

'The Crucible of the Malayan Nation': The University and the Making of a New Malaya, 1938–62¹

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Abstract

Like so many features of the British Empire, policy for colonial higher education was transformed during the Second World War. In 1945 the Asquith Commission established principles for its development, and in 1948 the Carr–Saunders report recommended the immediate establishment of a university in Malaya to prepare for self-government. This institution grew at a rate that surpassed expectations, but the aspirations of its founders were challenged by lack of resources, the mixed reactions of the Malayan people and the politics of decolonisation. The role of the University of Malaya in engineering a united Malayan nation was hampered by lingering colonial attitudes and ultimately frustrated by differences between Singapore and the Federation. These differences culminated in the university's partition in January 1962. In the end it was the politics of nation-building which moulded the university rather than the other way round.

'We Can only Carry on with the Existing Arrangements'

In 1961 that architect of colonial universities, Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, recalled that before the Second World War colonial administrators had 'displayed very little sympathy with local aspirations for university education.' 'They had,' he continued, 'little understanding of the part played in the modern world by universities,'

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and 'the idea of transplanting to the regions where they worked the only type of university known to them doubtless seemed fantastic.'² It is true that in 1925 the secretary of state's Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies (ACEC) had visualised an educational system developing in every colony from elementary schools through secondary, technical and vocational institutions to the tertiary level.³ In pursuit of this objective, enquiries, notably those led by Sir James Currie and Earl De La Warr in Africa, had in the 1930s examined the potential for higher education in the colonies. Yet, university development was not yet a priority of British policy.⁴ On the eve of the Second World War there were universities in only four regions of the colonial empire—Malta, Jerusalem, Ceylon and Hong Kong. Although there were other institutions of lesser status, which were expected to evolve into university colleges and eventually into full-fledged universities,⁵ ministers and their officials still focused on the primary, the vernacular and the vocational.

British reluctance to develop higher education was influenced by current principles of colonial government, previous experience

² A. M. Carr-Saunders, *New Universities Overseas* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), pp. 30–31.

³ *Educational Policy in British Tropical Africa*, Cmd. 2374 (1925). This was produced by the Advisory Committee on Native Education in the British tropical African dependencies, which later became the ACEC and extended its remit to the whole of the colonial empire. The ACEC consisted of civil servants, former colonial administrators and also church and educational representatives. In 1938 its membership of 20 included Professor Reginald Coupland (Beit Professor of Commonwealth History at Oxford), Dr Raymond Firth (then reader in anthropology at the London School of Economics) and Sir Richard Winstedt (former member of the Malayan Civil Service, president of Raffles College 1921–1931, director of education in Malaya 1924–1931 and Malay scholar).

⁴ S. R. Ashton and S. E. Stockwell (eds.), *Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice 1925–1945: British Documents on the End of Empire* (pt. 1) (London: HMSO, 1996), pp. lxxvi–lxxix.

⁵ Such institutions included Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture at St Augustine, Trinidad; Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone; Prince of Wales' College at Achimota, Gold Coast; Higher College at Yaba, Nigeria; Makerere College at Kampala, Uganda; King Edward VII Medical College and Raffles College, Singapore; Gordon Memorial College, Khartoum, the Sudan; and the Central Medical School at Suva, Fiji. See D. J. Morgan, *The Official History of Colonial Development: Volume I; the Origins of British Aid Policy, 1924–1945* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 107. See also Eric Ashby, *Universities: British, Indian, African; a Study in the Ecology of Higher Education* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966). For the principles and practice of colonial educational policies before the war, see Clive Whitehead, 'Education in British colonial Dependencies, 1919–39: A Re-Appraisal' in *Comparative Education*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 1981), pp. 71–80.

in India, contemporary attitudes to race and constant financial constraints. In conformity with the ideology of trusteeship and the practice of indirect rule, administrators discouraged the ambitions of Western-educated elites. They regarded university expansion in India since the mid-nineteenth century as a mistake. Operating in association with London University and primarily as examination centres rather than residential institutions dedicated to teaching and research, Indian universities were blamed for the production of numerous overqualified, unemployable, politically ambitious and intractable young men.⁶ Ministers and officials were wary of repeating this blunder elsewhere, as is illustrated in the following exchange between Lords Dufferin and Hailey a few weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Dufferin (parliamentary under-secretary of state for the colonies and chairman of the ACEC) asked Hailey (patrician member of the Indian Civil Service and author of the recently published but already monumental *An African Survey*) how he would proceed 'if he were educational dictator of the Empire.' Hailey replied that he would continue to promote popular, vernacular education rather than launch a programme for elitist, higher education. The development of colonial universities, he said, would have to await a government decision on 'what it was going to do with the educated product.'⁷ Furthermore, racial suppositions underpinned doubts regarding the capacity of non-Europeans to benefit from higher education. For example Harold Nicolson, a liberal member of the De La Warr Commission, which advocated university colleges for tropical Africa, starting with Makerere in Uganda, recorded, though not without a trace of irony, the following conversation which took place in Entebbe on 13 January 1937:

After dinner last night we discussed the capacity of the African brain. Kauntze [the director of medical services] said that it has been proved by Windt that the cells of the African brain were undeveloped. What he wanted to find out

⁶ Attempts were subsequently made, for example, by Curzon's Indian Universities Act of 1904, to develop residential, teaching universities. In 1917–1919 and running in parallel with the Montagu–Chelmsford constitutional reforms, the Calcutta University Commission placed emphasis on teaching functions, residential character, autonomy and provision of subjects relevant to Indian culture.

⁷ Minutes of the 96th meeting of the ACEC, 20 July 1939, CO 859/2/7, The National Archives (TNA), Kew.

was whether these cells developed in the educated African. So we must cut up a Makerere [college] student and see.⁸

Misgivings with respect to the expansion of higher education were heightened by financial considerations. In the interwar period colonial regimes depended on locally generated revenues, and, while they could apply for metropolitan funds made available by the Colonial Development Act of 1929, the funds were restricted to economic schemes. Since education was then regarded as an aspect of social welfare rather than economic development, the costs of any university project would have to be met locally, but even prosperous dependencies lacked the means. Sir Shenton Thomas, governor of Malaya, was uncompromisingly frank on this score: 'Malaya cannot finance a University at the present time,' he informed the Colonial Office in October 1939, 'and the public certainly will not help. We can only carry on with the existing arrangements.'⁹

In the late 1930s, however, all was not well with existing arrangements for higher education as for many other aspects of colonial government. There was growing unease in the Colonial Office and informed circles regarding all manner of issues. Disturbances in the West Indies and colonial scandals elsewhere challenged the orthodoxies of policy. The secretary of state for the colonies, Malcolm MacDonald, called for 'a seething of ideas' and sought specialist advisers in labour, social welfare and education.¹⁰ In 1939 he appointed Christopher Cox to the new post of educational adviser. A classical scholar and fellow of New College, Oxford, Cox had previously been seconded to the Sudan as director of education. He served as educational adviser for 30 years, first in the Colonial Office, later with Andrew Cohen in the Department of Technical Co-operation and finally in the Ministry of Overseas Development, until he was persuaded to retire at the age of 71. Cox may have had a cavalier attitude to routine administration, but he had vision, enthusiasm and energy. Shouldering a formidable workload, which included relentless travel overseas, and drawing upon a vast network of contacts at home

⁸ Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *The Harold Nicolson Diaries 1907–1964* (London: Phoenix, 2005 ed.), p. 171.

⁹ Thomas to G. E. C. Gent, 11 Oct. 1939, CO 273/651/14, TNA.

¹⁰ Clyde Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald: Bringing an End to Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 150. MacDonald was secretary of state for the colonies, 1935 and 1938–1940; governor-general, south east Asia, 1946–1948; commissioner-general, south east Asia, 1948–1955; chancellor, University of Malaya, 1949–1961; high commissioner, India, 1955–1960.

and abroad, Cox rapidly established himself as the key figure in determining policy at every level of colonial education.¹¹

MacDonald's appointment in 1938 of a commission to review higher education in Malaya should be seen, therefore, as part of a wider appraisal of colonial policies. The commission consisted of Sir William McLean and Professor H. J. Channon. McLean, who led the enquiry, had spent much of his career in Sudan and Egypt. He had planned the city of Khartoum under Kitchener's direction and, as engineer-in-chief at the Ministry of the Interior, he had designed the city of Alexandria. Having retired from the Egyptian Civil Service in 1926, McLean had researched regional planning at the University of Glasgow and had represented that city as its Conservative MP (member of Parliament) from 1931 to 1935. His special work for the Colonial Office included membership of the ACEC, participation in the De La Warr educational commission to East Africa and numerous papers on regional planning and social services.¹² Channon was professor of biochemistry at Liverpool University and would become a dominant figure in the ACEC from 1940 until 1945, when he was appointed head of the research division at Unilever Ltd, where he remained for the next 10 years.¹³ The Malayan enquiry would have a profound effect on Channon's thinking, inspiring him to write a seminal paper which, as we shall see, set the parameters for three wartime reviews: the Asquith Commission on Higher Education in

¹¹ See Clive Whitehead, 'Sir Christopher Cox: An Imperial Patrician of a Different Kind' in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 1989), pp. 28–42, reprinted in Whitehead (ed.), *Colonial Educators: The British Indian and Colonial Education Service 1858–1983* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 188–205; and Whitehead, 'Cox, Sir Christopher William Machell (1899–1982)' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Cox's papers as educational adviser have been catalogued by Whitehead; see CO 1045, TNA.

¹² See obituary in *The Times*, 25 September 1967, and also CO 1045/118 for McLean's papers on colonial development and welfare. Kenneth Pickthorn (MP for the University of Oxford, president of Corpus Christi College and member of the ACEC) had originally been appointed chairman of the Malayan commission but withdrew 'owing to the difficult political situation at the time.'

