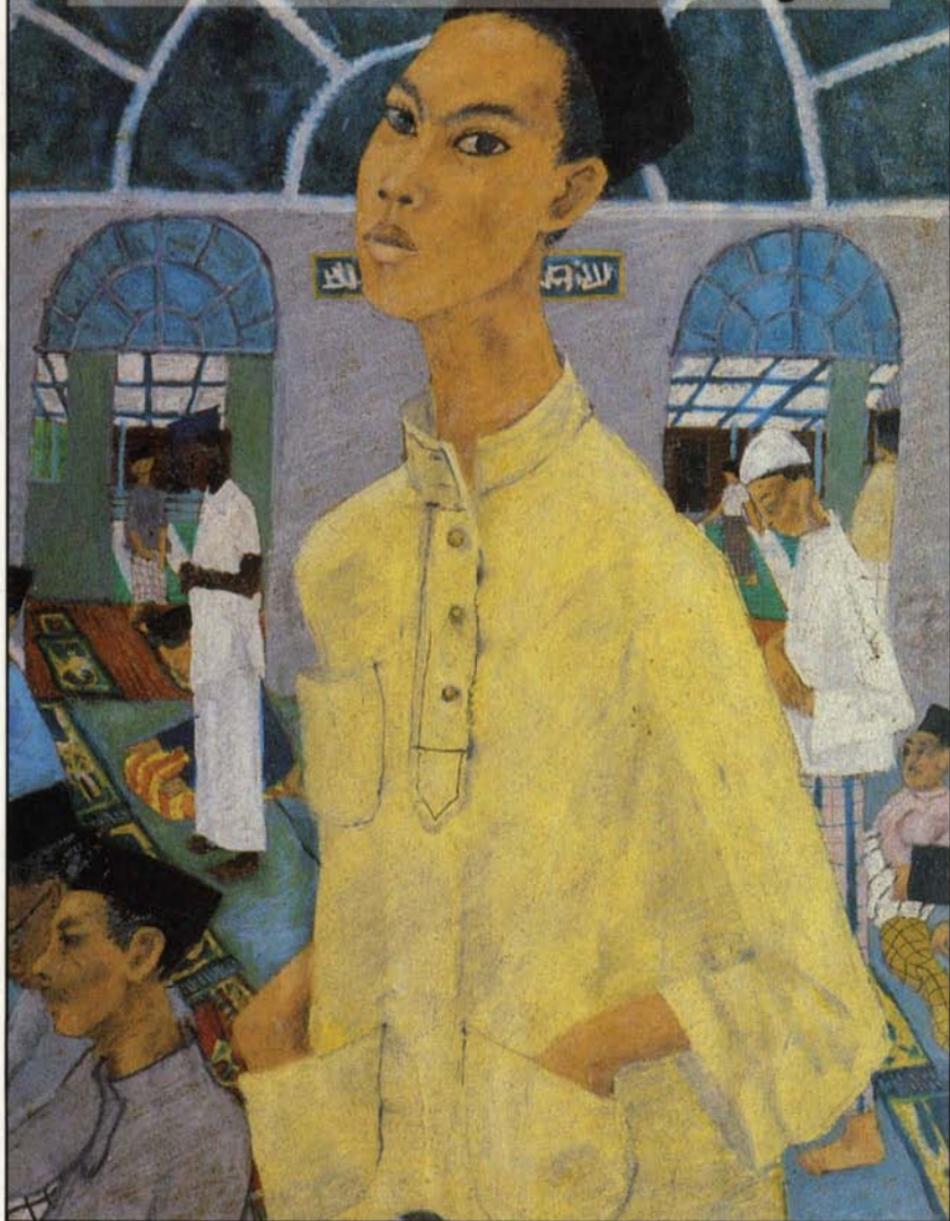


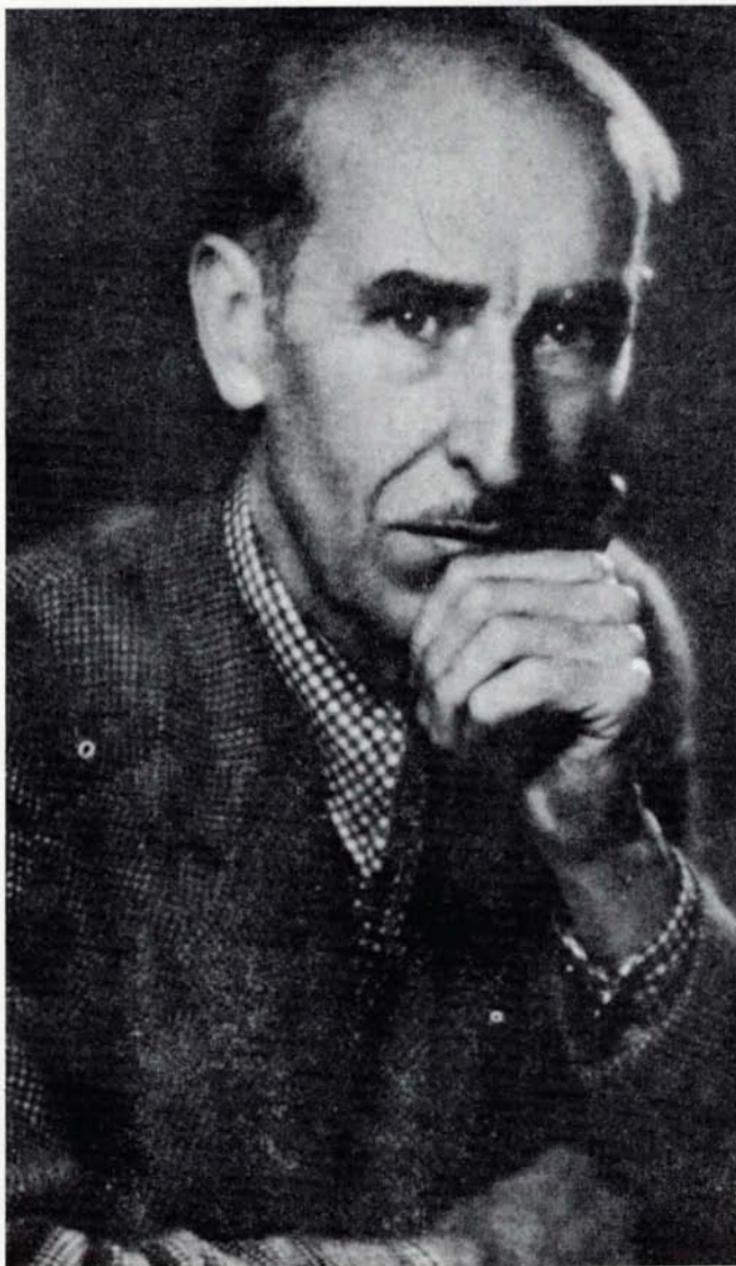
Henri Fauconnier

The Soul of Malaya



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THE SOUL OF MALAYA

BY
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TRANSLATED BY
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PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

When the East Asian Branch of Oxford University Press first considered reprinting this classic work—winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1930—they wrote to the author in the hope that he might be willing to contribute a valedictory preface to the Malayan scenes he knew so well.

Pleading age and illness, he replied regretfully that he was unable to do so, but sent instead an article written during the war, in which he recorded the changes in a planter's life since the days when he himself was one.

The following translated extracts make it plain that he has lost none of his evocative powers of writing, nor any of his memories of Malaya as it used to be:

Even recently, there was in France complete ignorance as to what a planter was. I still remember the short silence which greeted this word, when someone asked me about my job. Astonishment was hidden, no one wanted to appear to be taken in, the joke was politely smiled at, and when it had to be finally admitted that I really was a planter, agreement was distant, and then the conversation was quickly and kindly changed in order not to humiliate me, and also to avoid a recital of the misfortunes I must have undergone before arriving at such a point. . . .

Times have changed. . . . The French people have studied geography, and they know that the world is a vast and frightening place, and they are grateful to those who engage in the constant search for raw materials.

For the planter, also, times have changed. . . . Between the Malaya of my youth, and the Malaya of today there is as much difference as between Gaul before the Roman

conquest and France as we know it. In twenty years I have seen this country make good a delay of twenty centuries.

