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PHILIP GEORGE

Our Man in Tuscany,

Malayan-born English Writer, Lawyer, Traveller and Sportsman

THE SELANGOR RAINFOREST NEVER LEFT ME The Identities Of A Plantation Boy From Tuscany

The author carries Kerala within him through his parents and grandparents. He carries Malaya through childhood, Britain through education and professional life. He now inhabits Italy both physically and emotionally. Rather than competing identities, they feel like layers of one long conversation.

Before Malaysia had skyscrapers, before Putrajaya, before budget airlines stitched Asia together and before globalisation became a fashionable word, my world was bounded by rubber trees and rainforest.

At dawn in Prang Besar Estate, in the Ulu Langat district of Selangor, I would lie beneath a scratchy *kambli* blanket reluctant to leave its warmth. Through the misted windows of our bungalow came the sounds that marked the beginning of another day: cockerels announcing the first light, labourers calling to one another in the distance, and my mother moving quietly in the kitchen. Sometimes the smell of percolat-

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ing coffee would drift into the room before I opened my eyes.

My father, K.P. George, would already be preparing for his rounds as field conductor of the estate. Sweater, muffler, knee length socks, rubber shoes. Before most of us children were awake, he would be heading out to supervise hundreds of workers spread across more than two thousand acres of rubber trees.

Beyond the neat rows of plantation rubber stood Limau Manis, a vast rainforest pressing against the edges of our ordered world. I did not know it then that forest would become the deepest influence of my childhood. Looking back today from a small mountain village in Tuscany, more than half a century later, it is not the buildings or roads I remember most vividly. It is the forest.

I was born in Malaya in 1952, five years before independence. My parents had come from Kerala, part of a generation of Malayali migrants who crossed the Bay of Bengal seeking opportunity. My father arrived in Malaya in 1935 as a teenager with little more than determination and ambition. Through hard work and force of personality he rose through the plantation hierarchy, eventually becoming a respected conductor.

The Memory of Merdeka

Like many migrants of his generation, he belonged fully to neither place. His roots remained in Kerala, but his life was built in Malaya. Looking back, I suspect that tension between inherited homeland and adopted homeland was passed on to me and became one of the recurring themes of my life.

My earliest memories coincide with the birth of a nation. As August 31, 1957 approached, the adults around me seemed consumed by one subject: Merdeka. Independence. Everywhere people spoke of negotiations, citizenship, and the uncertain future of a newly forming

country. The Malayan Emergency still lingered in the background, a quiet shadow of communist insurgency in the forests, shaping the atmosphere even when not spoken of directly.

I was only five years old. Politics meant little to me. Yet one memory remains crystal clear. On the evening of August 30, 1957, my father, his Chinese assistant known to everyone as Lucky Strike Tan, and I travelled into Kuala Lumpur. My father wore a dark suit and smelled of Brylcreem and Old Spice. My mother scrubbed me with Chandrika soap and dressed me in new clothes as if I too had an official role to play in history.

We joined streams of people moving towards what is now Dataran Merdeka. What remains with me is not the ceremony itself but the crowd. Until then, I had never seen so many different people gathered together. Malays in traditional attire, Chinese families in elegant dress, Indians in saris and Western clothes, rich and poor, young and old. All smiling. All hopeful.

As midnight approached and Tunku Abdul Rahman stood before the crowd, I sensed, even as a child, that something larger than politics was taking place. A nation was attempting to imagine itself into existence. In the background, beneath the celebration, there was also awareness of the Emergency, of soldiers, rubber tappers vulnerable on remote paths, and the fragile line between peace and violence that shaped everyday life on estates like ours.

Many decades later, when discussions of race, identity and multiculturalism often become abstract and contentious, I still return to that memory. Before such matters became academic debates, I witnessed a simple human reality: people from different backgrounds genuinely believing they could build something together, even while carrying very different histories into that shared moment.

Back in Prang Besar, celebrations continued long into the night. The temple bell rang, prayers were offered, biryani and payasam were shared, and films arrived from Kuala Lumpur in a van carrying two enormous projectors. For the adults, it was independence. For me, another liberation was underway. I wanted a badminton racket.

My father considered me too young for a proper one. So I made my own from discarded wood salvaged from an old milk crate. Lacking shuttlecocks, I fashioned rubber balls from scraps of latex. Armed with this primitive invention, I spent hours hitting against walls, imagining myself as the great Malaysian badminton champion, Eddy Choong. The homemade racket became my first act of self determination.

A Mini-Asia Divided By Class And Race

Yet the estate itself was perhaps the greatest teacher. Looking back, Prang Besar was a miniature Asia. The British managers occupied large bungalows on commanding hills. Assistant managers lived below them. Conductors, clerks and supervisors occupied more modest homes. Further down stood the labour lines where hundreds of Tamil families lived.

Malay villages dotted the surrounding landscape. Chinese clerks managed records and commercial affairs. Gurkha guards watched over the compounds. Occasionally Orang Asli hunters emerged from the forests beyond. This was not an abstract multiculturalism. It was a daily, lived proximity of difference, shaped by hierarchy, necessity, and survival rather than theory.

The estate possessed invisible boundaries. The British maintained social distance through architecture, privilege and ritual. Their compounds contained tennis courts, manicured lawns, servants and pedigree dogs. Their children attended different schools. We rarely

interacted with them. The labour lines were also considered off limits. Naturally, I was drawn there.

