‘What if? ... Post-war choices in Singapore’

The launch of "What If?...Post-War choices in Singapore" took place in the Surrender Chamber, now renamed City Hall Chamber, City Hall, on the afternoon of the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War II in the Asia-Pacific area. For many Singaporeans it was their first chance to enter a room of great historical significance. The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board’s Photographic Exhibition was a visual reminder of the exciting and turbulent period.

Entries in the visitors book proved it was a day of Remembrance for many. Poignant thoughts were recorded from people who either participated or had near-and-dear ones in the momentous events which were part of the most extensive war the world has ever known. Some foreign visitors were surprised at the modernity of the island, which they had not seen since service days.

Our Guest of Honour, Mr David Marshall, a prominent lawyer, politician and latterly diplomat for many years, graciously agreed to launch our latest publication which was written in conjunction with the commemoration ceremonies organised by MITA.

* See Pages 2 and 3 for fuller report.

**Annual General Meeting...**

The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held on 1 August 1995 at the National Museum Theatrette was called to order at 6pm.

The President, Mr William Lim Siew Wai read his Report. The Hon Treasurer, Dr Kwok Kian Woon, urged members to come forward with projects.

After the election, Mr Lim asked if there was anyone willing to be co-opted on to the Executive Committee. Ms Boey Yut Mei and Mr Robert Powell agreed to become members of the Committee.

When the meeting was thrown open to the floor, Assoc. Prof Koh Tai Ann noted that the membership had dropped and asked if there was a membership profile. The President said that due to lack of social activities it was difficult to build up such a profile.

Mr Mok Wei Wei outlined the Chinese-Educated Community Conference. This will be another first for the Society as it will be conducted in Mandarin. Suggestions from the floor were numerous. Some felt that there could be a tie-up with a membership drive if the programme was innovative. Mr Mok and Dr Kwok who are spearheading this project promised the sub-committee would consider all the points raised and the result may be a different way of treating the subject matter.

Whilst this project focuses on a small distinct community in Singapore, the wider perspective has not been overlooked and the Society, through Dr Kwok Kian Woon is exploring the possibility of collaborating on a project which examines the unique Singapore experience from a cross-cultural view. There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned and refreshments were served.

* See Page 4 for President's Report.
'What if ... Post-war choices in Singapore' launched by Mr David Marshall

Many people gathered to watch the launching of the Society's latest book, "What if?...Post-War Choices in Singapore", by Mr David Marshall, who came from all walks of life and even different countries, since the veterans organizations had mustered large groups to tour the war theatre of fifty years ago

Mr Kwa Chong Guan welcomed the guests and visitors to the ceremony and then called upon the President to give his address.

"At the surrender ceremony on 12 September 1945, a Union Jack was raised over the Padding. However, for the multi-racial crowd looking at the flag fluttering over the Municipal Building, the Union Jack no longer held the same mystique. The Japanese Occupation had damaged the myth of British superiority. There was now a new political consciousness stirring across the land.

An interactive book
Our new publication, "What if?...The Choices of Post-War Singapore" is an interactive book. It allows the reader, within the context of his own personal environment, to decide the direction in which he wants to go - from how he wants to spend his money, to where he wants to be educated, to what kind of work he wants to do. He even gets to decide his nationality, which political party to support, whether he should or should not be a political activist and the form of government he wants.

Our Guest of Honour, Mr David Marshall needs no introduction to informed Singaporeans. However, many present may not know that he was a prisoner-of-war of 3 and a half years during the Japanese occupation; he spent the first year in Singapore and the remaining 2 and a half years in Northern Japan working in a coal mine. According to David, 600 prisoners from Singapore were sent to Japan and only 40% survived.

During the post war period, David made many important choices. In 1955, he stood for election as a member of the Labour Front. Having won the election, he gave up his legal practice and became Singapore's first Chief Minister. He resigned after 1 and a half years, as he and his delegation failed to obtain satisfactory terms of self-government from the British.

Difficult choices
In the subsequent years, David continued to make many difficult choices which in some instances substantially affected his career and his family life. He made them based on principles which he firmly believes in and was not deterred or discouraged by possible adverse consequences. Today we salute David for his courage and convictions in making the many important choices during his career.

