

# Tan Sri (DR.) Mohamed Said, former Mentri Besar of Negri Sembilan, recalls the past

## Golden days at M.C.

ON Saturday July 7, 1973, the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, celebrated its 68th anniversary and on that day its most illustrious Old Boy, Tun Abdul Razak, paid a visit to his Alma Mater to attend the Annual Speech and Prize-giving Day and to declare open a school hall named after him.

The occasion afforded an opportunity for two prolific contributors of the "Straits Times" to "survey the school's beginnings, its role and contribution in pre-war Malaya and to discuss the changes and expansion which the school has undergone since the war," as outlined in the introductory paragraph.

One of the first two well-written and well-researched articles, Cheah Boon Kheng described the genesis of the College as the Malay Residential School, set up at Kuala Kangsar in 1905.

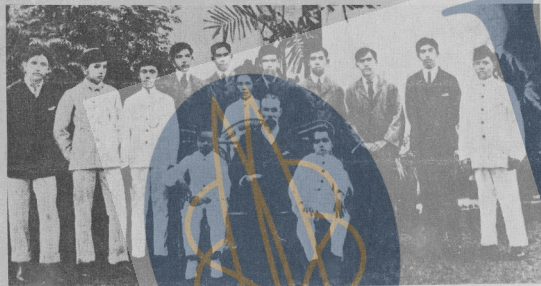
As such it made its unobtrusive, tentative debut on the educational stage owing to the very existence to the vision and initiative of Mr. R.J. Wilkinson.

In his official capacity this great Englishman then held the post of Inspector of Schools, F.M.S., and, thereafter, successively those of Secretary to Resident, (S. R.) Perak, British Resident (B.R.), Negri Sembilan, Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements, and last of all, Governor of Sierra Leone, while at the same time slowly gaining his reputation as scholar, historian and lexicographer.

### Supporter

It was Mr. Wilkinson who first conceived the idea of starting a boarding school for "the education of Malay good family and the training of Malay boys for admission to certain branches of Government service."

Kuala Kangsar was chosen as the site of the Malay Residential School and its first successor the Malay College for the reason that their most ardent supporter was Sultan Idris unquestionably Perak's



The first class in 1905. Mr. Hargreaves seated in the centre. The late Tunku Abdul Rahman, Yang Diptuan Besar and the first Agung is on his right.

ablest and most far-sighted ruler.

So as to enable Mr. Wilkinson to see to it that his brain-child did not die a premature death or succumb in the miasma of official inactivity, he was transferred to Perak as Secretary to the Resident in 1906.

By a strange quirk of fate the British Resident of Perak at that time was Mr. E.W. (later Sir Ernest) Birch, the son of J.W.W. Birch, the first Resident of Perak, who was assassinated at Pasir Salak in 1875.

He was described as "a man of great energy and an attractive personality." But what was even more significant about Mr. Ernest Birch was that "he made Perak the centre of the pro-Malay campaign" and with Mr. Wilkinson led the small coteries of British officers who "shared a common concern for the Malays."

and included, among others, R.O. Winstedt, E. Nathan, A. Caldecott, C.W.C. Parr an E.N. Murray.

From its lowly beginnings in an attic shed, the school flourished under the able guidance

of its first Headmaster, Mr. William Hargreaves, its student number increased, and when the impressive new building of the Sekolah Besar was completed in 1909, the name was changed to Malay College and the idea of "educating and training" was taken to the next level with the opening of the English public schools, was explicitly stated as the first objective of the school.

### New emphasis

The Sekolah Kechil (Preparatory or Prep School), built afterwards to accommodate the two lowest classes, completed the hypothesis of the Malay College as the Eton of Malaya, or so it was dubbed by sundry British officials.

In the second article, Adibah Amin described the radical changes that overtook the College after the Second World War and transformed it from an exclusive, aristocratic school with an enrolment of not more than 150, composed mainly of boys with

varying shades of blue blood in their veins to one that summarily did away with class distinctions of all kinds and relied solely on brains for its annual intake of students to round off its total student population of nearly 700.

There was also a salutary change in that much greater emphasis was given to the teaching of science rather than arts subjects to enable life College to play its part in the attempt of Government to redress the pronounced imbalance between scientifically-trained Malays and non-Malays in the country.

