

# SINGAPORE:

## A Portrait in Diversity

Singapore: A Portrait In Diversity  
© Tom Soper, 2015  
Copyright of text belongs to the individuals who provided it

ISBN: 978-981-09-7717-7

Published under the imprint Ethos Books  
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd  
28 Sin Ming Lane  
#06-131 Midview City  
Singapore 573972  
[www.ethosbooks.com.sg](http://www.ethosbooks.com.sg)  
[www.facebook.com/ethosbooks](http://www.facebook.com/ethosbooks)

The publisher reserves all rights to this title.  
Cover design and layout by Nurul Syafiqah  
Printed by First Printers Pte Ltd, Singapore  
Typefaces: 8/11pt Futura (T1)  
Material: 140/170gsm Maple White

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Soper, Tom.  
Title: Singapore : a portrait in diversity / Tom Soper.  
Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, [2015]  
Identifiers: OCN 928276444  
I ISBN 978-981-09-7717-7 (hardcover)  
Subjects: LCSH: Ethnology--Singapore --Pictorial works.  
I Immigrants--Singapore --Portraits.  
Classification: LCC GN635.S55 I DDC 305.80095957-dc23



# TOM SOPER

For

Lizzi

*One to the other*

&

Frank Drysdale

*He shall not grow old as we that are left grow old*



*"All the diversity, all the charm,  
and all the beauty of life are  
made up of light and shade."*

—Leo Tolstoy

09	Foreword
-	
11	Introduction
-	
15	Singapore Siblings: Reflections of a Long-term Visitor
-	
18	Portraits of the Past
-	

23	50 Portraits
-	
124	Behind the Scenes
-	
128	Acknowledgements
-	
130	About Tom Soper
-	



*Minnie & Alan Wall, taken around 1897*



*Minnie Wall taken around 1889*

As this project gained momentum, my mother, 11,000km away in the UK, was discovering an interesting family connection to Singapore. She was uncovering dramatic stories of hardship, tragedy, war and love involving our own family members who first set foot in Singapore as expats over 130 years ago.

In 1879 three young children arrived, alone, in Singapore. Minnie Wall, the eldest at 11 years old, looked after her young sister and brother. Their father had been declared bankrupt in England and so, to repay his debt, he was sent by the British Government to work as a chemist in Asia. He was stationed on a remote island which was deemed too dangerous for the children and so they were sent to live in Singapore.

After living in Singapore for several years Minnie married fellow Brit, James Drysdale, at St Andrew's Cathedral. They went on to have four children.

One of the children, Francis, or Frank, was a member of the Singapore Volunteer Rifles. He was one of the very few people killed in Singapore during World War One. He was guarding some civilian German prisoners when Indian soldiers serving in

the British Army mutinied. On 16th February 1915 the mutineers attempted to free the German prisoners and, in the fighting that followed, Frank was shot dead. He was only 17 years old and is remembered on memorials at the Singapore Cricket Club (SCC), at St Andrew's Cathedral and at the Victoria Hall.\*

On 16th February 2015, exactly 100 years after Frank Drysdale was killed, I arranged for family members, including my mother, along with representatives from the British High Commission and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, to visit his grave in Kranji Cemetery.

The story of Frank's brother is equally tragic. Alan, (coincidentally a keen amateur photographer) was an active member of the expat community in Singapore. He joined the Singapore Pilots' Association, the Singapore Swimming Club (SCC) and he played cricket for the SCC. Despite all these interests and also having a successful career laying telegraph cables for the Eastern Telegraph Company, Alan Drysdale suffered from depression and shot himself in his boat at Keppel Harbour in 1934, at the age of just 44.

Fortunately our ancestors who continued to live as expats in Singapore had a happier time, at least initially. Minnie's grandchildren, Dorothy and Sylvia Still, were renowned amateur sports women, who represented the SCC and The Tanglin Club. Between shoots for this project I visited the archives of the Singapore National Library with my mother. We found dozens of Straits Times articles noting the sisters' achievements in hockey and tennis, as well as some photos of them performing in a show at the Raffles Theatre. During the World War Two occupation of Singapore the sisters' father was a prisoner of war in Changi Prison and they themselves fled Singapore. After the war some family members returned to Singapore and my mother is currently researching whether the Drysdales who still live on the island are related to our family.

Knowing that members of my family have been living and working in Singapore for over 135 years has added an interesting twist to the 50 portraits project. Foreigners have at times played a significant role in the country's history and development. So I am pleased to be able to say, having put together this photographic celebration of national diversity, that my own family have played a part for such a long time. From those young children arriving in 1879 right through to the present, with me having recently left and my sister still in residence, my family have added to the diversity which I am now celebrating through this project.

