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ARTICLE

"Asia, not the European in Asia, must be our theme": A Partial Decolonisation of Malayan History at the University of Malaya in the 1950s

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Abstract

This paper examines the history-making of the first two Raffles Professors of History at the University of Malaya, C.N. Parkinson and K.G. Tregonning, to demonstrate the impact Malaya's decolonisation had on the historiographical practices of the university's History Department. It argues that both historians, animated by Malaya's decolonisation, attempted to re-frame Malayan history – through adopting a 'world-historical' and 'autonomous history' framework respectively – to meet what they perceived were the needs of a post-independence multiracial Malaya. Although both historians claimed to be producing histories for an independent Malaya, and while their frameworks were indeed methodologically innovative, both historians ultimately produced histories that continued to frame Malayan history using western frameworks. They were thus partially decolonised historians writing partially decolonised histories for a partially decolonised Malaya.

Keywords: Decolonisation of Knowledge; Historiography; University of Malaya; World History; Autonomous History

Introduction

On 31 August 1957, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, declared Malaya's independence from the British Empire. Following the British return to Malaya in September 1945, after the end of the Japanese Occupation in World War II, the call for *Merdeka* (independence) grew louder. On the one hand, some Malayans responded with a politics of violence, with the Malayan Communist Party launching a campaign of insurgency to establish a communist state, what has come to be known as the Malayan Emergency.[1] On the other hand, other Malayans responded with a politics of compromise, forging inter-racial alliances – a prerequisite set by the British for independence. Given the imperatives of nation-building and state-formation, most scholars have thus devoted their attention to a study of political and social developments during the period of decolonisation in Malaya.[2] Yet, nations are not built by political structures alone. Historical narratives that situate the nation's past, grounds its present, and set out its future, contribute as

[1] For the latest scholarship on the Emergency, see Karl Hack, *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[2] Tim Harper's *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* is still the leading work on this subject. T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

much, if not more, to the formation of an 'imagined community.'[3] This paper thus proposes shifting attention to instead consider the epistemological impact Malaya's decolonisation had on Malayan historiography at the time. It does so by examining how decolonisation shaped the historiographical practices of historians at the History Department of the newly-established, Singapore-based, University of Malaya (UM).

This paper closely examines the history-making of the first two Raffles Professors and Chairs of History at UM to demonstrate the impact Malaya's decolonisation had on the historiographical practices of UM's History Department. Through examining the scholarship of Cyril Northcote (C.N.) Parkinson and Kennedy Gordon (K.G.) Tregonning, I argue that both historians were animated by Malaya's decolonisation to re-frame Malayan historiography to meet what they perceived were the needs of a post-independence Malayan nation. If "historians help to create nations" through their histories, what kind of nation did Parkinson and Tregonning envision?[4] From their vantage point in Singapore, a city that was "increasingly a space to experiment with being modern, urban, and Malayan," both historians – themselves 'hybrid figures' due to their training in British institutions – saw multiracialism as foundational to an independent Malaya.[5] Believing that the scholarship of the colonial scholar-administrators that came before them to be inadequate in addressing this need, both historians sought new frameworks to make sense of Malaya's multiracial society. Parkinson, with his training in naval history, adopted a 'world-historical' approach which emphasised Malaya's global connections. Comparatively, Tregonning, influenced by ongoing debates over the place of colonialism in Southeast Asian history, adopted what has come to be called an 'autonomous history' framework in his scholarship.[6] Although both historians claimed to be producing histories for an independent Malaya, and while their frameworks were indeed methodologically innovative, both historians ultimately produced histories that continued to frame Malayan history using Western frameworks. They were thus partially decolonised historians writing partially decolonised histories for a partially decolonised Malaya.

Historiography on the Eve of Decolonisation

Before the establishment of UM in 1949, academic accounts of Malaya's histories were primarily written by British scholar-administrators, with Frank Swettenham's *British Malaya* (1907) being amongst the earliest works produced.[7] In *British Malaya*, Swettenham – the Resident-General of the Federated Malay States – sought to explain why and how the British came to be involved with Malaya, and the impact of the British intervention. Extolling the virtues of British colonisation, Swettenham's account is very much an account one would expect from a colonial scholar-administrator, written in the imperial framework.

An early attempt at using indigenous Malay sources can be traced to the work of Richard Olaf Winstedt, who was the only British scholar-administrator to not only use Malay sources in his writings, but who additionally collaborated with the Malays and published in the

[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (New York, NY and London, England: Verso, 2006); see also for the role of history in empire-building, Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[4] Anthony Milner and Wilbert W. W. Wong, "Winstedt, Colonialism and the Malaysian History Wars," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 52, no. 153 (May 3, 2024): 174.

[5] Karl Hack, "The Malayan Trajectory in Singapore's History," in *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century: Reinventing the Global City*, ed. Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin, New Edition (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 255.

[6] John R. W. Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 72–102.

[7] Frank Athelstane Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origins and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1907).

