A peaceful finale to 83 years of British rule in Malaya. Tunku (Prince) Abdul Rahman, soon to be the new nation's first prime minister, addresses his countrymen at merdeka (independence) ceremonies in Kuala Lumpur on August 31, 1957. Great Britain's official representative, the Duke of Gloucester (right), looks on.
Malaysia

Thirty years ago, two new nations achieved independence from Britain. One was prosperous Ghana in West Africa; it has since become a textbook case of Third World economic folly, official corruption, and chronic repression. The other, in Southeast Asia, was Malaysia (born as Malaya), which had just weathered a bitter communist guerrilla war. Largely ignored by American headline writers, Malaysia’s politicians quietly found ways to overcome deep-seated antipathies among its Malay, Chinese, and Indian citizens, and to achieve an unexpected level of prosperity and political tranquility. Here, our contributing authors sketch Malaysia’s history under a succession of foreign rulers, including the British, and analyze both Malaysia’s success and the new threats that may undermine it.

MONSOON COUNTRY

The capital of Malaya’s Red Earth Kingdom was an impressive city, with “triple gates more than 100 paces apart... bedecked with golden flowers, light bells, and hair tassels.” Its king sat “on a three-tiered couch, facing north and dressed in rose-colored cloth, with a chaplet of gold flowers and necklaces of varied jewels.”

This detailed seventh-century A.D. Chinese description of a vanished Malay city is one of many that have intrigued scholars during the last century. But, as British scholar Sir R. O. Winstedt notes, “Muslim fanaticism” and British ignorance led to the destruction of many important records and artifacts of ancient Malaya. Scholars’ knowledge of the era is as fragmentary as the shards of a magnificent urn.

Archaeologists generally agree that the ancestors of the modern Malays trekked overland from the Asian mainland beginning around 2,000 B.C. Some settled along the peninsula’s many jungle rivers, forcing Malaya’s aborigines to retreat into the wilderness. Others pushed on, journeying by outrigger canoe throughout the Malay Archipelago—the scattered islands of present-day Indonesia and the Philippines.

It was Malaya’s good fortune to lie midway between India and China, blessed by seasonal monsoons that swept sailing ships from China...
to Malaya and thence to India during part of the year, then shifted, reversing the seaborne commerce. “Few traders made complete journeys between India and China,” writes British historian John M. Gullick. “Instead they made a crossing to Malaya where they could exchange cargoes with merchants coming in the opposite direction.”

The first mariners to reach Malaya from outside the archipelago were probably traders from India, who seem to have established a solid presence on the peninsula by the second century A.D. Missionaries, fortune-seekers, and settlers followed, bringing with them the customs of India and also its religions—Buddhism and Hinduism. The insular Chinese journeyed to Malaya only sporadically, and their influence was far outweighed by that of the Indians.

By the 10th century, at least 30 “Indianized” Malay city-states had taken root along the peninsula’s coast and rivers. They were surrounded by a lush but inhospitable land, inhabited by elephants, tigers, macaws, cobras, and an occasional tribe of wandering aborigines. The coast was fringed with leech-infested mangrove swamps, which gave way to smothering jungles of bamboo and other flora, and a central mountain range cloaked in rain forests—all nurtured by the unremitting equatorial heat and up to eight feet of annual rainfall. The heavy rains depleted the soil, sharply reducing crop yields and making it hard for farmers to support large towns.

The Malay city-states were, in truth, minor settlements, probably little more than large fishing and trading kampungs (villages). They were all weak, variously owing fealty to distant rulers in Siam, or the kingdoms of Buddhist Sri Vijaya (in Sumatra) and Hindu Majapahit (in Java). In 1292, when Marco Polo sailed through the Strait of Malacca, between Malaya and Sumatra, on his way home to Venice from China, he found nothing in Malaya worth noting in his journal.

40,000 Souls, 84 Tongues

 Barely a century later, Malacca blossomed into one of Southeast Asia’s greatest kingdoms.

Malacca was a fishing village of perhaps a few hundred souls when a Sri Vijaya nobleman named Parameswara sought refuge there around the year 1400. Driven from his Sumatran homeland years before, he had traveled to Tumasek (Singapore), where he murdered the local chief, seized power, and formed a small pirate fleet. But his reign was brief. To escape the vengeance of the murdered chief’s Siamese protectors, he had fled to Malacca, taking with him perhaps 1,000 followers.

Malacca was an excellent pirate’s lair. Strategically located at a choke point along the busy Strait, it boasted a sheltered harbor dominated by a low, easily fortified hill. But the shrewd Parameswara soon realized that Malacca’s future lay in legitimate trade, and not in racketeering. When an envoy of China’s Emperor Chu Ti sailed into Malacca
A view of Malacca and its harbor around 1700, when the Dutch used the city chiefly as a fortress, trying to control shipping in the Strait. Inland, in the jungles, the Malays continued to live much as they had for centuries.

