

BOOK REVIEW

Templer and the Road to Malayan Independence: The Man and His Time, by Leon Comber. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2015, 239 pp.

There are a number of books on General Sir Gerald Templer and his two year proconsulship in Malaya (1952–1954) as High Commissioner and Director of Operations but views on the man are somewhat mixed. One view describes him as a "martinet in manner and appearance"; another labeled him a dictator while a Malaysian scholar claimed the man was notorious for his violent temper and intemperate language. Then there are those who saw his crucial role in defeating the Communist uprising while others credited this success to the Briggs Plan which was put in place before his arrival in Malaya by the previous Director of Operations Lt. General Sir Harold Briggs. This brilliant plan forced the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) to focus on consolidation rather than military offensive through its withdrawal deep into the Malaya-Thai border and later into south Thailand.

Leon Comber provides a fresh insight to the argument by giving a more balanced account of the man. He argues that Templer's "own input was the vigour and military drive he infused into the campaign against the Communists" and for this Templer should be given credit. I agree with Comber's assessment of Templer who was widely accepted as an outstanding general but his dealing with politicians were not as remarkable. His "well known abrasiveness and use of barrack room language left one with the feeling that he was an old-world imperialist who was out of touch with the times who regarded with extreme distaste the abandonment of Britain's imperial responsibilities." Coming from a former imperial functionary himself this is certainly a perceptive assessment of Templer.

Leon Comber is no stranger to post-war Malaya. As major he landed with the returning British/Indian forces in Morib, Selangor in September 1945. Later he served as a Chinese speaking Special Branch officer in the Malayan Police dealing with military and political intelligence during the Malayan Emergency. This officer speaks Malay, Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) and Hindi. Comber is also a well known writer. He had written popular books on Chinese magic and superstition, Chinese ancestor worship and Chinese festivals. His more substantive works cover the May 13th incidence and Malay-Chinese relations, Chinese secret societies including for the 1950s and on the Special Branch. The Special Branch book entitled *Malaya's Secret Police 1845–1960: The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (published by Monash Asia Institute, Clayton in 2009) was based on official documents which he had seen aided by personal observation while he was in the force.

Comber's sources for the study are impeccable. Not many scholars have seen these sources and Comber was one of the few who managed to consult them. His experience as honorary ADC to Sir Henry Gurney and as Special Branch officer came in useful. Comber had referred extensively to official British documents that are kept at the British National Archives at Kew (CAB Series, CO 229, CO 537, CO 1022 and PREM 11) and the National Army Museum in Chelsea, London which keeps materials on Templer. He had also consulted the National Archives of Australia notably the reports and observations by Australian diplomatic officers in Malaya and Singapore, the National Archives of Malaysia, the National Archives of Singapore, official papers and government publications besides myriad books and essays relating to the period and Templer. Another important source are the private papers of important political luminaries from Malaysia which are deposited at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. These include the private papers of Phair Gan (P. G.) Lim, Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun H. S. Lee.

Templer and the Road to Malayan Independence is divided into eight chapters including the conclusion. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, the well known Distinguished Professor from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia provides a foreword extolling Comber's contribution in putting "face to a theory through Templer and his brief presence in colonial Malaya in the creation of 'colonial knowledge' of the Malaysian variety". The book discusses the background of Templer's appointment to replace the assassinated Henry Gurney, Templer's early days in Kuala Lumpur, the implementation of Templer's political directive, his distaste of the British advisors to the Malaysian Chinese Association, MCA (Dr. Victor Purcell and Francis Carnwell), his involvement in the formation of the Kinta Valley homeguard which was funded by wealthy Chinese tin magnates who were strong supporters of the MCA, Templer's dealing with the Malayan system of justice which was seriously flawed and only served colonial interests making a mockery of the much celebrated sense of British justice, his roadmap of Malayan self government and his departure from Malaya. As part of the roadmap towards self rule 2.6 million non-Malays, the majority of whom were Chinese, were accorded Malayan citizenship. Most of what he had done during those two years were part of the official directive that was handed to him by the Colonial Office prior to his departure to Malaya in 1952. However, contemporary Malaysians viewed these moves in a different light.