Malay language. Compared to his contemporaries and predecessors, Winstedt was focused on the project of state-building on Peninsular Malaya, and thus devoted much attention to explicating what Anthony Milner and Wilbert Wong have termed the 'Melaka strategy' – a narrative that situates the Melaka sultanate as the cradle of Malaya.[8] From Melaka, Winstedt argues, the history and heritage of *Tanah Melayu* (Malay Lands) – what he euphemistically called the British 'protected' territories – stemmed. To be sure, Winstedt's writings were in support of British colonial policy. For instance, in his focus on the Malay monarchy through his use of the *hikayats*, Winstedt's writings aligned with the indirect rule strategy of ruling through the sultans in the Federated Malay States. Nevertheless, in his emplotment of Melaka as foundational to Malaya, Winstedt's writings were a decisive break from the Swettenham tradition.

There were, of course, challenges to Winstedt's 'Melaka-centred' strategy. One such challenge came from the historians at UM's History Department in the 1950s and 1960s, who sought to destabilise the Melaka-centrism in Winstedt by studying Malayan history using a 'world-historical,' and later, an 'autonomous history' framework.

Establishing the University

When planning for their return to Malaya after World War II, the British decided to consolidate their rule in Malaya under a single administration, instead of the different forms of administration found in the pre-war period. The formation of Malaya as a coherent unit in 1946 by the British under the Malayan Union plan, and later the Federation Agreement in 1947, was therefore the construction of a new geographic reality.[9] For the British-envisioned Malaya to work, they needed to cultivate a new form of Malayan national identity, one that was not tied to ethnic or racial identity, but instead to a spatial or geographical identity, one rooted in place, and what Anthony Smith terms "territorial nationalism."[10]

To assist their mission of constructing a territorial Malayan nationalism, the British turned to educational institutions like UM, which was established in 1949 from a merger of the King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College. In their report recommending the formation of the university, the Carr-Saunders Commission declared that "the main task of the University is to foster the growth of citizenship by concentration upon problems common to all."[11] As they saw it, UM was to be a university that would "emphasise the identity of the academic interest for all racial groups at every stage of the process of education," all while minimising "the segregation and possible divergence of the several racial interests, without in the least overriding cultural variety and distinctness."[12] In the minds of the Commission, the university was to be a microcosm of the Malayan society, a space where Malayans could come together to forge a new Malayan identity.

This intermeshing of political objectives and the goals of higher education was explicitly observed by the University Chancellor Malcolm MacDonald, who was also concurrently the British Commissioner-General of Southeast Asia. Speaking at the University's Foundation Day, he remarked that UM was "being founded at the same time as foundations are being laid for a nation of Malaya," noting that it was "a most happy coincidence for a university

[8] Milner and Wong, "Winstedt, Colonialism and the Malaysian History Wars," 194.

[9] See Chapters 4 through 7 of Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 3rd edition (London: Palgrave, 2017).

[10] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Repr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 135-7.

[11] Commission on University Education in Malaya (Great Britain), "Report of the Commission on University Education in Malaya (Chairman, Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders" (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1948)

[12] Commission on University Education in Malaya (Great Britain), "Report of the Commission on University Education in Malaya (Chairman, Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders)," 19.

can play a notable part in making a nation." While hedging that he was not suggesting that the university should be politicised, he underscored that "the university's good influence on the growth of a nation will be felt in many ways," such as through the breaking down of communal barriers through interactions by students of different races in common spaces in the university. Through those experiences, MacDonald hoped that Malayans "shall think progressively less of their distinctions of race and more of their common heritage and character as people of Malaya."[13] Hence, he declared, UM was to become "the crucible of the Malayan nation," "a cradle where a truly non-communal nation is nurtured."[14] UM was thus expected to effect not just a behavioural change; it was also expected to enact an epistemological shift as well by creating a new Malayan identity.

While the UM History Department had expected to transfer over W.E. Dyer, the Professor of History at Raffles College, they were met with news of his unexpected death. Knowing that establishing an epistemological sovereignty for Malaya required a specialist in Asian, and preferably Southeast Asian, history, the university sought to recruit a successor that would "strengthen the History Department on the side of its teaching and study of Asian history." Although "a person with qualifications and experience in any part of the field of Asian history" would qualify, the department indicated a preference for one that researched on Southeast Asian history.[15] In a choice between Brian Harrison – an Asian specialist who was already a lecturer in Raffles College – and C.N. Parkinson – a British historian who was lecturing on Naval and Maritime History at Liverpool – the search committee opted to employ Parkinson. While unanimously approved by members of the University Council, not all celebrated his appointment, with the Secretary for Chinese Affairs in Singapore noting his hesitance as he was "not sure that a specialist in Naval history is the type of man we require for his appointment."[16] Justifying their decision on the basis of his academic credentials, the Committee reported that even while Parkinson was not a Southeast Asian specialist, "it was clear that he would interest himself in this field, although it would naturally be from his own particular standpoint" and that he "could be relied upon to make a contribution to the history of any region in which he found himself."[17] During his eight-year tenure as the Raffles Professor, Parkinson would go on to prove his detractors wrong by pioneering the use of a world-historical approach towards the study of Malayan history.

