BOOK REVIEWS

Mubin Sheppard – *Tunku: His Life and Times*.

The Authorized Biography of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj

(Subang Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 2007, 2nd printing), paperback, 234 pp. ISBN: 967-9784-95-9

Christoph Marcinkowski *LAIS Malaysia*

The reissuing of Mubin Sheppard's *Tunku: His Life and Times*, the biography of Malaysia's 'Father of Independence' Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj (1903–1990), by Pelanduk Publications, one of Malaysia's leading publishing houses, could not be timelier as Malaysians and their friends had been celebrating the 50th anniversary of the country's freedom from colonialism. This work by Sheppard, a historian of Malaysian culture and heritage who was a close friend of the Tunku, became a classic after it was published by Pelanduk for the first time – in the present version – in 1995.

Mubin (originally Mervyn) Sheppard will always be remembered as a great friend of Malaysia. He was a British Muslim of Anglo-Irish ancestry, who for a long time had a close relationship with the Tunku. Mubin had a distinguished career serving both the Colonial and the Malaysian Government. He arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1928 and was employed in the Malayan Civil Service. During World War II, he was fighting in the defence of Malaya, serving as Company Commander in the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force, and was subsequently interned for three and a half years by the Japanese occupiers in Singapore. Sheppard's first post-war appointment in the colonial administration was in 1946, as the first Director of Public Relations Malaya, the predecessor of Malaysia's current Ministry of Information. He later served as British Adviser in two Malay states. In the 1950s, during the fight against the communist insurgents, Sheppard was responsible for the Emergency Food Denial operation which covered the entire Malay Peninsula, playing a very crucial role in combating the terrorists on the logistic front. After *Merdeka*, Malaysia's first leader after independence from Britain, Tunku Abdul Rahman, made Sheppard responsible for setting up the National Archives and, soon after, the National Museum, of which he was in charge until 1963. As a matter of fact, Sheppard had to create the Museum anew, as it had been destroyed accidentally by US airplanes in the final stages of World War II. After his retirement in 1964, Sheppard continued to

serve Malaysia in various capacities, such as editor of the journal of the Malaysian Historical Society, later known as *Malaysia in History*, and editor and honorary secretary of the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. He wrote 17 books, mainly about the history and culture of Malaysia, some of which were awarded Malaysian and international prizes. Malaysia's National University, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM, and Universiti Sains Malaysia, USM, both awarded him Honorary Doctorates of Letters. He was awarded the title *Tan Sri* by the Federal Government and that of *Dato'* by the Malaysian states of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. In Malaysia, he is particularly remembered as founder member of Badan Warisan Malaysia and of Sahabat Warisan Malaysia. Sahabat Warisan Malaysia ('Friends of the Heritage of Malaysia Trust') was a society set up in 1984 to support Badan Warisan Malaysia in its objectives. The Mubin Sheppard Memorial Prize is a culmination of one of its fundraising efforts. In 1995, Sahabat was dissolved and its membership was merged with that of Badan Warisan. His deep love for the history, culture and his fellow Malaysians is reflected in his service as the first Honorary Secretary General of the Muslim Welfare Organisation of Malaysia (PERKIM), which was conceived by his friend, the Tunku. Mubin Sheppard passed away on 11 September 1994. The Mubin Sheppard Memorial Prize was established to stimulate students' awareness of Malaysia's cultural heritage.

The first print of *Tunku: His Life and Times* has had its own history: It dates back to an earlier work by Sheppard on the life of the Tunku in two volumes, *Tunku: A Pictorial Biography, 1903–1957* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk, 1984) and *Tunku: A Pictorial Biography, 1957–1987* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk, 1987). The volumes offer a great collection of the Tunku's pictures from various stages of his life – from his childhood and his Cambridge student's life to his political heydays. In order to prepare himself well before embarking on his project, Sheppard compiled hundreds of questions for the Tunku to answer on events of his life. Tunku Abdul Rahman recorded the answers on tape and Pelanduk Publications transcribed them. These transcripts, in turn, were used by Sheppard as his raw material in writing the book. The decision to publish *Tunku: His Life and Times* after the demise of the 'Father of Independence' was planned and agreed upon earlier by the late Mubin Sheppard with the consent of the Tunku. The text contained in the 1995 (and 2007) versions of *Tunku: His Life and Times* has been reproduced accurately from the afore-mentioned two-volume *Tunku: A Pictorial Biography*, with an additional chapter to record the passing of Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Several biographies have been published on the Tunku before and after Sheppard's work, and there might be some truth in the common wisdom that biographies are mostly more interesting in terms of what they do *not* mention than for what they *do*. Sheppard's work, however, is somewhat different – in particular because of the manifold 'nature' of its author: a former senior civil servant in Malaya's colonial

