The background of the cover features several thick, hand-painted lines in red and yellow that intersect to form a large 'X' shape. The lines have a textured, brush-stroke appearance. The paper itself is aged and off-white, with some visible wear and tear at the edges.

# ***MALAYSIA IN FOCUS***

***RONALD McKIE***

***MALAYSIA***  
***IN***  
***FOCUS***

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***RONALD McKIE***

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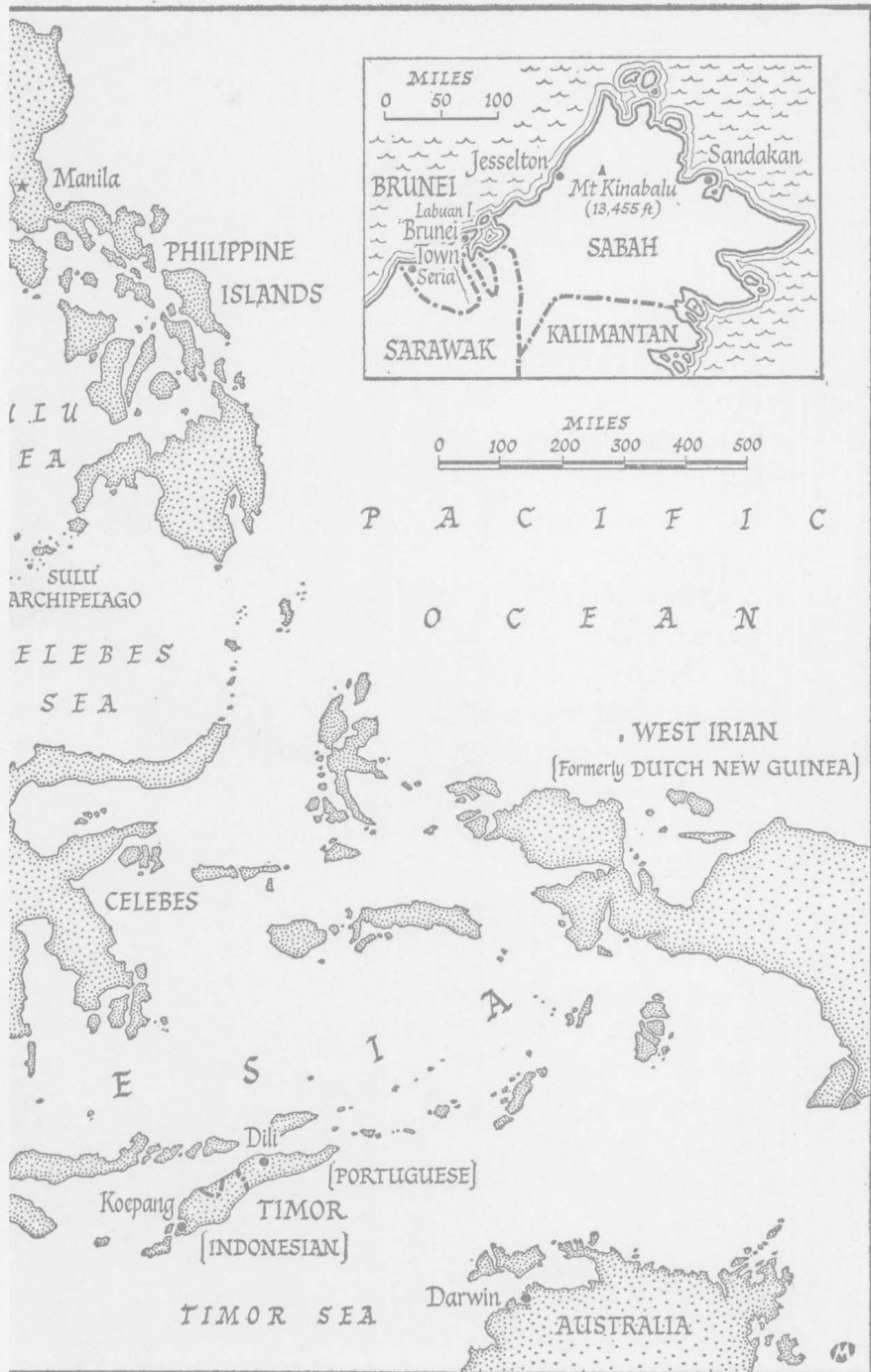
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## *An End—and a Beginning*