The Task of the Historian

Parkinson's world-historical approach was the product of his political and social context. Politically, MacDonald's lofty aspiration for UM to become the "crucible of the Malayan nation [...] a cradle where a truly non-communal nation is nurtured" must have been etched on his mind, especially since, as A.J. Stockwell has observed, Parkinson self-fashioned himself as "an agent of intellectual and cultural change when the British Empire was ushering in self-government."[18] Socially, Parkinson was aware of Malaya's ethnic diversity, observing in his inaugural lecture, *The Task of the Historian*, that "Malaya is a cross-roads, and Singapore

[13] Cited in Khoo Kay Kim and Edin Khoo, I, KKK: The Autobiography of a Historian (Kuala Lumpur: Kala Publishers Sdn. Bhd, 2017), 48.

[14] Cited in A. J. Stockwell, "'The Crucible of the Malayan Nation': The University and the Making of a New Malaya, 1938–62," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2009): 1168. Stockwell's article is also the leading piece on the history of UM's establishment.

[15] A. Oppenheim to P.F. Vowles, 4 May 1949, UM 217-49, National Archives of Singapore [NAS], p. 89.

[16] Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Singapore, to President, Raffles College Council, "Chair of History," 17 September 1949, UM 217-49, NAS, p. 60. In the same letter, it was also revealed that Parkinson intended to apply for the post of the Vere Harmsworth Professor of Naval and Imperial History at Cambridge upon its opening in 1951.

[17] P.F. Vowles to A. Oppenheim, 3 September 1949, UM 217-49, NAS, p. 67.

[18] Cited in Kevin Peter Blackburn, "The Decolonization of History at the Universities of Malaysia and Singapore: Historical and Philosophical Antecedents," in *Colonization and Epistemic Injustice in Higher Education: Precursors to*

even more so, where the influences of China, India, Arabia, and Europe all converge."[19] Put together, Parkinson saw his task as that of using the tools of history to nurture the independent non-communal Malayan nation that the British administrators envisioned for Malaya.

To tell such a story of a non-communal nation, framing is essential. For Parkinson, the Swettenham and Winstedt framing of Malayan history was ill-suited for his intention as they had centred ethnicity – whether it be the British or the Malays. The only solution, in his mind, was a world-historical approach to Malayan history, one that studied Malaya's ethnic plurality collectively and in an integrated fashion. As he explained in a circular to schools in 1954, while "it would be logical to begin historical work in Malaya with a study of Malayan history," "the logical is not always the practicable." This was because, unlike in Europe, "the pupil in Malaya is not working within the limits of the one civilisation and the same group of language," and was instead "moulded by influences which are remote in origin and diverse in kind." The Malayan student "cannot escape the influence of India, China, Islam and Europe," and "must try to reconcile at least four different ways of life."[20] Making a similar point in his inaugural lecture in 1950, Parkinson remarked "we are compelled by our very surroundings to study initially, *the history of the world*," concluding that "we may, by our example, prove to other Universities that this is, in fact, the right approach."[21] Parkinson's approach made Malaya's approach to her history different from that in other Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia, which looked inwards for their histories. Yet, it was also the only reasonable solution for Malaya. After all, unlike Indonesia which had a Java-centred political landscape for knowledge production due to direct Dutch rule, Malaya – which was mostly indirectly ruled by the British – had no such political centre; and if it did, that centre was multiracial Singapore, where UM was based at. Therefore, for Parkinson, writing a non-communal history in Malaya necessitated looking outwards.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that Parkinson wrote such a world history of Malaya. Nevertheless, we are able to observe glimpses of what he had in mind when closely reading the World History paper he designed for first-year UM Arts undergraduates. He replaced two papers, on "Oriental History from the Earliest Times to 1498 A.D" and "Oriental History from 1498 A.D," with a single World History paper.[22] Although Oriental History, as Dyer and Harrison may have intended it, was likely to have meant Asian, as opposed to East Asian history, Parkinson did not think it was acceptable to neglect the European dimension of the story. After all, the Europeans were to become key players in Malaya's history, especially after 1511 and 1874. Hence, while he agreed that he was "ask[ing] much of the student to move, in imagination, from Athens to Peking, from Delhi to Mecca, from Malacca to Venice," Parkinson nevertheless underscored that "history *as seen from Malaya*, cannot initially be anything but that."[23] That is, to even begin to understand a history of Malaya that comprised of its diversity of ethnicities, a knowledge of world history was regarded as a prerequisite. Through an understanding of world history, and specifically the history of the Chinese, Indians, Europeans, and Malays, Parkinson believed that historians of Malaya would be able to integrate experiences across race, thereby historicising and explaining Malaya's racial diversity in a connective manner. Hence, by the end of their first year, UM undergraduates were expected to not just "have some grasp of the basic facts [...] which concern us here

Decolonization, ed. Felix Maringe, Global Debates on the Decolonization of Higher Education (London; New York: Routledge, 2023), 106.

[19] C.N. Parkinson, "The Task of the Historian: Inaugural Public Lecture," 19 May 1950, UM 288-49, NAS, p. 253.

[20] C.N. Parkinson, "World History," 2 April 1954, UM 62-50, NAS, p. 25.

[21] C.N. Parkinson, "The Task of the Historian: Inaugural Public Lecture," 19 May 1950, UM 288-49, NAS, p. 253, emphasis added.

