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The Merdeka-voice man

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Did you know that it was a Mat Salleh who shouted 'Merdeka' at the proclamation of independence ceremony? Englishman Frederick Lees, a Malayan civil service officer then, tells WAN A. HULAIMI why he had to rise to the occasion

HE arrived in Malaya on a whim — his mother's.

The beginning of Frederick Lees' arrival in Malaya parallels the life of the fictional character Ferdagh O'Haney who was "enlisted for service in Malaya" one fine morning at breakfast by a mother who threw the thought at her newly graduated son over the top of the day's *Times*.

Lees, 83, now lives as a writer in the picture-postcard town of Rye, in Sussex, on the south coast of England.

He makes no secret of the inspiration behind the character of O'Haney in *Fool's Gold*, the first part of his Malayan trilogy (*The Malayan Life of Ferdagh O'Haney*), published in 2004.

"Sixty per cent of my novel is based on my own experience," he says.

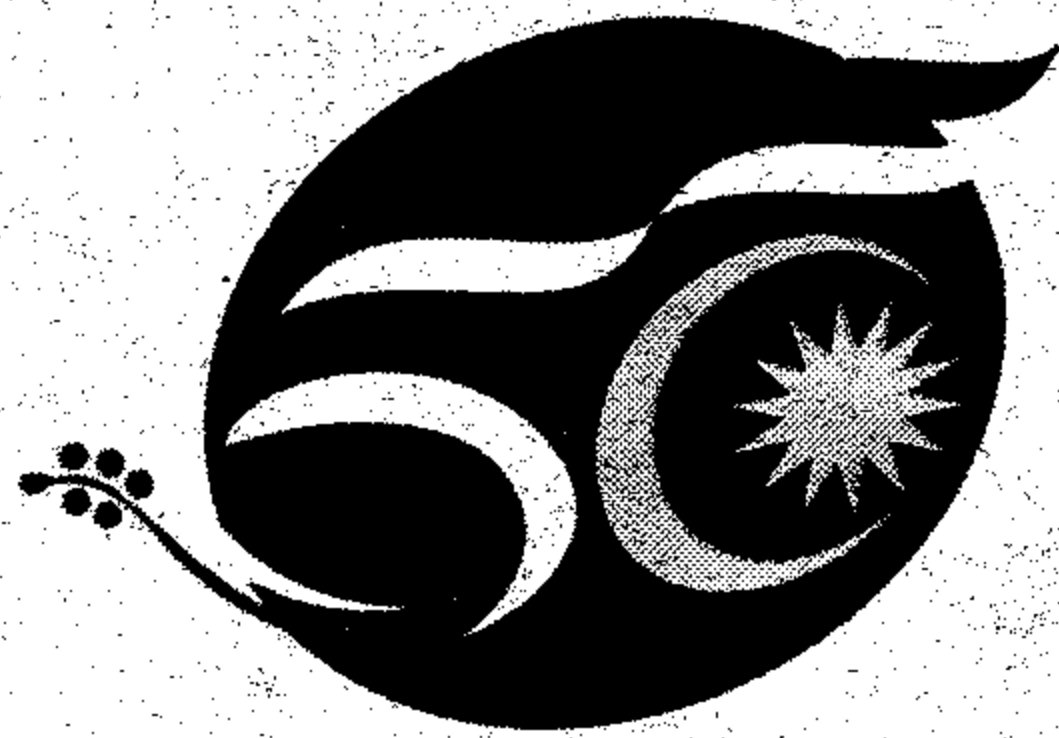
O'Haney, in fact, is not just Lees; he is a composite of many characters Lees met during his Malayan years.

In the colonial service, Lees was hand-picked for Macao to learn Chinese before being sent to Malaya as an officer in the civil service.

He speaks of life as a district officer serving under various state secretariats, but throughout his stay in Malaya he says he was constantly reminded of what his superior in the Colonial Office told him just before he left: that he was actually going out to prepare to be out of work.

