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ENVISIONING AN IMPERIAL OUTPOST:
THE COLONIAL CITY AND NAVAL BASE OF SINGAPORE IN ANGLO-AMERICAN
TRAVEL AND WORLD AFFAIRS WRITING, 1900-1942

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes and compares depictions of Singapore and British Malaya from the turn of the twentieth century to 1942, the year the colonial city and naval base fell to Japanese forces. While many studies have looked forward to decolonization after the fall of Singapore, this study looks back to the crucial decades before the Second World War. The primary sources for the study are selected articles and books by American and British journalists, travel writers, and world-affairs observers. These sources show a gradual shift in focus from Singapore as a thriving commercial hub and culturally diverse colonial city to a strategic naval base. The British, the Australians, the Dutch, and the Americans seemed to pin their hopes on the base as a counter to the rise of Japan. As the situation worsened before the end of 1941, the sources indicate the beginnings of a transition from British to American hegemony in Asia Pacific.

INDEX WORDS: Singapore, Malaya, British Empire, naval base, naval limitation.

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Travel and World Affairs Writing, 1900-1942

By

Eduardo Leon Mejia

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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Travel and World Affairs Writing, 1900-1942

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To Jan Mejia

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In just three months following the outbreak of the Pacific war in December 1941 Japanese forces swept through Southeast Asia and all but destroyed the American, British, Dutch, and French colonial empires in the region. The dramatic offensive culminated on February 15, 1942, when British Lt. General Arthur Percival signed the articles of surrender to Japanese Lt. General Tomoyuki Yamashita in a Ford factory office on the island colony of Singapore. The British had not experienced a defeat on such a grand scale since the loss of the American colonies in 1783. As it turned out, of course, the fall of Singapore did not mark the immediate collapse of the British Empire in Asia. But it was a tipping point in a longer process of decline from British hegemony to British withdrawal from “East of Suez.” The fall of Singapore seems to have come as a shock to many around the empire and the world. This begs the question, what did observers think and write about Singapore’s prospects before this disaster?

Topic and Question

Singapore is an island at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. It was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 on behalf of the British East India Company soon after the defeat of Napoleon and the end of France’s bid to surpass Britain and become the global hegemon. Instead, just a few decades after its loss in North America, Britain was expanding on colonial as well as commercial terms from South Asia into Southeast Asia, along the Chinese coast, and on to Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands.

Like the Portuguese and the Dutch before them, the British found the key to Asian commerce in Southeast Asia. The region was not only a rich economic zone in its own right but also the connecting point for the even greater zones of Indian and Chinese trade and industry. The Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1850s deepened the integration of these regions. Hong Kong joined Calcutta and Singapore in Britain's Asian commercial circuitry. Indeed, migration from China made Singapore a heavily Chinese city in the later nineteenth century. British industrialization brought further changes to Singapore's place in the British Empire. As demand for tin and rubber grew, Singapore's Malayan hinterlands became the site of profitable mines and plantations and the destination for an increasing number of Indian as well as Chinese workers. By this time, Singapore and other colonial possessions in the peninsula were joined together with native states, federated and unfederated, into a larger complex called British Malaya.

The American conquest of the Philippines in the Spanish American War, the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and the Chinese revolution of 1911 signaled that the twentieth century might turn on what happened in Asia Pacific. Faced with Germany's bid to replace Britain as the global hegemon, Britain responded by, among other things, entering into a naval alliance with Japan in 1902. The two powers renewed their alliance and Japan defeated German forces in China and occupied German Islands in the Pacific during the First World War. The anticolonial upsurge in Asia in 1919, from India and Southeast Asia to China and Korea, created a complex situation in which both power politics and people power would become forces in shaping Asia Pacific after the First World War.

Singapore was in the middle of this situation, literally as well as figuratively. It was important in terms of raw materials and maritime trade. As we shall see, it became important in strategic terms as Asian and global power balances changed. If hindsight in 1942 suggested that British military and naval strategy was flawed, what did the foresight of observers before 1942 indicate about the economic and strategic value of Singapore and British Malaya and the adequacy of British commitment and British effort to develop and defend these possessions? This will be the question that drives my thesis.

Scholarship and Sources

The fall of Singapore was not just a shock and a subject of controversy in the months before the middle of 1942, when the tide began to turn in the Pacific War in favor of the Americans and their British and other allies. In the decades since 1942, historians of military and naval power, diplomacy, and strategy have sought to understand what went wrong in 1941-42 and before.

The interwar period was a time of rapid technological change, especially in military spheres. David McIntyre's *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* and James Neidpath's *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defense of Britain's Eastern Empire 1919-1941* chart the planning, development, and delays of what would become known as the "Singapore Strategy."¹ First envisioned by Admiral John Jellicoe in 1919, it ultimately evolved through the next two decades of base construction in the

¹ W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979); James Neidpath, *Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

wake of new threats and technology and crisis such as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, as well as the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. One such change in technology was chronicled in Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney's *The Sinking of the Prince of Wales and Repulse: The End of the Battleship Era*, where they show how airpower became the new deciding offensive factor in power projection at the start of the Second World War, demonstrated decisively in the events of Pearl Harbor and the loss of the British Force Z ships off Malaya in December 1941.²

Wm. Roger Louis's *British Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939* examines trends that began to appear during the interwar period in how the British Empire gradually readjusted from a nineteenth century imperial power to a more open one that realized maintaining a European-centered order in the Pacific would mean some gradual shifts.³ Citing willingness and an attempt to embrace an eventual friendlier relationship with China, Louis points to trends such as the abandonment of the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance in 1922 in quiet deference to America and then the embrace of the Washington disarmament treaty of 1922 showing the beginning of cooperation with America in Asian power projection. Anthony Clayton's *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-39* looks at the interwar years as the last high tide of the British Empire as the dominant imperial power, but not the end of it. He emphasizes that after the First World War, Britain was relieved to see the demise of the global order, but since no new order had yet developed to challenge Western-style imperialism, Britain found itself as the sole power.

² Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney, *The Sinking of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse: The End of the Battleship Era* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 1977).

³ Wm. Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

Until the 1930s when other powers realized that the imperial structure had exploitable flaws, Britain held on by pursuing a strategic policy rather than an imperial one that could evolve quickly enough. The fall of Singapore and Asia was a result on this practice and placing more responsibilities on the military than it could hope to accomplish with its size and mission. Clayton sums up a point well by stating “Global presence doesn’t mean global power.”⁴

Nicholas Tarling’s *The Fall of Imperial Britain in South East Asia* takes this readjustment step a bit further in emphasizing the British realization and urge for the Empire to ultimately become independent states working together in economics and security.⁵ And in some ways, this is how they already were not exactly an “Empire” in the classic sense. In the ways that the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand already had independence, and with India seeking independence, the British on one hand saw the writing on the wall and sought a way to convert their possessions without losing them outright. The emergence of Southeast Asia as a powerful region complicated this movement due to cultural and economic factors. As the British would seek to reconcile the two, they would see the gradual end of the “Empire” as known, was just an end to the nineteenth century imperialism structure in the face of a new beneficial practice. Anne L. Foster’s *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* examines the arrival of Japan and the United States into the Pacific as imperial and modern naval powers set to challenge the hegemony of the old European

⁴ Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-39* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 514.

⁵ Nicholas Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in South East Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993).

system in the interwar years.⁶ She emphasizes the roles of nationalism and anticolonialism due to technological improvements such as consumer goods from Japan and the United States, and how this opened up feelings of anticolonialism. Workers' rights as felt by Malays and Indians in light of nationalist pushes from India and how these pressures became external weight on the British and Dutch imperial policies. Foster characterizes the era as "late high imperialism" to define the changing spheres from older European power practice to more of a global practice from many states, including those awakening states in Asia.

While the work of Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper lies outside the scope of this thesis, their monumental two-volume study, *Forgotten Armies and Forgotten Wars*, cannot be ignored.⁷ They do take us briefly into an interwar Southeast Asia and give us exposition on Malaya, Singapore, Burma, India, and Chinese influence with each and begin to introduce many of the prominent figures and movements that would play a part in the next forty years of Southeast Asian politics. Players and movements that united against the Japanese during the Second World War would be influenced by China and the USSR or by the United States in the postwar years. The rise of the Third World and the power politics of the Cold War were the backdrop to the decolonization of these countries and the need to choose which side of the power spectrum to align with.

My thesis builds on this historical scholarship. But to answer the question that drives my thesis, I analyze and compare a selection of primary sources. These sources are

⁶ Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution In Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

largely drawn from travel, business, and world-affairs writing. They include periodicals and books. Launched in the late nineteenth century, the *National Geographic Magazine* brought the world to American readers on a monthly basis, mixing ethnographic, nature, and travel writing with extensive use of maps and photographs. *Foreign Affairs*, an American magazine of international relations, publishes long essays and contributions by notable diplomats from various countries and scholars to particularly relevant areas of discussion. Its coverage of Asian in the 1930s and 1940s gives us nuance and depth from the diplomats and writers who were on the ground at the time in such places as China, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies. *Life*, a famous American magazine of photojournalism, was instrumental in providing a visual realism to world events and places. Their Singapore and Hong Kong pictorial spreads are extremely informative in how the public would view these colonies in the lead up to the war. *The Nation* is the oldest weekly political news magazine in the United States which offers opinion commentary and analysis and appears in this study in its attempts to draw the American public's attention to the urgent crisis unfolding in Asia in regards to Great Britain, the Dutch East Indies, China, and Japan. *Time*, a major American newsweekly begun during the interwar era, would bring human-interest stories at home and abroad to the events in the Pacific such as highlighting the value (and threats to) civilian air travel and commerce. The authors are Americans and Britons, which allow for Anglo-American comparisons of course, but also underline the shift from rivalry to alliance in the process of the decline of British hegemony and the rise of American hegemony in the struggle against Japan.

Plan of Thesis

My thesis is divided into five chapters, an introduction, three main chapters, and a conclusion. They are arranged chronologically to show the development of the ways in which the economic and strategic significance of Singapore was depicted and, increasingly, debated.

Chapter Two examines three texts from the early twentieth century that describe Singapore as a colonial city, as potentially strategically important “imperial outpost,” and as a colonial state that has a century of history but also a present on which hangs a future. The strategic appeal of the colony’s location juxtaposed with its early commercial success illustrates an immediate priority by the British on this possession. As time would move on, the dependence of Dutch trade and other European imports and exports passing through Singapore would make it a natural fit for the British to be basing all their hopes on centralizing Singapore as a bulwark against Japan in the 1940s. All the initial foundation blocks can be seen as well as some strategically foreshadowing policy formulations such as the proposal of the naval base.

Chapter Three traces depictions of Singapore from 1922, a time of relative prosperity and stability, to 1937, by which time the world depression had upset Asian and global politics. Its three sections analyze a broad overview of Singapore in the American *National Geographic Magazine* in 1926, examine business writing about Singapore’s economic challenges, and follow discussions of the “Singapore Strategy” of building a mighty naval base on the island as naval agreements reached in Washington in 1921-22 and London in 1930 and 1936 broke down, Japan as well as Germany broke out of the constraints on their power to challenge British hegemony, the situation in northeast Asia

became increasingly threatening, and, by extension, the situation in southeast Asia became increasingly uncertain.

Chapter Four covers the years leading up to the fall of Singapore. The first section deals with depictions of Singapore in 1938-40, as Japan invaded China and Britain opened its base in Singapore. The second section tracks writing about Singapore in 1940-41 after the German conquest of France and the Netherlands in 1940 suddenly changed the strategic situation in southeast Asia and Japan began to put pressure on the region as captured by writings in *Foreign Affairs*. The third section treats depictions of the last days of peace in Singapore in 1941-42, when *Life* captured in pictures as well as words some of the paradoxes of the colony.

Chapter Five, my conclusion, revisits my sources and my findings and considers their significance.

CHAPTER TWO
IMPERIAL OUTPOST:
SINGAPORE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the early twentieth century, Singapore had yet to mature beyond a busy trade port. Nevertheless, some observers saw greater strategic as well as commercial potential in the future. It was a transfer point between the Indian and Pacific Oceans by way of the straits of Malacca. At the turn of the century, Singapore was just coming into its own, as was much of Southeast Asia. It had received its own military command jurisdiction, separate from Hong Kong or India, in 1889. Still, the much more valuable and prestigious Indian Empire, by the settler-ruled Dominions of Australia and New Zealand, and by Hong Kong, overshadowed it with its vast hinterland of China. As a result, exotic and cosmopolitan Singapore had not yet captured the imagination of many, except perhaps for the readers of Joseph Conrad's stories. This would begin to change as the world economy boomed and as the European, American, and Japanese empires scrambled for colonies and concessions in Asia Pacific.

Properly charting the early development of the colony militarily lies in the official record. Military papers, a colonial census report, and the later in what is almost a fact book for arriving travelers that give a context into Singapore's countryside and population centers. For the benefit of this analysis these chosen works provide that detail. They tell of the defenses, the strategic value, population diversity, and offer some insight into the personality that began to develop with the colony's maturity before the First World War. The exotic side of the colony is to be found in *The Jennings Guide to*

Singapore, Penang, Malacca, and The Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Pahang, Negri Sembilan, and Sungei Ujong, also Johore, Deli, Bangkok, and Batavia.

Complete with a “handy sketch map of Singapore” this document was published by The Passenger and Tourist Agency in 1900. It tells a new arrival, all of the facts, figures, schedules, hotels, and sightseeing to do in Malaya.