¹³ On Channon's influence on policy and his role of liaising between the Colonial Office and UK universities, see 'Overseas Colleges in Special Relationship,' AC11/1/1, Archive of University of London; CO 859/45/2, CO 859/45/3 and CO 859/86/4; Ashby, *Universities*, pp. 206–211, 215–216, 220ff, 481–524; Bruce Pattison, *Special Relations: The University of London and New Universities Overseas, 1947–1970* (London: University of London, 1984), p. 17ff; I. C. M. Maxwell, *Universities in Partnership: The Inter-University Council and the Growth of Higher Education in Developing Countries 1946–70* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1980), pp. 6–10.

the Colonies, the Elliot Commission on Higher Education in West Africa and the Irvine Committee on the West Indies. The McLean Commission's remit was to 'survey existing arrangements for higher education, general and professional, in Malaya; and to consider in the light of local needs and conditions whether they require extension and, if so, in what directions and by what methods' and to consider 'the question of the possible development of a University in Malaya.'¹⁴

Higher education in pre-war Malaya was provided in Singapore at King Edward VII Medical College and Raffles College. Some Malaysians studied overseas, and a few were assisted by scholarships, the most prestigious being the Queen's Scholarships of which up to four were awarded each year. The Medical College, founded in 1905, had attained professional recognition and international standing. It was regularly inspected by the General Medical Council, and its diploma entitled its graduates to practise in any part of the empire. Conceived in the centennial of Raffles's foundation of Singapore, Raffles College had opened for teaching in 1929 with the scholar-administrator Richard Winstedt as its first principal. By 1939, in contrast with the Medical College, Raffles was not making the sort of progress expected of an embryonic university. Its diploma was not recognised outside Malaya, and its management lacked direction. The commissioners were invited specifically to 'report upon the present work of Raffles College, Singapore, and on any additional developments that seem desirable.' As they toured the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States in October and November 1938, McLean and Channon registered the interest taken by non-Malays in higher education but noted Malay suspicions and British scepticism. The acting principal of Raffles, George McOwan, actually opposed the college's advance to university status, since he believed that neither local staff nor students were ready for it (although we should note in passing that the 1940 intake would include two future prime ministers, Lee Kuan Yew and Abdul Razak bin Dato Hussain). It has been suggested that McOwan was protecting his vested interest in the status quo; having previously worked as a science teacher in a government secondary school, he 'devoted the rest of his career at the college to defending his privileges from any threat which might come out of progress towards

¹⁴ For the McLean Commission, see CO 273/651/9 and /14, CO 273/660/13 and *Higher Education in Malaya: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, June 1939*, Colonial no. 173 (HMSO, 1939).

full university education.¹⁵ McLean and Channon presented their report to MacDonald in June 1939, and it was published early the following year. It contained chapters on higher education in technical subjects, teacher training, English-medium schools and vocational education. Although they concluded that the time was not yet ripe for an autonomous university, the commissioners recommended as a first step the early 'fusion' of the Medical and Raffles Colleges to form a university college.

Notwithstanding the outbreak of war, the ACEC doggedly examined the McLean report. A few days after the fall of France, the ACEC consulted Sir Shenton Thomas who happened to be in London. Dr William Linehan (director of education in the Straits Settlements and adviser on education to the Malay States) attended the next meeting 3 weeks later.¹⁶ In contrast to Linehan, who was generally supportive, Thomas regarded the recommendations as naive, if not dangerous. The governor's recollection of the commissioners as ignorant outsiders, who had not 'made themselves particularly pleasant' during their visit to Malaya, no doubt added to the acerbity of his criticisms when he encountered Channon once again in the ACEC.¹⁷ Thomas argued that Malays had no desire for university education; a few were trained for government administration at Malay College, Kuala Kangsar (the 'Malay Eton'), and those who went on to Raffles formed a minority of the college's intake. 'The Malay,' he said, 'was retiring, shy, and quiet, and if thrown into the hurly-burly too quickly he was likely to become dispirited or swamped.' Indeed, leading Malays had been suspicious of the McLean Commission. The Persatuan Melayu Selangor (Selangor Malay Union) had pressed for the extension of educational opportunities at other levels, and Onn bin Jaafar had argued in the Johore State Council that a university was not in the Malays' best interests, since the overwhelming majority

¹⁵ Edwin Lee and Tan Tai Yong, *Beyond Degrees: The Making of the National University of Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1996), pp. 53, 59–60; McOwan had, however, been lecturer in chemistry at St Andrew's University before he was appointed professor at Raffles.

¹⁶ 104th meeting of the ACEC, 27 June 1940, CO 859/20/12; 105th meeting, 18 July 1940, CO 859/20/13.

¹⁷ Thomas to Gent, 11 October 1939, CO 273/651/14. When it was first suggested that Shenton Thomas should be invited to the ACEC, Gent pointed out that he 'would not be attracted by the special prospect of the presence of Prof. Channon at the meeting,' adding 'I shd. not bring his name into the initial invitation.' Gent to Cox, 25 May 1940, CO 859/20/12.

of its beneficiaries would be non-Malays.¹⁸ As regards the provision of higher education for the Chinese, Shenton Thomas dismissed the recommendation to establish a chair in Chinese studies. He contended that ‘to get rid of Communism and to avoid serious trouble later on’ it was necessary to make the Chinese ‘British-minded’ and that ‘the only course [to do so] was free English education.’ In defence of the report, Channon stated that Malay fears were groundless and that the English education of Chinese students should start at the elementary level rather than be delayed until the tertiary level. Whereas Thomas wanted to postpone the fusion of the two colleges until Malays had been won round and standards at Raffles improved, Channon counselled against ‘waiting until events dictated policy’ and urged that ‘the time for a step forward was now.’¹⁹

Thomas and Channon did agree on one matter: the dismal state of Raffles College. Whereas King Edward VII College compared very favourably with the smaller medical colleges in England, the academic standards and the calibre of staff at Raffles were mediocre. Shenton Thomas maintained that the professors should ‘not be only expert in their subjects but men with the missionary spirit who tried to make students good citizens rather than good robots.’²⁰ Channon used similar language when he objected to the appointment of W. E. Dyer as acting principal of Raffles. Dyer, he wrote, lacked ‘the wider outlook and university experience’ as well as the necessary “missionary” spirit.’ Dyer gave the impression of being ‘contemptuous of the Asiatic student and the value of Raffles College’ which he disparaged as ‘no more than a teaching institution’ equivalent to ‘a superior secondary school at home.’ Although he was a professor of history, he admitted to doing no research, ‘for in his opinion there was nothing worth doing in Malaya.’ Furthermore, he ‘did not have much social contact with students after formal teaching,’ nor did he have Asian friends. Channon concluded that Dyer was deficient ‘in the inspiration, sympathy and experience’ which Raffles needed in order to develop into a university college.²¹

In fact, nothing was done to implement the McLean report or even to replace Dyer as acting principal before the Japanese invasion in

¹⁸ W. R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 239–40.

¹⁹ 104th meeting of the ACEC, 27 June 1940, CO 859/20/12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Channon to Cox, 21 August 1940, CO 273/660/13.

December 1941 ended academic activity. The Straits government requisitioned Raffles College, though classes and examinations continued at the Medical College into January. The Raffles site was first placed at the disposal of the medical department and later converted from a hospital to a depot to house female evacuees from peninsular Malaya. On 11 February 1942 it was handed over to an Indian Army medical unit and came under enemy fire. By this time most European staff had already joined up with the volunteers, while the remaining civilians and students worked as medical assistants. Raffles's students were victims of the final bombardment of the city and the massacre of Chinese that followed the Japanese conquest. Remarkably, however, the fabric of the two colleges survived the invasion and occupation largely intact. European staff managed to take with them into internment hundreds of books for what became known as the 'Changi University,' and members of the Raffles College Council held at least one meeting in Changi, on 18 September 1942. After his release, Dyer returned to Raffles and supervised its post-war rehabilitation.²²

'An Intellectual Lend-Lease': Higher Education and Colonial Partnership

Colonial Office interest in higher education was kept alive during the Second World War largely through the efforts of Channon and Cox. Channon argued that planners should not be inhibited by either pre-war attitudes or wartime conditions but 'must be ready, if possible, to seize the great opportunity which the postwar impulse . . . [would] provide.' His experience on the Malayan commission had caused him to reflect further 'on the way . . . [they] might perhaps "integrate" university education within the Empire.'²³ In a memorandum written sometime in 1940, he explored the notion of a British-colonial partnership which would foster universities throughout the empire and equip dependencies for self-government. In Eric Ashby's view, his paper marked 'the turning point in British policy for higher education overseas' because it 'supplied all the essential ideas that were to give a

²² Some indication of the wartime depletion of Raffles College and its post-war rehabilitation is provided in its calendars, reports and magazines. See CO 1045/482, BW 90/616 and BW 90/617, TNA.

²³ Channon to Cox, 12 November 1940, CO 859/45/2.

new momentum and a new direction to British policy.²⁴ Christopher Cox immediately recognised its significance, and in February 1941 the ACEC invited Channon to chair a sub-committee on the future of higher education in the colonies.²⁵ By the time it reported in May 1943, the tide had turned in the fortunes of war, and the sub-committee accepted that the 'very success of our own propaganda' left them 'with no option but to go forward.'²⁶ The Atlantic Charter had in effect committed Britain to a 'new deal' for the colonies; partnership between Britain and the subject peoples was the order of the day. And partnership depended upon development programmes which would place a premium on higher education whose success would in turn depend upon the participation of home universities. Urging the adoption of a new outlook so as to 'bring the life of Colonies into more intimate contact with that of Great Britain,'²⁷ the Channon subcommittee not only recommended an authoritative enquiry into colonial higher education but also identified principles that should guide such an enquiry.

Channon's recommendation for a complete overhaul of colonial higher education came at a propitious moment. One senior official at the Colonial Office commented:

If we had appointed a Commission at an earlier stage of the war, we should have been told that it was all up in the air, and that we ought to be getting on with the war. But if we appoint it now, it will have a good chance of being acclaimed as a wise and far-sighted endeavour to meet the growing political consciousness of the Colonial peoples which has been stimulated by the war.²⁸

Indeed, higher education was a major feature of Oliver Stanley's historic statement on colonial policy which Channon helped draft.²⁹ Addressing the House of Commons on 13 July 1943, the secretary of state pledged 'to guide Colonial people along the road to self-government

²⁴ Ashby, *Universities*, vii, p. 475. Copies of Channon's memo are at CO 859/45/2 and CO 859/45/3, and extracts are reproduced in Ashby, *Universities*, pp. 481–492.

²⁵ Other members were Fred Clarke (director, Institute of Education, London), Julian Huxley (zoologist and philosopher), B. Mouat Jones (vice-chancellor, Leeds University), W. M. Macmillan (historian, journalist and critic of colonial maladministration) and Margery Perham (reader in colonial administration, Oxford).

