Edited by Nicholas Tarling

# Studying Singapore's Past


## C.M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore

# Studying Singapore's Past

## *C.M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore*

*Edited by*

*Nicholas Tarling*

NUS PRESS
SINGAPORE

Published by:

NUS Press
National University of Singapore
AS3-01-02, 3 Arts Link
Singapore 117569

Fax: (65) 6774-0652
E-mail: nusbooks@nus.edu.sg
Website: http://www.nus.edu.sg/nuspress

ISBN 978-9971-69-646-7 (Paper)



**National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Studying Singapore's past: C.M. Turnbull and the history of modern Singapore / edited by Nicholas Tarling. – Singapore: NUS Press, c2012.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN: 978-9971-69-646-7 (pbk.)

1. Turnbull, C. M. (Constance Mary) – Authorship. 2. Turnbull, C. M. (Constance Mary). History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005. 3. Singapore – Historiography. 4. Singapore – History. I. Tarling, Nicholas.

DS610.34
959.570072 — dc23 OCN781234324

*Cover image*: View of electronic tramcars plying along North Bridge Road and High Street (Courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore).

Printed by: C.O.S. Printers

# *Contents*

# *Introduction*

When the sad news of Mary Turnbull's death arrived in 2008, the idea of a Nachschrift at once emerged. That it has taken so long to produce does not imply any reluctance to contribute. Contributors were simply anxious to do their best.

It was in keeping with her sustained role in teaching as well as research that the Nachschrift should include work by younger scholars as well as those more senior.

Books of this kind need a focus even apart from the inspiration provided by the person whose memory they honour. Mary taught in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong as well as in Singapore, so much in the early years in KL that she claimed she could "count students instead of sheep to get to sleep".

Though her 1962 thesis was on the Straits Settlements and their transfer to the Colonial Office in 1867, and it was subsequently turned into a major book, her latter-day research turned her towards the Commonwealth more than Southeast Asia. In particular, she worked on Malcolm MacDonald, though finding his biography, as she put it, "so complicated, with such voluminous archives spread over many continents and a long span of time", that it did not "lend itself to in-depth research in any one area".

It was, however, in Singapore that she made her strongest mark, in particular by producing what became the most widely-used history of Singapore. The focus of the Nachschrift is thus primarily on Singapore, but that provides only a partial definition of its perimeter.

Mary was a scholar who enjoyed controversy and expected debate. It is not at all inappropriate that contributors felt free to comment on her work, if need be critically, as well as to appraise its impact. In some sense, the tribute is an evaluation, but the evaluation is also a tribute. And, just as it is appropriate to cover topics close to her heart, it is not inappropriate to add topics she did not pursue, or to point to evidence she did not utilise.

All those factors shape this book and help to give it coherence. We hope it not only provides a tribute to a distinguished historian, but also adds to the historiography of Singapore and to the debate among the issues that it raises.

The volume opens with P.J. Thum's entertaining and informative story of her life. That is followed by Karl Hack's discussion of *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005*, the third edition of which appeared after her death in 2009. He argues that it was "a teleological exercise in endowing a modern 'nation-state' with a coherent past that should explain the present".

Kevin Blackburn then discusses the book from a rather different point of view: if you were a musicologist, you might refer to its "reception history". When Singapore history was introduced into schools in 1984, the Ministry of Education's textbook drew on the chronology and themes she suggested. Her work thus helped generations of students to formulate their ideas about Singapore and its past, though now it is but one of several books on the subject.

P.J. Thum returns in a more critical vein as a third commentator on the work. Turnbull relied on English-language sources which he argues result in an incomplete picture of Singapore's history. Using the vernacular press, he argues, provides a fuller understanding of Chinese attitudes to the colonial government's post-war proposals on education, of student activism, and of episodes such as the Hock Lee bus strike.

Next follow two chapters that take the reader back from the closing years of colonial rule to the founding of modern Singapore. One comes from John Bastin, who was heading the History Department in KL when Mary countered insomnia by counting all those first-years, and is, of course, the world authority on Raffles. Raffles had promised to give the public a memoir on Singapore, but was hampered by the loss of his papers in the wreck of the *Fame*. Bastin believes that the *Historical Sketch* re-published here was, however, largely his work. Anthony Milner's paper argues that Raffles and other British officials of the period, with their concept of reconstructing a Malay "nation" under British tutelage, helped in the propagation of racial thinking among "the Malays".

Two more chapters move us back nearer to the end of the colonial period, the time, of course, when Turnbull began her own career as a civil servant. Kelvin Ng writes of the British Military Administration, which she claimed destroyed the goodwill that existed at the time of liberation. The reoccupation period, Ng argues, indeed had lasting consequences. Tony Stockwell writes of Governor Franklin Gimson, whom

Malcolm MacDonald thought might be too "starchy" for Singapore. The chapter reminds us of the trans-colony experience that senior imperial officials had, both, perhaps, an advantage and a disadvantage.

The last two chapters consider two aspects of what may be called the foreign policy of Singapore as a "nation-state", even though they begin in the colonial phase. Jason Lim discusses the overseas Chinese trade missions to China and Taiwan in 1956–1957, concluding that they had little success, but further polarised the Chinese community with respect to the question of citizenship. In the final chapter of the collection, the editor offers, by way of comment on Singapore's international position, some account of its stance on the future of other small neighbours of the two larger countries of the "Malay world", West New Guinea/Irian, Portuguese Timor, and Brunei.

Writing that, and collecting the other chapters from his fellow contributors, continually brought Mary's presence to mind, not only her writings, but the contacts and correspondence scattered but enjoyed over the greater part of half a century. Though she was demonstrably still sharp of mind and crisp of speech at the conference marking the editor's 75th birthday, age was soon to overtake her. The loss cannot be redeemed by a tribute, except to the extent that it stimulates interest in her work and in the historiography to which she contributed.

# 1

# Constance Mary Turnbull 1927–2008: An Appreciation[1]

*P.J. Thum*

## Early Life

Constance Mary Turnbull was born in West Lyham, Wooler in Northumberland on 9 February 1927, where her family had farmed the land for several generations. It was a difficult time for her family and for the country as a whole. Britain was still struggling to recover from the effects of the First World War. Having sold many foreign assets to pay for the war effort, and lost many others through enemy action, Britain had suffered a severe loss of foreign exchange earnings. This left the British economy more dependent upon exports, and more vulnerable to any downturn in world markets. But the war had permanently eroded Britain's trading position in world markets though disruptions to trade and losses of shipping. Overseas customers for British produce had been lost, especially for traditional exports such as textiles, steel, and coal. Churchill's restoration of the gold standard in 1926 had also made British exports more expensive. For a farming family, dependent on the vagaries of the market and the land, it was a struggle to survive.

With the development of exciting new opportunities in the motor and the electrical goods industries, many people left the land and headed to the cities to seek their fortune. Among them was Turnbull's father,

David Turnbull, who sold his farm and moved the family to Coventry, then the centre of the motor industry, in 1929. An early memory of Turnbull's demonstrated how common this occurrence was. The teacher in her Church of England primary school asked the class how many of them had been born in Coventry. Out of the 50 students in the class, only five raised their hands.

The family struggled on, living a simple existence amidst the Great Depression. When she was four, her mother, Edna Turnbull Williamson, got a job as a supply teacher. With Turnbull not yet due to start school, she was shipped off to the Isle of Man, where her mother's family were from, to live with her grandparents. She would later remember those "six idyllic months in the Isle of Man" with great pleasure.[2]

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, all the schoolchildren were evacuated eight miles to the south, to the Warwickshire town of Leamington Spa. While it later would be home to the Free Czechoslovak Army, at the time it was considered sufficiently far from the major industrial and military centres to be safe. However, nothing happened over the next eight months. It was the time of the Phoney War, as British and French troops sat entrenched on the Maginot Line, and the Germans on the Siegfried Line. They sat and stared at each other all winter. As time dragged on, people started drifting back home, and it was finally decided to send all the children back to school.

In the summer of 1940, however, bombing raids on Coventry began. The city not only contained major metal working industries, including cars, bicycles, and aeroplane engines, but since 1900 had developed a large munitions industry. Coventry was, therefore, in terms of what little international legal precedent that existed governing the subject, a legitimate target for aerial bombardment.[3]

Like many of the industrial towns of the English West Midlands which had been industrialised during the Industrial Revolution, industrial development had occurred before zoning regulations had come into existence. Many of the small and medium-sized factories were woven into the same streets as the workers' houses and the shops of the city centre.

However, there also existed large interwar suburbs of private and council housing, which were relatively isolated from industrial buildings as a result of being built after the zoning regulations had been made law. It was in one of these that the Turnbull family resided — on Harefield Road — and as a result, they managed to escape unscathed from the massive "Coventry Blitz" of 14 November 1940. It destroyed over 4,000 homes and over three-quarters of the City's factories. Turnbull's house had

its windows blown out and its roof knocked off, and a few houses around hers had suffered direct hits, but none of her neighbours were killed.

All the schools that survived the bombings were closed, and Turnbull was sent to Bangor, Wales, to live with her great-aunt. For the rest of the year, she attended Bangor High School with her cousins and led a "normal sort of existence".[4] When the local children spoke to them in Welsh, she and her refugee classmates would retaliate by speaking to them in French. She attributed her good knowledge of French and her ability to spell the name of one of the villages to which she was sent (Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch) to this beginning.

The next spring, the schools reopened, and Turnbull returned, just in time for another two massive raids on 8/9 April and 10/11 April. But by that stage, the city had adapted. The schools remained open and her studies continued.

As the war dragged on, food became scarce. Hunger was a constant companion, although she never starved. Small pleasures like peanut butter (which, inexplicably, was never rationed) were treasured. Spread on a small loaf of rationed bread, shared with a friend, it tided her over between breakfast and dinner.

In later life, Turnbull would not speak much of this traumatic stage of her life, except to tell the occasional humorous anecdote. One of her favourites was to explain how, in the aftermath of the Coventry blitz, the Germans invented the word *coventrieren*. Mistaken in their belief that they had wiped Coventry off the map, *to coventrate* meant to destroy utterly. Turnbull would always relate this anecdote with great relish, her wartime defiance rising again to the fore.

This spirit of defiance helped her when in the middle of the war, her secondary school's headmistress gathered the pupils and told them that in order to beat Hitler, they were all going to have to get A's in every subject at their School Certificate Examinations.[5] A gasp went around the room, as nobody at Stoke Park School had managed it even in peacetime. However, when the results were announced, Turnbull had done her part. Studying in bombed-out classrooms with no tables or chairs, she still managed to get all A's and win a county scholarship. "I don't think Hitler ever knew that," she wryly commented much later in life. "I think there were other reasons why he lost the war."

With her unprecedented success, her school sent her to Oxford at age 16 for an interview. Sitting in the waiting room, she was surrounded by girls from public schools, all of whom had been polished and prepared

for the interview and were full of self-assurance and confidence. In the interview, an eminent female historian looked down at Turnbull and told her she "had never heard of this Stoke Park School". Turnbull was told she was too young to apply and to come back the next year.

Entirely put off by her experience, Turnbull elected instead to go to Bedford College at the University of London, where she studied under an even more eminent female historian — Dame Lillian Penson, later the first female Vice-Chancellor of the University of London.

Graduating in 1947, she joined Imperial and Chemical Industries as a Training and Personnel Officer the following year. Then at the zenith of its power, ICI was a product of the same interwar industrial expansion that had shaped Turnbull's early life. Formed just three months before Turnbull was born, its range of products included pharmaceuticals, chemicals, explosives, fertilisers, non-ferrous metals, and paints, and looked towards a future of human mastery over the physical world.

Turnbull also yearned for a better, brighter, more promising future. She found the poverty and rationing of post-war London depressing. It was dreary, dull, and grey. Opportunities for women in post-war Britain were few and far between. Turnbull quietly resented the restrictions the economy and society placed upon her, and her heart longed for adventure and fun.

## Malaya

In 1952, having arrived early for an appointment in London, Turnbull walked into the Appointments Board office near Euston Station and said to the person in charge, "Have you got something exciting a long way away where the sun shines?"

Working hours having just started, the lady was still opening the post. She had just opened a letter from the Colonial Office asking for six women to be recruited. She offered it to Turnbull, saying, "What about Kuala Lumpur?"

"Well, that sounds perfect." Turnbull replied.

Surprised at her quick response, the lady asked, "Where is it?" Neither of them knew, nor did anyone else in the office, so they had to get an atlas out to find it.

A huge amount of manpower was being consumed with the Malayan Emergency and they were short of Administrative Officers to run the District Offices throughout the Federation of Malaya. As Britain had already committed to independence in the Federation of Malaya, the

Colonial Office was reluctant to recruit more men to the service as they would be permanent staff and would have to be reassigned to other colonies after Malayan independence. At the same time, the local University of Malaya had been established in 1949 and was just about to produce its first graduates. It was expected that these people would form the backbone of the future civil service.

As such, it was decided that they would recruit six women just to tide over the manpower shortage, freeing up the men to work in the rural District Offices at the frontline of the Emergency. Turnbull was offered a three-year contract, which she gladly accepted. Her family, largely on the basis of the film *The Planter's Wife*, had formed an alarmist picture of life in Malaya during the Emergency.[6] They did their best to dissuade her, but she was not to be talked out of it.