A book about Singapore and other “imperial outposts”, written by Colonel Arthur Murray and a two-volume work edited by Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, and Roland St. J. Braddell allow a glimpse into the development of Singapore from the time of Raffles’s founding into an early twentieth century prestige Imperial center. A place in the world where the significance of location cannot be understated nor undervalued. These books keep the spirit of this in mind. Through the three, the outsider can receive an appreciation of the early military, colonial, economical, and political developmental stages in the formation from a refueling port into the enterprise that encapsulated the colony during its heyday. While *The Jennings Guide* gives us a visual glimpse into the not so quiet colonial side of Malaya published in 1900, the Murray book was published in 1907 and shows us how Singapore was depicted in the context of the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance of 1903. The much larger work by Makepeace, Brooke, and Braddell, with a concluding chapter on the future of Singapore, offers a view of Singapore at the end of the First World War. In examining one, then the other, then back, a clearer picture as to the development of the colony from a military and defense side is formed. Makepeace’s study complements both Murray and Jennings in showing two sides to the colony. This would be a foundation that was laying down for the eventual naval base construction and the evolving “Singapore Strategy” for defense that would be employed during the

interwar years as the British began to respond to the challenges of late imperialism and new powers in the Pacific. It is in examining these three texts we see the foundation of a colony that was slowly growing in strength at the time and can gain an appreciation to the tools and challenges the British Empire would employ in responding to a growing presence new powers operating in the waters in the Far East.

A Colonial Panorama: Singapore in 1900

Even before Singapore had developed into a naval base, it did not take long for British sport to find a normal place on the schedules, even on Sundays. While the game of cricket was reportedly first incorporated into the normal past times of Singapore in 1837, it was in 1843 that it was formally recorded and possibly never left the imagery. While many images spring to mind when one thinks of colonial Singapore, the Singapore Cricket Club is one of those iconic landmarks still discussed ironically in the description of life abroad. It may not be true but it was how the façade was presented, even ridiculously. Pastimes fit for royalty became normal or seemed so. The first New Years regatta was held in 1834. Swimming, gymnastics, and the like all quickly found a place in society. While all British sporting was popular throughout the Empire, in Singapore it was different. To the outside viewer, one would wonder if anyone did do any work at all. But to look at what was supplied to the visitor upon arrival betrays a British efficiency in colonialism when one looks through the pages.

Singapore had a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers, sojourners, and travelers in the early twentieth century. *The Jennings Guide to Singapore, Penang, Malacca, and The Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Pahang, Negri Sembilan, and Sungei*

Ujong, also Johore, Deli, Bangkok, and Batavia,⁸ published in 1900, is a pocket guide for visitors, government, military, colonial, and tourist alike, that offered maps, train and steamship line times, and other point of interest to those getting around.

The guidebook offers a panorama of colonial Singapore. This official guide also provides an in depth look at the machine of the colony and its complete infrastructure, even without a large naval base. The preface reads: “This Agency undertakes to meet Passengers and Tourist on arrival and supply Guides and Interpreters, and arranges tours through the British Protected States of Johore, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak Java, and other places.” It also states “Guides and Interpreters Supplied.” This wasn’t just a handy pamphlet of advertisements but an official contact sheet. Like a world fact book, it provides information on population, terrain, and the ethnic makeup but with a friendly tone. To an official visitor, especially from Europe, Asia would seem intimidating and foreign, especially when confronted with the diverse ethnic make up of a place like Singapore. This book could be extremely helpful in directing one to ~~official~~ offices or to some point to make official introductions without becoming lost. Going section by section, one will find useful chapters and illustrations to draw from in navigating the colony from the point of disembarkation until they were settled in their lodging and beyond. The simple map of the downtown city lists all the main avenues and roads, as well as such spots as Ft. Canning, the racecourse, and the hospital and all wharves. The guide gives a census on the ethnic make up, the latitude of longitude, temperature, and also lists point of interest such as the Botanical Gardens, the Raffles Museum, and the

⁸ *The Jennings Guide to Singapore, Penang, Malacca, and The Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Pahang, Negri Sembilan, and Sungei Ujong, also Johore, Deli, Bangkok, and Batavia* (Singapore: American Mission Press, 1900).

Esplanade, where one can again take in the sporting atmosphere of football, cricket, and hockey. It is a mix of the necessary and the exciting. As a helpful reminder, in the recreation section, the guide reminds the visitor that there is a regatta at the harbor on New Year's Day and who among the locals normally participates in this event. More importantly, the mail service, such as the Royal Dutch Steam Packet Company, all denominations of churches and schedules, hotels and rates, the available newspapers, the consuls and their locations on Clarke and Collyer Quays, was well as Battery Road and the like are listed. The guidebook also provides a bit of information on the principal goods that are exported such as coffee, peppers, tin, gum Benjamin, gum copal, gum dammar (rubber), and mother-o-pearl shells. One cannot help but also notice the ads for Messrs. Katz Bros. at Raffles Place, Powell Robinson on Battery Road (the iconic Robinson's Department Store), offering military and civil tailoring, breech, hats, and shirts, with their specialties listed as "Naval and military uniforms, Gentlemen's Evening Dress, Sporting Garments, etc., etc."⁹ Even if one happened to be traveling to British Asia on official matters, this guide would still inform them of some of the better places to visit such as the Raffles Hotel where one can stay for a rate of \$6 per evening. These are just helpful reminders not for sightseeing, but for refurbishing one's kit of essentials after a long voyage.

For the land traveler who is looking to go up the peninsula, the guidebook is not limited to providing useful information about Singapore. It situates Singapore in the Malay peninsula and the wider Southeast Asian region. To get to each specific location such as a destination city in Malaya, there is a traveler's guide within the guidebook to

⁹ *The Jennings Guide*, 2-6.

assist these visitors in moving inland. A good example is the Singapore to Malacca section. The two opening paragraphs are a quick history of Malacca, in this case the oldest of the European possessions when the British took it from the Dutch in 1795, returned it in 1818, and regained it under treaty in 1824. Giving the distance by sea from Singapore: 118 miles, and 251 miles from Penang, it also provides the latitude and longitude.

The next section lists places of interest to visit in Malacca, including churches, as well as Mount Ophir, Malacca where it then provides some directions for those wishing to ascend the mountain. As you move north to this location the book provides a list of animals, fruits, and the best language to converse with the natives, Malay. This section also tells where to apply for a permit to carry arms if you are a sportsman, adding that such permits are never refused to Europeans. Proving the steamship and bicycle passage distances this section is completely detailed but also concise. There is a similar passage to Penang, to Johore, and to other locations from Singapore. Each is given its separate section in the book. When one takes this into account, we can appreciate the British enthusiasm for quality recreation intermingled with professional information to make such trips not only effective, but also pleasurable. Looking at the reputation of Singapore, seeing this early attention to detail, it is quite believable to start to see the colony as a modern marvel that was only just beginning to see her potential.

Singapore's Place in the Empire between the Anglo-Japanese Naval Alliance and the First World War

In 1907, A.M. Murray published his study and recommendations for the “outposts” of the British Empire. One of them, Singapore, was called “The Gateway of the Pacific,”¹⁰ but this is only in terms of maritime shipping. In reality the colony was so much more and such a rich cultural center that it was a melting pot of different peoples. For the British maritime interests in the early twentieth century, the port city strategically functioned as the gateway for trade, a hub connecting Indian Ocean land interests to the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand, and the quickest passage to shift imperial resources from those Indian Ocean and African regions into the Eastern hemisphere. Its importance was noted in Murray’s book *Imperial Outposts: From A Strategic and Commercial Aspect, with Special Reference to the Japanese Alliance*.¹¹ It was a study on various Imperial ports and colonies including the coast of Africa and Middle Eastern zones like the Suez region, takes a swing through the Asian colonies of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, noting the new Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902. It serves as an inquiry into the strategies and coastal defense plans of the territories of Great Britain in regards to their dependencies and the Dominions of New Zealand, Australia, and India in a time of war. It also gives a first glimpse as an early validation as to what would become the “Singapore Strategy.” While he tried to keep the focus on strategic concerns, it was impossible to completely separate military affairs from colonial politics and local policies. Some colonial contradictions were concerning. Murray noted that it was “found impossible to confine the proposed inquiry within the limits of purely naval and military

¹⁰ A.M. Murray, *Imperial Outposts: From a Strategical and Commercial Aspect, with Special Reference to the Japanese Alliance* (London: John Murray, 1907), 69.

¹¹ Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, 70-80.

consideration ... Naval power is only a means to an end, which is peaceful commercial expansion.”¹² By that he seemed to be saying it was impossible to treat this coastal fortification as just a military stronghold without taking into account the commercial aspects.

In his preface, Field Marshal Earl Roberts agrees with Murray that Singapore was much more than just another colony. Roberts notes that American control of Manila did discount the value of Singapore. Indeed, the allegiance to Britain of such a diverse population was remarkable. Seventy five percent of the residents of Singapore were Chinese; many of the migrant workers in the rubber plantations were of Indian origin, not to mention the local Malay population of the Strait Settlements. No longer were limits in place to isolate people to a local community. Or as the common expression goes, the world was smaller. Singapore was the “half-way house between India and China, the great trading center of the Malay Archipelago, and a secure base for naval operations.”¹³ The British presence was important here in Roberts’s eyes, if not for the security of the nation, but for the region. He did not seem to notice, like Colonel Murray did, that the colonial practice of government left something to be desired in global focus. That life went on in such a way as to ignore the domestic communities developing or global affairs was another of the aloof peculiarities of the British way of presenting themselves, which did not go unnoticed to the world outside. As Murray recorded: “Nothing struck the writer more forcibly during his visit to Singapore than the ignorance and apathy of the British unofficial [civilian] community in regard to questions of public interest. ...

¹² Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, 3.

¹³ Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, x.

Bankers and merchants alike limit their energies to the business of their calling, and leave public affairs to the ruling authorities.”¹⁴

What is remarkable of this summation was when it was recorded. Murray’s impressions thirty-four years later would resonate sharply in 1941 and beyond in damning the colonials for maintaining the status quo with little regard to the fact that they lived as a minority surrounded by a native population. The often justification to colonialism was to instill a sense of self being and standing up of the locals as this made the Empire stronger for Great Britain. Murray was for this. The civilians in Singapore or the Straits Settlements took a narrow view of things. They showed little interest in imperial and global issues.

The book played to military significance in 1907 in how the British attitudes on Singapore before the construction of the new naval base hinged on two factors. This is on the military defense aspect. First it was a meeting port for three Eastern Fleets to rendezvous in time of war: the East Indian, the Chinese, and the Australia squadrons, based in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Sydney.¹⁵ In the prewar Edwardian world, this would make sense as the Japanese Navy had not yet reached full potential. Dismayed by the removal of Imperial battleships from the area in 1905, the book cautions that the Japanese Alliance of the time should not be an excuse to shift responsibilities to Britain’s allies in naval matters. Singapore, he states, is one of the most important outposts in the Empire for the pure and simple reasoning that it is a “the half-way house between India and

¹⁴ Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, 74.

¹⁵ Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, 70.

China, the great trading center of the Malay Archipelago, and a secure base for naval offensive operations.”¹⁶

In fact this was really the status quo after 1905, and the effects could be seen on the now obsolete anchorage provided in such ports such as Hong Kong. Second and somewhat surprisingly, Murray’s take on the native populations in Malaya took for granted they would play a significant role in local defense. It can be deduced that he also saw the Singapore Volunteer Force as nothing more than an artillery unit of colonials as there were yet to be full troop compliments deployed at this time. That locals and indigenous peoples could be tapped as an effective fighting unit from the populace with complete loyalty to the British are a novel idea, but a farcical one. Murray gives the opportunistic number of 800,000 men to draw from, while not detailing the gender or age breakdown.¹⁷ This was a number based on a population report but not a real look into the diverse make up of able bodied men up and down the peninsula.

The strategic study that Colonel Murray had put together was based on an early tour of the Empire in the early twentieth century. He was limited by a schedule and by the overall purpose of examining Imperial outposts globally. So his startling revelations on the population not really comprising able bodied men to draw from when one takes into account age, gender, and fitness as the colonial attitudes ignoring this fact are not his main concern. He did recognize the value, as did Field Marshall Roberts, in Singapore as a deep-rooted point of influence for the Empire. Murray is a military officer, and on a strategic sense, he was even more swayed on the value that Singapore held in location. As of 1907, with friendlier relations with some of the Malay states around Singapore,

¹⁶ Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, x.

¹⁷ Murray, *Imperial Outposts*, 72.

Murray notes with approval that it made it an even more secure outpost. Singapore was just one of many of the imperial outposts that Murray inspected on his tour. Some of the other ones of note were Aden, Suez, and Gibraltar. However in the few pages of his notes he noticed the uniqueness of Singapore that he did not find in the other ones. Perhaps it was the location, all by itself. Situated in a diverse region and close to potential rivals, Singapore held a wider area responsibility than the other outposts.

Singapore from Past to Future

One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on 6th February 1819 to 6th February 1919 was compiled by Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, and Roland St. J. Braddell in 1918-1919.¹⁸ These men certainly had the credentials as Makepeace was the editor of the *Singapore Free Press* newspaper, Brooke was the port health officer of Singapore, and Braddell was the advocate and solicitor of the supreme court of the Straits Settlements. This is a variable, as well as illustrated, report commissioned on the colony's status one hundred years since its founding by Sir Stamford Raffles. Makepeace and his co-editors step back into the nineteenth century and draw lines to the present day to chart the formation of Singapore as a port refueling station, to a makeshift colony, and on into a fully recognized Imperial outpost under an independent military command jurisdiction.

¹⁸ Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, and Roland St. J. Braddell, eds., *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on 6th February 1819 to 6th February 1919* (London: John Murray, 1921), 2 vols.