²⁶ *Report of the Subcommittee on Higher Education*, Colonial Office, 15 May 1943, Misc. no. 507, para 103, CO 1045/196 (Channon report). The report is reproduced in Ashby, *Universities*, pp. 492–524.

²⁷ Channon report, para. 48.

²⁸ Sir Arthur Dawe to Sir George Gater, 20 May 1943, CO 859/45/3.

²⁹ See correspondence in AC 11/1/1 and Ashby, *Universities*, pp. 211–212.

within the framework of the British Empire' and 'to build up their social and economic institutions.'³⁰ Stanley went on to emphasise the 'immense part' which colonial universities should play if the 'goal of Colonial self-government . . . [was] to be achieved.' Envisaging 'an intellectual lend-lease between the universities at home and the Colonial centres of higher education,' he announced two commissions. One, led by Walter Elliot, would study the specific circumstances of west Africa.³¹ The other, to be chaired by Sir Cyril Asquith and composed predominantly of academics, had a more wide-ranging remit: to examine the relationship between colonial higher education and British universities.³² The Asquith Commission spawned a third investigation: that of a committee on the West Indies, led by Sir James Irvine.³³ It may be said that together Cox and Channon had played a decisive part in setting up this full-scale review, shaping its agenda and influencing its conclusions. Channon was a member of both the Asquith and the Elliot Commissions and the 3 days when Cox gave evidence impressed Asquith as 'an intellectual treat of the first order.'³⁴ Asquith submitted his report in early May as the war in Europe ended. Anxious lest it be overlooked in the euphoria, the permanent under-secretary at the Colonial Office made provision for his secretary of state to acknowledge its receipt as 'one of the first things to be done after the VE day holiday.'³⁵

The Asquith commissioners recommended that universities be established as soon as possible and that the normal route to full university status be via the dependent stage of a university college.

³⁰ Oliver Stanley, 13 July 1943, *House of Commons Debates*, 391, col. 48–52, 57–9, 62–4, 66–9.

³¹ Walter Elliot had held ministerial office in the National Governments of Baldwin and Chamberlain and had refused Churchill's offer of the governorship of Burma in 1941 (which went to Dorman Smith). The Elliot enquiry recommended three centres of higher education for British West Africa; see *Report of the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa*, Cmd. 6655 (1945).

³² Asquith, son of a former prime minister, was a high court judge. His terms of reference were '[t]o consider the principles which should guide the promotion of higher education, learning, and research and the development of universities in the colonies; and to explore means whereby universities and other appropriate bodies in the United Kingdom may be able to cooperate with institutions of higher education in the colonies in order to give effect to these principles.' The original papers of the Asquith Commission are at CO 958/1-3, TNA. See also *Report of the Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies*, Cmd. 6647 (1945).

³³ Irvine was a chemist and vice-chancellor of St Andrews. See *Report of the West Indies Committee of the Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies*, Cmd. 6654 (1945).

³⁴ Quoted in Gater to Cox, 23 May 1945, CO 1045/1476.

³⁵ Gater to T. Lloyd, 9 May 1945, CO 859/86/4.

Their report covered governance, curriculum, teaching, research and student welfare. It refined the principles which would underpin the development of higher education in the colonies over the next two decades. Far from attempting to reproduce Indian universities in the colonial empire, the commissioners blended the essence of British universities—English and Scottish, ancient and nineteenth-century civic—to create a model which might be modified to suit local circumstances. Indeed, the Asquith report has been called Britain's 'blueprint for the export of universities to her people overseas.'³⁶ It insisted on comparability with the academic standards of home universities both at the point of entry and the point of exit; the availability of a wide range of subjects; a balance between academic and professional disciplines as well as between liberal arts and scientific and technical subjects; and the pursuit of research alongside teaching. It also recommended academic initiatives that would safeguard local cultures and traditions. Furthermore, by stipulating that universities should be residential and open to men and women 'of all classes,' it sought to secure an environment conducive not only to study but also to national identity.

Academic standards were inextricable from academic freedom, and, the report pointed out, academic freedom would require protection from political interference and guarantees of financial security. In keeping with the concept of partnership, the Asquith Commission insisted that colonial institutions of higher education should receive material assistance from Britain. Indeed, none would have been built without capital funds made available by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1945 and its successors. Initially £4.5 million was allocated to higher education. In 1950 the sum was increased to £7.75 million. This was an unprecedented amount of metropolitan aid, yet as early as December 1946 it was clear that it would be insufficient to meet the publicised commitments. A few years later, as we shall see, the capital costs of the University of Malaya would rapidly outstrip available government funds. Additional assistance, in the form of personnel and expertise, were to be provided by British universities and channelled through a new body, the Inter-University Council for Higher Education in the Colonies (IUC).³⁷

The IUC monitored the development of colonial universities and university colleges. It supervised the allocation and expenditure of metropolitan funds (via another new body, the Colonial University

³⁶ Ashby, *Universities*, p. 214.

³⁷ See Maxwell, *Universities in Partnership*.

Grants Advisory Committee), and it appointed expatriate staff. For at least a generation and during a period extending beyond the end of formal empire, the new universities depended on academics recruited across the Commonwealth. While the task of filling senior posts proved exacting, in the late 1940s and 1950s young scholars whose interest in the wider world had been fired by wartime service were available and willing to take up lectureships overseas. Thus, to take two examples from the field of history, C. D. Cowan, a former submariner with the Dutch Navy in the South China Sea and later director of the School of Oriental and African Studies, was recruited to Raffles College, and Eric Stokes, who served in India and south east Asia from 1942 to 1946, spent 4 years in the University of Malaya and another 6 with the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, completing his career as Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at Cambridge.³⁸ Expatriate staff ebbed and flowed with the market; in the mid-1960s there was a white flight to Britain as a result of problems in overseas universities combined with new opportunities at home following Lord Robbins's recommendations for university expansion and Sir William Hayter's proposals for centres of African and Asian studies in British universities.³⁹

The IUC was composed of representatives from each home university and established universities overseas. It met for the first time on 8 March 1946 at the Royal Society under the chairmanship of Sir James Irvine. Irvine was succeeded in 1951 by Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, a sociologist who had followed William Beveridge as director of the London School of Economics (LSE). Carr-Saunders chaired commissions that promoted the University of Malaya and the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Walter Adams was the council's secretary until 1955, when he was appointed principal of the newly established but ill-fated University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. A few months after Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 Adams would return to Britain to succeed

³⁸ C. A. Bayly, 'Eric Thomas Stokes, 1924–1981' in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 97 (1998), pp. 467–498.

³⁹ See *Report of the Committee on Higher Education* [Robbins report], Cmd. 2154 (1963) and *Report of the Sub-Committee on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies* [Hayter report] (London: University Grants Committee, 1961). Hayter followed up an earlier enquiry chaired by Lord Scarborough, *Report of the Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies* (London: Foreign Office, 1947). See also, C. H. Philips, 'Modern Asian Studies in the Universities of the United Kingdom' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1967), pp. 1–14, and William Hayter, 'The Hayter Report and After' in *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1975), pp. 169–172.

Sir Sydney Caine as director of the LSE, an appointment vehemently opposed by LSE students on account of Adams's association with the white regime in Rhodesia.⁴⁰ One very active member of the IUC was Dame Lillian Penson, professor of history at London's Bedford College and Britain's first woman vice-chancellor. She had been a member of the Asquith Commission and later became especially involved in development of the University of Khartoum and the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. A 'formidable scholar and academic politician,' Penson 'put Bedford [College] firmly on the map and dotted those parts of the map of Africa which were coloured red with offshoots of London University.' She was also remarkable for insisting that her staff wear gloves while lecturing.⁴¹

The pivotal role of London University is to be explained partly by its long experience of running an external degree programme, partly by its association since the mid-nineteenth century with Indian universities and partly by its history of nursing English colleges (such as Exeter and Hull) towards independent university status. London's scheme of 'special relationship' was amongst Asquith's proposals. The task of establishing colonial university colleges and guiding their development until they became degree-awarding bodies was managed by a senate committee chaired for many years by Carr-Saunders. The operation was immense and complex: in the years 1946–1963, 425 visits by London staff were arranged to university colleges overseas, and in 1961–1962 some 280 London teachers were involved in examining overseas students, and more than 1,000 question papers were printed.⁴² The scheme ended in 1970 (with its last examinations being held in 1972), when the University College of Rhodesia acquired full university status. It should be noted that, while the IUC took a close interest in the development of higher education in Malaya, the University of Malaya was never formally in special relationship with London because it did not pass through the intermediate stage of a university college.

⁴⁰ See Michael Gelfand, *A Non-Racial Island of Learning. A History of the University College of Rhodesia from Its Inception to 1966* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1978); Tessa Blackstone, Kathleen Gales, Roger Hadley and Wyn Lewis, *Students in Conflict: LSE in 1967* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), pp. 1 and 153–161; Harry Kidd, *The Trouble at LSE 1966–1967* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 15–19.

⁴¹ F. M. L. Thompson, 'The Humanities' in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The University of London and the World of Learning, 1836–1986* (London: Hambledon, 1990), p. 71.

⁴² 'Overseas Colleges in Special Relationship,' AC 11/18, appendix IV. For a recent, celebratory history of London University's external programme, see Christine Kenyon Jones, *The People's University: 150 Years of the University of London and Its External Students* (London: University of London Press, 2008).

A distinctive feature of post-war educational policy was the emphasis placed on nation-building. Echoing the Channon report of 1943, the Asquith commissioners declared, '[W]e look on the establishment of Universities as an inescapable corollary of any policy which aims at the achievement of Colonial self-government.' Graduates would be indispensable for economic and social development, for political leadership and, as the report put it, for 'counteracting the influence of racial differences and sectional rivalries.' In addition to inculcating a sense of nationhood, colonial universities were designed to imbue the elites of emerging nations with a British view of the world and to prepare them for post-colonial membership of the Commonwealth. Yet plans for the rapid expansion of higher education in the colonies carried immense risks; it might raise expectations without fulfilling them, turn young people against the British connection and transform campuses into battlegrounds for the soul of the nation.