Before David Marshall launched the book, Singapore Heritage Society would like to congratulate the author, Ms Lee Geok Boi for writing this very interesting book. The Society would also like to thank its sponsors M/s Torie Holdings Pte Ltd and M’s Hiap Holdings [Pte] Ltd for their financial support which made the publication of this book possible.

The Society also thanks the staff of the National Archives and Oral History Department, Singapore History Museum, and the National Library for their assistance and the use of their materials.

First of its kind
This is the first Singapore book to present our historical legacy in a fun way while giving the reader a chance to view the lessons of history. Singapore Heritage Society is proud to publish this book as the Society's contribution to the collective national efforts to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific War.

Mr Kwa then called upon Mr Marshall to speak and after some consultation, it was agreed that Mr Kwa would read the speech on Mr Marshall's behalf.

Mr Kwa then invited members and guests to partake of the refreshments, where there was an opportunity to purchase the book which Mr Marshall gladly autographed.

* See next page for full text of Mr Marshall's speech.
DAVID MARSHALL’S ADDRESS

There are many books about the Japanese Occupation, about Syonan-To and the years immediately afterwards - biographies of heroes like Lim Bo Seng, autobiographies of ordinary and not so ordinary people - there's a new one by Maurice Baker for instance - there are history books from the British or Japanese points of view and there are studies of political change. But this book “What If?” is different. It tries to see events from the inside. What alternatives faced people? - ordinary workers or high government officials; anxious parents or idealistic students.

The social scenery was very different from that of today. The human memory can be very short and as those of us who were there, who made some other choices, pass from the scene, what is left? The effect of decisions which we or your fathers and grandfathers made is a legacy received by children in school today.

It is good that we should put hate and bitterness behind us and know that today is a different world, but by understanding and empathizing with the people who made the choices in the 40s and 50s the richness of the tapestry which makes up Singapore’s social scenery today can be appreciated and understood.

The other day two educated young Singaporeans asked me “What was Syonan-To?” I was shocked.

In this book, we see many facets of Singapore in the 40s and 50s. We notice there were many links with Malaya. We notice many different life expectations from those of today.

Look for a minute at the choices the governing power had. First the British Military Administration, then the Colonial government, which was becoming aware that old fashioned British Colonial Office authority from London was on its way out.

In 1945, the population was hungry. What should be done? They chose to continue the Japanese system of rationing and to establish community feeding centres along with the free market in goods which meant high prices.

There were 70,000 Japanese troops on the island. What should happen to them? They were re-employed in much needed labour teams for the next two years or so and only a few were tried for war crimes. The authorities could have made other choices.

There was mass unemployment. Labour exchanges were set up but would you have sought work there? This book shows there were other choices you might have made - turned to clan associations or kin in Singapore or elsewhere, or set up in a one man business.

Education became an urgent issue - English schools and Malay primary schools were again being financed by government. If you were Chinese where would you have chosen to send your child to school? The privately run Chinese language schools were politically influenced by either KMT or Communist movements and not geared to the future in Singapore. The English language schools were geared to the needs of the Colony but would your children lose their Chinese culture? And what about University? There was no tertiary education in Chinese in Singapore until the late 50s. You can empathize with those faced with choices about education as, then as now, education was seen as the key to a better way of life. The creation of Nantah came with mass support.

Political groupings were emerging - we can appreciate with the help of the book, why some chose to support or join the Communist guerrillas in Malaya, why some supported the Colonial setup, why some chose to be part of the growing Trade Unions and others made their views on the future known through a periodical Fajar or through the medical Alumni Association. Others chose to go to China to build a new future knowing they would never be allowed to return to Singapore.

The country needed economic development and capital was short. We are shown the alternative uses for capital which faced those who had money.

Often other people’s decisions seem odd or inexplicable but we are helped to see why people chose as they did and to appreciate the why’s and wherefores of what happened - why for instance decisions made about an abandoned Dutch girl led to rioting and racial and political strife.

