

SINGAPORE - AN UNFAMILIAR PLACE

Singapore is an unfamiliar place to me.

According to J G Farrell's novel 'The Singapore Grip' (1978):

“The city of Singapore was not built up gradually, the way most cities are, by a natural deposit of commerce on the banks of some river or at a traditional confluence of trade routes. It was simply invented one morning early in the 19th century by a man looking at a map. ‘Here,’ he said to himself ‘is where we must have a city, half way between India and China. This will be the great halting-place on the trade route to the Far East....’ “

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles had arrived in Singapore in 1819 as an agent of the British East India Company. He recognised that the island was a natural choice for the new port. It lay at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, near the Straits of Malacca, and possessed a natural deep harbour, fresh water supplies, and timber for repairing ships. He found a small Malay settlement, with a population of a few hundreds, at the mouth of the Singapore River.

The Dutch had been stifling British trade in the region by prohibiting the British from operating in Dutch-controlled ports, or by charging them high tariffs.

According to Farrell:

“Although people had once lived there, the island of Singapore, when he arrived, was largely deserted except for a prodigious quantity of rats and centipedes. Rather ominously, Raffles also noticed a great many human skulls and bones, the droppings of local pirates...”

Raffles offered to recognise a man called Hussein as the rightful Sultan of Johor and provide him with a yearly payment. In return Hussein would grant the British the right to establish a trading post in Singapore. A formal treaty was signed in February 1819 and modern Singapore was born.

In June 1823 Raffles signed a second treaty with the Sultan extending British possession to most of the island. Raffles died in 1826 at the age of 44.

In the next few decades Singapore became an important port in the region. Its success was due mainly to the opening market in China, the advent of ocean-going steamships, and the production of rubber and tin in Malaya. Its status as a free port gave it a crucial advantage over other ports in the area.

Singapore was not much affected by World War 1 as the conflict did not spread to Southeast Asia.

After this War the British government spent \$500 million on building a substantial naval base in Singapore as a deterrent to the increasingly ambitious Japanese Empire. It was completed in 1939. It had the largest dry dock in the world, the third largest floating dock, and enough fuel tanks to support the entire British navy for six months. It was defended by heavy 15-inch naval guns and by RAF squadrons. However it had no fleet as the British fleet was fully occupied defending Britain.

Farrell says that:

“When you think of the city as it was (before the start of World War 2) you should not imagine an uncivilised frontier-town of the jungle. You had only to stroll around the centre of the city with its wide avenues and lawns and look at the monolithic government buildings, at the luxurious department stores and at the marmoreal dignity of the banks, to realise that Singapore was the work of a great and civilised nation.”

The author acknowledges that there were other parts of the city, the various native quarters where Tamils, Malays, and above all the Chinese lived, which were rather less imposing. In those areas Chinese secret societies undoubtedly performed monstrous crimes, kidnapped their own prominent citizens, fought out appalling territorial battles, and stunned themselves with drugs.

A visitor might have gone to drink and dance at one the large amusement parks. For twenty-five cents he could dance with the most beautiful taxi-girls in the East, listen to the loudest bands, and admire the dragons painted on the walls. The girls with dolls' painted faces would support him if he was likely to fall on the floor full of Tiger beer.

When the visitor staggered outside into the sweltering night, he would inhale the incomparable smell of incense, of warm skin, of meat cooking in coconut oil, of money and of frangipani.

Farrell describes the elegant European suburb of Tanglin where Walter Blackett, chairman of the fictional illustrious merchant and agency house of Blackett and Webb Ltd. lived with his family. Tanglin resembled any quiet European suburb with its winding tree-lined streets and pleasant bungalows. There was a golf course; and many houses had tennis courts and some had a swimming pool. On the whole life in Tanglin suburb was peaceful and leisurely.

“Yet if you looked more closely you would see that it was a suburb ready to burst at the seams with a dreadful tropical energy. Foliage sprang up on every hand with a determination unknown to our own polite European vegetation.”

“If you left your bungalow unattended for a few months while you went home on leave, you were likely to come back to find that green lariats had been thrown over every projecting part and were wrestling it to the ground, that powerful ferns were drilling their way between its brick, or that voracious house-eating insects, which were really nothing more than sharp jaws mounted on legs had been making meals of the woodwork.”

Farrell discusses Chinatown and the commercial city where the fictional Walter Blackett did battle on weekdays:

“Down there in the city, taking the place of the rats and the centipedes which had once made it their home, seething, devouring, copulating, businesses rose and fell, sank their teeth into each other, swallowed, broke away, gulped down other firms, or mounted each other to procreate smaller companies, just as they do elsewhere in other great capitalist cities.”

Farrell says that the people up in Tanglin were apparently detached from the sordid encounters below. They were detached especially from the densely packed native masses. However Tanglin residents depended on the city and on the mainland beyond the Causeway. Pressures were transmitted from one part of the organism to another; and also much further in time and in space to us the readers, and to Farrell himself as he sits at a table writing.

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