Scholars have pointed out Templer's military prowess but as an administrator and politician his record was less impressive. His relationship with leaders of the Malayan political establishment notably leaders of The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the MCA was poor. In fact he seemed to distrust them notably the Tunku. Asian civil servants in the colonial bureaucracy similarly found him offensive and difficult to handle. Templer was equally displeased with his senior officers who had close personal relations with Malaysians. Looking at recent studies on postwar Malaya one is struck by the

minimal reference to Templer and his role in ending the Emergency or in putting into place a Malayan road map for self government.

One individual who was at the receiving end of Templer's violent temper and intemperate language was the Malay nationalist Abdul Aziz Ishak, former Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) and avowed socialist who served as Minister of Agriculture in the first Tunku Cabinet. Comber had described the episode in the book based on various accounts including Victor Purcell's and the official records. On his return from attending Queen Elizabeth II inauguration Abdul Aziz was summoned to meet Templer at King's House (present Carcosa Sri Negara). Without being given the chance to defend himself he was given a tongue lashing and labeled a "rat, and a rotten journalist whose name stinks in Southeast Asia." In 1955 Abdul Aziz wrote of the entire episode in his short autobiographical account *Katak Keluar dari Bawah Tempurong* which was republished in 1987. Abdul Aziz provides his side of the episode and its ramifications in the chapter simply titled *Peristiwa "Tikus"*. Templer was visibly upset with what he had written on the Queen's coronation ceremony. As one of the four journalist from the Commonwealth who were allowed into Westminster Abbey where the ceremony took place Aziz's sharp eye caught many things which he recorded and later published by Malayan and Singapore newspapers. He recalled in the meeting with Templer that he was called a Bloody Fool, Idiot and so forth; he protested these name callings and refused to accept them. When he was repeatedly called a rat, his patience simply worn out and he stood up to leave the room. It was then that Templer challenged him to publish the meeting which he did in both the Singapore Standard and Utusan Melayu. It became hot news for two months. Aziz received many telegrams of support from within the country and from Britain and India. He even cited Purcell's comment on the matter deriding Templer. He received strong support from the Malays while UMNO Youth regarded him as a hero. Aziz was also subjected to strict scrutiny from the Special Branch looking for mistakes/errors including to check whether he has a license for keeping a radio and a \$25 fine for wrong parking. Templer refused to talk to him for four months although Templer reappointed him as member of the federal legislative council in January 1954. In 1957 both met during the independence celebration in Kuala Lumpur but on a different note, no longer as adversaries.

According to Tun Abdul Razak Templer (*Tun Abdul Razak: Riwayat Hidup dan Zamannya* by William Shaw, 1977) was known to be firm with civil servants but at times could joke with them. As a newly wed Abdul Razak was on honeymoon in Penang in 1952 when he received a telegram from Templer to go to Cameron Highlands to check on the problem of flies; Abdul Razak refused to cut short his honeymoon. With regard the transfer of the state capital of Pahang from Kuala Lipis to Kuantan, the military and political supremo was unhappy with the change as he favoured Temerloh. As the Pahang State Secretary the adamant Abdul Razak had to face an equally adamant Templer who resorted to

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the usual strong language "I want you to move to Temerloh, but if you want to go to hell, just go to hell." Nevertheless the concept "the heart and mind" of the Emergency as rigorously implemented by Templer was later reapplied by Abdul Razak with equal vigour in his rural development planning after 1957.

Templer and the Road to Malayan Independence is useful in highlighting Templer's presence in Malaya and its impact on Malaysian politics. In a way the book has come a long way to rectify his position in Malaysian history while Malaysians of the older generations have differing viewpoints of the man.

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