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Who remembers?

By U-En Ng

'REFLECTIONS of Pre-Independence Malaya' offers an insight into the enigmatic Datuk Jaafar Onn. U-EN NG writes.

A MERE half century has passed since the formation of our Federation and, sadly, for many those events signify little today.

How much has been forgotten in the rush for material progress that has been shaping our national consciousness?

Who remembers that small, precious flame of burgeoning nationalism - a flame nurtured so long and so carefully by so many lest it gutter and die, or grow into an uncontrollable rage that might consume us entirely?

Who remembers the promise those times held? A promise not of the glittering, successful life that matters so much to us now, but of the mere chance - inestimably valuable - to shape one's own future?

Who remembers Datuk Onn Jaafar, the first Umno president - a man whose brilliance, vision and honour gave him the strength to shape events around him just as much as they gave him the humility to be shaped by them?

"This country and its people owe him a great debt," writes Datuk Mohamed Abid, a member of Onn's extended family, in the new edition of his book Reflections of Pre-Independence Malaya.

Encouraged by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the author wrote this work as a collection of reminiscences - he enjoyed a close personal relationship with Onn's family (his father having served as Onn's personal secretary) as well as others such as Tunku Abdul Rahman whose lives have become synonymous with Malaysia's history.

The new edition's highlights include valuable translations of Onn's speeches and previously unreleased photographs of Onn and other luminaries of the time.

"It was hardly surprising that the younger generation of Malays knew nothing of him [but] it came as an even greater surprise to discover that some of my own colleagues, people from my generation, knew very little concerning who he was, let alone what contributions he had made."

Mohamed's conversational - anecdotal - style of writing will appeal to many and his protests about not being a "proper historian" will go unheeded. Proper history is dry and tedious. Mohamed's accounts are quite the contrary.

Each of his chapters deals with a person who knew or worked with Onn. These portraits range from brief but illuminating second-hand accounts (such as the chapter on Sir Gerald Templer) to lengthier sections based on the author's personal experience.

In its style and content, this book will prove invaluable to those keen on understanding the the maturity of Onn's thinking and his courageous, often difficult, and little-understood motivations.

Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of Onn's ideas was contained in the speech he delivered to the Umno General Assembly in March 1951, a speech with reverberations that continue in some measure to this day:

"His ideas were too advanced for the Malay mentality at the time," said Dr Mahathir in a speech included in the appendix.

"He suggested that Umno's doors should be open to Malaysians of other racial groups, namely the Chinese and the Indians."

The proposal proved unpopular and was defeated. Onn resigned the presidency.

"His farsightedness was not appreciated, perhaps due to the fact that

the Malays at the time were not prepared for such a visionary," said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a speech likewise included in the appendix.

"Onn recognised this and realised that this was an obstacle which could hinder not only his leadership, but also the implementation of policies beneficial to his people. Therefore, he decided to vacate the post."

To Mohamed's credit, he includes this very speech in a collection of 18 translated for this edition with admirable clarity by Dr Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas:

"I have asked Umno members to throw open the doors [of Umno] before they are closed by someone else," said Onn. (Incidentally, according to Syed Ali Tawfik, Onn always delivered his speeches impromptu.)

"Today, I believe that the representatives present here are already aware of [other people's] plans and proposals. These flowers will blossom and bear fruit. They plan and propose to establish several political parties ... which do not confine membership to just one race, rather they would throw open their doors to anyone willing to be loyal to the Constitution approved by their party.

"We need to play the violin loudly to the tune of our song, let it not be the case that someone else plays while we only dance to the tune."

With this and other stories, Reflections of Pre-Independence Malaya allows us an otherwise rare opportunity to glimpse into the our own past.

Mohamed has performed a signal service in the cause of Malayan (and Malaysian) history. While his intention is not to answer every question we might have about the life of this enigmatic leader, it guides us well on our path to understanding our nation and its history.

If we are today even half as mature in our minds as Onn, we might perhaps finally claim our true legacy: the right to determine our own futures.

History. Who remembers? We will.

In a way, we must.

* `Reflections Of Pre-Independence Malaya' is published by Pelanduk and retails at RM160.

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