BACKGROUND BOOKS

SINGAPORE

"We in Singapore have to cultivate a very small garden, and the seeds we import for our garden must be selected with care and discrimination, so that no poisonous weeds are allowed to overrun our little plot of earth. But what seeds we do select can be the best that either East or West has to offer."

That is as pithy (and earthy) an expression as any of Singapore's leaders' hopes and plans for the future. It comes from President C. V. Devan Nair, Singapore's titular chief of state since 1981, an Indian by heritage and in younger days an ardent Communist (jailed by the British), a prominent union activist, and, ultimately, a loyal supporter of the People's Action Party who survived Lee Kuan Yew's purge of the PAP's pro-Communist wing in 1961.

Singapore was not built by the overly meek, the studiously consistent, the scrupulously virtuous. In his **One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore** (Murray, 1923; Univ. of Malaya, 1967), Song Ong Siang quotes Sir James Brooke, writing only two decades after the settlement was founded in 1819. Brooke at once praised and lamented the character of the Chinese who dominated the island's commerce:

"Their industry exceeds that of any other people on the face of the earth, they are laborious, patient, and cheerful; but on the other hand they are corrupt, supple, and exacting, yielding to their superiors and tyrannical to those who fall into their power."

Nevertheless, such ingredients often added up to a recipe for success in Singapore. In addition, they so flavored the island's history that respectable historians seem to have shied away, perhaps fearing that any general history would seem too "popular" (i.e., interesting) to suit academic tastes. Fortunately, C. Mary Turnbull was not deterred. For the specialist and nonspecialist alike, her illustrated, scholarly, and smartly written **A History of Singapore** (Oxford, 1977, cloth & paper) is the best survey available of Singapore's colorful path from antiquity to modernity.

Turnbull's study may be usefully supplemented by Donald and Joanna Moore's **The First 150 Years of Singapore** (Donald Moore, 1969), a compilation of documents with connecting text by the authors.

The "anything goes" capitalism that brought Singapore fortune, fame, and infamy during colonial days has been not so much diluted since independence as refined, sanitized, and institutionalized. Singapore today has a "directed" economy and centralized planning. But Iain Buchanan argues in **Singapore in Southeast Asia** (Bell, 1972) that the island's dependence on foreign investment and expatriate corporate management may be merely a disguised form of neocolonialism.

That aside, he also warns that the republic's role as wealthy middleman and regional processing center is increasingly aggravating to its two larger Moslem neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia. Singapore may now be a pearl, he says in effect, but the surrounding oyster feels it as an irritating speck of sand.

While Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his associates prefer to

focus world attention on Singapore's high standard of living, clean streets, and incorruptible bureaucracy, they are aware that potentially serious problems—foreign and domestic—do exist. Parents and government alike worry about a younger generation that takes schools, jobs, housing, and health care for granted—and seems to lack ambition. A small intelligentsia decries regimentation and conformity. In **The Economics of Modernization** (Asia Pacific, 1972), even First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee complained of his island's "depressing climate of intellectual sterility."

Some observers attribute that climate in part to the paternalistic political system imposed by Lee after 1963. One such critic is T. J. S. George. In **Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore** (Deutsch, 1973, cloth & paper), a political biography of the island's long-time "headman," George strives to give the austere Prime Minister his due. But his overall assessment is negative.

Lee, in George's view, "casts a pall of conformity and caution over the lives of the people he controls. He seems to assume that a sense of national identity can be created from television sets, apartments, and jobs, disregarding the citizen's right to respect and equality."

One manifestation of the lack of truly national feeling lies in what economist Lim Chong Yah calls the "hotel-guest mentality." Lim, whose local newspaper columns are collected in **Commentary on Economics and Current Affairs** (Federal, 1981), discerns the phenomenon mainly among affluent professionals whose skills are in demand around the world—the very people who have gained the most from Singapore.

