swan song. He was lined up against Jimmy Nelson from Kuala Lumpur. After a promising start in the earlier rounds, Key went down after a "light glancing blow on the chin" in the fifth round. He got up immediately but was sent down again with a right hook. When the seventh round began, he lost consciousness and was admitted to the local general hospital.<sup>48</sup>

On 20 March 1935, nine months before Yeo fought for the last time, Battling Key, the former Malayan

boxing idol, died without regaining consciousness. He was just 37 years old.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, Yeo outlived his erstwhile opponent and died on 20 February 1988 at the age of 83. In his obituary, the *Straits Times* described him as "a classy fighter, known for his bravery in taking on all-comers".<sup>50</sup>

Yeo Choon Song (Y.C. Song) died on 20 February 1988 at the age of 83. He was described as "a classy fighter, known for his bravery in taking on all-comers". Source: *The Straits Times*, 27 February 1988 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



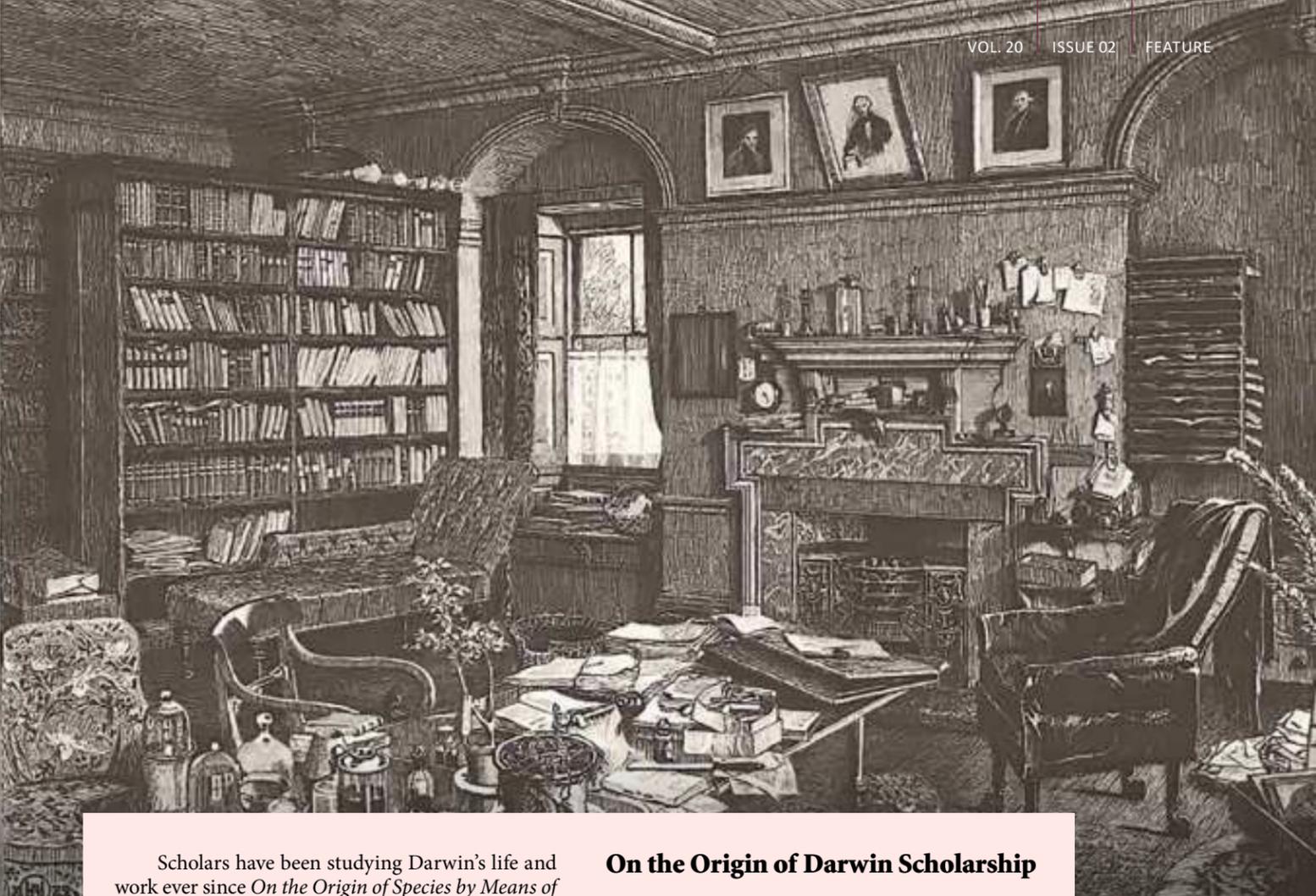
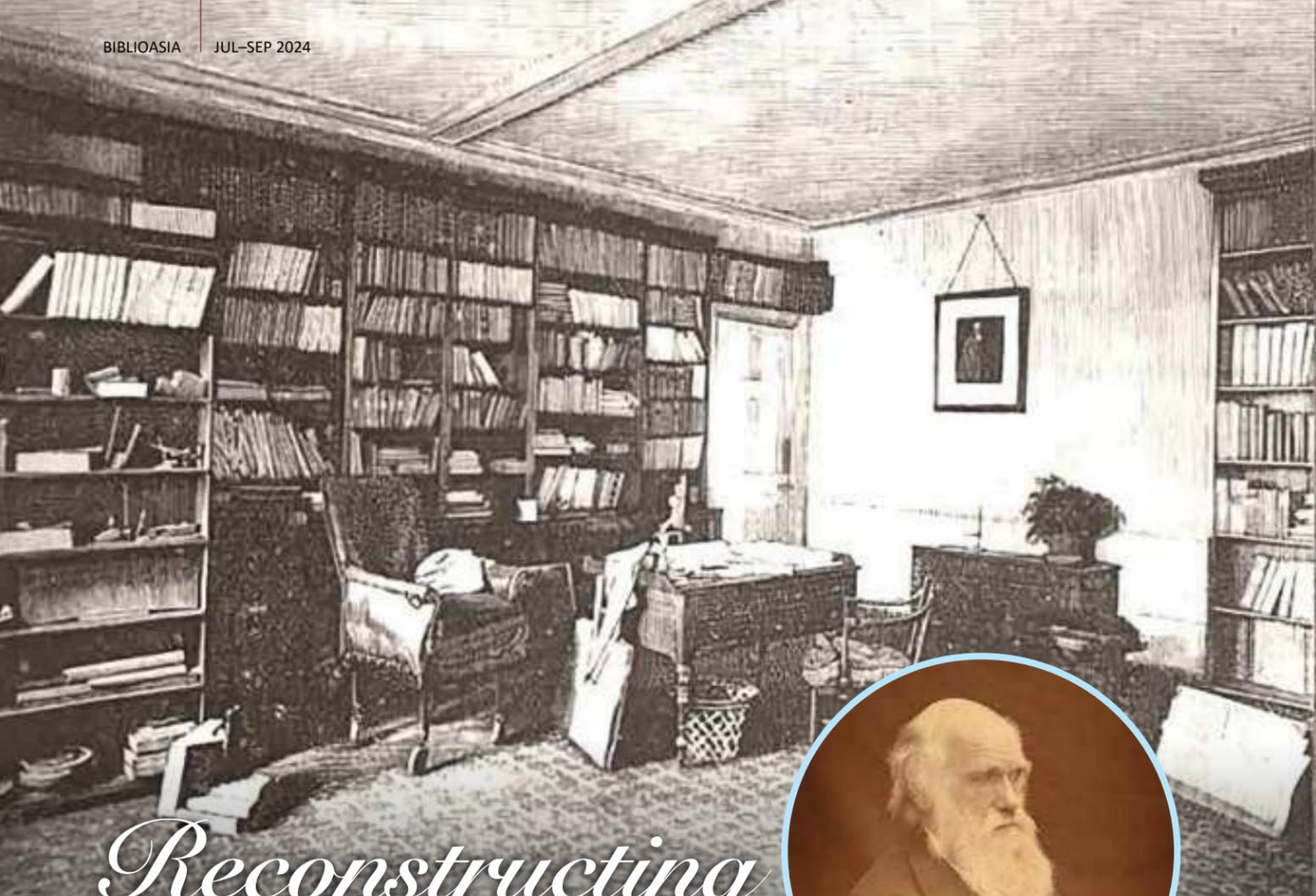
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- "Boxing."
- "Boxing."
- "Boxing." Almost immediately, the Battling Key – Young Pelky fight attained legendary status in Singapore's boxing circles. In later years, varying claims would be made about the size of the audience – ranging from 6,000 to 12,000. See, for example, "First Real Local Champion" and Rippa, "Battling Key – Battler and Philanthropist."

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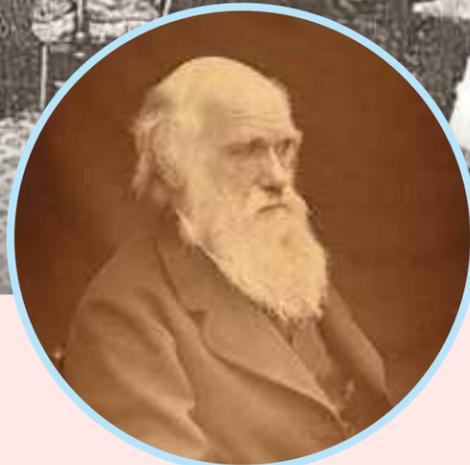
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# Reconstructing CHARLES DARWIN'S LOST LIBRARY

Almost 20 years of painstaking scouring and sleuth work have resulted in what is probably the largest and most comprehensive resource on Charles Darwin.

By John van Wyhe



Photograph of Charles Darwin by Leonard Darwin, 1878. From Darwin Online.

Charles Darwin (1809–82) is arguably the most influential scientist who ever lived. During his lifetime, he transformed the theory of evolution from ridiculed speculation to an established fact accepted by the international scientific community. The implications of this profound shift in how life on Earth is understood was immeasurable. Discussions of, and reactions to, Darwin remained common for over a century, and not only in biology and palaeontology but also in philosophy, art, literature and much more. Tens of thousands of publications have discussed Darwin's works in dozens of countries and languages in a continuous stream that has never ceased.

**Dr John van Wyhe** is a historian of science at the National University of Singapore, and the founder and director of Darwin Online (<https://darwin-online.org.uk/>). He has published 17 books, including *Dispelling the Darkness: Voyage in the Malay Archipelago and the Discovery of Evolution by Wallace and Darwin* (World Scientific Publishing, 2013).

Scholars have been studying Darwin's life and work ever since *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* was published in 1859, and today, scholarship on Darwin has become a large and sophisticated area of research. Indeed, it is a daunting area for young researchers to enter because the scholarly literature is so vast that it takes years to read and master enough of it to contribute something new. However, despite all this attention on Darwin and his writings, there has been one notable omission: in the 140 years or so since Darwin's death, a complete list of all the works that he owned, used and cited did not exist.

This gap has finally been filled. After 18 years of painstaking research – involving scouring numerous obscure lists and consulting unusual sources, as well as extrapolating from vague, fragmentary and handwritten notes – we have finally completed the task of cataloguing the contents of Darwin's enormous library. We now know that Darwin's library contained 7,494 unique titles across 13,000 volumes/items. Looking at the list, it is clear that Darwin had one of the most extensive and important private scientific libraries of the 19th century.

The research that led us to recreate this library was done as part of the project, The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online ([darwin-online.org.uk](https://darwin-online.org.uk/)), or Darwin Online for short. Darwin Online has gone beyond merely cataloguing Darwin's library; it has also reassembled this library virtually, allowing anyone to examine the works in detail. The result is an indispensable tool for scholars, scientists, researchers and students interested in the history of Victorian science.

## On the Origin of Darwin Scholarship

Large collections of Darwin's letters were first published by his son Francis in the years after his father's death in 1882. This was followed by two early drafts of Darwin's theory of evolution in 1909. About the same time, Francis donated much of his father's scientific library to Darwin's (and his) alma mater, the University of Cambridge. A catalogue of these books – but not the journals and pamphlets – was published in 1908. In 1929, Darwin's family home, Down House, was made a public museum and much of his library was transferred back to its original home. (Down House is located in the London Borough of Bromley; its garden and grounds remain open to the public.)

The modern age of Darwin scholarship is said to have begun with work on the enormous body of Darwin's manuscripts and private papers acquired by Cambridge University Library in the 1940s. These were broadly catalogued in 1960, and in the mid-1970s, an ambitious project was conceived by Frederick Burkhardt, former president of the American Council of Learned Societies, to publish all the letters from and to Darwin. The 30-volume endeavour, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, was finally completed in 2023 and published by Cambridge University Press.

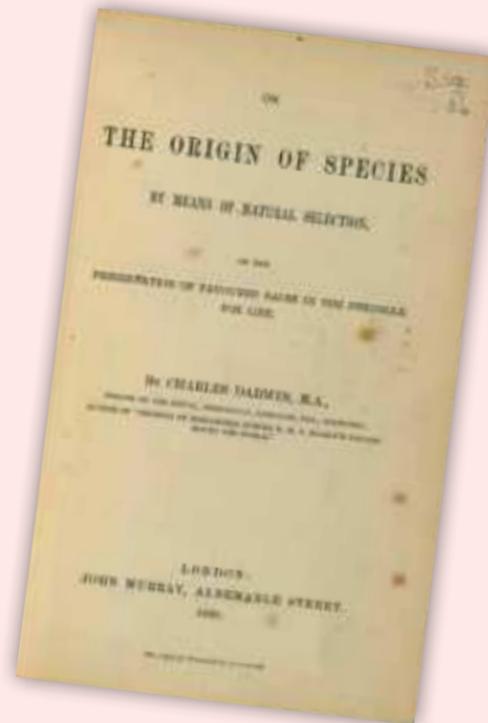
Between the 1960s and 1980s, editions of Darwin's transmutation (evolution) notebooks were published, showing in unprecedented detail the complex gestation of his theories and many of the sources Darwin had drawn from.

**(Facing page)** The only view of the back wall of Darwin's new study from an 1892 photograph by C.E. Corke. (Above) A week after Darwin's death on 19 April 1882, the family commissioned this copperplate etching (cropped) by Axel H. Haig. By stitching these together, we can see most of the bookshelves in Darwin's study. There were many other bookcases throughout the house. From Darwin Online.



(Left) Emma Darwin, aged 31 in 1839, the wife of Darwin. Watercolour by George Richmond. Her diaries were made available on Darwin Online in 2007. Courtesy of the Darwin Heirlooms Trust.

(Right) The title page of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, published in 1859 by John Murray. The top right corner has the call number that is recorded in the original handwritten library catalogue. From Darwin Online.



In 1990, a volume of the marginalia or annotations in Darwin's books was published based on the surviving part of Darwin's library of books housed in Cambridge University Library and Down House. These 1,476 books have since been referred to as "Darwin's Library". Having been thus cited and referred to so many times, it has led to the impression that this was the entirety of what Darwin's library originally contained. Specialist scholars were nevertheless aware that Darwin also had hundreds of volumes of scientific journals and thousands of pamphlets, offprints and book reviews, and these were not on this list of "Darwin's Library".