Nation-Building and the Foundation of the University of Malaya

Within a few years of the publication of the Asquith, Elliot and Irvine reports, university colleges were established in the West Indies, the Gold Coast, Nigeria and Uganda. British Malaya had been excluded from the wartime review on account of its occupation by Japan. Remedial action was taken by the British as part of their post-war rehabilitation of the area. Pre-war Malaya had been fragmented both administratively and ethnically, with the Chinese being in an overwhelming majority on the island of Singapore, and Malays forming the largest community in peninsular Malaya. In 1946 the British implemented a radically new scheme in which the states and settlements of the peninsula were welded into a Malayan Union, while Singapore became a separate colony. This arrangement was intended to be the first bold step towards the merger of all territories and the fusion of all communities within a single, self-governing nation state. One of the instruments for the construction of the new Malaya was to be its university.

At the instigation of Malcolm MacDonald (the former secretary of state for the colonies who was now governor-general of Malaya and Borneo), in August–September 1946 Raymond Priestley reconnoitred Malaya with a view to developing a university college. A geologist who had been a member of Scott's Antarctic expedition of 1910–1912, Priestley had been the first vice-chancellor of the University

of Melbourne and was currently vice-chancellor of Birmingham University. He had also been a member of the Asquith Commission and advised on the foundation of the University College of the West Indies. Priestley started from the Asquithian premise 'that self-government of the type the colonial regions are clamouring for, and to which we are committed, cannot be successfully exerted without Higher Education.' He applied to Malayan circumstances the Asquithian model of a small, residential institution with generous staffing and high standards. Although it was, as he admitted, 'a relatively expensive ideal,' it was 'fundamental to the success of the great experiment to which the British Commonwealth are committed.' Since the colonial university was intended to educate the country's elite, high academic standards could not be compromised. Halls of residence on campus would help engender a sense 'common citizenship or overriding national loyalty.' Priestley advocated a single higher education institution for the whole of British Malaya, but owing to the tension between peninsula and island—and between Malays and non-Malays—he recognised that its location would be controversial. He himself favoured a site in Singapore on account of its climate (which was marginally more tolerable than that of the mainland), its potential to attract private endowments and the presence of the College of Medicine, Raffles College and the Botanical Gardens.⁴³

On the basis of Priestley's preliminary findings, in January 1947 the Labour secretary of state, Arthur Creech Jones, appointed a commission of enquiry, chaired by Alexander Carr-Saunders. The other members were Leonard Barnes, a critic of colonialism who would later chair a commission on primary education in Malaya;⁴⁴ Ivor Jennings, vice-chancellor of the university of Colombo who would play a major role in drafting the constitution for independent Malaya; Professor George Pickering, director of the Medical Clinic at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, and subsequently Regius professor of medicine at Oxford;⁴⁵ and W. J. Pugh, professor of geology

⁴³ Extracts from Priestley's diary in Malaya, August–September 1946, and his 'Note for the Governor-General,' 13 September 1946, BW 90/550.

⁴⁴ Author of books such as *Empire or Democracy: A Study of the Colonial Question* (London: Gollancz, 1939), Barnes became closely involved in the shaping of Labour's colonial policy soon after he returned to Britain in late 1932 from South Africa, where he had farmed and worked as a journalist.

⁴⁵ Pickering also played a key part in establishing medical schools at Nottingham and Southampton Universities.

and deputy vice-chancellor of Manchester University.⁴⁶ The Carr-Saunders Commission was smaller and more focused than the Asquith Commission, but, like the Elliot Commission on West Africa and the Irvine Committee on the West Indies, it included local representatives: Haji Mohamad Eusoff of the Malayan Civil Service and Sir Han Hoe Lim, a member of the Singapore Advisory Council, both of whom would be appointed pro-chancellors of the University of Malaya.

The commissioners toured Singapore and the Malayan Union between late March and late April 1947. They visited educational and research establishments; they observed and admired the efforts to rehabilitate schools and colleges after the Japanese occupation; they were moved by the educational aspirations of young Malaysians; they were shocked by the wastage of talent at every level. Leonard Barnes estimated that 'some three quarters of the best brains of the country were either not drawn into the school system at all or dropped out of it before Standard V.'⁴⁷ They held further sessions in Britain and submitted their report at the end of September, although it was not published until the end of April 1948. That they would recommend the creation of some sort of higher education institution was never in doubt, but surprisingly the commission breached Asquithian orthodoxy to bypass the interim stage of a university college and propose the immediate amalgamation of Raffles College and the College of Medicine into a full-fledged university. Unlike the university colleges of Africa and the West Indies, it would not be bound in special relationship with London University but have the authority to confer degrees.

The commission justified this radical move primarily on academic grounds, but it was also influenced by political considerations. Indeed, a Colonial Office official noted that, 'deplorable' though it might be, 'Malayan politics . . . [were] inseparable from the conception of a Malayan University.'⁴⁸ A year earlier Malay protests against a new constitution, which they regarded as a seizure of their birthright, had forced the British to abandon the Malayan Union and negotiate a federal alternative that would safeguard the pre-eminence of Malay

⁴⁶ Others who had been considered included the editor of *The Economist*, Geoffrey Crowther, on account of his 'political experience and understanding,' and Professor W. K. Hancock, the Australian historian then at Oxford, but he could not be spared from his duties directing the official history of the Second World War, BW 90/550.

⁴⁷ Minutes of the 152nd meeting of the ACEC, 19 June 1947, CO 987/3, TNA.

⁴⁸ Minute by H. T. Bourdillon, 9 October 1947, CO 717/160/8, TNA.

interests. The commission's visit had coincided with subsequent constitutional consultations conducted with non-Malay leaders. This consultative process did not deflect the British from inaugurating the Federation of Malaya on 1 February 1948, but it did contribute to communal antagonism and the polarisation of local opinion. Carr-Saunders returned to Britain with, it was reported, the strong impression that 'the successful establishment of a University of Malaya at this juncture could serve a valuable political purpose, firstly by becoming an object of pride and loyalty which would knit together the diverse races of the country, and secondly by enhancing the prestige of Malaya in South East Asia as a whole.'⁴⁹ He had been impressed by the political consciousness of the Chinese and considered that a university would be a vital factor in deciding whether they would look towards Britain or China.⁵⁰ On the other hand, he was not blind to the possible adverse repercussions on race relations, since fewer Malays than non-Malays were likely to be able to take advantage of it, at least at the outset. It was in order to enable Malays to participate in higher education and prevent its monopolisation by non-Malays that he urged the simultaneous expansion of rural schools. Indeed, the pedagogic challenge at every level from primary school to university was 'how to blend the races and the language groups into one nationality.'⁵¹ Another pitfall which the commissioners had to negotiate was the historic rivalry between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. They steered round this by selecting Johore Bahru as the most suitable site for the main campus on account of its situation at the southern tip of the peninsula and directly opposite Singapore.⁵²

Malayan politics were, indeed, inseparable from the conception of the University of Malaya. On the one hand, it was supported by educationalists, the business community and non-Malays. H. A. R. Cheeseman, the Federation's director of education, claimed that there had been 'no report of greater importance to the progress of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ As reported by Sir F. Gimson (governor, Singapore) to Sir T. Lloyd (CO), 8 December 1948, CO 537/3758, TNA.

⁵¹ Freda Gwilliam (assistant educational adviser to the secretary of state), in minutes of the 179th meeting of the ACEC, 18 May 1950, CO 987/5.

⁵² See *Report of the Commission on University Education in Malaya*, Colonial No. 229 (London: HMSO, 1948). According to correspondence in 1949–1950 between Walter Adams and George Allen, the papers of the Carr-Saunders Commission were sent by surface mail for deposit in the archives of the new university, BW 90/551.

this country' since the time of Raffles.⁵³ T. H. Silcock (professor of economics at Raffles College) called it 'a masterly Report, a noble conception beautifully presented and defended with brilliant logic and fine sensibility.'⁵⁴ Singapore's *The Straits Times* hailed it as 'the most inspiring document.' It marked the end of an era

in which there was nothing but the godown, the tin mine and the rubber estate; in which overseas capital and immigrant enterprise were dominant in almost every walk of life; in which the English-educated classes of the Asian population were merely clerks and foremen serving a European ruling caste; and in which the life of the mind and of the spirit languished in a completely materialistic environment.⁵⁵

Malays, on the other hand, were more circumspect, just as they had been towards the McLean Commission 10 years earlier. Few were convinced that it would redress their community's economically depressed circumstances at the margins of modern Malaya, but Dato Onn bin Jaafar, who 10 years ago had argued against the establishment of a university, now accepted that it would provide Malays with the incentive they needed to meet post-war challenges. A major political figure as president of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Onn rallied Malay members of the Federal Legislative Council in support of the proposal and led the federal side in discussions with representatives of the Singapore Legislative Council, regarding the implementation of the Carr-Saunders recommendations. The University of Malaya was inaugurated on 8 October 1949, when Malcolm MacDonald, Britain's commissioner-general in south east Asia, presided over the opening ceremony as chancellor. As a progressive secretary of state 10 years earlier, when neither higher education nor nation-building had been

⁵³ *The Straits Times*, 1 May 1948. For press cuttings on reactions to the Carr-Saunders report, see BW 90/551 and CO 717/161/3.

⁵⁴ Lim Tay Boh (ed.), *A Symposium on the Carr-Saunders Report on University Education in Malaya* (Singapore: International Student Service, 1948). The symposium was held on 15 May 1948, and contributors included Lim Tay Boh, later lecturer, senior lecturer, professor of economics in the University of Malaya and vice-chancellor of the University of Singapore; Eu Chooi Yip, a graduate of Raffles College, secretary of the Malayan Democratic Union and later member of the Malayan Communist Party; Sardon bin Jubir, president of the Malay Union, Singapore, and later leader of UMNO Youth and cabinet minister in the federal government of independent Malaya; Tan Chee Khoo, president of the Medical College Union and later 'Mr Opposition' in the federal parliament of independent Malaysia; and Wan Abdul Hamid of the Raffles College Union.

