

*Jean Marshall's
Pahang Letters,*
1953-54

Jean Marshall's Pahang Letters, 1953–54:
Sidelights On Malaya During The Emergency
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Sidelights On Malaya During The Emergency



Edited by
MANDAKINI ARORA

LETTERS

Red Cross office
519 Belfield Road
Kuala Lumpur
20 Sept '53

Dear Mummy and Daddy,

Nous sommes arrivés as Miss Whittington¹ will have told you and I'm now recovering from the effects of the journey. I felt worse yesterday than when actually travelling and am still terribly affected by the heat if I do more than sit still under the fan.

You'll have had the Colombo letter² and on leaving Mount Lavinia we were delayed at the airport before the last long lap. This was of course mostly over the sea but we flew pretty high so various formations of cotton wool was one's only scenery for several hours. There was then the bluish-green jungle of Sumatra (I think Sumatra) & the islands alongside and then of Malaya. The air-conditioning had by then been put right and the plane was reasonably cool. I sat & slept (adjustable seats but no footrest so my feet by then looked like vegetable marrows) for most of the time & I couldn't read much because it was a bit bumpy. We arrived in Singapore³ a bit late and were herded in pens for ages & were finally released craving only for a bath & a drink. These luxuries

1 The overseas director of the British Red Cross Society in London.

2 The letter never reached Jean's parents.

3 Jean travelled from Northolt Airport with a Red Cross nursing sister.

however were not for us as the Red X lady said we were to travel on by the night mail. She took us to a café where I drank lime juice & thought she would be providing a meal but she didn't & left us in the station (sanitary arrangements were backward). We went up by the mail train & had fairly comfortable sleepers—I slept fairly well (dunlopillo) but the water was so mucky that we dispensed with washing. It was dark until about 6 when there was nothing much to see but palm trees & thick greenery & occasional Chinese walking the flooded rice fields. All much like geography textbooks. Buffalos here & there & occasional hump backed cows but no other livestock. We got into Kuala Lumpur about three hours late—no one to meet us alas, so we left our luggage to the mercies of Indian gentlemen & felt slightly lost. The Red X van turned up in a few minutes & we were wafted up “here” which is a very pleasant lofty bungalow which is the Red Cross office & house. Three people live here & there are three strays awaiting posting. It's astonishingly hot despite fans & at first I was just giddy & fainting—breakfast, bath, & rest revived me a little and I'm now more sane. We act with formality but I already know one of the other strays which is a comfort to us both.

I'm going to Kuala Lipis in Pahang (about midway between the two coasts) on Tuesday week where I commence my duties. This coming week I'm to spend with my equivalent for Selangor & to continue to live here.

At night it gets rather cooler which is merciful & during the day I have hardly been able to walk for five minutes. We sleep under nets of course & I have been bitten hardly at all. Sir Charles Matthew the local Red X bigwig came up for coffee last night (actually of course to have a look at the other new bod and me) but I don't know what he made of us; he talks all the time anyway.

The town is infested with traffic of all kinds—trishaws, bicycles, carts here & there & all types of cars. It stinks too but we are suitably poised on a hill & open to any breezes there are. I thought it was a spot cooler today (Sunday) but have decided that in unfanned rooms it isn't. I went to the European Presbyterian Church this morning which wasn't very exciting—there was an open arcade each side & about a dozen fans so it was cool—about 30 people there. Mostly Scottish I think.

Well I must go to rest so will stop now. After 29th my address will be

Red Cross Bungalow,
Kuala Lipis
Pahang.

Kuala Lumpur
24 Sept '53

I meet Lady T.⁴ on Monday.

Scissors found.

Address: Red Cross House

Kuala Lipis

Pahang

My dearest Mummy & Daddy,

Your letter arrived today (& two others posted on Sunday) & as the letter from Christine & Henry which was awaiting me on arrival is the only other I've had, I was v. glad to receive it.

Things seem less new & it's a little less hot so I'm feeling less strange. This week I've spent with the girl who runs the local state branch but she's had a lot on—it's been interesting but very like an English branch & not much like Pahang, I fear, which is one of the most junglous & un-Europeanized states. One morning we went to a ladies' exclusive working party in a magnificent house on Federal Hill (the hill) belonging to the Manager of the Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank. All very top drawer & I wasn't spoken to throughout.

4 Lady Peggie Templer, the wife of General Gerald Templer who was High Commissioner and Director of Operations in Malaya from 1952 to 1954.

The central office is now here (& this is Red X HQ if you want my “permanent” address) but the local office is still at Tanglin Hospital. All the hospital is a one-storey wooden building and pre-war built. It’s difficult to judge how bad or good it is & they are alarmingly short of staff.