THE thunderheads were lifting in grey folds above the rain trees and the stained tile roofs of the white barracks. The temperature was in the eighties, humidity higher still, a heat which pressed down with damp hands on this cricket field in Singapore not a hundred miles north of the Equator. Across the turf a Malay boy slept under a banana clump weighted with purple flowers, and at the pavilion, near where the road embraced the outfield, players sagged in cane chairs or lay under the trees, their boots small tombstones rising from the grass.

At the brown matting strip pegged on red earth the game was being played with guile and sweat, and presiding over this tribal rite, his silk shirt sticking to his thin shoulders, was Lord Selkirk, British Commissioner General for South-east Asia, a wide straw hat decorated with a red paisley pugaree shading his lined, humorously cynical face.

Lord Selkirk was keeping wickets, and keeping them skilfully for a man of more than sixty on a tropical afternoon when any sensible person should have been, if not asleep, then at least inert and in the shade. Crouched behind the stumps, he failed to catch few of the balls which General Ivan Harris, the opposing captain, missed, for this was a challenge game between the Army and the Commissioner General's team within the shrinking little England of Far East Land Forces Headquarters at Phoenix Park.

The sun began to dip towards the trees. The dancing air smelt of scorched grass, curled leaves, curdled bitumen from the road along which an Indian girl in a rose sari was riding her Lambretta. But on the field cricket was still being worshipped with that casual but passionate concentration which the British reserve for sport, beer, and warfare.

A six had just been hit, a faultless arc right out of the ground, and Lord Selkirk was getting down on his hams again to watch the next fast ball when a car pulled in behind the pavilion and a senior official from the British High Commission got out carrying a black dispatch case.

I saw no sign, no signal, pass between the newcomer and the field, but the game stopped halfway through an over as though a

sergeant-major had bawled an order. Lord Selkirk went to the pavilion, put on a short crimson sweat jacket and, still wearing his straw and now smoking a cigarette in a long black holder, sauntered with the official to another part of the ground where, joined by a playing member of his staff, they sat under a tree.

As any cricketer knows, only the most urgent news, war or revolution, can stop a cricket match, and particularly one between a Commissioner General and a General Officer Commanding. But the black dispatch case was already open and papers of state spread on the grass, so that the other players had no alternative but to wipe their faces and gather at the marquee on the far side of the field—as far away as possible from the cabinet meeting—and have afternoon tea.

For half an hour nothing moved except one bird which settled in a tree near the pavilion, put its head under its wing, and went to sleep. Then a Chinese boy in white carried a tray around the boundary and placed it almost reverently on the grass beside the Commissioner General. His Lordship poured, sipped, and ate iced cucumber sandwiches while the official scribbled on a pad on his knee what was probably the most uncomfortably conceived dispatch in the history of Britain's colonial empire.

The scribbling continued. More papers littered the grass. The High Commissioner fitted yet another cigarette to his long holder. The players came from the marquee, gathered in groups, began to stroll back to the field aimlessly flicking the ball between them. Another fifteen minutes of that heated afternoon dribbled away before the cabinet meeting ended.

The papers were returned to the black dispatch case. The official hurried to his car. Lord Selkirk returned to the pavilion, removed his crimson jacket, put on his batting pads, since the other team had been forced by the delay to close its innings, and went to the wicket to break every rule of batsmanship in the next few minutes.

But those dispatches? They were from No. 10 Downing Street, from Prime Minister Macmillan. They welcomed the concept of Greater Malaysia, suggested that the father of the plan, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, should confer with Mr Macmillan in London, and set in motion the negotiations designed to end Britain's colonial era in South-east Asia and in time to create a new and independent nation, the union of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories—the Crown Colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo and the British Protectorate of Brunei—and to begin one of the most fascinating political and social experiments of our time.

