THE MEMOIRS OF A MALAYAN OFFICIAL

VICTOR PURCELL

PERDANA LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION
YAYASAN KEPIMPINAN PERDANA

Victor Purcell's eighteenth year found him, on the outbreak of World War I, impatiently awaiting his summons to France. The rigours of campaigning and internment shed an idyllic light on his post-war student days at Cambridge, but did not appreciably dampen his enthusiasm for the unknown; 1921 saw his departure for another, far more remote destination: he had been appointed to the Malayan Civil Service as an Eastern Cadet.

The first thing he had to decide was, which of the local languages would he learn. Purcell did not hesitate: Chinese would open up for him one of the great civilizations of the world. He was somewhat startled to hear that this would "ruin" his career, but not discouraged. His studies took him to Canton and the Forbidden City of Peking. Then, attached to the Chinese Protectorate, he proceeded to a fascinating series of posts which took him all over the Peninsula.

From wartime bed-making "adopted by hospitals straight from the Spanish Inquisition" to the office of viewing prospective husbands for the inmates of a Malayan girls' home, this collection of reminiscences flows across thirty years in a delightful mixture of description and comment, touching on places and personalities, history and custom, and the darker strands of international politics in a narrative at once entertaining and informative—a vivid and imperishable picture of that long-vanished time, the "serene and happy colonial period".

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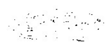

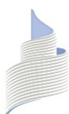
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馬華公會總部
Malaysian Chinese Association
Headquarters
67, Ampang Road 5th Floor,
P. O. Box No. 626
Kuala Lumpur,

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To Hugh and Diana

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Preface

My adult life to date arranges itself broadly under the following headings—the army in two world wars, the Malayan Civil Service (1921–46), United Nations Consultant (1946–48), and Cambridge don (1949—). Of the above experiences those in the Malayan Civil Service were much the longest, and are more likely to be of interest to the general reader than the others. I have therefore decided to make them the main subject of these memoirs.

On consideration, however, I felt that I could not altogether omit my experiences in the First World War and at Cambridge after it, since these were preparatory to my main career and conditioned my outlook irrevocably. For this reason I have given a concentrated account of these periods in a Prelude which I hope that my readers will find acceptable as a short introduction to *me*.

VICTOR PURCELL

Cambridge, 1964

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Contents

PART I PRELUDE

1 THE GREEN HOWARDS 3
2 YPRES TO SAILLY-SAILLISEL 20
3 CHEMIN DES DAMES 39
4 PRISONER OF WAR 56
5 CAMBRIDGE 70

PART II MALAYAN CIVIL SERVANT

6 EASTWARD HO! 93
7 TAKING COLOUR 119
8 AUTUMN IN PEKING 139
9 PROTECTOR OF CHINESE 151
10 ISLAND INTERLUDE 177
11 SUPREME COURT 199
12 IMMIGRATION OFFICER 220
13 WORK, PLAY AND CEREMONIAL 240
14 PERSONALITIES 267
15 THE BRITISH RECORD 286
16 WAR AND PROPAGANDA 305
17 AMERICA BEFORE PEARL HARBOUR 322
18 RETURN TO MALAYA 343

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YAYASAN KEPIMPINAN PERDANA

List of Illustrations

	facing page
The author as subaltern (Kaiser's war)	86
The attack on Sailly-Saillisel	87
The great court of Trinity College, Cambridge	118
The Government offices, Kuala Lumpur	119
Singapore: Chinese street scene	182
Ships and native craft in Singapore harbour	182
Canton: street near the West Gate	183
Hong Kong: the harbour from the Peak	214
Ch'ien-Mên, or water gate, Peking	215
Malayan house such as the one the author lived in	278
Penang: interior of the Ayerstam Chinese Temple	279
Penang: funicular railway	279
Lord Mountbatten planning Japanese surrender operations	310
The author as colonel (Hitler's war)	311

Map of Malaya between the Wars *pages* 152–3

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Part I

Prelude

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CHAPTER 1

The Green Howards

The first red-letter day in my career was 19 November 1914, when, at the age of eighteen, I joined the 11th (Service) Battalion of the Green Howards at Darlington as a temporary second-lieutenant.

