# BOOK REVIEWS

*The Underside of Malaysian History: Pullers, Prostitutes, Plantation Workers*. By Peter J. Rimmer and Lisa M. Allen. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990. Pp. xiv, 259.

In 1946 Chin Kee Onn published *Malaya Upside Down*, his first-person narrative of the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore from 1942 to 1945. It recounted the mundane everyday life in a difficult period and could be considered an early entry in the very small library of "people's histories" — accounts of life at the bottom of the ladder in Southeast Asia once the political and military forces had been factored out. In the four decades since, *Malaya Upside Down* has shown itself to be an important source for a period lacking a substantial documentary record. The editors of *The Underside of Malaysian History: Pullers, Prostitutes, Plantation Workers*, Peter Rimmer and Lisa Allen, both of the Australian National University, also take "sides" and utilizing documentary and non-documentary sources they and others recount aspects of the twentieth century history of the other side of the past — the side that is normally omitted, discounted, or worse still, dismissed. In a comprehensive fashion, the editors bring together essays on such topics as Indian railway workers in Malaya, 1880–57, prostitution and the Karayuki-san in Singapore society, and the syndromes of *amok* and *latah* among Malays. This collection of papers the editors define as a study of life as it is lived by the ordinary people — "a people's history designed to make present-day Malaysians conscious of the enormous contributions of their unheralded forbears" (p. xiii).

People's history is yet another term for the "new social history" or popular history and one well might ask if all histories with the exception of natural history are not about people in some fashion or other. Well, yes, some fashion but only some people. History has tended to be defined as about people who

write — who leave records of their accomplishments and less often their failures — records that are then collected, analysed, and dissected into an account of the past. It can be observed, however, that writing is an aberrant behaviour. What percentage of the population kept diaries, maintained their correspondence, preserved their professional and personal records, and then remembered to deposit them perhaps after some judicious pruning in a nearby archives? I would suggest, very few. The past then, as many historians have seen it, has been one of "you write (or are written about) therefore you were". Historians until recently have thus tended to concentrate on the most prolific sources of the past and these have been the governmental records and private papers when such exist. In addition, certain "people" classifications have dominated these records, namely, gender: male, class: upper, colour: white. The bulk of our past has thus been on matters that related most directly to the 5 per cent or less of our population who have left a documentary record.

Since the late 1960s there has been an increasing interest by historians in the new social history or people's history. People's history includes in its methodology a broad range of sources be it folk ballads, oral sources (oral history/tradition), folk medicine, linguistics, art or life histories (written or spoken). The ideological approaches may be liberal, conservative, Marxist, or simply a work of antiquarian interest. The subject matter is broad and growing exponentially as scholars research ethnicity, migration, family, material culture, criminals, the underclass, and labour. There may also be an analysis, as Christopher Hill does in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), of the ideas and ideology of the common people. The overall good is usually to avoid writing a history of just one stratum of society, to reach beyond to class, gender, religion, and ethnicity and to be inclusive of the past rather than exclusive. This allows for a firmer awareness of social structures in the "underside" of society as well as providing a voice for the voiceless — those marginalized by the record keepers of the past.

Rimmer and Allen have attempted in this volume to concentrate on the marginalized Malaysian and have shed new light on those on the underside of Malaysian history — the rubber smallholders, estate workers, railway workers, hackney carriage drivers, rickshaw pullers, prostitutes, and agricultural squatters. These too have left a record, albeit one that entails considerable research perseverance, a skilful multi-

disciplinary approach, and a circumspect imagination. The "documents" are not in the usual places as these histories are peopled by those who are not in the "usual" places either. Oral history/tradition, probate and court records, and medical records are all means by which these unusual historical niches must be explored.

Academic papers from a conference chosen, edited, and stitched together between two covers do not normally a seamless cloth make. In *The Underside of Malaysian History* there are nine papers (plus an introduction), divided into three parts — rural, urban, and health. The volume is also enlivened by a considerable number of photographs, maps, graphics, and tables, all of which add to the visual appeal of the work. Generally the "fit" works well with useful overlaps by Drabble and Barlow on rubber workers, Rimmer and Warren on rickshaw pullers and prostitutes, and Parmer and Manderson on issues of public health. Each of the nine articles, however, can be read separately and each represents an effort to portray the new social history of women, workers, and the environment.

Colin Barlow undertakes a systematic periodization of the economic position of the rubber workers in Malaysia up to the 1980s — specifically, the estate workers (Tamil) and the smallholders (the majority of whom were Malay). His comparison of regimentation in the former instance and flexible independence in the latter concludes with the observation that the position of rubber workers in Malaysia with its comparative democratic system, distinct ethnic bias in the workplace, and prosperity is almost unique.

With this overview, Drabble's article then concentrates on the inter-war years of 1922–41 and the rivalry between the smallholders and the estate owners, the latter making every effort during this period through the Rubber Growers Association to eliminate what they regarded as competition. As Drabble points out, the British colonial government in Malaya was faced with a blizzard of documents from the European producers that made the case that the production of smallholders should be restricted. The smallholders had not collected such minutia, and oral testimony was dismissed. The government was in some senses in danger of falling between three stools — estate holders, Malay growers, and Netherlands East Indies competition. Drabble's

comparison of the situation in the Netherlands East Indies is particularly useful here as he looks at the broader political implications in addition to the local economic interests.