When the Chief Secretary of the Federation of Malaya, Sir David Watherston, learnt women were being recruited, he cancelled the scheme. Watherston argued the natives would never work under women. Turnbull, however, had already been despatched, and thus became one of only two female officers ever in the Malayan Civil Service.

Coming from grey, spartan England, Malaya seemed to Turnbull a technicolour land of plenty. She arrived in the midst of tremendously exciting times. With perfect timing, she had arrived just as the worst of the Emergency was over, and in time to observe all the milestones of Malayan independence.

Her posting in Kuala Lumpur was to the Establishment Office, similar to what she had been doing before with ICI. Her predecessor was tremendously happy to see her, as it freed him to take up the District Officer post in Ulu Rompin, Pahang, a dangerous and critical post. Turnbull's work, though confining her to Kuala Lumpur, enabled her to have a deep understanding of the workings of the government throughout the Federation. Among her responsibilities was to report back all cases of accidents, illness, hospitalisation or death. Due to the Emergency, there were a large number of casualties. All of them had to be reported as quickly as possible to enable families to be informed before the standard 72-hour press embargo ended. It was a sobering duty.

An opportunity to escape Kuala Lumpur came during the 1955 Federal Elections. These were the Federation's first national elections, and it was very important that they were run smoothly and fairly. A shortage of Presiding Officers in Kelantan and Trengganu required many of the administrative officers to be sent out. Turnbull would forever retain vivid memories of how they were crowded into two little Douglas C-47 Dakota

airplanes, with everyone in a merry mood as it meant three days away from the office and all the files. In Kota Bharu, those who were posted north of the Kelantan River then got into a jeep, dropping off along the way until only two of them remained, destined for the town of Tumpat, Kelantan, just a few miles from the Thai border.

As the town was a traditional Muslim fishing village, it was decided Turnbull would speak to women voters and her colleague, the men. Also, the polling was scheduled from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. to allow the fishing fleet to go out. It was expected that the bulk of the voters would then turn up later in the day. However, when the polls opened at 10 a.m., there was already a massive queue of people, who waited quietly and patiently for their turn to vote. So vividly was the experience lodged in her mind that years later, Turnbull could still recall the individuals who arrived who were not on the register, describing each of them and how she worked out why each of them had not registered. In each case, she would tell them they could vote in the next election if they registered. "*Lain kali*," she said, meaning "next time". Unfortunately, her Malay was not up to scratch. "*Lain kali*" means "another time", and so as the polls were closing, all of them showed up again, thinking that she had meant that if they came back at the end of the day, she would sort out their problems and enable them to vote.

The Alliance swept to victory, winning 51 out of 52 seats and 81% of the total vote. The Alliance leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had built a solid consensus out of an extremely diverse multi-ethnic state. Recalling Britain's own indecisiveness in the 1950 and 1951 elections, she felt that Malayans had really given the British a good lesson in democracy and statesmanship.

## University of Malaya

In 1955, with her contract ending, and no possibility of renewal, Turnbull cast about for a new direction. By chance, she met Cyril Parkinson, Professor of History at the University of Malaya. Parkinson, who would later become famous for creating Parkinson's Law, was looking for someone to teach British history at the University of Malaya. He offered her a one-year post, which suited Turnbull. She had been thinking of returning to Britain to take a doctorate on Malayan history. The year would be a perfect time to gather materials for her thesis. However, one year would turn into two, and two into a lifelong career.

The Federation government were happy to release her a few weeks early, and so on 30 September 1955 she finished her work, attended a

small farewell party in her honour, got in her car and drove through the night to Singapore.

The overnight trip symbolised the change she encountered in Singapore. Officers at the Federation civil service were filled with worries about their future, but the staff and students at the University of Malaya looked forward with hope and optimism for a better tomorrow. Turnbull felt liberated, leaving a conservative bureaucracy to teach and engage with energetic and lively students.

The energy and excitement of Singapore both thrilled and scared her. The clarity of the Federation's political situation, starkly divided between "White" areas declared free of terrorists, and the dwindling "red" areas where communists lurked was in her past. Reading the English newspapers and listening to the politicians, it seemed as if Singapore seethed with subversion, with communists indistinguishable from nationalists, terrorists from patriots. Policing was much stricter and the hand of the state lay much more heavily upon the people. To her eyes, Singapore's greater law and order barely restrained the anger and bitterness of its subjects.

She was unable to access the Chinese world, although she did give it a good try. Among her papers is a beginner's course in Chinese that she never was able to complete. She also sympathised with the poverty of the population, the housing shortage that forced so many into little spaces, the mass unemployment, and the discrimination that the non-English-speaking faced.

However, she was horrified by the riots, the explosions of mass anger against the unfeeling government and the European elite. Although never personally in danger, the raging heat of resentment and bitterness scared her. Her instinctive sympathy for the British point of view, supported by the one-sided reporting of the *Straits Times*, and a war survivor's abhorrence of violence, ensured she would always condemn the explosive manifestations of the independence struggle. Without any ability to access the Chinese-speaking world, it would remain inscrutable to her, the language and culture a barrier she never was able to overcome.

Still, she contributed in her own way to the independence struggle. A visionary, Parkinson recognised that the University had to train independent Singapore's future administrators. He thus argued that the University should admit as many capable students as possible. The other departments did not share his vision, believing that the University was best served by limiting places to only the very best. However, Parkinson's own department stood behind him and admitted as many students as they could. Turnbull and her colleagues complained to one another about

being overworked, but recognised that they were working for the common good. As a result, the greatest proportion of independent Singapore's administrators had history degrees and had been taught by Mary Turnbull. By Turnbull's own reckoning, she worked twice as hard for Malaya when she was at the University as when she was in the Federation, and by all accounts, she did twice as much good.

Furthermore, Parkinson felt it was a ridiculous state of affairs that the University of Malaya taught a British and European history syllabus that was virtually identical to any British university. He devised a scheme to divide Malayan history amongst his department to research. From this came the beginnings of modern Malayan historiography. Turnbull chose the Straits Settlements as her speciality. From this research would later come her PhD thesis, "The Movement to Remove the Straits Settlements from the Control of India, Culminating in the Transfer to the Colonial Office in 1867". This would then become a book, *The Straits Settlements, 1826–67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony*, the first in a long and distinguished career.

Published in 1972, it was immediately recognised as "by far the best work done on the early history of the Straits Settlements". Khoo Kay Kim, writing in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, wrote that, "On a foundation of meticulous research", she had "traced the development of Straits society as a whole".[7] It remains the standard work on its subject. The depth of her research is illustrated by her discovery that the personal papers of Governor Orfeur Cavenagh (1859–1967) were in the possession of his grandson in western Canada. She personally went to convince his grandson to grant her access. They are now at the University of Victoria, BC.

One reason for her choice of this subject, as she always acknowledged, was convenience. Colonial documents in Singapore before the transfer to the Colonial Office in 1867 had been transferred to the Raffles Museum, while documents after 1867 had remained in the individual government offices. When the Japanese captured Singapore, they preserved the Museum, but many documents in government offices were lost during the Occupation. With paper in short supply afterward, many more documents were lost to looters. A rumour went around that some hawkers at the wet market were wrapping their fish and vegetables in governor's despatches from the late 1800s, but no one was ever able to confirm this.

Thus, between the surviving documents, and research carried out in England during the summer vacations, Turnbull was able to complete her work over several years, finally submitting her thesis to the University

of London in October 1961. Throughout this time, she carried a full teaching load as well. When the University of Malaya was divided into two in 1960, she moved to the Federation campus in Kuala Lumpur but carried on uninterrupted in her work.

## Family

Shortly after she had arrived in Malaya in 1952, a party was being held at the hotel where Turnbull was temporarily being housed. Some female colleagues asked to use Turnbull's room to change for the party, and invited her along as well.

Throughout the Emergency, there had been an unwritten rule that Kuala Lumpur was a neutral zone for both sides of the conflict. Consequently, there were no terrorist attacks on the capital itself, and anyone coming into KL who was legally entitled to carry guns surrendered them at the main police station. As a result, most of the local expatriate population poured into KL to relax at the weekend.

Amongst those arriving in KL that weekend to attend the party was the tall, dark Leonard Rayner. He strode into the party with two empty gun holsters on each hip, looking from all accounts like John Wayne. Surveying the room, his eye alighted on Turnbull and he asked her to dance. The cowboy turned out to be an accountant who worked for a coal mining company in Batu Arang. Ten years later, they were married.

By this time, he was based in Singapore, having started his own firm there, and was also Advisor to the Confederation of British Industry. Turnbull thus moved back to Singapore, where she and Leonard raised two daughters, Susannah (b. 1963) and Penelope (b. 1965).

However, motherhood did not slow Turnbull down. She continued to work and travel, but now she brought her two daughters along with her. In the days before jet travel, mass tourism and package tours, the lone indomitable woman and her two toddler daughters visited India, Africa, and Europe.

The political circumstances in Singapore continued to worry her from time to time. During the 1964 riots, Rayner, a member of the Volunteer Corps, was called up to active duty. The University and schools were closed and under curfew. During the day, Turnbull would obtain a curfew pass to go check on Rayner's office. Sorting the mail, it seemed that it largely consisted of letters from potential business partners in Australia and Canada who did not want to get involved in Singapore due to its uncertain political climate.

## Hong Kong

Within a few years, that climate began to turn against her. With the civil and security services thoroughly Malayanised, attention turned to the University. Europeans found their contracts restricted, their movements monitored, their lives made much more difficult. Suspicion fell on the University as a potential hotbed of radicalism and subversion. The humanities largely escaped unscathed, but the social sciences and other departments with many western academics were heavily scrutinised. On one occasion, the entire student body of the Political Sciences, Philosophy, and Sociology departments were summoned to the National Theatre, where they were warned of being overly influenced by their western tutors.

Singapore was moving forward and the government was determined to cast off its colonial past. The Rayners' house, originally leased from the government in the colonial era, was in danger of being terminated as the government wanted to turn it into a diplomatic residence. The girls' school, Raeburn Park, was scheduled for closure. Originally the school for port employees' children, it was situated on prime land in Tanjong Pagar. It was to be demolished as part of the port's expansion.

By 1971, Turnbull was the last expatriate left on the staff of the University, there for the sufferance on contract and not having a pleasant time at all. "The wrong gender and the wrong colour" in her words, she had none of the contractual rights that her colleagues did — no sick pay, no annual leave, no permanent contract. The University's obsession with shaking off colonialism even extended to forcing staff to teach their own ethnic background, regardless of their own speciality. Turnbull was forced to teach British history, of which she had comparatively little knowledge and had even less interest.

A post came up in the University of Hong Kong. They were starting a Master's programme in Comparative Asian Studies, and they wanted to put the emphasis on Southeast Asia to balance their traditional strength of China studies. The Head of the History Department encouraged her to apply. The opportunity was too good to pass up. She applied and got the post.

It was with a certain amount of sadness but a much greater amount of relief that Turnbull departed Singapore for Hong Kong. She found the University of Hong Kong to be a relief after the University of Singapore. Ironically, she experienced more freedom in the colony than in the independent country, as it was operating free of political involvement. The enormous restrictions and stultifying, politicised atmosphere of the

University of Singapore had made it impossible for her to pursue her research. Her ties to Singapore remained strong: Rayner would remain in Singapore to oversee his firm for several more years, she had many friends there, and many fond memories.

## A History of Singapore

Her strongest link, however, was the book which would make her name synonymous with Singapore history. She had already begun work on it in the late 1960s, but between family, work, and moving, it took her the better part of the decade to finish. She returned to Singapore to continue her research at every opportunity: Christmas, Easter, the long summer vacation were all spent in Singapore, partly at home with her family but mostly in the library and archives.

Part of the rationale for the book was the lack of a truly Singaporean history; Singapore had never been conceived of as an independent state. It was tied up with Johor, with Malaya, with the Straits Settlements, and with the wider British Empire, but never properly addressed on its own terms. A stronger rationale, however, was the political movement at that point in time, led by the People's Action Party (PAP) government, which declared that Singapore *had no* history, that the past was irrelevant, that Singapore's history started now. History had become unfashionable, portrayed as a colonial relic, an albatross around the neck of a young nation that yearned to fly free and forge its own destiny. It was even removed from the primary school syllabus in 1972, in favour of more "practical" subjects that prepared students to be part of the workforce in the future. As a historian, these events made Turnbull deeply uneasy and she believed them to be misguided and unconstructive. With her book, she set out to demonstrate the importance of Singapore's past to its present, to create the field of Singapore history, and to prove the PAP wrong.[8]

Published in 1977, reviews were excellent and praised her for creating the new field of Singapore history. Reviewing the book for the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Yeo Kim Wah praised her ability to separate Singapore from the Malayan mainland, presenting it on its own merits: "Skilfully synthesizing information gleaned from primary and largely secondary sources, Dr. Turnbull has succeeded in presenting the first scholarly and highly readable general history of Singapore."[9] However, he also felt that her book was best in the first few chapters and went downhill from there. The final chapter, discussing contemporary Singapore, felt weak, and her analysis appeared superficial. Turnbull took

these criticisms to heart, and when the next edition came out in 1988, the reviewer specifically praised her added chapters, which pulled no punches and delivered even-handed and insightful criticism of the PAP's later years.[10]

Yeo, in summing up his review of the first edition, agreed with Turnbull's introduction that the book was a beginning, not an end. It paved the way for further scholarship, and looked forward to a time where a definitive history would inevitably be published.