I went up to Darlington by train, travelling first class for the first time in my life. I was wearing my new uniform, having taken delivery of it from my tailor that very morning. It was of clay-brown serge, for in those early days of the war, in the general shortage of dye-stuffs (the Germans had had the pre-war monopoly of a British discovery), 'khaki' was only a comparative term, and within the next few months I wore tunics of silky green-grey gaberdine and brown-green barathea without arousing official comment, though gamboge collars were frowned upon by the Provost Marshal, who was also allergic to canary-coloured ties and 'sponge-bag' caps. My buttons were brightly polished and I wore a brand new Sam Browne belt with sword-frog complete, and in my pocket I carried the token of economic independence—a cheque-book (though it did not prove, as I had vaguely expected, to be a Fortunatus's purse).

As I sat back in the corner of my carriage (*first* class, don't forget) trying to appear to the manner born, I felt really proud for the first time in my life. The genus 'subaltern' had been glamorized by the nightly ecstasies of music-hall sopranos and the extravagances of the press into the beau idéal of a nation-in-arms. What callow, anonymous, completely obscure young man could be indifferent to the

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rôle of hero elect? Many an inexperienced head was, at least temporarily, turned by finding its owner in the full panoply of the commissioned warrior. My chest was inflated with importance and my muscles tensed. I could feel my Sam Browne spanning my chest and back like the ribbon of the Garter while the massed bands of the Brigade of Guards played in my ears.

I don't know whether it was Ouida or Anthony Hope who had imbued me with fabulous notions of military ritual, but somehow I had half an idea that there would be a guard of honour, or at least a deputation of my brother officers at Darlington Station to meet me, and that as a fatigue party sprang forward to take charge of my suitcase, my brother officers would cry out in chorus, 'Welcome, Purcell, to the dear old regiment!' whereupon there would be a waving of shakos followed by a burst of 'Huzzas!' before we drove off in whirling britskas to the plush-upholstered mess to celebrate the great event beneath the glittering chandeliers in magnums of Imperial Tokay. But there was nobody at the station at all. So I took a four-wheeler to battalion headquarters.

At the drill hall there was still no sign of excitement or even awareness of the distinguished reinforcement that the battalion was about to acquire, and the Orderly Room Sergeant had no previous intimation of my existence. However, he passed me on straight away to the acting Adjutant (Major Hills it was, O.C. 'D' Company, the Adjutant, Captain French, the son of the Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F., being temporarily away). Hills may have shaken hands with me and said some kind words (he probably did), but his close inspection of my uniform and his subsequent remarks have erased every other circumstance from my memory.

'Well,' he said at last, 'at least you are wearing the badges of the right regiment. The fellow before you had got the badges of the East Yorks and the one before him of the K.O.Y.L.I. And by the way,' he added, 'take that Sam Browne of yours and soak it well in paraffin.'

I glanced down at it. Whereas up to now I had thought of it as an aristocrat of military harness, as genteelly toned as rosewood or mahogany, I saw it now for what it was—a vulgar strap of a screaming upstart yellow! I murmured, 'Yes, sir,' weakly, and sagged spiritually like a punctured balloon. I have never been proud since.

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The 11th Battalion was still in process of formation. It consisted of a nucleus of some four hundred reservists, who had been called up in August, made up to strength by Kitchener's Army recruits. It was said that when the contingent of the reservists left West Hartlepool for Darlington they were mostly fighting drunk and had had to be locked in the train to prevent them from falling on to the line. Having seen Privates Quinn and O'Callahan of that draft after they had smashed up the guard-room at Beaumont Street Schools for the third time, I could well believe it. 'C' Company, to which I was posted, was composed mostly of new recruits, but the Sergeant-Major, Ayton, had come from the 1st Battalion at Rawalpindi to lick the men into shape—which he proceeded to do with the loudest voice and the most lacerating tongue in the whole Northern Command. I remember that he was still wearing his tropical uniform. My platoon, No. 9, was known as the 'Darlington Pals'. Its members were socially a cut above the ordinary run of recruits (many of them were commissioned later), and among them was young Harbottle, the son of the Mayor.

Our officers were either 'dug-outs' or civilians commissioned for the duration of the war. The latter included men of all ages up to fifty-odd—lawyers, schoolmasters, men from Shanghai and the Argentine—but half or more were undergraduates or other students. My Company Commander, Reeves, was an ex-militiaman, and had also served, it seemed, for some years in a cavalry regiment, while Murray, the Second-in-Command (killed later), had been a Cambridge undergraduate when the war broke out.