⁵⁵ *The Straits Times*, 3 May 1948.

fashionable, he had taken a keen interest in both aspects of colonial policy. In the years to come he would be an indefatigable champion of the University of Malaya. MacDonald saluted the university as ‘the crucible of the Malayan nation’ and declared that it would be ‘a cradle where a truly non-communal nation is nurtured.’⁵⁶

Successes and Strains: The University in a Plural Society

The University of Malaya expanded rapidly under its first two vice-chancellors. Dr (later Sir) George Allen had been identified as vice-chancellor early in the university’s planning stage. He was a bacteriologist who had worked in Kenya and at Kuala Lumpur’s Institute of Medical Research before becoming principal of King Edward VII College in 1930. Allen was succeeded in 1952 by Sir Sydney Caine, a Whitehall civil servant who had been financial adviser to the secretary of state for the colonies and had held senior positions in the Treasury. Between 1949 and 1956 Allen and Caine presided over a period that saw an increase in student numbers from 645 to 1,220. When registrations surpassed 1,000 in 1954–1955, they exceeded the target which Carr-Saunders had set for 1959; by 1958 they had advanced to 1,640. The staff–student ratio more or less kept pace with that in the United Kingdom, as the academic body expanded from 59 in the first year to 135 in 1955–1956. Whereas university growth outstripped expectations in Malaya, elsewhere in the colonial empire it fell short of them, owing to the slower development of secondary education. The University of Malaya became the largest in the colonial empire in 1952–1953, when student enrolments totalled 875. It compared favourably with other universities not only as regards student numbers but also in terms of its staff–student ratio, the proportion of local to expatriate staff, gender balance, library provision and endowments.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ These phrases extracted from MacDonald’s foundation day speech are taken from *Students’ Union Magazine, University of Malaya, 1953–54* (Singapore, 1954), pp. 35–36; *Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas 1946–54*, Cmd. 9515 (London, 1955); Khoo Kay Kim, *100 Years: The University of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2005), p. 48.

⁵⁷ See L. J. Lewis, ‘Higher Education in the Oversea Territories 1948–58’ in *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (November 1959), p. 8; *Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas*, p. 3; Lee and Tan, *Beyond Degrees*, pp. 114–115.

New departments opened. In 1950–1951 education and zoology joined the staple subjects inherited from Raffles's arts and science faculties, while parasitology and orthopaedic surgery were added to the medical portfolio. Further initiatives were planned in Asian studies (Malay, Chinese and Indian); in medicine, following an enquiry by Sir David Lindsay Keir; in social sciences, in response to a report from Sir Roland Braddell and Professor R. G. D. Allen; and, from the mid-1950s, in engineering and agriculture. Research and publications gathered momentum across the disciplines.⁵⁸ Professors, notably T. H. Silcock (economics), C. Northcote Parkinson (history), E. H. G. Dobby (geography), L. A. Sheridan (law), Donald Gould (physiology) and Gordon Arthur Ransome (medicine), provided academic leadership and battled for their departments in faculty and senate. Parkinson was appointed to the Raffles chair in history in 1950. He left behind him in England 'a broken marriage, two children . . . [he would] not see again for a decade, a discarded career as a naval historian, a medieval manor house, and the books . . . [he] had collected (or written) over the last twenty years.' Unlike his predecessor, W. E. Dyer, Parkinson was gregarious, hospitable and a research-active head of history. Deciding at the outset that his mission in Malaya should be 'to create for the country the historical background which its varied peoples might share,' he directed the expansion of the department and its switch in focus from European to Asian history, until he was able to retire on the royalties from *Parkinson's Law*.⁵⁹

Despite complaints about lack of contact between staff and students, there were shining examples of expatriates who energetically nurtured the new Malaya without indulging in eccentric fraternisation such as the 'whimsical or patronizing adoption of local costume, food practices and other superficial forms of identification with the people of the territory' which generally proved to be counterproductive in the new colonial universities.⁶⁰ Malcolm MacDonald was an enthusiastic participant at union dances and a generous sponsor of individual

⁵⁸ See Patricia Pui Huen Lim, 'University Research in Malaya 1949–1961: With a Bibliography of Staff Research and a List of Theses and Academic Exercises Submitted to the University of Malaya' (fellowship dissertation, The Library Association, 1968).

⁵⁹ C. Northcote Parkinson, *A Law unto Themselves: Twelve Portraits* (London: Murray, 1966), p. 118; C. Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law: Or the Pursuit of Progress* (London: John Murray, 1959.). See also the vignette of Parkinson by C. Mary Turnbull, a former member of the history department, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

⁶⁰ Lewis, 'Higher education,' p. 15.

students.⁶¹ A Quaker and a Fabian, Silcock was one of the few professors to invite students to his home.⁶² Patrick Anderson, lecturer in English literature, set up a creative-writing group and formed friendships with student intellectuals such as Wang Gungwu and Beda Lim.⁶³ Parkinson, who 'regarded his honours students as the civil servants, administrators and teachers of tomorrow,' ran fortnightly soirées, where undergraduates would take turns to read papers and where special guests included Sir Robert Scott (MacDonald's successor as commissioner-general), David Marshall (chief minister, 1955–1956), the novelist Han Suyin and Lee Kuan Yew.⁶⁴

Rapid growth, however, stretched resources and caused problems. Halls of residence were overcrowded; library provision was patchy and equipment in short supply. Research plans and new ventures were delayed, as was, for example, the launch of Chinese studies. Many of these difficulties could be traced to inadequate funding, even though the University of Malaya was financially better off than others. In the 1950s colonial institutions of higher education were financed from three principal sources: first, capital grants from the Colonial Development and Welfare fund (CDW); second, subventions by the local, colonial administration for recurrent expenditure, student scholarships and some capital and endowment grants; and, third, donations from individuals, business organisations or philanthropic foundations. Of the £7.75 million assigned by the CDW Acts of 1945 and 1950 to higher education in the whole of the colonial empire, £1 million was allocated to the University of Malaya for capital expenditure. In addition, during its first 5 years (1949–1954), the University of Malaya received from the local government a grant of over £2.5 million for recurrent expenditure (which was the largest sum provided by any colonial administration) and a further £816,666 for capital projects, while private benefactions swelled the endowment fund to more than £600,000.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, soon after he succeeded Allen as vice-chancellor, Sydney Caine discovered that the CDW contribution to the costs of acquiring and developing the proposed

⁶¹ Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald*, pp. xxii, 314, 318–319, 336.

⁶² Yeo Kim Wah, 'Student Politics in University of Malaya, 1949–51' in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1992), p. 358.

⁶³ Patrick Anderson, *Snake Wine: A Singapore Episode* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1955).

⁶⁴ Parkinson, *A Law unto Themselves*, p. 141; Lee and Tan, *Beyond Degrees*, pp. 103–105.

⁶⁵ *Inter-University Council*, pp.19–22.

site in Johore Bahru would probably amount to no more than 10% of the estimated total. This forecast convinced him of the need to devise an alternative to the strategy based upon creating a new campus in Johore Bahru. Having consulted Carr-Saunders with regard to this proposed deviation from the original plan, Caine urged the Colonial Office to drop the Johore Bahru scheme and utilise existing vocational, technical and cultural institutions in Singapore and the Federation.⁶⁶ In March 1954 the decision was taken to abandon the Johore venture and extend operations to a Kuala Lumpur division of the university, where agriculture and engineering were the first faculties to be developed.⁶⁷ This marked the beginning of the end of the unitary university.

Other features of the Carr-Saunders model were also being questioned. Indeed, the very notion of a multi-racial and co-educational university was at odds with ingrained educational practices in Malaya, where significant imbalances had developed between the opportunities and achievements of different communities, genders and regions. Until provision at primary and secondary levels had improved, university entry requirements and English-medium instruction would make higher education virtually inaccessible to the vast majority of students schooled in the vernacular, notably kampong Malays and the children of Chinese squatter families that had been evacuated during the emergency from jungle fringes to New Villages. The overall school enrolment may have increased by 108% between 1946 and 1952, but less than half the children of primary-school age attended schools. Although the number of teachers grew by 98% in the same period, teacher training was inadequate to cope with educational expansion.⁶⁸ The principles that university instruction should be in English and that the content, delivery and standards of degree programmes should relate to those in Britain may have been adopted with the best of intentions—to ensure international comparability and to cradle ‘a truly non-communal nation’—but their rigid imposition risked

⁶⁶ See CO 1022/345. For Caine’s articles on ‘The problems of the University,’ see *Straits Budget*, 18 June, 25 June and 2 July 1953.

⁶⁷ Professor R. A. Robinson was seconded by chemistry department to lead this work; he was later succeeded in the Kuala Lumpur branch by Professor Frederick Mason.

⁶⁸ Sir D. MacGillivray (deputy high commissioner) to J. Paskin, 4 February 1953, enclosure, CO 1022/440, TNA; extract from draft minutes of the ACEC, 13 December 1952, CO 1022/285; minutes of the ACEC, annex, 12 November 1953, CO 1022/286.

privileging some, alienating many others and jeopardising both race relations and the Anglo-Malayan partnership.

Before the war the British had generally assumed that Malays were innately less able and less motivated than other Asians and that their culture was not conducive to education. The Carr-Saunders Commission, by contrast, argued that it was inequality of educational opportunity, not racial characteristics, that accounted for wide variations in performance: 'All the evidence shows . . . that these educational differences are due not to the inherent intellectual characteristics of the races but to the operation of economic and social factors.'⁶⁹ The educational disadvantages suffered by Malays stemmed from problems of access, not indifference, to learning. Malay children were served by vernacular primary schools in their villages but were isolated from English secondary schools which were mainly located in the towns. As Charles Hirschman concluded in 1972, 'the colonial education structure which offered secondary education only in urban English schools resulted in a situation where geographic and language barriers kept most Malay students from higher educational achievement'.⁷⁰ This disadvantage was compounded by tuition fees, living costs and the challenges which university life in a city presented to the traditional values of the majority of Malays for whom Singapore was an alien environment. It is true that for Malays university education was not, as it was for many other colonised communities, the principal vehicle for political advancement, since they progressed to self-government and to key positions within the new Malaya along other routes, notably the time-honoured networks of indirect rule.⁷¹ Nevertheless, their virtual exclusion from higher education put them at a disadvantage compared with non-Malays and would force them still further towards the margins of modern Malaya. The establishment of the university department of Malay studies (led by Za'ba, doyen of Malay literature) went some way to fulfil the British pledge to foster indigenous culture, but the Carr-Saunders commissioners and other post-war reformers recognised that, until educational provision had been transformed in the schools, Malays

⁶⁹ *Report of the Commission on University Education in Malaya*, p.18.

⁷⁰ Charles Hirschman, 'Educational Patterns in Colonial Malaya' in *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (October 1972), p. 500.