Nowadays it seems quite normal for high officials to be answerable to the citizens, but in the context of the 50s the choice I made to Meet The People sessions caused surprise and alarm to many. This is just on the choices made which had long term effects and as you ruminate with this book it is possible to speculate not only on how would you have chosen on any issue but on how Singapore would be today if the choices had been made differently.
The past year has been busy with the Society moving into new areas both here and overseas. The seminar Our Place in Time held late last year, in conjunction with the Substation was such a success that we are now in the process of publishing the papers later this year. The sub-committee formed for this purpose comprised Dr Kwok Kian Woon, and Mr Kwa Chong Guan.

The Society is a member of the Asia & West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation and in November of last year they organised a Symposium on Hanoi in that city where Geraldene Lowe represented us along with another Society member, Boey Yut Mei. They presented a talk cum slide show on "Conservation in Singapore". Geraldene also gave a brief history of the Society and its most recent activities and presented a copy of "Living Legacy".

A seminar, "Future of Asia Past" was organised by the Asia Society in Chiangmai. I was invited to chair a session of their meeting which was held in January.

We were also asked to be part of the MITA 50th Anniversary of WWII Committee and we have undertaken to publish a book on the period entitled What If? which is an interactive book which allows the reader to make decisions on the direction in history he wants to go. This is the first locally produced book to present history in this fun fashion. The author, Lee Geok Boi is well-known to members as the author of "Syonan" and our newsletter "Roots". The Committee chaired by Mr Kwa Chong Guan with Mr Goh Eck Kheng from the Society and Mrs Lily Tan from the National Museum have worked very hard in a short space of time to meet the August deadline.

The URA has set up an Architectural Heritage Awards scheme and invited the Society to be represented. The ceremony held in July had Mr Lim Hng Kiang, Minister for National Development as its guest of Honour.

Geraldene has, as usual, undertaken a number of walks for members and at the URA's request conducted a heritage walk for Ang Mo Kio School.

So it has not been an uneventful year in some respects.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our donors. The Shaw Foundation is again supporting us by donating $10,000 for the publication of Our Place in Time, and our other publication this year, What If? has been given $25,000 by Torie Holdings Pte Ltd and another $5,000 from Hup Hiat Holdings Pte Ltd. These donations are banked into our NAC account thereby giving the donor tax exemption.

You can see from this that we endeavour to make each project self-financing by donation on a project basis.

Our corporate members should not be forgotten as they keep us afloat with their generous $1,000 subscription. As we keep finances to a minimum by not maintaining an office we are able to maintain a healthy bank balance.

Although we have been active academically, once again, we are still not doing too well in the social activities organised by the Society in spite of much discussion at our monthly meetings. To alleviate matters we are hoping to collaborate more closely with the Culture Society, whose Chairman, Ms Boey Yut Mei is also a Society member. The general idea is to have one major and two or three minor events a year and it is at this point that I urge any member who can contribute in this field to come forward. It is not necessary to sit on the main committee and there will be secretarial help available if that is perceived to be the problem.

But we are not entirely void of interesting projects for the coming year, apart from the launches of the two books I mentioned earlier, What If? the WWII interactive book and Our Place in Time, I would like to mention two such which are on-going and for which we have great hopes.

Mr Mok Wei Wei is chairing a committee with Dr Kwok Kian Woon to organise a workshop in Chinese to talk about the culture and literature of the Chinese in Singapore in the post-war period. This is fixed for mid-year 1996. We are also having discussions with a multi cross-cultural group of young scholars from different ethnic communities wishing to foster a better understanding between the communities in Singapore and I would like to call upon DR Kwok Kian Woon to explain a little more later.

There is an invitation from the Nara Machizukuri Center to send a representative to their Symposium on October 27-30th. The delegate is requested to give a short speech with slides on SHS and submit a paper by the end of August. Flights, hotels and meals are provided, so if there is anyone here tonight who would like to take advantage of this, could you please see me after the meeting.

Finally I cannot reiterate enough that the Society will only thrive if support is forthcoming from the membership. We are open to any suggestions and welcome any enthusiastic member who wishes to contribute in any way in keeping with the aims of the Society.
Ms Boey Yut Mei and Ms Geraldene Lowe represented the Society at the Third AWPNUC Annual Symposium held in Hanoi, Vietnam, from 7-12 November 1994. The theme was “Ancient Cities in Transition: The Challenges for Conservation”. The Symposium addressed a range of issues contributing to the preservation of Hanoi, including transport, infrastructure, city planning (housing and employment) and preservation of the Ancient and Colonial Quarters. It was jointly hosted by the People’s Committee and the Chief Architect’s Office.