Harbor around 1403, Parameswara pledged his fealty and gained the protection (and Chinese trade) that would allow Malacca to grow into a thriving port—"a vast fair" writes historian D. G. E. Hall, where "products of China and the Far East were exchanged for those of Europe."

Parameswara's successors extended their domain north to the mountainous border with Siam, and across the Strait of Malacca, to enclaves on the east coast of Sumatra. On the peninsula, they established sultanates in Perak and Johor, which survive today as Malaysian states.

Of greater importance, Malacca introduced Islam to Malaya. In 1445, after one of Malacca's frequent palace coups, a nobleman named Muzaffar Shah seized the throne and took a new title, sultan. Muzaffar was half Indian, and his family had converted to the mysticism-tinged Islam of the subcontinent. Malacca's nobles, and, eventually, its ra'ayat (commoners), obediently adopted their sultan's creed. The city became a seat of Islamic learning; zealous Malacca-based traders and missionaries spread Islam throughout the Malay Archipelago. Yet the Malays were not doctrinaire; they blended the ways of Islam with the familiar rites and customs of older faiths. Noblemen retained their Hindu titles; Buddhist rituals remained a part of everyday living.

Malacca reached its zenith soon after Muzaffar converted its people to Islam. His successor, Sultan Mansur Shah, erected a grand palace, boasting a seven-tiered roof, plated in copper and zinc and topped by gilded spires that overlooked the port. The Malay Annals (circa 1534), a Malay-authored mixture of history and fable, boast that the city's fame spread "from below the wind to above the wind."

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In 1511, Malacca’s riches attracted the attention of the Portuguese Viceroy Alfonso d’Albuquerque. He was a man of grand ambitions, who had once plotted to defeat the hated Moorish infidels of Egypt by building a canal to empty the Nile River. He arrived off Malacca, fresh from victories in India, with a small fleet and some 1,400 infantrymen. For two months, the Malays repulsed d’Albuquerque’s assaults. “But the Portuguese soldiers were disciplined and fanatical,” writes Winstedt, “and their artillery outranged the Malay guns.” During a last ferocious assault, the Malays were routed and the city was sacked.

The Portuguese gloated over their prize. “Men cannot estimate the worth of Malacca, on account of its greatness and profit,” wrote Tomé Pires, an entrepreneur who visited a year after the conquest. “The trade and commerce between the different nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Malacca.”

Pires found a city of some 40,000 souls, many of them merchants and transients from other lands. Among them were Moors from Cairo, Mecca, and Aden; and Indians, Chinese, and Cambodians. All told, Pires counted 84 languages in Malacca’s thriving bazaars and marketplaces. In reports to Lisbon, he catalogued the city’s riches with the feverish precision of a man who fears that he will not be believed: indigo, pearls, tin, opium, rosewater, tapestries, silks, raisins, gold, damask, and especially spices—pepper, nutmeg, cloves.

Pires pleaded for “excellent officials, expert traders, lovers of peace” to rule Portugal’s new colony; instead, Lisbon sent greedy opportunists. “Ask if they pay taxes, if they make monopolies, if they help themselves with the King’s money,” demanded the angry Jesuit missionary, St. Francis Xavier. Soon the ships from India, China, and the nearby islands found other ports of call; the foreign merchants departed.

Going Dutch

To all but a few Malays, the riches of Malacca had never been anything but a fantasy. While the city’s trade prospered under the sultans and, for a time, the Portuguese, most of its wealth remained in the hands of foreigners or the royal family and its retainers. Farming folk and fishermen, the Malays kept to their padi (rice) fields and boats.

The Malay kampongs clung to the banks of the country’s many rivers or nestled in small inlets along the Strait. The living was easy. Inhabiting simple thatch-roofed houses built on stilts, the villagers fished, tended their padi, and harvested coconuts and bananas from trees planted near their homes. Some bartered tin, rattan, or gold with river traders. More than a few restless lads turned to piracy, prowling the rivers and the Strait in their long-proved prahu, hoping to catch a lightly armed merchant vessel unaware.

An imam saw to each kampong’s Islamic customs, while a penghulu (headman) presided over secular affairs. Near the mouth of
MALAYSIA

Modern Malaysia, including remote Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, is a little larger than the state of New Mexico. Even today, about 70 percent of its territory remains covered by virgin jungle and tropical rain forests.
each major river lived the regional chieftain, or raja, who, often by possessing a brass cannon, enjoyed feudal powers over his subjects upstream. He collected taxes on all river trade, and exercised the right to requisition his subjects’ labor to erect a mosque or anything else that pleased him. His revenues enabled him to hire a private army of mercenaries. “Debt slaves,” subjects who had borrowed money from him on terms that offered little hope of repayment, were his household servants.