⁷¹ Josef Silverstein, 'Burmese and Malaysian Student Politics: A Preliminary Comparative Inquiry' in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1970), p. 10ff.

would feel intimidated by English-medium instruction at the tertiary level.

A major step towards correcting inequality of educational opportunity was taken with the enactment of the education ordinance of 1952. This legislation embodied the ideal of an integrated system of national primary schools where the medium of instruction would be either Malay or English.⁷² National schools were regarded as 'necessary to create a united nation, aware and proud of being Malayan,' and they were further promoted as independence approached.⁷³ The government also improved the access of Malays to English primary and secondary schools in order to enhance their chances of university education. By the start of 1956 there were about 34,000 Malays attending English schools, compared with 13,467 in 1949.⁷⁴ The impact of these measures on university recruitment, however, would not be felt for some time. In spite of the university's practice of admitting every eligible Malay candidate and offering Malays a disproportionate number of scholarships and bursaries, the country's largest ethnic group accounted for merely 10% of the student body in the university's early years.⁷⁵ Their position had scarcely improved by the time the Federation achieved self-government: of the 1,220 students registered in 1955–1956, only 149 were Malays, and they were most glaringly under-represented in science (18 of 284 science students), engineering (2 of 50) and medicine (27 of 438).⁷⁶

Rural Malays were not the only group deterred from applying to the University of Malaya. The products of Chinese vernacular middle schools were also repelled by the requirement for proficiency in the English language. Tan Lark Sye, who had come to Singapore from China in his youth and become a wealthy rubber merchant and industrialist, was prominent in the campaign for the higher education of Singapore's Chinese. He was a major benefactor of the University of Malaya's new library, and in 1953 he proposed the foundation of a

⁷² The education ordinance was largely based on the *Report of the Committee on Malay Education* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1951), chaired by Leonard Barnes, although its conclusions had been contested by a report on the education of Chinese Malaysians compiled by Dr W. P. Fenn and Dr Wu Tek-yao.

⁷³ See Colonial Office, 'Memorandum explanatory of Sir D. MacGillivray's proposals for national schools in Malaya,' 14 July 1956, CO 1030/51, TNA.

⁷⁴ 'Education for Self-Rule: Government Plans in Malaya', *The Times*, 31 January 1956, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, 'Report on a visit to the University of Malaya,' July 1950, BW 90/1017.

⁷⁶ 'Education for Self-Rule', *The Times*, 31 January 1956, p. 7.

Chinese-medium university. He took this initiative partly on account of the expansion of Chinese primary and secondary education and partly in response to Chinese dissatisfaction with the uncompromising attitude of the university authorities towards those with a poor command of English.⁷⁷ Funded by a massive public subscription from amongst Singapore's Chinese community, Nanyang University opened in 1956. It was modelled on the Sino-American universities of pre-war China, although its declared aim was to 'embody a new Malayan culture developed from the Chinese, the English, the Malay and the Indian.' Neither the colonial government nor the Inter-University Council in Britain attempted to prevent its foundation, but they did regret it. They felt that there were insufficient safeguards for academic standards and that Chinese-medium instruction would undermine the use of English in the colony. Moreover, they expected that Chinese donations to higher education would hereafter be diverted from the University of Malaya to Nanyang University. Furthermore, they feared that, in the absence of what they regarded as the steadying influence of expatriate academic staff, this all-Chinese institution might aggravate communal differences or encourage the Chinese youth of Malaya to seek inspiration from the People's Republic of China. The Singapore government therefore decided to play no part in its formation and refused to offer funding or even tax exemption to donors.⁷⁸

Student Aspirations

In contrast with the students of Nanyang, those at the University of Malaya during this period have been portrayed as conservative, cautious and diligent. The vast majority had no wish to cause offence either to its teachers or to its future employers. The typical undergraduate was devoted to study, not least because employment opportunities for graduates were greater in Malaya and Singapore than in many other countries emerging from colonial rule. Moreover, the blanket of regulations that curtailed freedom of expression in Malaya during the years of Communist insurgency deterred them from

⁷⁷ For the Malayan government's concern over the growth of the Chinese schools and their failure to meet 'the greater need of the new Malaya,' see despatch no. 232 from MacGillivray (high commissioner, Malaya) to A. Lennox-Boyd (secretary of state for the colonies), 2 March 1955, CO 1030/51.

⁷⁸ Lee and Tan, *Beyond Degrees*, p. 164.

risking their future careers by indulging in student politics. In any case, the students' union (whose establishment had been recommended by the Carr-Saunders Commission) was constitutionally bound to take no part in politics.

There were, however, notable exceptions. One of these was a future prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamed, who was amongst the few Malays to graduate in medicine in 1953 and who wrote articles for *The Straits Times* under the pen name, C. H. E. Det.⁷⁹ In addition, left-wing intellectuals (known to the Special Branch as the English-Speaking Intelligentsia or ESI) gained increasing influence in the students' union in 1949–1950. Some had been members of the radical but now defunct Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) and were active in the Anti-British League, an English-speaking subsidiary of the Malayan Communist Party. James Puthuchery was prominent amongst them. During the Japanese occupation Puthuchery had served in Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army and emerged an ardent crusader against colonialism. He entered Raffles College in 1948, transferred to the University of Malaya the following year and then became general secretary of the students' union. For all his militancy, he shared Carr-Saunders's view that the social function of the university was to develop a united, non-communal and self-governing Malayan nation and, as general secretary of the students' union, he strove to avoid compromising its apolitical standing or incurring the hostility of the majority of its members.

The university authorities were ambivalent in their response to student aspirations. They encouraged debate, conceded student representation on the board of student welfare and abandoned attempts to muzzle *Malayan Undergraduate* (the union's organ). On the other hand, they rejected a proposal for a Malayan Students' Party and were complicit in the surveillance activities of R. B. Corridon, assistant superintendent of police, whom they held in 'high esteem'.⁸⁰ In January 1951, after months of investigation, the police swooped. They broke up the English-speaking branch of the Anti-British League and detained left-wing students and other members of the intelligentsia. Over 30 arrests were made, though not all the detainees were students. Most were soon released, but five remained in custody. In London the secretary of state was concerned that detention without trial would stimulate anti-British propaganda and expose the government

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113. See also Anderson, *Snake Wine*, pp. 115–116.

⁸⁰ Gimson to J. Griffiths (secretary of state), 10 September 1951, CO 717/202/7.

to criticism in parliament, but he was persuaded that prosecution in court would fail on account of the likely intimidation of witnesses. The detainees included James Puthuchear, C. V. Devan Nair (of the Singapore Teachers' Union), Abdul Samad Ismail (assistant editor, *Utusan Melayu*), the wife of H. B. Lim (with Lim himself being politically active in London) and John Eber.⁸¹

Eber was an affluent Eurasian who had been educated at Harrow School and Cambridge and trained as a lawyer. A principal figure in the MDU until its dissolution in 1948, Eber had considerable influence on student radicals. Corridon worked tirelessly to convert student 'fellow travellers' into good citizens with the result that by the end of 1952 the vice-chancellor felt sufficiently confident to lift the ban on political societies. Early the following year, Puthuchear, who had resumed his studies after release from detention, played a leading part in the formation of the University of Malaya Socialist Club and the Pan-Malayan Students Federation. He also chaired the editorial board of *Fajar (Dawn)*, the organ of the Socialist Club. In 1954, however, the police moved in again and rounded up student journalists, when they published, and distributed beyond the campus, an attack on colonialism ('Aggression in Asia') to mark the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Eight members of the editorial board, including Puthuchear, were charged with sedition. About the same time the committee of the students' union resigned following a vote of no confidence.⁸² The *Fajar* eight came for trial in August, but the case for the prosecution collapsed thanks to the skilful defence counsel, the staunchly anti-colonial D. N. Pritt who was assisted by Lee Kuan Yew.⁸³

⁸¹ For the activities of the Anti-British League, the arrests of 1951 and the role of Corridon, see CO 717/202/7; Yeo, 'Student Politics,' pp. 346–380; Dominic Puthuchear and K. S. Jomo (eds.), *No Cowardly Past: James Puthuchear; Writings, Poems, Commentaries* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 1998), pp. 8–11, 57–61. See also Meredith L. Weiss, 'Still with the People? The Chequered Path of Student Activism in Malaysia' in *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2005), pp. 287–332, which focuses on campus unrest in the 1960s.

⁸² The new president, W. R. Rasanayagam, declared the Union to be critical of colonialism but opposed to Communism, *Students' Union Magazine, University of Malaya*, 1953–54 (Singapore), pp. 2–3.

⁸³ Puthuchear and Jomo, *No Cowardly Past*, pp. 11–14; Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), pp. 161–165. See also T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 297–299. A convert to Communism in the 1930s but never a member of the Communist Party, Pritt was expelled from the Labour Party in 1940. He espoused movements for colonial freedom in the 1950s; in 1953 he vainly defended Jomo

Meanwhile, Malayan students were discussing the political future of their country in the more liberal atmosphere of British society. From the Second World War onwards there was an immense influx into British universities of students from the colonial empire.⁸⁴ This occurred in spite of the stipulation in the Asquith report that colonial universities should have the capacity to meet colonial needs and that colonial students should be discouraged from going abroad except for certain post-graduate or professional courses. Estimates of Malaysians in higher education overseas varied because some computations were restricted to government scholars; others added privately funded students, and yet others included those training to be nurses or teachers. Carr-Saunders reckoned that in 1949 there were 321 Malaysians attending higher education institutions worldwide: 30 in Hong Kong, 60 in the United States, 80 in Australia and 151 in the United Kingdom.⁸⁵ Yet for the same year O. T. Dussek, who acted as liaison officer for Malayan students in Britain, counted 240 Malaysians in his charge.⁸⁶ Carr-Saunders may also have underestimated the numbers of Malaysians at Hong Kong University and in Australia.⁸⁷ In the immediate post-war years the Malayan student community in Britain was overshadowed by contingents

Kenyatta and others in the notoriously rigged trial at Kapenguria (Kenya), and in 1954 he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize.

⁸⁴ See *Colonial Students in Britain: A Report by the PEP* (London: Political and Economic Planning, 1955); A. T. Carey, *Colonial Students: A Study of the Social Adaptation of Colonial Students in London* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956); A. J. Stockwell, 'Leaders, Dissidents and the Disappointed: Colonial Students in Britain as Empire Ended' in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2008), pp. 487–507.