## Darwin Online

In 2002, while a research fellow at the National University of Singapore (NUS), far away from my home in Cambridge, I founded a project that is now called Darwin Online. This was a scholarly project whose website would include all of Darwin's publications, manuscripts, papers, bibliography, and catalogue of manuscripts and associated materials and introductions. From 2005, major funding was provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK to expand the project at the University of Cambridge.

The new site was launched in October 2006 and the news went viral. It was mentioned in hundreds

of websites and newspapers around the world, and covered by renowned media outlets such as BBC Radio 4's Today Programme, BBC Breakfast (TV), the regional BBC stations, CNN and *The Guardian*, etc. Millions of visits to the site brought the servers at Cambridge crashing down multiple times in the first 24 hours. Overnight, Darwin Online had become one of the best-known history of science projects in the world.

That was only the beginning though. Darwin's manuscripts and private papers were launched in 2008 when 100,000 images from the Darwin Archive in Cambridge became available, and another viral media event followed. Several other viral launches followed over the next few years such as when the diaries of Darwin's wife, Emma, went online in 2007 for the first time and his newly discovered student bills in 2009.

In 2010, NUS invited me to Singapore to continue my research and zoological historian Dr Kees Rookmaaker, who worked with me on Darwin Online, came with me. Together, we created Wallace Online ([wallace-online.org](http://wallace-online.org)), a complete edition of the writings of the great naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, who explored Southeast Asia between 1854 and 1862 and independently came up with a theory of evolution by natural selection similar to Darwin's.

In 2014, while in Singapore, we reconstructed and put online the entire 400-volume library that had been aboard Darwin's ship, HMS *Beagle*. Most of that library's contents had been reconstructed by the editors of *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*. I was able to add more titles from my own research, especially from editing *Charles Darwin's Notebooks from the Voyage of the Beagle*, a book published by Cambridge University Press in 2009.

In 2021, reviews of all his books were launched on Darwin Online. Numbering over 1,700 in several languages, it is the largest collection of the reviews of the work of any historical scientist.

Darwin Online also contains the largest collection of, recollections of, and obituaries of any scientist. With all this material, together with his publications (including hundreds of newly discovered shorter items), notebooks and papers, Darwin Online has become what we believe to be the most comprehensive scholarly website on any historical person in the world, with hundreds of editorial introductions and over 15,000 footnotes.

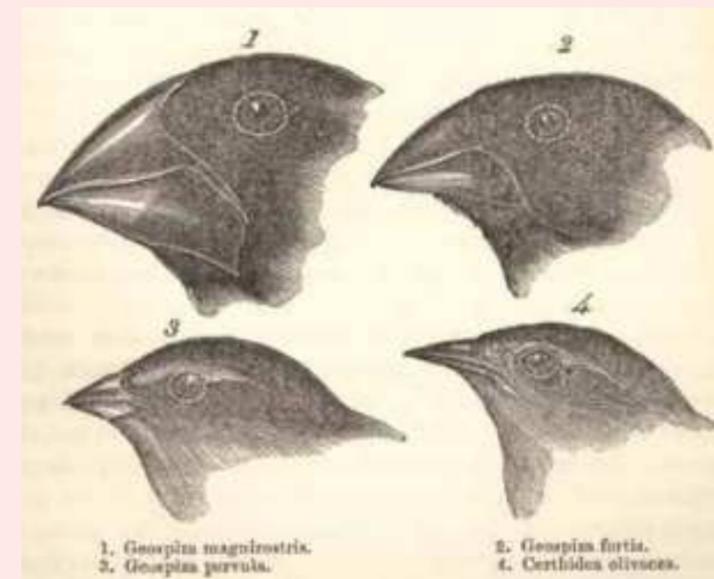
Since 2006, while Kees and I were doing all this, we had also been working on collecting and collating sources that reveal the contents of Darwin's personal library. Every year, I receive letters and emails asking whether Darwin had this or that book or article in his library. I was able to answer many of these by looking them up in our unpublished lists and notes so I knew there would be value in making this list available online.

Reconstructing Darwin's personal library, however, was a daunting project to attempt, let alone to complete. There were a huge number of pieces of this puzzle to assemble first; indeed, many more than anyone could have at first imagined or planned for.

In the past, many of Darwin's books were scattered throughout the stacks at Cambridge University Library and from time to time, their identity and locations were added to various internal lists. Due to the immense kindness and assistance from the former Keeper of Scientific Manuscripts, Adam Perkins, I was given copies of these lists, as well as a list of books at Down House. We were also provided with copies of the library's unpublished and paper-only catalogue of Darwin's "unbound materials" by cataloguer Nick Gill. This was a catalogue of 1,700 journals that had never been given a hardback binding.

Cambridge University Library had already given Darwin Online permission to include a copy of a newer item-by-item catalogue of the entire Darwin Archive (over 40,000 items) prepared by Gill. The conversion of that very catalogue to an online database was a major challenge and it took years before the library put it online.

To these, we added the records of Darwin's items found in over 80 other collections around the world, creating the world's first union catalogue of Darwin's papers. This enabled me to generate a list of the printed/published items owned by Darwin – there were more than 3,000. These ranged from newspaper clippings to scientific journals that were filed in his subject-specific research portfolios on particular scientific topics that interested him, such as the geographical distribution of species, the expression of emotions or instincts. It seemed to be an arbitrary decision to include a pamphlet that belonged to Darwin on one shelf as part of his library but to designate another in his papers as not part of the library. I decided from the beginning that these printed items should be counted as part of Darwin's library too.



## Family Documents

Vitaly important were the records that Darwin kept of his library as it was in his lifetime. In 1875, he had a handwritten 426-page catalogue, *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Darwin, Esq. M.A., F.R.S.*, of his library prepared by Thomas William Newton, Assistant Librarian of the Museum of Geology. (This was only published in 2011, in Darwin Online.) Going through this independently, Kees and I identified over 400 works that had once been in Darwin's library but were not in the surviving collections.

In the 1870s, Darwin and his son Francis also prepared catalogues of the thousands of pamphlets, offprints and book reviews in the library. Unlike the leather-bound *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Darwin*, these catalogues were made mostly from thousands of strips of paper, recording an item in one or two lines, in an extremely abbreviated form. These were transcribed and original entries expanded somewhat by Darwin scholar, P.J. Vorzimmer, in 1963. A photocopy of his work was placed in the Manuscripts Reading room at Cambridge University Library, where it still resides.

I had these catalogues digitised, transcribed and added to Darwin Online. The superb cataloguer Nick Gill produced a far more detailed improvement on Vorzimmer's catalogue and he generously shared a list of these in 2007. Kees identified many further items and I finished the work in Singapore.

Another valuable source of information came from an inventory of Down House, which was done after Darwin's death to calculate legacy duty or inheritance tax. With Darwin's death, his scientific library, mostly in his study, became the property of his son Francis. The books in the drawing room were, however, counted and the titles and number of volumes recorded. This obscure list is known to very few and had also never been utilised in reconstructing Darwin's library. In it, we find 2,065 bound books scattered around the house and an unknown number of unbound volumes, sundries and pamphlets. And,

After his voyage on HMS *Beagle*, Darwin observed that the Galápagos finches with different beak shapes showed that one ancestral species had evolved over time into 13 new species. From Darwin Online.

T.W. Wood's "The Courtship of Birds" in *The Student and Intellectual Observer of Science, Literature and Art* (vol. V, 1870), a book found in Darwin's library. From Darwin Online



in a precious piece of good fortune, the books in the drawing room were listed. Little more than an author name and a few words of the title and the number of volumes were recorded but it was enough to add 132 titles and 289 volumes of mostly unscientific literature to the Darwin library catalogue.

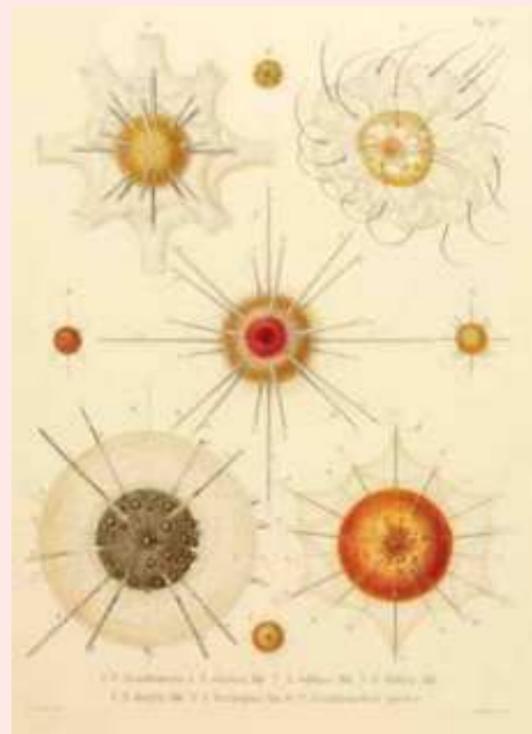
Darwin's wife Emma, who sometimes noted down books to buy in her diary, was another source. From her, 32 titles were added to the list. Many more book titles in her diary do not have prices next to them. No doubt some of these too were purchased, but it is impossible to distinguish them from books she intended to borrow from a library. Other works have been made known to us by owners of private collections.

Besides publishing the letters written to and from Darwin, the editors of *The Correspondence of Charles*

**(Right)** Skeleton of the extinct gigantic sloth, *Mylodon*. It was named by the English comparative anatomist Richard Owen based on a nearly complete lower jaw with teeth discovered by Darwin in 1832 at Bahía Blanca, Argentina, during the survey expedition of HMS *Beagle*. From Darwin Online.



**(Below)** Ernst Haeckel's striking 1862 drawings of Radiolaria, a type of plankton. These were found in Darwin's library. From Darwin Online.



Darwin also listed hundreds of publications in their footnotes that had been sent to or were purchased by Darwin but were no longer extant in the Darwin Library. There were also hundreds of references to items in Darwin's pamphlet collection, many of which were not found in all the other sources we had already put together.

Finally, with all of this valuable information at my disposal, I sought for evidence of further works owned by Darwin by scouring catalogues of rare-books sales and auctions from the 1890s to the present. This brought a few more unknown titles that Darwin had once owned. In addition, there were other titles to be found mentioned in Darwin's manuscripts.

After collating and recollating all of these, a second phase of detective work began – to identify all the vague references to authors and titles. Some were unambiguous and easy to fill in, others were extremely obscure or the handwritten reference so illegible that it took many tricks and roundabout methods to identify them. For example, a reference in Darwin's pamphlet collection reads "374 Turner W. Brain of Chimpanzee". This turns out to refer to "Turner, William. 1866. 'Notes more especially on the bridging convolutions in the brain of the chimpanzee.' *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* 5: 578-587".

In the catalogue of Darwin's papers were also thousands of items he had cut out of original publications, where perhaps only the name of the journal at the top of the page remained and very often not even that. However, today it is possible to search some of the best online text collections for the sentences in Darwin's clippings to ascertain which publication they came from. For example, one item was catalogued as "Anon. 1861. *The Field*: 32 (part issue)". I was able to expand this to "Harvey, R. 1861. Nest of the missel-thrush. *The Field* (13 July): 32".

### Surprising Finds

As there are literally thousands of works revealed in the new catalogue in Darwin Online, only a handful can be mentioned here. Previously, no works by the famous philosophers John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte were known in Darwin's library, now there are several. We now also know that Darwin owned a work by the great polymath Charles Babbage. Also found in the library is the memoir of William Chambers, the elder brother of Robert Chambers who is the secret author of the popular (pre-Darwin) evolution sensation, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844).

Other surprising discoveries include Paul Du Chaillu's *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, an article titled "The Hateful or Colorado Grasshopper", and other articles with alarming titles such as "The Anatomy of a Four-Legged Chicken" and "Epileptic Guinea-Pigs".

Many of the works that had not been preserved with the part of the scientific library after Darwin's

death were more ephemeral matter such as catalogues, items of personal interest, on health, social issues, and the fringe ideas of enthusiasts who sent their publications to Darwin. These items are in some ways now more interesting to historians than more formal scientific publications. For example, there was the sumptuous 1872 coffee table book *Sun Pictures: A Series of Twenty Heliochrome Illustrations of Ancient and Modern Art* (author unknown) which tells us that Darwin enjoyed art at home. In addition, there was also a mundane 1832 road atlas of England and Wales.

Darwin's devotion to the "water cure" for his ill health is well known, but we did not have a record, until now, that Dr James Manby Gully's book, *The Water Cure in Chronic Disease: An Exposition of the Causes, Progress, and Terminations of Various Chronic Diseases of the Digestive Organs, Lungs, Nerves, Limbs, and Skin, and of Their Treatment by Water and Other Hygienic Means* (1846), was on Darwin's shelves. Unsurprisingly, for a man who took such assiduous care of his finances, Darwin had a book on this too – Robert A. Ward's 1852 work, *A Treatise on Investments*.

We have found that many of the works that were not handed over to Cambridge in 1908 were among the oldest in the collection. This might have been why they were retained by the family and some later sold. These included Edmund Gibson's *Chronicon Saxonum* (1692); Johann Bauhin's *Historia Plantarum Universalis* (1651); Joseph Butler's *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736); Maria Elizabeth Jackson's *Botanical Dialogues, Between Hortensia and Her Four Children* (1797); and Thomas Burnet's *The Theory of the Earth* (1684).

### Digitising the Library

Darwin's library was so vast that the reconstructed list is 300 pages long. But it is far more than a catalogue. The library has also been digitised: approximately 10,000 links to electronic copies of the works are provided.

This final phase of the project included digitising further works to add to Darwin Online and linking to the enormous volume we had already digitised over the years. Then, all of the references needed to be checked – three times – and links inserted to freely available online versions of the exact same edition that Darwin had. This was done about 10,000 times. Because Darwin's library is now reunited with his complete publications, manuscripts and papers, it is possible to explore his work in unrestricted new ways.

### The Voyage of Darwin Online

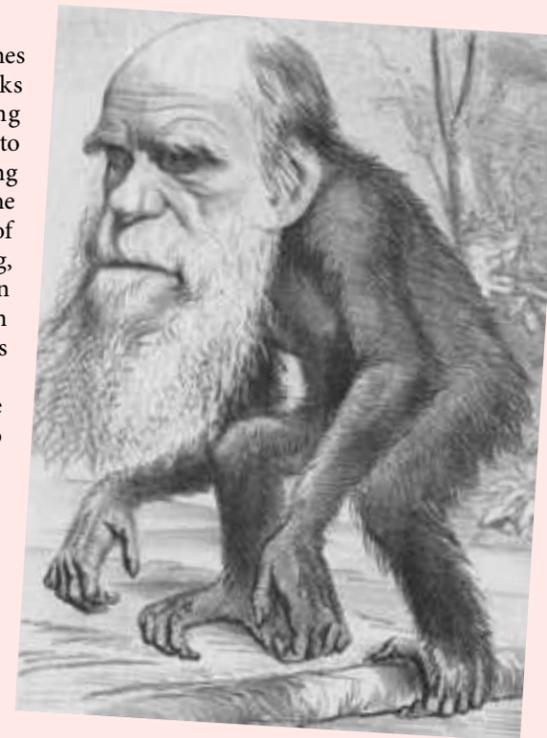
Once all the lists had been done, all the catalogues of rare books that can be found had been searched and the *Correspondence* scoured for all the references contained there, it was time to publish the list of Darwin's complete library for the first time. No doubt there were items we have not found, and hopefully any we have missed will be sent for inclusion. But with such

large projects, there comes a time when more weeks or months of searching produce too few results to warrant further delaying the release of the list to the public where it can be of use. At the time of writing, the library list on Darwin Online has already been visited over 15,000 times since 11 February 2024.