In theory, the rajas variously owed allegiance to one of a handful of sultans. But the sultans were largely powerless, exercising real authority only in times of war.

After Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511, the sultans of Johor, Perak, and Pahang (joined at times by the Sumatran kingdom of Acheh, and later by the Dutch) intermittently laid siege to the city. It was not until 1641, when the Portuguese had been driven from much of Southeast Asia, that strongly fortified Malacca finally fell to the Dutch.

Tin, Coolies, Pax Britannica

But the Dutch, whose lucrative traffic in East Indian spices flowed through Batavia (Jakarta) on the island of Java, had no wish to support a rival port. Malacca’s population soon dwindled to some 5,000; a visitor in 1699 called it “a Place of no great Trade.” Attacks by the Bugis, a seafaring tribe of ethnic Malays from the Celebes Islands, hastened its decline. The Bugis never conquered Malacca, but they carved out fiefdoms elsewhere on the peninsula, creating a new sultanate in Selangor.

Toward the end of the 18th century, the Dutch, overextended like the Portuguese before them, began to lose their grip on their Asian empire. In 1786, Britain acquired the island of Penang from the sultan of Kedah and established a naval base at George Town; in 1795, British troops occupied Malacca; in 1819, Thomas Stamford Raffles established Singapore (Tunasik having long since disappeared) on a swampy island at the tip of the peninsula.*

The Dutch bowed to the inevitable in 1824. The British won sovereignty over the so-called Straits Settlements and an exclusive sphere of influence in much of the Malay Peninsula. The king of Siam retained indirect control over four northern states (Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trengganu), content to leave the sultans of these impoverished districts mostly to their own devices.

The British did not seek to rule the entire peninsula. In 1824, London was reluctant to add to Britain’s vast and costly empire. By acquiring the Straits Settlements, the Colonial Office hoped mainly to protect the India-China trade route against European competitors—notably France and Spain—and local pirates. Once again, however, events in far off lands altered Malaya’s destiny.

*The future of Singapore, settled mostly by Chinese immigrants, was to diverge sharply from that of the rest of Malaya (see “Singapore,” Wilson Quarterly, Winter ’83).
During the 1860s, a new industry was born when manufacturers in Baltimore and New York pioneered the mass production of tinned meats and fish to provision Union troops on America's Civil War battlefields. In Malaya, enterprising Chinese merchants in the Straits Settlements were already operating small-scale commercial tin mines in the steamy interior of Perak and Selangor. Demand for Malaya's tin soared. In desperate need of cheap labor—the Malay states in Britain's domain contained at most some 300,000 inhabitants—the Chinese mine owners began importing tens of thousands of indentured "coolies" from South China to mine tin from open pits. Ultimately, the Chinese would play as important a role as the British in shaping Malaya's future.

Arriving by junk in Singapore or Penang, sometimes in chains, a new arrival was immediately inducted into the Chinese secret society that ruled his particular mining camp. Living far from family and friends, succumbing by the thousands to malaria and other tropical diseases, the miners purchased the protection of the societies with their absolute loyalty. The societies clashed repeatedly. A drunken brawl between two miners belonging to rival societies, or a dispute over a land claim, could bring hundreds of armed Chinese into battle, with the victors celebrating by dyeing their shirts in the blood of the vanquished. The local Malay chiefs, their small armies vastly outnumbered by the Chinese, had no hope of keeping order.

The Strait merchants had long clamored for British protection of the tin mines. Now, Her Majesty's government feared that French or German interlopers would step in to assure law and order if Britain did not. Late in 1873, Sir Andrew Clarke, the new governor of the Straits Settlements, arrived in Singapore with fresh orders from London.

Within months, he reported the results to the Colonial Office. His superiors were not displeased to find that he had greatly exceeded his mandate. Not only had he negotiated a peace between the warring Ghee Hin and Hai San societies in Perak, but he had also intervened in a Malay dispute over the succession to the sultanate's throne, throwing British support behind Sultan Abdullah. In return, under the Pangkor Engagement, Abdullah had agreed to accept a British resident "adviser."

A new era was about to begin. Malaya had been convulsed by war and unrest for centuries. The British, reluctant at first, would bring prosperity and the rule of law to Malaya, along with the burden of foreign direction. And the Malay leaders, with equal reluctance, would gradually come to embrace the British solution.