FORUM BOOKS

A NATION IS BORN

MICHAEL ARDIZZONE

CON PRESS

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Being a defence of
Malayan Union

by

MICHAEL ARDIZZONE

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TO

MY WIFE

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I DO not claim to be an 'expert' on Malaya. I neither speak all its languages nor know, intimately, the customs of all its peoples.

What I have is a newspaperman's knowledge of the country; and for that I apologise to no man, for the journalist's picture is necessarily a many-sided one, unbiassed by loves and prejudices.

During my years in Malaya I often said, and, indeed, wrote, that some form of Malayan Union would have to be introduced sooner or later, both to rectify injustices and to prepare the country for eventual self-government; and when, last year, the Colonial Office announced its plan for the new Malaya I was frankly delighted.

Since then, however, I have been saddened to see criticism, informed and uninformed, biassed and merely foolish, so obscure the merits of this statesmanlike measure that the great mass of English people, who know nothing whatever about Malaya, have come to regard Union as 'just another bad smell'.

It was the unfairness of this which caused me, in April, to write *A Nation is Born*, if only to give some of the public an inkling of the general picture so that they might judge more justly for themselves; but events, these days, move faster than printing presses, and it seems now, in August, as I add this preface, that before the book is published there may be modifications to the Union plan.

For myself, I hope that if there are modifications they will be trivial, for I still believe, however unfashionable it may be to do so, that Malayan Union is fundamentally good.

There are negotiations taking place now between British

representatives and the Malay rulers, but their outcome, whatever it may be, cannot affect the views I have set out here.

As I see it, the act of Malayan Union is the birth of a new nation. . . . Let us look into the antecedents of this latest addition to the world family, and try to prophesy how it is going to fare.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DIRECTLY and indirectly, I have had the help of many people in the writing of this little book. There is Mr. H. B. Egmont Hake, C.B.E., formerly a member of the F.M.S. Federal Council, from whose own work, *The New Malaya and You*, I have not hesitated to borrow; there is the Press Association, of whose admirable library I have had the use; and there are the compilers of the *Malayan Year Book* and other official publications.

I would not forget, though, the late Mr. J. H. M. Robson, C.B.E., who was the 'old hand' who first introduced me to Malaya a good many years ago; nor Mr. H. S. Lee, one of the ablest of Malayan Chinese, who explained to me something of the viewpoint of his compatriots.

Then again there are all my old Malayan friends, many dead, many only slowly recovering from their long ordeal in Japanese prison camps. Without their companionship I could never have known the old Malaya as I did, nor had the temerity to write about the new.

Chapter 1

CRADLE IN THE SUN

THE ten political entities which Malayan Union has now brought together under one government were the Straits Settlements (with the exception of Singapore), the four Federated Malay States and the five Unfederated Malay States.

If you had moved about these charming places, as I did in happy years before the war, you would have found little, if any, difference between them.

In them all the sun shone daily, from early morning until the swift, dramatic fall of darkness, unsoftened by twilight.

Everywhere was the same mixture of handsome, friendly peoples, varying a little in proportion but never in type. The same languages took you wherever you went.

Whether you were in Johore or Pahang or Malacca, or anywhere else in the little peninsula that is smaller than England, an hour's journey would have shown you the same variation of scenery—cool, green jungle, taking on a strange, purple hue when seen from a distance; wide fields of golden padi; groves of the poor, anaemic rubber trees which had a little of their life's blood drained away every day; long beaches of hard white sand on which clear, tropical seas were gently breaking, and which were fringed by palm trees and delicate, lacy casuarinas; thousands of acres of swampland overgrown with twining mangrove; valleys deeply scarred by man's search for tin; clean new towns of brick and concrete, and shapely, charming native villages.

Had you, in early evening, driven slowly along some road running through the swamp, you might have seen the kingfishers perched in their thousands upon the telegraph wire at your side, flying off singly as soldiers falling out from parade

as your car came near, each one disappearing into the leafage with a flash of blue and silver.

You might have walked by night, as I once did, into a remote jungle clearing, and seen a black panther posed splendidly upon a high, white rock, and stood for a moment entranced, watching him, until he took fright and crashed away into the darkness beyond.

You might have mingled with the laughing, cosmopolitan throng in some native fair, watching the strange, formalised 'operas' of the Chinese, or the monotonous, rhythmic *ronggeng* of the Malays.

Silken-robed, quiet mannered Chinese might have entertained you to tea in rooms whose furniture would have ransomed a monarch in centuries past.

Malays might have given you black, sweet coffee in their cool, wood-built homes, and perhaps talked to you of the days when their people were sailors and pirates, and shown you old booty taken from looted junks in the Straits of Malacca.

Tamils might have asked you to their temples to witness the strange festival of Thaipusam, when men molest themselves to prove to the world their piety and devotion.

You might have eaten prawns as big as a woman's fist, fried in batter; curries whose component dishes numbered thirty or more; Chinese banquets which lasted hours and introduced you to a score of delicacies you had never seen or tasted before.

From the trees and plants growing about your home you might have sampled the delicate mangosteen, subtlest flavour in the world, that is so ethereal that it can only be eaten in the country of its growth; the native pineapple, tender and rich with juice; the potato pear, which tastes like toffee; the durian, which smells like a bad drain and has a flavour of rum, custard and garlic all in one.

In the clubs and hotels, Chinese 'boys' might have served you with the pinkish gin-sling, pleasantest and most insidious of all tropical drinks—or whisky and gin at less than sixpence a tot!

You might have danced on cool verandahs to the music of Filipino bands, or wandered into great gardens under a moon which showed every blade of grass as if lit by lamplight; and perhaps, at midnight, you might have seen the white, delicate *Keng Wah*, shyest of all orchids, blossom into fulness.

There were a thousand other things you might have done and seen, a thousand other pleasures at your command in this soft, magical land that was kind to everyone, even to those who abused it.

And it was because Malaya was like that—and indeed it remains like that, for most of its graces are given by Nature and cannot be taken away by man—that the extraordinary, comic-opera structure of its political system was able to exist.

It was a confusion of government only possible among people who did not really mind, who knew, or thought they knew, that, come what may, there would always be rice for tomorrow's tiffin, a place in the shade where one was free to sleep, and pretty clothes to wear when sleeping was over and it was time to go about among one's fellow men.

Never was a country more cruelly hit by war than Malaya, where all this pleasant confidence was swept away in a few weeks, to be followed by three and a half years of harsh and brutal tyranny.

Illusions passed when Singapore fell, and though the sun still shines on the islands of the Golden Chersonese, these can never return. Malaya has been face to face with reality. Mentally it has matured.

It is tragic for those who, like myself, have known and loved the Malaya that used to be before the invasion to see the old ways pass; but they had to pass some time, and what the Japanese did was only to hurry up a process that was inevitable.

For Malaya is a rich country, a strategic country, and some day it may be a great country. It has been nursed by the British Empire for generations, and now it must prepare to stand on its

own feet in a hard, suspicious world—and it has half a century or even less in which to do this.

There are great tasks ahead before this independence can be achieved. A few signatures have brought about, on paper, the existence of a single government for the States of the peninsula and the island of Penang—later the island and fortress of Singapore must be included too—but there can be no union in fact until the many races of Malaya learn to think together, alike and for a common purpose.

Who are these people, and how will they achieve this unity? Let us see.