Tom Soper  
November 2015

\* By coincidence, one of the shoot locations for this project was Victoria Hall and another was at the barracks in the very area where Frank was killed. I also took the photo of Raphael from Nigeria at Raffles Institution where Frank's mother, Minnie, went to school.

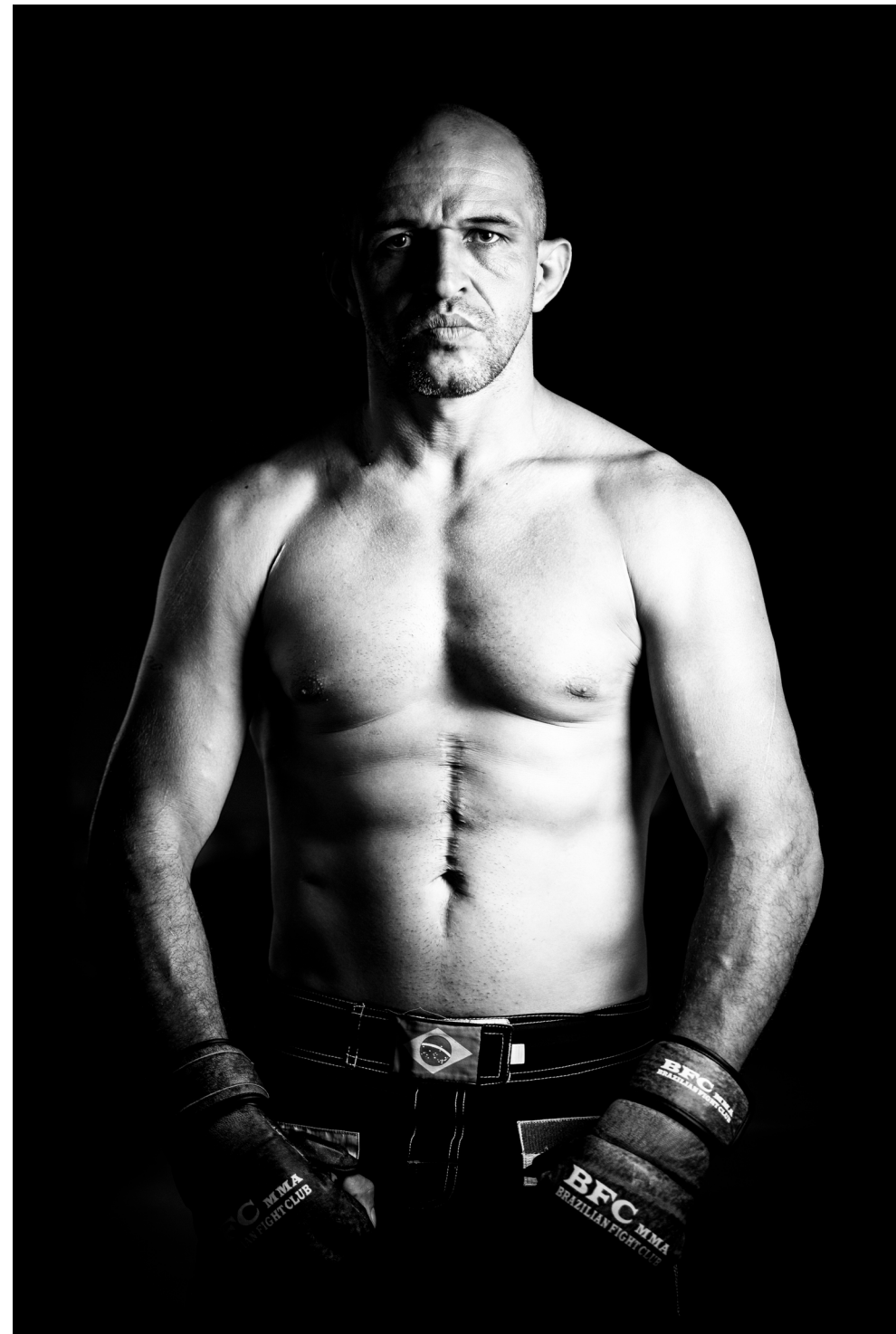
# Brazil



Silvio Romero Da Silvia  
Martial Arts Instructor  
Years in Singapore: 7

In all honesty, when I turned up for the shoot, I was a little frightened of Silvio. After all, he is a mixed martial arts champion and has the scars to prove it. He looked tough and scary but as I found out, he was incredibly kind and friendly. He was happy to put on his 'fighter' look for the camera, but away from the lens he showed the friendly, chatty side that is no doubt part of the reason his businesses in Singapore and Bali have been so successful.

