

# Early Tourist Guidebooks to Singapore

## The Handbook to Singapore (1892)



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*"No part of the world is now to be sacred from the intrusive foot of the tourist and where the traveler goes, guide-books will ultimately follow...."*

G. M. Reith, Padre in partibus, p. I

Travellers from Europe saw their journey to the East cut down by as much as half when the Suez Canal opened in 1869. Steamships, helped along with advances in their engine development, were preferred over sailing ships as they proved faster and more efficient. Beginning as mail services dispatching post, ships from companies like the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company soon became vessels for ferrying passengers. In turn, travelogues written by the adventurous sojourner who happened to be sailor, civil servant or missionary soon evolved into travel guides published by travel companies for the paying tourist seeking a leisurely but safe journey to the mystical but demystified Far East.

### A USEFUL VADE-MECUM

At a time when guidebooks for the Western hemisphere were being churned out by such publishers as Murray and Badaecker, Rev. George Murray Reith, resident minister of the local Presbyterian Church, took it upon himself to write a handy guide to Singapore for visitors to the town.

*"It is intended to supply a felt want in Singapore; to give in a handy form some notes historical, descriptive, scientific, &c, in regard to the town and island; to afford what information is necessary to guide visitors during their stay, and to obviate some of the difficulties which travelers always encounter in a strange place."* (Reith, 1892, p. iii).

This "useful vade-mecum" (Reith, 1892, p. iii) or ready reference was designed to help visitors who had merely a few hours to a few days in the town. In contrast, earlier guides that had preceded it, namely, *The Stranger's guide to Singapore* (1890) by B. E. D' Aranjó and *Picturesque and busy Singapore* (1887) by T. J. Keaghran had proved too "limited" in their "scope" (Aranjo's) (Reith, 1892, p. iii) or "too general to be of practical value" (Keaghran's) (Reith, 1892, p. iii).



Inside page to *Handbook to Singapore* (Reith, 1892)<sup>1</sup>.

Segmented into 15 chapters, the guide starts off with a condensed historical overview of Singapore beginning with its founding in 1819 by Stamford Raffles<sup>2</sup> and giving insightful details of events prior to 1900. Reith's historical overview is based on Buckley's articles in the *Singapore Free Press* entitled *Anecdotal history of Singapore* which later was to be published as an important text on Singapore's history.

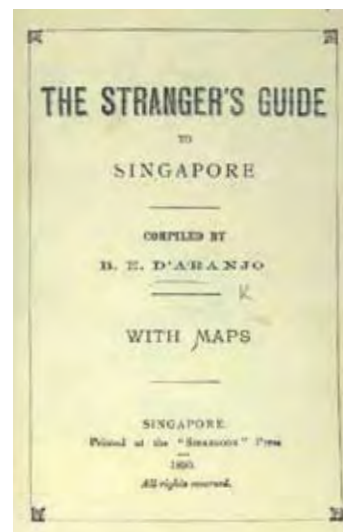
### DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ENVIRONS

Following this is a general description of the town and its environs, walking tours or drives, descriptions of buildings and landmarks as well as places of worship and hospitals. Reith does not merely describe landscape and landmark, but waxes lyrical over scenery and the island's natural beauty. For example in describing the approach to Singapore from the west, he notes:

*"The scenery has a quiet beauty that impresses every spectator; and as the water in the channel is generally smooth, all are able to enjoy the prospect. Every now and then the ship startles a gar-fish that skips nimbly over the surface of the water to a safe distance. Occasionally a golden-coloured watersnake may be seen hurrying away from the bows."* (Reith, 1892, p. 26).

He highlights details which set off the unusual beauty surrounding the island. For example, in the same passage he points to a common optical illusion in which the distant southern islands seem to be suspended above the sea.

In Chapter Four, he gives directions for four tours around and beyond the town, each one accommodating a tourist's length of stay which could vary from a few hours to half a day. The tours skirt around the wharves through the town to locations such as the Botanical Gardens, the Impounding Reservoir (MacRitchie Reservoir), a climb up Mount Faber, and a carriage ride to Johore



Inside page to *The Stranger's Guide to Singapore*, 1914.

Bahru. In delineating the journeys, Reith also paints a three-dimensional picture of Singapore town in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, highlighting familiar locations and landmarks now long forgotten, and capturing the leisurely lifestyle of the expatriate along with the labouring duties of the natives.



