Review Essay

Starting from this issue, the Journal publishes full-length review essays covering three or more books on a similar or related topic. Authors of such review articles are expected to attempt a critical, state-of-the-art review and strive for original and new interpretations. Books to be reviewed are preferably those published within the past three years. Potential authors are encouraged to communicate with the Review Editor.

In Search of a History of Singapore?

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The writing of history is a reflection of the people who write it — their experiences and perceptions, hopes and fears. One Hundred Years of Singapore (Makepeace et al., 1991), Turnbull notes in her introduction, is dedicated to the trader-statesmen and trader-fighters and their descendants who had realised their imperial dreams on the island. “The contributors to these volumes”, she continues, “saw the settlement not as a separate island but an integral part of the peninsula, a bastion of empire and guardian of the Pax Britannica.” Hence the book focuses on the activities of these Europeans and relies heavily on their reminiscences and old newspapers.
The reading of history is no less a reflection of the selective interests of the reader. In picking up this reprinted edition of two volumes, first published in 1921, to celebrate the centenary of the founding of Singapore in 1919, my hope was to read something that would remind me of the nostalgic past, of which my reference point was as an undergraduate in the Bukit Timah campus between 1969 and 1972. Much of colonial Singapore still remained then. Much has gone now. The publishers were no doubt mindful of the resurgence of interest in Singapore's past in the last decade. In reading this volumes, I also expected to gain some insights on Singapore society in the 19th and early 20th century. A more serious consideration in my agenda is to review this book in the light of how historians perceive the writing of history in Singapore today.

For this purpose, I chose to look at three other works which reflect recent developments in local historiography. Edwin Lee's study of the early colonial administration of Singapore and its impact on the Chinese population is an attempt to tell the personal and human side of the story. He focuses on the personalities and actors involved, both colonizers and immigrants, and his interpretation offsets the gloss which the volumes by Makepeace et al. sometimes give to the role of colonists in the early development of Singapore. Warren's contribution represents a significant departure from the colonial tradition which has dominated Malayan historiography and is an attempt to write a social history of the ordinary lives of working people in colonial Singapore, rickshaw coolies. Rimmer and Allen's edited volume follow on in looking at the "underside" of local history by extending its coverage to plantation workers, tin mine coolies and railway workers in British Malaya. This review evaluates these developments and suggests the contribution historical sociology can make to the writing of a history of Singapore. It also views such efforts in the context of the development of the nation-state since Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965.

There is a growing self-consciousness amongst historians in Singapore that they should be writing about a state which acquired independence more than a quarter of a century ago and which has been, and still is, preoccupied with establishing its nationhood. A History of Singapore (Chew & Lee, 1991) was recently published and reflected this increasing self-awareness. Nearly two thirds of the book is devoted to tracing changes in the political, economic and social landscape of Singapore since independence in 1965. Albert Lau, a local historian, wrote (1992:46) —

The evolution of a distinct Singapore historiography, as the historian C. M. Turnbull points out, is a "comparatively new phenomenon" (1989: xii). Partly because of Singapore's colonial past as a constituent unit of British Malaya, earlier accounts of the island's history have treated Singapore's story as inseparable from Malayan history, woven inextricably into the fabric of consecutive genre of Malayan historiography. The attainment of separate nationhood did not provide the inspiration for the writing of a new history of Singapore. Instead, the past was initially neglected as Singaporeans searched for meaning and for their destiny in the present and in the future rather than in the