[22] "History Syllabus [Draft]," n.d., UM 331-49, NAS, p. 82.

[23] C.N. Parkinson, "World History," 2 April 1954, UM 62-50, NAS, p. 27-28, emphasis added.

in Malaya." They were also expected to be able to "explain the forces which are moulding South-East Asia today."[24]

World History for Malayans

Although Parkinson pitched the paper, he did not teach it. Instead, the teaching of the World History paper was delegated to one of the two non-Malayan permanent hires he made in his tenure as Raffles Professor, K.G. Tregonning. Tregonning, born in Australia and educated in Adelaide and Oxford, began his academic career as a History Lecturer at UM in 1953. A year later, he began his PhD under Parkinson's supervision, completing a dissertation on "The Founding and Development of Penang (1786-1826)" in 1957.[25] In 1958, Tregonning was appointed the Acting Chair of History while Parkinson embarked on a sabbatical he was never to return from. He would officially succeed Parkinson as Raffles Professor and Chair of History in 1959. While teaching the paper, Tregonning decided to compile his teaching materials into a book, aptly titled *World History for Malayans: From Earliest Times to 1511*. The book thus gives insight into what was meant by a world-historical approach to Malayan history. It also reveals Tregonning's own approach towards such a world-history of Malaya.

World History for Malayans, like the course Parkinson envisioned, promised to deliver "an account of world history as seen from Malaya," and was intended to "appeal, not merely to the student of Malaya and Singapore, but also to that part of the general community who are interested in their heritage."[26] This appeal, Tregonning believed, was achieved by the regional focus of the book, with nine of the fourteen chapters dedicated to examining Asian civilisations in China, India, and in Southeast Asia. Before turning my attention to those nine chapters, it is useful to first consider how Tregonning attempted to make the remaining five chapters that examine European civilisations appeal to the Malayan. In those chapters, Tregonning takes the effort to connect developments and themes in European history to contemporary developments in Malaya. For instance, Tregonning lauds the role that migration – a phenomenon his reader no doubt would be familiar with – played in bringing "change and improvement" and "fresh ideas" to a post-Ice Age Southeast Asia, likely cementing the importance of migration in enlivening Malayan history in the eyes of the reader.[27] Tregonning also dedicates the sixth chapter of the book, "Europe," to examining the rise of Christianity as a world religion, noting that even in Malaya, "religious sisterhoods [of Christian denominations] still perform much of the humanitarian work which was expected of them in mediaeval times."[28] In doing so, Tregonning attempts to help Malayans make sense of their contemporary present, and, as Parkinson had intended, helped students to make sense of one facet of the multicultural Malaya they saw around them.

The greater part of *World History for Malayans* is dedicated, however, to an examination of Asian civilisations. The stakes of this study is made clear by Tregonning in his third chapter on India, the first Asian civilisation he covers in the text. "Even if we ignore the contributions made by the Indus," Tregonning writes, "the history of Hindu India [...] is, apart from the Chinese, the account of the oldest continuous culture in the world today. Knowledge

[24] C.N. Parkinson, "World History," 2 April 1954, UM 62-50, NAS, p. 26.

[25] Minutes 84-89/1953-1954, 3 June 1954, UM 289-49, NAS, p. 29. The original title of his dissertation was "A History of Malaya, 1900-1939," before the title was subsequently changed a year later, see Minutes of a Meeting of the Arts Faculty Board held on 8th December 1955 in the University Court Room (Paper 238/55), UM 62A-54, NAS, p. 165

[26] K.G. Tregonning, *World History for Malayans: From Earliest Times to 1511* (London: University of London Press, 1957), v.

[27] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 5.

[28] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 85-86.

of it is an essential prerequisite if we are to understand the outlook of an important section of the community of Malaya."[29] Similarly, in his chapter on the rise of Islam as a world religion, Tregonning also underscores the need for students to be aware of Islamic history, calling the religion "one of the great slumbering forces of Southeast Asia."[30] All of this comes together in the third section of the book, titled "South-East Asia" where in two chapters, "The Mainland" and "Malaysia," Tregonning connects these developments in India, China, and Europe to Southeast Asian history directly, showing how Southeast Asia was not just a "Greater India" or a "little China" but was instead "an amalgam, a synthesis, between the two, in which both elements played their parts."[31] For instance, Tregonning points concurrently to the development of Indian settlements in Kedah, and also the growth of violence and criminality in Malaya whenever China experienced political turmoil.[32] As he surmised, "the European demand, the movement of Islam, the southward pressure of the Mongols – all were affecting South-east Asia."[33]

As is evident from Tregonning's textbook, and as Parkinson had intended, *World History for Malayans*, with its integrated approach to historicising and explaining Malaya's cultural inheritance, was meant to help the Malayan student "try to reconcile at least four different ways of life," and to see these four different ways of life not as mutually exclusive to each other, but as mutually connected, becoming something greater than its individual constituent part.[34] In doing so, *World History for Malayans* "explain[s] the forces which are moulding South-East Asia today," and helps students to conceive of a non-communal history of Malaya.[35] This is also done through the textbook which took effort to emphasise "the mingling of cultures" and "the composite character of any civilisation," making clear "whenever possible [the] relation [of these different civilisations] to present day Malaya."[36]

World History for Malayans thus represented a challenge to Winstedt's Melaka strategy through its inclusion of non-Malays in Malaya's history.[37] While Melaka is also discussed in the text, with Tregonning noting that it was the heart of the East-West trade, it is never framed as the foundation to modern Malaya. Instead, Malaya's foundations were to be found in the waves of migration from all corners of the world, with the emphasis placed on Malaya's ethnic diversity. In these ways, a world history of Malaya, one as seen from multiracial Singapore, looked outwards for the sources of Malayan history, explaining the contemporary plural society that had emerged under British colonisation.