**View of the Harbour (Souvenir of Singapore, 1914, p. 6).**

*“(There) lies the Esplanade (Padang Besar) a large plain, encircled by a well-laid-out carriage drive. The Singapore Cricket Club, and the Singapore Recreation Club divide the plain between them for the purpose of cricket, tennis, bowls, and other athletic sports, and in the centre stands a fine statue of Sir T. Stamford Raffles, erected in 1887. A large part of the Esplanade occupies ground recently reclaimed from the sea; and it is now a favourite afternoon resort of the residents. On the landward side are the Hotel de l’Europe (Punchaus Besar) and St. Andrew’s Cathedral (Greja Besar)...”* (Reith, 1892, p. 36).



**Buildings and landmarks around the Esplanade (Souvenir of Singapore, 1914, p. 12).**

He also gives an interesting perspective on the Raffles Library’s standing during that era with an interesting emphasis on J. R. Logan’s collection of philological works:

*“The Raffles Library and Museum (Tempat Kitab)... is well worth a visit, for the Library is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the East, and the Museum, which is being daily enriched by zoological, mineralogical, ethnological and archaeological collections from the Peninsula and the Archipelago, promises to be, in time, one of the finest exhibitions of its kind in Asia... There is a valuable collection of Oriental literature, called the Logan Library, access to which may be obtained by special permission from the Secretary.”* (Reith, 1892, pp. 36 – 37).

Chapter Five offers descriptions of public buildings and places of interest, listing them alphabetically, many of which are no longer extant. They include the gaol which used to stand at the Sepoy Lines, Boustead Institute and the Chinese Protectorate. Others are of large spaces like Bukit Timah hill, the dockyards and the esplanade. Many of them are of government buildings and civic locations although he does highlight unusual local buildings and sights such as the Shrine of Iskandar Khan and the Shrine of Habib Noor along with Whampoa’s garden.

Other useful information such as a listing of clubs, societies, banks, consulates, religious buildings, hospitals, hotels and shops are also compiled in subsequent chapters. Of pragmatic importance are the rates for hiring private and hackney carriages, listed with tables of distance and relevant fares. The principal steamship lines and agents along with a listing of ports

are given in a separate chapter. Statistical details of population, imports, exports, shipping and even weather conditions reflect the dynamics between trade and people in Singapore at the turn of the century. There is even a chapter on the fauna, flora and geology of the island. He credits W. Davison of the Raffles Library and Museum for his work on the fauna, and H. N. Ridley for his piece on the flora and geology of Singapore, both of which were published in his handbook.<sup>3</sup>

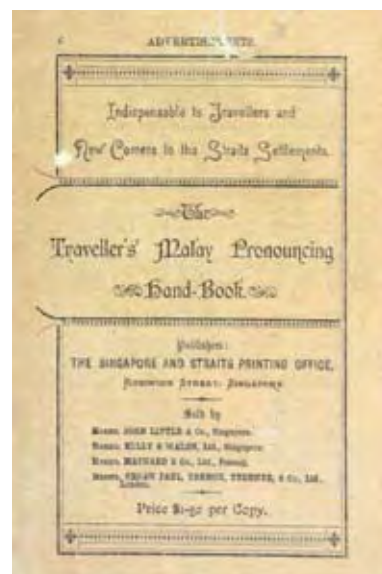
## COLLOQUIAL EXPRESSIONS

Throughout the text, Reith gives the colloquial place names mainly in Malay of colonial buildings and landmarks with footnotes giving pronunciation as well as English translations. A longer listing of Malay place names alongside their English names are given in Chapter 9, revealing how the locals viewed some of these colonial landmarks. For example, the Masonic Hall was known familiarly as “Rumah Hantu” (Reith, 1892, p. 90) or “Haunted House” and so the Methodist Episcopal Church that had just been established beside it was known as “Greja dekat Rumah Hantu” (Reith, 1892, p. 90) or the “church near by the Haunted House”. Also listed are Malay terms for giving directions to hackney carriage drivers such as “Turn the Carriage” – “Pusing kreta”, “Light the lamps” – “Pasang pelita (or Lampo)”, “Too much” – “Banyak chukup” and “Off with you!” – “Pulang!” (Reith, 1892, p. 92-93). He concludes with advice to purchase the *Malay pronouncing hand-book*, published in 1886, to better equip the visitor in communicating with the locals.