I know that May 27, 1961, will be more acceptable to history as the genesis of the idea to link these five territories in a political union, for that was the date when Tunku Abdul Rahman almost casually suggested the new federation at a luncheon given by the Foreign Correspondents' Association in Singapore, but I shall always feel that Greater Malaysia began traditionally with tea and iced cucumber sandwiches beside that cricket field on a drowsy Singapore afternoon in the gathering twilight of British rule, as a Malay boy slept under a banana tree.



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## Chapter One

A HIGH-CASTLED junk from Kelantan, perhaps from Thailand, was making in towards the Roads, the last of the sun splashing her russet sails and the blue and white eyes painted on her hand-shaped bows.

For more than two decades I had not seen junk sails against the distant Thousand Islands or the sun going to bed behind the squalor and luxury of Singapore. Now, in a frangipani scented garden along the coast, I was about to begin an old journey of new discovery, an experiment in time among people and places I once knew.

I first saw Singapore before World War II after flying from Australia in three and a half days in a biplane you will find only in aviation history books. Singapore then was at its colonial peak, a small provincial port and base dominated by traders, colonial servants and barrack-minded soldiers who lived a twilight existence as far apart as possible from half a million Asiatics, mostly Chinese, who did not count.

Now I was back, in eight jet hours, in a city which had sprawled but where other changes were less obvious though more significant. This was the last phase of British rule in South-east Asia, the final months of endemic rejection of white supremacy, the climax of yet another revolution more of our own making than Asian—a revolution we had helped create by providing Asians with their own historical dissatisfactions, through our own eagerness over the generations to take but to give little, except superficially, to command but not to understand, to rule but not to join, to be just when justice was not enough.

I had no detailed plan, except that people would play an important part in this journey of rediscovery. Knowing a little of the South-east Asian past I would try to assess, though in no authoritative way, the patterns of change and the forces which had shaped that change. I would look, with sympathy I hoped, at the world's newest country-to-be, Malaysia, at its genesis. I would wander with a notebook, seeing, listening and remembering.

The junk is turning the point. The light is changing. The palms step closer, reach higher into a sky of mother-of-pearl. The

starlings stop their frantic circling and blacken the fronds. A sarong smoulders at the end of the long garden.

For perhaps a minute, when colors are more brilliant, sounds more distinct, shapes more defined, the flare lasts. Then the blue light drains away and for the first time the air is cool ahead of the night sea mist as a light splutters on a fishing pagar a mile offshore to give the day its ultimate perspective.

Night comes quickly. It sweeps a last smear of rose towards Sumatra, dissolves a cloud, paints out the Plimsolls and the rust of anchored ships. A dark palm trunk reappears in another place. The dusk is almost suffocating. The garden stretches, stretches, and is lost in the sea.

From the past I still wonder, as the dark-dust settles, at this miracle of night and day, still feel the sudden pressure of unspoken things, unknown forces, in the incomparable Malayan night. Even when light spills on the terrace and the Chinese boy brings gin and fresh limes I feel, as I did the first time, the night's presence around the house, in the garden shadows above the little beach where monsoon and tide have played for years with the concrete machine-gun nest—nostalgic monument to the thinking of men who faced the wrong way.

This vague uneasiness is peculiar to this place, or perhaps only to me in this place. It is part of the transformation from light to dark, a change so violent and yet so gentle that the mind has no time to adjust to another dimension.

It is linked with an awareness of jungle, although there is no real jungle for miles, of the menace of wild things. It has something to do with the original inhabitants of this small island and area, the Malays themselves and their brooding spirits of earth and water and fire, of their *hantus* who speak from the sea and perch in trees and ride the clouds of this still *animistic* world of red earth clothed in green fur. Even *malam*, Malay for night, is an ominous word of restless scatterings, of furtive unseen things which have no place in the thinking of men whose race memory goes back to Celtic crosses on bare hillsides and beyond.

Perhaps this is why you feel in this place, among the gods and spirits which have shaped Asia, that at any moment something will happen to you that has never happened before, that you will be influenced by forces over which you have no control. It is a feeling almost indefinable and so illogical that you know it could be true.

Then I hear the cooling earth breathing and relax, drenched in night, and watch the stars arranging themselves and a flying fox

like the Chinese symbol of happiness flap in the moon's peasant face. I listen for old familiar sounds. . . .