It is an immense relief and satisfaction to publish something that has been worked on for so long and which builds on the work of so many scholars. Along the way, so many discoveries sparked new opportunities for footnotes or cross references in Darwin Online, and many of the revelations would form the basis for research articles and news stories of their own. That is for the future.

As for Darwin Online, our next major release will be caricatures of Darwin and his theories. In my book, *Darwin: A Companion* (2021), I published the most comprehensive catalogue of portraits of any scientist – over 1,000 unique Darwin portraits, including 210 oil paintings, watercolours and drawings, more than 600 printed portraits and caricatures, as well as over 240 three-dimensional works such as statues, busts and medallions and all known photographs, including a dozen previously unknown. And, unprecedentedly, it includes details of all known variants of these photographs produced to the early 20th century – more than 340. This is how Darwin's appearance became so well known to the public during the 19th century and after. In February 2023 a revised version of the catalogue of photographs was published in Darwin Online, illustrated with 450 images.

The caricatures will be a similar release, with new discoveries and hundreds of images of caricatures and satirical images of Darwin's theories from 1860 to 1939. Historians have come to recognise how important images of this kind are for the public understanding of science – or better put – public ideas about science since almost all of the images about Darwin's theories are based on stereotypes, misconceptions (such as "Darwin said we come from monkeys") and much older comic themes that just carried on being used. One of the main parts of this project is the contextual research necessary to explain what the images meant at the time to a modern viewer. That is the tricky part because, as trained historians know, without understanding the context, one cannot understand anything from history. ♦



A caricature of Darwin as an orangutan, published in *The Hornet* on 22 March 1871. From Darwin Online.

# A COOL BUSINESS THE HISTORY OF ICE- MAKING IN SINGAPORE

Ice has been an indispensable commodity in tropical Singapore since the late 19th century.

By Goh Lee Kim



Whampoa's Ice House in Boat Quay, 1958. National Library, Singapore.

**Goh Lee Kim** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She is part of the team that curates and promotes access to the library's digital collections.

There's nothing like downing an ice-cold drink on a scorching hot day. And in Singapore, hot days are aplenty. But the option to grab a cold drink wasn't always readily available. Before mechanical ice-making was invented, ice had to be imported into Singapore. Blocks of ice were cut out from frozen lakes and rivers and shipped in, a journey that would take many months. Of course, by the time the cargo arrived, up to half of the ice would have melted despite the thick sawdust insulation.

The lack of ice and refrigeration meant that food items like meat and fish were highly perishable. "At present meat requires to be cooked on the same day on which it is killed and the consequence is that it is but too frequently most horribly tough and difficult of mastication," reported the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* in 1845.<sup>1</sup> European residents missed their cheese, butter and fruits such as apples and grapes. For long-term meat storage, meats were preserved or cured using methods like adding saltpetre (potassium or sodium nitrate).

## Whampoa's Ice House

In 1854, prominent merchant Hoo Ah Kay (better known as Whampoa) and his partner Gilbert Angus began to import natural ice from America for his Ice House in Boat Quay. This provided residents in Singapore with their first supply of ice. "A great boon has been conferred upon the community of Singapore by the establishment of an ice house which has now been in operation for several months," the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported. "We trust that the spirited projectors of this public benefit will receive such support and encouragement as to induce them to render their undertaking a permanent one."<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, the venture did not last more than three years and by 30 November 1857, Whampoa had left the partnership due to heavy financial losses.<sup>3</sup>

American company Tudor Ice took over Ice House in 1861 but did no better, also incurring losses and leaving frustrated residents stranded with supply disruptions stretching months. "It was repeatedly stated by Mr [Frederic] Tudor's managers that the consumption was not nearly sufficient to meet the cost of the ice and other expenses, and that a loss had been incurred by that gentleman of nearly \$20,000, and further that unless a much greater quantity was sold the supply must be stopped," the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* reported in December that year.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, for Singapore residents, 1861 was also the year that Singapore Ice Works opened its doors on River Valley Road. In August, the company became the first to make and sell ice produced locally.

Straits Ice Company, 1900s. It began operations in February 1881. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



It was sold for three cents per pound, two cents lower than imported ice. The company's proprietor, Riley, Hargreaves & Co., had sunk in a fortune to procure the latest ice-making machinery for the venture, which quickly gained public support due to its more stable supply compared to Tudor.<sup>5</sup>

"The public must now decide whether it will support an establishment which will ensure a permanent supply of ice [Singapore Ice Works], or give the preference to a person who offers no guarantee that he will keep up a more regular import [Tudor] than has hitherto been the case," wrote the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* in December 1861. By 1865, Tudor had closed after the government enforced the sale of Ice House to Singapore Ice Works over the former's supply disruptions.<sup>6</sup> (The building once occupied by Ice House continued to stand in Boat Quay until it was demolished in 1981 for the widening of River Valley Road; a replica in Clarke Quay is still around today.<sup>7</sup>)

## A Necessary Commodity

Other companies began to enter the market, increasing the overall supply of ice to the island. Singapore Ice Works thrived as the main ice factory until February 1881 when Straits Ice Company, owned by Howarth, Erskine & Co., began operations.<sup>8</sup>

The resulting price war ended with the sale of Singapore Ice Works in June 1882 to Howarth, Erskine & Co., which amalgamated both companies and appointed Katz Brothers as its agent, selling a pound of ice at one-and-a-half cents.<sup>9</sup> The Singapore Distilled Water Ice Company (later renamed New Singapore Ice Works) subsequently opened in March 1890.<sup>10</sup> The factory used to be at Sungei Road until it relocated in 1984. Thanks to the factory, the area became known as *Gek Sng Kio* (结霜桥, meaning "Frosted Bridge" in Hokkien).<sup>11</sup>

By the 1890s, ice was seen as a necessity. An article in the *Straits Budget* in January 1897 waxed lyrical about ice. "Where should we be without it! We might, at a pinch, do without many things. Whiskey, for instance, might go, though heaven forfend; we could even abolish the harmless necessary soda; but ice we cannot do without.

New Singapore Ice Works on Sungei Road, 1982. The site of this factory at Sungei Road from 1890 until its relocation in 1984 gave the area its colloquial name of *Gek Sng Kio* (结霜桥, meaning “Frosted Bridge”). Lee Kip Lin Collection, National Library, Singapore.



Ice is like the dew from heaven; it blesses all alike. It cools parched palates and heated brows; it is a boon either in the sick chamber or the banquetting hall.<sup>12</sup>

A lack of cold storage facilities still prevented residents from obtaining meat, dairy and produce from further afield though. Similarly, tropical fruits from the region could not be exported to Europe. In December 1898, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* proposed having “a cold storage establishment in Singapore as a depot not only for fruit export but meat import and distribution”. “Consider how even tinned butter would gain by issue in a firm state instead of the nauseous oily condition that it presents on opening a tin [without cold storage],” the paper added.<sup>13</sup>

The availability of clean, imported frozen food became a reality in 1903 with the establishment of the Cold Storage Company in Singapore, which brought into the market frozen meat, fruit and dairy products from places as far away as Australia. Since ice was an essential component in its business, the company soon expanded into ice manufacturing in 1916 with its own plant. Its strategic location at Borneo Wharf in New Harbour (Keppel Harbour today) meant that ice could

be quickly loaded onto ships, giving it an edge over its competitors.<sup>14</sup> By 1919, Cold Storage had emerged as the main manufacturer of ice in Singapore.<sup>15</sup>

### An Appetite for Manufactured Ice

The early 20th century saw the trade of natural ice slowing globally as ice-making technology improved. In Singapore, ice-making was given a boost thanks to the steady source of water from the municipal supply and the introduction of electricity. “The major percentage of commercial ice today is manufactured. Natural ice for commercial purposes is practically a thing of the past,” reported the *Singapore Free Press* in January 1926. “It has been adjudged inferior because of its dirtiness, its poor crystalline structure, which causes it to melt rapidly, and the difficulty of handling it because of its irregular shape.” The paper added that “human ingenuity has perfected machinery with which clear, wholesome ice can be manufactured without complications, and at such a low cost that the dealer in natural ice finds it unprofitable to compete”.<sup>16</sup>

Usage of ice for domestic and commercial purposes also grew in tandem. Ice was sold and delivered to residences and businesses here mainly through subscriptions to the ice works, while non-subscribers had to purchase tickets for the ice.<sup>17</sup>

Domestically, ice was used to keep food fresh or chilled before refrigerators arrived in Singapore in the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> Affluent families would store perishable foods and dairy products in insulated ice chests, which were kept cold with regular replenishments of ice.<sup>19</sup> “The box would be made of wood,” recounted Aloysius Leo De Conceicao, a former bank officer and funeral minister. “But inside the box it was lined with a zinc or aluminium piece so that you could take out the ice and wash it and put back the ice... And then you put whatever you wanted, you wanted to chill your drinks or you wanted to keep a little things frozen or your left-over foods, you could keep it there.”<sup>20</sup>



(Right) Advertisement for an ice chest. Before refrigerators were common, households kept food in ice chests to make them last longer. These ice chests were typically made of wood and included a top shelf where ice was stored to chill the food below. Image reproduced from the *Straits Times*, 19 September 1906, 3. (From NewspaperSG).

(Farright) An ice bucket in a Peranakan home, early 20th century. Before refrigerators, households used buckets like this to store ice. Courtesy of Peranakan Museum.



An Indian ice seller, 1900s. Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

As factories traditionally sold ice in large blocks, consumers who required smaller amounts turned to ice sellers, who would purchase ice blocks from the factories and resell them in smaller pieces. The work was arduous as ice sellers had to manually haul heavy blocks of ice each day using sharp hooks and cut them into smaller pieces before delivering the ice to buyers using trucks, carts and even bicycles.

There were many of such small-time ice sellers in the 1950s and 1960s, but the numbers had dwindled by the 1980s. “There used to be three of us selling ice all within sight of one another. But that was in the fifties and sixties when Bukit Timah Road at the seventh mile was packed with drink carts,” ice seller Lim Lian Heng, 71, told the *New Nation* in 1980. “It’s [now] almost impossible for anyone to want to do such work. How many young men want to lug 70 katis of freezing ice with their bare arms 30 to 40 times a day?”<sup>21</sup>

Ice manufacturing was a very competitive business though. Even before Cold Storage opened its plant in 1916, there were already five ice factories in Singapore: Straits Ice Company (arguably the largest factory then), New Singapore Ice Works, Kallang Ice Works, Singapore Ice Factory and Chan Ngo Bee Ice Factory.<sup>22</sup> By the 1920s, the industry had consolidated into three main players: New Singapore Ice Works, Cold Storage and Atlas Ice Company of Malacca, which opened in 1925.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1930s, refrigerators began replacing ice chests in homes, and domestic usage of ice declined.<sup>24</sup> But ice-making remained a crucial industry commercially, especially to the flourishing fishing trade which required high-grade ice to keep catches fresh. By 1932, about 150 tons of ice were still produced daily in Singapore, mainly by Cold Storage and New Singapore Ice Works.<sup>25</sup>

### Impact on the Price of Fish

During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45), many ice factories were destroyed in bombing raids, and fell into disuse and disrepair. When the war ended, the ice companies attempted to restart operations, including Cold Storage. “Much of our plant and equipment suffered severely from neglect during the Japanese regime and we have had to meet, and are still facing very heavy

replacement and renewal expenditure,” the company reported in a circular to shareholders in August 1948. “Prewar activities in all directions have, however, been fully resuscitated and, in many directions, considerably extended.”<sup>26</sup>

As ice production was stymied by old and damaged machinery, and replacements from overseas were delayed, the price of ice spiked. A black market by “middlemen manipulating deals between ice manufacturers and the ultimate consumers” further drove up prices, from \$22.40 per ton in 1946 to more than \$100 per ton in 1947. This threatened the survival of many fishing companies which could not afford to purchase the ice.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, by 1948, the situation improved as new machines arrived and the black market was stamped out. Amid intense competition among ice manufacturers, prices dropped to \$20 per ton in 1949, benefitting both businesses and households.<sup>28</sup>

Ice was such an integral component of the fishing industry that when local ice factories attempted to raise prices to \$22.40 per ton in July 1952, fish dealers and merchants protested against the “unjustified” and “unwarranted” price increase, which they claimed would “not only add to the cost of living, but also increase the price of fish”.<sup>29</sup>

In a joint letter issued by the Singapore Fish Merchants’ Association and Singapore Wholesale Merchants’ Association, they wrote that “we have now decided that it will no longer be possible to bring into Singapore second and third grade fish, for fear of incurring financial losses”. The ice manufacturers backed down, at least, at that point.<sup>30</sup> Over time though, the price of ice continued to climb – reaching \$34.20 per ton in June 1979 – impacting the cost of fish for residents.<sup>31</sup>

### A Cool Business

Meanwhile, more ice factories came and went in the second half of the 20th century. After the acquisition of New Singapore Ice Works by Cold Storage in 1958, of the major factories that had operated in Singapore in the 19th century, only Cold Storage and Atlas Ice remained in business.<sup>32</sup>

Workers loading large ice blocks, meant for fishing companies, onto a lorry using sharp hooks, 1960s. The ice helped to keep catches fresh while out at sea. Primary Production Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





Pushing a cart loaded with ice blocks near Ellenborough Market, 1980. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

In addition to these large companies, there were also others. One well-known ice supplier is Tuck Lee Ice, which has been in operation here since 1924. Originally owned by Kwok Ku Loong,<sup>33</sup> it was sold to Hauw Kiat in 1957, an immigrant from China who moved to Indonesia and later Singapore. Hauw's descendants took over the business after his death in 1961 and successfully modernised ice-making by introducing food-grade ice hygienically made by machines. They also sold ice in smaller cubes that were more convenient compared to the conventional larger blocks of ice typically sold by other ice manufacturers. The company has since ventured into providing ice sculptures for events, beverage distribution, and transport and logistics services

for temperature-sensitive items. The Hauw family still owns and manages the company to this day.<sup>34</sup>

Another supplier that has rejuvenated the ice industry and continues to thrive in Singapore today is Jurong Marine Cold Storage (JM Ice), established in 1971. In 2015, the company moved away from the industry's traditional reliance on tough physical labour by investing in robotic automation in its packaging process. "We were facing a big headache as no one wanted to work as an ice-packer," said Eric Lee, one of the company's two executive directors. With the robotic arms, its workers were redeployed to other jobs.<sup>35</sup>

Given Singapore's tropical climate, ice manufacturers will never face a chilly reception from the market. ♦

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# THE SINGAPORE HOKKIEN HUAY KUAN COLLECTION

## A TREASURE TROVE OF INFORMATION ABOUT A UNIQUE INSTITUTION

Materials donated by the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan offer unique perspectives into the history of the Hokkien community here and the association's contributions to the nation's social and cultural landscape.

