

Maurice Collis, *Raffles: The Definitive Biography*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2009. 216 pp. ISBN 13-978-981-261-773-6.

The colossus of present-day Singapore is undeniably Lee Kuan Yew who, with his team of able lieutenants, led Singapore to political independence in 1965 and then set the course of its phenomenal socio-economic development over the last 45 years. Even in semi-retirement these days, Mr Lee commands much respect for his contributions to the nation.

Yet in the long term, what will the status of Mr Lee be? Singaporeans tend to have a short memory and do not care much for the past, given that they live in a constantly evolving physical landscape and they are pragmatically concerned about getting by from day-to-day. Already, many Singaporeans do not or hardly remember what his lieutenants did to help in nation-building, although some memories for older citizens (or new knowledge, for younger Singaporeans) have been sparked through the widespread press coverage of the deaths, homages and funerals of these lieutenants in the last few years as they pass on from old age.

If this is how Singaporeans view their leaders of the last 50, 60 years, of what significance to them is Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who lived two centuries ago? I believe most Singaporeans are at least aware that Raffles founded modern Singapore in 1819, that his statue stands at Empress Place, and that a hotel, a school and some roads bear his name. Unfortunately, few Singaporeans know Raffles' story and appreciate that if not for this man, they would not be living on this island and be Singaporeans at all.

For those interested to find out more about Raffles and understand his legacy, they should read Maurice Collis' *Raffles: The Definitive Biography*, recently re-issued by Marshall Cavendish in conjunction with the 190th anniversary of modern Singapore's founding. Originally published in the 1960s, this book was written as a concise introduction to the life and times of Raffles, as opposed to the lengthy biographies published previously. Even today, Collis' work is highly readable and informative, each short chapter chronologically sketching vigorous portraits of various facets of Raffles during his 45-year life span.

These portraits bring life to today's perception of an abstract historical figure. First, there is Raffles the Devoted Family Man. At 14, Raffles stopped schooling to join the East India Company as a clerk and help provide for his family upon his father's bankruptcy. Two years later, his father died and Raffles became the main breadwinner for his mother and sisters. He was also a loving husband, first to Olivia, whom he married in 1805 until her sudden death from illness in 1814, and second to Sophia, their marriage lasting from 1817 till his

death in 1826 from a suspected brain tumour. To the many children borne by Sophia, Raffles was a doting father; sadly, only one daughter lived until early adulthood.

Then there is Raffles the Industrious, Lifelong Scholar. While working as an EIC clerk in London (1795-1805), he read voraciously during his free time, making up for his lack of formal education. His industry brought him the notice of his superiors: in 1805, Raffles was promoted to the post of assistant to the Chief Secretary of Penang. On his voyage out to Southeast Asia, he studied Malay, one of the first British administrators to do so. By being able to communicate with the people of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, Raffles not only provided a bridge between the locals and the EIC, but also gave him the insights to promote British interests such as the administration of Penang and Bencoolen, the conquest and running of Java, and of course the founding of modern Singapore. During his two sojourns in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago (1805-16 & 1818-24), he continued to study the customs, culture, history, flora and fauna of the region for which he was highly respected in Europe. While his notes, journals, specimens and artefacts from his first travels survive, he tragically lost his entire second collection during the 1824 voyage back to Britain when the ship he was initially travelling on caught fire and sank.

The chapter, “Raffles Acclaimed by London,” presents yet another little known dimension of the man, that of Man about Town and Courtier. After working non-stop for 11 years in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, Raffles arrived back in Britain in 1816 for two years of home leave. London society was all agog with the intrepid man who pushed for the conquest of Java (thereby wresting control of the island from Franco-Dutch rule), led Java’s administration for almost 5 years, as well as the author of the *History of Java*. Apart from being wined and dined by many people, Raffles befriended Princess Charlotte, daughter of the Prince Regent, who until her death from childbirth was third in line for the throne. The Prince Regent himself was so impressed with Raffles’ scholarship in creating the *History of Java* that he knighted the man, thereby giving Raffles the title that we know him by today.

Collis naturally concentrates the bulk of his text in developing the portrait of Raffles the Dynamic Administrator and Visionary Envoy amidst a clear representation of the geopolitical reality of his time. Within 18 months of his arrival in Penang in 1805, he rose to become Chief Secretary. However, just being a mere bureaucrat was not enough for Raffles. His interactions with the locals and his travels within the region made him aware of the opportunities that Britain could exploit to advance its trade interests in East Asia vis-à-vis Franco-Dutch competition. By 1810, he was lobbying above his superiors in Penang to the Governor General of India for him to assume the role of Political Agent for the Malay States which allowed him to first sound out at ground level the feasibility of the EIC to take Java away from Franco-Dutch

control, and to later actually spearhead the conquest and administration of Java (1811-16). As Lieutenant-Governor of Java and later Bencoolen, Raffles was very much preoccupied in promoting fair trade and humanistic principles (such as anti-slavery practices).

When he left Britain in 1818 to assume the post of Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen, Raffles assumed he would continue his position as the Political Agent for the Malay States, advising the authorities in London on how to further check Dutch influence in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. It was this sense of mandate that led him to found Singapore in 1819. However, he saw that Singapore had a greater potential than to be just as an economic-political counterpoint to Dutch power amidst the Malay States. As a British-controlled free trade port at the southern tip of the Malacca Straits, he envisaged that Singapore would be a vital gateway of commerce between East and West, more so than Penang or Malacca would ever be.

Unfortunately, not all of his contemporaries or bosses shared his vision. Amongst his biggest detractors was the EIC itself, as certain members of the board often felt that Raffles presented the company with more responsibility than it could handle. Given that communication with London in those days took months, it was hard for Raffles to explain the situation he faced time and again and get the requisite approval or support he needed. As the man on the ground, Raffles seized the initiative quite often without proper authorisation, and then presented his bosses with the fruits of his actions after the fact. Consequently, to the end of his life and even beyond, the EIC insisted on reparations from Raffles and his estate for expenses incurred when establishing Singapore and administering Java and Bencoolen.

The subsequent phenomenal growth of Singapore has of course proved that Raffles was right in his estimation of Singapore's potential. According to Collis, Raffles, in founding modern Singapore, set his imprint on the development of modern Asia as well:

He had opened the door, he had pointed to the path, he had provided the idea, he had performed the act. Singapore stood. What else was necessary?... The stage was set for Europe's decisive incursion into East Asia. Old Asia was to disappear, a new Asia to be born, the Asia of the modern world. Such was the forces which Raffles set in motion by founding Singapore. (208)

Collis' sketches of the man, though brief, are highly illuminating. So if one wishes to get a fuller appreciation of this earlier colossus in Singapore's history and his relevance to life today, one ought to read *Raffles: The Definitive Biography*.

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