To Turnbull's amazement, over 30 years later, her book remained the standard text on Singapore history (and it still is today). The longevity of her work is testament to the quality of her research and writing.

However, it is also due to the purposeful promotion of her work by the Singapore government as orthodoxy. When the Singapore government finally woke up to the importance of a national education programme, it was Turnbull's understated, matter-of-fact historical narrative which became the basis for the official "Singapore Story".

Turnbull's work was more than convenient. Her values, born of the Great Depression, forged by Hitler's relentless bombing, and sharpened by the poverty of post-war Britain, emphasised stability, hard work, and thrift. These values influenced her work and were exactly the values that the Singapore government wished to inculcate. Her conservative approach to history, which told the story based upon the lives of politicians and leaders, mirrored the government's view of their achievements.[11]

However, the institutionalisation of her work as orthodoxy has also meant that the "Singapore Story" inherited its weaknesses. In particular, it rejects the possibility of alternative contexts to Singapore history. Turnbull herself, having been witness to much of Singapore's history, gave greater weight to personal experience and was doubtful of the merit of other perspectives. Her staunch defence of that approach has helped to legitimise the exclusion of other equally valid frameworks for Singaporean history.

In the introduction to her original 1977 edition, Turnbull had been careful to distinguish her history as a "sympathetic personal interpretation", writing that

> It is difficult to see that any 'standard' history of Singapore can be written for some time to come, since the diversity of cultural background and experience is so great that no foreigner or Singaporean of any one community can speak for the society as a whole ... it is presented in the hope that its limitations, omissions and faults may spur

> historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and others to fill in the gaps and correct misconceptions, in order that we may ultimately come to a greater understanding of the background of this young nation.

Over 30 years later, however, in the introduction to the third edition of *A History of Singapore* (re-titled *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005*), Turnbull specifically dismissed some of the challenges to her historical narrative as "infantile" and others as wistful nostalgia. She went so far as to explicitly criticise those who promoted an "alternative" history to the PAP version (and, indirectly, her work):

> Such 'vibrant diversity' was not music to the ears of investors, nor were the strikes, mass rallies, protest demonstrations and violence which accompanied it, and Singapore was to take the more prosaic path of eschewing ideology in favour of practical common sense in providing the security, jobs, housing, schools and other amenities of comfortable living.

However, she also expressed some worry at the pace of Singapore's growth and its costs. Just as chickens grown in battery cages develop health problems, stress, and aggression, Turnbull perceived that Singapore's crowdedness and relentless devotion to growth was "terrifying" and causing damage to its people.[12]

Ever aware of her responsibilities as a teacher, Turnbull had fought with her publisher (Oxford University Press) about the pricing of the book, forcing them to lower it substantially. She was not, however, able to do anything about the drab cover they put on it. This was not something she would permit in her next book, which followed shortly after. *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei* was published in 1979. Turnbull designed it as a basic textbook that integrated all of the British possessions in maritime Southeast Asia. It had a colourful cover and was priced attractively. Once again, it was well received, being praised for being "a clear synthesis of the great mass of events and developments that occurred", "very readable", and "of immense value" to teachers and students from undergraduates downwards.[13] At the same time, its structure remained premised entirely on the British colonial framework as a temporal and spatial reference.

Turnbull produced numerous journal articles and reviews, including a chapter about Malacca under British colonial rule in *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital, c. 1400–1980* in 1983. The second edition of

*A History of Singapore* was released in 1989. This time, she personally chose the cover illustration, an image of early Singapore.

She retired from the University of Hong Kong in 1990, a full Professor and Head of the History department. She and Leonard threw themselves into making a life for themselves in England. Leonard wanted to retire to the country, so they to chose to live in Sulgrave, Northamptonshire, near George Washington's ancestral home. It was not too far from London, where their children were, and convenient to Coventry, where her mother was.

Freed from the constraints of teaching and administration, her output multiplied. She kept up her research, holding visiting fellowships at Durham University and Cambridge University. A chapter on regionalism and nationalism in Southeast Asia was published in 1992 as part of the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia.*

In 1993, she was asked by Singapore Press Holdings, owners of the *Straits Times*, to produce an official history for their 150th anniversary on 15 July 1995. No history had been produced at the centenary as Singapore had been under Japanese Occupation, and the newspaper was eager to make up for it.

With less than two years to prepare and write the book, it was very rushed. It marked probably the most personally traumatic year of her life. Leonard contracted leukaemia, and Turnbull had to put all her work on the *Straits Times* history on hold while she looked after him in his final months. After his passing, with little time to grieve, she worked flat out, getting up at 5 a.m. and working until midnight every day. Already 67, she also had to take on gruelling travel to interview people and carry out research overseas. One trip involved a 13-hour flight to Singapore, a couple of days there for research and interviews, then a flight to Australia for one day, then back to Singapore for a few days, before flying back to Britain — where she promptly collapsed from the strain.

In addition, her house was burgled and many family heirlooms were stolen. On a trip north to visit friends and family, her car was burgled and burnt by the thieves to cover their tracks. In February 1995, on her birthday, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She kept going. Following an operation, she was given the all clear and the cancer never returned. Also in 1995, she was appointed to a Visiting Professorship at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and never missed her teaching duties. In 1995, right on schedule, *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of the Straits Times* was published.

1999 saw two more contributions to collaborative works: "Formal and Informal Empire in Southeast Asia" in volume 5 of the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, and "The Malayan Civil Service and the Transition to Independence", in *Administering Empire: The British Colonial Service in Retrospect*. She also wrote eight entries for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

The same year, alone in Sulgrave, Turnbull decided to move to Oxford and reconnect with academia. She was very active in the University community, attending many seminars and conferences. She also joined the local history society and enjoyed tramping about the county, visiting sites of historical interest. Her vitality despite her advancing age was a constant source of surprise to all who met her.

Not to rest on her laurels, her work took on new directions. In 2007, she presented new work on British colonialism and its role in the creation of the Johor Empire (which was published posthumously in 2009). A conference in her honour was held shortly after her 80th birthday that same year, celebrating and critiquing the continued dominance of *A History of Singapore* in the field of Singapore history.

Working tirelessly to the end, she submitted the final proofs to *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005* just two weeks before she passed away. It was published in 2009, reasonably priced, with a paperback cover, and an attractive cover photo contrasting old and modern Singapore that she had personally selected.

A tireless advocate and friend of Singapore, she also spent much time and effort promoting Southeast Asian studies in Oxford. She was a friend and mentor to many Singaporean students who passed through. But with typical grace and humility, she always felt surprised when they came to her doorstep, looking to meet the Grand Old Lady of Singapore history. A teacher to the end, she would read and critique their work, and tell them stories of Malaya as it had been, when she stepped off the airplane, a young woman looking for a little sunshine and adventure.

## Notes

1. Material drawn from the obituary in the *Straits Times* was written by the author, from John Gullick's obituary in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and from Mary Turnbull's interview with the Oral History Unit, National Archives of Singapore. Many thanks to Susannah and Penelope Rayner for their assistance.
2. Mary Turnbull, interviewed by Sashi Jayakumar, 12 February 2006, Oral History Unit, National Archives of Singapore.

3. Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, 13 February 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 117.
4. Turnbull, 12 February 2006, Oral History Unit.
5. Taken at 16, they were replaced by the GCE O Levels in 1951.
6. Starring Claudette Colbert, it was actually filmed in Sri Lanka.
7. Kay Kim Khoo, "Review of 'The Straits Settlements, 1826–67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony'", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4, 1 (1973): 147–8.
8. Turnbull, 12 February 2006, Oral History Unit; C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), p. 1.
9. Kim Wah Yeo, "Review of 'A History of Singapore, 1819–1975'", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, 1 (1979): 227–9.
10. Hugh Wilson, "Review of 'A History of Singapore, 1819–1988, 2nd ed.'", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 63, 2 (1990): 91–3.
11. See, for example, C.J.W.-L. Wee, "The Vanquished: Lim Chin Siong and a Progressivist National Narrative", in *Lee's Lieutenants*, ed. Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y.L. Tan (Singapore: Allen & Unwin, 1999); Albert Lau, "The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore", in *Imagining Singapore*, ed. Kah Choon Ban, Anne Pakir, and Chee Kiong Tong (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992); Kah Seng Loh, "Within The Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore", *Crossroads* 12, 2 (1998): 1–21; Hong Lysa, "Making the History of Singapore: S. Rajaratnam and C.V. Devan Nair", in *Lee's Lieutenants*, ed. Lam Peng Er Lam and Kevin Y.L. Tan (Singapore: Allen & Unwin, 1999); Hong Lysa, "The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, 3 (2002): 545–57.
12. Turnbull, 12 February 2006, History Unit.
13. Kay Kim Khoo, "Review of 'A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei'", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 55, 1 (1982): 89–90.

# 2

# Framing Singapore's History

*Karl Hack*

*Interest in the history of Singapore as a separate entity is a relatively modern phenomenon, and until recently her story has been treated as part of Malayan history.*

— C.M. Turnbull, "Introduction to the First Edition", in *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989, first edition 1977), p. xii

*… during the Ice Age, Southeast Asia was a single huge continent — a land-mass which included Indo-China, Malaysia and Indonesia. After the Ice Age ended there was a dramatic rise in sea-level that split up the continent into the archipelago of islands we see today.*

— Stephen Oppenheimer, *Eden in the East: The Drowned Continent of Southeast Asia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 17

## Introduction: Turnbull's Reframing of History

Mary Turnbull is most associated with *A History of Singapore* (1977 and 1989 editions), and with its posthumously published replacement, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005* (2009). This chapter argues that these works should be seen not just as the superbly crafted national histories that they are, but also as prime examples of how a geographical space's history can be framed, and reframed, over and again.

In *A History of Singapore* Turnbull talks about having written the history of a "young" Republic and "nation" that is referred to in anthropomorphised form as "she": as if state and nation are evolving life-forms.[1]

When Turnbull began writing these books in the early 1970s, she self-consciously set out to provide an authoritative, empirical, chronologically organised history for a country which had only been born on 9 August 1965: with Singapore's traumatic exit from Malaysia.

As such, *A History of Singapore* framed the entire of the island's history with reference to the post-1965 nation it would lead to. The work is, in essence, a teleological exercise in endowing a modern "nation-state" with a coherent past that should explain the present. This is history with a purpose, both in providing for a new market and academic discipline ("Singapore history"), and in helping the process of creating the embryonic object of discussion: Singapore. In stark terms, when Turnbull wrote, the very idea of "Singaporean" (as opposed to overseas Chinese, Malayan, British subject and other categories) was still being formed. Even the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) had assumed, before 1965, that the island's inhabitants would and should become "Malayans".

Turnbull's most famous works therefore embody a paradox. They adopt Rankean form — the empirical, chronological, story of how a nation and state evolved — to describe the origins of a nation that was palpably an objective, rather than a fact, when the work was conceived. They fit a pattern of "domesticated" western academics (notably those who taught in the University of Malaya) writing to the "nation-state" agenda of the first couple of decades after 1965. In this, Turnbull followed the approach of fellow University of Malaya lecturer K.G. Tregonning, with his 1972 book, *A History of Modern Malaysia and Singapore.*[2]

There is some similarity here between the role of the *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay Annals*) and that of these new "Singapore" histories. The *Sejarah Melayu* aimed to provide a suitable genealogy and origin for the Melaka-Johor-Riau Sultanate rulers, during a 17th century when they had long ago lost Melaka, and were threatened by rising Dutch power in the Straits.[3] The new histories of the 1970s also aimed to give Singapore a past or "genealogy" that would be meaningful and useful for the present.

This past could have been traced back to the 14th century, or beyond that to geological times. The history of a place can be as old as the events that formed its rocks, climate, fauna and flora. Turnbull could have begun her national history anywhere from geological time to 1965, and could have emphasised its long history as part of the Malay maritime world. Instead, her preoccupation with the roots of the post-colonial state led her to favour 1819, as a break with that Malay world.

In Turnbull's uncompromising words, "Modern Singapore was founded in 1819 on the initiative of one individual, Sir Stamford Raffles."[4]

In Turnbull's mind, it is the arrival of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the East India Company, and the policy of free trade, which is the departure point for the modern state, and for the polyglot mix of immigrants that would evolve into the modern, cosmopolitan "nation". She acknowledged that there was a pre-existing settlement under the tutelage of the Temenggong, a subordinate Malay ruler in the Johor-Riau Sultanate. But that settlement of a few hundred — with an *orang laut* or sea people majority ruled over by feudal Malays[5] — was pre-modern. In this story, the modern nation is traced back to the imposition of free trade and British control, and to a decisive break with Malay traditions. Where Malay *Sejarah* or stories/genealogies seek to project royal descent ever further backwards, to Alexander the Great or even Adam, Turnbull cuts the family tree off at 1819. It is as if she looks at an immense canvas, and then decides to frame just the bottom right-hand portion of it.