Looking back, the dug-outs divided themselves into those who were at least qualified to fight the previous war or the one before it, and those who were not only obsolete but 'cracked' into the bargain. Among the first sort, our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel R. L. Aspinall, D.S.O., stands out, while French and Reeves were also, within the limitations of their obsolescent knowledge, competent officers. They were, however, all three of them cavalrymen, which meant that they were not in their natural element commanding infantry. But the 'cracked' or fantastic individuals, though none of them lasted long, are much easier to describe.

Major Sir George Blazebrook, Bart., D.S.O., had been a great man in his time, but that time was not just then. He had the figure

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and whiskers of Don Quixote, his legs were curved into a bow-like wishbone, his spurs rattled like castanets, and he carried himself with a swagger which suggested d'Artagnan with acute arthritis. Most of the time, however, he seemed to be seated on horseback, except on a notable occasion when he fell off his charger on parade while bawling a command to a half-battalion. When we lined the streets to welcome Lord Charles Beresford (who, by the way, never turned up), Major Sir George Blazebrook, Bart., rode up and down in the rain, first at a trot, then at a canter, and finally at a gallop, enhancing his popularity with the sparse public at every stage. But when a tram tried to force its way through our ranks, he rode straight at it, like Don Q. at the windmills, and reared his charger up in front of it so that its fore-hoofs came down on the front of the tram like a ton of bricks on a corrugated iron roof. Slashing at the driver with his hunting crop, he shouted, 'Damnation, man! How dare you try to shove that damned thing through His Majesty's troops!'

The Major started early in the day to fortify himself for his duties, and once I was hailed by him at about 9 a.m. opposite the Imperial Hotel when I was on my way on parade, and (under orders) I joined him in a series of whiskies-and-sodas. When I finally arrived on parade about 11 a.m., Captain Reeves wanted to know where the hell I had been and I told him, in a tone that was more jaunty than regimental. The Major, however, was not always in a convivial mood, being often sombre and irascible, and in such a state of mind he placed the half-battalion he was temporarily in charge of under arrest because one man had reported the loss of his cap-badge. His final eccentricity was one night at a dinner (to which he had not been invited) suddenly to get down on all fours under the impression that he was a mad dog and to bite Mrs. G—— sharply in the ankle. We never saw him again.

Another dug-out was Major T. He was also somewhat senile, though invariably sober. He held the C.M.G. and had commanded something or other as a colonel in one of the Afghan wars—or was it the Tirah Campaign? He was convinced (*a*) that all progress had come to an end *c.* 1880, and (*b*) that all civilians were mentally deficient. He wore an enormously high stiff collar which was several sizes too large for him and which made his thin scraggy neck look like a gnarled tree behind a high khaki fence. Once, when in

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our local park he was instructing us how to sketch the surrounding terrain in tactical terms, he so simplified things to suit our feeble intelligences that we were left free to interpret his remarks according to our pleasure or caprice. Having been an art student at a previous stage in my short career, I drew a picture of the park with prams, bandstand, trees, and all, which had no military value whatever its artistic quality. I had a hunch that he would regard this as just one more proof of his thesis regarding the civilian mind and not as a leg-pull and, luckily for me, I was right. He held my drawing up for all to see. 'Look at this,' he exclaimed. 'Here is a chap who's drawn an *artist's picture!*' In pronouncing the word 'artist' his derision rose to a falsetto. (Many years later I heard one of our more celebrated war commanders use the cuss-word 'poet' with like intent.)

Some of our other dug-outs owed their fantasy not to self-caricature but to their misfortunes. Among these was Major D, a charming fellow, who had been shot through the windpipe in the Boer War, so that in attempting to impart to us some knowledge of musketry, he could produce only a string of shrill whistles like a train entering a tunnel, and since he had a natural stammer in addition, we were entertained without being instructed.

My own Company Commander, Reeves, although, as I have said, a competent officer, also had a strain of fantasy. His hobby was tent-pegging. On the slightest provocation he would give a demonstration of his prowess, using anything handy as a tent-peg, be it a stake in the ground or a child's rattle. He entertained the company in this way at every halt when we did our record forty-two-mile march in one day to Durham via Heighington and back. He knew his company drill well, though his heart was really in horses and his thoughts on Balaclava or Omdurman, and one of the first evolutions he taught us after I joined was to form 'cavalry square'—the rear rank standing up and the front rank on one knee, just as I imagine our infantry did it in the Napoleonic Wars.

