

THE MALAYAN LIFE OF FERDACH O'HANEY

Frederick Lees was born in 1924. He served in the RAF during the war and afterwards studied at Liverpool and London universities. He then joined the Malayan Civil Service and held posts ranging from District Officer through State Secretariat duties to Emergency work on the Director of Operations staff. His last position was Secretary of the Election Commission. Lees' most memorable moment in Malaya was his rousing call of 'Merdeka!' at the conclusion of Malaysia's Declaration of Independence ceremony on 31 August 1957 after Syed Jaafar Albar – who had been asked by Tunku Abdul Rahman to lead the crowd in cheers of 'Merdeka' as the dignitaries left the stage – lost his voice after the first two proclamations. Lees, who was sitting with Syed Jaafar in the control box of the newly erected Stadium Merdeka, stepped up to the microphone to save the day.

Lees returned to Southeast Asia in the British Diplomatic Service and worked in Singapore. In the 1970s he became involved in the work of British and European non-governmental organizations concerned with Third World development. This took him to Ethiopia and the Sudan. Later he returned to diplomatic work to train the foreign service of Papua New Guinea. The last part of his career was spent in the Asian Development Bank in Manila.

His first novel, *Annals of the Purple City*, inspired by a sojourn in Macau where he studied Chinese, was published in 1995. In the following year he published a widely praised historical novel, *The Arthuriad of Catumandus*. He is married, has two sons, and now lives in England in a little Sussex town about which he recently published a novel, *The Rape of Rye*.

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FREDERICK LEES



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Frontcover photo: Cricket pitch at Government House (1950).

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Backcover photo: Police talk to an old Chinese man who may have information about communist terrorists (1949). Image©Hulton

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To Marie Lees

I

In spite of his father's Irish nationalism and the subversive fact that, eighty-two years earlier, his grandfather had been in a Fenian plot to blow up Chester Castle, Ferdach O'Haney joined the British Colonial Service in 1949. Like so much else in his life, the step was something of an accident. At no point before, during or after World War II – in which he had fought because he carried a British passport – had he really considered what he wanted to do in life. With no desire for power or making a lot of money, but much addicted to pleasure, he had naturally enjoyed being a student. So, once he had got his degree – a First in History – the only path that appealed to him was that of postgraduate study. He just wanted to stay put; study had never made great demands on him and was no obstacle to having a good time. At heart he was a drifter though in no feckless sense. Perhaps best described as an intellectual dilettante, he enjoyed the present, he loved the past, but he drifted into the future looking backwards.

Because of his academic results, he was cocksure that a fellowship would be offered to him, though, to encourage this, he had shamelessly ingratiated himself with members of the academic staff, both male and female, several of whom already perceived him as a desirable addition to their ranks and sometimes to their beds. The eminent historian Geoffrey Barraclough once prophesied that he would end up as an eccentric old professor of early medieval history. Ferdach could think of many a worse fate.

But one morning, at breakfast, before any firm academic offer had been received, his mother glanced at him over the top of *The Times* and said, as though talking to herself, 'I wonder how Ferdie would get on if

he applied for this?’

Accustomed to his mother’s third-party form of address, Ferdach immediately replied, ‘Now what in the world would he be applying for?’

‘His Majesty’s Colonial Service,’ his mother replied with a disarming smile.

‘The Colonial Service,’ Ferdach repeated in amazement for the idea of such a career had never entered his brain. ‘Me, an Irish patriot, in the service of the Crown?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs O’Haney, with reserved English calm. ‘For service in Malaya.’

At this Ferdach thought his mother must, for a regular *Times* reader, be suffering from some obscure form of amnesia. Didn’t she know there was a communist rebellion in Malaya – an unpleasant guerrilla war? Did she want him to risk his life again? After four years in the RAF, bombing Germans and once being obliged to crash land in flames, he wanted no more of war. She must think he was an inveterate fighter like his father who, being also a man of conflicting convictions, had contrived to serve both the Irish revolution and the Crown. But before he could dismiss the idea his mother, who in many ways knew Ferdach’s needs better than he did, continued enticingly, ‘And candidates who want to learn Chinese will go to Macau for language study.’

In that instant, incredible though it may seem, Ferdach’s mind was made up. Europe apart, the Far East was an area of the world about which he had always indulged in the most romantic speculations, though speculations they seemed likely to remain for he had never identified any way of realising them. But in life as in love a good chance should be seized. Macau, China, journeys to marvellous cities, mountains floating above expanses of white mist, living among and learning to love fascinating people, mastery of an ancient culture through its language, quickly formed a glorious kaleidoscope of ideas in his brain. One of those irresistible impulses with which he was all too familiar was bubbling up in his mind like volcanic magma below a calm plain; one that did not require rational decision but acceptance. It was as though some inner being was compensating for his conscious lack of purpose. So it was that the following day he responded to the advert and not more than six weeks later, after a number of exams and interviews, he found himself in

a long dark-panelled room in the Colonial Office nervously approaching seven elderly gentlemen seated on a raised dais behind a horseshoe table.