First and foremost, Singapore was founded as a trade station, where Sir Stamford Raffles envisioned the potential between two oceans as a meeting point for maritime hegemony. It is quite clear Makepeace agreed that Raffles was a visionary as he describes how he saw the “enormous possibilities lying in the heart of that little Malay village. He dreamed of a great port to rival those of the Dutch, of a worldwide trade, of a gateway for the British Empire.”¹⁹ Arguing that it is hard to not be struck by the rapid development of the colony and the attraction and notice it would garner from all over, he does conclude that Singapore is on a fast track. Discussing the colony, Makepeace cites other government officials in agreement that Singapore filled a want for the British in providing a rival to the Dutch Asian trade. To ensure his vision, Raffles made sure there was freedom in trade and no taxes or limitations would interfere with the merchants’ pursuit of commerce. The British were not oblivious to the large influx of Chinese in the area and understood they were the lifeblood of this European venture. It would seem natural then to allow them to conduct their daily business as they saw fit. This also helped jumpstarting Singapore’s trade at the grassroots level before the European trade could really catch up with this new outpost. In regards to the freedom of trade, it is good to remember that European merchantmen were reminded on occasion that this freedom was still under the pleasure of the government of India and the East India Company. The foundation was set however, and from it Singapore grew through all of its normal headaches in organization and outlasted the East India Company. It set a tone in which it could weather currency crises, opium debates, taxes, shipping rings, and the First World War.

¹⁹ Makepeace et al., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1: 22.

Unsurprisingly, in describing the early defense strategy of Singapore and the surrounding settlements, Makepeace cites that the history of Singapore as a “fortified place does not reveal any creditable or consistent policy.”²⁰ It is quite a departure from how organized Raffles was in the port set up. Here, Sir Stamford Raffles based all recommendations of defense on advice from other officers and his own walking inspections. He first installed guns and some breastworks on a hill overlooking the settlement, which would later become Ft. Canning; the home and headquarters of the military command where Percival directed the final holdout during the events of 1941. However, at this time, the hill was just a small artillery point, in addition to a loose placing of guns at the entrances to the harbors and surrounding vulnerability points. Piracy was a very real threat in the straits of Malacca and due to its location as a way point, Singapore was an inviting target for all passing privateers who were looking to refuel stocks or put in to victualing and repairs.

In the colony itself, there was a spirit of men who understood the need for an organized defense. In 1854, the Governor held a public meeting to discuss the threats that Chinese rioting had posed around the colony and a Volunteer Corps, known as the Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps, was raised. The Governor was the first Colonel in charge, and the Corps would remain under the India Command until the separation of the Straits Settlements from the Indian jurisdiction in 1867. This was still before Singapore or the other settlements would receive their own formal status; an important classification in the growth and strength of the colony.

²⁰ Makepeace et al., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1: 377-81.

Considered an Asian backwater, Singapore had to rely on what it could put together on its own with little to no home support. Makepeace pays special attention to this in describing the early defense practices of the outpost. The volunteer corps was a small group of less than 100 men to maintain order and run defense in times of distress. Much of this was due to a lack of public awareness to the settlement as it stood. It was very real as the threat of pirates still loomed in the late nineteenth century through the Malacca Strait. A petition went for support in defense against Chinese pirates as their attacks “which has increased of late years to a great extent.”²¹ Really it was for a more efficient force to be organized. Gunboats to be manned partially by natives were put together. But practical help and public acclaim eventually came from home, from Britain itself. A lack of money meant that a defense budget to raise local volunteer troops was unheard of beyond the basic necessities. In 1872, a garrison of 1,024 troops occupied the town with Scottish troops from the 80th Regiment that were sent on loan from India. Most of the guns and provisions to this point had come from India at the time, which until 1867, was the formal command of the jurisdiction to which Singapore was attached. As such, the guns they received were on loan for protection. As were most of the troops. When the Scots arrived, word started to make it back to London and the *Daily News* began running weekly ads posing the question, “When is Singapore to have its guns?” The public support and notice held weight and in March 1889 the first of six guns arrived from London. In December 1887 the Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps was disbanded and the Singapore Volunteer Artillery was established in 1888. This would become the formal “home guard” from this point on. April 1889 also saw that the Straits were classified as

²¹ Makepeace et al., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1: 381.

an independent military command under Sir Charles Warren. In November 1890, more guns started arriving. In 1891 four of the Maxim guns arrived and they were presented to the Singapore Volunteer Artillery. Singapore volunteer corps units were raised as needed from this time through the outbreak of the First World War. Many times they were supplemented by Indian troops to maintain garrison strength but from this initial patchwork of volunteers and loaned guns, Singapore had become a military outpost. From that year through 1910 and onto 1919 Makepeace provides lists of the commanders of the Straits Command. A list, which up to that time in the Far East, had been, limited only to Hong Kong Command authority names. The importance of this is that these men were now placed next to the Hong Kong commanders as a separate head. This report goes on to conclude that the “attitude of public on the military contribution may be appreciated”²² with the commanders listed from then on to the present. It is another noteworthy addition that is added that Singapore was ahead of its time in the volunteer forces. It was the first to have a local Reserve Force and a Civil Guard Ordinance enacted among the colonies involving compulsory military service. It was a sign of pride that all able bodied British subjects in Singapore were trained men, who could operate at a professional level that outclassed many of their contemporaries elsewhere.²³ By 1919, defense capabilities had come along way from the time of Singapore’s founding a century earlier.

Alexander Still, the editor of the *Straits Times*, contributed a chapter to the book, titled “Singapore’s Future.” In it he starts with the 200,000 inhabitants and the fact the port is currently the seventh largest in the world, and claims it is something to begin with

²² Makepeace et al., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1: 383.

²³ Makepeace et al., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1: 390.

when prognosticating the future of the colony. The main question in 1919 is “will Singapore flourish?” The city’s past success has due to its *laissez faire* approach, as envisioned by Raffles. This must continue. The harbors are perfect for more ships as they are in calm waters. (In the 1940s, when flying boats began to use the harbor, this would still be the case.) After 1914, he notes that Singapore became the most important naval station in the Empire. The merits in aerial navigation have been proven and recognized. He says that it is proven that modern shipping is gained by smaller craft unloading from larger ships as they pass through large harbors. These “entrepots”²⁴ have been proven by the calm waters and the way the commerce is set up. Still says he dreams of a time when Singapore is one large city connected by rails all the way from Thailand and China that come bustling through what is now a beautiful city, but will be a metropolis. He expects Singapore to become even more urbanized, which must be managed to prevent it from becoming an overcrowded and dirty port city with no real identity. The first one hundred years has provided a strong foundation, but he says the world is getting smaller in the postwar era. Still’s essay is a preview of what late imperial Singapore might look like. But in 1919 it was unclear what would be the impact of an organization like the League of Nations on issues of war and peace as the world became ever more linked together. Singapore, Still says, must develop its own identity.

As the city becomes more urban, and the plantations do disappear from the city proper, a first step in “guiding” the development is to make sure any new construction is laid out in a way that preserves the public health. Developing wide main streets serving as corridors with wide side streets to connect them, and less alleyways would keep the

²⁴ Makepeace et al., *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 2: 562.

city open to the tropical air and healthy. Still cautions future planners to keep the ‘Godowns’ near the wharf district, so they do not interfere with the rest of the city’s expected growth or the health of the population. He believes residential and commercial areas should be separate and divided into zones of ethnicity. Still stands behind that his motives are not separate but equal, but just to preserve harmony and respect to diverse cultures.

Finally, Still claims that Singaporeans need agency in their lives, and it starts with an overhaul of the education system. Chinese higher education cannot work when Malay is the language of commerce and English is the language of government. He wants to develop a united system that will allow higher education to flourish in Singapore and residents will not have to abroad for university. Only in this way will Singaporeans find intellectual development and progress.

Makepeace, Brooke, Braddell, and their fellow contributors offer a largely positive take on a colony on the upswing in defense preparation and evolution. As of 1919, the Singapore Strategy was beginning to be put together and the goal of this work was to provide a status report to “where are we now.” Their observations are that Singapore is on track to continued development. In the early twentieth century, Singapore was beginning to capture the imagination as to its possibilities and forward reach. The potential of this colony was seemingly endless.

Conclusion

Looking back at these three texts from the early twentieth century some observations can be drawn. These texts offer a base-line for tracking Singapore’s

transition during the 1920s and 1930s and beyond. Singapore began as a pretty loose confederation of merchants who learned to coexist with the East India Company, the Chinese, and the Malays in jumpstarting a commercial stopover for trade. As the colony grew, so did the interest in the location and the space. This piqued the Indian government's attention and they began to impose a more organized imperial influence on the port. By the mid-nineteenth century, the colony had grown into a commercial enterprise with all the trappings of luxury and wealthy commerce. *The Jennings Guide* attests to the growing institutional and social development of the colony. By the late nineteenth century, it became obvious that the military defense portion of the colony needed more than a garrison and some volunteer artillery forces as Singapore was too important and too vulnerable. So as Makepeace tells us, Singapore became an independent military command and the Strait Settlements became a unified jurisdiction. In 1907 and the time of Colonel Murray's visit, London had become even more convinced that Singapore was on equal footing strategically with Gibraltar, Aden, and Suez in tying together the British Empire's global hegemony in sea power. In prestige it was never to be on par with Hong Kong in China, but in importance it was clear that Singapore was the stronger younger brother. The First World War would show Great Britain the resource potential of Asia in times of crisis. Singapore never fell on a backburner, nor was it forgotten. As we shall see, by the beginning of the interwar period plans were being drawn up that would ultimately lead to the construction of the new Naval Base and fashioning of an Asia Pacific defense strategy to ensure the flow of naval forces as well as maritime trade east and west. Murray and Makepeace could only

envision the potential. But like Sir Stamford Raffles before them, they saw a greatness in Singapore beyond the profits of trade. They saw a new front in the projection of power.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM HEGEMONY TO CRISIS:

SINGAPORE, 1922-1937

Historians consider the years between 1922 and 1937 as one of the most significant eras in the history of Singapore. This was a consequence of global more than local causes. As a result of the First World War, the global balance of power had changed with the rise of the U.S. and Japan, the collapse of the Austrian, German, Ottoman, and Russian empires, and the altered position of the Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa in the British empire. At the beginning and for years going forward, British policy was to maintain peace in Europe, preserve the empire, and recover from the economic and financial costs of the world war, including agreements on reductions in defense spending reached with other great powers and other measures of international cooperation through the League of Nations. However, the world depression following on the New York stock market crash in 1929 brought new challenges. In *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-39*, the historian Anthony Clayton stresses that the British paid more attention to Empire as the world economy contracted. The raw materials, foodstuffs, trade, and markets of the empire were seen as essential for bringing back the British economy, while the general revulsion against wartime slaughter went against building up British military and naval forces.²⁵ Thus

²⁵ Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-39* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 17-19.

Singapore's economic value as supplier of rubber and tin would be important, but its strategic role in the naval defense of the British empire in Asia would remain unappreciated for years until the situation in Asia became critical.

The Imperial Conference of 1921 between the leaders of Britain and the Dominions made it clear that the burden of imperial defense would fall on Britain and that the Dominions were wary of commitments beyond their shores. The Washington Conference of 1921-22 produced a number of agreements that superseded the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance and that promised to put off the danger of war. In addition to limitations on naval forces set to last for ten years, the Nine Power Treaty guaranteed the integrity of China and the Four Power Treaty, agreed by Britain, France, Japan, and the U.S., stabilized the Pacific. The historian Anne Foster has shown that the Washington Conference, far from ending the "diplomacy of imperialism," brought the U.S. into an alliance with the British, Dutch, and French to secure their colonies and block Japanese expansion in Asia Pacific.²⁶ The London Conference of 1930 extended the naval limitations until 1936, but events soon afterwards in China and Manchuria made it unlikely that Japan would continue to accept such restrictions. It was a rump conference of Britain, France, and the U.S. that met in London in 1936 to take stock of Japan's abandonment of naval limitations. Whether it was because of commodities like rubber and tin or infrastructure like a deep harbor, drydocks, and storage facilities, the importance of Singapore, the Malayan peninsula, and the straits between the Pacific and Indian oceans only grew between the early 1920s and the mid-1930s.

²⁶ Foster, *Projections of Power*, 19.

This chapter covers Singapore in the years between 1922 and 1937. The first section focuses on a long and revealing article about the colony in the *National Geographic Magazine*, when it could still be said that Britain remained the hegemonic power in Asia. The second section considers Singapore's changing fortunes during the world depression and its new position in imperial defense. The third and final section explores the place of Singapore in the British response to the growing crisis in Asia.

The Lion City at Work

In 1926, the *National Geographic Magazine* published the appropriately entitled "Singapore, Crossroads of the East: The World's Greatest Mart for Rubber and Tin Was in Recent Times a Pirate-Haunted, Tiger-Infested Jungle."²⁷ In this thirty-page article, Louis Simpich takes readers into the island colony via pictures and an upbeat description of its great economic potential. The energy of the description of Singapore is evident from the beginning. The article jumps headfirst into the mystique of the "Lion City," noting the rapid rise from a jungle wetland to a modern extractive and commercial economy. Special attention is paid to the short time it took Singapore to rise in economic value from Raffles's founding to the 1920s. Noting that Singapore was tenth among ports in the world in 1925, Simpich then introduces the broad outlines of the colony's history. The striking aspect of the growth, he states, comes from both the remote position of Singapore and from the comparison that other cities in Asia took hundreds of years to

²⁷ Frederick Simpich, "Singapore, Crossroads of the East: The World's Greatest Mart for Rubber and Tin was in Recent Times a Pirate-Haunted, Tiger-Infested Jungle Isle," *National Geographic Magazine*, March 1926, 235-269.

develop, whereas Singapore is just one hundred years old. The 100-year mark was often noted at this time, partly due to the new developments of the interwar years such as shifting of the balance of sea power between Europe, the U.S., and Japan after 1919. Remote is dropped as a term with the article falling into line with every other synopsis of Singapore; it is quick to use the adjectives of “gateway,” “crossroads,” and “melting pot.”²⁸ While these terms seem repetitive when describing British Malaya, and specifically this city at the tip of the peninsula, it cannot be stressed enough how important the location of Singapore was to maritime and naval powers in terms of commerce and power. An estimated 10,000 ships traversed the Malaccan Strait in 1925, bringing Singapore together with the trade of “Europe, Africa, and India, with Australia, China, Japan, and the Americans.”²⁹ The latter two countries on this list were the newest of the imperial powers to make their presence felt globally after the First World War.