In the wake of these two articles, an account of what the college was really like in 1919 and the five ensuing years, when the writer was a student, there may not only be of interest to its present alumni and the general public, but may also remind its pre-war old boys of the halcyon days of the past, when it did seem to many that in the words of Voltaire's Pangloss, "everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds," while

to some, particularly Pak Sako, everything was not what it should be in Malaya.

### Son Anecdotes

I was enrolled as a student of the College at the beginning of 1919, missing Mr. Hargreaves, who had retired, by six months. Mr. J. O'May, who had been first assistant to him from the inception of Malay Residential School, had been appointed Acting Headmaster and it was to him that I reported.

Mr. Hargreaves, an Englishman and a Master of Arts of Dublin University, had been described to me by a cousin of mine who had been acting in the College five years before me as a tall commanding figure with an impressive grey moustache.

Furthermore, from the affectionate and reverent manner in which the senior students spoke of him and the many anecdotes told of him, one could only conclude that he must have been a great headmaster.

By contrast, Mr. J. O'May was an Irishman and paradoxical as it may seem, was a graduate of Oxford University.

### Well-liked

Unlike Mr. Hargreaves who was described as a very good teacher, his habit of talking "nine-tenths of the dozen" on the subject he was teaching in class, no doubt attributable to his Irish

gift of the gab, had the effect of making him a long-winded and boring teacher.

In appearance he was an inconspicuous figure, below medium height, whose clean shaven face was not improved by an unduly prominent nose.

He was well-liked by the boys for his kind and friendly attitude towards them. But he was too familiar with them with the result that familiarity nearly always breeding contempt he was not much respected by them.

Thus, whenever he made the round of the dormitories after "lights out" at night, he was subjected to all kinds of practical jokes by the more mischievous among the senior boys.

These pranks sometimes consisted of the squirting of black ink on his white-drill suit or the throwing of an old shoe at his retreating figure, whereupon he would return to investigate, irately muttering "Sakali!" in the sudden silliness of the dormitory.

And on the football field, he was often tempted with a ball apparently within easy reach, only to be balked of it by a player much faster than he.

Despite all the teasing and practical jokes, however, it was fully expected that he would be confirmed as Headmaster, as he had been Mr. Hargreaves's right-hand man for as long as the school had been in existence.

Much to everyone's surprise, therefore, it soon became known that a new Headmaster had been appointed.

Contrary to the normal practice, whereby the Secretary of State for the Colonies would appoint someone who was already a member of the Malayan Educational Service on the recommendation of the Director of Education, this time the appointment had been made direct by him.

The Secretary of State had selected for the post Mr. L. S. Jermyn, an assistant master at Glenalmond College, an English public school.

### Shattered

The news appeared to have a shattering effect on Mr. O'May on being officially informed that a new Headmaster had been appointed and that he would be arriving in Malaya within the next few weeks, he resigned his post, as a European in the Educational Service and accepted that of Manager of Barker & Co Ltd of Kuala Lumpur.

Mr Jermyn duly arrived at Kuala Kangsar

accompanied by the frail and delicate looking Mrs Jermyn and their two-year-old son, Peter Jermyn.

After he had taken over charge of the school from Mr O'May.

## ... when life seemed as it ought to be

he had the whole school assembled in the Great Hall and in his speech, paid a glowing tribute to Mr O'May for his long and devoted service to the College.

He then presented Mr. O'May with an inscribed ivory carving, towards the purchase of which the whole school had subscribed.

In his farewell speech in response to Mr Jermyn's, he was apparently unable to control his emotion and the tears flowed freely on his sunken cheeks.

Many of the younger boys, who had not had much contact with him, wept silently in sympathy.

At the time none of the boys had the remotest idea as to why Mr O'May was not confirmed as Headmaster

### Consoled

I now believe that it had to do with his Irish nationality and the troubled political condition of Ireland following the 1916 uprising and its suppression by the Black and Tans.

In retrospect, I also believe that in what must have been the greatest disappointment of his life and the most devastating blow to his self-esteem, he was consoled by the love of a woman.

For during his acting Headmastership, he had fallen in love with the Lady Medical Officer, working at the Women's Hospital, Kuala Kangsar.

His love was reciprocated and he married her a few months before leaving Kuala Kangsar for Kuala Lumpur.

Incidentally the frequent sight of Mr O'May kissing his newly-wedded wife on the verandah of his bungalow provided vicarious excitement to several sex-starved senior boys, some of whom were already grown men.

