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Colonial Asia in Fiction: The Sumatra. A Kind of Fighting

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COLONIAL ASIA IN FICTION

THE SUMATRA. By Donald Moore. New York: Doubleday, 1959. 286p. \$3.95.

A KIND OF FIGHTING. By Patrick Crutwell. New York: Macmillan, 1960. 272p. \$3.95.

For most Americans Southeast Asia three decades ago was a "far-flung corner of the world." World attention—and scholarly endeavors—were largely focused on Europe.

All this has changed swiftly.

The Pacific war, the birth of seven independent Southeast-Asian nations, and the menacing flow of Communism, among other factors, have made Bataan, the Burma Road, and Singapore part of the everyday world of the popular magazine, the local newspaper, and the novelist.

Southeast Asia's enlarged role in international affairs is reflected in the growing number of postwar novels about this polygot area of approximately 165,000,000 people. A recent study of the reviewer located titles of nearly 1300 novels on Southeast Asia. Many of these bring insights and information regarding this part of Asia which are unavailable elsewhere.

Two British novelists have written significant novels about a British possession on the road to total freedom and a country once part of the Empire, the State of Singapore and the Union of Burma. **THE SUMATRA** is a fiercely realistic story of the desperate struggle of Philip, an Eurasian physician, to find his place in postwar Singapore, unenthusiastically disguised in the novel as "The Colony." A sensitive son of a wealthy, complacent Indian physician and his shrewd English wife, Philip rebels against the coarse prejudice of his sweetheart's Blimpish father. He feels driven to labor for improvement in the lives of the Chinese, Indian and Malayan masses who crowd nearly 1,500,000 strong into an island the size of the State of Montana.

Rejecting an affluent life in his fathers fashionable clinic, Philip associates himself with a dedicated female Chinese physician whose free clinic is located among Singapore's death houses (where some Chinese bring their sick aged relatives to die) and coffin makers. Joining the left-wing Citizens' Party, he is slowly drawn into approving and participating in a series of mad riots instigated by the Partys leaders, more interested in power than the people's welfare. The climax occurs when a British journalist friend, Paul, and Philip's father, badly burnt by acid, help him escape from one riot

where he was completely disillusioned regarding the Party's motives. Returning to Philip's residence, another riot almost develops but is halted either by the newly found courage of a formerly ineffectual Chief Minister or the sudden appearance of a *suma tra*, a violent, tropical storm.

THE SUMATRA is a topical novel bristling with sharp opinions. There is the "unquiet" American embassy official who studies everything published in Red China, assimilating "a mass of unimportant information... but never with the slightest glimmer of understanding." Paul, who perhaps speaks for the author, believes "colonies to be wrong, that a colonial society indefinitely prolonged produced either a revolution or a race of nincompoops." Philip and his mother speak eloquently, and accurately, for the Eurasian who "is rejected by both sides that gave him life, and himself rejects his brother bastards who also reject him." Many penetrating references are made to the folkways of the elite Singapore society that dictate that during formal affairs guests need not wear a coat but must carry one to the door to give the servant. Then there is the practice of male guests urinating in the moon-flooded garden on the disarming pretext that it helps the lawn.

Moore insists that his novel "is a work of fiction, describing imaginary persons and events in a nonexistent colony." Yet THE SUMATRA describes with vivid accuracy the vicious, paralyzing Singapore riots of 1955 and 1956. The Citizens' Party bears a cunning likeness to the People's Action Party that recently won 43 out of 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly of the new, largely autonomous State of Singapore. Perhaps for these reasons the novel has been withdrawn unobtrusively from Singapore bookstores and returned to Mr. Moore's publishing firm for "certain alterations."

Crutwell's A KIND OF FIGHTING is a partly fictional biography of Lin Soe, the star-crossed leader of an imaginary Southeast-Asian country called Sagha. However, the author's background—seven years teaching English at the University of Rangoon and service in the Burma campaign—and a superficial knowledge of Burmese history quickly indicates Lin Soe is Aung San, Burma's national hero who was assassinated in 1947.

The novel's plot is meager. Professor Little, the narrator, teaches at the University of Port Randolph (Rangoon). Here he is attracted to Lin Soe, an intensely dedicated student whose sole aim in life is to rid his country of the British. During the war, Lin Soe allies himself with the Japanese but along with the people at large he is soon disillusioned by the cruelties of the "yellow dogs". Through Little's negotiations, Lin Soe and his ragged citizens' army agree to cooperate with the returning British forces. When the

Japanese are defeated, Lin Soe's party refuses to cooperate with the British civil government and finally wins complete freedom for Sagha. Shortly thereafter he and some of his followers are brutally assassinated by hired Saghan gangsters in the legislative chamber.

To appreciate fully the novel's historical significance, some background in Burmese affairs is required. Aung San (Lin Soe) first attracted British attention when he organized a strike of University of Rangoon students in 1936. He rose rapidly as an anti-British protagonist. In 1940 Aung San and a few associates accepted an invitation to go to Japan to be trained for the part they would play when the Japanese invaded Burma. Returning with the Japanese, Aung San was appointed Minister of Defense. Later he became the chief personage with whom the returning British had to negotiate. Aung San demanded Burma's independence; no compromise was possible. In January, 1947, he was a key figure in the London conference that granted Burma its freedom. His brutal killing six months later was a national calamity. The distinguished Southeast-Asian historian, D.G.E. Hall wrote: "No Burman at the time commanded such personal support or showed such gifts of leadership as Aung San, and what Burma needed more than anything else [at this time] was effective leadership."

Of the two books, *THE SUMATRA* is more engrossing as a work of fiction. *A KIND OF FIGHTING* is distressingly didactic; characters exist largely to engage in detailed debates on British colonialism or Southeast-Asian nationalism. Moore knows his Singapore with a keen intimacy; taking a series of actual events as material, he has created an exciting tale. Both novels, however, can augment the inquiring reader's understanding of a part of the globe where some think the next war may begin—if, indeed, war has ever stopped there.

DONN V. HART

THE WALLED CITY

INTRAMUROS DE MANILA: de 1571 hasta su destrucción en 1945.
By Pedro Ortiz Armengol. Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica. 1958. 121 p. of text, 114 p. of plates.

Intramuros, the walled city of Manila, was the original seat of Spanish government in the Philippine Islands. But as a result of World War II the once gay university town, religious center and citadel all in one is now, as one travel guide book has it, a "ruined relic of the Spanish period in Philippine history." Sr. Ortiz has