Simpich makes an interesting comparison between Singapore and New York. Like New York, Singapore wasn’t taken or bought. It was settled, developed, and cultivated on a vision by traders as an effective location for an outpost. In this case, the East India Company bought this Malay wetland from the Sultan of Johore. Now, after 100 years, the State of Johore is still its own state, but under British “protection” in the region. The governor of Singapore also is the High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States and Brunei and oversees Borneo and Sarawak, which means that the whole area falls under British imperial jurisdiction. A truly global as well as wealthy city due to the different ethnic populations brought together and the lucrative export of rubber and tin, at the same time it was ultimately held together by the Colonial Office in London.

²⁸ Simpich, “Singapore, Crossroads of the East,” 241.

²⁹ Simpich, “Singapore, Crossroads of the East,” 235.

That the American *National Geographic Magazine* would mention this clean organizational structure was not an accident.

On many levels the diversity of the colony's inhabitants played an extremely important part in Singapore. With different meanings for everyone, most reports and books published at the time devoted a great amount of space to discussing it. The population of this island in Malaya included Malays, British, other Europeans, Chinese, Japanese, Ceylonese, Indians, as well as many islanders from Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Simpich is most interested in the Chinese and their southward migration to Singapore.³⁰ Their contributions to powering the gears of the island colony run deep, as they are credited with jumpstarting the early tin mining, cultivating the trade, construction, and even the banking. The racial hierarchy dividing the Asian populations in the colony placed the Chinese at the top, with the Malays and South Asians below them forming much of the working class. Noting that it was the Chinese who made up some of the early millionaires of Singapore and Penang, Simpich points out that without the rich diversity of the population the marble white city of the British wouldn't be possible.

Much of what made Singapore distinctive could be found on the water as well as the land. According to Simpich, "Boats by the hundreds, of every conceivable type and size, built anywhere from Amoy to Aden, swarm in these straits."³¹ The boats range from luxurious to very basic, with the latter being described as having palm thatching for roofs. The cargoes coming shed light on the local trade in livestock, tapioca, kerosene, and, above all, teak. Teak is a durable wood from Southeast Asia, averse to warping and

³⁰ Simpich, "Singapore, Crossroads of the East," 241.

³¹ Simpich, "Singapore, Crossroads of the East," 245.

splitting and unappetizing to ants. It is used for railway coaches, the interior of steamers and other boats, furniture, and wherever there was need for a hardwood that retains a polish.

The article is full of illustrations and photographs. Pictures of rubber tappers at work in the plantations, smoke houses where the rubber is prepared, and “godowns,” the warehouses where the rubber is stored, vividly show the massive rubber trade. Pictures of fishermen in canoes coexisting with junks, and steamers convey the sheer variety of the coastal and maritime life of the colony. Additional images show a war memorial in the park overlooking the waterfront and scenes of the modern city. The waterfront park is wide open along the harbor where people are seen passing by the green manicured lawns with the white tower standing tall in the foreground.³²

Simpich discusses the Europeans as well as Asians who live and work in Singapore. The British were the ruling group. They enjoy a tropical life of considerable leisure. Recreation and sports are mentioned, for example. The warm climate is judged healthier. For example, infant mortality is lower in Singapore, earning it the nickname the “paradise of children.”³³ As we have seen, recreation and sport was an important part of the British colonial lifestyle. Singapore’s prosperity supported investments in the modern infrastructure in buildings, roads, and plumbing and, of course, supported a life of relative leisure for those at the top of the colonial and racial hierarchy.

Interestingly, Simpich recognizes that “the East” and “the West” commingle in colonial Singapore. One could find a Chinese theater on one side of the street hosting a live play with a theater troupe, and a modern cinema on the other playing movies from

³² Simpich, “Singapore, Crossroads of the East,” 249.

³³ Simpich, “Singapore, Crossroads of the East,” 250.

Hollywood. The audiences were not necessarily distinct. For example, the Malays and Tamils tended to go to the movies.³⁴

Simpich is favorable to Singapore and sees a great deal of potential in the colony and the Empire. The cultural diversity, not just the geographic location, seems to be the key to its future. Having developed from almost nothing in the nineteenth century, Singapore promises to grow faster than other Asian cities because of the seeming syncretism of the best of the East and West coming together to make the colony work so successfully. In the context of the 1920s and with the construction of a new naval base just beginning in 1926, Singapore in Simpich's account is a place of economic and cultural significance, not strategic importance.

In 1929, H. Foster Bain wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs*, "Singapore's Control of Key Mineral Resources."³⁵ He gives a brief description of the type and variety of mineral deposits in Malaya and the location value of Singapore as an exporter of these minerals from its placement as a crossroads of Asian and world trade routes. Bain specifically cites the main Pacific and Indian Ocean routes that intersect at Singapore. Interestingly, he recognizes the role played in extraction by local as well as global actors. He notes that one tends to think of the Dutch, British, American, and Japanese as the main parties concerned in Pacific trade, but the Malay peoples, especially when it comes to developing mineral resources, should not be overlooked. The key minerals are tin and iron ore. While the nearby Dutch East Indies extract only 2% of the world's supply of oil, British Malaya is responsible for no less than 60% of the tin extracted from the earth.

³⁴ Simpich, "Singapore, Crossroads of the East," 250.

³⁵ H.F. Bain, "Singapore's Control of Key Minerals Resources," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1929, 666-69.

While tin's toxicity is a problem for its use in food containers, global dependence on tin for this and other uses remains and Singapore will continue to dominate the world market. Iron ore is a commodity of the future for Singapore. Current technology makes removal and processing of iron ore uneconomical. While it is abundant, it contains a good deal of nickel and chromium and requires additional preparation before going into blast furnaces. The cheaper grade of Malayan iron ore available now is unsuitable for ship plates or sheets. Writing before the onset of the world depression and its ramifications for global balances of power as well as wealth, Bain concludes that the leading mineral resources of Southeast Asia may flip in time due to changes in supply, demand, and technological advances, but the location of Singapore will remain key for the foreseeable future.

The Strategy of a Naval Base in Singapore

If Bain in 1929 still saw Singapore in terms of mines, plantations, and a port, others were beginning to see its significance rather differently. The background to the reappraisal of the strategic value of Singapore in the decade before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 returns us to the years immediately following the peace settlement of the First World War in 1919. In the postwar spirit of international cooperation and disarmament, the U.S government convened a major conference of the great powers in 1921-22. One of the treaties negotiated among the participants was a naval limitation treaty that effectively replaced the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance with a new naval treaty signed by Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the U.S. A ten-year "holiday" was agreed on naval expansion and tonnage rates for the three biggest naval powers were set according to a 5:5:3 ratio. The fleets of the British Empire and the U.S. were made

equivalent, limited to 525,000 tons and fifteen capital ships each. The Japanese fleet was limited to 315,000 tons and nine capital ships.³⁶

Before the Washington conference took place, a 1919 report on imperial naval problems by Lord Admiral John Jellicoe to the Committee on Imperial Defense envisioned a Dominions Far East Fleet that could be collected and maintained at Singapore. The naval limitations treaty agreed in Washington squashed this idea, but even now the necessity for Singapore grew.³⁷ Construction of a dockyard at Singapore was initially begun in 1920 and would continue on for another twenty years. The progress of building was stop-and-go over the years as different British parties with different priorities came to, and fell from, power in London. Other imperial and global developments affected the priority and funding given to Singapore naval base. Construction costs were often cited as a consideration, although the Dominions were picking up a great deal of the price. The larger challenge was the question of who ruled the waves of the Pacific. The Anglo-Japanese alliance of the Edwardian era had been succeeded by the American-Japanese rivalry of the interwar era. The Four Power Treaty on the Pacific agreed by Britain, France, Japan, and the U.S. at the Washington conference in 1921 had calmed the waters but there was no guarantee of smooth sailing if stormy weather blew in.

One consequence of the 1921-22 Washington treaties was a prohibition on any modernization of naval harbors in Hong Kong, Guam, and all other Pacific outposts.

³⁶ W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 31, 32.

³⁷ James Neidpath, *Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 27-30.

Singapore was the exception, for its position between the Indian and Pacific oceans fell outside the lines of the Pacific agreement. Obviously, a base in Singapore could serve to protect British territories and sea-lanes in South and Southeast Asia. It could also help defend either India or Australia and New Zealand. What was unclear was the prospect of some conflict involving Japan, either with China or the U.S., and the Singapore could play in supporting British interests more generally in Asia Pacific.

In July 1929, Nicholas Roosevelt, an American diplomat and vice governor of the U.S.-controlled Philippines, penned an article entitled “The Strategy of Singapore” for *Foreign Affairs*.³⁸ A member of the American Council on Foreign Relations, Roosevelt was a frequent contributor to its prestigious world affairs journal and an expert on the Pacific. After paying homage to Sir Stamford Raffles, Roosevelt points out that Singapore was now one of the most important ports in the world. As much commerce passed through it as through the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal, the world’s other two great “gateway” maritime passages.³⁹ What is more, Roosevelt argues, Singapore is sited on a strategic line of communication connecting the Pacific Dominions to India and westward to the rest of the Empire in Africa, the Middle East, and the Atlantic.

Roosevelt wastes no time in discussing the most pressing reason for the growing importance of the colony: the naval base now under construction in 1929. The base’s location on this island is protected and defensible, with inland straits favorable for a deep-water berthing of capital ships. Expanding the port already allows modern docking and repair infrastructure to be added as well. Building a base means new naval dockyards,

³⁸ Nicholas Roosevelt, “The Strategy of Singapore,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 1929, 317-322.

³⁹ Roosevelt, “The Strategy of Singapore,” 317.

capable of mooring, servicing, and repairing these new and larger warships without tying up other commercial dockyards. Given the Royal Navy's switch from coal to oil, fuel storage is a consideration, as is ammunition storage and the ability to protect both these strategic supplies. According to Roosevelt, envisioning Singapore as a commercial port no longer suffices.

After setting out the basic needs of a naval base, Roosevelt poses a deeper question from an American viewpoint. Claiming that neither Britain nor the U.S. have properly understood the role of bases in naval operations, he asks, "Why Singapore?"⁴⁰ The answer is very simple, yet often overlooked. Roosevelt begins his argument with the point that the purpose of a naval base has to be considered in terms of peace as well as war. Far from serving as an embattled fortress, the naval base should provide facilities and supplies for a fleet operating far from home. Oil storage and dry-docks are vital in peacetime as well as wartime. According to Roosevelt, "a fleet without a naval base within striking distance is much like an automobile in the Sahara."⁴¹ For example, a damaged warship requiring repairs needs a base close enough to reach before sinking or sustaining another attack and where the necessary work can be done in a secure environment. Singapore could provide a forward operating base for British and Dominion ships in the Pacific and Indian oceans to refit and reprovision. No less than three quarters of the Empire falls within the circle of Asian Pacific operations at the center of which is Singapore.

Not everyone thought along the lines put forward by Roosevelt. The British government convened another naval conference in London in 1930, and the treaty signed

⁴⁰ Roosevelt, "The Strategy of Singapore," 319.

⁴¹ Ibid.

there by Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the U.S. extended naval limitations to 1936. Some felt that the Singapore base went against the spirit of this agreement and put at risk the relative calm in Asia Pacific. However, support for the base came from several quarters. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada remained in favor of the base and made contributions to defray its costs. The project also enjoyed support from outside the Empire. First and foremost, it offered something of a shield to the Netherlands East Indies, where the oil sector was expanding but where Dutch forces were unable to defend these possessions on their own. Similarly, the Americans in the Philippines were glad to keep the British in and the balance of power in their favor. The French in Indochina also benefited from the British presence. As Roosevelt concludes, the Singapore naval base would not just support the British Empire, but help underwrite stability throughout the region for all Western powers. While Japan was not seen as a threat at this time, the possibility of some sort of conflict in Asia and Europe, with the potential to keep British warships in Western waters, was mitigated by the Dominion, Dutch, and American dependence on the base for their own security. It was considered very unlikely that Britain would fight alone in Asia Pacific. In 1929, Roosevelt optimistically expected that the construction of the naval base would be completed within just a few years.⁴²

Naval Bases at the End of the Naval Limitation Treaties

In little less than a decade, much had changed in the Asian, European, and global situation. By the time the agreement reached in London in 1930 expired in 1936, the world depression had produced a profound transformation in world politics. Japan moved

⁴² Roosevelt, "The Strategy of Singapore," 321, 322.

into Manchuria in 1931, left the League of Nations, and announced it would not negotiate fresh naval limitations. It squeezed China until finally launching a full-scale invasion in 1937, inflicting great suffering on the Chinese people and threatening American and European interests in the country. Germany became a dictatorship under the Nazis in 1933, left the League of Nations, and began to rearm and expand its borders. Italy, already a Fascist dictatorship, began to drift towards Germany and Japan. By the time of the London conference of 1936, only Britain, France, and the U.S. gathered to discuss naval forces.