My first impression of Mr. Jermyn, when he visited us in class at the Prep School a few days after his arrival, was of a tall, handsome and distinguished-looking man of about 34 summers.

On closer observation, however, his boyish sensibility was shocked at the discovery that he suffered from considerable disabilities.

These physical defects, I found out later, were due to the ravages of polio which infected him during early adult life.

They consisted of the paralysis and atrophy of the small muscles of his right hand which rendered it quite useless for the purposes of writing or grasping.

Consequently he wrote with his left hand, which made a distinct, writing not exactly of the copy-book kind.

In addition, the paralysis and atrophy of certain muscle groups in his left leg caused him to walk with a distinct limp, rendering his gait rather ungainly.

These physical handicaps appeared to have caused an adverse psychological effect on his temper, as I was to learn later, when he taught us English Language and Literature in the upper classes.

For whenever a student gave a specially stupid answer to his question, his temper was apt to be of the atrocious kind, and "You blithering idiot!" he would shout at the top of his voice.

### Erratic

They accounted, too, for his somewhat erratic headmastership, as evidenced, among other things, by his laxity in enforcing discipline, which contrasted sharply with the severity of the punishments meted out by him in at least two particular instances.

But as an appointee of the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and as a practising poet, whose poems were from time to time published in the college magazine and various Malayan periodicals, he was much respected by the students.

Besides, he was such a handsome and distinguished-looking man despite his physical defects, he taught us English so well and was so appreciative of good work done by students,

that he was quite a popular Headmaster.

As a new boy, I was placed in the lowest form in the Prep School and was accommodated in one of the two dormitories on the upper floor of the school, which were provided with iron spring bedsteads and mosquito nets, but had to bring our own mattresses and pillows from home.

### Grading

Contrary to the usual practice in other schools, the lowest form in the Malay College of my time was known as Class Six, form two to Class Five and so on up to Class Two, equivalent to Standard Seven, the highest class in those days.

After passing the Standard Seven Government Examination, or which a certificate was awarded, graded First and Second Class, a boy either left school and sought employment in Government Service or, if selected, was placed in the Special Class for Malaya Probationers, where he had to undergo three years further education and training as cadet for the Malay Administrative Service.

This class structure was retained for the further years after my admission to the College, and the Government Standard Seven Examination was held in December 1919 and 1920.

After that Class Two was converted into Class Two B, the equivalent of the former Standard Seven, and

Two new classes were added, i.e. Class Two A, the Junior Cambridge Class and Class One, the Senior Cambridge or School Certificate Class.

The Seven Standard Examination was abolished and the boys had to sit the Junior Cambridge Examination in 1917, after they had completed a not her year's schooling.

Those who passed this exam were awarded the Junior Cambridge certificates by the Cambridge Examination Syndicate, these certificates being graded Honours and ordinary Pass certificates.

Having passed the Junior Cambridge exam, a boy may elect to stay on in the Senior Cambridge class and at the end of another year sit for the Senior Cambridge or School Certificate Examination or leave school.

After passing this exam a boy either left school, or if he was selected as a Malay Probationer, had to undergo one further year's education in the Special Class as a cadet for the M.A.S.

### REDUCED

- 9 DEC 1973  
The original three years probationership has thus been reduced to one year.

The Class Six master at the Prep School was Enick Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad, or Za'aba (now Tan Sri (Dr.) Zainal Abidin) who was later to win fame as a writer and a scholar and to be appointed the first Headmaster of the Malay Studies Department of the University of Malaya.

As was the practice in those days, he taught all subjects in Class Six. The text-book on English grammar used in Class Six was the one written by Cikgu Abdul Majid bin Haji Zainal, an old boy of the old Malay Residential School who had afterwards taught at that school. He was later to write "Self-taught Malay" in the "Marlborough" series of "Self-taught" publications dealing with the major languages of the world.

### ACCENT

Most of us did not have any difficulty in passing the annual examination and were accordingly promoted to Class Five.

The Class Five master was Cikgu Hassan who taught English very well. He prized himself on his accent and spoke the language with a distinct English twang.

He was in addition, an amusing sort of teacher, who delighted in making literal translations into English of idiomatic Malay expressions, as for instance "to eat wind" for "makan angin", "eat salary" for "makan gaji", "eat put in mouth" for "makan sup", "walk walk only" for "berjalan-jalan sahaja".

His grammar was a little good book and was written as to be a great help to boys who on admission to the College did not know a