By Ang Seow Leng and Seow Peck Ngiam



A painting of Thian Hock Keng titled "Chinese Temple, Singapore" by artist Alfred T. Agate and engraver J.A. Ralph, 1842. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

**Ang Seow Leng** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing the Singapore and Southeast Asian Collection, developing content as well as providing reference and research services relating to Singapore and Southeast Asia.

**Seow Peck Ngiam** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her responsibilities include selection, evaluation and management of materials for the Chinese and donor collections. She also conducts research and writes on collection highlights for the library.



This 1828 document is believed to be the oldest land title deed found in Singapore. A Sim Loo-ah had purchased the plot of land on Telok Ayer Street from the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies (the precursor of the East India Company) for a quit rent of 1.55 Spanish silver dollars per year. Two of the signatures in the deed belong to Kenneth Murchison, second Resident Councillor of Singapore (1827–33), who was stated as the witness, and Samuel George Bonham, Murchison's deputy and who later succeeded him as the third Resident Councillor of Singapore (1833–36). Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection, National Library, Singapore.

**A** title deed dating back to 1838 with pioneer businessman Tan Tock Seng's signature. Records of schools like Tao Nan, Ai Tong and Nan Chiau. Documents regarding the relocation of temples and cemeteries. These are just some of the more than 4,300 documents that the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan donated to the National Library in 2021.

Other documents include land records, rental records, receipts dating back to the Second World War, old business correspondences, photographs and minutes of meetings. All these materials are now part of the National Library's Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection.

This collection is important because these papers shed light on many important institutions in Singapore, especially those relating to the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan. Among the documents donated, for example, are nine early title deeds for the land that the Thian Hock Keng temple sits on.<sup>1</sup> Located on Telok Ayer Street, Thian Hock Keng is one of Singapore's oldest Hokkien temples and also a national monument.

From these documents, which were kept in a safe for many decades, we learn that Tan Tock Seng had acquired multiple plots of land in Telok Ayer Street between 1838 and 1839 at prices ranging from 160 to 200 Spanish silver dollars per plot for the construction of the temple.<sup>2</sup> He purchased these land parcels from the resellers who had originally bought them from the British East India Company.<sup>3</sup>



The purchase of land in Singapore during the early 19th century was usually in the form of a 99- or 99-year lease issued by the Straits Settlements government, where the lease or grant was subject to a yearly quit rent.<sup>4</sup>

A document numbered 593 and dated 1828 shows that a Sim Loo-ah had purchased a plot of land on Telok Ayer Street and paid a quit rent of 1.55 Spanish silver dollars per year. This 1828 land title deed is believed to be the oldest land title deed found in Singapore.

A quick survey of land title deeds reveals how quickly the price of land in Telok Ayer appreciated in those early years. Just four years later, in 1823, Sim sold the land to a Tan Leng for 100 Spanish silver dollars. Tan Leng in turn sold the same plot to Tan Tock Seng in 1838 for 170 Spanish dollars, and the title deed bears the latter's signature.

The construction cost of the temple was about 37,000 Spanish dollars. This was borne by wealthy

This 1838 title deed for a plot of land on Telok Ayer Street bears the signature of Tan Tock Seng, who purchased the land from a Tan Leng for 170 Spanish silver dollars. Tan Leng had purchased the land from Sim Loo-ah in 1832 for 100 Spanish silver dollars, who had originally purchased the land from the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies (the precursor of the East India Company) for a mere quit rent of 1.55 Spanish silver dollars per year. Today, this land forms part of the premises of Thian Hock Keng. *Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

Hokkiens in Singapore and ship-owners from Zhangzhou and Quanzhou in China. Topping the list of donors was Tan Tock Seng, who gave \$3,074. He was followed by another local businessman, See Hoot Kee, who contributed \$2,400.<sup>5</sup>

### Thian Hock Keng – More Than Just a Religious Space

Construction of the present Thian Hock Keng temple at 158 Telok Ayer Street began in 1839 and was completed by 1842.<sup>6</sup> However, the temple actually traces its roots to a simple prayer house that had been

set up in 1821 along the shoreline of Telok Ayer Basin. It was dedicated to the Goddess of the Sea, Mazu (妈祖), who is the protector of sailors, fishermen and travellers. Chinese immigrants would go to the prayer house to give thanks for their safe passage to Singapore.

On 28 June 1973, Thian Hock Keng was gazetted as a national monument. The architecture of the temple is consistent with Chinese temple architectural traditions from Minnan (a southern Fujian province in China), such as complex timber posts and beam structures with decorative features like the “swallow tail” roof ridge and intricate carvings.<sup>7</sup> The temple was repaired and restored to its current state in the mid-1990s and won an honourable mention in the 2001 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.<sup>8</sup>

### Formation of the Hokkien Huay Kuan

In addition to shedding light on the early history of the temple, the archival materials are also a window into the Hokkien community in Singapore. This is because besides being a place of worship, Thian Hock Keng was also a social centre where Hokkien leaders would gather to make important decisions regarding the Hokkien community, business issues, fund-raising plans, management of burial lands and even registering marriages.<sup>9</sup>

Between 1840 and 1915, a small group of merchants and rich Hokkien businessmen such as Khoo Cheng Tiong and Tan Boo Liat helped hold the council elections of Thian Hock Keng Temple. In 1915, the council prepared a constitution to register with the colonial government but was exempted from registration in 1916. The council was renamed Thian Hock Keng Hokkien Huay Kuan (*huay kuan* means “clan association”).<sup>10</sup> This marked a new phase of the Huay Kuan as it gained prominence in the Hokkien community. Management of Thian Hock Keng Temple came under the purview of the Huay Kuan, changing the dynamics from when it first started as a social arm of the temple.

In 1937, the Hokkien Huay Kuan was registered as a non-profit organisation under the Companies Ordinance, with a focus on education.<sup>11</sup> Its affiliated schools include Tao Nan School, Ai Tong School, Chong Hock Girls' School (today's Chongfu School), Nan Chiau Primary School, Nan Chiau High School and Kong Hwa School.<sup>12</sup> The Huay Kuan also led the way in establishing Nanyang University (present-day Nanyang Technological University), raising funds and donating 523 acres of land for the university's campus in Jurong.<sup>13</sup>

### Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection

While Thian Hock Keng's historical land title deeds are part of the 2021 donation by the Hokkien

Huay Kuan to the National Library, the majority of the collection are postwar materials. They can broadly be classified into the following categories: clan operations and activities, school operations, management of temples and burial grounds, and management of properties.

**In addition to shedding light on the early history of the temple, the archival materials are also a window into the Hokkien community in Singapore.**

Devotees worshipping at Thian Hock Keng, 1965. Photo by Wong Ken Foo (K.F. Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



The Hokkien Huay Kuan's Thian Hock Keng House Rent & Ground Rent Register, dating from 1942 to 1948, reveals a fascinating detail. During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the register was maintained in black ink. Interestingly, entries were penned in red once British rule resumed in Singapore, marking the period of political transition. *Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Collection, National Library, Singapore.*

Eight sets of minutes<sup>14</sup> provide a detailed look into the Management Council of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan's decisions from 1950 to 1984, while five other sets of minutes from various departments<sup>15</sup> of the Huay Kuan offer insights into their specific activities between 1962 and 1987. There is also a dedicated set of minutes that presents meticulously documented motions for discussion and important documents,<sup>16</sup> as well as records pertaining to amendments of the Huay Kuan's articles, notices and circulars.<sup>17</sup>

Also included are official correspondences from 1950 to 1977, which offer glimpses into the clan's external interactions with entities such as the Housing and Development Board Branch, and Public Works Department Roads Branch.<sup>18</sup>

Records relating to the schools managed by the Huay Kuan help to illuminate the history of Chinese education in Singapore. Documents such as balance sheets and donation records provide perspectives on the changing educational landscape such as school relocation in the late 1960s.

Highlights include documents on an exchange of land between Nan Chiau Girls' High School (comprising both primary and secondary levels) and Chung Cheng High School (Branch), which were both formerly located at Kim Yam Road, and the rebuilding of Nan Chiau's new campus at the same site. To meet Nan Chiau's growing student population and to facilitate its reconstruction efforts, the campus of its secondary school was temporarily relocated to Guillemard Road. Its primary school campus continued to function at Kim Yam Road from 1965 to 1968. Nan Chiau at Kim Yam Road was rebuilt and expanded in 1969, and brought both the primary and secondary campuses under one roof.<sup>19</sup> Chung Cheng High School (Branch), on the other hand, shifted to Guillemard Road in 1969.<sup>20</sup>

The materials in the collection also reveal historical insights into the Huay Kuan's role as the guardian of sacred spaces. For instance, documents from 1949 to 1982 detail the relocation of Kim Lan Beo. Established in 1830, Kim Lan Beo is one of Singapore's oldest temples and counts prominent Hokkien individuals like Lim Boon Keng and See Tiong Wah in its past management committees.<sup>21</sup> It was originally at Yan Kit Road in Tanjong Pagar and came under the management of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1960. The documents track the journey of the temple's eventual relocation to Kim Tian Road in Tiong Bahru, culminating in its reopening in 1984.

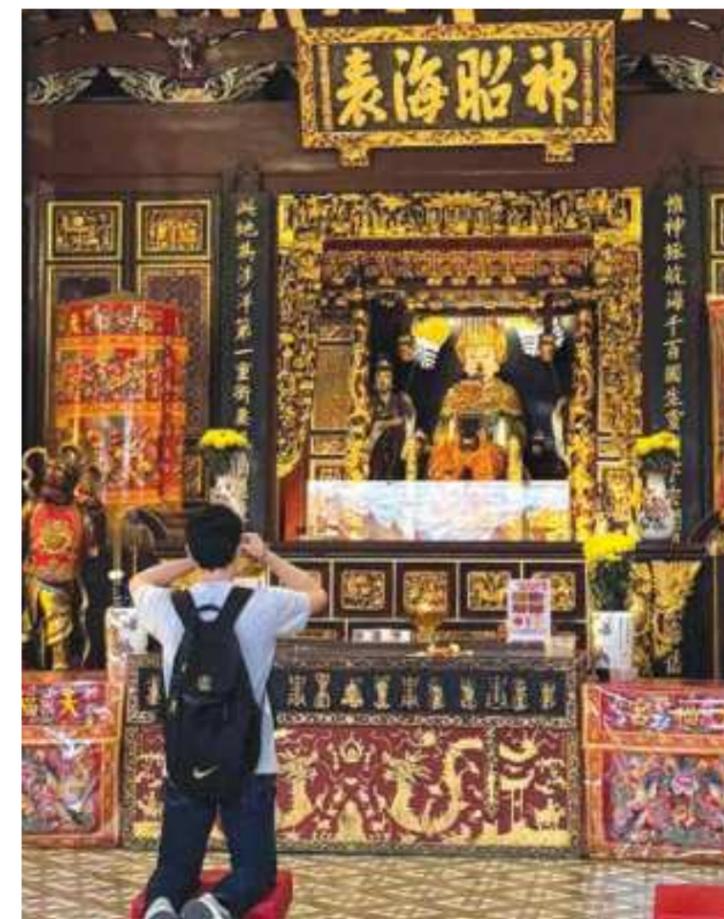
Beyond temple stewardship, the collection showcases the Huay Kuan's management of burial grounds like Kopi Sua (羔叻山) near Mount Pleasant Road<sup>22</sup> (1961–73) and Leng Kee Sua (麟记山) in Tiong Bahru. Documents reveal the complexities of maintaining these spaces, such as surveying squatter settlements and addressing illegal construction (at Leng Kee Sua) and dealing with land acquisition by the government due to urban planning.

The collection also holds materials that document property rentals under Thian Hock Keng dating back to 1942. For example, a detailed rental register sheds light on the shops – such as Eng Aun Tong (永安堂) owned by businessman Eu Tong Sen – that leased the temple's properties from 1942 to 1948.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond these property registers and account records are a wealth of papers pertaining to land and rental agreements for various properties and villages, including Mandai Tekong Village (万利泽光), off Mandai Road.<sup>24</sup>

The photographs in the collection also provide information about the Huay Kuan and its activities. These showcase past management committees and capture unique moments such as traditional mass weddings, school life, burial grounds – bringing the clan's past vividly to life.

This brief survey only touches the surface of what is available in the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan



Shrine of Mazu, Goddess of the Sea, at Thian Hock Keng, 2024. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

Collection. You can request to view the materials highlighted in this article (access information can be found in the Notes listed below), or find out more by consulting us (via email at [ref@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:ref@nlb.gov.sg) or at the reference counter on Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Building). ♦

#### NOTES

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# Cikgu Asfiah Abdullah A Cultural Luminary

A former teacher and *mak andam* fulfils her dream by writing a book on Malay recipes in 1986, the first all-Malay cookbook from Times Books International.

By Toffa Abdul Wahed



An array of Malay kuih is featured in *Hidangan Warisan Kita*. On the left-hand page (clockwise from the top) are kuih halwa maskat, baulu terenang, sesagun and deram-deram. On the right-hand page is kuih telumba. Images reproduced from Hajah Asfiah Haji Abdullah, *Hidangan Warisan Kita* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1986), 18–19. (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG).

## A Champion of Malay Culture, Tradition and Artistry

Born in 1920 in Kampong Gelam, Asfiah began learning the art of making Malay *kuih* from her mother when she was just 6 years old. She also helped out at her mother's food stall in front of their house on Bussorah Street, directly behind Sultan Mosque, during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. "My mother taught me how to bake Malay cakes which she herself was very good at. Then I was sent to Rochore Malay Girls' School, where I learnt handicrafts like embroidery and flower-making," she told the *Straits Times* in an interview in June 1986.<sup>7</sup>

The skills that Asfiah acquired in school further enriched her repertoire. In 1931, after completing Standard Four at age 10, she began teaching Malay handicrafts at the school. "It was difficult at first," she said. "Many of the girls were only a year younger than me and I could not control them sometimes. I kept having to go to the headmistress for help."<sup>8</sup> Despite her initial challenges, Asfiah found joy in teaching and continued to impart her skills and knowledge to others throughout her life.