Aspinall, the C.O., was in a class on his own. He was a nephew of Sir John French and had been a captain in the 15th Hussars and had won the D.S.O. in the Boer War, but had for some reason or other retired from the army for some years before World War I broke out. According to *Who Was Who* (that valuable collection of self-'write-ups'), his recreations were 'hunting and coaching'. The

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present war had been a God-sent opportunity for him to do once more what nature had intended him to do always, namely, 'to soldier'. He intended to make our battalion into a first-class fighting unit, and in double-quick time, and to get it out to France before the war was over—he hoped by March 1915. To this end he aimed to create an *esprit de corps*, which meant, so I gathered, that everyone should be convinced that the Green Howards was the finest regiment in the British Army and the 11th Battalion its finest battalion. For my part, I found little difficulty in adopting this belief, since the 11th was the only battalion I knew, but when I later served with other battalions of the regiment, I had to modify it to suit the new circumstances. Colonel Aspinall lectured us on the meaning of *noblesse oblige* and gave as an example the case of an officer who had ordered a special train to take him back to his unit to avoid overstaying his leave. (I duly noted that to qualify for the *noblesse* one had to be able to afford a special train.) One officers' meeting, held to select specialist officers for transport, signalling, etc., he concluded by saying that when the war was over he had no doubt that at least two officers from every New Army battalion would be given permanent commissions in the Regular Army. Here was our chance. He would, he said, be on the lookout for the right men. ('If we work hard,' observed Oppé to Bartram with a gentle smile as they walked out of the room, 'we may become subalterns in a line regiment!' Oppé, about forty, was known to us as 'the F. E. Smith of the East'; Bartram, also aged about forty, was the managing director of a large firm.)

But if Colonel Aspinall had not regarded the army as the *summum bonum* of human existence, he could not, as he did, have put heart and soul into making us all into soldiers. However, the military profession, finding itself in a position of importance that it had never enjoyed before in British history, and no doubt wishing to compensate itself for the rather apologetic rôle it had played for so long in Britain owing to the absence of full-scale wars, sometimes overdid the idea that soldiering was the only career open to a gentleman. Personally, I was not altogether 'sold' on the army gambit of treating junior officers, *pro forma*, as pickpockets who had been caught in the act. Aspinall had a way, too, of flaying officers in front of their men. [A window over our 'C' Company parade ground

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where he lived at Beaumont Street would go up and in a fluty metallic voice he would rasp out, 'Damn it, sir (in this case Oppé, not me), why aren't you wearing gloves on parade?'] But I learned to like and respect him in the end. When the formation to which the 11th Battalion belonged was turned into a reserve army to reinforce the other Kitchener's Armies, he applied for and obtained a command in France. I had breakfast with him in his flat in Greycoat Gardens when I was on leave from France in February 1916, a few months before he was killed leading a battalion of the Cheshire Regiment into action with a walking stick on 2 July.

If, looking back all those years, I ask myself what was the prevailing spirit at the time, I can only reply, 'patriotism', though I must try to analyse what this really meant. It was quite different from the spirit at large on the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. We, who were youths at the time, held an unquestioning belief in the ascendancy of Britain as part of the natural order of things, and the challenging of it by Germany was something very like 'impiety', in the Latin sense of the word. We had been brought up on Kipling, Newbolt, and 'Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you'. Moral and legal considerations and the sanctity of 'scraps of paper' did not figure greatly in our outlook. We had, so far, no experience of the real meaning of war, and an ethical approach, alas, is the child not of prosperity, but of adversity. Being young, we loved action and sensation of any sort for their own sakes, and thought to us was painful. We had simple ideas, and these were mostly second-hand. So convinced were we that the one thing open to an Englishman was to join up, that we could only regard those who did not do so as men who shirked their responsibilities. That youths without profession or business and with no wives or children to keep were freer to serve their country than those with ties of this kind, we did not stop to reflect.