As long as times are good, these people are happy to remain in Singapore, writes Lim. But ask them to contribute something to the republic—allowing their sons to be drafted, for example—and they check out of their "suites" and move abroad.

Newspapers are watched closely in Singapore, but despite inevitable self-censorship, columnists still enjoy considerable latitude, and letters to the editor reflect a riot of opinion. Among everyone's favorite targets are the government's frequent attempts at moral or social uplift, its campaigns to curb (for example) spitting in public or to "make courtesy our way of life."

Two of the better newspaper commentators are B. J. Wu and Paik-Choo, each the author of a recent volume of essays: respectively, **Singapore Accent** (C. Nair, 1981) and **The Pick of Paik-Choo** (Singapore: Times, 1982). Both take aim at a variety of local initiatives, including government language policy—the requirement, in particular, that Singapore Chinese, most of whom speak south China dialects and are avid fans of movies in Cantonese imported from Hong Kong, make their children learn Mandarin, the official language of the People's Republic of China and of Taiwan.

Paik-Choo ridicules the proposal that even personal names be changed to their phonetic Mandarin equivalents. (In Chinese, the meaning of written characters is universal, but each dialect pronounces them differently.) She cites the case of two of her cousins, whose names in Hokkien are pronounced Ah Lok and Ah Loh—after their mother's favorite music, rock 'n' roll. In Mandarin, the connotation is lost.

Knowledge of standard English is a different matter. Government and populace are one in recognizing that

English is the language of trade and the government defends its purity. Citizens are reminded continually that local "Singlish" will not do.

Some characteristics of Singlish, as classified in **The English of Singapore and Malaysia** (Eastern Univ., rev. ed., 1979) by R. K. Tongue, include omission of the verb "to be" ("People will glad to buy it"); repetition of adjectives ("Do you speak English? Broken, broken"); omission of prepositions ("We go your home"); and confusion of the personal pronouns "he" and "she."

As an intensely mercantile community, Singapore long paid little attention to literature and the arts. Yet, more than a few outsiders, including Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad, found fertile ground for fiction in the ennui—hardly new or unique to Singapore—that is traditionally handmaiden to economic well-being in the tropics.

The portrait of jaded British colonial society before World War II presented by J. G. Farrell in **The Singapore Grip** (Knopf, 1979, cloth; Berkley, 1980, paper) is echoed in Paul Theroux's **Saint Jack** (Houghton, 1973, cloth; Ballantine, 1976, paper), the tale of a dissolute American expatriate who operates a seamy R & R hotel in Singapore for warweary GIs from Vietnam.

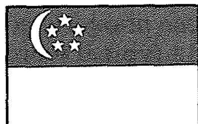
Even the tales by Singapore's popular Catherine Lim—collected in **Little Ironies** (Heinemann, 1978, paper only) and **Or Else, The Lightning God, and Other Stories** (Heinemann, 1980, paper only)—present families and individuals adrift in materialism and amorality.

In "The Taximan's Story," a cabby decries the immorality of schoolgirls who "friend, friend, the European and American tourists, and this is how they make fun and also extra money" and reveals that he caught his daughter with Europeans and now won't let her out of the house. But he declines a passenger's request to wait because "must go off to the Hotel Elroy—there plenty of young people [with Europeans] to pick up."

Perhaps Singapore's best-known author—though few realize that he lived in Singapore and taught at the university there—is C. Northcote Parkinson, author of **Parkinson's Law** (Houghton, 1957, cloth; 1962, paper). Parkinson derived some of his droll but perceptive laws of bureaucratic behavior (e.g., "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion") from practices he observed in, among other places, "a certain British colony."

That was colonial Singapore. Today, on Lee Kuan Yew's efficient little island, many of Parkinson's laws seem to have been repealed.

—*K. Mulliner*



EDITOR'S NOTE: *Mulliner, 43, is assistant to the director of the Ohio University Libraries. He is co-editor of* Malaysian Studies II *(with John Lent, 1983).*