A full chapter, the last in the book, focuses on the Malay language and literature and was commended by Paul Kratoska in the introduction to the 1985 reprint as “a competent summary of the then current views on the Malay language” (Reith, 1985, p.v). Here, Reith reveals his appreciation for the poetic nuances found in local expressions:

*“Many of the common words and phrases of ordinary life are, from a Western point of view, highly poetical, owing to the childlike, but artistic combination of ideas that are not naturally connected. The Malay, for example, calls the sun Mata-hari, “the eye of day,” he speaks of a brook as anak sungei, “the son of a river,” when he is sorrowful or angry he says he is sakit hati, “sick at heart”...”* (Reith, 1892, p. 130)

Reith also introduces the reader to the wealth of Malay literature ranging from its dramatic legends to the profound truths found in *pantuns* or poems while lamenting the loss of “a valuable collection of Malay manuscripts,



**Advertisement for a popular book on Malay vocabulary (Reith, 1892, Advertisements, p. 6).**



made by Sir Stamford Raffles" (Reith, 1892, p. 133) when his ship went up in flames.

## ILLUSTRATIONS AND ADVERTISEMENTS

Although there are no sketches, photographs or illustrations, there is a useful map of Singapore with an accompanying index. Interestingly, a plan of the Botanical Gardens is also the only other illustrated panel in this publication. Unfortunately, the Library's copy lacks the town map and plan of the gardens. Eleven pages of text-based advertisements end off the guide and show some aspects of the early companies and agencies that helped fuel the tourist trade.



The dining room of a hotel (Souvenir of Singapore, 1914).

## REPRINTS, REVIEWS AND REMISS

Reith had taken some pains to ensure that the published information was accurate although in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this had proved difficult. Even so, Reith had pre-empted a reprint of the guide saying: "... it is hoped that future editions... will correct the errors that may have crept into this edition" (Reith, 1892, p. iii). Indeed, some 15 years later, Walter Makepeace would help update the guide, adding an extra chapter on the Federated Malay States and photographic plates of landmarks and sights in Singapore by G. R. Lambert, besides providing the most current statistical and informative data for 1907. This version of the guide remained highly valued with a reprint made in 1985 by Oxford Press with an insightful introduction by Paul Kratoska.

Mary Turnbull, in her review of the 1985 reprint summarises the handbook's value succinctly, thus accounting for its repeated reprints across almost a century:

*"Designed for the days of leisurely sea travel, the Handbook is more informative than more modern counterparts, assuming an intelligent interest in government and civic matters. It thus provides the modern reader with a clear picture of some aspects of Singapore life at the turn of the century, although heavily slanted towards the expatriate minority."* (Turnbull, 1988, p. 302).

Kratoska, in his introduction to the 1985 reprint of the handbook, notes that "Something of the character of the late Victorian traveler can be seen from the information Reith provides

and the sights he recommends. The attraction was not Asia but European activities and accomplishments in Asia, and the city's main points of interest were the fruit of the Public Works Department's art." (Reith, 1985, pp. v – vi). Turnbull, however, counters Kratoska's criticism of the text as being European-centric by pointing out that "the guide was enterprising for its day in recommending strolls through the "native quarters" and shopping forays into the "Thieves Market" in Rochor (Turnbull, 1988, p. 302).

Reith seemed aware of the cultural tightrope he walked when writing his guides and travelogues, and had published an open apology for any offence inadvertently made which he published in his subsequent book, *Padre* (1897):

*"If offence has been given by some of my remarks and criticisms, I am heartily sorry; none was intended: but in this age one cannot put pen to paper without unwittingly wounding somebody's sensibilities, especially when the manners and customs of other nations are involved... Nations very naturally feel hurt when they are taken at anything lower than their own estimate, or described in terms which do not correspond with their own glorified ideas of themselves. But the description that startles and hurts them does not mean envy or malice in the describer – at least not usually; it is sometimes done with the best intentions."* (Reith, 1897, p. ii)

And then as if to explain both why such offence is likely to be made by one especially from the British Isles, and how the Briton can sustain similar criticisms, he says:

*"The Briton seems to be the only person in the world who can take the prick of a foreign free-lance with a laugh and a careless shrug of the shoulders. This no doubt is due to the invulnerable vanity and insufferable arrogance of the Anglo-Saxon, about which other nations are in a chronic state of eloquence... Most of our countrymen, however, live in healthy and blissful ignorance of what their neighbours think and say of them: and it is well that they should be so."* (Reith, 1897, p. ii)

Both Kratoska and Turnbull agree that the handbook is a child of its time – "a competent guide to a colonial city and a colonial way of life" (Reith, 1985, p. x) as well as offering "a justifiable pride in showing off the settlement to visitors" (Turnbull, 1988, p. 302). It was after all written from a British perspective for the Western tourist and we must read it with a Scotsman's sense of humour!