But all these retrospective provisos notwithstanding, and allowing fully for youth and ignorance and the love of adventure, and even for the attraction of an inadequately paid job (7*s* 6*d* a day), and allowing, among the older men, for husbands eager to escape from unhappy marriages or square pegs seizing the chance to forsake round holes, there remained a large residuum of generous impulse to exalt those early days of a costly war. In any case, whatever their

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motives, the volunteers of my generation paid heavily in casualties for the temporary kudos they enjoyed. In officers especially, we lost heavily, for this was a 'subalterns' war'. The 11th reinforced other battalions of the regiment on several fronts. From 'C' Company alone, Oppé and Kingcombe were killed in Gallipoli, Murray, Melhado, and Faithfull in France, and Bartram died from illness contracted on active service shortly after the armistice. Hutchence survived but lost a leg. It was the same story for the rest of the companies of the 11th and for the battalions I afterwards served with in France. Of the three colonels I served under, two (Aspinall and Kent) were killed and the third (Fife) was badly wounded. As we all know, Britain lost over a million killed in the war of 1914–18, but, with another war in between, it is all fading into dimness. Why did A die and B survive? The blasphemous will say that it was 'God's will'; an answer kinder to the management is that it was just a brainless accident. What the moral is, I don't know, but *historically* it is all very simple:

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on; nor all thy Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.
> —*Rubá'iyát of Omar Khayyám*

Yet with all its qualities and enthusiasms, this generation was, after all, only a section, if a selected one, of the society of the time and shared its prejudices and shortcomings.

Being officers, we had, of course, also to be 'gentlemen', and as it was still only early in the war, this qualification was taken seriously. If one were to judge by the anxiety to 'place' people manifested in conversation in the mess and elsewhere, one was bound to have a vision of Britain as a pyramid of rigidly stratified castes, and one expected to espy a British Brahman in coronet or gaiters standing apart on some lofty terrace, British Kshatriyas of the armed services or Vaishayas of commerce keeping jealously to their strata, while hordes of British Untouchables slunk about the streets or hid themselves in public urinals. Actually, in the 11th Battalion, of the quasi-Brahman caste we had three Honourables (not to mention several Old Etonians) and our dug-outs were, by definition,

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Kshatriyas, but the rest of us were (if the truth be told) just plain British *bourgeoisie*, many of us with working-class grandparents, or great-grandparents in the more patrician instances.

Between upper and lower middle class, however, the real, if invisible, social *ha-ha* of Britain was (then, as now) located, separating those who had been to the 'right' schools from those who had not, a distinction as absolute as that between the saved and the damned—at least in the opinion of the saved. In my own case, however, the fact that my public school was an obscure one (although nearly two hundred years old), and therefore 'wrong', did not occasion me undue embarrassment. Speaking standard English as my first language and making no social claims (having none to make), I was usually given credit for advantages I did not possess. But, financially, I had to sponge on my parents to keep up appearances.

I see all this, of course, through the sophistication of an added forty years. A photograph of the period shows me as a tall, moon-faced youth—the greenest of the green. In my first few weeks I committed every possible enormity. But I soon learnt better. I was not intended by nature to be a permanent butt or the regimental buffoon, but for a moment I feared that I might be. Within a week of joining the regiment, I went to sleep (or dozed) in a cinema and remained seated while 'God Save the King' was being played. Someone saw me and reported me to the Second-in-Command who handed me over to a 'subalterns' court-martial'.

Hillman was the President. He had been an actor in peacetime and he was wearing a Harry Tate moustache, which he twitched up and down and side to side like a semaphore. The Prosecutor was Kingcombe, and Murray was Prisoner's Friend. I was indicted with all the circumstances of ribaldry and contumely, and pleaded guilty. The Prosecutor gave me an odious character, but the Prisoner's Friend urged that I should be let off lightly, in view of the notorious feebleness of my mind. The sentence of the court was that I should stand on my head and sing the National Anthem.

The proceedings so far had been the source of great merriment to everyone present, except me, who took it all with dead seriousness. I felt convinced that I had committed a terrible crime which had brought upon me humiliation from which I should never

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recover. However, by a gigantic effort I pulled myself together enough to say in a very subdued voice that I was anxious to comply with the sentence of the court but in view of the difficulty of singing at all in the position stipulated, perhaps I might be allowed to sing the Anthem while remaining the right side up. After some discussion, this permission was granted by the court (a trifle self-consciously I seem to remember), and in a thin, tremulous voice I sang the only verse of the Anthem I knew. Tears were starting to my eyes, and I nearly broke down. When the court adjourned *sine die*, I saw everyone looking very uncomfortable. My lack of a sense of humour, it seemed, had spoilt the fun. But it wasn't only my sense of humour that had failed. It was that, having no experience, I completely lacked a sense of proportion. Even now I should like to explain this to Hillman, Kingcombe, and Murray, but they were all three of them, alas, killed in action within a year or so.

