

Mary Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2009. 224 pp. ISBN 978-981-261-859-7.

In the Shadow of the Rising Sun is a good read. This true story is about an Englishwoman, Mary Thomas, who joins her brother Francis when he returns to Singapore in 1939 to resume his teaching position at St. Andrews School. However, what should be a pleasant visit abroad turns into a life-changing experience for Mary when she (together with thousands of others) is taken as a prisoner of war and is forced to endure three and a half years of internment. During this period of time, Mary kept a diary on which this book is based. *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun* was first published in 1983. The Marshall Cavendish edition is a reprint. On the last page of the text it is stated that just as this edition was going into print, Mary died in her sleep at the age of 102.

In the Shadow of the Rising Sun is a vivid description of the events of World War II in this part of the world, particularly in Singapore. The narrative is replete with specific information about Singapore at that time: the Japanese Occupation, life immediately after the war, references to locations, roads and landmarks, as well as names of various people, including Japanese generals and some of the sentries who filled the hearts of their captives with so much uncertainty and terror. Because of this careful evocation of the past, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun* is a valuable resource book for the scholar of history and any reader who is an aficionado of the Second World War. I can only imagine the interest, and maybe even nostalgia, of a reader who recognises the names of people and places in this book, some of whom and which no longer exist.

To the person who is intrigued with colonial and postcolonial issues, this text looks at the reversal of fortunes of the ruling class residing in Singapore. Mary makes mention of their privileges: "It is difficult to convey to people who have never been to the East the atmosphere of the easy life of the Europeans in those days. The unchallenged prestige of a ruling race was automatically the right of almost every white person" (18). Initially, the Europeans did not pay much attention to the Japanese invasion when it started in December 1941. An insight into Mary's own thoughts are reflective of the way the Europeans in Singapore generally felt about the Japanese threat. But gradually everything began to alter dramatically: "Nothing had prepared us in the slightest degree for the sort of thing which actually lay ahead" (21).

To a reader keen on life narratives, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun* is riveting. Against this backdrop of dramatic historical change, Mary writes her own story about a young woman born in the Cotswold hills in Gloucestershire and who desires to see the world. Her trip to Singapore initiates her into colonial life: "On the day that I arrived, I was introduced to what were considered the basic essentials of feminine life in the tropics – the matter of servants and the social

life of the clubs” (13). But Mary yearns for something else. When the war finds its way to Singapore, many leave, fearing for their lives. Mary however decides to stay and serve on the Medical Auxiliary Service. This decision results in her incarceration. Indeed, many other women also did not flee because of family, other commitments or the altruistic desire to be of use during this troubled time, and they all suffered a similar fate. Much of the space of the narrative is devoted to this episode in Mary’s life. Internment meant living in close quarters with hundreds of other women under constant supervision by the guards. It meant food rationing, tattered clothes and absolutely no privacy. It was a highly unnatural existence and Mary recounts numerous aspects of this life – the food they ate, the duties and chores assigned to inmates, their diversions, the daily routines and the mindset and behaviour that evolved from this type of communal living. “Internment was a revelation of humanity when it is stripped of pretence and of all the decorations and supports with which ordinary civilian life demands that we shall try to conceal our essential selves” (55). Yet, though she talks about acts of treachery and unkindness as well as moments of anguish, she also, and often too, evokes times of great solidarity and compassion: “Camp life was also full of touching and surprising kindness. Perhaps, in a way, none of us will ever have happier birthdays than those we spent in internment” (81).

In the Shadow of the Rising Sun has a neat, chronological structure and the written text is occasionally interspersed with photographs, poems that the author composed and simple drawings of the enclosed environs which were her home for a while. All these give the text a personal, intimate touch. There are, of course, many narratives of this ilk, i.e. stories about the Englishwoman who travels to the colonial outpost and the tribulations and challenges she faces there. What I find so appealing about this book is the lack of drama in the writer’s style. By this I mean that though the subject of her book is harrowing and intense, it is not dealt with in an emotionally heightened way. There are no lengthy, introspective reflections, no vituperations against the Japanese. She does not deny the atrocities but at the same time says: “It is only fair to give them credit for refraining from committing as much evil as they easily might have done, and for the genuine efforts of some of them, at risk of their lives, at civilised behaviour, kindness and humanity” (98). It is this balance in her voice and treatment, the way she does not focus on self but portrays herself as one of many, which gives this book a kind of honesty and integrity. In the early pages of the narrative, there is a dedication to some of the people the author had known. All of them are deceased, some from illness and some because of the war. Inevitably the theme of death is pervasive in this book but we come away from it deeply moved by the fortitude of the human spirit.

Carol Leon
University of Malaya, Malaysia