This was 1950 and India, Pakistan and Indonesia had already taken their roads to nationhood. Ten years later British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was to deliver his speech about the "wind of change" blowing across the continent of Africa.

In Kuala Lumpur, Lees moved on to become an officer on the staff of the director of operations, Sir Harold Briggs. Communist insurgents were waging war against the colonial power and tak-



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ing rubber tappers, tin miners and farmers along the line as collateral.

A plan was devised by Briggs to resettle villagers, the majority of whom were Chinese farmers living on the edge of jungles, in new villages.

These were squatters, villagers, communist sympathisers, victims of their brutal "persuasion" and people who were generally caught in between. Not a small number of them were Malays.

Briggs' plan was to resettle them away from the communists, and to keep the communists away from them. Lees had to go with other officers to do population surveys, persuade them of the need to move, and then take them to resettlement areas.

In his book, O'Haney became Lees' voice. He was on a mission to resettle some residents from the black area of Chemor in Perak.

O'Haney had this to say of his work: "By now the Communists had fully grasped the dangers to them of the Briggs plan.

"Though it would not starve them into submission, experience in parts of Malaya where it had been implemented showed that their fighting effectiveness was radically weakened because of their reduced ability to collect or extort supplies."

Like O'Haney, Lees was becoming

aware that in his work he was "heavily dependent on the support of Malay soldiery and Chinese resettlement officers". The settlers had to be re-housed by race, and the Chinese, by clans.

This was where Lee's knowledge of Cantonese became his tool of work. He got along well with the armed forces, and his Chinese officer, a man named Gordon Choo, became a close friend.

In February 1957, Tunku Abdul Rahman laid the foundation stone to the Merdeka Stadium. Forewarned, Lees saw this as an inevitability in his life.

Yet when it came, it was with an ironic twist: Far from being made jobless, he was enlisted into the committee that orchestrated the Independence Day celebrations at Merdeka Stadium.

At midnight, Aug 30, 1957, Tunku Abdul Rahman delivered his independence message to the people. "A new star has risen in the eastern sky, a star of freedom for yet another Asian people."

From his drawer, Lees pulls out a bound copy of cyclostyled sheets, the schedule of events on the morning of Saturday, Aug 31.

Everything was timed exactly as it should have happened. "At 7.36 HRH the Duke of Gloucester arrives at the stadium and greeted by Datuk Abdul Razak and Encik Abdul Rahman Talib," he reads from one page.

But not everything went to plan, the Declaration of Independence as read by the Tunku and which everyone now takes as the highlight of the event, was not read as timed in the sheets.

"What happened was a bus came up to the front of the Merdeka Stadium, drove into the storm drain and could not be removed. So the whole ceremony took place one hour later," recalls Lees with a chuckle.

He also remembers another incident that still gives him great satisfaction. Lees was in the stadium's control box with Umno's then rising star, Syed Jaafar Albar.

Just as they were studying the schedules and looking out nervously for possible glitches, "Tunku Abdul Rahman popped his head in" on his way down to the stadium grounds.

He asked Syed Jaafar to lead the crowd in cheers of "Merdeka" at the conclusion of the event.

This Syed Jaafar did. "Merdeka! Merdeka!" he shouted into the microphone as the dignitaries were moving out from the specially built Merdeka platform in the stadium.

The crowd responded with equal gusto, and then, according to Lees, another hitch: Syed Jaafar lost his voice.

"Syed Jaafar turned to me and said, 'My throat's gone, my throat's gone. You do it!'

"I did and shouted 'Merdeka' into the microphone, and 'Merdeka!' the crowd responded. Again, 'Merdeka!..."

In his house in the peak of Rye, at midday, in front of the landmark church of St Mary the Virgin, Lees speaks his gruff voice into an imagined microphone of 50 years ago.

"Merdeka! Merdeka!" Lees proclaims to the whitewashed room of his book-lined study.

He sits back with a broad smile. "I thought then, 'This is marvellous, it gives me tremendous satisfaction. This is why I came here.'" — MPS



Frederick Lees was on the committee that orchestrated the Merdeka celebrations.