The 'Autonomous History' Debate

In authoring *World History for Malayans*, and particularly in his rejection of Southeast Asia as a "Greater India" or a "little China," Tregonning reflected the intellectual context he was in. In the 1950s, historians in and of Southeast Asia began to debate whether Southeast Asia possessed its own history, one that was "worthy of consideration in its own right" and "not as an appendage of India, China or the West."[38] Such a debate arose as historians

[29] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 32.
[30] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 97.
[31] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 152.
[32] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 171.
[33] Tregonning, *World History for Malayans*, 172.
[34] C.N. Parkinson, "World History," 2 April 1954, UM 62-50, NAS, p. 25.
[35] C.N. Parkinson, "World History," 2 April 1954, UM 62-50, NAS, p. 26.
[36] C.N. Parkinson, "World History," 2 April 1954, UM 62-50, NAS, p. 27.
[37] Milner and Wong, "Winstedt, Colonialism and the Malaysian History Wars," 194.
[38] J.D. Legge, "The Writing of Southeast Asian History," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume One, Part One, From Early Times to C. 1500*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1

sought to make sense of how to write a history of the region that was experiencing political decolonisation. On one side of this debate were those who affirmed the existence of such an 'autonomous history' of Southeast Asia. This included historians like J.C. van Leur who urged historians of the region to pay attention to how "an older indigenous culture continued to exist" beneath the Indian, Islamic, and later European influence on the region respectively.[39] However, van Leur argued, such attention could not be afforded when history was seen "from the deck of the ship, the ramparts of the fortress, [and] the high gallery of the trading house."[40] Van Leur thus called for a perceptual shift in the historian's historiographical orientation. In a piece published in 1962, the historian John Smail referred to this historiographical orientation as one of writing an 'autonomous history.'[41] Such a history, Smail argued, would "displace [the historian's] attention from the colonial relationship to the domestic history of the area," and to "see continuities which span the late colonial period and carry on to the present day."[42]

As a graduate student and later Raffles Professor, Tregonning became one of the most strident advocates for 'autonomous history,' going as far as to declare in a lecture to the Johor Bahru Rotary Club that "Asia, not the European in Asia, must be our theme."[43] Despite being trained in Oxford, Tregonning criticised European historians – among whom he curiously did not include himself – for viewing Malayan history "through Europo-centric eyes" and centring the lives of "the European in Asia, not Asia itself." Historians of Malaya, he declared, needed to "to turn away from this [Europo-centrism] and give more prominence to the Asian elements in this story."[44] Rather than view Malayan history "from the office of the colonial powers, or from the deck of a foreign ship," words which almost exactly echoed van Leur, Tregonning urged the reader of his *A History of Modern Malaya* (1964) to "stand with [him] on the beach" because "for the historian of Malaya, that is the only true position."[45] Hence, in his text, Tregonning downplayed the role the European spice trade played in the rise of Melaka. While accepting that the European spice trade did affect Malaya, Tregonning argued that its effect was "not at all noticeab[e] until the end of the Malacca Sultanate," and that "to read back into the centuries its later importance is to adopt a Europocentric attitude to Malayan history that is at variance with the facts." Far more important for Tregonning's purpose was "the bustling, vigorous intra-continental trade of sea girt Asia," for it was "Asian and not European trade that explains the growth of Malacca."[46] Similarly, Tregonning refused to accept European framings of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Malayan history as a Portuguese and Dutch period respectively, calling this "a basic historical mistake," caused by the bias of historians who were "brought up in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century historical attitude of surveying the world in a Europo-centric manner."[47] Rather, "the sixteenth century is properly the Achinese century in Malayan history," and the eighteenth century the "Bugis century."[48] Tregonning thus self-fashioned himself as one such autonomous historian of Malaya.

[39] Legge, "The Writing of Southeast Asian History," 7-8.

[40] Cited in Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," 76.

[41] Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia."

[42] Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," 88, 100-101.

[43] K.G. Tregonning, "Look at our story from the inside, not from outside," *The Straits Times*, 24 November 1958, 6.

[44] Tregonning, "Look at our story from the inside, not from outside."

[45] On van Leur, Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia"; K. G. Tregonning, *A History of Modern Malaya* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1964), vii.

[46] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 25.

[47] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 45.

[48] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 46, 59.