Turnbull's approach to Singapore's history was thus forged to suit the needs of a particular postcolonial, post-1965, post-"exit-from-Malaysia" era. Her consequent commitment to the national and chronological approach remained unwavering to the end. In 2006, she visited the National University of Singapore (NUS) to discuss the third edition of her Singapore History that would appear posthumously as *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005* (2009). At the NUS, she attended a seminar, sitting alongside two Singaporean scholars who had very different approaches to history.

First, there was Hong Lysa, then of NUS, who saw the various "histories" of the island as discourses, each with political and other motives. Hence, she saw Turnbull's work as helping to underpin a PAP narrative in which a modern state is formed in 1819, and in which the PAP from formation in 1954 had struggled heroically to forge a nation, against wrong-headed communists, chauvinists, and liberals. By contrast, Kwa Chong Guan, of Nanyang Technological University's Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (now part of the Rajaratnam School of International Studies), suggested that Turnbull's works artificially and microscopically focused on just a short stretch of Singapore's history. Instead, he offered the image of a maritime centre with over 700 years of history. This was how he was already teaching Singapore history to students on the National University of Singapore's Scholars Programme, through an optional Singapore Studies module. I also inserted this longer timeframe into the History courses at Singapore's National Institute of Education (NIE, part of the Nanyang Technological University), from the Academic Year 2001–2002. Where previous lecturers' courses had stressed that their

courses addressed "the country's past since 1819", the first Singapore history examination paper I set reflected the still-contested nature of the longer framework. It included the question: "Does Singapore have any useable history before 1819, or is almost everything before 1819 mythstory and travellers' gossip?"

By 2005, a range of courses at both the Nanyang Technological University and the National University of Singapore gave significant space to discussing the pre-1819 period. They also added new themes such as heritage, and tackled some old themes (such as immigration and the plural society) in new ways; for instance, through topics such as "Chinatown" as heritage site, and prostitution and opium.[6] At NUS, the range of courses now allowed students to opt for innovative approaches, or still study the more traditional history in the module "Singapore: The Making of a Nation".[7]

The teaching of Singapore history at university had entered a period of experimentation, and this was also reflected in publications. In 2009, Kwa Chong Guan joined other scholars in publishing a book which could be considered as a companion volume for courses on Singapore's history as a global city. This was Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yong and Derek Heng's *Singapore: A 700 Year History from Early Emporium to World City* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009). This illustrated history is designed to appeal to everything from advanced school students, to undergraduates doing the increasing number of "Singapore Studies" survey courses available at NUS. The other two authors were senior NUS historian Tan Tai Yong, and America-based Singaporean archaeologist and historian Derek Heng.

*Singapore: A 700 Year History* neatly encapsulates the "700 versus 200 years" debate on Singapore history. It could be seen as a companion text to Kwa Chong Guan's Singapore Studies module at NUS of the time (SSA211, "The Evolution of a Global City State", Academic Year 2011–2012). It also encapsulates the tension between seeing the island's history as a series of very different manifestations as a maritime centre, or as mainly the background to or evolution of the modern nation. The 700-year school is supported by archaeological excavations from 1984 onwards, and by the writings of those involved in them, such as John Miksic and Derek Heng. Elsewhere, the latter has argued for "Casting Singapore's History in the Longue Dureé", by accepting that there has been an oscillation back and forth between two different ways of functioning as a "Melaka Straits region port settlement". At some points, Singapore

has functioned as an entrepôt embedded in a bigger structure (East India Company, British Empire or Malaysia). At other times, it has struck out as an autonomous polity (Temasek, modern Singapore).

In this longer framework, periods of relative decline, such as the 17th to 18th centuries, are re-inserted into the island-story of being a rising and falling maritime port settlement. Hence, Peter Borschberg's *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009) traces how Europeans and others saw the island in a period when it hosted little more than a local maritime official of the wider Johor-Malacca Sultanate.

In short, there are "700 versus 200 years" and "origins of the modern state versus long durée" framings for Singapore's history. The longer versions lend themselves to the inclusion of more abbreviated stories from disparate times. For Heng, it is as if a painter includes several vignettes from different times on one canvas, which is nevertheless given coherence by a central theme or image of river, sea and trade.

For Kwa, Heng and others, the initial thrust was towards claiming some sort of continuity between these periods. That continuity, however, consists more in place — the opportunities and dilemmas thrown up by sitting at the meeting of the monsoons on the Melaka Straits — than of institutions or even a "nation". In 2010, I pushed this idea a little further, suggesting that the multiple experiments with how to respond to this dilemma were to some extent distinguished by their disconnection, their very variety.

This argument for the history of Singapore as a series of reinventions appears in Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin (edited with Karine Delaye), *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century: Reinventing the Global City*. Abandoning the idea of uninterrupted chronology, its introduction argues that Singapore as a location has hosted diverse and partly discontinuous experiments on how to achieve centrality in the Straits: how to become a, or preferably the, pre-eminent entrepôt for central Southeast Asia and the Melaka Straits. Hence, *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century* offers chapters on the 14th-century Temasek experiment, Raffles' vision of Singapore as the place where British leadership would revive Malay culture and trade, and the attempt to make Singapore and its inhabitants "Malayan". It emphasises differences between these periods; for instance, the island's truly multicultural population before 1870s, compared with Chinese predominance after the vast immigration from China in the 1880s–1920s.[8]

In this approach, the very nature of the island's history is seen as lying in this constant need to reinvent its role and comparative advantages, in order to retain centrality in flows of people, trades and goods: a centrality other Straits cities would happily steal away. In this approach, the "continuity" between the 14th and 21st centuries is not one of institutions or peoples, but rather of this need to reinvent in order to adapt to the rapidly shifting geostrategic and geo-commercial context around Singapore.

These very different ways of framing Singapore's history were already taking form by the 2006 workshop at NUS, at which Turnbull defended her approach — and narrative national history — against the demands of Kwa for a 700-year global city frame, and Hong Lysa for a more critical approach to the post-war story of PAP success. Understandably, Turnbull's reaction was to defend the need for a narrative framework, and to argue that only limited changes were needed to her existing work, for instance by increasing Malay perspectives in the foundation of Singapore, and by adding a last chapter to update the story for 1990 to 2005.[9] In the resulting book, she repeated her defence of 2006, that "Narrative history has fallen out of fashion of late, in favour of a thematic approach … But this does not displace the need for a chronological story, which gives due weight to each stage in turn and attempts to place individuals within a framework of evolution over time …"[10]

The problem is that the choosing of the "framework" is vital, and in her earlier career, Turnbull herself had not made the evolution of the "modern" nation-state her main framing device. Instead, her various books frame Singapore's past in different ways. Her *The Straits Settlements, 1826–1867: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (London: Athlone, 1972) firmly locates Singapore as an East India Company dependency, and a cosmopolitan administrative headquarters for the "Straits Settlements" (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore). Penang — not Singapore — was the headquarters of government for that unit from its establishment in 1826 until 1832, and of judicial administration until 1856. The Chinese, though quickly becoming the largest single group in the population, did not predominate this period in the way they later would, even in Singapore itself. Indeed, for this period, a more significant proportion of the total Chinese were settled "Straits Chinese", or Peranakan whose ancestors had intermarried with "Malays".

So in this book, Turnbull describes something qualitatively different to the modern state, or to the Singapore that emerged after the 1870s,

with the vast expansion in Chinese immigration, and in the state's capacity to rule directly (rather than indirectly through revenue farms and Chinese leaders). Though this book originated in a thesis on the 1867 transfer of the Straits Settlements from East India Company to Colonial Office control, it aimed to "trace the development of Straits society as a whole". Furthermore, one of the last pieces Mary wrote returned to this Straits theme, covering "Penang's Changing Role in the Straits Settlements, 1826–1946". This article appeared posthumously, in a 2009 book which originated in a project on "The Penang Story". Had Penang been allowed to choose, it would probably never have agreed to leave its "Straits" union with Singapore in 1946 in favour of the Malayan Union. But having been forced into that Malayan framework in 1946, like Singapore, its "Straits" period became overshadowed. Recent politics framed the narration of the past, and Mary found herself writing about Straits Settlement Penang as part of a more localised project on "The Penang Story".[11]

Mary's first book, on the Straits Settlements, meanwhile, was able to take a specifically "Straits" framework. It framed Singapore as a part of a bigger Indian-based system, with which its links were nevertheless slightly tenuous. Hence, there was a mere monthly steamer service to Calcutta as late as 1864.[12] Turnbull also traced how the Straits Settlements developed into more than a mere outpost and trading station for the East India Company. Given its location and the frailty of links to India, it began to embed itself into the region, interpenetrating the Malay Sultanates on the peninsula.

The result of this trend was that a distinctly "Straits" period in Singapore history also saw the beginnings of a "Malayan" trajectory within it: the era contained within it its own antithesis. This too is reflected in Turnbull's *The Straits Settlements*, which sees frustration at East India Company limits on intervention in the peninsula as one cause of demands for a transfer to London control. It also reflects in her edit and re-release of L.A. Mills, *British Malaya 1824–67* (Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1961). This work framed the Straits Settlements as part of the wider area of Southeast Asia. Thus, in the early period the Settlements were both part of an East India Company centred world and its trade networks across to China, and yet also the emerging commercial centre of the "Malayan" interests of the company.

Ironically, then Turnbull's early career did not focus on Singapore per se, nor suggest that the past should be narrated as the origins of a

distinct Singapore "nation" or "state". Indeed, the next logical step for Turnbull might have been a history of the island as a part of "Malaya", or Malaysia. She was a lecturer at both branches of the University of Malaya (in Singapore 1955–1960, and Kuala Lumpur 1960–1963), and then at the University of Singapore (1963–1971) after the two branches became separate universities. So she served in the universities at the time of the PAP's rise (it formed its first government in June 1959), and at the height of political moves to make Singapore more "Malayan". This was the period when almost all Singapore politicians craved merger with Malaya, but could see little immediate hope of achieving it. Hence, the moves to make the island more "Malayan", including an anthem sung in Malay, a stress on learning Malay in schools, and in 1957, an agreement that a Malayan representative would have the casting vote on a new Internal Security Council (ISC) when Singapore achieved full internal self-government (June 1959). Turnbull thus joined the University of Malaya and its successor at a time when a whole series of scholars — such as C.N. Parkinson (Raffles Professor of History 1950–1958) with his *Heroes of Malaya*, and Wang Gungwu (who was experimenting with distinctively "Malayan" poetry) — felt themselves a part of "something important": and above all else, something "Malayan".[13]

This "Malayan" trajectory had become a significant and increasing driving force in the island's history as long ago as the 1920s–1930s, by when the causeway to the mainland had opened (1923). I have traced elsewhere, in my "The Malayan Trajectory of Singapore's History", how this comprised several overlapping strands in education, infrastructure, demographics, economics and politics, which by the 1940s–1960s led most commentators to assume that Singapore's only viable route to independence was as part of a wider Malayan framework. This, however, was to be one framework that most scholars, Turnbull included, would downplay after Singapore's independence. It simply did not fit what happened on 9 August 1965, when Singapore and Malaysia parted ways.

It also did not fit with Turnbull's experience after 1963, as a young academic situated in the University of Malaya's original Singapore campus, now newly restructured as the separate University of Singapore. The University of Malaya itself had initially been intended to have just one, Johor-based campus. Had that happened, separation would have been an academic nightmare. Instead, financial limitations meant that the when the new university first opened in 1949, it was based at the old Raffles College campus in Singapore. Then, local demand led to the opening of

a second campus of the university in Kuala Lumpur, in 1959. Though the two campuses were initially seen as complementary, both wanted to cover an increasing range of subjects. Both were tending towards becoming full universities in their own right, and they eventually split in 1962. By 1963, Mary was part of the new University of Singapore. Within a couple of years, she would also find herself in the new independent state which politicians such as Lee Kuan Yew had proclaimed a virtual impossibility throughout the 1950s and up until 1965: Singapore.

Turnbull thus experienced Singapore's first tumultuous years after separation, before moving from the University of Singapore to the University of Hong Kong in 1971. Turnbull only abandoned Straits and Malayan frameworks for emphasis on a "Singapore" one at this stage. In fact, *The Straits Settlements* first appeared in 1972. By the early 1970s, however, she was being encouraged to write a history of Singapore by Oxford University Press, which felt the unexpected state needed its own country study. In this context, she reframed her approach. The result, in 1977, was *A History of Singapore, 1819–1975*. She had made the personal and intellectual journey from framing the island as part of the "Straits", through looking at the early formation of its identity as a part of a wider "British Malaya", to "Singapore" as something distinct. In this, she reflected the mood of the time. H.F. Pearson's *Singapore: A Popular History 1819–1960* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1961) had been followed by Donald and Joanna Moore's *The First 150 Years of Singapore* in 1969 (Donald Moore, 1969).[14] Where pre-1914 writers had almost always written of the "Straits" or "British Malaya", authors now seemed impatient to throw off old names for new.

