

Visiting Raffles' grave the day I turned 24

Sean Lim

For *The Straits Times*

It started with author Neil Humphreys' Facebook post on Jan 28 when the Singapore Bicentennial was launched, and he shared his visit to the burial site of Sir Stamford Raffles in London.

Jan 28 was my birthday and I happened to be in London, so why not make the day meaningful by following what Mr Humphreys did? Anyway, Raffles' grave was situated close by, at St Mary's Church in Hendon, a 30-minute train ride from the city.

Upon arrival, I was disappointed that the church was locked and nobody seemed to be around. I tried walking through the church's cemetery, fruitlessly trying to find Raffles' tombstone. On the verge of leaving, I gave it a last shot by ringing the intercom.

Fortunately, a church warden answered. He was just about to call it a day, so I was lucky to make it in time. He showed me around and shared that when Raffles died in 1826, he was not allowed to be buried within the building. According to the warden, this was peculiar given someone of Raffles' stature. Apparently, he had had a disagreement with then vicar Theodore Williams when he was alive.

Williams had stakes within the slave trade and objected to Raffles' anti-slavery stance. Given the conflict of interest, it was unsurprising that Raffles was laid to rest outside the church. It was only about a century ago that his tombstone was fitted inside after the church was extended.

After the story-telling, the warden showed me a gold-plated plaque erected by Raffles' family in 1887, stating his role as a "founder" of Singapore. We then moved towards the chancel, and the warden removed a plastic cover on the floor, revealing Raffles' grey concrete tombstone.

Honestly, his tombstone came as a surprise to me. Raffles is a key figure in our history and I imagined his grave to be grand and monumental. Instead, it was just a modest gravestone. Maybe it was not an English tradition for non-royals to have a glitzy tombstone or memorial, never mind their fame. A similar observation was made at Westminster Abbey days later, as I saw the tombstones of other luminaries such as Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton.

Before I left, I mentioned to the warden that this visit was special because it coincided exactly with the bicentennial's launch and, of course, my birthday as well. He was aware of Singapore's

commemoration of 200 years since the 1819 landing by Raffles on the island of Singapore. Seems that the reach of our little red dot is quite wide!

I added that the commemoration was controversial because some felt it was glorifying colonialism and hence improper. Never mind that the bicentennial was termed as a "commemoration" and not "celebration". Some even accused the Government of creating a feel-good effect for looming elections. There were others, however, who said it was important to recognise this chapter in our history.

The warden gave his own take on Singapore's colonialism. He said that while colonialism was constructed as repressive and evil, we must acknowledge the benefits gained from the political system introduced by the British. One would be the rule of law, so as a small country we can be treated as an equal on the international stage; another would be parliamentary democracy, giving Singaporeans the power to elect leaders regularly. Moreover, compared with other colonial legacies elsewhere, Raffles was a "lesser evil", he argued.

For me, what remains crucial are the lessons. We will be marking Total Defence Day on Feb 15 – a harsh reminder that only we ourselves are responsible for protecting Singapore, after British neglect led to Singapore's fall to the Japanese in 1942. The date marks a blemish in our history – so by all means, frown upon it and vow not to let history repeat itself. Similarly, with colonialism, we can commemorate and draw lessons from its advent and eventual end.

Second, we can let pragmatism prevail. As much as we condemn the ideology of colonialism, we should not denounce everything linked to our colonial history, which unfortunately was what some post-colonial countries did, to their disadvantage.

Successful aspects of the system left behind and inherited by us should continue to be embraced. Nobody is advocating a revival of colonialism, but neither should we destroy what worked for us.

Like it or not, colonialism is part of our history. It would be more helpful to be practical and acknowledge the benefits it brought us. I am confident that after five decades, our national identity is strong enough not to falter simply because of a bicentennial commemoration. It takes more than that to break us apart, if we ever do.

I believe that even older people, who themselves lived through colonialism, are rational enough not to overly indulge in the negative experiences of colonialism and ignore the benefits we inherited.



The Singapore Bicentennial commemorates Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival in Singapore in 1819. While some condemn the ideology of colonialism, we should not denounce everything linked to our colonial history, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

Like it or not, colonialism is part of our history. It would be more helpful to be practical and acknowledge the benefits it brought us. I am confident that after five decades, our national identity is strong enough not to falter simply because of a bicentennial commemoration. It takes more than that to break us apart, if we ever do.

The bicentennial can be a fruitful period for us as we take stock of our history, even as we argue on the merits and drawbacks of the colonial era. The heat of the debate reflects how passionate Singaporeans are about their identity and the national narrative.

It can also be a time of self-reflection. As I was leaving the church, I heard the distinct twang of the Singaporean accent. Two other young Singaporeans were visiting the church to see Raffles' grave.

Both were undergraduates studying in London. "You guys are also here because of the 200 years' thing, right?" I asked, a little taken aback by this spontaneous meeting of fellow Singaporeans at an unlikely place.

They smiled and nodded, and we took a wifie together. There

seemed to be an unspoken Singaporean bond created immediately, built upon a common acknowledgement of our history. I am sure they will have their own interpretation of Raffles and the British colonial legacy this bicentennial.

As for me, I will remember the day I turned 24 fondly, as the day I visited Raffles' grave in his own homeland on the very same date, 200 years ago, that he fortuitously set foot in my own home country. I might have been far from home, but my mind and heart were very much of Singapore.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Sean Lim is an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore studying political science.