Another afternoon we had to call at the General Hospital which, I should judge, is of better standard. Today I had to go over to the military hospital about 15 miles out & this afternoon went to a New Village about 30 miles away. A very damp, dreary place but the girl who works there seemed content. This village was bigger than most (8000 inhabs) & 100% Chinese. My uniform dresses have shrunk & to my despair & fury I have got to have some more. This means I shall need some money (the unused bit of the £15—ie, about £13, is advance on this month’s salary so I shall draw very little cash until end of October) & I have not yet discovered the best way of sending it—not by cheque—the only bank in Lipis is the Mercantile Bank of India so my a/c shall be there—I’m having coffee with someone in that bank who has just been working in Kuala Lipis & who will tell me just what you should do. My Victoria Bank only contains about £10 so I shall borrow from you please—£10 will do—& I’ll let you know just what’s the procedure.

I go up to Lipis by road Tuesday & stay one night at Raub and then on to Lipis where the Branch Organizer,⁵ who will return to KL the next day, & I are to dine with the Resident (tiddly pom). I shall be living in the Red X Bung. in the town & an Australian nurse is already living there. The Bung. I saw today seemed quite nice— rather sparsely furnished & small but not like a shack.

I've been in & out of the town this week. There are three European shops & prices there & in the Chinese shops are phenomenally high. The dollar (2/4)⁶ is definitely about the value of 1/- & the idea that everything is cheap is just wrong. My dresses will cost me about £3.10 & are being made by a Chinese dressmaker. All the streets are full of the various races each in their own costumes. The Indians are either bearded, tall Sikhs who look rather formidable or small very dark people—Tamils from the South. They mostly do unskilled labouring jobs & the Sikhs are traders. It's not easy to distinguish Malay men from Chinese except that the former often wear songkoks (local version of fez). The women are all colourful—the Chinese in pyjamas of course & the Indians in saris. The Malays wear sarongs with loose scarves round their heads. Of course quite a large proportion of the better educated wear European dress. I can't remember what I

5 The London-appointed head of the Red Cross in Malaya.

6 Two shillings and four pence. Until 1971 the British pound comprised 20 shillings and there were twelve pence in a shilling.

said in my last letter so you must ask questions.

If you want a letter to get to me quickly & for certain send it ordinary air mail. I called on Mrs Cullen's⁷ brother y'day but he was out. Landrover practice tomorrow—so far I've been driven.

7 Dorothy Cullen was the Gray family's neighbour in Kent. Her husband died as a Japanese prisoner-of-war while working on the Thailand-Burma Railway. Shennan refers to the Cullen family papers in *Out in the Middy Sun*.

EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT, 2017

WHEN I FIRST met Jean in Singapore in 2004, I knew that she was the widow of David Marshall but little else about her. I was intrigued by the elegant and imposing 78-year-old woman, as Singaporean as she was English. We became friends, and with her permission I started recording her stories—of family antecedents in Bristol and Kent, a youth in wartime England, Red Cross work during the Malayan Emergency, her move to Singapore in 1957, and marriage to David Marshall in 1961. Jean is a natural raconteur who weaves socio-historical context into her personal history to recreate a richly hued and textured past. I was interested in how she had come to make Singapore home. I learned that work brought her to Malaya and then to Singapore. She became a Singapore citizen in 1960. Marriage in 1961 and a growing family grounded her in Singapore.

In 1954, when she went back to England after her year with the Red Cross, Jean wanted to return to work in Malaya. While her Red Cross job had proved to be frustratingly different from what she was engaged for, she somewhat knew the lay of the land and had developed a social and professional network. “I enjoy Malaya but would like to do a job for which I am competent!” she had written earlier to her parents (6 Dec. 1953). She did return in 1955, to Kuala Lumpur as a medical social worker (or almoner) with the Colonial

Medical Service. In part, her job was to foster local expertise and work for her own “abolition”. Her post was Malayanized in 1957. She then joined the Department of Social Studies at the University of Malaya¹ in Singapore, to develop a new diploma in medical social work. *Kent Messenger* reported that “one of Kent’s many daughters who have wandered far from home ... Miss Jean Gray ... is to help train social workers from Singapore and other parts of Malaya (possibly even from other south eastern countries of Asia).”² The daughter of Kent had planned to venture even farther afield when her university contract ended in 1961—to Chicago for a higher degree in social work. But events took a different turn.

Before moving to Singapore, Jean had read in the press about Singapore’s first elected chief minister (1955–56), a fiery and colourful lawyer named David Saul Marshall.³ In and out of the courtroom, he was by all accounts a larger-than-life personality with striking looks and flair—with a “star quality”, to quote his political biographer, Chan Heng Chee.⁴ David has gone down in the annals of Singapore legal history as a legend.⁵ Jean met him in 1959 at the convocation of the

1 Established in 1949 by a merger of Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine, the University of Malaya introduced a Social Studies diploma in 1952 in the context of the colonial government’s heightened concern with social welfare (see Ho Chi Tim and Ann Wee, *Singapore Chronicles: Social Services* [Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Straits Times Press, 2016]).