He was cunning enough to know that he must show this clutch of former colonial governors that he was the right material. And he was a good actor. To their initial questions, which were ordinary enough, he gave crisp and to-the-point replies, succinctly outlining his background, his interests, his conservative views on most of the important things in life, and, of course, his sporting activities, about which he lied even more for he hated physical exertions unless they were amorous. At length came the crunch when a small and rather emaciated bald gentleman, through whose features the skull seemed almost visible, asked in precise Scottish tones, ‘Now what, Mr O’Haney, would you say was the primary duty of a Colonial Service officer?’

Seated at a lower level, Ferdach shot up at him a gaze that was at once sincere, piercing and, strange to relate, compounded with affection, and said in terms equally precise, though not Scottish, ‘To maintain law and order, sir.’

There was an almost imperceptible, but nevertheless quite distinct, murmur of approval from the other members of the mystical panel; seven pairs of old eyes seemed to light up at the sight of this handsome, well-groomed young man, who would carry forward the imperial sword of destiny which each of them had, in his own youth, taken up. In that moment Ferdach said to himself, ‘I’m in Ferdie, dear boy. I’m in.’

On the first day of the course at London University designed to familiarize recruits with their future life, their supervisor of studies, a Mr Eliot, began his welcome address by saying, ‘Gentlemen, you have entered this service to work yourselves out of a job.’

This did not come as a shock to Ferdach. In the years leading up to the war, he had already been seduced by the left-wing apostles, Auden and Spender, Laski and Orwell, the gullible Hewlett Johnson and the progressive rest. He had even, when at the university, joined the Communist Party and studied the dialectics of this, that and the other in the rather dirty Liverpool branch, complete with unwashed spittoons, of the Boiler Workers Union. Although he had left the party sometime during his time in the RAF, he was still very much of the left and he knew which way the wind was blowing. And sharing the anti

imperialist sentiments of his father, it didn't worry him a jot. But he was amazed that such a prescient statement should trip so lightly from the mouth of the man appointed to monitor and maybe spy on them during their year of study. However, the expressions on the faces of the thirty or so rather serious young men around him hardly suggested that the words had jolted their view of the world. They were upright, loyal to the Crown and, apparently, the epitome of Dr Arnold's Christian men, who anticipated a lifetime of undiluted colonial authority and honest work ahead of them in places ranging from deepest Africa to the far Pacific. Unlikely that they would be persuaded otherwise by some none-too-senior liberal-minded functionary – perhaps a misfit unsuited for duty overseas – from the Colonial Office.

Their studies embraced the anthropology, economics and history of the territories to which they were to be posted. There were also language studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where Ferdach had his introduction to the Cantonese dialect of Chinese. Unfortunately, the far from inscrutable staff in the Chinese Department seemed unable to agree on teaching methods; bitter feuds raged over varied forms of romanization, so that the instruction, using conflicting systems, was pretty useless as Ferdach discovered when he eventually reached Ipoh, a prosperous mining town in the north Malayan state of Perak. There, although Cantonese was the lingua franca among the Chinese, Ferdach's knowledge of it on arrival turned out to be less than minimal. In fact, it would have been better if all of the young men destined for Malaya had been taught some Malay, a simple version of which was commonly understood by the majority of Malaya's inhabitants, regardless of race.

Chinese apart, the other subjects to be studied were not unfamiliar to well-read Ferdach, who quickly slipped into the habit of cutting many of the lectures. This gave him the opportunity to immerse himself for a while in the world of Fitzrovia, which he soon discovered from his dingy digs in Little Russell Street. In five minutes he could be in Charlotte Street or Rathbone Place, with their exciting pubs – the Fitzroy Tavern, the Marquis of Granby, the Wheatsheaf and the Black Horse – frequented in those days by a varied assortment of artists, actors and writers, easy women, servicemen looking to be picked up, and an extraordinary variety of dropouts. Across Oxford Street were slightly, but only slightly, more

salubrious haunts: the Gargoyle, Berlemont's French pub, the Mandrake Club, the Colony Room. In these places the literary and artistic company was amusing, occasionally brilliant but invariably inebriated. He had stumbled into the heyday of postwar Fitzrovia in which sexuality, a subject of great concern to lusty young Ferdach, was even freer than it had been during the war years. He threw himself into that life with gusto.

Truth to tell, Ferdach was sometimes inclined to abandon his intended career. Not just because of the temptations of London but because of the stuffiness of some of his fellow students. Could he really fit into their kind of colonial society? He could see merit in their seriousness and their honesty and he came, almost against his will, to see merit in much that he learned about British rule in the colonies. But there was his other self that stood aghast at their self-satisfied belief in the English right to rule. They gloried in the obverse side of the coin and forgot the reverse of which he, with his Irish blood, was well aware. Maybe if he had fallen in love at that time with one of the women with whom he had affairs, he would have strayed from his chosen path. But he did not; none of the women captivated him sufficiently. None held sway for more than a few weeks, some only for a night. However, in his last academic term he was taken up by a film director who, fascinated by Ferdach's melancholy good looks and that slim young body always given generously if somewhat casually, wanted him to take a substantial part in a film on Modigliani he was making provided, of course, that Ferdach moved into his Belgravia flat on a permanent basis. What young man wouldn't be tempted by a film career? Before long he too might possess just as luxurious a flat as the director's where he had begun to spend more time than he should, though so far without commitment.

