

PHT *newsletter*

PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG • PENANG HERITAGE TRUST

c/o 11 Free School Road, 11600 Penang • Fax/Tel: 04 - 281 3187

Number 7

September 1994

Talk by *Susan Ellen Gross* on

MARTINHA ROZELLS

Light's Dark Lady

Thursday 8 September '94, 8.00 pm

State Art Gallery Penang

3rd Floor Dewan Sri Pinang

(The Gallery is at the back of the Dewan)

Was Martinha Rozells the 'Nonya' the Sultan sent to seduce Captain Francis Light and his trading company to Kedah? Was she the 'princess' the Sultan gave Light as a bride - with Pulo Pinang as her dowry? Was 'Thong Di' her other name? Martinha was certainly dark in the sense of being an elusive and disputable figure.

British Empire historians have usually portrayed her as a shiftless, thriftless 'half-caste' (Was she also dark in complexion?) who 'had not the brains or the inclination to look after her children', as if anxious to show she was a scandalous episode in Light's life and did not deserve to inherit his 'Garden house plantations.....called Suffolk' or his 'bungalow in George Town'. Was she the victim of a dark campaign of detraction? Was she turned into 'a convenient woman' of the zenana (harem) by a verdict of gossip and not of history?

Intrigued by Light's will, American novelist Susan Ellen Gross spent eight months in the libraries of Penang and the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur combing through old records and documents dating back to 1780 in an effort to get behind the rumours, prejudice, and malice which have accompanied the mystery and misrepresentation surrounding Martinha's life.

Says Ms Gross, "Martinha's period, place, and personality deserve further scrutiny. She lived with Light for 22 years and was the mother of their five children. Her story is also that of what happened to the enormous estate he bequeathed her. It's a story of treachery and betrayal, a land swindle of vast and ugly proportions, a scandal that involved the collusion of top government officials, dark dealings that might have led to the assassination of some of the island's earliest governors. Suffolk House, no doubt, was the grand prize."

Susan Gross is the author of sixteen novels, including the highly acclaimed Midnight Fury (Fawcett, 1981) about 15th century Spain. A graduate of the University of Southern California in French literature, she has been a guest lecturer at the Los Angeles and San Diego campuses of the University of California as well as Glendale and Pasadena Colleges. Her books have been translated into ten languages.

PHT Office

The address of the PHT Office is
c/o 11 Free School Road
11600 Penang

The Fax/Tel: number has been changed
from 04-213187 to 04-2813187

PHT Annual General Meeting 1994

The AGM was held on Saturday 27 August '94, at 2.30pm, at the E&O Hotel. Chaired by Dato' Nazir Ariff, it considered and approved

1. The Minutes of the 1993 AGM
2. The 1993/1994 Annual Report
3. The 1993 Accounts

Mr Eddy Choong had something to say. He was not quite happy with the style in which the 1993/94 Annual Report was written and would like to go on record as saying that he felt that here and there the report took members too much for granted. It took the liberty 'to speak for everybody' and it was simply not true that all PHT members thought Metropole was a 'much loved hotel' that deserved to be saved. He himself did not think much of the building and had said so publicly more than once. According to him, an annual report is not a place where one can freely express a personal opinion. ■

Letters, Articles, Announcements

Proud to be a member

Dear Teong Kool, Just to let you have my formal apologies for the AGM, which I hope goes well.

I enjoyed the latest Newsletter and am proud to be a member of an organisation which is so active, and dedicated to the care of Penang's unique identity and heritage.

Needless to say, any member who happens to be in the UK will be most welcome to descend on me here in Faversham. For the past few weeks we have even been able to lay on a Penang-type climate! If anyone wants to know what the town is like, they can ask Tengku Idaura.

Best wishes to all my friends.

*Arthur Percival MBE BA DLitt FSA
Honorary Director, Faversham Society
Preston Street, Faversham, Kent ME 13 8NS
Tel: 0795-534542 (office), 0795-533261 (home)*

Dear Mr Percival, En Amiruddin Fawzi, our Council member, will be visiting the UK sometime in September. He says you can expect him to descend on you.

The AGM went well. Dato' Nazir Ariff fielded all the questions and one complaint with perfect aplomb and in less than an hour it was over. 22 members came and there was a quorum. Tengku Idaura took an afternoon off from her short one-week holiday so as to be with us. Even the newly married and now slightly enlarged Khoo Salma Lubis was there: morning sickness or no, she would not miss Alexandra Ong's superb homemade pizza and apple cake. They all wish you a lovely autumn.