On the other side of the debate were historians like John Bastin, Professor of History at the Kuala Lumpur division of UM between 1959 to 1963, who cautioned about the unintended consequences of politicising history-making. Responding to Tregonning in his inaugural lecture, and expanding on his thoughts in a paper, Bastin argued that even while "some colonial historians were guilty of a tendency to over-emphasise Western cultural and political preponderance in the Southeast Asian region," it was still "no reason why the important indirect effects which Westerners had on the course of Southeast Asian history during those centuries should now be totally obscured by the zealous critics of those historians."[49] "It would be extremely dangerous," he observed, "if, in an anxiety to meet the political demands of a resurgent Asian consciousness, historians of Southeast Asia began to minimise too much the part played by the Westerners in the region."[50]

Historians of Southeast Asia, Bastin notes, faced two obstacles to their writing of such 'autonomous' histories. First, he questioned whether historians of Southeast Asia – most of whom, like Tregonning, were Western and had received Western training – would be able to "allow his mind to be dissolved in the strangely different, and frequently confusing, Southeast Asian world." Although not affirming that "the European historian should subordinate everything to a Western interest," he found that it is more likely that this would "set severe limitations to the possibility of Western historians ever successfully interpreting this history from an Asian point of view."[51] Second, Bastin observed that historians of Southeast Asia depended upon sources to write their histories, the vast majority of which are in European languages, "comprehensible only within a Western historical framework," and tend "to establish the pattern of the historical narrative before it is even written." For this reason, Bastin argued that "the fact [...] that often the richest sources for the study of modern Southeast Asian history tend to be Western sources leads, inevitably, to the imposition of a Western structural framework on that history."[52] To the extent that historians, European or Asian, "bring to their study of Southeast Asian history the concepts and categories and periodisation of Western historiography, and interpret Southeast Asian history in the light of these concepts and categories," then "the type of Asian and Southeast Asian history which is being written today, even by Asian historians themselves, is history in the Western tradition; for the kind of history with which we are familiar is indissolubly tied to the whole Western cultural base," and "no amount of emotional criticism of this historiography will alter that state of affairs."[53]

Bastin's provocative lecture was met by critical responses from Southeast Asianists, who although acknowledging the potential pitfalls that Bastin mentioned, nevertheless found fault with his generalisation of Southeast Asian historians.[54] To be fair to Bastin, however, his criticism did apply to Tregonning. For example, in his *A History of Modern Malaya*, Tregonning frames the concept of 'modernity' in Malaya along Western characteristics, listing attributes such as the "rejection of dogma," "challenge to accepted modes of thought," and "insistence upon enquiry and rational belief," as "the outstanding factor of

[49] John Bastin, "The Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History" (Papers on Southeast Asian Subjects No. 2, Department of History, The University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, 1960), British Library, 12.

[50] Bastin, "The Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History," 14.

[51] Bastin, "The Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History," 15.

[52] Bastin, "The Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History," 16-17.

[53] Bastin, "The Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History," 17.

[54] See D. P. Singhal, "Southeast Asian History: Some Comments on 'The Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History,'" *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 1, no. 2 (September 1960): 118–23, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0217781100000235; W.F. Wertheim, "Asian History and the Western Historian: Rejoinder to Professor Bastin," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 119, no. 2 (1963): 149–60; Syed Hussein Alatas, "Theoretical Aspects of Southeast Asian History: John Bastin and the Study of Southeast Asian History," *Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1964): 247–60.

the modern world."[55] This 'modernity,' Tregonning argues, only began in Malaya in the nineteenth century, specifically 1848 – the year tin ore deposits were discovered in Perak.[56] This discovery was to lead to the British intervention in Perak in 1874 with the Pangkor Treaty. It was only through British colonisation, then, that the Malayans "became curious, to enquire after new knowledge, and to challenge the validity of old thought."[57] This suggests that the impulse to modernise in Malaya was the product of western contact. Hence, Tregonning credits Swettenham, the first Resident-General of the Federated Malay States, as "one of the more important of the men who shaped Malaya for the modern world."[58] Indeed, at various points, European activities and perspectives are privileged above those of the Malayan. For example, while Tregonning refutes Hall's claim that "Penang was founded for reasons of naval strategy," rather than looking at Malaya for the cause, Tregonning instead urges his reader to look "elsewhere, at the general position of the British in Asia."[59] Rather than naval security, Penang was founded for the British East India Company to "improve their operations [in the China tea trade], to give them a bazaar more stable than their shifting decks [...] a secure base where they could acquire commodities that would assist the China trade."[60] Comparatively, very little is said about Penang, which Tregonning dismisses as an "uninhabited island."[61] Even if there were people on Penang, Tregonning's description of Penang prevents the possibility of learning about them and their history. Moreover, while Tregonning asked his reader to stand with him on the beach of Malaya, it was not to view the Malayans. Instead it was to watch the colonial powers "arrive" onto the shores of Malaya.[62] In doing so, Tregonning privileges the role that external forces – notably the West – played in Malaya's modernisation, foreclosing the possibility of autonomous sequences in Malayan history being discovered. Finally, unlike Winstedt who made extensive use of the *hikayats*, Tregonning explicitly dismisses them as a source for history, calling the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals, but literally History of the Malays) "unsatisfactory evidence" that "abounds in legends and obvious fables" and is "disjointed and does not follow a chronological pattern" – chronology, as Tregonning understood it, itself being a Western historiographical concept that emerged after the *Sejarah Melayu* was written.[63] Ironically, for a self-fashioned autonomous historian of Malaya, not only did Tregonning not read any Southeast Asian languages, he cites as evidence and for further reading in his bibliography the accounts of the very colonial scholars whom he accuses of being Eurocentric. To the extent that Tregonning relied upon European scholars for his histories, it is little wonder that his history, although framed in the language of autonomy, was ultimately written using the same Western frameworks he railed against and which Bastin had cautioned about.