After we had completed the main shoot, Silvio changed into his traditional Brazilian clothes for a few Capoeira photos. He began playing the Berimbau and after a few minutes, he started to sing. His voice was so gentle I stopped taking photos and just listened for a few moments. It was mesmerising. Was this the same man who, a few minutes ago, had been looking down my lens as if he wanted to thump me?





Sherry Dixon  
747-400 Airline Pilot  
Years in Singapore: 4

*"I miss having four seasons in a year and taking long, relaxed walks through the woods."*

Sherry was another lucky find for this project. There can't be many female Luxembourg 747 pilots of Indian parentage around the world! When we met, Sherry was a whirlwind. She jumped in my car at 7 o'clock in the morning and was full of energy and very chatty. She was dressed in her stylish pilot's uniform and wore a pair of Doc Marten's boots with huge heels which she told me helped her reach the controls when she was flying. She's really not very tall but the combination of uniform and boots gave her some genuine presence.

I chose the former barracks at Loewen Road as a location for this shoot because of the stylish colonnades, which I hoped would create some nice depth in the portrait. The white columns also meant that Sherry, in her dark uniform, stood out from the background. Sherry told me that she had done some modelling in the past and she obviously knew how to pose. However, I wanted a more natural look and so was pleased when I managed to catch this moment as she was putting on her hat. I love her confident expression with just the hint of a smile.

**Luxembourg**

# Singapore

/  
 Geraldene Lowe-Ismail  
 Tour Guide  
 Years in Singapore: 77



Geraldene refers to herself as a Singapore Sling; a cocktail of Singapore's religions and nationalities. Her parents were Eurasian, with Russian, Chinese, Danish and Palestinian heritage. She also calls herself a Peranakan: a descendant of Chinese immigrants to Singapore who embraced Malay, European, Indian, and Arab cultures. Geraldene is also of a religious mix, having been born Christian and converted to Islam when she married her husband, Ismail, in 1968.

As well as being a suitable representative of the international flavour of Singapore residents, Geraldene has a wider interest in this project due to her incredible historical knowledge of the expatriate community in Singapore. She was one of the country's first tour guides and in 2014, she was awarded a Tourism Lifetime Award by the Prime Minister for over 50 years of service to Singapore tourism. Geraldene still conducts tours today at the age of 77, continuing to delight tourists and locals alike with her wonderful anecdotes about past expat residents.

I am delighted that Geraldene agreed to be part of this project. She loves her country and is a passionate Singaporean, but she also represents the confluence of nationalities who have trod the ground of Singapore and left their mark on its culture.



/  
 Nadia Boychuk Bremner  
 Entrepreneur / Jewellery Seller  
 Years in Singapore: 3

*"I miss Ukraine's traditions which we keep from over 100 years ago. Ukraine is still very spiritual. But now my country is fighting in the war for its unity and independence."*

When I photographed Nadia, her home country, Ukraine, was being torn apart after a year of bitter civil war. She was keen for the portrait to reflect her concerns about her homeland. Here she sits, in national dress, thinking about family and friends back home, hoping they are not being affected by the conflict. While Singapore feels safe and secure, many expatriates live with anxiety, worrying about friends and family in their home countries.

To create this sombre atmosphere on Nadia's bright roof terrace was not easy. First, I seated her at this rustic-looking table which worked well with her national dress. Then I cranked up the shutter to speed to shoot an incredibly fast exposure. Finally, I had to carefully adjust the flash so that it just threw a small amount of light onto Nadia's face and did not overexpose the scene around her.

**Ukraine**





Tom Soper began his professional photography career when he moved to Singapore in 2010. During his five years in Singapore, Tom worked with a wide range of clients from global corporations to families to school. Alongside commercial assignments, Tom enjoys working on personal projects, including volunteering his skills to NGOs—a career highlight was to photograph Aung San Suu Kyi at the Special Olympics Winter Games in Korea.

Tom has been commissioned by *National Geographic Traveller Magazine* and his photographs of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in Singapore were widely published across the world. He has been a finalist in several competitions including *Travel Photographer of the Year 2014* and *BBC Travel Photographer of the Year*.

Tom now lives in the UK where he continues to strive to improve as a photographer. He is currently shooting a project, *The Landscapes of East Anglia*.

As well as photography, Tom's other passions include running marathons and spending time with his son Sam and his wife, Lizzi, a teacher.

Website: <http://tomsoperphotography.com>