



# FACES *of* COURAGE

**A revealing historical  
appreciation of colonial  
Malaya's legendary  
Kathigasu family**

**Incorporating:**

*No Dram of Mercy* by Sybil Kathigasu, GM

*The Papan Guerrillas and Mrs K* by Chin Peng

*Exploring the Legend* by Norma Miraflor & Ian Ward



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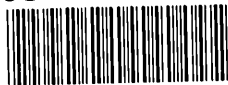
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## **Faces of Courage**

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## FOREWORD

Our interest in the story of Sybil Kathigasu, her nation's most celebrated war heroine, was kindled during our trips to Perak, Malaysia, between 2000 and 2002. We were then in the midst of double checking background material for Chin Peng's book, *My Side of History*. Our enthusiasm to tackle the Kathigasu story was stoked further by the realisation that so much of what we had read about her in files was peppered with glaring errors in fact.

Sybil Kathigasu's life is more than just a tale of unshakeable faith and remarkable courage. It is also a primer on what Malaysia was, once upon a time – a divided Malaya ruled by white masters. It would be a monumental mistake to ignore this colonial experience in the name of selective remembering.

By virtue of their personal convictions, witnesses to history invariably have differing perceptions of the same situations. Chin Peng and Olga Kathigasu, we found, hold sharply differing views on Sybil's exploits in Papan. Chin Peng lauds Sybil's gallantry. Her daughter Olga asks, rather poignantly: Why did we have to suffer so? Both perspectives have considerable merit. Both are valid.

Too often, readers shy away from the study of history. They fear that scrutinising the past might disturb accepted norms and undermine established comfort zones. They suspect it to be a tedious field peopled by figures of mythical proportions basking in a heap of footnotes. In fact, history is an epic-in-progress and heroes are human as the rest of us – men and women whose throats get parched, who grow tired, who love and err.

Earlier renditions of Sybil Kathigasu's heroism went unexamined for years and succeeded in transforming a very human story into a myth. This myth-making threatened to create an anachronism in a country that has experienced so much in so little time.

Sybil Kathigasu was a woman of conviction; she was daring and incredibly brave. She had a great capacity for service and sacrifice. But she was not all goodness and light. She was also tempestuous, fiery, a bully. In accepting her vulnerability, we make Sybil transcend the quaintness of the era into which she was born. In exploring her humanity we meet a more believable, a more accessible heroine. We have endeavoured to re-gain for Sybil Kathigasu, human being and heroine, the relevance she rightfully deserves.

– Norma Mirafior & Ian Ward

# *Contents*

## *Part 1*

### *No Dram of Mercy*

By  
**Sybil Kathigasu, GM**

Chapter 1 .....	9	Chapter 11 .....	75
Chapter 2 .....	19	Chapter 12 .....	83
Chapter 3 .....	25	Chapter 13 .....	95
Chapter 4 .....	33	Chapter 14 .....	103
Chapter 5 .....	37	Chapter 15 .....	115
Chapter 6 .....	41	Chapter 16 .....	127
Chapter 7 .....	47	Chapter 17 .....	137
Chapter 8 .....	53	Chapter 18 .....	141
Chapter 9 .....	59	Chapter 19 .....	151
Chapter 10 .....	65	Chapter 20 .....	157

*Part 2*

*The Papan Guerrillas and Mrs K*

By  
Chin Peng

Her unholy alliance .....165

*Part 3*

*Exploring the Legend*

By  
Norma Miraflor and Ian Ward

The Yoshimura trial .....185

Of Dawn and the burden  
of her splendid, baffling legacy .....205

The forgotten Kathigasu –  
amazing Olga .....217

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*I am sorry for thee: thou art come to answer  
A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch  
Uncapable of pity, void and empty  
From any dram of mercy*

– William Shakespeare,  
*The Merchant of Venice*,  
Act IV, scene 1.



# *Part 1*

## *No Dram of Mercy*

By  
**Sybil Kathigasu, GM**

Completed in early 1948, the manuscript for *No Dram of Mercy* was withheld from publication until finally released in London in 1954.





The passage of six decades have left little impact on Sybil Kathigasu's World War II retreat at 74 Main street, Papan, south-west of Ipoh in the Malaysian state of Perak. The vacant blocks of land that once flanked the two-storey shophouse, serving as vegetable patches, have given way to nondescript structures. But for the erstwhile medical clinic that witnessed such intense drama, time has stood still.