2 Untitled, *Kent Messenger*, 16 Aug. 1957.

3 For an account of David Marshall’s political career, see Chan Heng Chee, *A Sensation of Independence: David Marshall, A Political Biography* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2001).

4 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

5 See Kevin Tan, *Marshall of Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

University of Malaya, where she was a social work lecturer and he was an honorary law lecturer. David later said: “I saw her among the academic staff. She looked most attractive in her academic dress. I asked for an introduction.”⁶ David was 51 years old and popularly believed to be a confirmed bachelor—“a much sought-after party guest and ... a man about town”.⁷ Jean was 33. He was a Sephardi Baghdadi Jew, born in Singapore in 1908 to Saul and Flora Mashal (later Anglicized to Marshall). Having rebelled in his teens against the religion that his devout mother imposed on him, as an adult David became a leading figure in the Singapore Jewish community. Jean was a practising Christian.

Yet they had much in common and were intellectually well matched. They shared a love of words and of books. David read widely and, in his public oratory, combined a dramatic bent with literary elegance. As a youth, he had read the Bible a few times over and credited it for his “feel for the English language”.⁸ Books were—and continue to be—vital to Jean’s life. Her letters from Malaya are filled with literary references and turns of phrase.

On 5 April 1961 they were married at the Singapore Registry Office after a private ceremony of blessing at the house of their friends Bishop and Mrs Amstutz. David had written to Jean’s parents and met them on a visit to England. In the absence of Jean’s family members at the wedding, the vice-chancellor of the university gave her away. Jean stopped

6 “Marshall To Wed”, *The Straits Times*, 3 Apr. 1961.

7 Tan, *Marshall of Singapore*, p. 197.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

doing paid work when she got married, as had her mother before her. She believes that in Britain “[her] generation is the last one which happily and with a sense of rightness gives up ... a career on becoming wife and mother.”⁹ She continued to do social work as a volunteer. David and Jean had four children who now live in Singapore, Paris and London.



David, Jean and their children, Ruth, Sara, Joanna and Jonathan (left to right), at home in Singapore, 1978 (photo credit: Jean Marshall)

The Marshalls moved to Paris in 1978 when David was appointed Singapore’s first ambassador in France. They returned to Singapore in 1993 and David died two years later. Jean continued to live in Singapore: “It never occurred to me to relocate to England. Of course, my ethnicity is permanent. But after 60 years, I identify with Singapore.”¹⁰

⁹ Jean Marshall, Oral History transcript, Reel 3, p. 21.

¹⁰ Mandakini Arora, “Jean Marshall: At Home in Singapore”, *Sunday Times*, 10 Apr. 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/jean-marshall-at-home-in->

In 2005, to celebrate Jean's upcoming 80th birthday, three of her friends organized a weeklong road trip to Malaysia for her to revisit places where she had been over 50 years earlier and of which she often spoke. In Raub, they attended the English Methodist Sunday church service. In Kuala Lipis they stayed at the old Residency, now a rest house and very much frayed at the edges. It was the building that Jean had been in on her very first night in Kuala Lipis in 1953 when she attended a party there, hosted by the British Adviser and his wife. She described the building, then, to her parents as "a spacious, beautiful house of the type one imagines it would be" (28 Sept. 1953). In Kuantan the friends visited Pekan, the royal seat of Pahang. This was not Jean's first visit to Pekan. It was, however, her first time visiting as a Datin of Pahang. In 1965 the Sultan of Pahang conferred the title of Datuk on David, in appreciation of his legal help. Jean shared this anecdote with her friends during their visit, and one of them writes, "so [as Datin] we addressed her for the day."¹¹

Jean's year in Pahang in 1953–54, of which the letters in this book paint a detailed picture, was the start of Jean's life away from England. Intrinsically, hers is an interesting history as she has inhabited and navigated worlds seemingly far removed from each other. The work that she did for the Red Cross during the Malayan Emergency, the friends she made, how she felt about her work and the people she interacted

singapore.

11 The quote is from the unpublished journal of Dorothy Lau, who very generously shared it with me.



The Sultan's palace, Pekan, 1954 (photo credit: Jean Marshall)



Jean (centre) and her friends outside the Pekan state museum, formerly the Sultan's palace, 2005 (photo credit: Dorothy Lau)



A street in Raub, 1953 (photo credit: Jean Marshall)



A street in Raub, 2005 (photo credit: Dorothy Lau)

with, are specific to her as an individual. But, individual interest apart, her letters from Malaya are also of broader historical relevance. They are one Englishwoman's perspective on late colonial Malaya and they shine sidelights on Malaya during the Emergency.



Jean, 2015 (photo credit: Jean Marshall)

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