

Expatriate tales of early Malaya

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IN 1954, *The Malay Mail* daily celebrated the installation of a spanking new rotary press, "the first of its kind in the federation", with a supplement, "50 Years of Progress".

It was in fact almost 60 years since *The Malay Mail* first appeared on Dec 14, 1896 at a price of 15 cents for four pages.

The 1954 supplement includes the reminiscences of two long-term residents of Kuala Lumpur, Edith Stratton and B.J.P. Joaquim.

Stratton arrived in 1896 to be the headmistress of the government English school for girls.

She was breaking new ground doing so and struggled against the traditional prejudices of many in the local community against the education of girls.

But she had an initial enrolment of 18 and set about teaching them geography, needlework and Swedish drill.

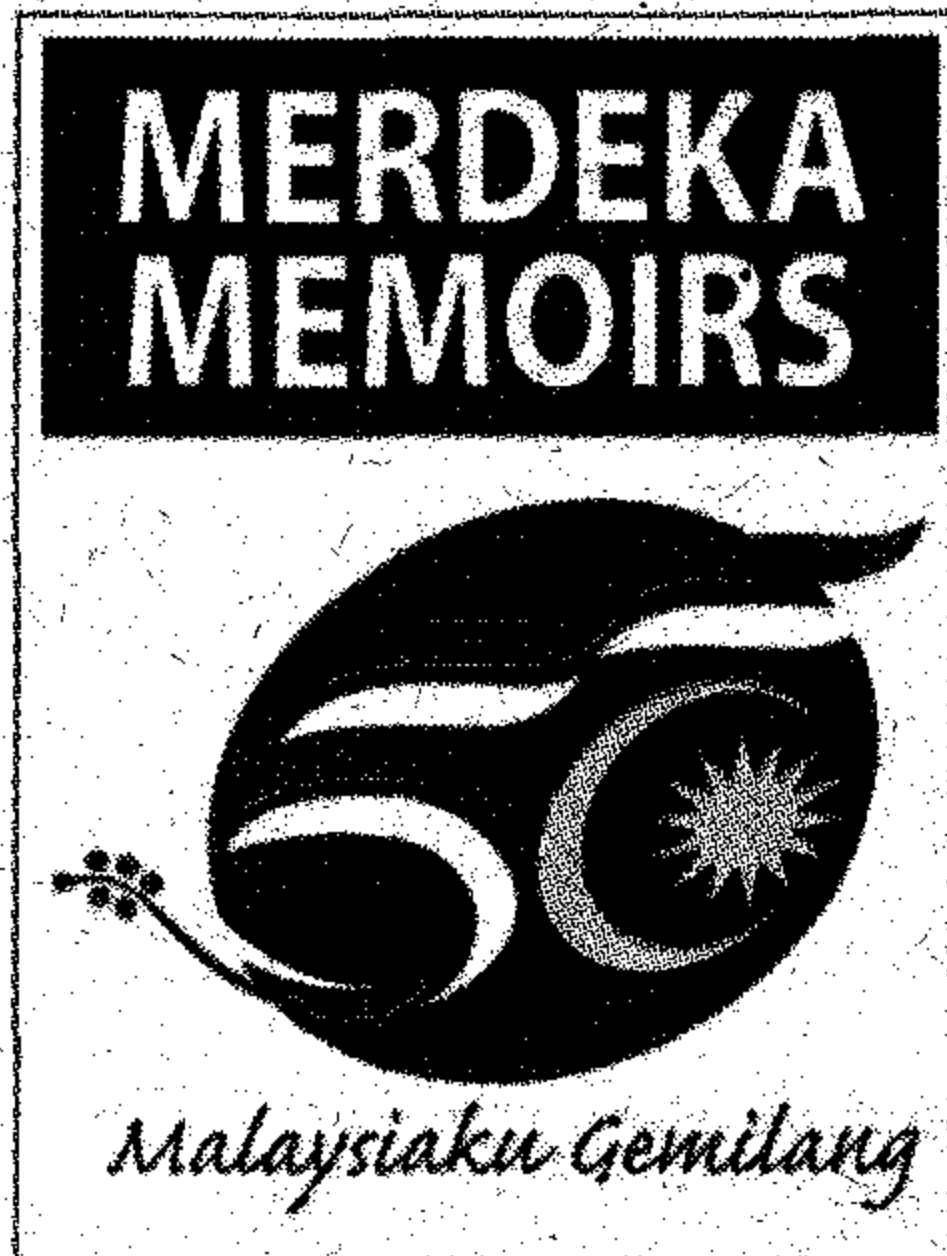
After three years, however, she left to marry John Brown, the assistant government printer, and 50 years later as Mrs Stratton Brown, she was living on a small estate in Petaling, though she was often seen walking the streets of Kuala Lumpur with her shopping.