Our difficulty, as officers, was that we had to instruct our men while at the same time learning the job ourselves. We also had to select men to be N.C.O.s. Few of us had had any but the most superficial training (a couple of months in the Senior O.T.C. in my case) and the information imparted to us by our dug-out superiors was valuable only as instilling into us a sense of army tradition and procedure. But from the little information that percolated through from the front, we could see that, as regards modern methods of warfare, our instructors were entirely out of date. (Colonel Aspinall, for instance, personally taught us sword drill and sword exercises, and for the first month or two we saw ourselves leading charges, sword in hand, but we did not take our swords to France.)

The trouble was that we had to learn to fight without any real knowledge of the kind of war we were up against. We knew from the papers and from an occasional visitor on leave from the front that the armies were bogged down in the trenches, but this was officially regarded as a temporary state of affairs and we were exhorted in orders to cultivate the 'offensive spirit'. A Scotch colonel, touring all the camps, demonstrated the approved method of gouging out German guts with a bayonet and taught us into the bargain some clever 'dirty tricks' with the foot and the butt end of the rifle. When we went under canvas in Hummersknot Park, we learnt to lie on our bellies in echelon, and to advance in 'short,

PERDANA LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION YAYASAN KEPIMPINAN PERDANA

sharp rushes' as the (Boer War) field-training manual prescribed. We were taught to read maps, to find our way across country, and to give fire orders, and I became a qualified instructor of signalling on a course at Tynemouth. (I also note from an old Red Cross certificate among my papers that I am qualified to render first-aid to the injured. God help the injured!)

As the war went on, infantry warfare became more and more complicated—we had to be our own engineers as well as experts in gas warfare, bombing, Lewis guns, etc., but in those early days the one piece of mechanism we had to master was the rifle. For some weeks, however, we had not even one service rifle (S.M.L.E.) between us. We had been issued with ten long Martini-Henrys (1871) per company and these were carried by our front files. (The men, incidentally, were dressed in the blue uniforms of the militia. We did not get our khaki until well on in 1915.) The S.M.L.E. rifle ·303, it seemed to me, was a very straightforward affair. There was so little to be learnt about it. But simple as it was, musketry instruction was a very uphill task. A proportion of the men got the idea of it at once, and some of these made better shots than any of the officers; the majority gradually learnt to be second or third class shots, while a small minority could not hit a haystack at ten yards' range. To teach them to bring the back sight, fore sight, and target into line as they pressed the trigger was attempted with the aid of all sorts of devices—charts, discs, tripods, etc., and often at the risk of life and limb to the instructor (Sergeant Ashworth, our Battalion Sniping Sergeant in the 7th Battalion, of whom more hereafter, was killed late in the war while instructing in England by a round left in the rifle of a recruit). The truth seemed to be that while the average intelligence was not very high, that of the minority was subnormal. After conscription came in, the average was much lower than in the volunteer days, and when I was with the 3rd Reserve Battalion at West Hartlepool in 1917, I was saddened to see some of the material our social and industrial system had turned over to us to make into soldiers or dispose of as cannon-fodder.

The connexion, if any, between intelligence and social and economic conditions it is not my business to trace, but I saw enough later on in the war of the homes of miners and urban workers in the

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VICTOR PURCELL
C.M.G., Ph.D., Litt.D.(Cantab.)

Photo: Owen Lattimore

Victor Purcell, C.M.G., Litt.D., was born in 1896 and educated at Bancroft's School and Trinity College, Cambridge. He served in the Green Howards in the First World War and was twice wounded. He joined the Malayan Civil Service in 1921, and held many appointments including Protector of Chinese and (wartime) Director General of Information. In 1945–46 he was Principal Adviser on Chinese Affairs to the British Military Administration.
From 1946–48, Dr. Purcell was a Consultant on Asia and the Far East to the United Nations and from 1949 until his retirement in 1963 he was Lecturer in Far Eastern History at Cambridge. He is the author of many books both on Southeast Asia and China. They include *The Chinese in Malaya* (1948), *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (1951), *Malaya-Communist or Free?* (1954), *China* (*Nations of the Modern World*) (1962), *The Revolution in Southeast Asia* (1962), *A Background to the Boxer Uprising* (1962), and *Malaysia* (1964).
He is now engaged on a three-volume history of the Chin. se Revolution.

It is regretted that this biographical note, written by Dr Purcell, was printed just before his death on 2nd Janua.y, 1965

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