Just how far Turnbull's writing was being remoulded by the needs of the nation-state can be seen when we remember that, for the vast majority of the 156 years that Turnbull's 1977 volume covered, Singapore was formally a part of the Straits Settlements, whether as an adjunct to British India (1826–1867) or as a Crown Colony (from 1867 until de facto ending by Japanese Occupation in 1942, and de jure dissolution in April 1946).[15] She had in fact written about a period that covered "Straits" Singapore, Singapore as part of the Japanese empire, and Singapore as a post-war colony whose separation from Malaya was seen as temporary, with barely a decade of self-consciously separate "Singapore" history on the end (1965–1975). Singapore's history of being rooted in larger frameworks — and of overlapping pulls towards such frameworks as the Indian, Straits, South Seas and Malayan — had not changed: historians had.

## Alternative Frames

We have already seen that the history of "the place that we now call Singapore" can be framed in multiple ways, notably as the "Straits", "Malayan", and Singaporean, and on a small canvas covering 200 years or a larger one covering 700. We have also seen that the latter raises questions of what you put in the frame, whether you attempt a coherent narrative, or incline to sketch disconnected vignettes onto one canvas: more like a patchwork quilt made from old dresses. Even if we agree with Turnbull that a narrative or chronological account is invaluable — necessary even — we can argue about when that should begin, and about how different periods should be brought together. Her act of writing as if there is a distinct "Singapore" narrative is, for periods before 1946 at least, a "political" one, and downplays other ways in which Singapore could be framed. This section will now go further, and suggest a series of more radical ways in which Singapore history has been, or could be, reframed.

### *1819 and All That: The "Singapore Story" Template*

We start off with the framing device commonly used when the PAP projects history, and in school education since history returned as a major school subject in the 1980s. This is the "Singapore Story", as scholars soon dubbed the quasi-official version of Singapore's history which dominated from the 1990s. This narrative was put to the public most dramatically in a 1997 sound and vision show entitled *The Singapore Story*. Thousands visited this at Suntec City. It was subsequently refracted into a video which showed at the Singapore History Museum (today's National Museum of Singapore) until 2003. It focused on times of threat and tribulation, notably the war, the Hock Lee Riots and economic and security frailty, and the 1964 riots and communal dangers. It sought to project a vision of a vulnerable and potentially chaotic society that needed strong rule and nation-building, and the idea that this "story" was an objective reflection of "facts". Hence, its use of video close-ups of violence, of documents, and of the feeling of direct exposure to the evidence. In short, while carefully constructing a narrative intended to impart messages, it sought to suggest it was more truth imminent in evidence than story-telling.[16]

Variants of this "Singapore Story" with lessons attached were subsequently integrated into education, as "National Education" in schools from 1998, and into ministerial pronouncements. This reached its apotheosis in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan* Yew (Singapore: Times, 1998), and *From Third World to First* (Singapore: Times,

2000). Lee had stood down as Prime Minister in 1990 after leading the country from when the PAP first won power in 1959. His resignation was a planned transfer of power to a nurtured second and third generation of leadership, with Lee subsequently retaining influence first as "Senior Minister" (1990–2004), and then as "Minister Mentor" (2004–May 2011).[17] Older PAP leaders now sought to enlist history — as the wartime generation started to pass away — to show why only the PAP's approach could have worked. It is no surprise that these works tell a story in which a small cadre of leaders is seen as treading the only possible path to success — through self-discipline and international investment — surrounded on all sides by a swampy morass from which they are assailed by liberals, communists, communalists and others, whose foolish visions could only have led only to disaster.[18]

This "Singapore Story" has informed most post-independence writing on Singapore's history.[19] Preoccupation with it has led university academics to detail key events with painstakingly researched books, notably on merger and separation.[20] Even anti-establishment histories and individuals have usually failed to escape its gravitational pull. For, in framing themselves as contestations of the PAP-state's "Singapore Story" many have, ironically, condemned themselves to orbit around it. For instance, Lee Kuan Yew's left-wing comrade Lim Chin Siong — who left the PAP to form the opposition Barisan Sosialis party in 1961 — is usually judged as either undercover communist (Lee's label for him) or (as he claimed) idealistic young trade unionist. A Discovery Channel documentary on Singapore's history, first shown in 2005, thus included a clip of Lim saying he was not a communist (a reaction to the "Singapore Story"), but nothing of Lim's own ideas.[21] At the time of writing, Lim's own speeches and memoirs remained mostly untapped,[22] though Kevin Tan was writing a biography. It seemed, belatedly, as if Lim's story might finally be told on his own terms, not just as an echo of the PAP narrative.

From 1998, the "Singapore Story" was entrenched. First, there was the major public exhibition on the "Singapore Story", emphasising the war years, the subsequent PAP struggle for independence and against communism, ethnic chauvinism and economic peril. Second, "National Education" based around this narrative — and attached "lessons" about how Singaporeans must behave — was integrated into school curriculums, at first as separate lessons, and ultimately infused across subjects. Students were also taken on "Learning Journeys" to wartime and business sites to reinforce the story's messages. There was an insistent state desire that students at all levels be imparted lessons through social studies at Primary

School, and history at Secondary, such as "We Must Ourselves Defend Ourselves". There was also relentless emphasis on the need for social and economic discipline.

When trainee teachers were thought to be getting insufficient "National Education" through infusion, the author was called upon to launch a separate interdisciplinary "Singapore Studies" module at the National Institute of Education. In 2003, the module description explained that this covered:

> ... issues of broad, contemporary relevance to Singapore's survival, health and growth as a nation and a global city-state. Inculcation of concepts essential for analysing related topics such as democracy, foreign relations, global economic challenges, and national identity.[23]

Inevitably, scholars taught the material in an open and critical way. Other modules — such as one on Multicultural Studies — tackled "national" issues in a more comparative framework, eventually supplanting Singapore as an "Essential Module" on the Bachelor of Arts (Education) degree.[24] At NUS, meanwhile, a range of "Singapore Studies" modules was made available not only by History Department modules being open to other disciplines, but also through the "Scholars Programme". The latter offered both traditional modules on building the "nation", and also modules by external lecturers who offered different perspectives on Singapore.

The mode by which students received the "Singapore Story" was thus constantly being refined and the modules involved were increasingly diverse. There was no clear evolution, but a jostling of old and new. Hence, at NUS, by the early 21st century, you could study more traditional courses on the nation-state, or Kwa Chong Guan's module on Singapore's emergence as a global city-state over 700 years. The perspective you got depended very much on your choice of individual module. At NIE and NTU, by contrast, a smaller number of courses each tended to include multiple approaches. Hence, my own suite of Singapore courses at NIE blended "people's history" (further discussed below), "alternative paths" (post-war politicians with alternative views to the PAP), heritage and the 700-year approach with more traditional topics. Later on, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students were also offered a module in a History Minor, at least one version of which offered a very wide range of approaches and themes.[25] With NTU's launch of a new History Major in its Humanities and Social Studies School from 2012, such choices could

be expected to increase.[26] Overall, a much greater variety of "frames" were, and are, being used to teach Singapore's history as time marches on.

Despite some small mention in history texts of pre-war events, and the increasing use of "National Education" themes in more imaginative ways at university level, the emphasis in school texts nevertheless remained on the origins and formation of the modern nation and state, particularly from the war years onwards.

History in schools thus paid relatively little attention to the long duration, the "Straits Settlement Story" and the longer Malayan trajectory in the island's history. The latter became truncated to 1961–1965. Instead of coming out of increasing interpenetration of the two areas, the "Malaysia" idea was now portrayed as if sprung on an unsuspecting Singapore public by Malaya's premier, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in May 1961. Hence its history, from inception to formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963, becomes a brief aberration. The idea comes just in time to save a PAP leadership terrified its left wing might otherwise defeat it, and demand separate independence. Malaysia plays the function of flushing that left wing out into the new Barisan Sosialis party, and of defeating them in the merger referendum of September 1962. Malaysia is then inaugurated in September 1963, but quickly undermined by Malay "ultras" from the mainland whose reckless campaigning in Singapore sparks racial riots in July and September 1964.

The breakdown of this brief marriage of convenience, and separation of 9 August 1965, is dealt with elsewhere, by scholars such as Tan Tai Yong and Albert Lau. The subsequent presentation of the period almost as an interruption of the development of Singapore and a sense of its identity from "suffering together" in the war onwards, is of course contrary to the PAP's own plans at the time.[27] Lee Kuan Yew had sought merger because he — along with most major Singapore politicians — genuinely thought that it was the only viable route to independence. With Lee and Lim Chin Siong as exceptions that prove the rule, most senior PAP leaders had been born in Malaya, and had family there.

Notwithstanding this "Malayan" reality, the emphasis in National Education was on the "Malaysia" period as an exceptional time. It also portrayed it as another of the many threats that allowed the PAP to prove its abilities, and which forced Singaporeans to buckle down to national survival against the odds under PAP leadership. The longer-term significance of Malayan trajectories in Singapore history — before and after merger and separation — is for the most part ignored.

What emerged from the 1990s was thus rather more complex than the PAP had first envisaged. There was indeed a "Singapore Story", and "National Education", with the detail in that being filled out, and increasing attention given to what one book dubbed *Lee's Lieutenants*: the generation who faithfully and successfully served the PAP-state in its early decades.[28] But in reality, there was also a vibrant debate about "200 years versus 700", and increasing experimentation at university level with teaching different aspects of Singapore history, with courses approaching Singapore history from perspectives as varied as media and cultural history on the one hand, and left-wing attempts at revisionism on the other. There was, therefore, both a restrictive vision at school level, which downplayed the long duration and "Straits" and "Malayan" frameworks, and yet a competing range of alternative framings at university and research tiers.

These major alternative frames are perhaps the most obvious, but others — both existing and potential — also present themselves. What I want to do now is to briefly survey some additional ways in which we can radically reframe Singapore history.

### *The Really Long Duration*

We have already seen tension between the 700- and 200-year approaches to Singapore's history. But while Kwa, Heng, Miksic and others propose a "long duration", there is a still longer perspective. For even the 700-year approach still sticks to a conception of history as solely about people, institutions, and social forces. Yet we can also think of Singapore's past as about "place", even as the "biography" of a place. Hence, Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* (London: Vintage, 2001) touches on Neolithic origins, and has chapters on waste and light. Norman Davies recasts his history of Britain as *The Isles* (London: Macmillan, 1999), and begins after the last Ice Age.

Ackroyd's approach might suggest a "biography" of place that covered similar themes for Singapore, and Davies' a chronology stretching at least to first human habitation. The approach can be pushed even further. We could reframe history as that of the physical mass that now makes up what we call Singapore, and the things that have happened to this mass, and on it. At its extreme, this suggests a geological timescale.

This approach can reach back to discuss the very origins of Singapore's separate and distinct existence. Some 200–300 million years ago, in the Triassic period, "the land we now call Singapore" was a rock

mass that was joined to the Asian mainland. This rock mass was in turn located up to 3,000 miles east of its current location. The Sajahat Formation of rocks, whose jagged mass juts out to sea from Pulau Tekong, dates from this period.[29] If we scratch the surface of the land, and tap Singapore's subterranean and geological history, we are forced to adopt a framework of thousands of miles, millions of years, and of shifting tectonic plates. We are also forced to see Singapore not as separate, but as a local manifestation of larger patterns.

Even if we restrict our history merely to the planet's surface and its flora and fauna, "the place we now call Singapore" needs to be placed in a very wide frame, and considered as an integral part of the wider region in which it is situated. Singapore is too narrow a framing device for this. So too is Malaysia. One wider area may be "Sundaland". A mere million years ago, the islands of "Sundaland" were connected to each other, and to mainland Asia. "Singapore" was one part of a mostly continuous land mass. As sea levels changed during the Pleistocene period, this connection periodically disappeared, eventually leading to the current isolation of the islands. Stephen Oppenheimer describes this process succinctly:

> At the height of the last Ice Age around 18,000–20,000 years ago, Southeast Asia formed a continent twice the size of India, and included what we now call Indo-China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The South China Sea, the Gulf of Thailand and the Java Sea, which were then all dry, formed the connecting parts of the continent. Geologically, this half-sunken continent is termed the Sunda shelf, or Sundaland.[30]

Oppenheimer's wider claims, that this flooding caused an exodus of Austronesian peoples, that carried Southeast Asian influence to many other civilisations, is contentious. But his genetic research tallies with other scientists. Indeed, it has merged into a contestation of the old idea that Austronesian languages and cultures spread from the Taiwan region into Southeast Asia. Hence, Pedro Soares *et al.* argue, in the journal *Molecular Biology and Evolution*, that:

> Modern humans have been living in Island Southeast Asia (ISEA) for at least 50,000 years … The attention of archaeologists and geneticists has usually been focused on the last 6,000 years — in particular, on a proposed Neolithic dispersal from China and Taiwan. Here we use complete mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) genome sequencing to spotlight … that haplogroup E, an important component of mtDNA diversity in the region, evolved in situ over the last 35,000 years and expanded

> dramatically throughout ISEA around the beginning of the Holocene, at the time when the ancient continent of Sundaland was being broken into the present-day archipelago by rising sea-levels. It reached Taiwan … within the last 8,000 years. This suggests that global warming and sea-level rises at the end of the Ice Age, 15,000–7,000 years ago, were the main forces shaping modern human diversity in the region.[31]

Thus, what is now maritime Southeast Asia — taking in Malaysia, the entire of Indonesia, Borneo, and coincidentally "the land now called Singapore", originated as one geographic unit.[32] Moreover, the very identity of "island" or "maritime Southeast Asia", as an area of diverse but interconnected groups with intense maritime linkages, is rooted in a last major global warming. In the very widest sense, "histories" of Singapore ought to include a map of Sundaland, and discussion of the formation of the unique blend of genes, geology, geography and climate which gave rise to this one tiny fragment of the wider regional system.