Flute and drums and brass. . . .

Plaint of cart wheels passing slowly and the song of the Tamil driver, broken with pauses, like a man muttering in his sleep. . . .

Padding of a rickshaw puller, steady as a pulse, the high clamor of his bell or his half-shouted half-grunted warning as he swerves and pads on, his oil lamp dwindling. . . .

But all I hear from the road beyond the trees is the swish, swish of tyres.

The manager repeated the legend that his hotel had been built last century by an English duke. A nineteenth-century duke could have been responsible for decorating the lounge bar in woodland scenes from deepest England, complete with prints of hunting and highwaymanship, but only a contemporary duke would have nailed four Chinese characters to the wall above the dusty Bols bottles—characters which resembled a house, a man running, a bush and a head of a Sioux—and supplied the simple translation below, "Terms Cash".

My Chinese hotel was a house of surprise. Swingdoors opened, a little reluctantly, to another time, for in what had once been the original reception hall was a double staircase of carved teak with mirrors painted with Chinese birds and flowers let into the woodwork under the stairs. Even the carved posts supporting the central landing of the staircase were faced with mirrors, and enormous mirrors in carved frames with faded gold leaf were set beside historical scrolls, now rotting and stained, that were once masterpieces of Chinese embroidery art.

At the top of the grand staircase was an open hall, with rooms on either side and each room distinguished by columns supporting a doorway arch. The high roof of this hall was domed, narrowing upward into a glassed turret thirty feet above the floor, and below the dome was a musicians' gallery, where no musician had ever played, enclosed by a fragile double rail.

Below again, and behind the staircase, was the dining room where tables were set between sweeping white arches supporting a beamed blue roof. This room was open to gardens on either side, and to the flap of washing, and from one end was dominated by the largest mirror in the house, ten feet high and five feet wide, a collector's piece topped with carved gold flowers and filigree held together by the talons of golden eagles.

It was here among the reflected ghosts of the nineteenth-

century colonial era, among Chinese scrolls, Siamese teak, Greek arches and abominable cooking, that I settled into a bedroom where an ancient air-conditioning unit thumped and wheezed all night and where Foo Wee Suan, the room boy, looked after me like a favorite aunt.

Foo was a Hailam from Hainan Island, tall and thin with elegant hands and a stretched face. When he smiled he looked at the world with gentle irony, or perhaps he was observing just another foreign devil. He had natural dignity, and he moved as positively and silently as a good safe-breaker.

With that unique bush telegraph of the Chinese he knew when I came in and when I went out, when to fill the thermos or bring tea, when the laundry was needed, whether I preferred bananas or papaya. Foo also saw that the tub was always full, since the bathroom was primitive—an old washtub on a stand and a metal dipper, and much the same as many other bathrooms I had known in Singapore, except that in place of the tub I missed the big decorative Shanghai jar. Some of these jars, which kept water almost ice cold, were so large that you could get into them, and the story used to be told of the woman who did and became stuck and had to call her houseboy. After much shouted persuasion the boy brought a hammer and smashed the jar, and the woman never recovered from the shock of a “native” seeing her, white, flabby and glistening, awash on the bathroom tiles among the broken crockery.

It was in this hotel that I began to discover other more significant echoes of twenty years before. My fellow guests in the blue roofed dining room were Chinese, English, Eurasian, Hindu, Dutch, American, a collection which, even in a non-European hotel, was unknown in the Singapore of the past where segregation between white and other racial colors, and between the different colors themselves, was, except for a few rare non-conformists, rigidly practised. This multi-racial and religious mixing, even in an impersonal dining room, suggested the breaking down of old taboos, old prejudices, the development of new thought and attitudes, and of a new and healthy toleration. If this was only a rare beginning then here was a revolutionary room where a new society in microcosm broke bread.

Here was the source of endless speculation and inquiry. And I was still wondering what other changes I would find when from above the grand staircase a child began to play scales, but softly so that when he or she stopped the notes did not cease but seemed to drift among the rooms, into the building itself, into



the teak carving, into the stained spaces behind the old mirrors whose eyes were long blurred with the seeing of too many things.