In *Looking back on Selangor in the 1890s*, she recalled how the Chartered Bank closed on the days of race meetings so that its tellers could staff the tote, and that officials went to church on Sundays in top hats.

Joaquim, a barrister, also wrote for *The Malay Mail* under the *nom de plume* of "Klyne Street", where he had practised since 1913.

Joaquim recalled the recol-

If the writings in *The Malay Mail* were anything to go by, the British expatriate community seemed to have led an interesting life in olden Malaya. JOHN GULLICK recalls some anecdotes



lections of the judge who had tried Ethel Proudlock for murder in 1911, the basis of Somerset Maugham's story *The Letter*.

He also wrote about one of the floods when he had swum across the padang (Merdeka Square) "without putting foot to ground".

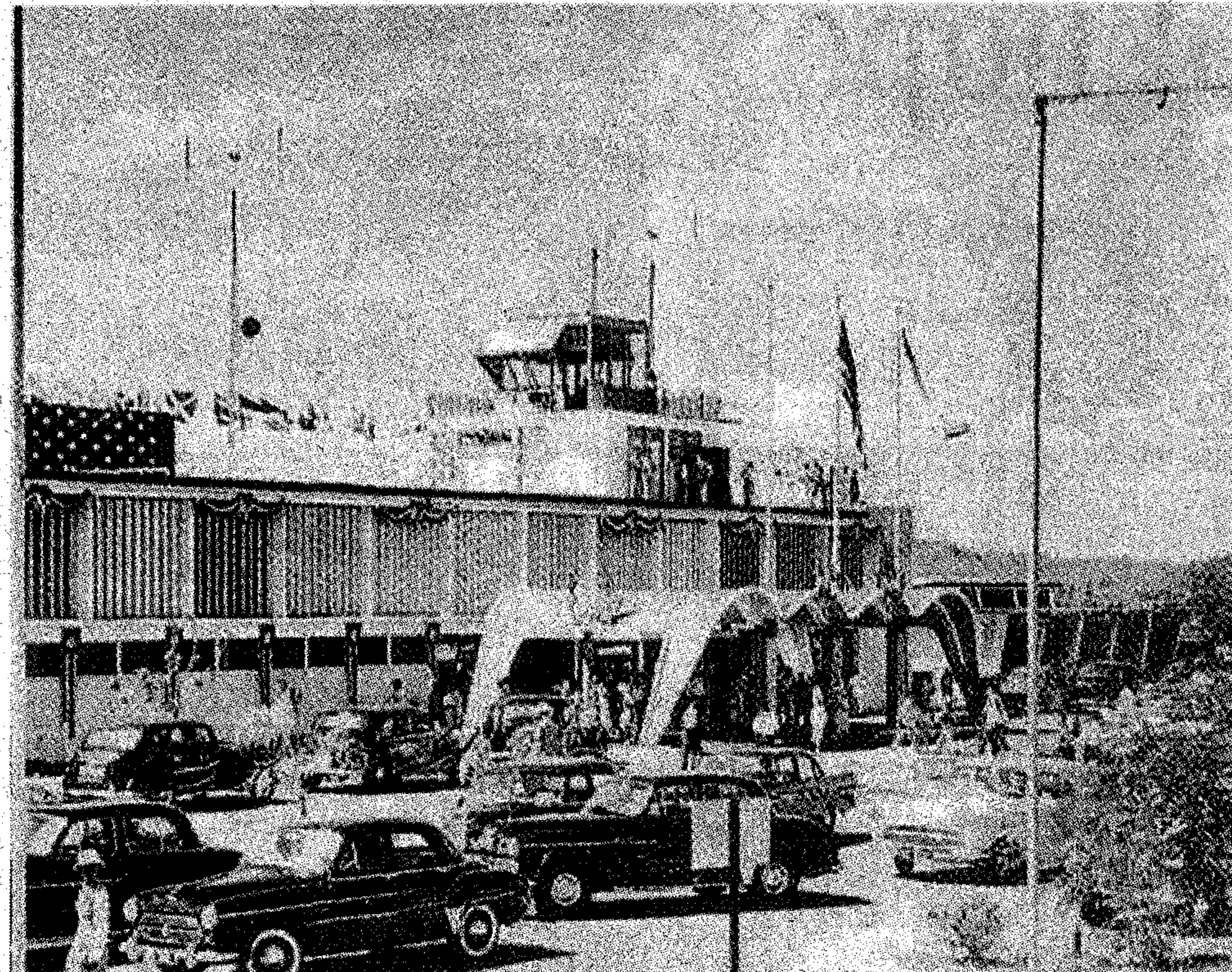
In 1954, I went to dine with Choo Kia Peng, whose memoirs are still unpublished.