The term "Sundaland" is still used by scholars, for the biogeographical region that is the legacy of that landmass. Biogeographically speaking, there is no distinction between one side of the Singapore Strait and the other. Both belong to a region characterised by a diversity of freshwater habitats including hill streams, lowland floodplains, and peat swamps. Indeed, until very, very recent times, the terrain on both sides of the Straits was very similar, with its mangroves, creeks and then jungle inland. Even an event as apparently "modern" as the campaign for and Fall of Singapore (8–15 February 1942) is inexplicable without understanding that the Singapore Strait united as much as divided "Singapore" from Johor. The broken terrain of creek and jungle, and easily crossed Strait, made it easy for the Japanese to obtain surprise and local superiority.[33] Nearly four decades earlier, in 1904, people on the island could still talk of going "to Singapore". Jurong pepper farmer Yao Ah Soh had to get up at 4.30 a.m. to go "to Singapore" to sell fowl, only returning at 2 p.m. For people like him, "Singapore Settlement" was still distinct, and his life distinctly rural, like that of the Malayan peninsula.[34]

Until very recently, then, "Singapore" suggested the maritime settlement around the Singapore River as much, if not more than, the island as a whole. This is how the Malays of the Melaka Sultanate and its Johor-Riau successors viewed Singapore across several centuries, as one river/sea settlement amongst the many in the broader Straits area that was their domain.[35] In short, one way of framing Singapore is by its geology, geography, and the wider setting they are embedded in.

### *People's Histories*

> *I am a tailor and have a tailor's shop at Sago Street, Chop Wong It. … I have a partner in the chop. I live with my wife at No: 1-4 Upper Chin Chew Street ... a lodging house above a Chinese doctor's shop. The corpse that the coroner viewed … is that of my wife, named Choo See, aged 31 years. We have been married for 10 years. There were no children. I procured my wife from Perak, where she was in a brothel … On Tuesday she told me that she had lost $400 dollars at Johore at the gambling table. She pawned all her jewellery to the value of $330 … I told her to take comfort and that when I had the money I would redeem the jewellery … [upon returning from work] … I observed that her hands and mouth were smeared with chandu. Her skin was not quite cold, but she was quite dead.*[36]

While we could reframe Singapore's history to geological timescales, from the late 1980s, some historians have sought to do the opposite, and focus down on individuals, such as Yao Ah Soh and his wife Choo See, and their personal, intimate experiences. In short, they began to experiment with something else that Turnbull's account gives relatively short shrift: "people's history", otherwise termed "history from below" and overlapping the history of the "everyday".

Singapore history, and university-level history courses, have long included "pioneer" Asians, immigrants-made-good and businessmen who also became community leaders. Turnbull's histories include such figures.[37] But there has also been a trend from the late 1980s towards giving "everyday" life and ordinary people more of a place, and even a "voice" of their own. That is, there has been a trend towards "history from below", which goes beyond mere description and statistics, to try and recapture the voice, perspective, and agency, of ordinary rickshaw pullers, prostitutes, opium addicts, and of the populace in general. Instead of the canvas showing a portrait of the ruler, or group portrait of their court, it now teems with as much life as a Hogarth sketch, or as Rembrandt's "Night Watch", crowded with people from all walks of life.

There have been at least three major forces behind this trend, namely a "Warren" school of Singapore history, the rise of oral history, and the general increase in "history from below" internationally.

The most prominent influence has come from James Francis Warren. Warren is an Australian-based American scholar who has written books on pirates, and two major works of "collective biography". The latter are *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993). Warren's

work gives a more direct voice to ordinary people even than Lee Poh Ping in her *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1978), or Brenda Yeoh in her *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003). Though the latter works are interested in ordinary people, they lack the depth with which Warren recreates the world "from below", and his intensive search for their actual words. Indeed, for Brenda Yeoh, they are interesting specifically in relation to government housing and environmental policy, rather than for their own sake.

Warren's two main works in this area sprang from a desire shared by a number of scholars to reinsert the missing objects of colonial policy, or even better to write what some of them termed "people's history", history "from the underside", and "history from below". Peter Rimmer and Lisa Allen, in their *The Underside of Malaysian History* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), described their motivating questions as: "how do we write an authentic history of individuals and groups who have left few, if any, records; and how do we bring out the everyday lives of the people?"[38] Given that many of immigrants were illiterate, this posed enormous challenges.

Warren came across one answer to this question serendipitously, when he discovered the un-catalogued coroners records for Singapore, and was allowed to work on them. He describes his methodology as "prosopographical", in the sense of using recurring records — in this case about death — as fragments from which to construct "collective biographies" of groups of people. It is rather like trying to make a single mosaic of "rickshaw pullers and their life" from shards from thousands of different mosaics. On the other hand, through interweaving of coroners records, court records, reports, newspaper records and the occasional snippet of oral history, Warren is able to let "ordinary" people speak for themselves (albeit through statements to authorities).

In this, Warren was influenced by American scholars' work on the everyday. But his approach also echoes the work of third-generation *Annales* historians such as Emmanual Le Roy Ladurie, who in his micro-history, *Montaillou*, tried to reconstruct the daily life of 13th-century Alpine villagers through inquisition records. The strengths are the same, the vivid invocation of people's thoughts and passions and experience of gender, power religion, agricultural practice, and the everyday, often extracted by reading "against the grain" (that is, for things incidental to what the interrogator or official was seeking). The weaknesses are also the same, that court records originate in extraordinary circumstances, and

by their nature (especially coroners' records) may sift out life's winners (the rickshaw puller made good) in favour of its losers (Ladurie's 30th-century Cathars, tried as heretics, or the tuberculosis-ridden puller who overdoses on opium). However much you seek agency and balance through court records, you are liable to find an inordinate share of misery. If you traced the lives of Europeans in Singapore through the coroners record, you might conclude that rather a high percentage committed suicide following financial troubles.[39]

Warren has not only given us books that we can use (in Ladurie's redolent phrase) to "breath life" into the everyday, but has also supervised students after his own image. Notable examples include Stephen Dobbs and Loh Kah Seng, both of whom broaden the approach to include a heavier reliance on oral history: something all the more necessary as the Singapore National Archives (who now hold the coroners records) have imposed tighter conditions on their use.[40] To a degree, reliance on oral history also sidesteps the criticism of microhistorians such as Ladurie and Carlo Ginzburg, and of Warren's collective biography, that the records they relied on were mediated. They were court records obtained under threat of court intervention in people's lives.

Stephen Dobbs penned *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819–2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), which brings to life the world of the boatmen who frequented the Singapore River, before their relocation. Loh Kah Seng, meanwhile, has explored "people's history" from the Great Depression, through the post-war Singapore left, to ordinary Singaporeans responding to British military withdrawal in the 1970s.

Quite separately from these developments, Cambridge-trained Chua Ai Lin (initially with Mark Emmanuel) began to teach a course on "Popular Culture in History" at NUS. Chua had also introduced, by 2010, an advanced "Approaches to Singapore" course that included heritage, social memory such as that of clubs, and oral history.[41]

"History from Below" had also made an appearance at the National Institute of Education by this time. Between 2001 and 2006, together with Kevin Blackburn, I integrated many of these approaches into courses taught to trainee teachers there. Students were asked to do their own oral history project on a place, event, or on the immigrant origins of their family. This acted as a training in oral history, before they considered issues such as the nature of prostitution, and the significance of opium (which furnished 40–60 per cent of Singapore's pre-1914 revenue) on local society. Hence, 2004 questions for the first-year History course "Themes in Singapore History" included: "How far and in what ways is

it true to say that Singapore's prosperity and growth have been reliant on the harsh exploitation of immigrants and underclasses?", and "To what extent do you agree with James Francis Warren's assessment of the impact of prostitution on prostitutes' lives?".

Thus, at NIE, "people's history" was integrated into modules, along with oral history, heritage (Chinatown), and the 700-year perspective, along with more traditional study of the war, and the post-war origins of the modern state. Since 2006, successor courses at NIE, if anything, seem to incorporate slightly less "people's history", though they still range over pre-1819, heritage, and "alternative" political views of the MCP and left: no mean feat for a single module.[42]

Where issues such as "people's history" had to be crammed, with other approaches, into just one module, one trick was to use them as a window into vital issues such as immigration, the nature of the colonial state, and the transition of Singapore from almost a "Wild East" Chinese immigrant boomtown of the 1870s–1890s, to a modern cosmopolis of the 1920s. Hence, for instance, the pervasive use of opium by pullers and in brothels reflected the colonial state's emphasis on free trade and *laissez faire*, meaning low revenues and low levels of state interference. That led to a degree of indirect rule (hence farming out revenue "farms", that is, the right to sell specific substances and services). So too the state's emphasis on open borders and immigration was vital to economic growth, and to providing tens of thousands with economic opportunities, but the cost was terrible housing, poor services, and for many, harsh toil and early death. "People's history" presented alongside imperial and state history could thus be "mainstreamed". Hence, Warren's works can be used alongside Edwin Lee's work on the colonial state, and Carl Trocki's on the central place of opium in early state formation, and on building relationships between Chinese elites and the colonial state.[43]

In short, "people's history, especially as "collective history", can intersect the Rankean "national history", in the sense of events broadly shared by a community, and therefore constitutive of a shared or imagined commonality. Likewise, the history of collective memory need not be something disconnected from "national" history. Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack's *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* uses differing memories of the Second World War, from the political to the everyday — to show how the various levels — individual, community (Malay, Indian, Chinese, European, and Eurasian), and state interact. This allows the construction of unifying, state-sponsored narrative about

the war and its significance to be tested alongside community and individual experiences. "People's" history does not have to be marginalised and oppositional to a mainstream.

Nevertheless, a certain type of "people's history" — one formulated in direct opposition to the "Singapore Story", has enjoyed a startling rise in the first few years of the 21st century. As I noted above, by 2010, the NIE course on Singapore history appeared to have little on "history from below" in the sense of "ordinary" people, but did tackle the 1940s–1950s from the perspective of "Political Alternatives? — Malayan Communist Party, Trade Unions and Student Movement".[44] This might be termed the left-wing, radical, or "alternative paths" approach to framing Singapore's history.

### *Alternative Paths*

> *the British and Lee Kuan Yew conspired and collaborated to crush the opposition before the 1963 General Elections. The whole aim of this merger was to crush the opposition. … In examining their past records, they are standing on a pedestal that is leaking with worms and vermin.*
>
> — Ex committee member of Barisan Sosialis, and ex-detainee (1963–1982) Dr. Lim Hock Siew, speaking at the launch of *The Fajar Generation* in 2009[45]

> *Operation Spectrum is an open wound … a little black hole in history.*
>
> — Playwright Alfian Sa'at in a speech at The Legends Hotel at Fort Canning, 26 June 2010, referring to the arrest and detention of 22 mainly Catholic social workers, lawyers and activists in 1987, accused of being Marxist conspirators[46]

> *There was no Marxist conspiracy. I was never the leader of the alleged Marxist group … Victims have kept silent for too long ... Before the assault I firmly stood my ground, refusing to be intimidated. After the assault I succumbed and allowed them to make me into a docile puppet, writing and signing long tracts of self-incriminating lies and half-facts. … let us not forget the hundreds of other ISA detainees who have suffered much much more without the chance of seeking redress, especially those who have gone to their grave in a blanket of silence. We who are still alive owe them the duty to seek out the truth and accordingly proclaim their contribution to the true history of Singapore. … We must fight for the abolishment of the ISA. … It is time for us to stand up for our human rights.*
>
> — Ex-detainee from Operation Spectrum Vincent Cheng, to an SDP crowd at Hong Lim Park in Singapore, 26 September 2010[47]

The perceived need for a history of "alternative paths" stems from the very dominance of the "Singapore Story", with its emphasis on the PAP saving the island from communist, chauvinists, naïve liberals and others whose dreams — it is suggested — could have led to disaster. In this story, there was only one safe way: that of the multiracial, technocratic, PAP. So strong is the pull of the "Singapore Story", that even those whose stance is critical, such as social scientist Yao Souchou in *Singapore: the State and the Culture of Excess*, have tended to focus more on the state itself than on alternatives Hence, in an attempt to explain how protest has been inhibited, Yao ends up focusing mostly on the state. His conclusions end up being about how intelligent leadership, colonial and post-colonial, calibrated coercion, opting for the least harmful control (such as press licensing rather than arresting journalists).[48]

In this context, alternative models for Singapore have tended to wilt in the face of increasing PAP control of the press, and development of a model of "communitarian" society,[49] and of disciplined, state-led, foreign-investment-driven, development. These left little space, in the 1970s to 1980s, for public discussion of alternatives.

