

THE WHITE CROCODILE'S TALES: MY MEMOIRS

by

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Comments by

John Hughes

Hughes as Teacher and Head Master

If you walk the hallway at Penang Free School today you will come across a plaque commemorating visits in 1983 and 1996 of J.M.B. Hughes, a former Headmaster. In the Principal's office you will also see his picture on the wall, removed from where it once was placed on the hallway wall alongside the long line of distinguished Penang Free School Headmasters (as was the original term for Principal). J.M.B. Hughes, better known to friends as Mike Hughes, was a geography teacher at Penang Free School from 1948 to 1952, then in 1957 returned to the school to be Headmaster after periods serving at Sultan Ismail School in Kelantan, and the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar.

Mike Meets his Bride

Now, Penang was also a scene of romance for Mike Hughes! In 1951 he was asked to meet a newly arrived lady teacher for St George's Girl's School in the E&O hotel. The romance developed and blossomed, when this lady, who was deeply interested in music and drama was "borrowed" in 1951 to direct a play "The Rivals" in answer to an appeal from the Chairman of the PFS Music & Drama Society, Jeyaraj C. Rajarao, to raise funds for the school. This lady was Jean Wright, who was also destined to teach English and drama at the Penang Free School from 1957 to 1963. Jean and Mike married in 1952 and had five children, four girls and one boy, all but one was born in Malaya.

My Father and I

I am Mike Hughes's only son, born in Penang in 1957 and raised for the first six years of my life in the Bungalow opposite the Penang Free School that was then the Head Master's residence. So I write this article not from the perspective of one of Mike Hughes's former Malayan pupils or colleagues, but as his child. I confess that when I think of my father I feel a sense of guilt for having taken my parents for granted. They served as providers of all my needs. They provided lovingly for all my selfish needs so characteristic of a child; bed and food, education and much more were all provided even as I was growing up. My father would selflessly transport me to wherever my activities beckoned. Little did I ever think about my parents or considered what sort of people they were. When my father and mother passed away in March 2011, within five days of each other, I was left with my four sisters to grieve this sad loss.

His Memoirs: a Unique Legacy

However, my father had left a unique legacy which I will describe as a gift. During his old age he had written his memoirs and stored these in disparate locations. These were written free hand, typed on paper or on the hard disk on his computer (with which he had become somewhat proficient in his old age). It was with great fascination I read them, and then pieced together these memoirs and found out so much about my parents that I never knew and will forever regret not asking them the many questions that arise in my mind today. The writing of the memoirs had been stimulated by suggestions from Malaysian friends who felt a great deal of nostalgia for their old teacher and friend.

Memorial Gatherings by Old Frees

In May 2011 a memorial was held for Mike and Jean Hughes at the OFA in Penang, and also by the OFA in Kuala Lumpur, attended also by Old Frees from Singapore, significantly by the President of OFAS, Dr. Alex Ooi. Until that time, I had come to know only a few former Penang Free School pupils who were close to my father. These were people who either lived in England or visited on a frequent basis. I was most familiar with Dennis Lee (a famous concert pianist), and Datuk Lim Chong Keat (an eminent architect and renowned botanist). At the memorial it was overwhelming for me to meet many more Old Frees. One person who made a particular impression on me was Jimmy Yeoh. Jimmy related to me how his father, who was a PFS teacher, had sadly and suddenly and prematurely died of a heart attack. My father had made it his priority to visit Jimmy's family and ensure they were cared for. This was something Jimmy had never forgotten. I told Jimmy of the memoirs and said I would make a point of sending him a copy.

Getting the Memoirs Published

In 2011, I was working in Jakarta, and on one occasion I accompanied my youngest daughter on a school sports trip to Kuala Lumpur. During that trip, I arranged to meet Jimmy at a restaurant. When I arrived, Jimmy was there accompanied by none other than Mr. Jeyaraj Rajarao. Jeyaraj, like Jimmy, had a special bond with my father based on some good will. My father provided him with work as a temporary teacher at the Penang Free School, and thereby helped him through some very difficult times. Together, Jimmy and Jeyaraj proposed publishing the memoirs and using them as a catalyst to promote an academic award at the Penang Free School in my parent's names. It was then that the concept was born. The memoirs were finally published through ARECA books in June 2014. The book is titled "**The White Crocodile's Tale; My Memoirs**".

Significance of Title

The title “**The White Crocodile’s Tale**” will seem strange to many, so let me explain! Mike Hughes was a great proponent of school activities. This took various forms, including geography field trips (most notably to Langkawi), rowing a sampan around Penang and having school outings to walk up Penang Hill, camping trips to Batu Ferrenghi and long hikes to explore nature. These outings were very popular and served to foster great camaraderie between pupils and teachers alike. During Mike Hughes’s earliest days at the Penang Free School the “Emergency” in Malaya was in full flow, and it was for this reason the safe haven of Langkawi Island was chosen as an attractive destination for geography field trips. A favourite port of call on the field trips was the then secluded and beautiful freshwater lake of Tasik Dayang Bunting. A Langkawi legend tells of a ghostly white crocodile, the spirit of a slain princess, that lives in the lake. Hence, the boys would excitedly scan the waters looking for the mystical beast – a kind of Loch Ness monster of Langkawi. As these vigils became more and more futile, the boys looked for a substitute crocodile. Declaring they had indeed sighted the elusive crocodile they picked up Mike and carried him to the water and dunked him into the lake amidst great laughter and shouts of “Look, there he is! The white crocodile!”