administrative machinery; a sincere convert to Islam, the religion of the majority of former colonial 'subjects'; a close friend to the 'topic' of his endeavour as a writer; and last, but not least, if not above all, a former member of the British ruling class who fell in love with Malaya and decided to stay on in order to accompany Malaysia on her way. Sheppard had thus been able to draw a picture of the Tunku and his times that is much more vivid and telling than what is usually offered on the lives of great statesmen and leaders. Moreover, another reason for the appeal and importance of this biography is the significance of its 'topic', the Tunku, within the history of Malaysia and in comparison with other independence leaders of former colonies, many of which faced subsequently a rather uncertain, if not troublesome future. Compared with this, the Tunku should perhaps also be remembered – by Malaysians and foreigners alike – as the leader and, in a sense, founder, of a stable, prosperous and democratic country which features 50 years after independence (contrary to countless other countries that underwent struggles for freedom from colonialism) a freely-elected government – currently the world's longest-serving – with an alliance – Barisan Nasional, BN – that mirrors Malaysia's ethnic groups, religions, and cultures.

Sheppard's book consists of 18 chapters that evolve around crucial events in Tunku's life. The preface by Sheppard is dated 1 August 1994 and appears thus to have been written only very shortly before his death the following month. Most impressing to this reviewer has been the ability of the author to present to his readers a picture that does not let Tunku appear as 'superhuman', a kind of 'super-hero' – again, contrary to many other of the world's early post-independence leaders of the 1950s, such as Egypt's Nasser. Most of Tunku's achievements as a leader are known to Malaysians and politically interested individuals abroad. What was lacking *before* Sheppard published his biography, however, was a portrait of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the man, a picture that would reveal as much as possible of his upbringing and even personal habits – even those which would be perceived as signs of weakness by certain people. To the mind of this writer, the particular fascination of Tunku consists in his unpretentious, honest and humble, yet steadfast, way of life, whether before or after he went into politics and assumed the leadership of the independence movement of his country. He was born as a prince; a son of a ruling sultan in the Malay state of Kedah and sent to Cambridge to study law, he was often perceived as displaying a typical 'rich kid's' attitude. The book does not only mention that Tunku's ancestry is Siamese from his mother's side (a fact which everyone knows in Malaysia), but also offers deep insights into the setting of Kedah at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when it had been still under Siamese suzerainty, and into the various connections between the courts in Bangkok and Kedah. These connections reflected, among many other things, the

facts that members of Kedah's royalty – including the Tunku – often spent a part of their lives in the Siamese capital.

Upon his return from Britain, Tunku Abdul Rahman was posted at various administrative functions in the countryside of Kedah, where he could see for himself the often appalling living-conditions of the locals. His sense for justice destined him to become their champion – without becoming an exaggerated version of 'Robin Hood' – often supporting them in their petitions, even to the extent of making enemies among his peers and superiors. During World War II, he 'rescued' – in fact 'kidnapped' – his incapacitated father, the sultan, from a perhaps ill-fated escape to the strategically important island of Penang, which doubtlessly would have been a desirable bombing target for Japanese airplanes. During the brutal Japanese occupation period he tried to improve the lot of his people by pleading their case to the new rulers, however, never by giving up his dignity, before, towards the end of the war, opposing the occupiers openly. This part of the book, dealing with pre-independence Malaya and Tunku's life *before* his involvement in the independence movement was the most rewarding one to this reviewer. The rest is part of Malaysian national history and has been told by others.

Many of Sheppard's readers – especially non-Malaysians who spent some time in the Malaysian capital – will be interested in the many trivia provided by him on Kuala Lumpur as it looked during the days of the Tunku – prior to the massive transformation that took place subsequently, in particular during the Mahathir era. It had been the Tunku who conceived the idea for the building of the beautiful National Mosque, the National Museum, the arrangements concerning the *Dataran Merdeka* or 'Freedom Square', and the National Monument which commemorates the heroes of Malaysia and the Commonwealth nations who gave their lives for the defence of Malaya against the Japanese invaders and the communist terrorists. All of those buildings have since then become major landmarks of Kuala Lumpur.

In sum, the book offers much more than what is usually to be found in a biography. It grants not only Malaysians but also foreign friends of this country with a deep insight into what it meant to fight for independence in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious context, to unite a nation, and to preserve its freedom from the threat of Communism and against malicious envy from the part of others. Moreover, Tunku Abdul Rahman's particularly humane (and often 'all too human') attributes emerge perhaps best from Sheppard's book: his humbleness in spite of being of royal stock, his aversion to false pride, his sense for reality, and his being true to himself and his own words, features that have often also been attested by men who went different ways, among them Singapore's leader Lee Kuan Yew. It is thus hoped that Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj and Tan Sri Dato' Al-Haj Mubin Sheppard will be remembered not only by Malaysians, but also by all those who have become acquainted with the country, its people, and its diverse cultural heritage.