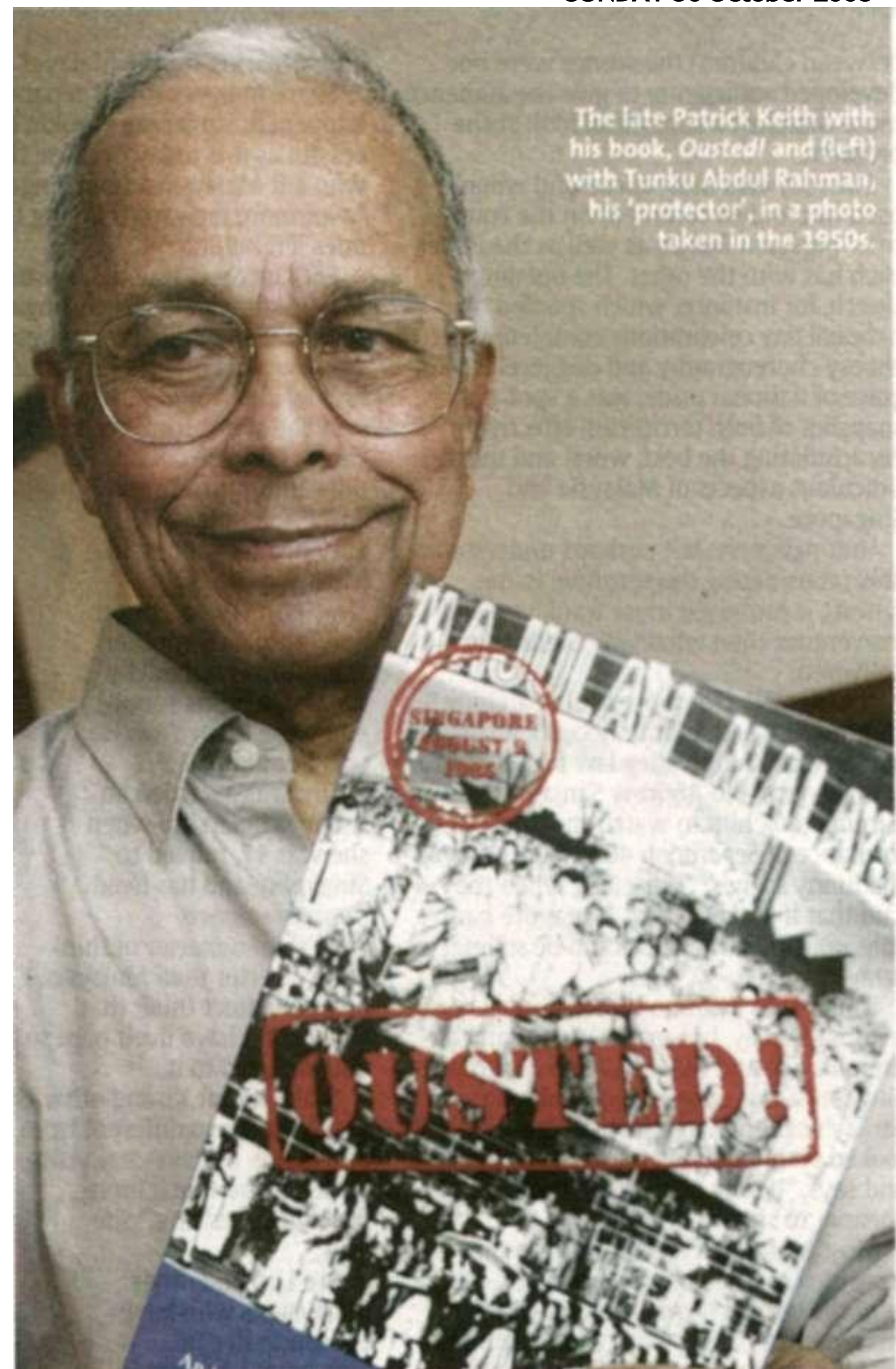


Insight



The late Patrick Keith with his book, *Ousted!* and (left) with Tunku Abdul Rahman, his 'protector', in a photo taken in the 1950s.

# A journalist remembers

**S**IR Patrick Keith. I know where your wife works. We will rape her and kill her. And if we don't get her, we'll get your daughter."

The message was written on a piece of paper, smeared with blood and folded around a bullet. It was not the first of its kind, but it was the last received by Keith. Shortly after this threat was delivered, he made the decision to leave Malaysia. He and his wife, Constance Pereira, emigrated to Australia. The year was 1968.

"I didn't want to leave," Keith says in an interview in Petaling Jaya earlier this month. Keith was in Malaysia for the unofficial launch of his book *Ousted!* and also to attend a reunion with his old friends and fellow-journalists, like M. G. G. Pillai, Ahmad Merican and Felix Abisheganaden, from the years before independence.

Keith was a journalist at *The Malay Mail* from 1947 to 1949. He

then moved to *The Straits Times* where he stayed three years before joining Radio Malay where he worked until he left the country.

