

## PART II

### REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

*Reminiscences of some alumni.*

#### COLLEGE DAYS WITH THE FIRST INTAKE

*An unseen Hand guided me into it and  
lifted me much much above myself.*

**V Ambiavagar**

*Dip Arts*



*M*y heartiest congratulations and gratitude to the alumni affairs and development office of the National University of Singapore for organising this 65th anniversary of the unofficial opening of Raffles College in June 1928.

I am very fortunate to be still around and able to meet so many graduates of that historic institution which gave to the Malaysian states and Singapore the leaders who excelled at building independent and prosperous Malaysia and Singapore, two of the very few countries in the world that can be proud of their post-war history.

The precise time of the opening of the College proved for me, in later years, to be of special significance in my life and career, much more significant than I could have imagined at that time. Why or how I shall disclose in a while.

I came to know every student of that pioneer batch of 1928 and several of the next two batches. I would have come to know all of them intimately, but for the recession that began to set in for the two territories and prevented the building of more hostels to enable all the Singapore students to live in the hostels for all the three years instead of just one year. But for my interest in games, I would have known even fewer of them.

I cannot help feeling very sad to miss so many friends who meant so much to me both at College and later on. My nostalgia is clouded by recollection of how much Malaysia and Singapore lost by the untimely death of persons like Utam Singh, the most brilliant student of the first batch, Koh Eng Kwang, one of the finest friends and gentlemen taken away by the Japanese, Guy Machado, another fine gentleman who passed away during the Occupation, Paramsothy, who took the initiative to found the Singapore Teachers' Association, but also succumbed to the Occupation. Others who have departed this world, to whom I was deeply attached, at least gave their full service before bidding good-bye.

If Raffles College had opened earlier or later than 1928, I do not think I would have gone there and I would not be writing this article. Earlier, my poor scholastic record would not have helped me to qualify for a scholarship. During the three years of my teacher training I had gained some knowledge of how to appreciate what I read and had enjoyed much general reading that stood me in good stead when I did English literature at the principal level. Also my full qualification as a teacher enabled me to fit into my profession with confidence.

I regret to mention here that the education course during my time at the College was not related to the proper needs of a teacher. It was too much high-faluting psychology and no training in how to handle a class of pupils, not even how to prepare a lesson.

If the opening had been delayed I would have begun enjoying the princely qualified teacher's salary of one hundred and thirty dollars, plus a fifteen percent allowance per month. (I had qualified in May 1928.) I had experienced hunger and poverty since childhood. The offer of fifty dollars per month for a Raffles College diploma, in addition to the qualified teacher's salary, after sacrificing three years' earning would have held no attraction. I would have taken the same attitude as my colleagues — that the diploma called for too much sacrifice for too little benefit. As it was, several colleagues called me a damned fool for sacrificing a luxurious living to study for a diploma of little value.

It was some unknown power that made me apply for a government indentured scholarship to study at the College. For one thing I thought the College course would prepare me for the London University external examination. I was disillusioned in this when I found that the syllabus was deliberately designed to prevent Raffles College graduates from sitting the London examinations. Too many local teachers with university degrees would have meant a reduced demand for expatriates, several of whom were not university graduates. (In those days an expatriate's commencing salary was four hundred dollars and the maximum of the local teacher's was three hundred dollars.) If too many of us possessed university degrees, there would have been a clamour for us to be paid better.

I nearly withdrew from Raffles College especially when the first vacation came, and I was told that the fifty dollars scholarship would be reduced to twenty dollars during vacations. The argument was that we would be living with our parents at our own homes. I had no parents and no home. While I was a student teacher, I had been subsisting on my student teacher's salary by messing with three bachelor friends. When I told them that I would have to withdraw from College, they offered to let me live with them free and reimburse them later. My dependence on them became heavier in my second and third years because all Singapore students had to clear out of the hostel after the first year. The previous grand announcement that living in hostel was a necessary part of higher education came to nought for Singapore students. Also I regretted very much not being able to mix well with subsequent batches of students.

Again, it was some external force that prevented my acting like two other qualified teachers who decided to go back to work.

