

WHAT A GREAT MOMENT FOR MALAYA

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I was among the first Malaysians to hear the date of independence from the Tunku in person



TUNKU
ABDUL AZIZ

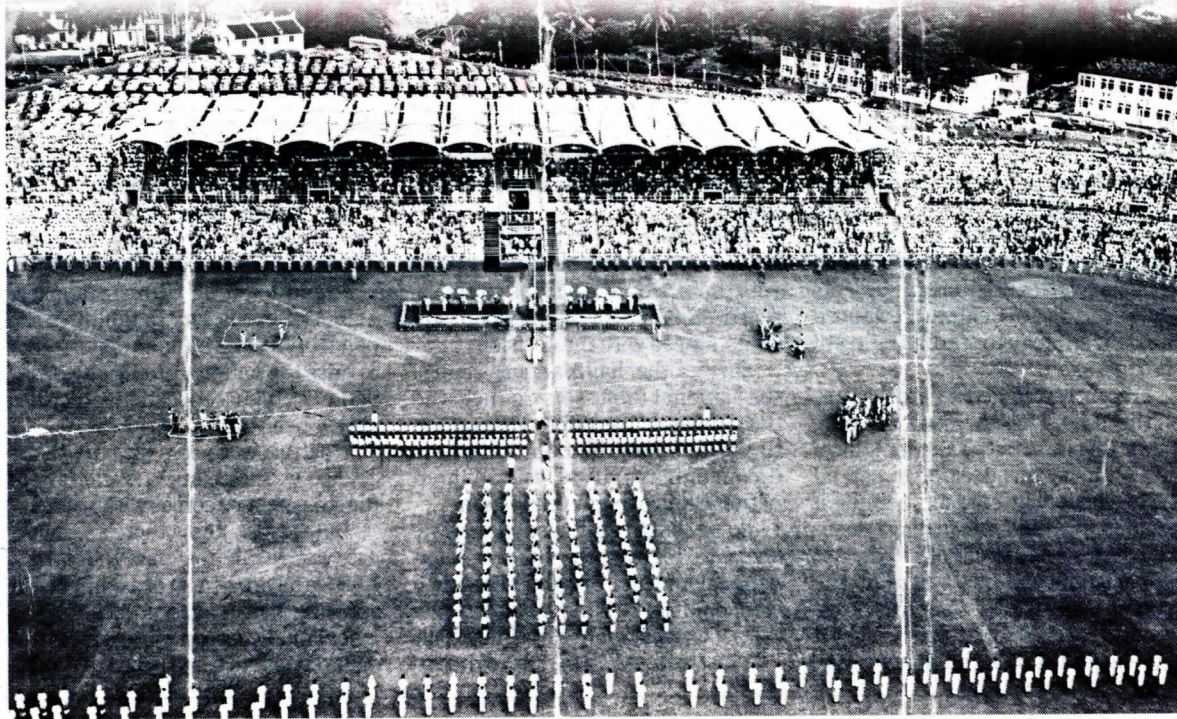
THIS Merdeka season has opened the floodgates of long-suppressed memories of people and events that have shaped my deep sense of love and loyalty for the land of my birth. For me, the most cherished memory was that of an event that occurred on Feb 7, 1956. It was a cold and blustery day, typical Merseyside weather for that time of year.

For some 300 of us, young Malaysians at the Malayan Teacher Training College, Kirkby near Liverpool, Lancashire, it proved to be the high point of our two-year sojourn in austerity-stricken England that had yet to recover fully from the ravages of World War 2. Our scrambled eggs for breakfast, as I recall, were still made from wartime powdered egg.

Just after lunch, a convoy of British government black Humber Super Snipe limousines came through the main entrance, winding its way to the reception area where the principal, G.J. Gurney and his deputy, Professor Attlee, awaited the arrival of the visitors. The then chief minister of the Federation of Malaya Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj alighted from his car to a very warm Malayan welcome.

Tunku, having concluded successfully his negotiations at Lancaster House with Alan Lennox-Boyd, the colonial secretary, and now armed with an agreement for our country's independence, decided to make a special train journey from London to Liverpool to visit us. We had no idea that there was a surprise in store for us.

In the course of a short speech, conveying his pleasure at being with us, he announced, out of the blue, that Malaya would become an independent nation "on Aug



Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaiming independence for Malaya at Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 31, 1957. FILE PIC



31, 1957, if possible". He caught us completely by surprise.