Then surer fingers played Chopin as a bat, no bigger than a matchbox, came in from the garden, circled near the ceiling, and flicked into the flowering shrubs on the other side. I waited, hoping it would return. Then I followed it into the night.

## Chapter Two

THE wise warn us never to go back. The wise are probably right, but the cave urge is strong in most of us to take another look, even though the romantic garden has shrunk to an untidy backyard by the time we arrive.

On a steaming morning, under a sifted sky, I returned to Orchard Road, which used to bisect an area of almost rural peace between the city and the main residential suburbs. Flame of the Forest still opened their scarlet umbrellas along its way, but now over traffic like Chicago's, and shops and flats and bars covered once-open grassland where a herd of milking goats, wearing pink and blue and white brassieres, grazed in the late afternoons watched by a crippled Indian herdsman and stray startled tourists.

The old Chinese cemetery, where monsoon rain flattened the long grass around the womb graves, and where relatives brought rice and fruit and baskets of frangipani, had disappeared, and in its place was a block of flats and a wasteland behind and beside it—a bulldozed hillside the color of orange peel above which still hovered the outraged spirits of the Chinese dead.

A Chinese duster man passed, his familiar bicycle a nodding, swaying mass of brown feathers. A drink seller languidly shook his bell and spat betel juice at the cars. The sweating pedicab riders, who had replaced the rickshaw pullers allegedly on humanitarian grounds, pedalled their heavy clumsy vehicles with three times the effort that any despised rickshaw boy ever pulled.

I came at last to one of the objects of my search—a long low building which, in the time I had known it as Café Wien, was painted green and looked like a tired bordello. Now it was Prince's Restaurant, where you need an expense account to eat, and although redesigned and redecorated, probably many times, and air-conditioned with Antarctic thoroughness, there still lingered behind the panelling of its darker corners the small echoes of conspiracy, for Café Wien had been a café-rooming house and a gathering centre of the local German Nazi Party in those days when Adolf Hitler was advancing to Munich and beyond and the death of millions.

It was here, where the Nazi manager terrorised his assistant

with Party threats, and where the assistant was servile and arrogant by turns to his guests, that I had spent my first uncomfortable weeks in pre-war Singapore among the weary smell of sauerkraut. It was here, too, that I listened interminably to advice on tropical living and colonial taboos from my fellow English Tuans.

White society in those days was not unlike a geological chart. At the top were the important white masters, the Tuan Besars who ruled political and commercial Singapore like grandmothers in a traditional Chinese home and who tolerated no deviations from colonial norms. In the middle were the secondary but still important Tuan Ketchils or Small Tuans, the down-the-line executives, and at the bottom of the chart were the young or otherwise unimportant underpaid Tuans like myself. But even to be a Tuan, the lowliest member of the ruling class, conferred special privileges, including the right to shout at servants and to be rude to Asians in general.

A Tuan, I was warned, did not mix with Asiatics or Eurasians, although it was permissible to sleep with them, or travel in public transport, or sit in the same seats at any entertainment, but he must wear a coat and tie, except at weekends, must soon after arrival in the colony drop his visiting cards in the private letter boxes of his company's Tuan Besars, and must not wear a sarong instead of pyjamas because that was an early sign of going native. He should also sleep with a sheet or light blanket across his middle, a ritual under the ever-clicking ceiling fans which discouraged the fever, a word which even Somerset Maugham could not resist, though it did not protect me from the mosquito which gave me dengue or the melancholia of that fever's convalescence. A Tuan also had a duty to himself and to society to take as much exercise as possible because this was good for health and white morale and a good example to Asiatics who lacked all sporting instincts. Avoidance of games was regarded as almost a new form of perversion.

This was the time, and long before the air-conditioner had turned Singapore nights into autumn, when a few old European hands still slept the traditional way—on a hard wood Chinese bed covered with a thin mat and with a wood block, curved to fit the head and neck, as pillow. With this went the Dutch Wife, on every bed when I first knew Singapore, and still used by a few—a tight sausage-shaped bolster in a white slip over which you cocked one leg for comfort and added coolness.

From Café Wien four of us had moved to a crumbling Dutch colonial bungalow where we lived in decaying splendour with a