From the moment I was posted to Raffles Institution I felt glad that I had gone to Raffles College and that I had not allowed adverse circumstances to force me to back out. I began enjoying the challenges of teaching secondary classes, training the school hockey teams, supervising the publication of the school magazine, guiding the school literary and debating society, founding the school historical society, editing Chorus (the Journal of the Teachers' Associations of both Singapore and the Malay States), leading the Singapore Teachers' Association in appealing for a revision of the teachers' salary scheme, founding the Graduate Teachers' Association and leading it to appeal successfully to Sir John Nicoll to implement a new scheme of salaries, as well as opportunities for promotion to administrative posts proposed by a committee of the Legislative Council, but shelved by his predecessor. These turned out to be stepping stones to several higher activities, including my being invited to a part-time tutoring and later full-time lectureship at Raffles College and then the University, and my appointment as Deputy Secretary/Deputy Director of Education. All this sounds like boasting, but my purpose in recounting it is to show that the opening of Raffles College in 1928 proved to be of very special significance in my life and career, and that an unseen hand controlled my destiny. I had not been a good student at school, I had shown no promise of any kind, but fate played a big hand in the founding of Raffles

College in 1928 for me to get an education and also in keeping me around to savour this historic occasion!

Forty-three of us from the Malay States and the Straits Settlements eager for a higher status than the Normal Class certificate and for the pride of teaching in secondary schools, indentured to serve as teachers in secondary schools and matriculated in June 1928, to study for an arts or science diploma at the end of a three-year course.

Leong Peng Chong, the first Anderson Scholar and A P Rajah, a private student, who came only to gain maturity before going to Cambridge and Oxford respectively were exceptions. While all of us had also to do education in addition to the three subjects — one at principal level, the other two at subsidiary — they were exempted from education. The education course required us to be attached to schools during the long vacations for practical teaching experience.

The forty-three matriculates were reduced to twenty-nine in less than a month. Those who went away silently and secretly from the College did so, I think, because they discovered that the intellectual food at the College was beyond their capacity to digest. Even some of the twenty-nine found the going too tough.

It would not be out of place to record here that A P Rajah was a great asset to our cricket and soccer teams at a time when we had such a small number to draw upon. A P had never played soccer in goal before, but sportingly agreed to try and proved to be good. It was his fighting spirit that made him a success.

In those colonial days emphasis in education was not on excellence in examination results, but on all round performance and all round did not mean just mental but physical as well. In selecting personnel for training as teachers, it was standard practice to short-list applicants according to their academic results, and then give preference to those who could be most useful in taking charge of activities on the school field. Since Raffles College was founded primarily to produce secondary school teachers, it was not surprising that a good number selected as indentured students excelled at sports.

Present-day Singaporeans would not be surprised, therefore, to learn that many of us were so crazy about games and athletics that even on the Saturday and Sunday preceding the start of the final examinations on Monday we were playing soccer or cricket or both, and laughing at those swotting for the examination.

My nostalgia is linked to the quadrangle where we commenced playing on the very first day of our lectures and to all those I teamed with or played against. The spacious field beside Bukit Timah Road took too long, about three months, to be ready for us. The person who pushed the contractors to speed up getting the field ready was Prof Gillett.

My nostalgia is also for the companionship, advice and help he gave all his students and those who came into contact with him on the cricket field. He wanted to be with us in the cricket team and frequently joined us at practice. Gillett was a refreshing non-colonial; he was not just our professor but our friend.

We were disappointed with our literature syllabus, it being too extensive and not sufficiently intensive. It was from Chaucer to Robert Bridges, from the miracle plays to Bernard Shaw's plays, from the early romantics to D H Lawrence. We did not blame Gillett for it. He was sympathetic. He fulfilled the requirements of the syllabus, but gave us in-depth knowledge of the early romantic period, the Victorian era and the beginnings of the twentieth century. He set us a wide choice of questions at the examinations.

We, the matriculating students, felt excited and jubilant to be told by Dr Winstedt, the principal, that we were the pioneers of a liberal tertiary education in the country. He was speaking to us in the quadrangle between the science block and the Eu Tong Sen hostel, because the administrative block with the hall was still under construction. He said other things as well, but I cannot recall what they were, as I was too busy counting the number of familiar faces and assessing which of them would be useful to make up the cricket, soccer and hockey teams.

Ung Khok Cheow and Lee Mun Yui were also looking around and obviously counting. I did not know then they were looking for rugby players, although they were good at soccer and hockey also. All of us knew that T Mori, the only Japanese among us, would be the best all-rounder. There was not a single game he did not play and at which he did not excel.