After her mother's death, Asfiah took over the business and the stall remained a regular fixture at the annual food fair in Kampong Gelam. During

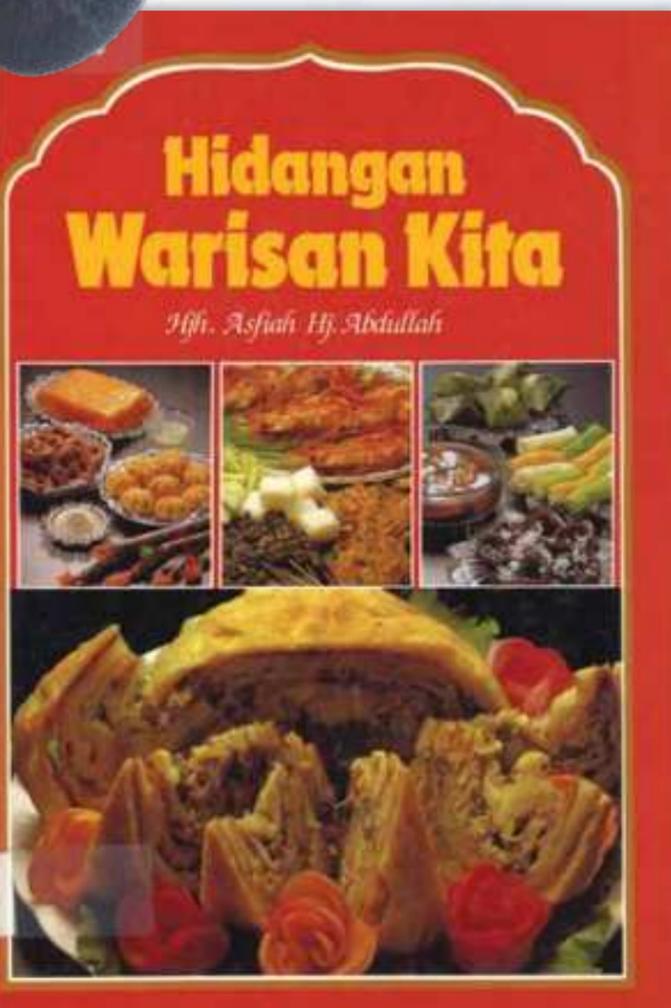
In 1986, a cookbook titled *Hidangan Warisan Kita* (Our Heritage Dishes) was published by Times Books International. Written by Hajah Asfiah Haji Abdullah,<sup>1</sup> a matriarch revered for her expertise in the cultural arts, the book was priced at \$18 and showcased 178 recipes for a wide array of traditional Malay food,<sup>2</sup> namely *kuih-muih* (an assortment of sweet or savoury snacks), noodles, rice, accompaniments to rice (*lauk-pauk*) and *gubahan* (elaborately prepared dishes for special occasions such as weddings and engagement ceremonies).<sup>3</sup>

In her preface, Asfiah invited readers to embark on a journey to discover the authentic ways of preparing traditional Malay dishes. "I sincerely hope that with the publication of this book, all our heritage cuisines and dishes will continue to be cherished, not lost to time, and will become a treasure in our kitchens for generations to come," she wrote.<sup>4</sup>

This book represented many firsts. It was the first time that Times had published a cookbook written in the Malay language by a Malay author, and in doing so, the publisher had put Asfiah in the company of familiar household names like Terry Tan and Betty Yew, who had written several cookbooks about Singaporean cuisine, Malaysian cuisine and Peranakan Chinese cuisine for the same publisher.<sup>5</sup>

After the book was published, *Straits Times* journalist Haron Abdul Rahman noted that this was possibly the first of its kind – a Malay cookbook in hardcover no less. This achievement was, he suggested, not so surprising given that "Hajah Asfiah Haji Abdullah, the authoress of *Hidangan Warisan Kita*, is a rare woman where preserving Malay heritage and upholding Malay culture and traditions are concerned".<sup>6</sup>

Toffa Abdul Wahed is a Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. She works with the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection.



Asfiah Abdullah's cookbook, *Hidangan Warisan Kita*, features several dishes on the cover, including *bunga kobis* (main image). From Hajah Asfiah Haji Abdullah, *Hidangan Warisan Kita* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1986). (From National Library, Singapore, via PublicationSG).



Asfiah Abdullah with her cookbook, *Hidangan Warisan Kita*, published in 1986. Source: *The Straits Times*, 14 August 1986. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

this time, Bussorah Street would be lined with rows of makeshift stalls that attracted people from all over Singapore for the delicious food. She enticed customers with a smorgasbord comprising *kuih* and dishes like *mee siam* and *laksa*. In 1980, Asfiah passed the torch of running the business to her daughters, Salamah, Rasidah and Masita, but continued to help in the preparation of the *kuih*.<sup>9</sup> Later, her youngest son



Asfiah Abdullah putting together a *sirih dara* (arrangement of betel leaves and flowers to symbolise a bride's chastity). Source: *Berita Harian*, 18 July 1971. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



also took an interest in learning to run her *kuih* and *tekat* (a type of traditional Malay embroidery used to decorate ceremonial items made of velvet with designs created using gold threads) business.<sup>10</sup>

Known affectionately as Cikgu Asfiah (*cikgu* in Malay is a title for teacher), she dedicated her life to serving the community and imparting her vast knowledge of Malay culture to the younger generations through not only her cookbook but also via classes at her home on Bussorah Street, demonstrations, talks and exhibitions. The publication of *Hidangan Warisan Kita* was her crowning achievement, but her contributions to the Malay community extended beyond the culinary realm.

Asfiah was also renowned for her expertise in Malay wedding customs, needlework and flower arrangement as well as traditional skincare, makeup and hairdressing. Although Asfiah made her income from teaching the cultural arts, she firmly believed that it was her duty and responsibility to pass on her knowledge to young Malay girls and women.

Margaret Sullivan, who featured a chapter about Asfiah and the *kuih* trade in her book, *“Can Survive, La”: Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore* (1985), hailed her as a “teacher and guardian for [sic] traditional Malay culture in Singapore”. Asfiah “[saw] herself as an articulator of traditional values with almost a

‘mission’ to pass on the knowledge before ‘Malayness’ was [lost]”.<sup>11</sup> In 1987, a journalist with the *Berita Harian* newspaper described Asfiah as an “activist of Malay handicrafts”, highlighting her unwavering commitment to preserving Malay culture.<sup>12</sup>

Asfiah developed a profound interest in *kesenian Melayu lama* (traditional Malay arts), including bridal wear, dressing up the wedding dais and floral decorations for the matrimonial bed. She was, however, unable to devote much time to this interest. In 1949, having retired from teaching after almost two decades, she wasted no time in becoming a *mak andam*.<sup>13</sup> The role of a *mak andam* holds significant cultural importance in Malay weddings. Their duties traditionally involve beautifying the bride, as well as guiding the bride and groom through various rites and ceremonies that take place before, during and after the wedding.<sup>14</sup>

Asfiah went on to become a well-known and esteemed *mak andam*, a role that she performed for some 20 years. “I must have been a *Mak Andam* for more than 1,000 brides,” she told the *Straits Times* in 1986. “I have many fond memories of these occasions, like when I refused to let the best man bring in the groom unless he could answer my *pantun* (rhyming riddle).” She revealed there had been instances when the best man became so irritated that he would stomp off, leaving the hapless groom behind.<sup>15</sup>

Asfiah’s remarkable skills and knowledge as a *mak andam* also led to numerous engagements and invitations from cultural organisations. These include Persatuan Kebudayaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS;

Society of Malay Culture, Singapore) and Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapura (Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations Singapore), who recognised her as a valuable advocate for preserving Malay heritage and culture.

### Membership in Malay Organisations and Associations

Asfiah’s involvement in PKMS dates back to the early 1960s when she joined as a dedicated member. She was elected as the vice-chairperson in 1971, making her the sole female member on the executive committee at the time. This role allowed her to work alongside prominent figures within the Malay community, including Mahmud Ahmad, the chairperson, and Abdul Ghani Hamid, the secretary.<sup>16</sup>

Notably, in 1973, Asfiah played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Women’s Wing of PKMS, which aimed to promote and advance traditional handicrafts among local women. She was also elected as its vice-chairperson.<sup>17</sup>

Within PKMS, one of her major contributions was a regular course she ran for women titled “Seni Usaha Daya” (The Art of Effort and Ability) at Jalan Eunus in the early 1970s. The course, which was offered at \$30 and open to the public, consisted of 12 weekly classes on Malay handicrafts, including embroidery and needlework, flower arrangement, making flowers from craft materials, and arranging the *tepak sirih* (ceremonial betel box used in Malay weddings) and

*sirih dara* (an arrangement of betel leaves and flowers to symbolise a bride’s chastity). Every participant received a certificate upon passing the course.<sup>18</sup>

The course revived interest in Malay traditional arts and empowered the participants, many of whom subsequently pursued a career as a *mak andam*. The popular course could have as many as 100 students. Most of those who enrolled were housewives.<sup>19</sup>

The PKMS also organised exhibitions showcasing the students’ handiwork. For instance, after the completion of a course in 1972, Asfiah hosted a small exhibition at her residence which ran for two days. Visitors lauded the women’s resourcefulness in producing captivating works on a budget. In an interview with *Berita Harian*, Asfiah reiterated that there was a need to pass down ancestral knowledge to younger generations, as many lacked the skills to create these traditional pieces particularly items for weddings. She emphasised the rarity of such items and proposed updating them to appeal to modern tastes, especially tourists unfamiliar with these cultural treasures.<sup>20</sup>

Asfiah’s association with Majlis Pusat and its women’s department began in the early 1980s. Despite not holding any leadership positions in this organisation, she participated in numerous activities from conducting classes on the cultural arts to organising exhibitions, just like she did with PKMS.

In 1981, she had about 30 of her *sanggul* (embellished hairbun) creations displayed in an exhibition by Majlis Pusat titled “Pameran Seni Budaya” (Cultural Arts Exhibition) held at the National



Members of Asfiah Abdullah’s family at their stall at the food fair held every year on Bussorah Street during Ramadan. Image reproduced from Margaret Sullivan, “Can Survive, La”: *Cottage Industries in High-rise Singapore* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1985), 55. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 338.634095957 SUL).



Asfiah Abdullah (extreme right) examining her students' handiwork at a showcase organised by the Women's Wing of the Majlis Pusat. The event was held to mark the end of the cultural arts course that she had conducted. Source: *Berita Harian*, 18 July 1981. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Museum. The exhibition was one of the programmes offered as part of the inaugural Pesta Budaya Melayu (Malay Culture Festival), also organised by Majlis Pusat, from 6 to 15 March. It was touted as the “first large-scale Malay cultural festival in Singapore”.<sup>21</sup>

Kasminah Bakron, a 24-year-old clerk who visited the exhibition, was amazed by the artistry of the products and went on to enrol in a course taught by Asfiah and organised by the women's wing of Majlis Pusat. She said: “Saya terpesona melihat kehalusan orang-orang Melayu lama dalam kerja-kerja tangan seperti menggubah, tekad-menekad [*sic*] dan adat-adat lain, seperti bilik pengantin, yang kita mungkin tidak tahu erti sebenarnya jika tidak mengikuti kursus seperti ini.” (“I am fascinated by the finesse of the Malays from the older generations in handiwork such as flower arrangement, *tekad* and other customs, such as [those related to] the bridal chamber, which we may not truly understand if we do not attend courses like this.”)<sup>22</sup>

**“I have always wanted to place on record some aspects of Malay culture, such as our food and customs. This is a chance to keep some of this for posterity.”**

### A Dream Come True

Since the 1970s, Asfiah had been advocating for books to be written on various aspects of Malay culture. Speaking at a Hari Raya Aidilfitri

An uncommon dish of *mee maidin* prepared by award-winning author Khir Johari. The recipe is featured in *Hidangan Warisan Kita*. Photo by Woo Pei Qi.

gathering organised by the women's wing of Majlis Pusat in August 1980, Asfiah emphasised the need to document the types and methods of cooking Malay dishes, and preserve traditional makeup techniques to ensure that traditions of the Malay community would not fade into obscurity. She said: “Kalau wanita-wanita muda hari ini tidak mahu belajar cara masakan kita kerana dianggapnya leceh, maka dengan sendirinya masakan Melayu akan hilang ditelan zaman.” (“If young women today do not wish to learn [how to cook] our dishes because they perceive them as troublesome [to make], then on its own Malay cuisine will be lost to time.”)<sup>23</sup>

Asfiah had wanted to publish a Malay cookbook for many years before her dream came true in 1986. “I have always wanted to place on record some aspects of Malay culture, such as our food and customs. This is a chance to keep some of this for posterity,” she said in an interview.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to *Hidangan Warisan Kita*, *Berita Harian* reported in July 1971 that Asfiah had compiled three manuscripts aimed at providing general guidance to women.

The first, titled *Seni Usaha* (The Art of Effort), has instructions on creating handmade items and is accompanied with illustrations. The second, *Seni Usaha Daya* (The Art of Effort and Ability), delves into the realm of handicrafts and household management. The last, *Seni Ayu Pusaka Ibu* (Gentle Art Inherited from Mothers), is a tribute to ancestral art and values.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that Asfiah never got a publisher for these manuscripts, or that they were only reproduced cheaply for use in her classes as teaching aids.

Speaking to the *Straits Times* in August 1986, Asfiah said with tears in her eyes: “I feel very sad when I see my former students compiling recipes and selling them in a cyclostyled booklet form. How long can such booklets last? How effective are such efforts? No, that wouldn't do. A book has to be published, preferably with a hard cover, so as to give such efforts a chance for permanency.”<sup>26</sup>



Asfiah began writing *Hidangan Warisan Kita* in 1984. On top of facing difficulties typing and concentrating due to her age, she also could not find help initially in the writing of the manuscript. Her family eventually played a crucial role in bringing her dream to fruition when her daughter Salamah, son Khairul Anuar and grandson Asrin, became involved in the book's production. Margaret Sullivan's feature about Asfiah in her book also caught the attention of Times Books, which eventually became her publisher, leading to the realisation of her dream at the age of 65.<sup>27</sup>

In her dedication, Asfiah wrote: “Buat suami, anak-anak dan cucu-cucu yang banyak memberi perangsang dan galakan dan buat semua anak bangsa yang gemarkan masakan tradisi kita.” (“[To] my husband, children and grandchildren who had given me a lot of encouragement and to all Malays who love our traditional cuisine.”)<sup>28</sup> Slightly more than a year after the publication of the book, Asfiah died at her home on Bussorah Street in August 1987.<sup>29</sup> Through her perseverance and dedication, Asfiah's dream of sharing her heritage with future generations lives on in the pages of *Hidangan Warisan Kita*. ♦

The writer thanks her mother, Auntie Fatimah, Amanah Mustafi and Khir Johari for their assistance and advice. All English translations in this article were provided by the writer.

