

Tributes to a prince among men

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Fifty contributors wrote from the heart of their years with the man who inspired this nation to Merdeka and in the face of opposition, had the courage to forge Malaysia. From tomorrow, *The Star* is honoured to run daily, selected excerpts from their tributes in Prince Among Men – Recollections and Reflections on Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra.



Source of joy: The Tunku's family was his comfort after he left office. Here Tunku Dr Sofiah is seen sharing a light moment with him.

HE called him Ayah Tam, reflecting his relatively dark complexion. But she hardly ever saw him while growing up, as he was "actively involved among the bandwagon of Malay intellectual elite fighting for our country's independence".

Tunku Datuk Dr Sofiah Jewa, the first Prime Minister's niece, only came to know her famous uncle well years later, when she and her husband, Datuk Dr Yaacob Merican, were practising lawyers in Sabah.

Today, she is fiercely defensive of the nation's warm-hearted founding father.

His family "were his only comfort" in the cold days after he was blamed for the May 13 riots and tossed aside.

Prince Among Men – Recollections and Reflections on Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra is Dr Sofiah's behind-the-scenes effort "to set the record straight."

When history was rewritten in the years immediately following the race riots, Tunku's name was virtually effaced from textbooks. His railway ticket was unceremoniously recalled, described Dr Sofiah. His companions ebbed away.

In England, fellow students had teased Tunku for taking his time sitting for his Bar and put it to a lack of intelligence. Not so, defends Datuk Ann Majeed, former director-general of the Social Welfare Department. "Somehow, I had a sneaking suspicion that Tunku was in London not just to complete his Bar examinations; he was there to prepare himself professionally and practically for his future political activities at home."

"He was guided by intuition and made the right decisions on the quiet even in the midst of crises, be it the Communist insurgency or the Indonesian Confrontation," attested Kelantan political veteran Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Later, few recalled that Tunku had never wanted to be prime minister – he was rather reluctantly persuaded into it by his deputy and successor Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

Thus, Tunku stepped out of the comfort of his palace, embraced Malaysians, then sold his Penang shophouses one by one to finance Malaya's independence fighters, and later Umno itself.

Tunku's generosity was legendary to his peers, but more so to the poor.

In his years at the helm, Tunku gracefully loosened ties with colonial Britain, fought off the Communist insurrection, forged Malaysia, held to his guns during Indonesia's Konfrontasi, stood stoically in the face of Singapore's secession and steered the young nation through its early years of international diplomacy.

Tunku saw the humour and respected those of divergent opinions.

After an "extraordinarily hot" lunch "deliberately done to cool me down," Tun Musa Hitam recalls being driven to Tunku's retreat home on



a hill in the midst of the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) stronghold.

Musa was amazed to see him cordially greeted by everyone as they passed by.

"You see, these people do not agree with me on several issues, yet they seem not to bother that my house is located in their midst," remarked a relaxed Tunku.

Then came the years of disillusionment: the May 1969 riots and Tunku's exit.

"When Tunku retired from office, it was as though a great oak tree that had given shade to everyone had sacrilegiously been uprooted," wrote Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud of his beloved mentor.

"Incidentally, I wish to place on record that despite his position of importance as Bapa Kemerdekaan and Bapa Malaysia, Tunku was never given a farewell by Parliament," he recalled.

He details with sadness Tunku's last public act – the laying of the foundation stone for the Heroes' Memorial in Kuching – where Tunku insisted on addressing the crowd from his wheelchair.

For Tunku was man of his word. Despite his own fragile health, he wanted to fulfil his promise to Taib, an old friend.

Taib himself had flown in the plane to accompany Tunku from Penang to Kuching. The return was sombre, Tunku was flown straight to Kuala Lumpur and admitted to the general hospital. He died a week later.

These are but some of the warm, first-hand accounts from 50 friends and family that grace this 494-page, quality volume.

If anything, Dr Sofiah today regrets not having caught more people a little earlier, "while they could still remember and before they died."

Nevertheless, her initial inspiration in 1997 to put together a tribute to her uncle has met a happy ending. By sheer coincidence eight years later, the National Archives, without knowledge of her parallel efforts, appointed Prabhakaran S. Nair as project editor. He sought Dr Sofiah and her husband's help, and they obliged.

"For two years, we put aside everything to work on this book," she said of their joint labour of love.