It would appear that even while Tregonning attempted to live up to the political imperative to write autonomous history, he was ultimately unable to understand the method itself. In his article, Smail argued that autonomous history is not about replacing a Eurocentric bias with an Asia-centric bias, for doing so is "merely replacing one bias with another."[64] What needed to be changed was not one's bias but one's angle-of-vision or perspective. As Smail understood it, three types of histories may be written: History A or the

[55] K. G. Tregonning, *A History of Modern Malaya* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1964), 67.
[56] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 186.
[57] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 68.
[58] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 142.
[59] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 69-71.
[60] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 70-71.
[61] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 75.
[62] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, vii.
[63] Tregonning, *Modern Malaya*, 41; Siegfried Kracauer, "Time and History," *History and Theory* 6 (1966): 65-78.
[64] Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," 76.

History of Holland, History B or the History of Indonesia, and History AB or the history of Dutch-Indonesia foreign relations. Anti-colonial historians, of which Tregonning might be considered as one, Smail noted, offered History AB "as a substitute" to History B.[65] Tregonning, in merely adding Malayan actors to an essentially British framework of Malayan history, "shift[ed] the moral viewpoint from Europe-centric to Asia-centric," but "shift[ed] the perspective from Europe-centric not to Asia-centric but instead a mixed perspective leaning to the Europe-centric side."[66] In doing so, while he attempts to decolonise Malayan history, his attempt was ultimately a partial one.

The 'autonomous history' debate influenced Tregonning's historiographical orientation. In *World History for Malaya*, he reflected the trend of carving out a space for a history of Southeast Asia as a region in itself. However, when we closely read his attempt at constructing such an autonomous history of Malaya, we see that his history, while framed as autonomous, was ultimately reliant upon Western frameworks of historiography. Tregonning was ultimately a product of his own training as a BLitt student in Oxford and under Parkinson – who had used such Western frameworks in his own *British Intervention in Malaya* (1960). Tregonning may have preached autonomous history, but he certainly did not practice it.

Tregonning's and Parkinson's Legacies

Nevertheless, Tregonning's advocacy for autonomous histories – even while he did not write them himself – set in stone institutions for future generations of historians to attempt to complete what he had started. One such institution was a journal, the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (*JSEAH*), now the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies. JSEAH* was established to supplement the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, which Tregonning found to be too closely connected to the British. *JSEAH* was thus envisioned as a journal which "covered the whole of Southeast Asia that engaged its history from a more grounded perspective within the region, not from colonial vestiges," one that was "devoted to Southeast Asian History, published in Southeast Asia with articles whenever possible by historians working in Southeast Asia."[67]

To build up interest and awareness in the journal, Tregonning convened the First International Conference of Southeast Asian Historians between 16-21 January 1961, which featured 105 delegates (six *in abstentia*) from 21 nations presenting 59 papers across nine sessions.[68] Speaking to the press, Tregonning hoped that the conference would allow European historians to understand how Southeast Asian histories could be written differently, that is to centre the Asian and not the European, so that they could avoid "writing about the history of Asia as if it was the history of the European in Asia."[69] Perhaps because of this, eight of the nine sessions were either chaired by an academic based in Southeast Asia, or by an academic who was connected to UM.[70] While it is, of course, easier to ask colleagues to chair sessions, the prioritisation of Southeast Asian historians over more prominent historians like C.P. Fitzgerald, could be seen as an attempt to stake a claim for

[65] Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," 95.

[66] Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," 80.

[67] Ho Chi Tim, "A Situated History of The Journal of Southeast Asian History/Studies (1960-1979)" (M.A. Thesis, History Department, National University of Singapore, 2008), 17.

[68] "First International Conference of South-East Asian Historians at the University of Malaya, January 16-21, 1961" (Programme, University of Malaya Singapore, 1961), NUS Central Library Singapore-Malaysia Collection, 12-14.

[69] "Confab of S.E.A. Historians" *The Straits Times*, 10 March 1960, 4.

[70] "First International Conference of South-East Asian Historians at the University of Malaya, January 16-21, 1961," 5-6.

Southeast Asian history and historians in the academic hierarchy. By allowing Southeast Asian historians to moderate and guide discussions, the structural organisation of the conference itself made clear that Southeast Asian historians ought to be centred in the field of Southeast Asian history, and that it was for them to determine what the research agenda was to be.