Late one hot and sunny morning, Ferdach woke up there alone in bed to find his naked body being sketched by an almost legendary Fitzrovia artist, Nina Hamnett, whom his film suitor, as part of his research for his Modigliani masterpiece, was cultivating ... for as long as she could come up with useful information. It being morning she was not yet sozzled on gin. He asked her what she thought of the director's offer. She went on sketching, then turned to look at him intently before saying, 'Pity you haven't got big muscles – apart from that monster. I love men with muscles. They make better models. I'm always glad when Ross brings

back his guardsmen. They're his real cup of tea. Real thickheads. He must have had a brigade of them. Yes, I've always liked his guardsmen.'

Ferdach knew what she was telling him but he wanted her to be more explicit, not giving him an ambiguous warning like some ancient oracle. He had always been aware of the sadness that seemed to exude from Nina's frail body belying both her bravado and her strident contempt for convention, but he knew that the sadness was combined with wisdom born of pain. He asked her again first with his eyes, then with, 'Ross says I look like Modigliani. And I can act Nina.'

She put down her charcoal deliberately. 'Maybe so, but don't accept it. Ross is an exploiter. Don't listen to him – especially when he tells you what a fool you are to leave this country. No, get out of the bloody place while you can. I've observed you closely. You're an original, not a copy. Acting's not for you.' Her voice became unusually grave. 'I've had a good life Ferdie, no, not good, not good at all ... an exciting life. Once I knew everyone who mattered.' As was her wont, she reeled off names: Sickert, Roger Fry, the Sitwells, Augustus John, as well as many people she knew in Paris for she was an ardent Francophile; Ferdach knew about Cocteau, Picasso and Gaudier-Brzeska but there were others he had never heard of. 'But look at me now. Finished, a ghastly wreck. People tell me I stink. And where are the marvellous men I put before my talent? My artists, my sailors, my boxers? Nowhere, nowhere at all. I tried to live through them. I used them as my mirror but never saw myself. No darling, you'll have a better life in the East. Get out. This country is a shithouse.'

'Well it won't be before too long. Now there's a Labour government, we'll see great changes. We'll see—'

Nina gave a peculiarly throaty snort. 'Do you know one of the very first things Clem Attlee did when he got to Number 10? He rang up his old school to tell them an Old Haileyburian was now prime minister of England. Doesn't augur well for classless education does it?'

'It's probably a fairy tale. Anyway, change takes time,' Ferdach temporized uncertainly, remembering that day when he had given an extremely left-wing speech to a hangarfull of RAF guys at a mock election organized by the commanding officer at RAF Swinderby as flying had been cancelled due to bad weather. He had won by a resounding majority. It had been a harbinger of the great Labour victory a few weeks

later. No, things really were going to change. People wanted change.

Nina had come over to him and was staring down at him as if he were some sort of odd biological specimen, which of course as a human being he was. 'No, my pretty boy,' she said stroking his hair and then, more delicately, his cock, before returning to her work, 'it's no fairy tale. It's true. But you can just take it as a metaphor if you like. That way it has more meaning. Things will change for sure. There'll be more bread and lots more circuses. And they'll probably let the masses behave as wantonly as us in time. Anything to keep them in their place once religion's gone phut. But fundamentally things will be the same. The top drawer will stay in place, only the muck in it will change, for the worse. So, not being rich, if you want a good life, get out. And here's some really practical advice: always go to places where it's never cold. Oh, the cold of London and Paris in the winter! Now get up. Get dressed. Let's go to the Café Royal. You can buy me a foxy gin. I don't want to use my begging tin today.'

As usual, Ferdach was happy to go with her. She might look a sight but she was generous minded and gay in the true sense of the word; and when necessary she could talk wisely. He was influenced by her greatly both in taste and in outlook. She was a model for the sort of woman he would admire: not one concerned with money, social position or breeding, but a woman who loved passionately and with complete freedom wherever she chose. She could tell marvellous stories; she could make people laugh; she thought boldly and she could be outrageous. One night she went into the Black Horse and shouted to all the writers, artists and soldiers gathered there: 'Darlings, I've had the change of life and I can fuck and fuck and fuck.' Some wag replied: 'But Nina you always have.' Her coarseness might make her anathema to respectable men and decent women yet her sensitive intelligence helped Ferdach to understand an earlier, more brilliant, world – the London and, above all, the Paris of the first decades of the century when all that was to become fashionable and allegedly new towards its end had first been experimented with without being didactic or under the false impression that it was breaking new ground.