

Book review: Ronald McCrum: The Men Who Lost Singapore, 1938-1942. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. ISBN 978-981-4722-39-1

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Discussing such concerns would have strengthened the atlas as a resource for policy makers and researchers who would have been able to gain a clearer understanding of the reliability of the data. Even if the authors had ultimately chosen to defend the controversial census data, their arguments could have provided valuable insights for readers. The absence of a discourse on these themes leaves the atlas vulnerable to criticism. Critics of the 2014 census, for example, might disregard non-related findings in the atlas simply because of the book's association with it. This is extremely unfortunate, especially since publications like this atlas are rare and much needed. Nonetheless, the atlas also has the potential to spark new debates on data gathering in Myanmar and will provide a basis for the further exploration of the themes it contains, thus likely inspiring a new wave of interesting research.

Richard Roewer

RONALD McCrum, *The Men Who Lost Singapore, 1938–1942*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Xv, 265 pages, \$36.00 SGD. ISBN 978-981-4722-39-14

The Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore – famously styled “Britain’s worst disaster” by Churchill – has been analysed and re-assessed on so many occasions that we now have a small library on the subject. So can anything new be said about this military debacle and subsequent human catastrophe? Ronald McCrum’s answer is to the affirmative, as he points to the role of the civil administrators and their difficult relationship with the military commanders and advisers sent in to defend the island. For his study (a remake of his 2014 MPhil thesis from SOAS, London), McCrum has singled out four leading British figures as “the men who lost Singapore”: Governor Shenton Thomas; Commander-in-Chief Robert Brooke-Popham; Admiral Geoffrey Layton of the Royal Navy; and Alfred Duff Cooper, who had been sent to Singapore to mediate between the civilian and the military “camps” but ended up chairing the island’s War Council.

As McCrum shows, it wasn’t the number of cooks as such that spoiled the broth but rather a general lack of coordination and communication – often resulting from the assumption that someone else would make necessary decisions and take action – that led to the collapse of the “impregnable fortress”. McCrum positions the agency of his four protagonists, both by action and default, in a broadly chronological framework spanning from 1937 (when the war in Asia began) to the fall of Singapore in March 1942. Much of his analysis focuses on the individual errors of judgement and misconceptions concerning the events that unfolded before them, while at the same time he acknowl-

edges that circumstances – the situation in which these errors were committed – did change constantly and hence impacted heavily upon individual agency.

This gave McCrum's four protagonists little space to get it right, as Governor Thomas's journey to Kuala Lumpur in December 1941 nicely illustrates. On the one hand, McCrum acknowledges the trip as a "brave and noble gesture" (obviously sending a signal home that the situation was under control), while on the other he blames Thomas for his soothing radio message to Singapore, which according to McCrum illustrates that Thomas was underestimating the severity of the situation (pp. 50–52). But what would his alternatives have been? Not to travel to Kuala Lumpur would have indicated that it was no longer safe to travel to Malaya, whereas revealing the real situation over the wireless would have undermined the image of the "impregnable fortress" (battered by Japanese airstrikes as it was from December 1941) and could have sparked a panic among the inhabitants of the city.

This latter possibility deserves rather more attention than McCrum was willing to pay to it. The widespread perception (or rather misconception) of Singapore as being able to withstand a siege or attack was a set-piece of British military planning on all levels, notably of the London War Cabinet. And with Churchill being more concerned about the defence of Britain and the situation in Europe than with the war in the Far East, Singapore as much as any other part of the Empire became a pawn to be sacrificed for the benefit of a greater good, the defeat of Hitler. Above all, it also has become clear in the meantime that the Japanese commanders in charge of the conquest of Singapore had a comprehensive plan to achieve their aim. It built on their naval and aerial superiority in the region to allow for a rapid advance of the land-based troops through Malaya; and not least they were familiar with Singapore's weaknesses, notably the city's limited food and water supplies, the destruction of which, they knew, would make a swift surrender likely.

Omission of such wider contextualisation or "structures" more generally limits the value of McCrum's assessments to a certain extent, and the value of the book is further lessened by the lack of care taken with regard to factual matters or diligence in general. Admiral Layton comes without a first name in the text or the index (that his name was Geoffrey can be found only in the small print on the flyleaf), and the index misses several page numbers for some entries. Added to this are misleading statements such as the suggestion that the Allied powers resorted to overland aid for the Chinese government after the Japanese invasion of China in May 1937. This refers to the Burma Road, which linked Rangoon through Lashio and northeast Burma to Chiang Kai-shek's new capital Chungking. In May 1937, however, this overland connection was a vision rather than a passable road – one that would not become operational until late 1938.

A final notable omission is that of Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, the GCO who had been put in charge of defending the city (in April 1941), but ended up having to sign the instrument of surrender. His role in the defeat made him a perfect scapegoat in the eyes of the British public, the general staff in London and not least Churchill himself, despite attempts (including his own) to clear his name. If the omission of Percival, and the contemporary and later historiographic controversy surrounding him, wasn't caused by the limitation of space alone (keeping in mind that the book started off as a master's dissertation), McCrum has missed a golden opportunity to make his research relevant to a wider debate. Only when read in this light can McCrum's work be seen as a useful addition to the debate about why Singapore fell; otherwise it lacks a certain degree of comprehension and depth.

Tilman Frasch

CATHERINE SMITH (ed.), *Resilience and the Localisation of Trauma in Aceh, Indonesia*. (ASAA Southeast Asia Publication Series). Singapore: National University of Singapore Press / Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018. Xii, 178 pages, SGD 38.00 / USD 25.55. ISBN 9788776942328 (pb)

Catherine Smith, an anthropologist, achieves something quite rare in the globalised and often entrenched debate on trauma and resilience: in her dense and vivid ethnography she depicts the quest of the local population of Aceh in Indonesia to understand and give some meaning to transgenerational suffering as a consequence of protracted political conflict. Even though the idiom of trauma has entered the medico-moral landscape of Aceh, its decades-long isolation has left the region less affected than other regions by the globalisation of psychiatry and consequent spread of standardised trauma therapies of Western origin. Smith's research focuses on ordinary citizens affected by the separatist conflict (1975 to 2005) between the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) and the security forces of the Indonesian government. Particularly in the North almost 80 per cent of the population was affected and accused of taking one side or the other. Villagers became victims of shootings, torture, threat, extortion and the burning of houses. Many suffered multiple traumas, as the region was also hit by the tsunami in December 2004, which caused more than 160,000 deaths in Aceh alone and destroyed large parts of the infrastructure.

The author draws her findings mostly from an intensive qualitative field study spanning a total of 17 months in 2008 and 2009, mostly in the northern parts of the country. The author arrived for her field research at a time of hope for a peaceful and more economically stable Aceh, almost four years after the tsunami and the