In his 1937 article “Naval Bases in the Pacific” in *Foreign Affairs*, William Henry Chamberlain faced a different world than the one Nicholas Roosevelt had studied in 1929. Chamberlain’s chief concern here is the meaning of naval bases to the modern sea powers of the Pacific and their interrelationships. By this time the London conference of 1936 had clarified the new situation created by Japan breaking out of the naval limitations treaties and going to war against China. In Chamberlain’s words, the naval limitation treaties were now “of purely historical interest.”⁴³ The otherwise futile London negotiations had one advantage according to historian Anthony Clayton. They brought the two other great naval powers, Britain and the U.S., closer together. In practical terms, it started conversations about the possibility U.S. warships might make common cause with British and Dominion ships and make use of Singapore.⁴⁴

Chamberlain cautions that Japan probably saw no reason to try to match Britain or the U.S. in capital ship strength. However, improvements in ships and airplanes had put

⁴³ William Henry Chamberlain, “Naval Bases in the Pacific,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 1937, 484.

⁴⁴ Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-39*, 265.

Japan at an ever greater disadvantage under the treaties. This feeling of inferiority clashed with Japan's rapid rise in Asia and its aggressive moves towards China. He speculates that Japan's longer-term plans did not entertain transoceanic warfare against a distant enemy. In all likelihood, the Japanese would seek to build a largely defensive naval force around its home islands, using submarines for example to strike larger enemy warships that had sailed from as far away as Britain or the U.S.⁴⁵

Chamberlain's main argument concerns naval bases. Like Roosevelt, he believes bases are just as important as ships in modern naval warfare. Japan would look with alarm at the U.S. Navy fortifying Guam, the Philippines, or the Aleutian Islands on anything like the scale of Hawaii's Pearl Harbor. So would a British expansion of Hong Kong. Such moves would bring Britain and the U.S. much closer to the home islands. If Japan followed suit with a naval base in the Japanese colony of Formosa, the escalating naval arms race would only heighten mutual distrust. Treaties would do little to lower the likelihood of a clash in the Pacific.⁴⁶ According to Chamberlain, Britain had been trying to shore up the status quo with the naval limitation treaties of 1921 and 1930. British interests were widespread across Asia Pacific. In particular, London did not want Japan to turn southwards from China to Southeast Asia and to the South Pacific or South Asia. The almost completed naval base in Singapore, in conjunction with Hong Kong, placed Britain ahead in the naval base game. Even so, any conflict in the region could prove very costly to the British.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Chamberlain, "Naval Bases in the Pacific," 485.

⁴⁶ Chamberlain, "Naval Bases in the Pacific," 487.

⁴⁷ Chamberlain, "Naval Bases in the Pacific," 489.

In Chamberlain's view, Singapore's importance had not diminished since Roosevelt's appraisal eight years earlier in 1929. Construction of the base had accelerated and was now nearing completion. It had a new dry dock, a grading dock, oil storage facilities, a deep water harbor protected by the island, and access to air power from Malaya, Burma, and India. It remained a pivotal link between the British empire in Asia and the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. It would be a bulwark against Japan as the latter tightened its grip on coastal China. Moreover, looking ahead to the projected independence of the Philippines in 1946, Singapore was a shield against the possibility that a new government in Manila might lean towards Japan and away from the U.S. and the European colonial powers in the region.⁴⁸

Given the uncertainty surrounding Japanese and American moves following the end of the naval limitation treaties and Britain's ability to uphold the status quo through diplomacy, Chamberlain concludes that Singapore is one of the Empire's main cards. While it was still a base without a fleet, the base itself was a card to play in the naval game.

Conclusion

As these articles by Simpich, Bain, Roosevelt, and Chamberlain demonstrate, Singapore was a crucial place in the British empire in Asia from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. What changed was the assessment of its value, as economic interests remained steady but strategic concerns grew. By itself, Singapore was a special kind of colony. The legacy of its rapid development from a fishing village to a world-class

⁴⁸ Chamberlain, "Naval Bases in the Pacific," 492.

commercial entrepot in the nineteenth century suggested a bright future based on the contact and mixing of diverse Asian and European populations collaboratively engaged in lucrative commerce.

As Nicholas Roosevelt made clear, a naval base could have greater importance in peace than in war. Singapore's new naval base would extend the role of the colony beyond serving as a busy port with a hinterland of very profitable mines and plantations. It was not just a gateway, but a hinge on which to maintain the status quo in Asia. As William Henry Chamberlain would reiterate, Singapore was the lone Imperial naval base to be built during the period of the naval limitation treaties. Fortunately exempt from the base restrictions in the naval limitation treaties, it gave Britain a weighty asset for maintaining the balance of naval power and preserving at least the appearance of a European order in Asia Pacific. Of course, treaties work only so long as the signatories observe their obligations. Indeed, by the mid-1930s, this diplomatic convention was no longer the case. Growing instability in Asia Pacific prompted the British to put the base on an accelerated schedule for completion and new agreements were sought with the United States over their potentially expanding fleets in the Pacific. The extent of Japan's ambitions and the capacity of its military and naval forces were still unclear, especially with regard to a protracted land war in China and the prospects for subsequent conflict with either the Soviet Union in Northeast Asia or Europeans and Americans in the Pacific and Southeast and South Asia.

In 1934, the British critic and writer Cedric Belfrage traveled from Britain to the U.S. via the Middle East, Ceylon, the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, Australia, and the South Sea islands. His sexually- and racially-charged account, *Away from It All*, is

nevertheless an amusing record of his experiences along the way. The “old days” of the Empire were fast receding. Writing about Malaya, he observes: “I was quite used to hearing about the Old Days; nearly every town I visited had its Old Days, but one thing was sure and that was that I would never catch up with the Old Days anywhere and find them going on there and now.”⁴⁹ This insight did not necessarily make him a seer of the new days coming, for all his interesting and critical comments on the resemblance of Singapore to “an American city.”⁵⁰ For example, he mentions the naval base under construction in Singapore, claiming it is cloaked in secrecy but explaining it is aimed at Japan. In keeping with his disillusioned attitude to life, however, he dismisses the base: “as far as I was concerned they could keep their old secret, I wouldn’t have known a good naval base from a bad naval base at five yards’ range and wouldn’t have cared anyway.”⁵¹

As we shall see, the sense of crisis would become palpable just a year after the publication of Belfrage’s 1937 memoir and the drift from peace to war would become pronounced thereafter. It would become ever harder for the British to stave off their worries as the next phase of what Anne Foster has called “late imperialism” got underway.

⁴⁹ Cedric Belfrage, *Away From It All: An Escapologist’s Notebook* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937), 196.

⁵⁰ Belfrage, *Away from It All*, 202.

⁵¹ Belfrage, *Away from It All*, 200.

CHAPTER FOUR
FROM PEACE TO WAR:
SINGAPORE, 1938-1942

The year of 1938 was set to be the start of a reassertion by the British Empire of hegemony in Southeast Asia. New challenges had appeared but the Empire had weathered them accordingly. As it had in the past, the imperial machine was constantly adapting to focus and redress issues as they came about. As we have examined previously, The Washington Conference of 1922 and the London conferences of 1930 and 1936 and their respective treaties had expired. Japan had walked away from the Nine Power Pact with its invasion and occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and then again with its full-scale war with China in 1937. Great Britain had to this time been playing the peacekeeper in the region trying to keep a sense of order among its financial investments into China and trade interests on the seas, while also ensuring a strategic angle to ensure the Royal Navy still ruled the seas.

In Europe, Germany had been threatening to expand beyond its borders and the British had found themselves in a similar situation of trying to preserve the peace on the continent. In turn, their fleet would be committed to the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean with little left to spare to send to Asia. The combination of the arms limitations treaties and the worldwide economic depression had reduced the resources available to the armed forces. But the British were determined not to let the details disrupt their version of the status quo, which meant a tranquil Pacific trade and power projection controlled by the Empire's hegemony. And so they felt they could adapt as always. In the

spirit of cooperation, the United States Pacific fleet was able to operate out of Hawaii and with sufficient notice could be dispatched if needed to aid the British in the Pacific.

The high command in London and around the Empire was fully aware of the crisis looming ahead. Perhaps the fact that their war plans were always strategically evolving kept resolve in the belief that they could adapt to whatever new conflict could arise. This had always been the cornerstone to the Empire's success. Strategic planning was always unfinished and always adapting to new challenges. In 1938, it was the military that invoked this rationale. On the colonial side, the plantation owners, exporters, shippers, and businessmen were focused on keeping business and profits up as normal. Adjusting to market volatility was the priority and the Japanese, while a concern, were a distant threat. However, this approach to imperial challenges was not as strategically focused as the military. The Singapore Naval Base had restored confidence for a time. This seemed to be a tangible answer to the rapidly expanding Japanese. The British, Americans, and Dutch now felt that they had a foothold from which they could marshal their forces and stage appropriate responses to events in Asia, thereby ensuring stability and strength to their imperial possessions. That there was such a stubbornly held faith in this narrative would make what came to pass in December of 1941 even more shocking.

In this chapter, we will examine the years of 1938 through 1942 as the European and Asian crises opened into war and the British attempts to keep a focus to Asia, with what would prove to be limited resources. The opening of the Singapore naval base in 1938 and how it was a statement by the British of how they meant business in 1938 is examined through *National Geographic Magazine* and British Movietone newsreels, as well as through the on site observations of writers such as John Gunther, who attended

the base's opening. We will then look at the Asian crisis as Carveth Wells traveled through the British outposts on his return to Singapore. John Gunther's and Rupert Emerson's contributions to *Foreign Affairs* will be taken to account in 1940 on the looming crisis becoming more urgent. Did the British take on too much by trying to think they could protect so many imperial possessions such as the Dutch East Indies, on top of Malaya, without help? Was too much put on the notion of Singapore as a deterrent? We will examine British preparations and adaptations as seen by *The Nation*, *Life*, *Time*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the war correspondent Cecil Brown of Columbia Broadcasting from Singapore. Finally as December 7 and 8, 1941 came, we will look at the reactions of the British to meet the Japanese and check the advances down Malaya, including Penang's abandonment and the Force Z disaster, of which Cecil Brown was a participant on the HMS Repulse. His constant battles with the censors in Singapore's headquarters became a central theme of frustration for him and other journalist trying to report from the battles being waged over Malaya. It becomes clear to trace how the journalistic reporting changed and adapted from a feeling of hope, to demonstrating the importance of Singapore, to Asia as a whole, and how the Empire was not just the only power with interests to defend. With an eye on the Americans and the Dutch, it becomes apparent that the British were holding together a peace for several powers. Then as the 1940s appeared the tone would change to appeal for understanding and help from the Americans in the way that they became the audience that the reports were intended for.

Hope in an Uneasy Climate: Singapore and Asia Pacific, 1938-1940

1938 brought a reassuring hope in Asia Pacific. The British Empire decided to put out some reassuring visuals that the Empire in the Far East was stronger than ever, despite ongoing war between Japan and China. Specifically, in the Indian Ocean area it was business as usual. British Movietone News put together a newsreel in 1938 called *Alert in the East* to coincide with the opening of the new HMS Sembawang, as the new Singapore Naval Base was officially named.⁵² Giving a stunning visual to the colony, the public saw the British Navy (minus any capital ships) at full pomp and ceremony during the dedication. An aerial view of the base in the Johore Straits was as intimidating as it was beautiful. It gave scale to the new grading dock, the floating dry dock, and the oil and other storage facilities. The newsreel went on to discuss the Aden outpost as guarding the Red Sea passage and Singapore as guarding the security of the Pacific passage so the Indian Ocean was secure. Indian troops, South African troops, and other troops from the Cape to Aden to Singapore were shown drilling and on exercises. Australia and the Port of Darwin was linked in this chain to show the Dominions were secure. The narrator went on to say “throughout the Pacific are communities enjoying peace and prosperity under British law.” Hong Kong was mentioned, as were new fortifications and torpedo boats shown, again with aerial and on the ground views. The purpose of the newsreel was to unquestionably ensure to the British people and the world that the Far East Empire was united, large, and powerful. Similarly, the *National Geographic Magazine* put out a pictorial spread in 1938 titled “Singapore: Far East Gibraltar in the Malay Jungle.” Unlike the 1926 pictorial essay, this spread did not carry an essay with it, but let the pictures speak for themselves. The only written portions are in

⁵² *Alert in the East*, British Movietone News, 1938.

the captions that give descriptions to each photo page. Interestingly enough, the first picture below the article's title was of Fort Canning, overlooking the harbor. The fort is clearly visible against the skyline, with observation towers jutting into the sky. Beneath it is a sprawling harbor with local Chinese and Malay fishing boats and junks, some sailing past and others tied up at the quays. No deep-water vessels are in the picture, but they wouldn't be mooring in the inner harbor. However, keeping the picture to local boats with the fort in the background is telling. The caption beneath reads: "Singapore, British naval base and strategic point on the age-old silk and spice routes through the Strait of Malacca has outgrown its leisurely life centered about this river. Ultramodern defenses, just completed make the flat tropical jungle island impregnable."⁵³ The tone of this pictorial is clear. This is a statement from Great Britain that Singapore's lazy days are behind it. Embedded among the white marble buildings and tropical green flora, hidden weapons announce that one of the world's foremost ports has now been turned into one of the most modern naval bases in the Empire.