There was the age of the little hut. To find land suitable for cultivation, the planter had to cross the coastal marshes, follow mysterious water courses, drive into the heart of the virgin jungle, and open up a road through the lianas, the bamboos and the undergrowth. The site once chosen, a small portion of the jungle was felled and fired. The planter lived in a hut made of bamboo and palm leaves on the edge of the burnt-out clearing, which little by little spread out around him, leaving him in the middle of a black and desolate desert. He had no furniture, the bare minimum of clothing, and lived on rice and tinned foods. The destruction of the jungle, and the flight of the animals who had lived there, created an austere solitude. The great events of his life were the appearance of the first growth in his nursery of rubber seedlings—two little green leaves announcing that life was at last being renewed in the midst of desolation—an encounter with a wild beast or a troop of elephants in the course of his exploration of the jungle, an attack of fever, or a letter from Europe arriving rolled up in the pleats of a Malay *sarong*. He lived all day among his coolies, learning their language and their customs, incorporating the functions of king, judge, and doctor, self-reliant in his loneliness, all-powerful, and abandoned.

Then came the age of the wooden house. Other plantations were opened up all around, and roads traversed the jungle. Bordering the road appeared a Chinese shop where it was possible to procure tea, coffee, cigarettes—and better still, fresh bread. Passing ox-carts were to be seen, carrying furniture from the town, frozen Australian meat, acetylene lamps and bicycles. The plantation stretched out into the distance, its rows of trees bright green against the red earth. Tapping began, and a factory was put up. The price of rubber rose month by month, and every steamer unloaded

at the ports a quota of business men from London, Brussels and Paris, suddenly curious to see these, hitherto unknown countries, now revealing such a rich future. Capital was plentiful.

Several years later, we come to the age of stone and cement. The planters are now working for powerful companies who lodge them in bungalows and provide every comfort. Electric light comes from the factory, from which one can hear day and night a constant slow pulsation. Cars rumble down the roads. The coolies ride to the Chinese shop in a taxi. The planters have their central club where they meet in the evening to discuss the latest methods of cultivation, seed selection or grafting seedlings. Life is less difficult, less dangerous, but it is complicated by new worries and heavier responsibilities. The old-time planter, and the planter of today come from the same stock, but circumstances have created different types. If comparing them one could say that the first had been a young man ready to take all risks, the other is a mature man concerned with avoiding risks: the primitive man of action, compared with the civilized reflective thinker, because with security comes worry. It is no easier to conserve and improve than to create. To be a simple planter is no longer enough, it is now necessary to be an administrator, an accountant and a scientist. Everything depends on your intelligence and tenacity, and if it is true that you are now only a cog in a big machine, you are a precious, vital, cog.

His own letter to us closes with these words '... mais je veux vous dire combien je suis heureux de savoir que ma chère Malaisie se souvient encore de moi et me fait l'honneur de rééditer mon livre'.

FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

In offering this book to the English-speaking public, may I remove a possible misconception. I am aware that the beau rôle is given here to my two Frenchmen, but this was inevitable, as they are the main characters in the narrative as well as my spokesmen. Moreover, my object being to give an insight into the soul of Malaya, this could only be attained through the medium of rather exceptional individuals. It follows that my Frenchmen are not ordinary Frenchmen (nor, I must admit, representative planters), whereas the Englishmen who appear incidentally through the book had to be chosen amongst the crowd of ordinary, typical colonists whom one may meet anywhere within the Tropics. My somewhat sophisticated Frenchmen are my heroes in fiction, but their hearty, bluff English comrades were my friends in life.

H. FAUCONNIER

Radès (Tunisia), September 1931.

I

PLANTER

Jikalau tidak kerana hujung
 matahari bulan terbit tinggi

Jikalau tidak kerana along
 matahari siang sedek & main

THE anniversary of the armistice was celebrated in Kuala Paya by two minutes' silence and two days' orgie. But the orgie of the second day, which was a Sunday, confined itself respectably to the club and to the homes of the little Japanese girls who pretend to invite you in for tea, and only sober cases of drunkenness were met with in the streets.

I shall never forget those two solemn minutes on the Saturday morning: then it was I saw him—the man I had been looking for and never hoped to meet again. He appeared on the veranda of the club where the British Resident, the officials, and all the would-be important citizens, stood in frozen rigidity; and bewilderment was in his eyes. He ignored the nervous twitchings of the club secretary's pump head, and came and leaned against the railing. No one moved, but from the corners of their eyes they glared at him.