As a consequence, it has sometimes seemed as if no one could escape being framed by the "Singapore Story". One could be for the "Singapore Story" (and writing down of left opponents as simple communists and fellow travellers). Or, as with Carl Trocki and other critics, one could be for modifying it on the grounds that it exaggerates threats, dismisses real alternatives, and downplays the contributions of non-PAP actors to post-war history. Even Carl Trocki and Michael Barr's *Paths Not Taken: Polital Pluralism in Postwar Singapore*, which explicitly gives voice to groups such as trade unionists and the MCP, ultimately balks at totally rejecting the "Singapore Story". It claims that it "complements it" by adding the stories of "unrecognised contributors to the construction of Singapore".[50]

Hence, one either subscribes to the "Singapore Story" (which Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli further dissect in their *The Scripting of a National History*),[51] or argues that the PAP's opponents were not mere communists, fellow travellers and dupes, but genuine left wingers and liberals whose alternatives were victims of collateral damage in the PAP's struggles against communism and communalism. In short, critics imply the PAP used a sledgehammer to crack a nut, continued using the sledgehammer long after the remaining nutshell had been pulverised, and in the process destroyed liberal and other alternatives. In their eyes, the PAP threw out the baby with the bath water, and so was left with a shackled and

timid civil society (ever afraid of transgressing uncodified "out of bounds" markers, and of the possibility of detention without trial), a state-owned and chastened press, and in general an authoritarian environment.

Hence, the title of Michael Barr and Carl Trocki's *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Postwar Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008). This resulted from a project which aimed to uncover alternatives, in the sense of alternatives at the time and alternative interpretations of history since. *Paths Not Taken* includes chapters on the liberal vision of the first Chief Minister David Marshall (Chief Minister 1955–1956) on ex-detainees such as trade unionist Michael Fernandez, and on youth, Catholic activists and civil society up to the 1980s.

David Marshall's liberal vision — inspired by the lawyer's respect for the sanctity of the individual tagged on to the Labour Front's commitment to social justice — here provides one of the most tantalising "alternatives". It raises the question of whether the PAP's communitarian approach (placing community above individual freedoms and rights) and technocratic and disciplinary slant was the only way. Was there an alternative to removing trial by jury, and so allowing Singapore courts to decide for themselves — and within the "rule of law" — whether people were guilty of defamation or contempt of court without the balance of a non-judicial jury?[52] Was communitarianism indispensable, or could the rights and freedom of the individual have been accorded greater emphasis? David Marshall's belief in the need to protect and advance the individual is used to suggest an alternative vision of civil society, governance, and trial by jury.

This sort of "alternative paths" approach does not necessarily imply "people's history", but the two do overlap. It has been fuelled by the growth of oral history due to the ending of the Cold War around 1989–1991, and the slight easing of the state's stance on criticism from the 1990s.[53] These factors have encouraged ex-detainees, and members of the left in general, to be slightly more willing to talk in public rather than risk taking their stories with them to the grave, as Lim Chin Siong did in 1996. Vincent Cheng voiced their feelings in the September 2010 speech cited above, when he said, "The first step towards redress is for victims to open their mouth or to pick up their pen".

These changes have coalesced into what might be termed a new wave of history about Singapore, which focuses on alternative voices and "paths" for the period from the 1930s to 1960s, and especially for the 1950s–1960s. In one sense, this is a delayed version of what had already

happened in Malaysia, where the signing of a final peace agreement with the Communist Party of Malaya in December 1989 saw some ex-insurgents return, and a significant number write memoirs. While the most notable of those was communist party Secretary-General Chin Peng, they also included the memoirs of Singapore's Fong Chong Pik (Fang Chuang Pi), who Lee Kuan Yew had dubbed the communist's "Plen" (plenipotentiary) in Singapore for the 1960s. Fong had fled to Riau in 1963, and then to the jungles to fight, before dying in southern Thailand in 2004.[54]

There is therefore an exercise in "recovery" of history which spans everything from liberals in civil society, to card-carrying communists, including those with blood on their hands. It is emphatically not just about recovering the voices of "revolutionaries", though the recovery of voices of the left wing is a major component. This recovery does, however, contest the framing of the Singapore left wing as merely "communists" and therefore dangerous individuals who had to be defeated even if that meant not playing by "Queensberry" rules.

This left wing covered a very broad range of people, and at one time encompassed most of those in the PAP. *Men in White: Untold Stories of the PAP* (2010) — the product of three *Straits Times* journalists and more than 300 interviews — shows how even Fabian Socialists such as Maurice Baker could flirt with Marxism while students. Baker is shown reminiscing about reading both *The Communist Manifesto* and *Daily Worker*.[55] The environment of post-war London, where many future PAP leaders studied, and of the communist victory in China in 1949, encouraged people across the left to ask questions. How far would constitutional measures suffice to ensure decolonisation? How far would direct union and street action be required to win *Merdeka* and secure people's rights? For some, there was also the question of whether the gun would also be necessary. In this context, people such as Chinese-educated Jek Yuen Thong and English-educated trade unionist C.V. Devan Nair might start out communist, and gradually elide with the non-communist, "right" wing of the PAP; while others might move in the contrary direction. This was the fluid, fervid, effervescent world of the left.

In 1956, Singapore's Special Branch estimated there were not more than 25 MCP members in Singapore, with about 1,500 Anti-British League (ABL) mass executives, and another 1,500 not fully integrated into the latter. Membership of the ABL itself did not indicate MCP membership, since in the anti-colonial atmosphere of the 1950s, being

anti-British, hence anti-colonial, seemed natural to many in Chinese-language schools. This relatively modest MCP level was before waves of arrests in 1956–1957 devastated the party, and the at times barely functional MCP Singapore Town Committee. Communists in this order of numbers, inchoately connected through a clumsy cell structure, and intermittently funnelled instructions from leaders in Malaya and Indonesia, were in a weak position to "control" a mass party such as the Barisan was from its foundation in mid-1961.

On the other hand, they did have key MCP cadres such as Chan Sun Wing inside the PAP, and later in the Barisan Sosialis (to which he defected in 1961). The MCP was also used to cooperating with a range of politicians including Lee Kuan Yew himself (hence having members within the PAP from 1954, and Lee meeting Fang as the "Plen" several times). Furthermore, prestige attached to the communists for their wartime resistance to Japan, for post-war political and union struggles against the British, and for communism's role in liberation movements around the world. In the context of worldwide anti-colonial struggle, this meant that they could influence, if not set, the tone of Barisan Sosialis policy from its formation in mid-1961, and could compete to win over members of the "progressive" left to actual party membership.

Despite their tendency to talk of "communists", Special Branch sometimes saw the likes of Lim Chin Siong as also "under strong communist influence" rather than as members. The language employed by British and federal representatives was elastic, reflecting the reality that Lim and many others had a Marxist frame of reference, and shared with communists the willingness to act as part of united fronts and to resort to direct action if constitutional means failed.[56] British Commissioner for Southeast Asia Lord Selkirk believed, in 1961–1962, that Lim would not necessarily incline towards the Soviet Union and China if he won power, and might keep to constitutional means in the meanwhile. For a while in 1961–1962, Selkirk was therefore reluctant to sanction arrests of Lim and his associates, arrests sought first by UMNO representatives within Singapore's Internal Security Council, and in late 1962 by PAP representatives too.[57]

The Barisan was, then, a "progressive" left party in its own eyes which — like the early PAP — overlapped communism at its extremes. Its journal *The Plebeian* and many members conceived of themselves as part of a worldwide, anti-colonial, "progressive" trend which included communists.[58] The Barisan tried to position itself as the party that truly

represented the working classes (notably the Chinese working classes) in opposition to the now overwhelmingly bourgeois (and mainly English-educated) topmost leadership of the PAP, and jostled to control the labour movement.[59]

This label of "progressive" left — which identified people with world-wide anti-colonialism, socialism, and campaigns in places such as Algeria — was arguably the key one for many. The way merger with a highly conservative Malayan Federation seemed to be foisted on them from 1961–1963, and subsequently the mass arrests under Operation Cold Store of February 1963, further radicalised the Barisan. In other words, Operation Cold Store was possibly as much the cause of Barisan's radicalisation and willingness to consider extra parliamentary methods — such as protests and strikes — as the consequence. From their viewpoint, events from Cold Store to 1966 gradually confirmed there was little or no scope for them to pursue their aims through meaningful parliamentary politics. Hence, their final Barisan withdrawal from Parliament in 1966 to take to street protest, which then led to further arrests.

The way the "progressive" left wing shaded into communism, and the fact that Singapore has never ended the conflict with the MCP, have made it difficult for people to talk openly about their views of communism. Hence, for instance, Michael Fernandez and Loh Kah Seng have written an intriguing chapter on post-war unionism, which nevertheless fails to grapple with the issues of unionists' actual relationships to communists, and communism.[60] This means that an ironic result of the PAP's refusal to make a final peace with the MCP, is possibly that the PAP and public are denied full information on the real extent of many people's communist sympathies and connections.

An additional result of the struggle for survival in the 1950s–1960s was that it endowed the PAP and the Singapore state with a set of discourses, or ways of thinking about, whether or not people were "communist" or "subversive". Given the fluidity of the left wing, and yet equally real danger of entryism and subversion of Singapore parties, the PAP needed ways of classifying some people as beyond the pale. How could they do this?

The case of Lim Chin Siong is instructive. For *Men in White*, Lee Kuan Yew revealed that the Internal Security Department had records that Lim Chin Siong "met the Plen three times", once in 1961. Lee continues, "These revelations showed that even though Lim denied he was a communist, he did make contact with the communist underground and that he collaborated with pro-communist PAP assemblymen in a bid to

topple the PAP government in 1961." In fact, this does not prove that Lim was doing any more than Lee himself, meeting the Plen in order to be aware of and take advantage of MCP policy.[61] The more interesting claims come from Chan Wun Sing, the ex-PAP and Barisan member who became a full MCP member in the late 1960s. He claims that Lim was close to becoming a party member when his contact disappeared. Lee concludes from such evidence that Lim was not only in contact with, but also "taking orders" from the MCP. Again, given that Lee himself met the Plen, and that Lim Chin Siong also made sure he met Lord Selkirk, Britain's regional Commissioner, in mid-1961, this is a non-sequitur. The most that can be said from this is that Lim saw himself as a member of the "progressive" left wing, inspired by events in China and willing to work alongside communists, and that though he may or may not have considered joining the party formally, he almost certainly did not. However, the discussion in *Men in White* is perhaps more instructive on how the PAP categorised people, and so framed Cold War history. This suggests a gap between people's subjective classification of themselves, and the PAP view of their "objective" status.

People on the left seem able to conceive of themselves as progressive, Marxist, or Anti-British without being necessarily "communist". Lee Kuan Yew by comparison classifies as a communist anyone "who took orders from either the communist party or its affiliates". Though apparently tight as a definition, he then states in *Men in White* that Lim was "taking orders", though the only overt evidence for this is that Lim met the Plen. If that is the level of proof required, the distinction becomes potentially meaningless and dangerous. Proximity and meetings do not constitute "taking orders".

Former PAP Organising Secretary and Home Affairs Minister Ong Pang Boon, meanwhile, also appears to start with a tight definition of a communist, as "one who swore allegiance to MCP and was a card-carrying member of the party or its communist organizations". That is very clear. But when it comes to Lim, we find a far more elastic approach. Hence, *Men in White* states that Ong accepted that Lim might not be a card-carrying member, "but by his actions and speeches in the 1950s, he sounded like a communist and he supported communist objectives".[62] The latter suggests a more communist-style approach to categorisation. That is, following Marx, communists distinguish between people's subjective position (what they think they are) and their objective position (how they act, and its practical effect). Hence, it may be that neither Lim's — nor by extension other people's — formal party position, nor

their subjective beliefs, are in themselves the deciding factors in whether a person is labelled "communist". Rather, the questions are whether they have any proximity, which can be interpreted as "taking orders", and if their actions are deemed to have objectively "supported communist objectives".

On the PAP side, faced with MCP entryism, such tough criteria possibly seemed justified in the 1950s to 1960s. People were not going to simply admit to membership of an illegal organisation, which was still waging guerrilla warfare in Malaya. On the other side, however, it meant that a progressive left-wing politician or unionist could all too easily be categorised "communist". This then made them vulnerable to detention without trial. Lim Chin Siong himself went to his grave denying he was ever a communist, and the evidence — thus far — proves only that he maintained contact with communists, and shared much of their worldview.

Our main interest here is not whether Lim could be classified a communist, but the way the PAP and Singapore state classified people, and thus "framed" this period of history. This shaping of the PAP by the 1950s–1960s struggle extended beyond mere attitudes: it rewrote the very DNA of the party. Hence, it became, in 1958, a cadre party like the MCP, in which the Central Executive Committee (CEC) selected cadres, who helped to select the CEC. Its very structure was dictated by the need to defeat entryism, or a left-wing mass membership "capturing" the party. Even so, the party was severely damaged by desertions when the Barisan Sosialis was formed in 1961.

The cadre system, and the use of loose criteria to label people "subversive" then outlived the period of significant communist entryism into the PAP.[63] This survival may in turn go some way to explaining the arrest of Catholic social activists in May 1987 as "Marxists", regardless of their claimed, subjective position. Their use of social action to influence society and labour conditions had been, to PAP eyes, Marxist (class-based and extra-parliamentary) subversion, as well as "subversive" of the state's ability to manage society and economics. These tendencies survived the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991. While Malaysia and Thailand signed peace terms with the remaining communist insurgents in 1989, Singapore did not.