American author and historian John Gunther made frequent commentary on British Asia in the 1930s, working as a war correspondent. His *Inside Europe* book on political, social, and business issues was worked into a series including *Inside Asia* and other *Inside* books that made him famous. In the interwar years, he worked in Europe and travelled to Asia to document the growing unease. He contributed extensively for *Foreign Affairs* and some of these works wound up in his 1938 book *Inside Asia*. On Singapore, he happened to be invited to attend the opening of the naval base HMS Sembawang and

⁵³ "Singapore, Far East Gibraltar in the Malay Jungle," *National Geographic Magazine* May 1938, 599.

his cultural observations while there would be the center of his *Foreign Affairs* contributions on the strategic value of Singapore.

Gunther makes clear his main point: Singapore is a warning to Japan. Not aggressive but somewhat of a threat to the Japanese communicated in a clear language: the British mean business when it comes to the Far East and everyone needs to be aware of this fact. As we have stated before, in modern naval warfare, bases mean as much as capital ships. If this was the case, then Singapore is Britain's version of the modern German battleship Bismarck in the sense of deterrence. Gunther charts the January 1938 opening as communicating this language to the world. The most significant part of the opening beyond the press coverage of the base, something that was already known, was the participants. Three American cruisers happened to have stopped and were in attendance causing a row in Tokyo, especially when the British claimed the American cruisers just happened to be in transit from Australia. It looked strange that the timing synched up so well. When the American cruisers left Singapore a few days later, two British warships left with them, prompting rumors of joint maneuvers. In reality that American vessels and British ships would be cooperating in the Pacific would be not surprising in the wake of the end of the limitations treaties as both nations navies had been exploring cooperative ways to coexist around their imperial interests in the Pacific.

Gunther saw the opening of the base as one to not be viewed in a vacuum. It must be taken in light of events in Europe and the war in China.⁵⁴ Everything was pointing to Japan to be mindful of the European (and growing American) presence in the Pacific region and Singapore was beyond just a statement of Britain's evolving Pacific Policy

⁵⁴ John Gunther, *Inside Asia* (London: Harper and Bros., 1939), 305- 311.

and interwar rearmament. It wasn't a joint demonstration of the U.S. and Great Britain, but as Gunther points out, it did give the Japanese a bit to think about.

John Gunther saw Singapore as an interesting, yet paranoid place in the minds of the colonials. They were suspicious of spies from Japan, and yet, they worried about offending Japanese sensibilities in the region. But the Japanese were not exactly secret in their spying, nor were the British trying to hide much that was at the base. They enjoyed their new modern fortress and if the Japanese fishing boats were reporting it, then so be it. Gunther describes the docks (the floating dry dock and the grading dock) with the same marvel that was seen in the modern press on the newsreels and in other journals and official press releases. That Singapore was everything these men were reporting jointly points to such a modern marvel of engineering that the base actually was. But beyond that, Gunther does add that contrary to the public persona, the naval base does lack a large naval contingent. The naval command is headquartered in Hong Kong, and Singapore has only one old World War One era warship on permanent station. This was a point the British did not like to make much noise about. However Gunther is impressed by the aircraft facilities and their potential. Singapore always was within easy reach from India, Burma, the Dutch East Indies, and Australia and facilities were there for military and civilian aircraft to use. It was a gateway hub, with the ability to function like a modern airport. But like the port, the landing strips were all about the "ability" but still did not possess the planes or the ships. He summed up the general approach to Singapore in *Inside Asia*, with one small blurb on absentee colonialism summing up what so many historians have concluded: "The British rule their colonies by a subtle combination of power and prestige. The power is always there, but often it is in the form of battleships a

thousand miles away; meantime the young officer may boss 10,000 people with a swagger stick and dinner jacket.”⁵⁵

Singapore was not just the only Asian outpost that was built up in this press blitz. As we saw in *Alert in the East*, Hong Kong was not forgotten either. Nor should it have been as its proximity to Japan was much closer and the colony had a front row seat to the war with Japan and China. Hong Kong was Great Britain’s prestigious stake into China and represented its financial and imperial interests in that country, and this the Northern Pacific region. While Singapore would soon eclipse Hong Kong in strategic importance, in the British hierarchy, this Chinese island colony still held rank. So when *National Geographic Magazine* did their follow up pictorial to Singapore, it was only natural that they included an accompanying piece. “Hong Kong: Britain’s Far Flung Outpost in China”⁵⁶ was a pictorial which showed a deeper side of the colony and like Singapore, one that was fully professional in its operations. The pictorial showed the colonial side of the island and the people and gave a nuanced spread in eleven pages. It showed pictures of the harbor, the many ships, the fortified beaches, and the netting to enter the harbor. Striking a balance between the military, colonial, and business aspects, it was just a gentle reminder that Hong Kong was still strong and open for business.

We have examined stubborn resolve of the British in Singapore and the Far East as shown to the press but a deeper look into the unfolding unease in Asia can be seen further in the traveler on the ground jumping from colony to colony. Carveth Wells was a

⁵⁵ Gunther, *Inside Asia*, 315-16.

⁵⁶ “Hong Kong, Britain’s Far-Flung Outpost in China,” *National Geographic Magazine*, March 1938, 349-60.

fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and an international celebrity.⁵⁷ He travelled to Southeast Asia in 1919 and the highlights of his expedition were chronicled in his memoir *Six Years in the Malay Jungle*. On top of exploration and discovery in Asia, Wells had been continent-hopping in his travels and had touched just about everywhere. Asia had captivated him and, with his wife's blessing, he returned in 1938. *North of Singapore* is a memoir of Wells's return expedition took him from Japan down through China and ultimately back to his roots in Malaya and Singapore. In working his way to Southeast Asia, Wells's stops through Shanghai and Hong Kong gave him a front row seat as an observer to the complicated dynamics of the Japanese war with China as felt by the colonials. He noted that the people of Shanghai had grown accustomed to the large loss of life and now do not even become inquisitive when he asks them if they have heard of news of the war. Wells goes onto describe an incident at the Bund in Shanghai's International Settlement. Many Chinese had fled and thousands had died on the way out. Wells says that on the Garden Bridge, which separates the International section (the Europeans) from the Japanese controlled parts, is a good place to observe the attitudes of the Chinese towards Japanese and back. Wells stood on the bridge with two Scottish sentries when he observed some Japanese sentries kicking a Chinese national. As he took off his camera to take a picture, he stumbled and the Japanese sentry looked at him menacingly. Wells thought he could be shot until the Scottish sentry reassured him to "not bother myself with the Japs,"⁵⁸ and to go about setting up his camera. He had not had to work with guards protecting him before. But he was afraid of snapping pictures of

⁵⁷ "Carveth Wells," Iowa Digital Library, accessed June 9, 2018.

⁵⁸ Carveth Wells, *North of Singapore* (New York: R.M. McBride, 1940), 109-111.

Japanese soldiers after that. Japanese bombers had destroyed much of Shanghai and the Chinese were subservient to the Japanese troops. It was terrible to witness. Wells left Shanghai for Hong Kong on September 1, 1939 feeling that while he should not wish one power should police the world, he hoped after this and with the destruction in Europe that people would just remember that when England “practically policed the world (except the United States) during the reign of old Queen Victoria, the world had sixty years of peace. Britannia still rules the waves.”⁵⁹ He was a firm believer that Great Britain could hold the status quo. This attitude seemed to be the prevailing one as tensions escalated. A nostalgic return to the heyday of Imperial rule for Europeans.

Wells’s arrival in Hong Kong was much more pleasantly received. Not occupied by the Japanese, this imperial outpost was still a billboard to the importance of the Empire in China. Hong Kong was the second largest exporter of tin behind Malaya for Great Britain and a huge importer of kerosene. As the newsreels had shown, Hong Kong had been fortified with more defenses placed around Victoria Harbor. Wells got to see this first-hand. The new torpedo boats that came out to escort them in through the defensive nets, as well as a cruiser that came to escort their American steamer into the approaches, it was very much the British colony with the magnificent harbor and import export opening into mainland China. Barbed wire was along the beaches and gun emplacements were hidden in preparation for a perceived enemy that had not come yet. After being gone for twenty years, Carveth Wells noticed the modern dress of the Chinese, a sign of the cosmopolitan culture of Hong Kong and coastal China generally. More traditional rickshaws and boatmen balanced this. Here war was more on the minds

⁵⁹ Wells, *North of Singapore*, 113.

of the people, unlike in Shanghai where they didn't gossip about it, but lived it. It was here that Wells became aware of the fact that Germany and Great Britain were now at war. One conversation Wells remembered having with a Japanese man earlier in his trip involved potential invasion of Hong Kong. The Japanese man told him it would take two days to take the island. He asked an Englishman the same question presently and he replied "One day."⁶⁰

Shortly after his stops in Shanghai and Hong Kong, Wells finally was able to journey down to his ultimate destination of Singapore. He was mesmerized at Singapore's evolution from a backwater coastal station to a modern city. Some things remained the same. He said of the Raffles Hotel, "It is an immense rambling structure, with huge courtyards full of coconut palms and lovely tropical flowers. Surrounding these courtyards are tiers of wide verandahs on to which open lofty bedrooms, twice the height of any ordinary hotel room."⁶¹ All the romantic ideals of the high era of British Empire were represented. The white Victorian colonial building, soldiers in their tropical uniforms, polo and cricket matches, and verandas where tea and gin were served to the elites at the Raffles Hotel and cricket clubs. Everything was clean white and green. But other things were different, as he noted even at Raffles, now the bathrooms had plumbing. It was a rapid change from his previous visit in 1919, before running water and when "There used to be a time when the name Singapore conjured up visions of people dying of cholera, plague, and smallpox. This reputation was quite underserved ... Singapore is

⁶⁰ Wells, *North of Singapore*, 119.

⁶¹ Wells, *North of Singapore*, 126.

so healthy that even the rats average only three fleas apiece, an important item when the spread of plague is considered.”⁶² Wells was amused, and happy to see the developments.

Carveth Wells had seen the worst and the best of the Great Britain in Asia as he went from the north to the Southeast tips of the Far East Empire. In Shanghai he had witnessed destruction and ambivalence by all sides. Hong Kong had a sarcastic but very British way of carrying on with business, with the residents surprised every day the Japanese had not yet attacked. Singapore carried with it a much more distant and secure feeling, with marvels at the new developments of infrastructure and a sense of distance from conflict. In all, the attitude was the same: that the world would remain functioning as long as the British were in charge and calling the shots, preserving the peace. The attitude was one of professionalism, but compartmentalization and this glimpse at a micro level was symptomatic of the attitude of the British policy at a larger level.

Beyond Singapore, 1940-1941

With the European theater in full war mode, more pictorial essays and articles began appearing in the news magazines such as *Life*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Time*, and the *Economist*. The general tone of journalism in 1940 becomes more than just showing that the British were in charge of Asia, but also an explanation of why the Far East was important. Because it wasn't only the British who were trying to hold on to colonies and concessions and guarding their interests to guard, but also the Dutch, the French, and the “neutral” Americans. Many of these publications were aimed at the United States audience however, as we shall see with John Gunther and Rupert Emerson.

⁶² Wells, *North of Singapore*, 127.

It was a balancing act by the British censors to direct the focus not just on Singapore and Asia, but the Pacific region as a whole and how Asia was the key to contributing to the war effort closer to home in Europe and the Middle East.

Life had a 1940 pictorial essay titled “Germany, Italy, and Japan Brandish a United Sword in Threat Against U.S.,” the purpose of which was to explain how the tides of war in Europe could affect the United States through the British “red line of Empire”⁶³ in Asia. The piece is explaining how in part, thanks to Great Britain’s stubborn defensive war, the German war plans have shifted to have the Axis powers swing wide out into the globe to destabilize the British Empire, through Africa and into the Pacific. Specifically, Hong Kong, Singapore, then the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies. The *Life* spread goes on to provide illustrated maps to Southeast Asia and show pictures of the barbed wire beaches of Hong Kong, as well as Imperial troops manning gun emplacements. When the piece shifts to Singapore, it is to highlight this as the last standing bastion if Hong Kong falls and the hinge to the whole ocean theater. That the Tokyo Press is now accusing the United States of “extending its grip on Singapore” is to show that Japan now sees the United States as a threat and the Philippines is thus at risk as well. Considering how sensitive the British censorship was to news and to the tone coming out of Asia, this is a pointed warning to the United States to get into the fight sooner, rather than later, as the British need the additional deterrent in the region to alleviate the pressure they have in the Atlantic.

For the Dutch residents of the East Indies, 1940 came in with unease. The Dutch East Indies was almost five times as large as Japan. The northwestern island of Borneo

⁶³ “Germany, Italy, and Japan Brandish a United Sword in Threat Against U.S.,” *Life*, October 7, 1940, 29.

was a British possession, which interlocked the two countries even more. The islands of the Dutch East Indies were home to rubber, tin, sugar, coffee, tea, tobacco, copra, and a host of other mineral and agricultural commodities. Petroleum was a major commodity and Royal Dutch Shell had a variety of investments working in Southeast Asia with partnerships from United States investors and British. The East Indies stands fifth among the producers of the world's petroleum with a 1939 output of 61,580,000 barrels.⁶⁴ Almost half of the Indies goods sent for export were routed through Singapore and Malaya as well. It was hard to track the exports to Japan because of the Singapore transshipments made direct figures difficult but it was important, especially during the Sino-Japanese war. Japan shared the Indonesia export market with the British and the Americans and felt that the Dutch was unfairly infringing upon Asian territory that they should have a right to. That the Netherlands had no naval strength probably fueled this resentment more. While Malaya was the number one single producer of rubber and tin, their overall status in the economy and stability in the region had a linked effect on the Dutch holdings as well. The Dutch East Indies depended on the British for export through Singapore, investments from London, and most importantly, for protection in the region. They were situated near to the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. On top of the resource productions, these were major sea-lanes in the South Pacific where maritime commerce was the lifeblood. So stability in the Far East British Empire meant protection for the Dutch empire as well.