⁸⁵ Carr-Saunders, 'Report on a visit to the University of Malaya', July 1950, BW 90/1017.

⁸⁶ Memo by Dussek, 18 March 1949, CO 537/4781. Dussek had been the first principal of Sultan Idris Training College, 1922–1936, and from 1925 had combined this position with that of assistant director of education in charge of Malay schools.

⁸⁷ Notwithstanding the decrease in the Malayan Chinese attending Hong Kong University after the University of Malaya opened, the number was as high as 161 in 1950. The figure for Malaysians studying in Australia in 1953 was 509. C. M. Turnbull, 'The Malayan Connection' in Chan Lau Kit-ching and Peter Cunich (eds.), *An Impossible Dream: Hong Kong University from Foundation to Re-establishment, 1910–1950* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 116; and *Inter-University Council*, p. 3. See also Norman Harper, 'Asian Students and Asian Studies in Australia' in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (March 1958), pp. 54–64. In *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), Ooi Kee Beng describes the student experience of a future Malayan/Malaysian statesman who proceeded to the University of Melbourne after graduating from King Edward VII Medical College in 1946.

from West Africa, but the disparity had been reduced by 1953, when it numbered 1,200 compared with about 1,700 from Nigeria and 750 from the Gold Coast.⁸⁸ In addition to those registered for university courses, government-sponsored Malaysians attended the teacher-training college at Kirkby (near Liverpool), with the first contingent of some 150 starting the programme in January 1952.⁸⁹

Uncertainty over the numbers of Malaysian students in Britain suggested lapses in the provision of both care and security. Some years earlier the Colonial Office's Advisory Committee for Education had called for improvements in student welfare on the grounds that '[i]f they return[ed] discontented, evil results . . . [would] certainly occur.'⁹⁰ The pressure to make amends increased after the declaration of the Malaysian Emergency, and in 1949 Malaya Hall was established as a student base in London's Bryanston Square. At the same time, however, political activists, such as H. B. Lim (Lim Hong Bee) and John Eber, were watched by the home security services. Born in Kuala Lumpur, Lim had won a scholarship to study in Britain in the mid-1930s and by the late 1940s was proselytising for the Communist cause through his magazine, *Malayan Monitor*. As we have seen, John Eber had been arrested in Singapore in 1951 as part of the clampdown on students and intellectuals. On his release he was allowed to go into voluntary exile in England in spite of the governor's misgivings. Sir Franklin Gimson would have preferred to keep Eber in detention:

John Eber is considered to be as great a danger to public security in Malaya whether he is in Malaya or England. His activities in Singapore which led to his detention were largely concentrated among University students and others of a similar type. If he went to England there is no doubt that he would continue subversive activities among students and be as great a danger to Malaya there as he is here.⁹¹

⁸⁸ J. L. Keith (director of colonial students) to Raja Sir Uda bin Raja Mahmud, 24 September 1953, CO 1028/27. A member of the Malaysian Civil Service since 1924, Raja Uda was the Federation's first commissioner for Malaya to be appointed to the United Kingdom (1953–1954); he became governor of Penang after independence.

⁸⁹ CO 876/139, TNA. An additional teacher-training course was later launched at Brinsford Lodge in Wolverhampton. These programmes were discontinued in the 1960s. In September 2001, 500 Kirkby alumni (including Tuanku Bainum, the Raja Permaisuri of Perak and former Raja Permaisuri Agong) held a reunion in Kuala Lumpur to mark the 50th anniversary of the embarkation of the first cohort for Kirkby.

⁹⁰ Channon report, para 102.

⁹¹ Gimson to J. D. Higham, 12 July 1951, CO 717/202/7.

The Colonial Office overruled Gimson on the ground that repressive measures against intellectuals would be counterproductive and in the hope that Eber himself might be rehabilitated. On his arrival in England, Eber renewed his links with anti-colonial pressure groups. He joined Fenner Brockway's Movement for Colonial Freedom and later served as its general secretary, in which role, however, he resisted the growing influence of Communists.

In October 1953 Eber was elected secretary of the Malayan Forum, a London-based students' organisation whose founders included Abdul Razak (future prime minister of Malaysia) and Goh Keng Swee (future minister and deputy prime minister of Singapore).⁹² Like the student radicals in Singapore, the Malayan Forum aspired to the creation of a united, non-communal and independent Malayan nation. It published these views in its magazine, *Suara Merdeka (Voice of Freedom)*, but the metropolitan authorities tolerated a greater degree of freedom of expression than was permitted in the colonies. Officials responsible for student welfare in the United Kingdom in the main refrained from heavy-handed action against Malayan students. They regarded Malaysians as more academically hardworking and less politically engaged than other overseas students and enjoyed comfortable relations with presidents of the Malayan students' union of the United Kingdom, such as Maurice Baker, C. V. Wong and H. G. Gan.⁹³ In short, although the student experience contributed significantly to the political development of men who later rose to national prominence, during the 1950s student politicians played no more than a minor part in the independence movements of the Federation and Singapore. Their university education threatened to cut them off from the people, as, like the British, they grappled with 'the dilemma of how to impose a new national culture from on high.'⁹⁴

A Colonial University or a National University?

In the mid-1950s many more Malaysians were benefiting from university education either local or overseas than had been anticipated even by the progressive Carr-Saunders Commission. Yet neither the

⁹² Yeo, 'Student Politics,' p. 366ff; CO 717/193/3; CO 1022/196.

⁹³ See, for example, Colonial Office Minutes in CO 1028/28.

⁹⁴ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 506.

British nor the Malaysians were entirely satisfied with the results. Growth in higher education had been overtaken by political and constitutional change, and, as they prepared to transfer power, the British were alarmed by the relative paucity of Malaysians of any race who were qualified for public service positions or interested in applying for them.⁹⁵ A growing number of Malaysians, for their part, were frustrated by restrictions on both the admission of students to the university and the appointment of local graduates to academic jobs. They wondered whether the purpose of the University of Malaya had been to contain self-determination rather than foster it. Although the founding fathers had stated their intention to use higher education to prepare Malaya for independence, it was difficult to rebut the charge that such preparation was on British terms and in accordance with the British way. After all, the university had been set up by the British, funded by the British, staffed by the British and moulded according to a British model. The principle of autonomy had been compromised by the appointments of the British commissioner-general as chancellor and a senior Whitehall civil servant as vice-chancellor. In addition to specific grievances—notably the failure to accommodate the Chinese-educated, reluctance to make local appointments and delays in establishing departments of Chinese, Malay and Indian studies—arcane and anachronistic customs imported from British universities jarred with the new Malaya. The academic dress that imitated London University's and the alien names of Michaelmas, Hilary and Trinity which were applied to the three terms were minor matters in themselves, but these trappings were symptomatic of the unfortunate attitude of some expatriates who 'brought with them the mental picture of a western university—more specifically an English one, or even an English provincial one'—and who appeared 'to have sought too rigidly to reproduce it in an Eastern multilingual community.'⁹⁶ In spite of admirable endeavours by some individuals to build bridges between staff and students and between expatriates and locals, Westerners were regarded as standoffish.

By 1956 the brotherhood of scholars was weighed in the balance, and the university's contribution to the public good was found wanting. University management was hobbled by disagreements over policies and between interest groups. Professors and heads

⁹⁵ 'Education for Self-Rule', *The Times*, 31 January 1956, p. 7.

⁹⁶ *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the University of Malaya 1957*, sessional paper of the legislative assembly, Singapore, Cmd. 54 (1957), para 21.

of departments, who dominated the senate, strenuously defended academic standards and freedom. Non-professorial staff objected to the autocracy of the professoriate. Locals resented the fact that outsiders held plum positions. Expatriates worried about the security of their jobs. The Guild of Graduates and lay members of council, who were in the majority on the governing body, set their sights on political independence and demanded the Malayisation of posts. These stresses and strains came to a head in early October 1956, soon after Sir Sydney Caine had left to become director of the LSE. In his valedictory address to the convocation, which was delivered in his absence by the acting vice-chancellor (Professor E. H. G. Dobby), Caine responded to critics by insisting that the University of Malaya was a 'colonial University' only in so far as it had been 'consciously created by the Colonial power to prepare for the expected death of colonialism.'⁹⁷ He went on to rebuke senior members of the Guild of Graduates for withholding moral and material support. His speech, which was 'perhaps unwisely' read in full, provoked a protest meeting of the Guild in which Dobby 'found himself confronted by a deeply felt resentment which he did not dispel.'⁹⁸ At this moment of crisis the university's leadership singularly failed to either reassure academic staff or ease local vexation over the position of expatriates. Four professors resigned forthwith, and the guild demanded the appointment of a Malayan vice-chancellor.⁹⁹ Investigation was essential, and at the suggestion of Malcolm MacDonald, who continued to take his responsibilities as chancellor very seriously after his translation to the high commission in New Delhi, a full-scale review of the university's record and future direction was authorised.

The 1957 commission of enquiry was a Commonwealth operation. It was chaired by Dr R. S. Aitken, vice-chancellor of Birmingham,

⁹⁷ For the text of the speech and its repercussions, see BW 90/1657.

⁹⁸ *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the University of Malaya 1957*, para 18.