The labour settlement possessed a life entirely its own. Chickens wandered freely. Goats and cattle responded to familiar voices. Radios competed with one another. Babies slept in cloth hammocks suspended from rafters. The air carried the scent of woodsmoke, curry, jasmine and livestock. The Tamil boys fascinated me. Many were physically tougher than I was. Their stories were filled with snakes, wild animals, jungle adventures and hard work. Sitting on overturned latex buckets, eating tapioca and sardines cooked with onions and spices, I listened to tales that made my own world seem tame. The Malayan Emergency occasionally surfaced in adult conversation, reminding everyone that the surrounding forest was not only beautiful but also a politically charged space where different groups moved invisibly through terrain we were taught to fear.

At the time, I simply enjoyed their company. Years later, arriving in England as a young immigrant with twenty pounds in my pocket, I realised how much I had absorbed from them. Their resilience, humour and refusal to complain had quietly prepared me for challenges yet to come.

Encounter With Orang Asli

Yet if Prang Besar was my classroom, Limau Manis was my university. The forest began where the plantation ended. Adults warned us repeatedly not to enter it. Naturally, this made it irresistible. On Saturday mornings, my friends and I would organise expeditions. A woodpecker call served as our secret signal. Once assembled with bicycles and questionable judgement, we headed towards the rainforest.

The journey itself felt like entering another realm. The ordered geometry of rubber cultivation gradually gave way to untamed abundance. Giant trees disappeared into the canopy. Vines hung like ropes. Strange cries echoed from unseen creatures. Streams rushed over rocks. The air itself felt different. We explored, swam, climbed, swung from vines and searched hopefully for elephants and tigers, neither of which ever appeared.

What did appear one day changed me. My friends had stopped near the edge of a thicker section of forest. Curiosity pulled me onward alone. A rustle came from nearby undergrowth. Then a figure emerged. He was lean, brown skinned, carrying a blowpipe and arrows. He seemed less a visitor to the forest than an extension of it.

For a moment neither of us spoke. He looked directly at me, not with hostility but with a calm awareness that made me feel suddenly conscious of my own place in the world. I was a child of the plantation. He belonged to something older. He nodded. I nodded. Then he disappeared back into the forest. The encounter lasted only seconds but has remained with me for more than sixty years.

Only later did I understand why. In that brief exchange I sensed, perhaps for the first time, that there were worlds beyond the ones adults had constructed. Before the estate, before colonial boundaries, before roads and plantations and politics, there existed an older relationship between people and landscape. The Orang Asli man belonged to that older world. The encounter never left me, nor did the forest itself.

As children, we believed our surroundings would last forever. Of course they did not. Development arrived. Malaysia modernised. Rubber estates gave way to new priorities. Roads widened. Forests retreated. New cities emerged. The Malayan landscape that had carried the memory of the Emergency and the plantation economy slowly transformed into

something more urban, more planned, and more detached from the world I had known.

Many years later I returned to Prang Besar. The place of my childhood had changed almost beyond recognition. The rubber trees that had shaped my father's working life were disappearing. Landscapes that once seemed permanent had become temporary. I was fortunate to make one final visit to Limau Manis before bulldozers transformed the region and Putrajaya emerged as Malaysia's administrative capital. Standing there, I understood that I was saying goodbye not merely to a place but to an era.

The Passage Of Identities

Today I write these reflections from Tuscany, in the Garfagnana hills, beneath landscapes once shaped by Etruscan and Roman worlds Tuscany. The journey from a rubber estate in Selangor to a stone village in Italy was not one I could possibly have imagined as a barefoot boy cycling through rainforest tracks.

Between those worlds lay England, nursing, banking, law, family, friendship, triumphs, failures, and the ordinary passage of decades. Yet age has a curious effect. Instead of simplifying identity, it often complicates it. Am I Indian? Malaysian? British? Something else? The older I become, the less useful such categories seem.

I carry Kerala within me through my parents and grandparents. I carry Malaya through childhood. I carry Britain through education and professional life. I now inhabit Italy both physically and emotionally. Rather than competing identities, they feel like layers of one long conversation.

Perhaps that is why I feel increasingly grateful for having grown up in the Malaya of the 1950s and 1960s. Before I understood politics, I

encountered diversity as everyday life. Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Orang Asli, British and others were not sociological categories. They were neighbours, colleagues, teachers, friends and occasionally adversaries. The experience left me with a lasting suspicion of simplistic narratives. Human beings are always more complicated than the labels attached to them.

From my terrace in Tuscany, I sometimes think of those misty mornings in Prang Besar. The estate is gone. Much of the forest is gone. Many of the people who populated that world have passed away. Yet memory has a stubborn habit of resisting bulldozers. The older I become, the less I see my life as a journey from East to West. It feels more like a gathering together of worlds: a Dravidian inheritance from Kerala, a Malayan childhood among Malays, Chinese and Indians, an English education and professional life, and now an Italian horizon beneath Etruscan shadows. The rainforest never left me. Its voice still whispers beneath all the others.

Note on the Author

Philip George is a solicitor, cross-border jurisdiction lawyer, former international sportsman, writer, and global traveller. Born in Malaya and educated in England, he has spent five decades navigating law, culture and politics across continents. Now based in Tuscany, he writes on geopolitics, identity and power, blending lived experience with historical insight to explore how nations and individuals adapt in an unsettled world. He has published *Racket Boy: Where's My Country* (with Geetha K.), and *Ruta 40 at 72*.