### NOTES

- Her name has also been spelled “Aspiah”. For this article, I have used “Asfiah” which is how it is spelt in her cookbook. The honorific “Hajah” (or “Hajjah”) and “Haji” are titles given to women and men respectively who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. I am using the current spelling “Hajah”, which is recommended by *Kamus Dewan*, 4th edition (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2005).
- Malay food here refers to dishes from various communities and subgroups found within the Malay ethnic group. Immigrants from other parts of the Nusantara (the Malay World), such as Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, Banjar and Malaya, came to trade, work as well as settle in the bustling, cosmopolitan port of Kampong Gelam. Asfiah herself was of Javanese descent.
- According to food writer and cooking instructor Christopher Tan, the word *kueh* or *kuih* refers to a diverse variety of sweet and savoury foods and snacks. *Kuih* is the formal spelling used in Malay today. See Christopher Tan, *The Way of Kueh: Savouring & Saving Singapore's Heritage Desserts* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2019), 2. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 641.595957 TAN)
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### ASFIAH ABDULLAH'S INTERVIEW WITH HASNAH ANI AND AMANAH MUSTAFI

On 8 October 1985, Hasnah Ani and Amanah Mustafi, scriptwriters with the former Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, interviewed Asfiah Abdullah for a television programme. They asked her various questions about Malay customs, ranging from engagement ceremonies and wedding customs to customary feasts. She talked about customs she was very familiar with such as being a *mak andam*, *suap-suapan* (the bride and groom feeding each other yellow glutinous rice), *khatam quran* (completion of Quran recitation) and *makan berdamai* (bride and groom eating together).

Asfiah also shared her expertise on a variety of Malay dishes, how to make them and how they had evolved over time. The dishes mentioned include *kuih coro* (also known as *kuih bakar manis*), *kuih telumba*, *kuih selang madu nikmat* (also known as *baulu terenang*), *sambal goreng pengantin*, *serondeng* (*dendeng ageh*), *rojak* and *nasi rampadan*.

The National Library of Singapore has the nine-page interview transcript (in Malay) in its holdings, thanks to the kind donation by Amanah Mustafi who still works in television and broadcasting today. If you wish to read the transcript, do make a request at Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Building.

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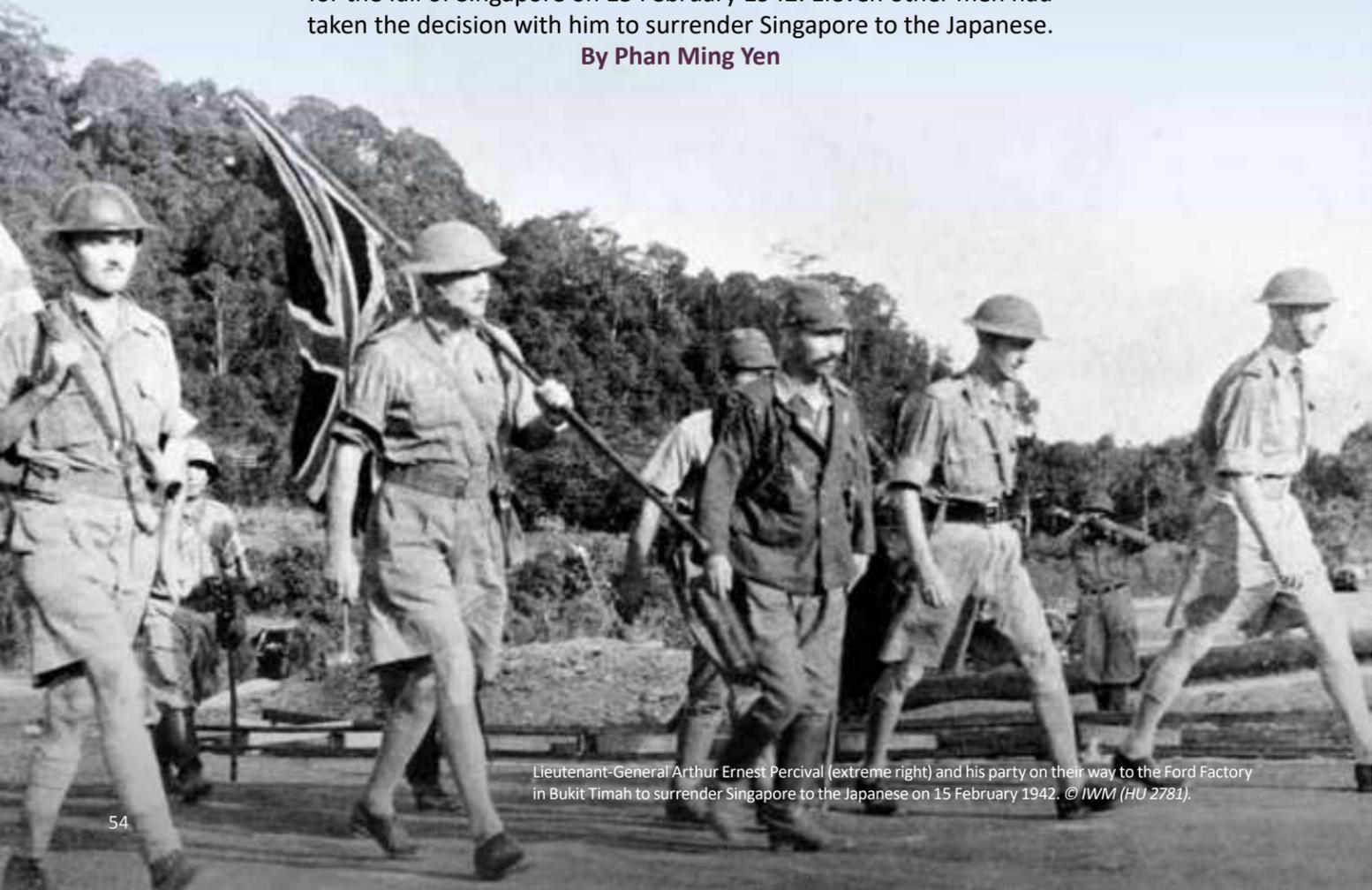
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# THE OTHER MEN WHO SURRENDERED SINGAPORE

Arthur E. Percival should not have been made the convenient scapegoat for the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. Eleven other men had taken the decision with him to surrender Singapore to the Japanese.

By Phan Ming Yen



Lieutenant-General Arthur Ernest Percival (extreme right) and his party on their way to the Ford Factory in Bukit Timah to surrender Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. © IWM (HU 2781).

Decades after the surrender of Allied forces to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, much of the blame for the fall of Singapore remains associated with Lieutenant-General Arthur E. Percival, General Officer Commanding Malaya. As military historian Clifford Kinvig noted, Percival was not merely associated with the defeat but “he seemed to some commentators to bear a large responsibility for it”.<sup>1</sup>

While Percival, as the commander in charge of Malaya, was ultimately responsible for making the decision, that decision to surrender was not made alone. On that fateful day, the surrender was decided by Percival in consultation with 11 other men.

On the morning of the 15th, Percival had called for a meeting in the Battlebox, the underground bunker at Fort Canning, which had served as his headquarters in the last days of the Malayan Campaign. The aim of the meeting was to update the key commanders of the dire situation facing Singapore and to decide on the next course of action.

The war in Malaya had begun with troops of the Japanese 25th Army landing in Kota Bahru in northern Malaya, and Singora and Patani in southern Thailand on 8 December 1941. On the same day, Japanese planes dropped the first bombs on Singapore, killing 61 and injuring 133 people. Two months later, on 8 February 1942, the first Japanese troops landed in Singapore via the northwestern coastline of the island.<sup>2</sup>

Now, after a week of intense fighting and bombardment, the battle front had been reduced to a semi-circle about three miles from Singapore’s city centre.<sup>3</sup> The island had less than 24 hours’ worth of water left, and food and ammunition reserves were running desperately low.<sup>4</sup> Naval power had been lost with the sinking of the HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* off the coast of Kuantan on 10 December 1941, while Royal Air Force (RAF) planes had been outclassed by Japanese aircraft.<sup>5</sup> On 9 February 1942, all RAF aircraft were withdrawn to the former Netherlands East Indies.

Among the other 11 men huddled together in the same room as Percival, three were senior officers who, according to Percival’s minutes of the meeting, had asserted their views when opinion was sought for the next course of action. They were Lieutenant-General Henry Gordon Bennett, Major-General Frank Keith Simmons and Lieutenant-General Lewis Macclesfield Heath.

Bennett (1887–1962) was Commander of the 8th Division of the Australian Imperial Force and had been assigned the defence of Johor and Melaka. In 1944, he published his account of the Malayan Campaign in a book titled *Why Singapore Fell*.<sup>6</sup> He had also been called “Australia’s most controversial Second World War Commander”. That was because, among other

**Phan Ming Yen** is an independent writer, researcher and producer. A former journalist and arts manager, his current areas of research are on the Malayan Campaign and Japanese Occupation in Singapore. He has written about 19th-century music in Singapore and also on the Syonan Symphony Orchestra during the Occupation.



(Left) Lieutenant-General Arthur Ernest Percival arriving in Singapore to take up his appointment as General Officer Commanding Malaya, 1941. © IWM (K 652).

(Below) Lieutenant-General Henry Gordon Bennett was Commander of the 8th Division of the Australian Imperial Force, and assigned the defence of Johor and Melaka. *Australian War Memorial P01461.002.*



things, following the surrender, Bennett handed over command of his division and left Singapore, supposedly to “pass on his knowledge about how to fight the Japanese”.<sup>7</sup>

Simmons (1888–1952) was Commander of the Singapore Fortress and responsible for the defence of Singapore, the adjoining islands and the eastern area of Johor. He was the subject of a biography, *The Story of Major General F.K. Simmons, CEB, MVO, MC, a Man Among Men*, by Percival. In Percival’s eyes, Simmons had a “particularly tactful and courteous manner which was an undoubted asset in his dealings with the civilians of Singapore. He worked unceasingly for the welfare of the troops in that city”.<sup>8</sup>



(Above) Major-General Frank Keith Simmons (right) with General Archibald Wavell (left) and Brigadier Arthur Drury Curtis (centre), c. 1940. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Above right) Lieutenant-General Lewis Macclesfield Heath commanded the III Indian Corps from 1941 to 1942 as part of the Malaya Command and had been entrusted with defending northern Malaya. This photo was taken in 1939 at Bassano & Vandyk Studios, 38 Dover Street, London. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Heath (1885–1954) commanded the III Indian Corps from 1941 to 1942 as part of the Malaya Command and had been entrusted with defending northern Malaya. Before his arrival in Malaya, he had gained success as the General Officer Commanding the 5th Indian Infantry Division in the East African Campaign where he planned and executed an assault on the Italian Army at the Battle of Keren in Eritrea in March 1941. In Heath's obituary, the *Straits Times* noted that he had been a "soldier whose tactics have been praised by his superiors" and he had served with "distinction in many frontier incidents".<sup>9</sup>

Lieutenant-General Henry Gordon Bennett (3rd from left), Commander of the 8th Division of the Australian Imperial Force, with a map spread out before him, outlines to newsmen the current situation, 1942. *Australian War Memorial* P01182.009.

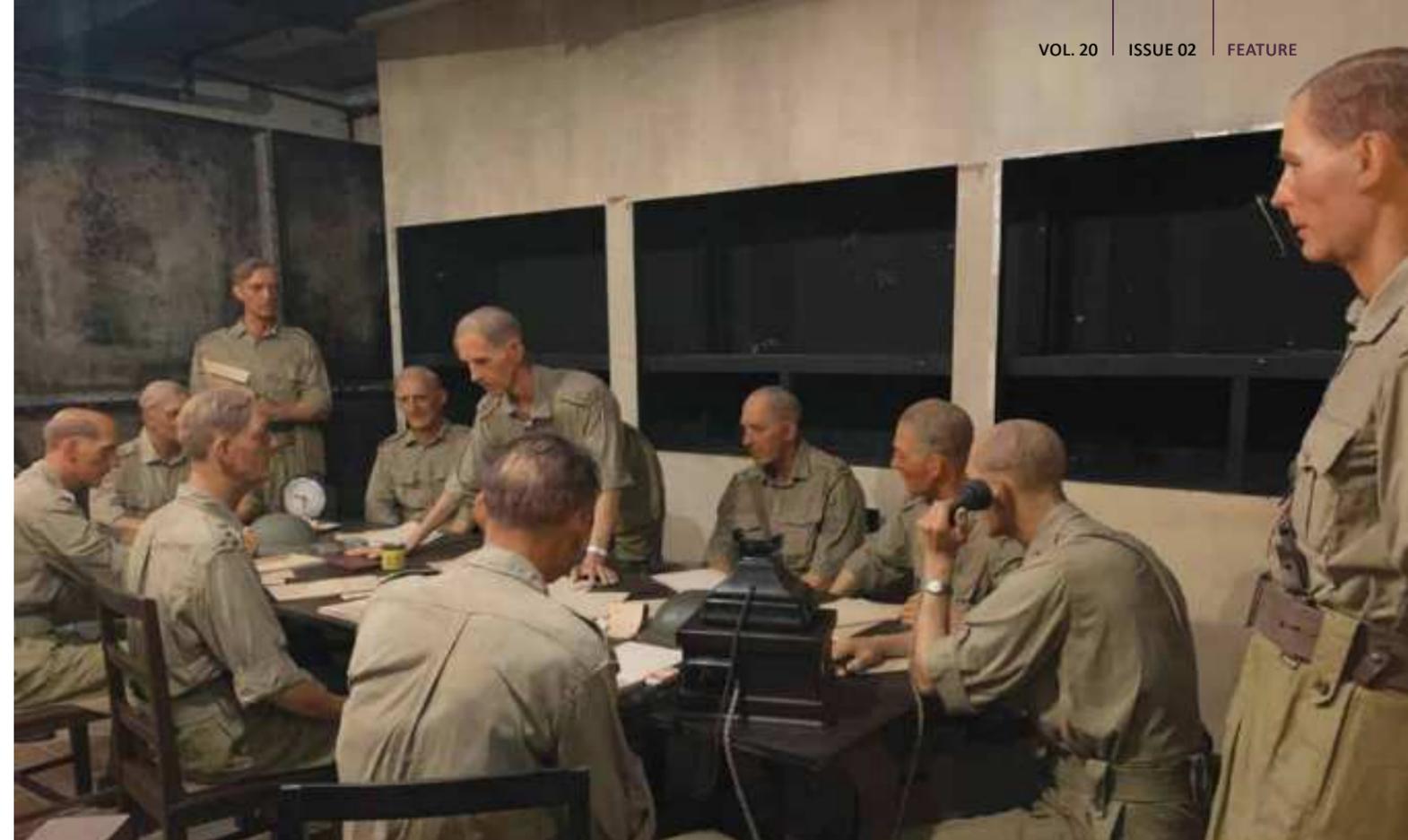


In Percival's notes of the meeting, Heath had argued that "there is only one possible course to adopt" and that was to do what Percival ought to have done two days ago, "namely to surrender immediately". Heath added that the defenders could not "resist another determined Japanese attack and that to sacrifice countless lives by a failure to appreciate the true situation would be an act of extreme folly".<sup>10</sup> Bennett agreed with Heath and dismissed Percival's proposal for a counterattack. When Percival sought the opinion of others, Simmons was recorded to have said that he was "reluctant to surrender", but could see no other alternative.<sup>11</sup>

The rest, according to Percival, "either remained silent or expressed their concurrence" with Simmons. Major Cyril Hew Dalrymple Wild, Heath's General Staff Officer, recalled in his own notes that the "decision to ask for terms was taken without a dissentient voice".<sup>12</sup>

While the spotlight has typically fallen on Percival, Heath, Bennett and Simmons as the most senior officers in the room, the remaining eight men were also part of the decision-making process. They were Major Cyril Hew Dalrymple Wild,<sup>13</sup> Brigadier Thomas Kennedy Newbigging, Brigadier-General Kenneth Sanderson Torrance, Brigadier Alec Warren Greenlaw Wildey, Director-General Ivan Simson, Inspector-General Arthur Harold Dickinson, Brigadier Eric Whitlock Goodman and Brigadier Hubert Francis Lucas.