He chose to share the news of the most momentous event in our history with the country's 300 young men and women of all races, who — together with those trained earlier and subsequently, 1,500 in all by the time Kirkby College closed — were to make such a signal impact on the teaching profession, quite disproportionate to their numbers, to the great benefit of countless pupils they taught with imagination, panache and dedication.

It was in an obscure little English village known to us as "Kampung Kirkby" that the Tunku announced to the world that a newly independent country was about to take its rightful place among the community of sovereign nations. The excitement was palpable and unrestrained. English reserve went out of the window when the Tunku shouted "Merdeka" three times in that now familiar voice that we continue to hear with a sense of pride each year on Aug 31.

I was then the editor of *Pan-duan*, the college annual publication and the thought uppermost in my mind, in all that heady mix of great joy and pride, tinged with a modicum of uncertainty about the future of our country, was how I could ever hope to do justice writing about such an emotionally challenging historic event.

I was for a moment transported back in time and space to my hometown of Alor Star. I was 12 years old, a pupil at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in 1946, when I first heard about Datuk Onn Jaafar, who fascinated me.

His opposition to the British government decision, plotted during the war, to scrub the agreement with each of the Malay rulers and to turn the country into another colonial territory in the shape of the Malayan Union, was well-documented. No one, in my view, was more astute at reading the duplicitous intentions of the British than Onn Jaafar, the greatest Malay of his time.

Much of what I had learnt about Malay nationalism had come from a remarkable young teacher, Mohamad Khir Johari (later Tan Sri), who was both my Form and House Master. He was later to become a friend and mentor whose memory I still cherish and respect enormously with the passing of time.

I am convinced to this day that the history he taught was not based on the officially approved syllabus because his treatment of the subject was peppered liber-

ally with the evils of imperialism. Khir Johari became a marked man because of his anti-British attitude. He was young, defiant of authority and tempestuous.

One morning, having marked the class register, he announced that we were going to "Padang Court" to listen to Datuk Onn Jaafar. We formed two neat lines and, led by our Form Master, we marched towards the school gate, which was some distance away.

Suddenly our progress was interrupted briefly by a booming voice coming from high above. It was the rugby-loving G.J. Gurney, our much respected and feared headmaster. "Where do you think you are going?" he bellowed. "Come back, come back at once!" he demanded.

Khir Johari, looking straight ahead, continued walking and we thought it was great fun defying the headmaster. I could not understand much what Datuk Onn actually said but enough to get the drift of his message that Malays must be united to fight the Malayan Union.

The upshot of this little act of civil disobedience was dismissal from service for Khir Johari. As fate would have it, Khir Johari became education minister some years after Merdeka. My old headmaster at Alor Star, Mr Gurney, was the principal of Kirkby College when I arrived in 1954.

When asked by Dr James Rawcliffe, my old headmaster at Klang High School, on a visit about my progress, Gurney

replied: "He works by fits and starts." Gurney was spot on. That was me all right.

I returned to colonial Malaya from England in the autumn of 1956, in time to witness, at the stroke of midnight on Aug 30, 1957, the last symbolic act of the end of the British Empire as far as my country was concerned, when the Union flag was hauled down and the Malayan flag went up, with due ceremony, to take its rightful place as a symbol of freedom from colonialism.

Then on Aug 31, I made my way to the brand new Merdeka Stadium in pouring rain. Surprisingly, and as if in answer to our collective prayers, it stopped as quickly as it had started. With the sun's brilliant rays bursting through the low moving clouds, the presentation of the Instrument of Independence by the Duke of Gloucester, in a movingly poignant ceremony, went like clockwork.

This was quickly followed by several emotion-packed shouts of Merdeka in quick succession by Tunku Abdul Rahman that were echoed enthusiastically by the more than 20,000 Malaysians of all races in the jam-packed stadium.

Merdeka holds special significance to me. I was among the 300 Malaysians who heard the momentous, first ever, announcement of the date of our country's independence from the Tunku in person, who had led the Malayan team that negotiated with great success the transfer of power to the people of Malaysia.

I was there on the Selangor Club Padang, with thousands of Malaysians waiting for the bewitching hour of midnight for the Malayan "Big Ben" to strike the midnight hour. That would be the signal for the flag ceremony to begin. I was there in Merdeka Stadium to see His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, representing Queen Elizabeth II, hand over the Instrument of Independence to our newly minted prime minister of independent Malaya.

What a great moment for Malaya, and the historic significance of that event on Aug 31, 1957 was not lost, not only on those who were there as eyewitnesses, but also others, sitting next to their radios, throughout the length and breadth of Persekutuan Tanah Melayu, listening to the broadcast by Radio Malaya.

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