Outside of *JSEAH*, generations of Singapore historians continue to grapple with the challenge to write such autonomous histories. While his contemporary at UM, C.M. Turnbull, did not attempt to write such an autonomous history of Singapore in her *A History of Modern Singapore* (1977) due to the exigencies of nation-building at the time, his challenge to find such autonomous sequences was answered by Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong who, in their *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (2019), posit that "the underlying plot or theme of an autonomous history of Singapore may lie in the shifting and evolving harbours or ports around which a settlement or city developed."[71] In his obituary of John Bastin, Kwa noted that "today, a younger generation of scholars continues to grapple with the issues Bastin had highlighted some 60 years earlier."[72] While true, it is also useful to recall that Bastin's inaugural lecture was a response to Tregonning. In some ways, Tregonning's legacy may well have been making autonomous history a goalpost in Singapore historiography. Parkinson's legacy, in the meanwhile, may be in building the foundations for future historians of Singapore and Malaysia. In an undated memorandum, Parkinson revealed that he had refrained from making permanent offers of employment to historians at UM after his first year as he had plans for the UM historians he trained, like Eunice Thio, Wang Gungwu, and Wong Lin Ken, to eventually succeed him.[73] Indeed, all three went on to join UM as lecturers, with Wang and Wong eventually rising to Head of History in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore respectively. In Malaysia, however, Tregonning and Parkinson have faded out of the historiography. Instead, Winstedt's 'Melaka strategy' was taken up to align with the interests of the ruling party, and continues to be in use.[74]

Conclusion

In writing national histories, Anthony Milner observed that "the narrators need to be able to refine or modify their formulations to account for the often changing data at hand (the 'social realities'). Their ideological work must be sensitive to context — especially, to the different types of alternative and competing projects that are specific to the would-be 'national' community."[75] This is because they "do not merely add a further dimension to this state creation." Rather, "they also help to make all these building enterprises intelligible and convincing for people whose loyalty and commitment is vital to the nation project's success."[76]

[71] Karl Hack, "Framing Singapore's History," in *Studying Singapore's Past: C.M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012); Kwa Chong Guan et al., *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2019).

[72] Kwa Chong Guan, "John Sturgus Bastin: A Memoir," *Biblioasia* 20, no. 4 (March 2025): 63.

[73] C.N. Parkinson, "Memorandum on the Staffing of the History Department," n.d., UM 331-49, NAS, pp. 33-34. The only non-Malayan permanent hires he did make after his first year included K.G. Tregonning and C.M. Turnbull, both of whom served until 1967 and 1971 respectively, with the former resigning in the hopes of obtaining a position at the University of Western Australia that he ultimately did not obtain, and the latter moving to the University of Hong Kong.

[74] Wilbert Wei Wen Wong, "Sir Richard Olaf Winstedt and the Historical Creation of 'Malaya' and 'Tanah Melayu'" (PhD Dissertation, School of History, Australian National University, 2021).

[75] Anthony Milner, "Historians Writing Nations: Malaysian Contests," in *Nation Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, ed. Gungwu Wang, Nation-Building Histories (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2005), 156.

[76] Milner, "Historians Writing Nations," 119.

Parkinson and Tregonning were no different from Milner's observations. Although different, their writings challenged the British-centrism and Melaka-centrism of Swettenham and Winstedt by adopting a 'world-historical' and 'autonomous history' framework to study Malayan history. Both of these frameworks were adopted in light of their understanding of the needs of a future, post-independence Malaya. To the extent that UM was envisioned as a multicultural space, one that reflected the British envisioning of a multicultural Malaya, British-centrism and Melaka-centrism were ill-suited for their purposes. They thus had to "explain away the different aspirations, fears and loyalties that operate in the community for which their national narratives are designed."[77] This was the broader context for the emergence of Parkinson's 'world-historical' approach to Malayan history, with world history understood as a means of making legible the roots of multiculturalism in Malaya. In this way, Parkinson's method, which was expanded upon in Tregonning's *World History for Malayans*, centred multiculturalism as foundational to Malayan history. To an extent, this might be considered as a form of intellectual decolonisation; after all, the focus was placed squarely on Malaya and making world history useful for Malayans. However, as noted when discussing Tregonning's intervention in the 'autonomous history' debate, this was a partial decolonisation, for the concepts and categories used to make sense of this history were still Western and colonial. In sketching out such a world history, and indeed even in Tregonning's *A History of Modern Malaya*, the narrative does become a variation of what Dipesh Chakrabarty referred to as a "master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'."[78]

Nevertheless, these were two historians who were keenly aware of their intellectual and political contexts as British-trained historians in a decolonising Malaya that underpinned their history-making. As Tregonning notes in an oral history interview, the history of the coloniser could no longer be written "when the colony was being abandoned and broken up." History-making at the university thus had to reflect "the climate outside the university."[79] Beyond history-making, these historians were also involved the training of future historians, like Khoo Kay Kim, Wang Gungwu, and Joginder Jessy Singh, who went on to train other historians themselves. Even while the pair were not able to write the histories they set out to write, epistemically, they had set the goalpost for the next generation of historians. For this reason, we might then conceive of these two historians as partially decolonised historians, making partially decolonised histories, for a decolonising Malaya.

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[77] Milner, "Historians Writing Nations," 119.

[78] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, England: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

[79] Tregonning, Interview with Dr Kennedy Gordon (K.G.) Tregonning (Accession Number 002783), Reel 5.

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