Their reported silence and concurrence can perhaps be understood – within present-day management discourse – as "acquiescent silence". This is the silence of individuals who "accept the prevailing circumstances and who are not inclined to speak, participate or spend effort to change current status", or they are of



the opinion that "it is pointless and unnecessary to express" their viewpoint. They think "that remaining silent could protect their relationships and allow them to perform their job better".<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, an overview of who these men were can perhaps serve as a starting point for further research into broadening the existing narratives of the surrender.

### Cyril Hew Dalrymple Wild (1908–46)

Among the eight, Wild is probably the most interesting. Wild, together with Percival, Newbigging and Torrance, had been members of the surrender party and were photographed walking towards the Ford Factory to meet with Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, commander of the Japanese 25th Army. It was Wild who carried the white flag.

Wild acted as Percival's interpreter for the occasion. He was fluent in Japanese having studied the language while working for the Rising Sun Petroleum Company in Yokohama in 1931, leaving only in early 1941. Wild rejoined the British army in June 1940. As Heath's General Staff Officer, he was given the task of speaking to journalists and was on duty at operations headquarters in Kuala Lumpur on 7 December 1941 when he heard the news of Japanese ships heading towards Malaya.<sup>15</sup>

Wild died in 1946 and conspiracy theories surround his death to this day, largely in part due to his postwar role as a War Crimes Liaison Officer for Malaya and Singapore, assisting the three War Crimes Investigation Teams operating in the region then.<sup>16</sup>



(Above) A diorama of the meeting of the 12 commanders at the Battlebox on 15 February 1942. Courtesy of Global Cultural Alliance.

(Left) Major Cyril Hew Dalrymple Wild testifying before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo. Wegner, U.S. Army Signal Corps. Harry S. Truman Library.

In September that year, Wild had testified before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo on the initial Japanese landings in Kota Bahru and subsequent atrocities by the Japanese army. Wild, however, died in a plane crash on 25 September 1946 in Hong Kong, en route to Singapore from Tokyo.<sup>17</sup>

In 2014, the Hong Kong broadsheet, *South China Morning Post*, revisited the incident in an article



Japanese troops crossing the Causeway into Singapore after constructing a girder bridge over the 70-foot (21 m) gap, 1942. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

headlined “Cover Up at Kai Tak? ‘Allies Caused Hong Kong Plane Crash That Killed 19 to Assassinate British Investigator’”. The article cited war veteran Arthur Lane who said that at the time of the accident, Wild had been “building a solid case that could have seen the Japanese emperor held accountable for some of the worst atrocities carried out by his troops in the early decades of the last century”. It also made the sensational claim that Wild had been “killed to preserve the imperial lineage in Japan and halt the spread of communism across Asia”.<sup>18</sup>

Lane alleged that “a few days before his death, Colonel Wild had made it known to the American authorities that he had enough evidence to be able to convict Hirohito [the emperor of Japan] of war crimes, including bacteriological warfare experiments” and Wild “was then ordered to cancel any further work in this direction and to hand over all the documentation he had so far accumulated”.<sup>19</sup>

In her book about the people buried in Hong Kong Cemetery, teacher and historian Patricia Lim wrote that on “news of the crash there was jubilation amongst the Japanese in custody”. All interview transcripts and detailed notes relating to the War Crimes Tribunals were lost in the crash and all further trials compromised. Lim stated that while it is “impossible to find the cause of the crash”, “it was thought that the triads may have been involved in sabotaging the plane for a big payoff”.<sup>20</sup>

James Bradley, a former prisoner-of-war whose life Wild had saved while they were both working on the infamous Thai-Burma Railway, wrote a biography of his saviour titled *Cyril Wild: The Tall Man Who Never Slept*, first published in 1991. During his internment, Wild put his Japanese language skills to good use and relentlessly interceded on behalf of his fellow prisoners-of-war. This led his Japanese captors to call him *nemuranu se no takai otoko* (“the tall man who never slept”).<sup>21</sup>

### Thomas Kennedy Newbigging (1891–1968)

Newbigging has generally been identified as the officer who carried the Union Jack as part of the surrender party that met the Japanese army at Ford Factory on

15 February 1942. This, however, is a matter of some dispute as one account suggests that it was Torrance who carried the Union Jack.<sup>22</sup>

Newbigging was the Deputy Adjutant-General, Malaya Command, from 1941 to 1942 and had received the Military Cross for his actions during World War I. He had first gone with Wild and Hugh Fraser, colonial secretary of the Straits Settlements, to deliver a letter from Percival to Yamashita following the morning meeting. They met with Colonel Ichiji Sugita (who would serve as Yamashita’s interpreter later that afternoon), who handed a letter to Newbigging requesting that Percival personally meet with Yamashita.<sup>23</sup>

A week after the surrender meeting, and while incarcerated at Changi Prison, Newbigging was said to have spoken to Sugita after British internees realised a massacre of the Chinese population was taking place. He is reported to have said: “I ask that you should not shoot any more Chinese and that you should not ask our men to assist you by burying them.”<sup>24</sup>

Newbigging was later interned in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) and then Manchuria. He retired in 1946.<sup>25</sup>

### Kenneth Sanderson Torrance (1896–1958)

Born in Guelph in Ontario, Canada, Torrance had served with the Canadian Army in World War I where he was awarded the Military Cross. In the interwar years, he transferred to the British Army and served in India and then in Malaya at the outbreak of World War II. Torrance later served as Brigadier General Staff, Malaya Command, and was awarded the Order of the British Empire in the 1942 New Year’s Honours List ceremony for his bravery while serving the British forces during the Malayan campaign.<sup>26</sup>

After the fall of Singapore, Torrance was first interned in Changi Prison, then in Formosa and later in Mukden (present-day Shenyang), Manchuria. He returned to Guelph after the war, his health having been severely affected by his internment. Torrance died in his winter home in the Bahamas in 1958.<sup>27</sup>

Till today, Guelph remains proud of Torrance. In May 2023, online news site *Guelph Today* featured Torrance in an article titled “Guelph’s Military Contribution Goes Beyond Lt.-Col. John McCrae”.<sup>28</sup>

### Alec Warren Greenlaw Wildey (1890–1981)

Wildey was Commander, HQ Anti-Aircraft Defences, Malaya, and the meeting at the Battle Box took place in his office. A recipient of the Military Cross for his actions in World War I, Wildey arrived in Singapore in 1937 as Commander, 3rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade Royal Artillery. From 1940 to 1942, he assumed the role of Commander, Anti-Aircraft Defences, Malaya.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, soon after arriving in Singapore, Wildey was involved in a fatal car accident. On 23

December 1937, the press reported about a “fatal motor accident in Keppel Road soon after midnight on 20 Dec” in which Wildey was charged with “causing the death of a ricksha-puller by negligent driving”.<sup>30</sup>

Wildey was acquitted in February 1938, with the chief court inspector stating that he had received instructions from the deputy public prosecutor to ask for a withdrawal of the charge. A verdict of misadventure was returned with “no evidence of criminal negligence or rashness on the part of Col. Wildey”.<sup>31</sup>

In 1946, Wildey was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In the recommendation, it was said that during the Malayan Campaign, Wildey had “show[n] himself cool and resourceful in dealing with situations as they developed”.<sup>32</sup>

### Ivan Simson (1890–1971)

Simson was Chief Engineer of the Malaya Command with the additional duties of Director-General of Civil Defence during the last six weeks of the Malayan Campaign.<sup>33</sup> He was the officer who updated the meeting on 15 February 1942 of the dire water situation.

Before the outbreak of war, Simson had recommended an overhaul and construction of fixed defences but this was dismissed by the Malaya Command and Percival on the basis that such work was bad for morale.<sup>34</sup>

Simson’s views of the surrender can be found in his account of the Malayan campaign, *Singapore: Too Little, Too Late: Some Aspects of the Malayan Disaster in 1942*, first published in 1970.<sup>35</sup>

### Arthur Harold Dickinson (1892–1978)

Dickinson was the only member of the civil government present at the meeting on 15 February 1942. He

joined the Straits Settlements police force in Singapore in 1912, and most of his career in the Special Branch was spent in Singapore, Melaka and Penang.<sup>36</sup>

Dickinson was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1937 for his “tactful handling” of a series of strikes in the Federated Malay States. In 1939, he was promoted to Inspector-General of Police, Straits Settlements, and established the Malayan Security Service in September that year. This replaced the Straits Settlements and Malayan Police Special Branches.<sup>37</sup>

In a blog entry in 2013, Dickinson’s great-granddaughter Johanna Whitaker recalled how throughout her childhood, she had heard stories of her great-grandparents during their period of internment in Changi Prison, eating “snails and cockroaches for sustenance throughout those tough years and when the war was over and they were released... they were mere skeletons”.<sup>38</sup>

### Eric Whitlock Goodman (1893–1981)

Goodman was senior gunnery advisor to Percival and served as Commander Royal Artillery of the 9th Indian Division, Malaya. During the meeting on 15 February 1942, he had reported on the ammunition reserves. A recipient of the Military Cross in World War I, Goodman was also awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 1937.<sup>39</sup>

Goodman’s account of the meeting in his diary is factual in tone, stating that he attended a conference “in which it was decided that it was useless to continue the fight as water and ammunition were failing and food too was running short due to losses by capture. I think too that conditions in the native part of the city were a great anxiety – the numbers of unburied dead lying about”.<sup>40</sup>



Indian labourers clearing debris in Singapore after a Japanese air raid, 1942. © IWM (HU 57224).



The victory photo taken immediately after the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Goodman died on 8 December 1981. In an obituary by Major Frederick James Howard Nelson, Goodman's Brigade Major in the 9th Indian Division, Nelson remembered Goodman as one who whenever "things looked hopeless he was sure to appear in person and by his apparent unconcern for danger restored the confidence of all ranks".<sup>41</sup>

### Hubert Francis Lucas (1897–1990)

Lucas was Chief Administration Officer of the Malaya Command from 1940 to 1942. He fought in World War I and was educated at the Royal Military Academy as well as Cambridge University.<sup>42</sup>

In 1946, Lucas was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. He was commended for having "tackled" the administrative problems of transportation, supply and accommodation during the Malayan Campaign with "coolness and resource", and the good results achieved within the services were largely due to his leadership.<sup>43</sup>

### In Retrospect

Ultimately, the decision to surrender was a unanimous one albeit, perhaps, with reluctance. In the spirit of counterfactual history (addressing the "what if" question), one cannot help but wonder what the outcome would have been if the decision to launch a counterattack to recapture Bukit Timah had been taken – a comment that Bennet had made, according to Wild, when the commanders were discussing the details of the surrender. However, Wild had dismissed the comment "made not as a serious contribution to the discussion but as something to quote afterwards". Wild reported that the comment had been "received with silence".<sup>44</sup>

On the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore in 1992, this writer, in an article for the *Straits Times*, posed the following question to four historians – two from the National University of Singapore, a historian

from Japan and a historian from the United States: Could the British army have held on against the invading Japanese army in 1942 and turned the tide? All four were unanimous in saying that the Japanese would have eventually prevailed.<sup>45</sup>

American military historian Stanley L. Falk said that there was no way the British could have held on and turned the tide: "Singapore was lost from the beginning. Given the preponderance of Japanese military strength and the fact that they could have brought in more military strength if needed, it was inevitable that Singapore would fall."<sup>46</sup>

Singapore military historian Ong Chit Chung was of the opinion that the British could have held out for a while, but defeat was only a matter of time. "Even if a Rommel or a Montgomery or a Patton had been in a similar position, it would have been quite difficult for them to hold the island without

air and sea power. They may have been able to delay the defeat but for how long I do not know," said Ong.<sup>47</sup>

Japanese historian Shimizu Hajime observed: "The British may have outnumbered the Japanese by more than half, but the Japanese troops had greater fighting spirit, and this played a crucial role in their victory."<sup>48</sup>

The scholarship for why Malaya fell so quickly is vast and complex, and continues to evolve as new documents are released from the archives and translations from Japanese sources are made available.<sup>49</sup>

The reasons for the British defeat have generally ranged from flaws in the overall British defence strategy for Singapore; the Allied commanders' conduct during the battle; inadequate resources afforded to Percival; and generally ill-trained Allied troops to the bold and relentless "driving charge" strategy adopted by the Japanese army, and their ability to adapt as compared to the "set piece positional defensive battle" adopted by the British that "simply would not work in the terrain of northern and central Malaya".<sup>50</sup>

Whatever decision taken on 15 February 1942 may not have made a difference to the final outcome. However, it is a decision that should not be viewed as the burden of just one man to bear. The room for dialogue and conversation on its narrative still remains open. ♦

### BATTLEBOX AND FORMER FORD FACTORY

The meeting on 15 February 1942 when Lieutenant-General Arthur E. Percival, General Officer Commanding Malaya, made the decision to surrender with 11 other commanders took place at the Battlebox – an underground bunker at Fort Canning. Admission to the Battlebox is free. (For more details, see <https://battlebox.sg/>)

The actual surrender took place on the premises of the Ford Factory in Bukit Timah, which had been turned into the temporary headquarters of Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, Commander of the Japanese 25th Army. On the afternoon of 15 February, Percival met Yamashita at the factory to discuss surrender terms. Yamashita demanded an immediate, unconditional surrender and threatened to launch a devastating attack on the city that night. Percival signed the surrender document at 7.50 pm.

Today, the surrender site is known as the Former Ford Factory. It houses a permanent World War II exhibition by the National Archives of Singapore showcasing the events and memories surrounding the British surrender, the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and the legacies of the war. (For more information, visit <https://corporate.nas.gov.sg/former-ford-factory/overview/>)

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# PIONEERING LOCAL JOURNALIST

## R.B. Ooi



R.B. Ooi at work, 1940s. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

As a journalist, R.B. Ooi always had his finger on the pulse of Malaya, bringing to the fore issues at the heart of the nation.

By Linda Lim

Being in a war zone is always dangerous, even for non-combatants, as R.B. Ooi, the former editor for the *Singapore Standard* and the *Eastern Sun*, could attest.