Rupert Emerson contributed a piece on the Dutch East Indies that kept this consistency going through *Foreign Affairs* in 1940 with "The Dutch East Indies Adrift."

⁶⁴ Rupert Emerson, "The Dutch East Indies Adrift," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1940, 738.

As it has been shown through contributors like Roosevelt, Gunther, and Bain, to name a few, the purpose of these *Foreign Affairs* pieces on Southeast Asia was to educate but also to stress that there was more at stake in the colonial East than the colonial lifestyle of the Saturday night dances at the Raffles Hotel. Singapore, Penang, Burma, the Dutch East Indies, as well as China and French Indochina were all working enterprises, which enabled many things such as textiles, automotive, and defense industries to remain strong in the West. Their abundance kept supply strong and this fed to other industries. All of this was important to growing economies in the post-depression era. The Japanese threat as well as other emerging changes with rising nationalism and unrest made these areas worthy of attention and preventative action and cooperation. To treat the Far East as a vast backwater as many in London seemed to do on the priority scale was dangerous in 1940. *Foreign Affairs* were reporting this in a very serious yet thoughtful manner.

Emerson's piece zeroed in on the fact, among the production and export numbers, that the Japanese were eyeing the Dutch East Indies now. It had always been seen as a weak link to the imperial defense of the region. The Dutch knew this and were also fearful that the British would seek to offer some of this territory (or to stand by while it was taken) as a token appeasement to Japan if it came to that.⁶⁵ On April 16, 1940, to the dismay of the Dutch, the Japanese declared their assurances of goodwill towards the Netherlands and its possessions. This good will and disinterestedness were seen in translation as a first step in offers of "imminent" protection and destruction.⁶⁶ The pronouncement stated "the Japanese Government cannot but be deeply concerned over

⁶⁵ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 218.

⁶⁶ Emerson, "The Dutch East Indies Adrift," 735.

any development accompanying the aggravation of war in Europe that may affect the *status quo* of the Netherland East Indies.”⁶⁷ This was Japan’s anticipation of the German *Blitzkrieg* against the Low Countrie and France in May 1940, which as Emerson points out, threw the Dutch East Indies on its own. There was no navy to enforce Dutch imperial claims to the area, or to anywhere in the globe. Not only did the Dutch rely on Singapore and Penang to export through, but they also relied on the Royal Navy for protection. The economic cooperation between the two empires made this a profitable operating principle for both but with Japan in China and needing to deepen their oil and military resources, it was a correct assumption that they would see Holland’s territory as a step to hedge their own power. Tokyo officially stated that they were not interested and that the Netherlands had no importance to them, but this was routine and seen as a gesture to a new and forceful treaty. This in turn brought an immediate and sharp reply from the United States Secretary of State the following day (April 17) that “intervention in the domestic affairs of the Netherland Indies or any alteration of the status quo by other than peaceful processes would be prejudicial to the cause of stability, peace, and security not only in the region of the Netherlands Indies but in the entire Pacific area.”⁶⁸ As Emerson goes onto point out, the United States followed this up by announcing the Pacific Fleet would remain stationed in Pearl Harbor for exercises.

On October 21, 1940, *Time* took a hard look at the U.S. policy of neutrality and specifically whether it was now the right time to get into a fight with Japan. “Naval Problem of the Orient”⁶⁹ highlights a meeting in Washington between the Naval

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “Naval Problem of the Orient,” *Time*, October 21, 1940, 26.

Secretary Knox, the CNC Pacific Fleet Admiral Stark, and the CNO Naval Operations Admiral Richardson to speak on the issue of what to do if the navy was called upon to fight Japan. The question of the meeting was not a decision “if” but just a tactical evaluation of “when.” It was another acceptance by the press that the United States and Great Britain would be allies sooner than later. But still the United States held neutral and the burden remained on Great Britain. This is an important aspect to note as the end of 1940 approached. The British were realizing that their role as the holders of the ever-peaceful “status quo” was adding immense weight that was stressing the Empire. Still, the British continued on with business as usual.

In 1940 John Gunther contributed a piece to *Foreign Affairs* on the state of things as he saw them in Asia titled “Our Pacific Frontier.”⁷⁰ He described the policy of the Western powers, including the United States, as dominated by three attitudes. First, the Open Door as enunciated by John Hay in 1899. An equality of opportunity for citizens of all nations to trade at will in China. Second, the Washington treaties of 1921-22 and the terms in which all the principal naval powers agreed to maintain certain ratios and not engage in build-ups or arms races. This also applied to bases in the Western Pacific in the Four Power Pact. Moreover, in the Nine Power Pact, Japan also agreed to respect the territorial integrity of China. A portion of this, Gunther points out, has been flagrantly violated by Japan in respect to China but the other powers do still abide by it. Third, the Stimson doctrine of non-recognition, enunciated following the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, states that the United States refuses to recognize “any situation,

⁷⁰ John Gunther, “Our Pacific Frontier,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1940, 583-98.

treaty, or agreement which may be brought about by means contrary.”⁷¹ Gunther’s contribution was aimed at the citizens of the United States who had yet to enter the European theater of war and where cries of isolationism and neutrality were very strong. Gunther was telling the American people, not of the threats posed by the Japanese to the Pacific region, but to the right now situation. This is how it was, and there was no getting around it. Urging points such as protection for American citizens abroad in China, Japan, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, and so on, he reminds that is a responsibility to ensure their protection when they are threatened. Gunther then discusses U.S. investments in China and trade and what this state of crisis is now doing to the United States economically. He then hits a point that it is in our interest to protect our power and prestige in the region. “By protecting that prestige in the Far East and in Pacific waters, we contribute to political stability throughout the world.”⁷²

As 1940 gave way to 1941, the British, through *Life*, let two large pictorial essays come through on Singapore. They were nothing new or not seen before and they did nothing new. But they did have a mission to give another visual to the British Empire and the depth of the commercial side, mixed with the strategic side of Singapore to hammer home the notion that it was the hinge on which the Pacific was secured. In March, American writer Theodore White’s pictorial essay for *Life*, “Singapore: City and Base,” attempted to sum up the cross appeal of the colony. He backhandedly complimented a “great polyglot emporium, where 10,000 middle class British colonials prosper and live upper class lives,” but also made a point to note the deep diversity of “418,00 Chinese,

⁷¹ Gunther, “Our Pacific Frontier,” 584.

⁷² Gunther, “Our Pacific Frontier,” 588.

plus Malays, Indians, Japanese, and Arabs,” who lived there.⁷³ But his grandest praise came for the naval base, which White referred to as a “bedazzling phenomenon.” He went on to say that the capacity of the base is unlimited and describes the various docks, storage facilities, and mooring plans, to which he writes were “prepared for every ship in the British (and presumably) American Navies.” This obviously was a bit of an overstatement but it fit into the spirit of the narrative and augmented the photographs. However, White does note an ominous theme that is often repeated in the journalistic observations: “Singapore today is a base without a fleet.”⁷⁴ A lot hinged on the British here and it was more than just a lack of a fleet. They had expectations from other European powers to buy time while Europe dealt with Germany. And the United States was still neutral.

In July, *Life* published “Singapore: Britain’s Far Eastern Fortress,”⁷⁵ which was a full on pictorial essay spread on Singapore, the threats facing it, and what the British were doing about it. It was a no-nonsense and informative piece that is one of the most vivid of all prewar presentations of the colony preparing to fight. It highlights the fact that Singapore is a key player in keeping the Indian Ocean under British control. It also stresses how it also holds Asia and that this is “frightening responsibility has whipped hot, languid Singapore into a year and a half of frantic armament. A tolerant free trade city basking in the shadow of British Navy, it has never worried before.” This was not exactly true on the rearmament scale as Singapore still was an island that was full of defensive potential but had no fleet and very few troops and airplanes to fight. But the British

⁷³ Theodore White, “Singapore: City and Base,” *Life*, March 17, 1941, 17.

⁷⁴ White, “Singapore: City and Base,” 18.

⁷⁵ “Singapore: Britain’s Far Eastern Fortress,” *Life*, July 21, 1941, 61-73.

always swore they were a simple call to India away. However, the language had increased here and it was in this small set of essays that *Life* goes on to describe the rubber and tin trade, the exports, the fact that these materials help the war effort, and continue to impress the reader with the value of the colony. It also does its best to diminish the idea of Singapore as the easygoing exotic colony that had lazy tea times and polo matches. Showing pictures of troops training in Malaya from all over the empire, the article tries to show unity and resolve in a little colony standing up to the imperial bullying of Japan. It was not a completely fictional story, and the military was indeed prepping for battle. The British understood what was happening but they hoped that the Japanese would see Singapore as a battle they would not want to get involved in.

Keeping with the strategic location and how civilian travel could be harmed as well, *Time* published an article in 1941 on airline travel. Included with a note on the Japanese airline expansion and how Air Nippon and the Japanese military had used strong-arm tactics and engagements even to form their “horseshoe” shaped wedge of routes around the Philippines into pro-Japanese Thailand and Palau among other routes and had shot down two China National Aviation planes to enforce this hold. But now, with KLM, Pan Am, and Great Britain all operating peaceful air routes, for now the Japanese expansion is at a lull to avoid any incidents that could upset the peacetime balance. But people are still wary and cautious as *Time* reports “In Manila everyone regards it as an extension of the U.S. diplomatic arm—right to the heart of Britain’s Far Eastern trouble zone.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ “Pan Am to Singapore,” *Time*, June 12, 1941, 71.

A Failed Repulse, December 8, 1941-February 15, 1942

As the end of 1941 approached, the reality of war had come to the front door of England and it was all anyone in the Empire could think about. Covering the Pacific theater had evolved from traveling through the region to now fully embedded reporting from the front. Cecil Brown was a war correspondent for Columbia Broadcasting in the United States who had been relocated from the Middle Eastern front to Asia. His accounts of Singapore give us a very good accounting on the British command structure on the ground and the censorship that they controlled while balancing the approaching threat. In his memoirs *Suez to Singapore*, Brown recounts an incident early on with British sensors that deeply influenced the perspective of the shaky hold of the military.

On September 27, 1941, deeply frustrated at the lack of access in cooperation from British officials to foreign journalist, Brown prepared a report on Singapore to cable home as formal news that was cancelled by Governor Shenton Thomas for censor violations. The cable told of a meeting that twenty foreign journalists had with Sir Geoffrey Layton to protest the lack of cooperation with and the intimidation of foreign correspondents. The correspondents refused to be told what to report and were finding if they stepped out of favor with command that their access to flying boats, ships, and military cooperation was limited. This infuriated many of the journalists who were veterans of other conflict zones. In Brown's cabled story, he discusses Singapore's mentality, which is based on the hope of an American military bailout in the sense of a fleet for help or Russia to intervene against Japan. Brown wrote "Dozens of Britishers have said to me: 'if only American ships come here, most of our troubles would end.' By the way, if the United States fleet does come into Singapore, it would mean that

Singapore at last would end its role of a naval base without a navy.”⁷⁷ Obviously this was embarrassing, but true. Governor Thomas killed the cable, and threatened Brown to stop. Brown, enraged would not let the matter die and took his protests to Alfred Duff Cooper to then send to Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Sumner Wells for formal protest. This caused a stir and opened up huge accusations to the British military’s “all is well” official front being a smokescreen.⁷⁸ Brown’s issue was not alone and was shared by other correspondents in the local press office. This was one of the first, but not the last instances of the cracks in the foundation that the British were later accused of in misleading the public. However, while the journalist would be allowed the freedom of press, in the end there wasn’t much time left for it to make a difference.

Brown would continue to cover the press conferences. One of note involved the military’s normal attempts to stir up the home defense. Up until the end, the British believed that the Malays would fight along side of them when the time came. Lt. General Percival would continue to appeal to the Asian population to take up military service yet was strangely upset when his appeals fell on deaf ears. The response he said again and again was “very very disappointing.”⁷⁹ This was a perfect generalization of the British attitude and indifference to the locals. Up and down the peninsula, rubber plantation workers were rioting because of poor conditions and low pay, but were ignored by the colonials. British officials always seemed unmoved to the evolving community and agency of the workers.

⁷⁷ Cecil Brown, *Suez to Singapore* (New York: Random House, 1942), 204.

⁷⁸ Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, 203, 206-207.

⁷⁹ Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, 220.

On December 7, the Japanese invaded northern Malaya and several places in Siam, notably Kota Bharu. Cecil Brown was drinking with other journalist when word of the war had reached Singapore. Shortly after he received word that a secret naval force was preparing to go out to fight and he was one of the journalist allowed to join it. It was so classified that only Brown and another reporter were allowed to go and they were told nothing. Brown was going to join the crew of the HMS Repulse on the doomed Force Z mission to answer Pearl Harbor and the opening offensives by the Japanese against the British in Hong Kong and Thailand. His eyewitness account of the battle off Malaya and the sinking of both HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales by Japanese torpedo bombers is harrowing and vivid. Brown survived this new and disastrous development in naval warfare and returned to Singapore, where shortly afterwards he was able to send his story of the battle to Columbia Broadcasting.

On December 16, Brown states in one of his cables that Singapore is holding its breath “but there is increasing concern about the trend of the fighting.”⁸⁰ The reports of the fighting in Malaya seemed confusing to Brown. What bugged Brown was the general communiqués issued by the Singapore GHQ. It seemed the censorship machine was back in full swing, spinning. It was part of an everlasting sense of restriction felt by the entire journalist in Singapore. “British and American correspondents here for four months offered suggestions and urged officials to prepare for coverage of a war. The outbreak of the war found no changes, with the result that efforts to report the situation in Malaya are

⁸⁰ Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, 346.

very severely restricted.”⁸¹ And after the loss of the two battleships, the British naturally did not want to instill a defeatist mindset.