Prof. Nguyen Lan, Chief Architect of Hanoi, opening address dealt with “Development Planning for Hanoi and Opportunity for Investment”. Hanoi is the centre of the Red River Delta with a GDP increase of 10.55% on average in the years from 1991-93. During that time investment reached US$1.68 billion from nearly two dozen countries.

The Ancient and Colonial Quarters, constructed in the 19th and 20th centuries in French architectural style, are to be preserved. The old streets lined with two-storey shophouses, have, in some cases, been reconstructed to four and five storeys, which stand out dramatically. Conservation is difficult as enormous changes in the cultural, social, environmental and economic sectors are anticipated. Ms Boey’s presentation of “Conservation Areas in Singapore City” seemed very appropriate.
As usual, Geraldene Lowe was on hand for much of the year to take members on some of her famous walks. Her historical knowledge of Singapore is so renowned that soon you will be able to read of her walks, in a forthcoming book, as well as joining her making them.

The first, this year, was at Chinese New Year when Geraldene took members around the Istana grounds. The start was 8am but this seemed to be extremely optimistic as the heavens had opened and a walk through grass and grounds seemed a very dim prospect, but the clouds passed and by the appointed time the weather had improved enough for the walk to go ahead. This walk was repeated on May Day, when the grounds were open for the first time for this occasion.

Later in February there was a change of venue with a walk through the Kampung Glam area and the Hajjah Fatimah and Sultan Mosques as members saw how Muslims were preparing for the end of Ramadan. Once again the weather was inclement and some thought the walk would be cancelled, but conditions improved and people were able to see tombstone carvers, blacksmiths and ended sampling cakes at the food stalls around the mosque.

An unique tour was conducted in June which had the theme of tiles, of which there are many examples in Singapore. Because of distance, a bus was essential. The route covered a Chinese temple, with both Oriental and Occidental tiles, a Catholic church, Eu Tong Seng’s Theatre decorated with opera figures and on to the Railway Station to the hand-painted tiles depicting scenes of Malaya - coconuts, tin mining, rubber tapping, trading, vegetables and rice. Then it was the turn of the Serangoon Road area and finally to a shop selling old tiles from Europe, India and Japan.

On 30th September a dinner-cum-walk was organized in the Little India area to see the Navaratri (Navas-nine, rathri=night) Festival of dance. This is celebrated for the first nine days of the new moon in the month of Puratasi. The large group met in the Bellios House off Buffalo Road where Geraldene gave a brief history of a very unusual dwelling which has been restored. Dinner was then held in a restaurant specializing in Andhra cuisine where our memories and observations were tested in a quiz organized by Ms Boey Yut Mei. When dinner was over, a short walk through the back lanes brought us to the Kalliaman temple where a large crowd was watching young women dancing in the Bharata Natyam style from south India, a very disciplined form and much appreciated by the audience. The visit was completed by a short history of the Hindu Pantheon.

SHS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND RENEWAL FORM

I wish to join the Singapore Heritage Society as (tick appropriate box below):

☐ Ordinary member
(Singapore citizens/permanent residents aged over 21 only, annual subscription $50.00)

☐ Corporate member
(all organisations, no voting rights, not eligible for office, invited as observers to meetings, annual subscription $1000.00)

Name: Mr/Ms/Miss/Ms...

Organisation (corporate members)...

Address:...

Telephone: (Home) (Office)

I enclose my cheque for $...

RENEWAL OF SUBSCRIPTION

I, enclose a cheque for $50.00.

Date: Signature:

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

"OUR PLACE IN TIME"
The papers presented at this Conference will be published in the New Year. This project was sponsored by the Shaw Foundation.

"THE FAMOUS WALKS OF GERALDENE LOWE"
At last, Geraldene’s walking tours are to be published in a forthcoming book.

SEMINAR: CHINESE-EDUCATED COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE
The Society is organizing its first seminar to be conducted in Mandarin in the latter part of 1996. The seminar will focus on the changes within this community from the '50s.