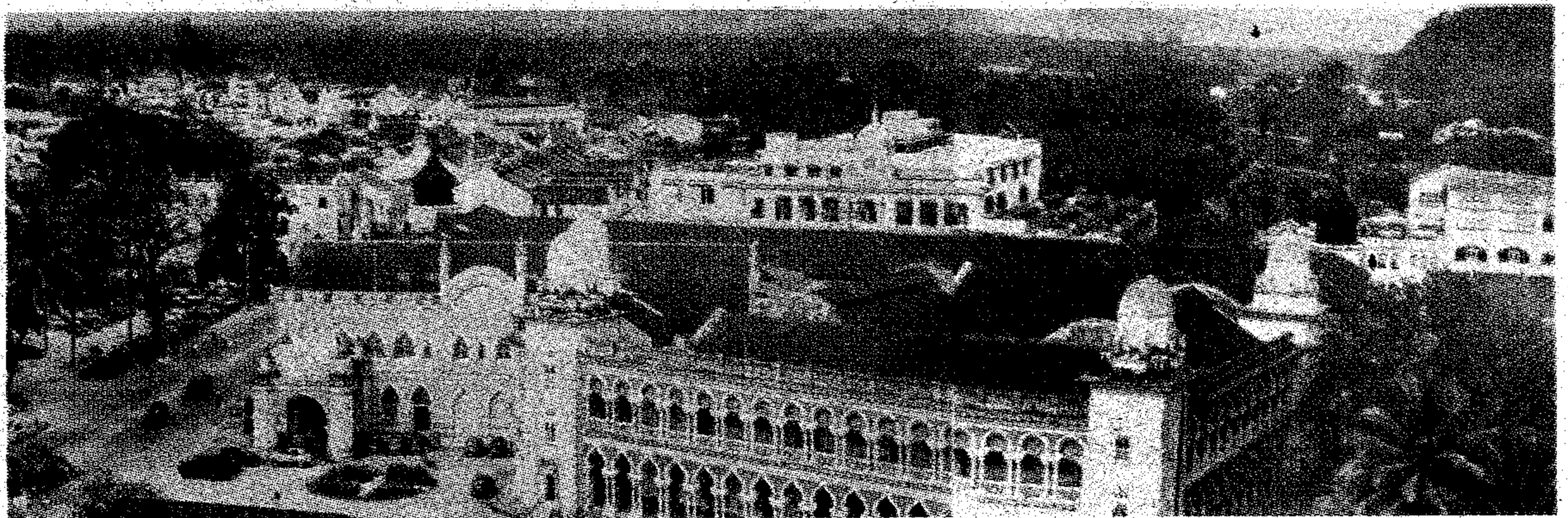


Trailing memories of the 50s

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John Gullick, a 92-year-old historian and former Malayan Civil Service officer, remembers Kuala Lumpur in the 1950s as he reminisces from his home in Essex, England, where he lives in retirement



In the years just after the war, Kuala Lumpur was a town bursting at the seams with a population of 200,000.

KUALA LUMPUR came through the war without suffering major damage, though in August 1945, an allied bomber missed the railway goods yard and destroyed the FMS Museum (now rebuilt as Muzium Negara).

But in the years just after the war, Kuala Lumpur was a town bursting at the seams, with a population of 200,000 as compared with 120,000 pre-war, and still rising rapidly as people fled from the turbulent countryside or sought jobs.

In 1951, 85,000 people were living in 10,000 temporary homes, ranging from squatter shanties to substantial but temporary wooden houses. All stood, usually without legal titles, on land set aside for planned building programmes or plots that were deemed unsuitable as they were swampy or flood-prone.

After struggling to develop housing estates, the planners eventually opted for a new town of Petaling Jaya, originally intended to house squatters displaced from Kuala Lumpur.

It was still a community divided, as it was before the war, into a colonial bureaucracy on the west bank of the Klang river and a rumbustious business world on the other side.

In a shop, the man behind the counter would be Chinese, at a railway booking office, it would be an Indian, and at the police station, the desk sergeant was Malay.

It was a spatial divide too — Chinatown, Kampung Baru and Bangsar and Sentul. It was friendly enough but the idea of a representative, perhaps, elected municipality only came to fruition in 1952.

As an amateur historian, I believe that an awareness of the past is an essential part of the contemporary scene.

One of the landmarks for Kuala Lumpur was the publication in 1955 by the *Malay Mail* of a supplement containing the reminiscences of old-timers, who could remember as far back as the 1890s.

Then, in July 1956, came the three-day festival of culture at Tasik Perdana. I remember walking among the huge crowd absorbed in watching the dances or dramas on a dozen



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stages. Tunku Abdul Rahman had opened the festival, arriving on a barge across the lake.

Back in October 1951, there was a more sombre occasion — the funeral of Sir Henry Gurney, who was killed in an ambush on the road to Bukit Fraser. Again, I stood among a huge Malayan crowd to watch the cortege go along Jalan Raja, with the Rulers walking behind the bier. The service at St Mary's Church was relayed by loud speakers.

Towards the end, came a reading from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: "My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage... So, he passed over and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

The Rulers may have remembered an earlier gathering in Kuala

Lumpur when they came out to the balcony of the Station Hotel, some near to tears, to bow to the demands of the Malay concourse outside that they should boycott the installation of the governor of the detested Malayan Union.

There were other moments of drama in Kuala Lumpur, too. One was when Sir Gerald Templar refused to attend a formal dinner at the Lake Club, still committed to its European exclusiveness, because the Sultan of Selangor had not been invited to be his fellow guest. It was the sound of trumpets that brought down the walls of Jericho.

There were less conspicuous moments of history. In 1950, I was living in one of a group of new, temporary houses of wood and corrugated iron at the end of Jalan Kia Peng near the junction with Jalan Tun Razak, built to relieve the housing shortage. One of my neighbours was a Malay barrister from Kedah, who had just taken up a junior appointment in the attorney-general's department. He was Tunku Abdul Rahman.

As the Umno leadership crisis reached its climax, we expatriate householders noted the flow of cars bringing the power brokers to confer with the Tunku. We were at the time quite unaware that Malaya was finding its man of destiny.

Since I departed (to go on leave) in late 1956, I have revisited Kuala Lumpur six times, the last in 1998. Apart from the vast increase in size, one notes the infrastructure of a national capital — the Parliament House and the National Memorial in Tasik Perdana, the stadium, the skyscrapers, the Petronas Twin Towers and so on — to house the political and economic institutions of an independent country, and the airport and hotels for the vast number of tourists and other visitors.

As in every other great city in the world, the motor vehicle is king. In the old days, one could walk to his destination, but it is no longer a place friendly to pedestrians. But, that is no doubt the predictable lament of an old-timer.

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