The guidebook can be read online at the Singapore Pages at <http://sgebooks.nl.sg/details/020000003.html>. The 1907 reprint by Walter Makepeace as well as the Oxford Press 1985 reprint are also available at the National Library. Photographic plates for this article were derived from the *Souvenir of Singapore*, 1914 which is also available at the Singapore Pages at <http://sgebooks.nl.sg/details/020000029.html>. ■



The local people (Souvenir of Singapore, p. 8).

# About George Murray Reith

(b.1863, Aberdeen Scotland – d.1948, February 27, Edinburgh)

## EARLY LIFE

The eldest son of Dr Archibald Reith, George Murray obtained his MA at Aberdeen University in 1884 and furthered his education at New College, Edinburgh. He assisted at Dundee Mc-Cheyne Memorial before being ordained at the London Free Church Presbytery. Then he was sent to serve in Singapore in 1889 where he was made the minister of the local Presbyterian church in Singapore between 1889 and 1896.

## PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

He was the eighth minister appointed to the Presbyterian church since the founding of the local church in 1856. It came under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery of London (North) as many of the merchants who attended this church would retire to London. However, the church was always associated with the Scots who had formed the first congregation. The church building at Stamford Road was established more than a decade earlier in 1878 prior to Reith's arrival. Ministers stayed between four and six years, so Reith's term of about seven years was considered long. He preached at the Presbyterian church as well as the Boustead Institute each Sunday. Besides this, he also conducted monthly lectures on Church history and Biblical Criticism along with special classes on the background to Scotland. He was unafraid to engage the authorities in controversial matters such as labouring on Sundays<sup>4</sup> and the problems of gambling at the races. Nicknamed the Presbyterian padre, likely after his publication *Padre in partibus* (1897), he was succeeded by Rev S. Stephen Walker in 1896 after which Reith returned to Edinburgh in Scotland.

## COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS

As a parting gift, the community in Singapore gave him a silver ink stand – a sign of how his contribution to Singapore town was greatly appreciated. Besides serving as preacher and minister, he was also founder and the first secretary-treasurer of the Straits Philosophical Society which began in 1893. In addition, he was also a committee member of the Straits Settlements Association as well as the Straits Asiatic Society, Raffles Institution and Raffles Library. He also gave direction to the local Theological Society which held monthly meetings. He remained active in the community even after he left Singapore, contributing to the local press, writing particularly of the Scottish community until as late as 1910. Locally, he was most known for publishing the *Handbook to Singapore* in 1892, which was then revised by Walter Makepeace and republished in 1907. The later version was republished in 1985 by Oxford Press almost a century later.

## LIFE IN SCOTLAND

Upon his return to Scotland, he was appointed minister to St Cuthbert's United Free Church, Edinburgh in 1898. He continued writing and served as editor of the *Proceedings and Debates of the Free Church General Assembly* in Great Britain from 1900. His poor health led him to resign from St. Cuthbert in 1911 although he continued ministry serving as minister to Cumbernauld Baird United Free Church in Glasgow between 1916 and 1917.

## QUOTATION

"Do not believe all the evil things that well meaning and religious people with ample leisure write and say about their fellow countrymen abroad, and the worse things they imagine about them. Do not withdraw yourself from the life of the place, for fear of contamination. Mingle freely with people of all ranks and classes, learn their lives, carrying with you the white flower of a blameless life and you will find, that though the social life is freer, and the morality more lax than that to which we have been accustomed in Europe, the hearts of most are sterling gold – metal which may be worked up, and worked up by you, to adorn the temple of God." – (The Presbyterian Church. (1896, April 27). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, p.2)

## FAMILY

**Father:** Dr Archibald Reith, Aberdeen.

**Sister:** Mary Reith, eldest sister (b.1865? - d. 1947, March 25). She had married James Moffatt, the learned theologian who became well known for his translation of the Bible.

**Wife:** May McNeill Bowie (m. 1907), daughter of Rev. John Sharp Bowie.

**Sons:** He had four sons.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Library's bibliographic record indicates "Imperfect copy".

<sup>2</sup> It does however touch on early references to the island in Malay legend found in the *Sejarah Melayu* and in the *Lusiad* of Cameon – a Portuguese epic.

<sup>3</sup> Davison's and Ridley's articles are found in chapter 13, but Davison's is an abridged version of the original.

<sup>4</sup> Reith argued against labour on Sunday despite the increase in wages. The matter was being discussed at the Colonial Office

particularly among shipping firms, docks and mariners. *The Straits Times*, (1891, September 21), p. 2.

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