Making friends among all the unknowns was an organised ragging – twenty of A section of the hostel ragging twenty of the B section by catching them unawares and holding them fully dressed under the shower until they were thoroughly drenched. Mori enjoyed it most. He was so tough that it took six of us to pin him down and carry him kicking and struggling to the shower. I think that the six of us were more bruised than he at the end!

English, history, and geography lectures during the first term were held in what was intended as the residence for the principal, because the administrative block was still under construction. Dr Winstedt, the principal, never lived in the campus. He was concurrently director of education and lived elsewhere. I saw him at the campus only on four occasions, the first time, when he addressed us at the unofficial opening of the College; the second, when he came to deal with a mild riot (which I shall tell about in due course); the third, at the official opening in 1929; and the fourth, when he gave us our diplomas. Professor Buchart deputised for him in administrative matters.

The beginnings of the English library were at Gillett's house. It was subsequently transferred to the English department in the administrative block. For quite a while books disappeared immediately after the first tutorial pair of the week had come out of Gillett's room. They would be the books mentioned for reference for the next tutorial essay. We guessed who must have been bagging them. We climbed over the cubicle walls of two students whom we suspected, and found them stacked under the bed of the second one. He never discovered who had taken away the books, because we distributed them around and exchanged them among ourselves.

Strangely enough there were no lectures or classes on the English language. In this, Raffles College followed the tradition of English universities, but not that of the Scottish or Welsh or Irish. Those who were responsible for drawing up the College syllabus did not wait to think that we were not English born, and that very few of us had been taught any English by English teachers. The weekly lectures on the English language were only for the science students.

A word about the history professor – W E Dyer. He had come to this country as an expatriate teacher and was teaching at Raffles Institution. There being no other applicant for the post of history professor, he was appointed, so said a report. He was a pompous imperialist in dress, manner, and behaviour. Cap and gown for lectures, oozing utter pomposity.

Amon, a kind and affable soul, was reader in geography and professor of education. He was obviously a shell-shocked war veteran, who was apparently not well enough for his duties. I learnt very little geography and nothing in education from him. He at least mixed well with us and gave us good advice. In contrast, hardly any student came into contact with Dyer except at tutorials.

The hostel superintendent, Edwards, a retired army sergeant, not knowing that students at a hostel in an institution of higher education were not soldiers in a barracks, had to undergo training from us in how to deal with us. I will quote just two incidents.

Immediately after our dinner there would be some horse play which caused some noise. On one occasion he stopped innocent Ismail bin Aziz and told him, "Don't behave like a pig." Fortunately fellow students stepped in between them and prevented Ismail punching him. After a long lecture by Wee Seong Kang about the sensitivity of Malays to terms relating to the porcine breed which could result in murder, Edwards apologised and peace was restored.

The second incident which caused Winstedt to appear at the College was in connection with the poor quality of food served at the canteen. A few weeks after the opening of the College, the fish and meat content declined in quantity. Complaints to Edwards proved futile. One night someone threw his food on the floor. Others followed. Some threw the food at the walls. I was not in the dining room at that time. Edwards failed to find out who had been responsible and wanted me as president of the fledgling students' union to find the culprits. No one owned up. Edwards imposed collective punishment—requiring us to clean up the mess and pay for the broken crockery. We defied him and he reported the matter to Winstedt, who arrived and asked me for a report. After listening to me he promised to see to it that we would have satisfactory food, but in the future we were to lodge with him any complaint that Edwards failed to rectify. If we took the law into our hands he would take disciplinary action against us.

Our sporting activities commenced in the very first year itself. Medical College was agreeable to begin inter-college games with us at cricket, soccer, and hockey, although they knew that we had too few players to choose from. The idea was to establish a tradition. Inevitably we were trounced in the first and second years, but we gave them a good fight in the third. In later years the rivalry became sharp. I leave account of that to our more worthy successors.

In conclusion may I extend to all old Raffles Collegians a warm welcome and a very happy reunion with their former friends and colleagues.



*Oei Tiong Ham Hall, Raffles College, 1931 (The balcony housed a "library". You borrowed a book and entered the particulars in a large record book yourself. A clerk from the Office checked the lending and returning from time to time. No regular librarian.)*