

Correspondence

Brief notes on K.G. Tregonning's "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist"

[Miss Agnes Tan, the daughter of the late Tan Cheng Lock, wrote to us on 4 March 1980 giving her views on some points raised in K.G. Tregonning's article on her father. The page references given below refer to the text of the article published in this Journal, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979) :25-76.]

- P. 51 Ahmad Boestaman did not receive help for legal expenses from Tan Cheng Lock.
- P. 57 Hostility between Malays and Chinese did not break out during the Emergency. The Emergency was not a Chinese attempt to capture Malaya but was the result of Communist insurrection. The Communists as always utilized the aspiration of independence in colonial regimes to gain the support of the people. The "Chinese were isolated, hated, suspected and feared" by the Colonial Government and not the people, since it was mainly the Chinese who were killed and who suffered the greatest hardships as a result of the emergency. They lost their homes when they were moved to new villages; they lost their lives and their loved ones. The squatter market gardeners even lost their livelihood. The poor tappers or villagers in remote areas were threatened and lived in terror of their lives if they did not help the terrorists by supplying them with food. If they did, they would be punished by the police or government. They were between the devil and the deep blue sea. Many were deported as a result, until Tan Cheng Lock through the MCA at long last persuaded the government to resettle them in protected new villages, where they could not be reached by the Communists.
- P. 58 There was hardly any inter-racial ill-will in the past. In the historical town of Malacca there was Temple Street where could be found a Malay mosque, an Indian temple, and a Chinese temple side by side, and the respective worshippers worshipped and practised their respective religions side by side amicably without hatred, malice, or disrespect for the other religions. They were so tolerant of each other that the Malays allowed the Chinese to sell pork outside their mosques when the pig, and consequently pork, is considered unclean by every Malay.
- P. 61 In 1952 when the Communists threw a hand-grenade at Tan Cheng Lock in Ipoh, Perak, to remove him from the country, as he had rallied the Chinese to support the government, he was undaunted and undeterred in his fight against the Communists. As soon as he was out of hospital he went throughout the length and breadth of the Malayan Peninsula to speak in rallies to unite the Chinese as well as the other races into one nation, one government, and one country. In spite of the appeals of his wife to retire and desist in politicking, he went everywhere in the remote countryside to help all those in trouble and in need of help to win them over.
- P. 75 His accident and illness occurred in 1956.

[The Rt. Hon. Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia from 1948 to 1955, wrote to Miss Agnes Tan on 4 April 1980 commenting on the article. Reproduced below are relevant portions of this correspondence.]

I have read with very keen interest the article which you sent me about your father. I think that in general it presents him very well as a far-seeing leader of the Malayan people in general and the Malayan (including the "Straits-born") Chinese in particular throughout a very historic period. Indeed, it shows him as perhaps the most wisely prophetic statesman of his time about the independent Malayan nation-to-be. I agree with you that it does not bring out strongly, though, that he was not only a prophet about that great event but also one of its principal creators in practice.

In my own draft of a chapter about Southeast Asia in a book of memories that I am writing, I have described how he and Dato Onn were more responsible than any other Malayan leaders, or the British authorities, for establishing a friendly cooperative partnership between the peoples of different racial communities in Malaya — without which a harmoniously united independent Malayan nation could never have come into existence. They did this largely through the two years when the Communities Liaison Committee was holding its meetings in 1949 and 1950. One reason why your father's great and vitally important part in all this is not fully understood and appreciated today is that the Committee was not an official body but an unofficial group of the political leaders of all the different racial communities in Malaya (plus myself and, occasionally, one or two Singapore Chinese) who met informally. Their discussions covered political, economic, and other related relations between the different communities, and the unanimous agreements that they reached formed the basis for the constitution of the independent Malaya which emerged a few years later. But the minutes of their meetings are not in the official documentary records, and perhaps Tregonning, like other researchers, was not able to read them (I could not get them to read when I was in the National Archives in Petaling Jaya about two years ago — the Archives did not possess them then; I hope that they do now). I very greatly admired the ability, courage, and wisdom which your father showed in all this work, and also felt deep affection for him as a charmingly friendly personality.

You write that "the second part" of Tregonning's article contains a lot of "misinformation and inaccuracies". I presume that this refers to the second section headed "Politics and Administration". This deals with the period from 1912 until the Second World War. I was not in Malaya at all until 1946–55; so I do not know at first hand about events through that earlier time.