

By Invitation

Singapore and the United Kingdom: 1819 to 2019

Time for a balanced and objective review of our 200-year journey together



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For *The Straits Times*

On Jan 29, 1819, Stamford Raffles, accompanied by William Farquhar and a small entourage, arrived in Singapore. His objective was to establish a port and trading station for the East India Company. This is the beginning of the story of modern Singapore.

Our founding Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, held this view. Speaking to the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce on Feb 6, 1969, he said: "But for the wisdom and foresight of the Englishman with whose name the history of modern Singapore will always be associated, your Chamber, you and I, all of us would not be here today." Singapore's founding fathers were famous for many things. One of them was their disdain for political correctness. They preferred the truth to fashion and never shied away from defying convention.

On Aug 8, 1969, a state banquet was held to celebrate both National Day and the 150th anniversary of the founding of modern Singapore. Princess Alexandra was among the invited guests, representing the British royal family.

Speaking at the banquet, Mr Lee said: "... we deem ourselves among the fortunate few who can afford to be proud of their past, with no desire to rewrite or touch up the truth. It is a short history, 150 years, but long enough for us to value our association with the British people."

BICENTENNIAL BOOK

Singapore and the United Kingdom have a 200-year-old relationship. To commemorate the bicentennial, my friend Scott Wightman, the British High Commissioner, and I have co-edited a book, entitled *200 Years Of Singapore And The United Kingdom*. It will be launched today by Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu.

The purpose of this book is to undertake a balanced and objective review of the past 200 years, to draw some lessons from history and to think about the future.

The book is not an attempt to

glorify British imperialism and colonialism or the British rule of Singapore.

I am not an admirer of Professor Niall Ferguson. He argued in his 2002 book, *Empire: The Rise And Demise Of The British World Order And The Lessons For Global Power*, that the British empire was the cradle of modernity.

In 2017, Indian politician and intellectual Shashi Tharoor published a book, *Inglorious Empire*, about the British rule of India. Dr Tharoor accuses the British of having destroyed India, economically, culturally and psychologically. I regard his book as a good counter to Prof Ferguson's book.

It is also not the purpose of our book to deny that Singapore had a history before 1819.

We acknowledge that Singapore had been settled, not continuously, but intermittently, since the 14th century. We have therefore included essays by historian Kwa Chong Guan and archaeologist John Miksic on Singapore's pre-1819 history.

In his speech on Feb 6, 1969, Mr Lee said: "When Stamford Raffles came here 150 years ago, there was no organised human society in Singapore, unless a fishing village can be called a society."

TIME TO HONOUR FARQUHAR

Mr Wightman and I both feel that Raffles has been given too much credit and Farquhar, the first Resident, too little for his contributions to the success of Singapore. Raffles was the visionary; Farquhar was the pragmatist who turned the vision into reality.

No one did more for the success of Singapore, in the first four years, than Farquhar. Mr Graham Berry has written an excellent essay to set the record straight. We hope that, in this bicentennial year, the Singapore Government will acknowledge our debt to Farquhar in an appropriate way.

MILESTONES OF A 200-YEAR JOURNEY

Two hundred years is a long time. We are able to select only a number of key milestones and requested some experts to write on them. For example, we have an essay by Associate Professor Peter Borschberg on the two treaties of 1824: the Anglo-Dutch Treaty and the Crawford Treaty. It was under the Crawford Treaty that the British obtained sovereignty to Singapore.

We have an essay by Mr Kenzie Ting on Singapore's port city heritage. He is an expert on port cities and is the author of a new book, *Singapore 1819: A Living Legacy*.

Associate Professor Farish Noor has written an important essay on migration and multiculturalism in



colonial Singapore. When Raffles founded Singapore, he appealed to Chinese, Indian, Arab, Jewish, Armenian and Western traders and entrepreneurs to come to Singapore. Many answered his appeal. Farquhar was able to use his reputation and network to persuade Malays, Bugis, Javanese, Acehnese, Boyanese and Minans to join the settlement.

Prof Farish concludes that due to the fact that the settlers came from so many parts of Asia, "they gave to the land that they would adopt as their home a multi-perspective worldview that would ensure that Singapore remain a hub in the globalised post-colonial world to come".

Other milestones covered in our book include the Indian mutiny of 1915, World War II, the Japanese

Occupation, Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army, the rise of nationalism and anti-colonialism, and the political developments between 1945 and 1963, and from 1965 to the present.

On the topics of merger and separation, we decided not to request two Singaporeans to write on them as we are all familiar with the Singapore narrative. To add value, we decided to invite British historians A.J. Stockwell and Nicholas J. White to do so.

There is also a noteworthy essay by Mr J.Y. Pillay on the decision by the British government to withdraw from its military bases in Singapore by 1971. This was a big blow to the newly independent government, which was faced with high unemployment and the lack of job opportunities. It was estimated

at the time that the withdrawal would mean the loss of 10 per cent of our gross domestic product. Miraculously, Singapore survived this early setback. The story is worth telling.

THE BRITISH LEGACY

The biggest chapter of the book is on the British legacy in Singapore. We have many good essays on the English language, the rule of law, the free port, free trade, open economy, the civil service, health, education, welfare, town planning, low-cost housing, anti-corruption, business, sports, culture, the Commonwealth and so on.

The British left a rich legacy in Singapore. However, it is fair to say that, in many instances, the British had laid the foundation but it was the Government of independent

Singapore that got the job done.

This is true in the fight against corruption, in town planning, in the building of low-cost housing, in diversifying the economy, in cleaning and greening the city, and so on.

Ms Irene Ng and Mr Alan Hunt have written about the transformation of the relationship between Singapore and Britain, from 1965 to 2019. Ms Foo Chi Hsia and Mr Wightman have written about the future of our relationship, post-2019.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I was born and grew up in colonial Singapore. Colonial society was both racist and hierarchical. The whites were first-class citizens. The Eurasians were second-class citizens. The rest of us were third-class citizens.

The British colonial administration in Singapore did not observe the democratic norms and freedoms that the British citizens enjoyed at home. Anyone deemed to be critical of or disloyal to the British could be banished to the land of his birth.

I personally experienced censorship, for the first time in my life, when I was a student at Raffles Institution (RI). I had submitted two articles to the school magazines, one against apartheid in South Africa and the other criticising the way in which our hawkers were being hounded by the police. The school submitted my essays to the Ministry of Education, which decided that they could not be published.

To be fair, I must also say that there were many good people from Britain who were working in Singapore, as doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, teachers and so on. In RI, I had several expatriate teachers. I remember three of my teachers, Mr T.J. Evans, Mr J.T. Lippitt and Mr W.T. Andrews, with respect and gratitude.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I would say that the British rule of Singapore was 60 per cent good and 40 per cent bad. However, compared with the other colonial rulers in South-east Asia, the British were the least bad. They left us with a rich legacy. We were able to build on that legacy and to catch up with and even surpass Britain in some respects.

Over the past 200 years, the relationship between us has been transformed from that between the ruler and the ruled, between a rich country and a poor country, between a developed country and a developing country, into a relationship between two equals.

When Britain leaves the European Union on March 29, it will be in uncharted waters. I want to say to our British friends that they have our goodwill and support in their new journey.

I have a final thought. I think we should remember the hard work and sacrifice of generations of Singaporeans. It is the collective efforts of these people, over the past 200 years, which have produced the success story called Singapore.

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