This Cold War echo continues to "frame" the PAP understanding of recent history. This can be seen in *Men in White* (2009). This was written by a team of journalists seconded from the government-controlled *Straits Times*, giving it quasi-official status. This book falls into a number of traditions. First, that of journalists claiming to present all sides of the story,

while adopting PAP categorisation, ranging back to Lee's press secretary Alex Josey, through Dennis Bloodworth, to this present-day creation. Such works include interviews with or about "opposition", but tend to paraphrase these or frame them as respondents to the main PAP story. Second, therefore, it belongs to the tradition of allowing PAP opposition to speak but mainly in relation to the PAP story rather than of their own plans, ideals and visions for Singapore. This second tradition is cemented by PAP guardianship of sources. The authors are given privileged access to official sources, and both these and the oral histories used are not made publicly available, or only selectively so after publication of the quasi-official version. Combined with the lack of any regular, and regularised, release of state papers, this means that fully balanced, academic source analysis and construction of alternative interpretations is rendered impossible. Thus, *Men in White* undoubtedly gives greater insight into the right-wing PAP's enemies, but mediates their testimony mostly as paraphrase, and "frames" it as part of a story of PAP "Heroes" overcoming people who followed communist orders and communalist instincts.

This issue of Cold War framing is vital not just to individual reputations, but also to how significant events are viewed, such as Operation Cold Store of February 1963. Initially, the British Commissioner for Singapore, Lord Selkirk, had been sceptical of the case for arrests. The British move towards accepting detentions came in 1962, and more for political than security reasons. The Malayans demanded arrests in Singapore before the planned merger, and the Brunei revolt of December 1962 provided the pretext for these. In February 1963, the PAP leadership then ensured that over a hundred of the left — more than Kuala Lumpur or Britain initially thought justified — were detained in Operation Cold Store. Perhaps the most glaring omission of *Men in White* is any serious analysis of the events immediately surrounding Operation Cold Store, or any space for alternative voices on Operation Spectrum: the arrest of 16 "Marxist" social activists (later widened to 22) in 1987.[64] There is, therefore, a real clash between the PAP presentation of merger as a necessary move opposed by opportunists following MCP orders, and the Barisan interpretation of merger as an opportunistic move by the PAP right wing, in order to crush the left. There is also a fundamental difference over whether the people arrested from 1961–1966 were "communist" and subversive, or (for some at least) progressive left-wingers willing to use strikes and protests as well as Parliament. The point here is not whether one side or the other is wrong, but that these represent very different ways of "framing" key events.

To be fair, there were other dividing lines than communist/non-communist. Lee Kuan Yew had a radical conception of the supremacy of Parliament, one which did not allow for challenge of its decisions and right to govern whether by union action or other non-parliamentary sources of power.

Over time, increasing numbers of people have started to challenge the PAP framing of the Cold War period. By around 1999 to 2001, a range of such people — veterans of mid-century politics, ex-detainees, academics seeking a more varied view of the past — was beginning a process of recovering suppressed and self-censored voices.

Two of the earliest such alternative readings concerned Lim Chin Siong — PAP co-founder, who in 1961 became Lee's enemy when he left the PAP to help found the breakaway Barisan Sosialis Party and oppose the specific form of merger the PAP were pushing for.[65] These two works included a chapter on Lim Chin Siong, and the book *Comet in Our Sky*, in which ex-detainees and colleagues such as Tan Jing Quee joined academics to try and give a glimpse of Lim's life and beliefs.[66]

What the proponents of this compensatory history have in common is that they all suggest that within the overall PAP-driven framework, there should be a greater range of "Makers and Keepers of Singapore History", and a greater range of "voices". "Makers and Keepers of Singapore History" was the title of a journal special edition in 2007, a 2008 workshop, and a 2010 book.[67] This "new wave" of history gathered support from a range of young Singaporean schoolteachers — doctoral candidates, schoolteachers and from the arts and university world — who launched an online journal in 2007: *S/pores* (http://s-pores.com).[68] In reality, this "new wave", including contributors to *S/pores* had much broader interests than merely the left wing, embracing amongst other things culture, the arts and popular history. From the beginning, however, *S/pores* gave a great deal of its space to oral history of the left and ex-detainees, and commentaries on these. It included accounts, for instance, of the 1954 trial of University of Malaya socialists over an article on "Aggression in Asia" in their journal *Fajar*.

*S/pore*'s focus reflected a flowering of forums and publications on and by the left. Its coverage of the *Fajar* trial, for instance, was followed in 2010 by Poh Soo Kai, Tan Jing Quee and Koh Kay Yew publishing *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club of Malaya and the Politics of Postwar Malaya and Singapore* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD). In *The Fajar Generation*, ex-detainees such as Poh Soo Kai and Dr. Lim Hock Siew directly chal-

lenge PAP interpretations of them as communist, and suggest their own rationale for opposing merger in 1961–1962, and their own progressive socialist mentality. The book also portrays the essentially socialist and anti-colonial radicalism of the University of Malaya Socialist Club of 1953–1972. Tan Jing Quee *et al.*'s *The May 13 Generation* does the same job for the Chinese Middle School Students, explaining how a generation of Chinese-educated students saw themselves as bearing intellectual, social, cultural and political responsibilities: which just happened to find expression in a range of "progressive", "anti-British" and leftist activities. They were as passionately "anti-Yellow Culture" (denoting degraded media including the pornographic) as anti-British. We too easily forget now how such young men were amongst the most highly educated vanguard of a Chinese-speaking generation whose education had been vitiated by war and the Japanese Occupation: what NTU sociologist Kwok Kian Woon has called the "otherness" of their past.[69] They felt a burden of responsibility to lead as intellectuals and activists, and what we have in English thus far is merely the tip of a vast Chinese-language iceberg of their publications and memories.[70]

As of writing in 2010 to early 2012, further memoirs (in Chinese) were being prepared. So too were additional English-language books: on Lim Chin Siong (a biography by Kevin Tan); and on, *The University of Malaya Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya* (edited by Loh Kah Seng, Edgar Liao, Lim Cheng Tju and Seng Guo Qian).

Some scholars have questioned whether this trend might go too far, and "romanticise" even violent subversives. Ong Wei Chong, then a Research Fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, pointed out that the MCP did wage guerrilla warfare from 1948–1989, and set off explosive devices even in 1970s Singapore. The threat of violence was by no means imaginary. In reality, however, many if not most of the broad left whose stories are being told were not espousing actual violence. In addition, the Malaysian case shows that any such tendency towards romanticising violence is soon more than countered by the memories of those who suffered it. A stream of memoirs of insurgents, from two books on Chin Peng in 2003–2004 onwards — there set off equally robust responses from veterans and Malay politicians.[71]

This oral history and memoir work sometimes does, in brief moments, escape the gravitational pull of the "Singapore Story", to offer glimpses of non-PAP actors, ideas and motivations on their own terms, in their own voices. Hence Fong Chong Pik's memoirs (Fang Chuang Pi)

convey how passionately he believed in the 1950s–1960s that only the communists might effectively oppose and reform "the darkness of colonial society". They also convey the sense in which young Chinese-educated students felt themselves to be intellectuals with a responsibility to lead society, in the tradition of Chinese student radicalism of the previous half century.[72]

These "alternative histories" are also seen by some as a potential path to political healing, an idea expressed in a 26 February 2006 "Detention-Healing-Writing Forum" in Singapore. At this, ex-detainees described the torment of detention with no known date of release or trial, and the healing power of writing and discussing their experiences. Michael Fernandez, for instance, both claimed he had been a genuine unionist trying to help the Singapore Harbour Union — "the rice-bowl of 11,000 workers and their families" — before his arrest in 1964, and that he wrote on toilet paper in detention, as he was denied writing paper. For him, writing, having his own voice, was and is vital. Considering that the longest detentions (Dr. Lim Hock Siew and Chia Thye Poh) ran to two decades or more, and were only terminated with conditions, the significance of such work is obvious.

But the Ministry of Home Affairs declined the theme of political healing through writing, restating its opinion (in a letter to the *Straits Times* of 8 March 2006) that men such as Michael Fernandez were "communists", who if unchecked would have threatened Singapore's stability.[73] Since then, some political videos have been banned, and in 2010, the National Library of Singapore insisted that ex-detainee Vincent Cheng be removed from the list of speakers for a public forum on history organised by the NUS History Society. Vincent Cheng was one of the 22 — including lawyers and Catholic social activists — arrested for an alleged "Marxist" conspiracy in 1987. The government had accused him of "carrying out Tan Wah Piow's instructions to build up a mass-based united front of grassroots organizations in Singapore to oppose the government, by violent means, if necessary".[74] The alleged mastermind, Tan Wah Piow, continued to deny there was any such thing, or that he supported communism, and to insist that he merely corresponded with people about how to seek change for Singapore through democratic means. More to the point, he and others argued that using the Internal Security Act when there was no imminent security threat, rather than the courts, denied basic justice. It removed people's opportunity to defend their actions as within the law.[75]

In addition, Goh Chok Tong later told interviewers that "Some were conscious of what they were doing. Many [of the others] had their own ideas of what was good for Singapore but they were not fully aware that they were being manipulated by other people". Author Michael Barr was informed by one ex-detainee that he had been urged to admit he was "an unconscious conspirator". Together, such evidence suggests that the approach of labelling some opponents "objective" subversives or communists — the Cold War mode — was at play again.[76] In this sort of Orwellian context, a person's subjective identity and aims were not necessarily a defence.[77]

Clearly, there were still limits to Government toleration, especially where the possibility of ex-detainees discussing detention itself, or denying the basis of their detention, arose. But even the act of holding such a meeting was unprecedented. From its formation in 1966, the Singapore Ex-Political Detainees' Association had acted as a control on what ex-detainees could do. That ex-detainees would address a public meeting of more than 200 in 2006 was evidence of the state's increased willingness to tolerate discussion at the margins.[78] In addition, the internet was making policing of information increasingly difficult. You can ban an individual from making an article or film, but once it is already on the internet, it is almost impossible to prevent its circulation. Martyn See's video of ex-detainee Lim Hock Siew speaking was banned in 2009, but only after more than 40,000 people had seen it, and it had gone viral.[79]

As of 2011, the recent wave of "alternative" history was, therefore, tolerated rather than endorsed by the state. It is variously a set of "reclamation" activities for lost voices and previously suppressed or self-censored accounts, a project to recapture the "dynamic and idealistic culture of political contestation and pluralism" of the 1940s–1960s,[80] a restoration of reputations and "societal memories", a cry for the recognition of the harshness if not "injustice" of detention and for the removal of impediments to liberal democracy, and an attitude of alertness versus perceived "Singapore Story" distortions of history. I say alertness because *Men in White* was reviewed soon after its 2009 publication, both in a public forum and on *S/pores*. These reviews claimed that the book downplayed crucial episodes (Operation Cold Store), ignored alternative views (the Barisan's own reasons for opposing merger at the time), stereotyped the party's triumphant right wing as heroic men of principle, and its opposition as weakly following communist orders, and generally framed events in the traditional "Singapore Story". While accepting the book as a riveting

read which did give additional coverage to PAP opponents, they nevertheless tried to out what they saw as its narrative devices, biases, and omissions.[81] Indeed, if anything, the criticism failed to acknowledge that *Men in White* probably went as far as could be expected — in the context of its time and authors — to acknowledge the left-wing contributions to Singapore history, including: providing the initial mass base for the PAP; putting crucial pressure on the British to accelerate concessions; and by its example and competition forcing the right wing to try and "outleft the left" in social and housing programmes in dedication and selflessness.[82]

It seems as if a kind of stalemate has come about, in which "alternative" views of recent political history dominate non-state sites on the internet, and seep into the state-dominated media in a limited and ambivalent way,[83] while the government keeps a tighter lid on state papers,* insists its framing of the Cold War period is the only valid one, and withholds adequate documentation for re-examination. In some ways, this situation works to the government's advantage. It focuses debate onto the radical left and ex-detainees per se, and away from other "alternative paths" and issues such as those of liberalism, the rights of the individual, the case for reform or abolition of the Internal Security Act, the scope of civil society, and the relative distribution of benefits in society.[84] It presents Singapore's post-war history — and by implication present — as a choice between bad communism and communalism on the one hand, and good technocractic PAP rule on the other, rather than as a myriad of ideas, experiments and options of all kinds. That deflects attention from the new wave historians' much broader agenda of putting all areas of life (culture as much as politics) and all levels of society (from the impoverished to the politician) back into the picture. As such, this issue of how to frame just a few crucial decades of Singapore's history remains highly contested, and highly relevant to contemporary politics, society, and security.

## Conclusion: The Postmodern Condition and the History of Singapore

This chapter does not claim to be comprehensive, but rather to locate Mary Turnbull's work as one of many different actual and possible

* Singapore does not release departmental papers on a 25- or 30-year rule as in Australia and Britain respectively, let alone have the kinds of "Freedom of Information" regulations enjoyed there and in the United States.


image
not
available