The next day, Brown received word that Penang was at risk of being overrun. Until then the population in Singapore believed that the Japanese had been held to a beachhead. Then on the night of December 17, the official communiqué was this: “We have successfully disengaged the enemy and are South of the River Krian.”⁸² Brown thought about this as he mulled over this confusing report. It suddenly occurred to him that someone had inserted a bit of what he had learned was “defeated optimism” into the report and Penang had fallen. Worse, the British had evacuated Penang. British censors told him this was not true but by Friday the rumors had reached Singapore’s population. “The Malays and Chinese are especially concerned. As near as I can make out they have absolutely no confidence any longer in what the British tell them.”⁸³

It was much worse than that. As Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper examined in *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*, the British lost the moral war in Penang. Singapore held a military presence and a port. It was a prize and a natural target of the Japanese. On December 11, hours after the Force Z disaster, Japanese planes flew overhead to bomb the base on the island of Georgetown, across the channel from Penang. About one thousand civilians came out onto the docks to watch the Japanese bomb the Royal Air Force base in Butterworth, across the strait. These were Indian and Chinese workers from the rubber estates. The same rubber workers that had been so poorly treated over the past few years with wage garnishments were many of the ones who gathered to

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, 349.

⁸³ Ibid.

watch the show. They were interested in watching the show about to happen across the harbor. “They watched with fascination, not knowing what was coming as a shoal of fish would stay to watch in silence as a fisherman surrounds them with a net.”⁸⁴ Then a Japanese plane dropped a bomb on the docks. More followed as did constant machine gun fire. About 1000 people died immediately due to being out in the open when the Japanese planes decided to bomb Penang and Georgetown together. That night, the British ordered all civilians out of the city. Overnight many fled on boats and down the Peninsula. It was not lost on the workers and Malays that those who left on boats and who fled were all white colonists. The British retreat was so rapid that their “scorched earth” policy was poorly implemented and the Japanese inherited many useful boats and even an oil installation. These boats and junks that were left behind would become immediately pressed into service as transports to the Japanese troops as they made their way down the peninsula. This would further enable them to cut around the British troops and get behind and in between their ranks. As news of the Japanese landings combined with news of the loss of HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales, the colonials in the settlements such as Singapore tried to ignore the panic. However, when the refugees and displaced Europeans from Penang and the plantations began to arrive, they streamed into Singapore and Rangoon telling tales of Japanese barbarism, fueling defeatism and panic.⁸⁵

The British flight down to the safety of Singapore was in full view. Asians were outraged. It was clear that the British had abandoned all non-whites. The British resident

⁸⁴ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 119.

⁸⁵ Noel Barber, *Sinister Twilight: The Fall of Singapore* (London: Cox and Wyman, 1968), 55.

in Singapore, Duff Cooper, issued a radio broadcast claiming that all persons had been safely evacuated. On December 22, he stated that “The majority of the population had been evacuated” and by now people everywhere had seen the European survivors arriving in disarray in Singapore and Rangoon. His words were taken as “the majority” only pertaining to the white planter class. All claims of no distinction of race were seen through. Because it was clear that the flight from Penang was a panic and many were left behind, it was obvious that he meant the Europeans. This blatant lack of decorum and sensitivity solidified this anger and resentment.

Conclusion

The British would continue to be driven down the peninsula into Singapore. As they fled they fell into disarray due to the Japanese being more acclimated into jungle warfare. It had a psychological effect on the people of Malaya as this collapse unfolded around them. At first it was the Indian troops that went to face them and as the Japanese moved further south, it was the raw Australian recruits who met them. Each section of British troops was forced back after hard fighting. Percival wanted to fight a holding action in Northern Malaya but he could fall back at his discretion. The troops were coming back regardless. Not to mention the fact that the Japanese were infiltrating their ranks from all sides. This was another result of the botched flight from Penang and the many boats left in the harbor. The indigenous population and laborers never forgave the British for what they saw as a betrayal in Penang. The general infighting at headquarters in how to censor and report properly would go on to fuel inter service disagreements and blame in recounting history of the conflict long after the war ended. Cecil Brown left

Singapore on a flight to Batavia on January 23, 1942, three weeks before the surrender. He remained frustrated about the censorship problems for his duration in Southeast Asia.

As we have examined, the tone of the journalistic reports from 1938 to 1942 shifted from hope, to calls to action, to warnings, to a war fronting of all is well. At first most of the reports was well-intentioned commentary as to the importance of Asia. This was set against a fear of the Pacific Theater becoming a second rate backwater of a front. But as the crisis in China began to spill southward, the calls from journalist became more hurried. The British were not stretched too thin. They did not make any clear mistakes that would doom them until the fall of Penang. But by trying to do it all alone as the one hegemonic sea power when until a hurried attempt at the end to bring in the United States from neutrality, the British put themselves into a position of disadvantage. Singapore was a symbol of a complex power hold that the British did not want to part with or share and did not want to dissuade from the old ways in protecting. They thought they could adapt their way out of it but in the end, it was simply that they did not have enough tools to bring to the fight and did not seek out additional avenues until the last minute.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The British would continue to be driven down the peninsula into Singapore. As they fled they fell into disarray due to the Japanese being more acclimated to jungle warfare. It had a psychological effect on the people of Malaya as this collapse unfolded around them. Japanese planes continued to bomb Singapore daily. Up north the troops kept fighting bravely. At first it was the Indian troops that went to face them and as the Japanese moved further south, it was the raw Australian recruits who met them. Each section of British troops was forced back after hard fighting. Percival wanted to fight a holding action in Northern Malaya to slow the Japanese advance, but the Japanese were infiltrating the battlespace from all sides and the troops continued to fall back. This was another result of the botched flight from Penang and the many boats left in the harbor when the British failed to enact a proper scorched earth retreat policy. On February 9, 1942, the Japanese would cross the causeway to the island and spread out into Singapore cutting off vital arteries like the water reservoir. The British were holed up in Singapore in large numbers, but disarray and confusion cancelled this advantage and the siege was over in seven days. On February 15, despite being ordered to fight until the end, British Lt. General Arthur Percival surrendered to the Japanese. The iconic imagery of Percival marching to meet Lt. General Yamashita at the Ford Factory with a white flag of surrender and the Union Jack was a stunning and grim image of the end of an era. One

Australian officer said to Cecil Brown that day in Sydney that it was like “plunging a fork into a sponge.”⁸⁶

A feeling of shock was felt across the Empire and finger pointing quickly ensued. The Australians were upset that they sent troops just in time to have them wasted in surrender and cried betrayal. Churchill famously said Singapore was “the worst disaster and the largest capitulation in British history.” W. David McIntyre’s take in his book was “Imperial rhetoric had given way to sour grapes about Commonwealth obligations.”⁸⁷ *The Nation* quickly said in an article from February 27, 1942, “The Shape of Things,” that while there could be a tendency in the United States to place all the blame on British complacency in the laxity of Singapore’s defenses or a failure of a scorched earth policy, it cannot be ignored that responsibility also lies right with the United States. This exemplifies how towards the end, the tone of the writings had become a bit more titled towards the responsibilities of the Americans as the emerging global hegemon. Because the base was as essential to the United States defense policy as it was to the British, the thoughts that the United States should have done more as it had two months to provide help but did not.⁸⁸

We can learn so much from writings about Singapore from the turn of the twentieth century to the end of the First World War. The history of Singapore edited by Makepeace, Brooke, and Braddell takes us back to the beginning of the colony and its founding principles, such as Sir Stamford Raffles’s vision of universal free trade, that formed the core of its later development and success. The East India Company, the Indian

⁸⁶ Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, 506.

⁸⁷ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, 209.

⁸⁸ “The Shape of Things,” *The Nation*, February 21, 1942, 205-208.

Empire, and eventually the British Empire would enforce their own rules onto this approach; the spirit of the city remained as shown by the cultural melting pot Singapore developed into. And on that foundation, the British were able to build an imperial colony that would ultimately be the capital city of all commerce traveling through the Indian Ocean into the Pacific and vice versa. It was such an important gateway that its importance would go beyond the British Empire to be embraced by the Dutch and the Americans. Strategically, as Murray would show, it was seen by the military as a perfectly protected position for a naval presence and for a stronger Empire to project sea power to support the commercial enterprise. The potentials for Singapore after the early success would also feed the imperial mindset of placing so much responsibility to its abilities to hold together the region.

In the 1920s, the British felt it was their responsibility to enforce and hold together the “status quo” of European hegemony in the Pacific as they saw it. Asia was too important of an economic powerhouse with unlimited resources. Singapore was in a time of tranquility and the British for a time had no other competitors in the region. The naval disarmament conference of 1921-22 was fresh, as well as memories of war, and while the United States was slowly learning to embrace the Pacific, it had not yet exerted its influence into the region as a major power to challenge Great Britain. A spread from the *National Geographic Magazine* in 1926 show a peaceful wonder of the tropics and exalt the potential of this paradise as well as trumpeting the diversity of the colony. The 1920s were also a time that Singapore writing very much would look at the mineral trade, the rubber and tin mining, and the potential of exports. 1923 was also a time when the British would begin their construction on the new naval base, which lay just outside the

exclusion zone of the naval limitation treaties. The merits of the base would be debated on and off through the end of the 1930s and the completion of the base.

The 1930s were known in memories as the idyll summertime of Singapore, but as the decade went on the region went into a crisis mode with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931-32 and then into full alarm with the Sino-Japanese war of 1937. This would end the formal arms limitation treaties and cause the Western powers to begin to become more active in their operations in the Pacific. William Henry Chamberlain would write “Naval Bases in the Pacific” for *Foreign Affairs* arguing the merits of strong naval bases. He noted a strong naval base was equal to a strong battleship in modern naval warfare and this would become an accepted mantra as the United States became a formal presence along with the British and Dutch in the Pacific. The Singapore naval base would open in 1938 to great press fanfare, and the British would spend a great deal of time promoting their new base with pride. American news magazines like *Foreign Affairs*, *The Nation*, and *Time* would all pay attention as well. And writers such as John Gunther and Carveth Wells would be offering their own examinations on the region through their personal travels through the East. In Wells’s case, this also involved a detailed take on his time in Japanese occupied Shanghai and a very nervous Hong Kong.

By 1939 and 1940, it was clear to the British that by accepting the role of the hegemon in the Pacific, it was their responsibility to keep the peace as the Japanese war against China moved forward. Germany was at war in Europe, leading to the fall of the imperial powers of France and the Netherlands. This time would also see the British and Americans begin to discuss and practice cooperation in the region. Japan was the axe that would chop the globe in half and divert almost half of the military to the Pacific if they

were not properly pacified. The British would be responsible for the protection of the Dutch East Indies, where much of trade flowed through Singapore, keeping the Eastern side of the Indian Ocean sphere of the Empire open to the Pacific, and monitoring their own financial and natural resource investments in China, via Hong Kong. Rupert Emerson's *Foreign Affairs* essay "The Dutch East Indies Adrift" discussed this issue of the British and Dutch relationship and *Time* would also be one of the magazines to pose the question whether the time had come to confront Japanese aggression.

The tone would keep turning from hegemony to alarm as the 1940s rolled in and *Life* would publish its revealing pictorial essays on Singapore. They would exalt Hong Kong and Singapore as the "Thin Red Line of Empire" in the Far East.⁸⁹ These pictorial essays would go beyond just showing the merits and beauty of Singapore, but also begin to show fortifications along with photos of the rubber plantations and tin mines, as a reminder of Americans investments and interests in Asia. And deeper down in all of these articles, they would point out that Singapore was a naval base without a fleet. John Gunther would argue that it was imperative that Americans take a hard inventory of their national defense by glancing towards the Pacific.

The fight for Malaya lasted two months. During that time following the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was scrambling to get the United States Pacific responsibilities in line, as well as to move new ships into the Pacific. In Great Britain, it was also a time for moving pieces across the Empire to aid in the Pacific. The writings and reports on Singapore just called for it to hold while this could happen. But that was not to be the case and by February it was over. The finger pointing would continue through the rest of

⁸⁹ "Germany, Italy, and Japan Brandish a United Sword in Threat Against U.S.," 29.

the year until the battle of Coral Sea and Midway when the United States Navy turned the tide of the Pacific with dramatic victories at sea.

And yet scholars since that time have continued to argue over the causes and variables that led to the disaster in Singapore and Malaya in order to show that it was more nuanced than a single failure up the line and a combination of root causes that needed to be learned from. Quite possibly the endless possibilities and rapid rise of the first one hundred years of Singapore had placed a false sense of importance into the British. They held the keys to the most strategically relevant plots of infrastructure in the hemisphere. The arms limitations treaties that allowed for the base construction also meant that no Far East Fleet would drop anchors at the station. But in the British mind, they had the Empire, and if ships were needed, they could provide them quickly. No one foresaw the Axis powers at the time, and even then, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor temporarily crippling the American fleet.

The articles, books, and pictorial essays contributed through the eras show how Great Britain maneuvered through the period from 1900 to 1942 in regards to their imperial policy in the Far East. For a while they were ahead of the time, then operating within the times, then reacting to them as they came. Singapore was a visual game changer for the practice of power abroad, but it was not the lone event to trigger a movement. It is outside the scope of this project to debate military tactics, imperial policies towards nationalism and agency, or the rise of modern technology. These writings allow us to trace the trends of the late imperial era as they changed and evolved up through the Second World War, only to lay the groundwork for the future that would usher in a new

era of hyper powers, not imperial powers, in a new era of the Third World and the Cold War.

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