Volunteering for Good Causes

For some reason dunkings became a tradition for my father at the Penang Free School. The school boys frequently threw him into the sea or swimming pools on various outings as they considered Mike more as a dear and close guide in their growth than a feared and distant teacher. On one occasion, when I was a five year old boy, I was at a fund raising fair in the Penang Free School grounds. I recall watching in horror as my father (let us not forget, the Headmaster!), seated himself beneath a bucket of water, and proceeded to get a good soaking, much to the delight of the on looking boys who anxiously queued up to aim a ball at the bucket to overturn it and drench my father. Quite some money was collected at this booth! With the exception of a certain five year old boy who was in a state of

shock, great fun was had by all, including my father! In fact you could argue that Mike Hughes was an early “ice bucket” trendsetter!

Brief Review of Book

The memoirs give a fascinating insight into life in the Penang Free School from the late 1940's to early 1960's. They also provide insights for the reader into the background of a person sent by the British government to educate young Malaysians destined to play key roles in what was then the young country of Malaya soon to become Malaysia. And there is reflective thoughts of some of his colleagues and students who were close to him.

1957 was a notable year from the Hughes family perspective. It was the year Malaya won its Merdeka. It was also the year when Mike Hughes became Penang Free School Headmaster at the age of forty, and also (coincidentally and of far less importance!) the year of my birth. I believe, like most of the British expatriates working in government positions, Mike Hughes expected to be leaving Malaya shortly after Merdeka. However, he was given the great honour of being asked by the first Malaysian governor of Penang, Raja Tun Uda, to stay and ensure the transition of the school to an environment and educational excellence befitting the newly independent nation. The Hughes family stayed in their much loved and adopted home, the Head Master's Quarters, in Penang until 1963 when the Head Master's position was handed over to Mr. Tan Boon Lin, the first Malaysian headmaster. The concept of foreign rule in Malaysia now seems long past, forgotten and inappropriate for the modern era. I like to think that my parents were exemplary components of transitioning a colonial administered nation to a vibrant new country. There is no doubt that the sleepy island of Penang of the 1950's has changed and developed radically from that time, with no small contribution from the Penang Free School boys of my father's era.

Beyond relating events in Malaysia, the book provides fascinating insights into different phases of Mike Hughes's life. Detached from Malaysia as these may be, his upbringing in pre-war England including his childhood and education at public schools and Oxford University provide a vision into a time now long forgotten. Mike also relates of his military service in World War Two, events that culminated in India and Burma where he first came to love and respect the people of South East Asia.

Book Launch and Objectives

The “White Crocodile’s Tale” is being officially launched at the OFA centenary events in KL, Singapore and Penang on 21st October, 2014, the school’s Founder’s Day and 198th Anniversary. Copies are available through the respective OFA organizations. As per the original intent, the proceeds are dedicated 100% to two Penang Free School academic awards: the J.M.B. Hughes Prize for Best Student, which will continue the present similar award given by the OFA Kuala Lumpur & Selangor, and the Jean Hughes prize for the best Music and Drama student. Additional donations to this fund are most welcome as we are hoping to perpetuate the prizes for long, long years ahead.

From the Hughes family perspective the book and awards achieve another objective, we thought long and hard about a memorial for our parents in Malaysia, the country so close to their hearts and the people they were so attached to. The book serves this purpose as a lasting memory for them in Malaysia, and the Penang Free School Awards are a small, but fitting contribution to education at the school, an association with the proudest days of their lives.

Thanks to Helpers

I was assisted and guided by many in compiling the book. Foremost, I must mention Jeyaraj Rajarao; his tenacity and drive belie a man of his age, and without him the book and awards would most certainly not have come to fruition. Also, Dr. Teoh Soong Kee and Dato(Dr.) Anwar Fazal, have provided the steady hands and common sense that has frequently guided us through periods of uncertainty. Our “man in Penang”, Loo Hock Guan, has further been invaluable, most particularly with liaison with the Penang Free School. Khoo Salma Nasution provided the link with the publishers ARECA books. I also make special mention of Dennis Lee, Datuk Lim Chong Keat, Jimmy Yeoh, Khoo Teng Chye, Prof. Dr. Teoh Seng Chye and Ching Eng Kee and his gang of former Penang Sea Scouts for the lively sessions they had at the sea with my dad! Not least, my thanks reach out to all Old Frees who have supported and will support the purpose we have set out for ourselves. Thanks are warmly expressed especially to the Presidents and the

committee members of the OFAs in Penang, Kuala Lumpur & Selangor and Singapore for the ready support given