⁹⁹ The four professors were E. M. Glaser (physiology), J. W. H. Lugg (biochemistry), R. C. R. Morell (English), J. C. Cooke (maths and dean of science). On 22 October the acting vice-chancellor, Professor E. H. G. Dobby, wrote in confidence to S. J. Worsley, secretary of the IUC, '[T]he Glaser resignation turns on the dispute about the promotion merit of Dr Toh Chin Chye.' See BW 90/1657. As regards Caine's successor, in January 1957 Council appointed Professor (later Tan Sri Sir) Alexander Oppenheim to serve as vice-chancellor for not more than 2 years. In fact, he remained vice-chancellor of the unitary university until 1962 and continued as vice-chancellor in Kuala Lumpur until 1965. Oppenheim had joined the maths department of Raffles College before the war.

who had recently conducted an examination of the finances of the University College of the West Indies. The other members were Dr Tara Chaud (former vice-chancellor, Allahabad University), Dr Goh Keng Swee (acting director of social welfare, Singapore), Dr Haji Megat Khas (former state physician, Perak, and member of the university council) and Dr S. L. Prescott (vice-chancellor, University of Western Australia). While they praised the university's expansion and high academic standards, the commissioners regretted instances of dogmatic adherence to the English model and of insensitivity to Malaya's 'rapidly changing society.' The university's tardy response to Asian aspirations and its reluctance to adjust to 'the problems and opportunities of developing a modern university in the Malayan setting' had fuelled recriminations in the senate and the council and resulted in disappointment for children from vernacular schools. The commission's recommendations included the reform of the university's constitution and also of its administration, which had been hampered by a frequent turnover of key officials: three vice-chancellors, five acting vice-chancellors, three registrars and two bursars, amongst whom there had been little previous experience of higher education management. As regards the integration of the university within the wider community, the report proposed, first, a scheme for the assisted entry of bright students from vernacular schools (via preliminary English-language classes); second, recruitment of more local staff (short of complete Malayisation); and third, the development of the Kuala Lumpur division with a view to its ultimate transformation into a separate university.¹⁰⁰

The report of the Aitken Commission was completed in the wake of momentous political events: in 1957 the Federation of Malaya achieved independence on its own, and it was agreed that Singapore would be granted full internal self-government in the near future. These decisions would have major repercussions for the university, and Aitken foresaw 'difficulties in plenty ahead.'¹⁰¹ One problem was the apparent determination of the Federation government to go its own way, an issue to which we shall return. Another was the cleavage, particularly in Singapore, between the English-educated Chinese and the Chinese-educated Chinese. Although Nanyang lay outside Aitken's brief, the commission could not ignore its powerful

¹⁰⁰ In addition to the *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the University of Malaya 1957*, see CO 1030/569 and DO 35/9773, TNA.

¹⁰¹ R. Aitken to A. Lennox-Boyd, 21 December 1957, CO 1030/569.

appeal to the students of Chinese middle schools in both Singapore and the Federation. Its very presence posed a challenge to the University of Malaya, which, as we have seen, had been remiss in making provision for applicants from the vernacular stream. The cause of Chinese education, which the Nanyang students' union championed, became the cause of the dispossessed Chinese. In Aitken's opinion it would be futile to attempt to secure the ascendancy of the 'half westernized Chinese' over the 'Chinese Chinese.' Instead, he thought, '[O]ur policy should be to unite the two groups so far as it might be possible to do so, and keep the Chinese as a whole sitting uncommitted on the fence between allegiance to the west and allegiance to China.'¹⁰² Although Aitken believed that any loyalty to China was 'more an allegiance to China as China, than an allegiance to communism,' by 1959 the governor of Singapore, Sir William Goode, regarded Nanyang a breeding ground for 'Communists of high quality.'¹⁰³

In January 1959 Goode appointed an enquiry into academic standards at Nanyang. S. L. Prescott, who, in addition to serving on the Aitken Commission, had taught for 7 years at a Chinese university, was its chairman. There were three Chinese members, nominated by Harvard, the University of the East in the Philippines and the Taiwan National University, and a fourth member from Leyden University. Their task was complicated when Singapore's chief minister, Lim Yew Hock, sought to win popularity and improve his chances in the forthcoming election by conferring university status on Nanyang. His ploy failed to prevent the victory of Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP), although for a time it raised the hopes of the Chinese-educated. These were soon dashed by the Prescott Commission which concluded, 'The overall impression of Nanyang University is that it has grown too fast without continuous expert planning over a long period before the admission of students.'¹⁰⁴ Its scathing criticism of academic standards severely reduced the employment prospects of Nanyang graduates and provoked student protests. Some immediate remedies were put in place following a further review appointed by the PAP government and chaired by the distinguished physician, Dr Gwee Ah Leng: first, a subsidy towards Nanyang's reorganisation, second, recognition of degrees in

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Goode to Iain Macleod, 23 November 1959, CO 1030/652, para 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Report of the Nanyang Commission, 1959* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 27; see also BW 90/554 and DO 35/8194.

the expectation that Nanyang would develop into 'a real university' and, third, a scheme to admit Nanyang graduates to public service as probationers.¹⁰⁵ On this occasion violence was avoided, but student militancy at Nanyang would dog the regime of Lee Kuan Yew who in December 1963 lamented, '[A] situation is developing which if left unchecked will make it more a University of Yen-an [the stronghold of Mao tse-tung after the Long March] than of Nanyang.'¹⁰⁶

A cultural clash of a different kind occurred in 1960, when the newly appointed professor of English in the Singapore division of the University of Malaya fell foul of the PAP government. At the start of his inaugural lecture, 'Robert Graves and the Decline of Modernism,' D. J. Enright took a swipe at government attempts to preserve the traditional 'sarong culture complete with *pantun* competitions' from the taint of Western 'yellow culture.' Enright urged Singapore and Malaya to remain culturally open. The riposte of Singapore's acting minister of law and culture was to threaten Enright with deportation:

We have no time for asinine sneers by passing aliens . . . You will be packing your bags and seeking green pastures elsewhere if your gratuitous advice in these matters should land us in a mess. The days are gone when birds of passage from Europe or elsewhere used to make it a habit of participating from their superman heights of European civilization.¹⁰⁷

The case quickly became a cause célèbre, as students, the press and opposition politicians protested against government interference in university affairs. The upshot was that Enright remained in post for 10 years, after which he resigned of his own volition. In fact, local opposition to expatriate appointments was waning. By the mid-1960s the University of Malaya was hard-pressed to recruit academic staff from any source. Opportunities offered by new universities in Britain and Australia encouraged a migration of expatriates elsewhere, while high-calibre Malayan graduates preferred more lucrative non-academic careers to university teaching and research.

¹⁰⁵ *Report of the Nanyang University Review Committee*, misc 1 of 1960, presented to the legislative assembly by the minister for education, 6 February 1960. See also CO 1030/1090. For the esprit de corps of Nanyang students in the face of adversity, see Lee and Tan, *Beyond Degrees*, pp. 169–172.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Justus M. Van Der Kroef, 'Nanyang University and the Dilemmas of Overseas Chinese Education' in *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (October–December 1964), p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ D. J. Enright, *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor*, (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1990), p. 128; see also Carr-Saunders, *New Universities Overseas*, p. 201 n. 6.

Partition

The administrations of self-governing Singapore and independent Malaya were now refashioning higher education according to their separate national projects. Months before the Enright controversy, Singapore's ministers had been questioning some of the cherished principles of the Asquith–Carr–Saunders model. Addressing students on the university's role in society, the minister of education had emphasised that freedom went hand in hand with responsibility and that the university could not remain an ivory tower isolated from the society that funded it. He questioned the 'colonial anachronism' of financial allowances for expatriate staff and the need for the costly provision of residential accommodation for students.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, ministers felt that, *pace* Carr–Saunders, the young nation's lack of competent technicians required universities to train more students in vocational disciplines and to a lower standard than had hitherto been the case.¹⁰⁹

The Federation government similarly stressed the university's function both to impart technical skills and to nurture national identity through education in the indigenous language and culture. Education was a burning political issue, and it became a bargaining counter in the contest between and within the principal communal parties. The more radical elements in UMNO pressed their essentially moderate leaders to guarantee the supremacy of the Malay language in education and administration. This approach, which was adopted despite the misgivings of UMNO's partners in the multi-racial alliance, came to shape the course of higher education in the Federation. After 1955, when the Alliance took charge of internal government, and especially after independence in 1957, there were three major developments: the construction of the Kuala Lumpur campus, the adoption of the Malay-language policy and a transformation in the pattern of Malay admissions. One by one, engineering, science, education and agriculture departments were set up on the Kuala Lumpur site. In September 1959 Tun Abdul Razak, Malaya's deputy prime minister, declared that his government was determined to establish its own 'truly national university.'¹¹⁰ By 1960–1961 (the last session of the united university) 654 of the 2,316 students were enrolled with the

¹⁰⁸ Yong Nyuk Lin, quoted in *The Times*, 13 June 1960, p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ 'More Students, Lower Standards', *The Times*, 18 July 1960, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ 'Political Spur to Growth of a University', *The Times*, 11 May 1960, p. 11.

Kuala Lumpur branch.¹¹¹ Partition came in January 1962 with the inauguration of the University of Singapore and the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

It is ironic that the University of Malaya was partitioned when plans were afoot to repair the political breach between Singapore island and mainland Malaya by drawing them together within a greater federation of Malaysia. One may speculate as to the reasons why the two governments abandoned a shared institution at the very moment when they were promoting political union. Perhaps university development was marginal to the politics of merger. Or maybe the forces that led to university partition were symptomatic of a fundamental lack of commitment on both sides to any form of closer association, be it constitutional, economic or educational. Or possibly the formation of separate universities was intended to reduce the issues aggravating tension between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Higher education was a culturally sensitive matter, but it was also a matter over which central control might be surrendered in order to safeguard the larger scheme. If the marriage of convenience with respect to defence, internal security and external relations had any chance of lasting, each territorial component of Malaysia would have to be assured of autonomy in subsidiary activities. In much the same way as multiple universities in Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda were intended to relieve regional tensions in those states, it may have been hoped that acceptance of educational autonomy for Malaya and Singapore would enhance the prospects for their constitutional merger.

During the period of decolonisation, resources, race and politics proved stronger than highly principled and closely reasoned strategies in determining whether one or several universities should serve a particular area. In the Caribbean, for example, a successful effort was made to ensure that the regional university would survive the collapse of the Federation of the West Indies in 1962. Similarly, when the Central African Federation was dismembered in 1964, the British government, the IUC and London University all strove to prop up the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. But after Iain Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, the political and racial compromises which the British were forced to make in order to sustain their involvement in this institution became so unpalatable and ineffectual that, one by one, London University, the IUC and

¹¹¹ For the shift of the university to Kuala Lumpur and its early development, see Khoo, *100 Years*, pp. 63–101.

the British government withdrew support. In Malaya, as in the West Indies and central Africa, the university had been intended to provide a common service for a fragile grouping of British dependencies. In contrast to the outcome in the West Indies, however, as territories drifted apart economically, politically and constitutionally, so too did the branches of the university. Yet, although the unitary University of Malaya did not survive British decolonisation and although the ideals of its founders in some instances atrophied into formulae, both its expansion and the standards which it maintained in the period to 1962 surpassed expectations and on all counts compared favourably with other institutions of higher education in Britain's colonial empire.