

Paul Leslie Smith, *Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story*. Malaysia: Marshall Cavendish. 556pp. ISBN 978-983-3845-51-4.

Paul Leslie Smith's *Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story* joins a host of texts written in English about WWII Malaya, ranging from Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*, Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*, and Chong Seck Chim's *Once Upon a Time in Malaya*. Unlike many other wartime texts, however, with the exception of Agnes Newton Keith's *Three Came Home*, Smith's work focuses largely on Borneo. Exposure to Borneo's position before and during the Second World War is long overdue.

Smith familiarises the reader vis-à-vis scrupulous detail about the pre-war native lifestyle of the Ibans, Malays, and their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. He also exposes the reader to the climate and vegetation of Borneo, in and around Miri, located along the Sarawakian coast of north central Borneo. For example, Smith's central character, Geoffrey Portas, otherwise known as the Tuan Lari, eats *nasi lemak* and "red snapper grilled on a banana leaf" (25), converses, if hesitantly, in the Malay language and sees indigenous plants such as casuarinas and camphor, not to mention pepper vines. Portas also battles leeches and foot rot as he travels overland through Bornean jungles and swamps.

Smith also exposes readers to an intimate picture of the natives' lifestyles. In one scene, Portas describes the longhouses, made of "smooth camphor," on stilts, complete with a

veranda [which] ran the length of the building, half the width of the total....
This was the *ruai*, the communal area where the tribe enacted its social life....
The inner portion of the *ruai* was formed by a continuous wooden wall, running the length of the house, punctuated by low doors leading to individual family dwelling areas. (Smith 40-41)

In this same section, Smith notes the "sexually gregarious girls of the Ulu, in this land where sex was regarded as a form of endearing friendship" (45).

The tuans, or the white men, also play largely benevolent and heroic roles throughout the novel. The Tuan Lari becomes an icon of "Golden Bollocks" (97); he compassionately wins the confidence of the natives, and Smith depicts him as a good colonist, if such a possibility could ever exist, and Smith's own allegiance to England must solidify his justifications. For example, Portas even cares for Ah-Tok, his servant who falls ill to conditions caused by the colonists' tapping of Borneo's oil (57). Portas is no W. Somerset Maugham character;¹ he immerses himself fully into Bornean life.

Most of these descriptions of Bornean livelihood and kindly colonists mingling amicably with natives appear before the Japanese land on the island, thereby allowing

¹ In *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Tash Aw makes numerous references to foolhardy Maugham-like characters who drink pink gin and refuse to adapt to Malayan life. For example, see Tash Aw, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, 335.

Smith the opportunity to establish his prewar setting.² After the arrival of the Japanese troops, which exert considerable brutality by shooting children out of trees (286-87) and bayoneting women, Smith reflects, “The British may not have been perfect... but they [the Japanese] had not needed to resort to so overtly cruel an organisation to maintain control” (340).

Newton Keith is not so naïve in her portrayal of colonisation, although her descriptions of the Japanese seem a bit more tempered than Smith’s. She sardonically pokes fun at her husband’s role as an “Empire Builder” throughout her first work, *Land Below the Wind*, which also paints the prewar livelihood of Borneo and its natives. The reader also has the chance to visit the surrounding islands in the Sulu Sea and to encounter jungle life through her eyes. And as in Smith’s work, the conditions in Borneo change abruptly once war becomes imminent.

However, although Newton Keith describes the lifestyle of Borneo’s indigenous life, including its gibbon apes and Muruts, her work is not as painstakingly detailed as Smith’s. Her gender – as an American wife of an Englishman who works as a Conservator of Forests and Director of Agriculture for the north Bornean government – surely lends her a different perspective. Her wartime experiences, as described in *Three Came Home*, are largely limited to situations in concentration camps. Like Portas, she does not escape beatings from the Japanese (Keith 157-58), but her wartime experiences revolve around to the perspective of a mother who haggles for eggs to feed her young son.³

The Tuan Lari, on the other hand, vested in protecting Miri’s oilfields and his woman, Vong, from the Japanese, participates in a bit of guerrilla warfare. For example, he watches “jungle law” intervene to decapitate Japanese who pursue him and his companions in the jungle (381). And Smith does not hesitate to describe Japanese methods of torture, including the imbibing of water, “after which the guards would jump on [Portas] as he lay on the floor” (461).⁴ Finally, Smith gives the reader a brief synopsis of some of the ills that afflicted POWs, ranging from cholera to “Rice Balls,” a condition that affects a man’s scrotum due to a lack of vitamin B2 (421).

In his description of wartime and other experiences, Smith, a British expatriate engineer⁵ as is the Tuan Lari, possesses a strapping vocabulary, often peppering his descriptions with phrases such as “multitudinous anachronistic reptiles” (368) and “bombastic old twat” (368, 53). Such a vocabulary may deter the novice reader, who

² The Japanese do not arrive until page 263, almost halfway through the novel.

³ Newton Keith writes, “In two and a half years of imprisonment in Kuching I ate five eggs, but I got a lot for George [my son]. Sometimes I was so hungry that I had literally to keep my eyes off his food when he was eating. But that extra food... [is] the reason why he is well today” (113).

⁴ Smith presumably learned about this description from various displays at museums in Changi, Singapore where this method of torture is described in detail.

⁵ Smith has lived in Malaysia for nearly 20 years (Paul Leslie Smith, “Rainforest Tears,” 1 April 2009, <<http://rainforesttears.com>>. See this site for a synopsis of the book as well as a tight history of Sarawak and of the author’s life.

otherwise may well benefit from *Rainforest Tears*' valuable history lesson. The book also contains numerous apostrophe errors.

Despite these surface errors and an extensive pre-war introduction, one can classify Smith's work as an excellent work of creative nonfiction due to his careful recognition of specific dates and events during the war. For example, although Smith creates fictionalised characters and scenes, he endeavours to align missions in his work with real-life missions, such as Operation Denial. Smith credits his research to out-of-print books in "second-hand bookstores" and the Sarawak museum's resources (557; i). Smith also occasionally uses his Author's Notes to establish his *ethos* further. For example, after Portas and his companion, Sergeant Stephenson, miraculously escape the Japanese, Smith interrupts his narrative: "*Many readers may be sceptical at this point of the success, without loss, of our fictional... team.... Readers may wish to note the official list below, compiled from post-war interrogations from both sides. The figures relate casualties arising from the actions that the Semut I team – parachuted into Bario from March 1945 – were involved in*" (389-90). The figures reveal fewer than two dozen whites, Chinese, and natives killed, a stark contrast to the numbers of over 1,200 Japanese killed or taken prisoner (390).

Finally, as *TimeOut KL* notes, "the real strength of this book is in the detail and accuracy of the Occupation" (qtd. in Smith, "Rainforest Tears"), and any WWII historian who wishes to see fictional, if brief, roles played by the likes of Winston Churchill and General MacArthur should read Smith's work – and should await his sequel, a work in progress.

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