In *Ousted!* Keith presents the story of the Malaysia-Singapore split as seen from his ringside seat as a journalist and, from 1965, the deputy director of external information, as well as a well-liked and trusted aide of first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The book is published by Singapore-based Media Masters, headed by Norma Miraflor and Ian Ward, who also co-wrote and published in 2003 *Chin Peng: My Side of History*.

Ward calls *Ousted!* a "publishing milestone". In an e-mail interview, the former South-East Asian correspondent for British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* (1962-1987) says, "The ejection of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 was surely an event of immense political and historical importance, not only to the

two countries immediately involved, but to the immediate South East Asian region and, indeed, internationally.

"How many other states have been thrown onto the international stage through an ousting? Yet, as vital as these events have been, it has taken 40 years for the first complete book on the subject to be made available to the general public."

Keith's clear and vivid account of this segment of history is told from the perspectives of three key players in the separation story: Tunku Abdul Rahman; Singapore's then chief minister Lee Kuan Yew; and Tan Siew Sing, president of the Malaysian Chinese Association.

It claims to be an "even-handed look at the racial politics" of the time and its publishers think this claim is entirely valid.

"Keith's book is far more than a segment recollection," says Miraflor, also by e-mail, "Everything he has touched on in the book is documented. Equally important, the author has studiously avoided the ever-present temptation of injecting his presence on the numerous episodes he recounts."

Keith has always been known for his candour, when he was a journalist and while working in the government service. As a result, he incurred the wrath of Ahmed Sukarno, Indonesia's first President (1945-1968), whose supporters were responsible for the aforementioned threats on Keith and his family.

"Sukarno singled me out," says Keith. "It was reported to me that he once said, There is a white man called Sir Patrick Keith who is blackguarding me. He is spreading all kinds of lies. I will make an edict: We will kill him'."

Keith was not a knight of the British Empire nor a mouthpiece of the Malaysian Government. But he did feel responsible for relaying the truth - that Sukarno was promoting unrest by spreading anti-Malaysian propaganda. With his life and his family's at stake, Keith saw no alternative but to leave.

He acknowledged that he might not have written the book had he not emigrated to Australia: "Not only did my move free me from the considerations that a local author

would have to deal with, living abroad has also allowed me to distance myself from my subject - it's given me objectivity with which to tackle the subject matter."

Ward supports this idea, saying that "(*Ousted!*) would probably never have been written had the author remained in Malaysia."

Miraflor adds, "Keith is a good example of someone who chose to leave his country but retained an enduring relationship with and interest in Malaysia. His migration to Australia certainly enhanced his views of the political situation in which he had been totally embedded up to 1968."

As he saw it, the separation ultimately "was a direct result of racial politics."

"It broke my heart. Malaysia is my country. Even though I left it many years ago, I still consider it my own. When Singapore left us, I couldn't bear it."

He disagreed with suggestions that Lee Kuan Yew had planned to join the federation as part of an elaborate scheme to gain total independence.

"No," said Keith, "I believe Lee was genuinely upset when he made that announcement. He was in shock. He did not believe that Tunku had shown such strength of will. He thought that the Tunku was soft and pliable. So he was, but he could also be stubborn and determined. I think that if Kuan Yew had been more patient, if he had waited another five years, it would have been different."

Keith enjoyed a close relationship with Tunku, calling the prime minister his "protector". "I was vocal and spoke the truth, the way I saw it. I refused to be a mouthpiece for the government and as a result Umno Youth was unhappy and more than once called for me to be sacked. But Tunku said, 'Leave Keith alone. His heart is in the right place.' I think he appreciated my

honesty.

"Although to some Tunku was a bumbling old fellow, he was what Malaysia needed, someone who had the common touch, was easy going and had a calm, pleasant and soothing personality." "On the other hand, Kuan Yew was the sort to fire you up - he could inspire you but he could also make you angry. He was a person who used you," continued Keith. "He had many sharp edges and if you got too close you would end up wounded."

Later, when posed with this question through his publishers: Could there be a reunification of Malaysia and Singapore? Keith replied from his home in Melbourne on Oct 21:

"For the best part of three decades I was convinced Malaysia and Singapore would never reunite as a national unit. However, more recently I have begun noticing signs that perhaps attitudes are altering on both sides of the causeway.

"Of course there are old-guard connections still around carrying the legacy of political animosities. But this scenario cannot go on forever.

"I have the distinct impression that Malaysia is mellowing on the racial issue. You might not get that feeling if you are in the company of (those) who still feel it is their duty to display a strong resistance to change. But ultimately - and I hope I'm right in this - political pressures and realities will prevail and hard-liners in both territories will simply be forced to soften their viewpoints."

These were Keith's last words to the press. He died, aged 75, at 11am on Oct 24, at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne, leaving behind his wife, Constance, and three grown-up children. - **By DAPHNE LEE**

• **Popular Book Company** is giving a 20% discount on *Vusted!* at all its outlets from today till Nov 30.