Although born in Taiping, he had spent 13 years in China before coming, as a rather overage student, to a Penang school.

He began his Selangor career in 1900 as a bookkeeper at Loke Yew's mines in Ulu Selangor.

Among his stories is a hilarious account of driving an early motorcar (for Loke Yew) that caught fire in old Market Square (Medan Pasar).

Under Loke Yew's patronage, Kia Peng rose to the top



The International Airport in Sungai Besi in the late 1950s.

and became the recognised spokesman for his community, serving as an unofficial member of the FMS Federal Council in the 1920s

The Japanese occupation was not a happy episode in his career, and in the 1950s, he was living in retirement in a vast, gloomy mansion on "Millionaire's Row".

But he was an excellent host with many memories to share.

Datuk Sir Mahmud Mat was

my neighbour in Seremban in 1947.

Later, I read his memoirs, published as *Tinggal Kenangan* (in memory), giving an account of his career.

He had been born in Pahang, where his father was an official at the royal court, at a time when it was still much as Hugh Clifford had described it in his short stories.

Mahmud was one of the first pupils of Malay College Kuala

Kangsar, founded in 1910, and he then began a career that brought him to the senior ranks of the Malayan Civil Service at the outbreak of war in 1939.

He came out of wartime retirement in 1945 to help the Sultan of Pahang through the difficult period before and after the Japanese surrender and went on to hold high public offices, including the speakership of the federal

parliament.

Another notable book is Dr Mohamed Said's *Memoirs of a Menteri Besar — Early Days* which tells of the author's boyhood at Linggi and progress to Malay College Kuala Kangsar in the 1920s.

The Japanese moved the Kuala Lumpur girls' school, at which Mrs de Silva had taught since 1925, to another building and made her headmistress.

The ensuing battle of wits between them ended two years later when she failed in an oral exam in Japanese and was demoted to a clerical post in the food controller's office.

In August 1945, the Japanese distributed their remaining stocks among the staff and de Silva found herself in the street with a 100kg sack of rice that she could not carry home.

So she gave it away to friends and colleagues. In old age, she told her story to a colleague as material for a history of the school.

Reminiscences of Malaya, like any others, vary with the personality of the author and his talent for telling an interesting story.

An exceptionally pompous governor of the 1920s titled his book *Trivial Fond Records* which says it all, and there are a lot more of that complacent type.

But the best tell a vivid story and contribute to Malayan history. — MPS

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