During the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), Ooi worked as a press officer to General Gerald Templar, the British High Commissioner for Malaya, who had been tasked to deal with the communist guerillas. In a 1969 letter to his daughter, Mrs Irene Lim, Ooi wrote that he had spent three years “covering the jungle war for the government, local and foreign press”. That meant spending time with British troops in the jungle. And while they tried not to draw attention, apparently the communists knew they were there. Ooi further wrote that a surrendered Malay communist had come up to him and asked what they had been doing in the jungle near Bentong, Pahang, with a Gurkha patrol. “He and his men were waiting to ambush the Gurkhas when he saw us following the Gurkhas in thick jungle with film camera and still camera. He thought we were from Hollywood, so did not shoot...”<sup>1</sup>

Ooi also had to worry about being shot by the British. “Once I was sent to the jungle to study the morale of British troops. Those young soldiers were scared stiff when they entered a rubber estate. One of them tripped over a wire and set off an alarm in a hill. The soldiers ran up the hill firing like mad and so we had to run with them or else we might be fired upon by both sides... Those were dangerous years for me and two of my cameramen colleagues. I should have got an OBE [The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire] for that.”<sup>2</sup>

R.B. Ooi, born Ooi Chor Hooi (1905–72), was my maternal grandfather. He was one of the earliest local Malayan journalists writing in English and had worked for newspapers ranging from the *Straits Echo* to the *Malayan Times*. In 2023, Irene Lim – his daughter and my mother – donated his personal papers and photos to the National Library of Singapore. These are now held in the R.B. Ooi and Edna Kung Collection. His writings give us a window into discourses – such as multiculturalism and the Malayan identity – that publicly preoccupied the English-educated in the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods in Singapore and Malaysia.

### Career in Journalism

Ooi started out as a junior reporter for the Penang-based newspaper, *Straits Echo*, in 1923. He was the first Chinese reporter among other Ceylonese-Eurasian, British and Australian staff. In 1924, he joined the Treasury in Kuala Lumpur as a clerk. Between 1929 and 1933, Ooi worked as an assistant secretary at the Pontianak Gold Mine, which was owned by his

father-in-law, Kung Tian Siong (1876–1958). He then went on to work for Duncan Roberts, managing the International Correspondence Schools at 10 Collyer Quay in Singapore. Ooi also moonlighted as a part-time reporter for the *Straits Echo* from 1923–28, and the *Malaya Tribune* from 1934–42, under the penname R.B. Ooi.



R.B. Ooi with his father-in-law, Kung Tian Siong, on Siglap Beach, 1939. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

In 1942, the family left Singapore for Bukit Mertajam in Province Wellesley (now Seberang Prai), Malaysia, having been informed by Ooi’s “Malay journalist friend” (possibly Yusof Ishak, who later became the first president of Singapore in 1965) that he was on a death blacklist for anti-Japanese articles he had published before the Japanese Occupation (1942–45).<sup>3</sup> A year later, Ooi got a job at Juru Rubber Estate in Province Wellesley, an experience that provided much material for his later articles on “life in the *ulu*” (*ulu* referring to remote wild places).

Returning to Singapore after the war, Ooi became chief reporter, then sub-editor and columnist for the *Malaya Tribune* (1945–49). He later worked for the Information Department in Kuala Lumpur as a press officer in 1949 (until 1954) during the Malayan Emergency.

From 1954–58, Ooi was the editor-in-chief of the *Singapore Standard*. He rejoined the Information Department in 1958 and was appointed head of the press and liaison sections in May 1960. He was subsequently editor-in-chief of the *Malayan Times* (1962–65) and later the *Eastern Sun* in Singapore (1966–68).

After his stint at the *Eastern Sun*, Ooi became a freelance writer (penning a regular column titled “Impromptu” for the *Straits Echo*) and broadcaster (hosting a monthly current affairs radio talk show called “Window on the World”). In 1968, he received the Ahli Mangku Negara (Defender of the Realm) decoration

<sup>1</sup> Linda Lim is a Singaporean economist and Professor Emerita of corporate strategy and international business at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. She also served as director of the University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong of Malaysia. Ooi's last column was published in the *Straits Echo* shortly after his death in Kuala Lumpur in December 1972.

### Early Life

Ooi was born and raised in Bukit Mertajam on a coconut plantation "bigger than Singapore" established by his great-grandfather Ooi Tung Kheng, an immigrant from China who was one of the founders of Bukit Mertajam.<sup>4</sup> Ooi attended a Methodist primary school and studied at the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) on Penang Island for

**(Right)** R.B. Ooi being conferred the Ahli Mangku Negara by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong of Malaysia, 1968. Image reproduced from "A Royal Honour," *Eastern Sun*, 6 April 1968, 4. (From NewspaperSG).

**(Below)** R.B. Ooi and Edna Kung's wedding at Wesley Church, 1925. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

**(Farright)** A young R.B. Ooi, date unknown. Courtesy of Irene Lim.



his secondary education. He would catch the 4.30 am mail train from Singapore to Prai every morning, then the ferry to Georgetown, before cycling to school. He won a scholarship after topping a state-wide exam.

On 15 September 1925, Ooi spotted Edna Kung Gek Neo (1910–2003) on the train. Struck by her beauty, he noted down her name and address from her luggage tag and wrote to her father proposing marriage. Finding out that the Ooi family were educated wealthy landowners, Edna's father, Kung Tian Siong, a Singapore businessman and direct descendant of Confucius,<sup>5</sup> agreed. The Kungs were Christian, so Ooi was baptised for the wedding held at the Wesley Church in Singapore on 5 December 1925, when he was 19 and Edna 15.

To fulfil his mother's wishes, Ooi and Edna had a second wedding in Bukit Mertajam according to Chinese rites. They had four children: Irene (born in 1927 in Kuala Lumpur), Violet (1932), Eric (1934) and Sylvia (1936), the latter three were born in Singapore following the family's move there. Unfortunately, the marriage broke down. My grandmother, Edna, remarried towards the end of the war while my grandfather did not.



### Being Malayan

In his writings, which can be seen in the papers donated, Ooi would, sometimes uneasily, inhabit and navigate the British colonial/Western world and the Peranakan (that is, Malay-influenced) Chinese traditional culture into which he had been born and raised.

His writings reveal a man who was a proudly self-conscious Straits Chinese, embodying the three strands of their history and identity – Chinese, Malay and British/Western. Ooi wrote about many aspects of Straits Chinese life and culture. In "The Babas and Nonyas,"<sup>6</sup> he recounted the incorporation of Malay music, drama, dance, religion and food into Peranakan culture. He noted that the babas (Peranakan men are known as *baba*, while the women are known as *nonya*) supported Malay opera and *keroncong* music competitions, described their "religious liberalism" as they worshipped at Malay shrines while seeking help from Thai *bomohs* (shamans), and praised their "innovative genius" in being able to adapt and learn from various cultures.



**(Left)** R.B. Ooi and Edna Kung's traditional Chinese wedding at the Ooi family home in Bukit Mertajam, 1925. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

**(Bottom)** This family photo was taken on the birthday of Linda Lim's great-great-great grandmother Saw Kim Lian (centre) in Bukit Mertajam, c.1923. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

they are to be found in the Colony of Singapore and the Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca," he wrote in the *Singapore Standard* in 1954.<sup>9</sup>

He was particularly critical of foreign-educated university graduates, whom he felt "[could not] adjust themselves to their home environments... at this juncture many Malayan graduates feel that their own indigenous cultures are far inferior to what they have acquired in western countries... They were loud in their complaints that Malaya was an uncivilised and uncultured country, because they could not indulge in the fripperies of modern living"<sup>10</sup>

In 1948, in the *Malaya Tribune*, Ooi called Westerners out for their ignorance of Malaya, their sense of superiority, snobbery and racial prejudice, which led to discrimination of locals:

The British have been administering Malaya for over a century, yet the people in Britain know very little about Malaya... The stories with British heroes subtly preached the superiority of the 'orang puteh' in every imaginable situation... Now with snobbery returning to Singapore, some Europeans here... are daily becoming more 'snooty'... Let them be more human, more friendly, and forget their colour, and they will find Asians more friendly to them.<sup>11</sup>

As much as Ooi was critical of Western attitudes and some Westernised Asians, he expressed in the *Straits Echo* in 1972 that he did not support the erasure of place names and other markers of Malaysia's colonial heritage. He wrote: "New histories are being written in [Asia and Africa to] rub out former colonial influences.

Ooi was also a passionate advocate of what we would today call multiculturalism, which he saw as a necessary foundation for unity and progress in Malaysia. In 1941, Ooi wrote in the *Malaya Tribune* that "[t]he Straits Chinese, through their long association with Malays understand the Malays better than new arrivals from China... [who] do not know their language and seldom mix with them".<sup>7</sup>

Thirty years later, in 1972, he wrote that the "Malayan Chinese must cultivate a Malayan consciousness and consider themselves people of this country and of nowhere else... the Straits Chinese or Babas endorsed this view because they considered themselves assimilated or integrated Malaysians".<sup>8</sup>

### Western Influence

However, Ooi was also critical of the Straits Chinese for their British affectations, political apathy and class snobbery. "It is the Chinese from the fourth generation onwards who are more British than the British and



Histories can be written to suit the new people in power, but previous historical influences are embedded deep in the subconscious minds of the people. Their cultures, religions, languages and social customs will contain earmarks of the waves of civilisations that had washed over them in the course of centuries.<sup>12</sup>

### Curtailing Press Freedom

Ooi was a consummate newspaperman and believed that freedom of the press was essential.<sup>13</sup> He had spent most of his journalistic career in Singapore and believed that the independence of Singapore's newspapers was being eroded.

He revealed in an interview that during his two-year tenure at the *Eastern Sun* between 1966 and 1968, he had experienced run-ins with then Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Lee had "on several occasions, in front of all the other editors in Singapore (he called us up as a group very often), accused me of being an MCA [Malaysian Chinese Association] or UMNO [United Malays National Organisation] spy. Also, he often sent his political commissars to our office to see what we were doing, PAP [People's Action Party] agents were put on our staff and morale was very low."<sup>14</sup> This was one of the major reasons why Ooi subsequently left Singapore in 1968 and moved to Kuala Lumpur.

In that same interview, Ooi described 1971 as a "disastrous year" for journalism in Singapore. That was the year Lee had shut down the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald*, and also jailed the owner and

editors of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* Chinese newspaper without trial. In an unpublished 1971 manuscript about the history of English-language newspapers in Malaya, Ooi attributed Lee's actions to his suspicions that the press was "being financed by foreign interests to gain control of Singapore... [w]hatever his bogeys are, the press in Singapore is a docile and commercial one controlled by him."<sup>15</sup>

In a 1972 commentary in the *Straits Echo*, Ooi called for newspapers in Singapore and Malaysia to be separated. "If Singapore does not want foreign capital in and foreign control of its newspapers, why should Malaysia allow Singapore capital to control Malaysian newspapers?" he argued. "Malaysia should have her own independent Press."<sup>16</sup>

Ooi also frequently, both in private and in public, railed against the insularity and parochialism of Singaporeans. "Though Singapore claims to be a metropolis, yet the average Singaporean is more parochial than village folks... While Singapore has made economic progress, it has lost its soul. Money is the god Singapore worships."<sup>17</sup>

### Family, Culture and Nation

Ooi's writings reflect the issues he cared most about – culture, identity, ethnicity, language, education and race relations – which are still salient today in both Singapore and Malaysia. Though still contentious in societal terms, the national and familial contexts are more positive than what Ooi had come to believe towards the end of his life.

Ooi's descendants have fared well. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren in Malaysia have married across ethnicities and cultures and are fluent in multiple languages. Several of them, mostly women, did their undergraduate studies in England in engineering, law, accountancy and economics, and all returned home (to Malaysia) thereafter. English remains the dominant family language, as are Western attire, music and other "cultural" habits.

I'm sure my grandfather would be pleased that scholarly research on Straits Chinese history and culture is flourishing today, and that there has been a revival of Straits Chinese arts and culture in both Singapore and Malaysia, with thriving Peranakan associations, cuisine, performing arts and literature. Explorations of local history and "heritage" that formed such a large part of his writing have become popular, even entrenched, in both countries.

As a teenager in Singapore, I wanted to be a writer and corresponded with my grandfather who lived in Malaya at the time. Education had always been important to him, and he wanted his daughter, Irene, to go to university, which the Second World War and familial disruptions had sadly rendered impossible. Despite his antipathy to foreign university education and academics, he was very proud when I went to Cambridge University as an undergraduate, then the pinnacle of British colonial academic aspirations, and later to Yale.

I think he would have been pleased to learn of my own inclinations towards writing popular commentaries on current affairs, which were published in newspapers like the *Straits Times* when I was doing my PhD. These include pieces challenging the status quo (in my case, primarily on economic policy, but also on race, inequality and East-West tensions), which could be considered the kind of "political writing" he had done.

In my retirement, I co-founded and co-edit an academic blog promoting scholarship "of, for and by Singapore", which also advocates for academic freedom.<sup>18</sup> In Singapore in 2017, I gave a keynote speech at my alma mater, Methodist Girls' School, closely tracking my grandfather's own arguments for multiculturalism, but for the 21st century. This was years before I read his work.<sup>19</sup> To paraphrase a popular saying, the durian does not fall far from the tree. ♦



(Below left) R.B. Ooi working on his typewriter, date unknown. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

(Below) R.B. Ooi's descendants in Malaysia have married across ethnicities and cultures. Courtesy of Irene Lim.



### THE R.B. OOI AND EDNA KUNG COLLECTION

Donated in 2023 by Mrs Irene Lim, daughter of R.B. Ooi, the more than 300 items in the collection include typescripts of Ooi's articles, which cover a range of topics besides the economic, social and political situation in the region.

Other highlights are his articles for the Foreign News Service such as "The New Nation of Malaysia" (c.1962); an unpublished article, "The English Press of Malaysia and Singapore" (1971); scripts for Radio Malaysia, including one for "Window on the World" about the death of former Indonesian president Sukarno; and personal letters and photographs.

Materials from the collection can be viewed at Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library via online reservation from the third quarter of 2024.



R.B. Ooi (seated, left) with his Straits Chinese friends, date unknown. Courtesy of Irene Lim.

### NOTES

- Excerpt from letter from R.B. Ooi to his daughter Irene Lim dated 21 November 1969. The letter is among the materials donated by Lim to the National Library of Singapore for the R.B. Ooi and Edna Kung Collection. For more on Lim's life, see Irene Lim, *90 Years in Singapore* (Singapore: Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd., 2020). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 307.7609595 LIM). An excerpt from this memoir was published as Irene Lim, "Asthma, Amahs and Amazing Food," *BiblioAsia* 16, no. 4 (January–March 2021): 64–68.
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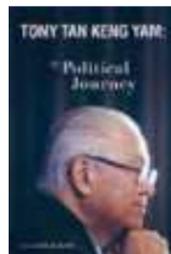


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By National Library Board and Urban Redevelopment Authority

National Library Board and Urban Redevelopment Authority (2023), 252 pages  
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By Benjamin J.Q. Khoo and Peter Borschberg, with an Introduction by Kwa Chong Guan

The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (2023), 124 pages  
Call no.: RSING 303.482595704 KHO

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