Loh Kok Wah is even more specific as to local interests in his examination of the agricultural squatters in Kinta district in the state of Perak between the two World Wars. He notes early in his essay that the

> structural changes that affected the lives of the ordinary coolies can be traced by consulting local (that is, district rather than federal or state level) official records. (p. 73)

The agricultural squatters phenomenon has usually been perceived as a direct consequence of the Japanese occupation when migration from city to countryside by the Chinese population took place. Loh, with his examination of local documentation, concludes that this usual view is fallacious and the population drift was the result of the employment and unemployment pattern of the tin mines and the need for agricultural produce in the area. The colonial authority maintained control of the land for the mines by a system of Temporary Occupation Licences which could be granted to, or withdrawn from, squatters at any time. Such arbitrary measures were related to both mine employment and food production. It would have been useful to have examined the role of women through oral testimony as their role was crucial to agricultural production.

Many of the traveller accounts of this century note that upon landing in Singapore, travellers were often taken by rickshaw not to a hotel but to the brothels of Sago, Malabar, or Bugis Streets. This co-operative juxtaposition of coolie pullers and prostitutes brings together two excellent articles by Rimmer and Warren on public transport and prostitution, respectively.

Rimmer on pullers and hackney carriage syces follows two broader themes of how labour adapts to new technology and what are the new methods of co-ordination and control of labour that came about. Rimmer's major source are the annual reports of the Singapore municipality's Hackney Carriage and Jinricksha Department. In a well-documented work, Rimmer examines the technology involved, the social relationships between the workers within these two modes of transport, and the resultant structure of working relationships that came with the

introduction of the jinricksha in Singapore and the eventual passing of the hackney carriages into history.

Warren's article is the only one in this volume that examines working-class women's history in any detail and integrates into his essay an account of where women's history should stand in the social history of Southeast Asia. His account of the Karayuki-san (working class Japanese women who lived abroad as prostitutes) is given as an example of an approach to women's history and to "people's" history. He is one of the few writers who has come to grips, and successfully, with the most difficult aspect of what was promised in the book's introduction — a methodology that would provide at least a start in a dialogue with the voiceless.

Amarjit Kaur mentions in his article on Indian railway workers (1880–1957) that he has drawn on the "voiceless" through interviews with four informants. However, who they are, when and where they were interviewed, why them and not others, has not been indicated. Surely in a book of those on the bottom rung, informants should be footnoted in the same manner as the documentary record. Oral evidence will not be recognized as a legitimate source of history, if it does not appear in footnotes, endnotes, or a bibliography. In this volume Kaur is the only writer who mentions using oral evidence and makes excellent use of it (p. 110 passim), yet many of the other papers are well suited to oral research.

The final section, ". . . In Sickness and in Health", includes an in-depth view by Parmer of the well-being of the estate workers in the federated Malay states in the 1920s and can be read most usefully with Barlow and Drabble. Parmer's research again highlights the conflict of government policy and estate owner priority which did not mesh, especially when they clashed over a Health Board Scheme that would have improved the worker's health at the expense of the government and owner. The onset of the Depression in 1930 was a convenient rationale for ending a systematic and comprehensive medical service that would have saved many lives.

Private capital for public health is also a theme in Manderson's paper but she examines the funding by the Rockefeller Foundation in co-

operation with the colonial government of a Rural Sanitation Campaign in Malaya. It was in essence an adult education programme on hygiene and sanitation, specifically with regard to hookworm. She also notes the efforts at controlling malaria and the perception of particular diseases by colonial administration with the resultant precautions to be taken. It would be of value in such an analysis of colonial attitudes to note the experience of colonial administrators in other tropical colonies. In West Africa, for example, in the last half of the nineteenth century, a high percentage (over 25 per cent) of Europeans died of malaria. Every *known* precaution was taken but had little impact. It should be noted that the perception of health and thus perceptions of the culture of the population in Malaya were not just Eurocentric but also "empirical", with the emphasis on the "empire".

Winzeler also looks at European perception in his paper on Malayan *amok* and *latah*. He judiciously weighs both his evidence drawn from field-work and that of other scholars and suggests that probably psycho-pathological causes are involved. However, he also urges further comparative work in both Dutch and Malay sources by historians who could make a considerable contribution.

In summary, the studies in this volume of twentieth century Malaysian history have utilized and interpreted sources that have not been given the same credence as earlier studies with more political and élite themes. Taken in toto, they point the way to new fields of research to till and, more importantly, provide a few new field tools to wield. People's history and all that the term conjures up (women, labour, ethnics, colonized, poor) has barely begun and *The Underside of Malaysian History* provides a strong challenge to all historians to look again at the past beyond the privileged to the underprivileged, beyond the masters to the marginalized and beyond the texts of the past to the textures of everyday life.

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