You will be surprised by the number and assortment of talented and energetic people we have in the PHT. There are poets, novelists, editors, artists, musicians, dancers, actors, academics, administrators, doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, city-planners, developers, contractors, businessmen, sportsmen, not to mention committed radicals and recalcitrants, activists and lobbyists, treasure hunters and organic farmers, and – it's probably just a load of rubbish, it can't be true – demolition experts. ■

Other Faces

*You see the present
in the instant, in this cluster
of minor faces glowing
like unfinished jewels,
forbidden yourself to touch
though you would know
the sorrow.
A moment's swirl arouses
an ancient chant to rhyme
a prayer whispered: "nor ever
poor, nor ever pure,
except you make me."*

*Faces flagging like flowers
droop in lines before
obedient servants of the people,
passing one to another
weary petitions to the King —
while a moon-faced houseman
is siphoning blood with the air
of a Harpo Marx
in the depths of the children's hospital
where the eyes of the infants
of Ethiopia
emblazon the discoloured walls*

*Gan Teik Chee
Penang*

Orthopaedic boot

Dear Sir, How pleasant it was to return to Penang after an absence of six months and find some recent issues of your newsletter awaiting me. However, I also found that many gaping holes have been torn in the rich fabric of Georgetown, and it makes me wonder what exactly is local officialdom's definition of a 'conservation area'.

Take Northam Road: here was a majestic thoroughfare of stately mansions and magnificent trees but ever since it has (I believe) been designated a protected area houses have been smashed down like skittles. Where venerable buildings once stood rise indifferent flashy modern slabs, one – the MBF tower – seemingly inspired by an orthopaedic boot; when the trees go, all will be set in a metallic sea of parked cars, so what's left to conserve? I myself watched in dismay and with a growing sense of powerlessness as the elegantly scalloped dome of the old Metropole was smashed to fragments: what hope for Soonstead and the numerous minor charmers which contribute so much to this once grand avenue?

Apart from some stunning examples of private enterprise – Leith Street springs to mind – is there yet hope? There are, I think, a few positive signs. Along Jalan Tanjong Tokong there are two gleaming white bungalows: one has had a blue roof and other additions, and thus looks new, when it is in fact a renovation. The other, owned by Eden is brand new, but detailed reasonably well-enough to pass as an over-zealous renovation. Opposite Holiday Inn there is a low-rise 'bungalow' group which is at least decorative and may age passably. It's easy to deride these pastiches as Toytown or Disney, but it does show that there is an awakening of commercial interest in the past: the Kentucky Fried Chicken building along Larut Road still stands, and there is the interesting-looking new Disted College complex rising sympathetically by, and incorporating, an old mansion.

If large companies are bothering to build decoratively, which presumably takes more care and cash than the average modern slab, then I think the PHT must continue its battle even as the past crashes down around us. It is possible the multi-nationals here will catch the trend and even lead it responsibly. Nobody wishes to stop progress, and there are many examples already, domestic and international, of new uses for old buildings. The tragic irony may however be that when some future generation, educated at last to appreciate its heritage, looks around for the real thing, there may be little left to refer to which is actually genuine.

Alan J Flux

c/o Equator Academy of Art
47 Anson Road, 10400 Penang

Dear Alan. I see you have been getting around the island quite a bit on that old and battered contraption you call your bicycle.

Have you seen what they have done to No. 1 Penang Road, the Khoo Sian Ewe house? I can't begin to imagine at which point someone thought it was a bright idea to turn its lovely facade into what looks like the entrance to the multi-storey car park behind it.

The Disted College does look to have been designed, unlike the St. Georges Girls School across the street. It's a pity they don't have the space for a proper campus. Would you like to interview the architects – I know who they are – of this 'interesting-looking complex' for the PHTnewsletter? You are right, we need to draw more attention to the few better examples of heritage development in Penang. ■

Any (re)action?

Dear PHT Team, This is just a note to bring you up to date with what's happening in Penang's sister city. Since my last trip to Penang you have had a few other visitors from Adelaide including Graham Ingerson our Minister. I have not been able to get near him since his return but am told by his staff he enjoyed Penang very much. May I say thank you to all those of you who looked after him while he was there. And Barry and Alison Rowney were very impressed by the Syed Alatas project.

Ahmad's letter to Datuk Tan seemed to spell out the very obvious interest both local and international groups have in the significance of Suffolk House. Was there any (re)action? Or just the usual? I hope to bring something with me to Penang which may help promote the restoration project.

We are now part of a consortium from Adelaide (SAGRIC International) which has been shortlisted to undertake a planning and development guidelines aid project in Hanoi through the Australian Government's AIDAB agency. The Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation symposium in Hanoi in November is now considered by AIDAB as a significant event and a precursor to the aid project. Regards to you all.

Bruce Pettman

SACON, 30 Wakefield Street, Adelaide SA 5000

Dear Bruce. As not all our members are familiar with the 33 year old history of the Suffolk House restoration project, I'm including in this newsletter the Ahmad Chik letter to the MPPP urging them to move on from exchanging letters to exchanging land.

I'm afraid we haven't heard from them. They might have lost interest even in exchanging letters. ■

Hanoi Symposium

7 - 12 November, 1994

Theme: *Ancient Cities in Transition —
The Challenges for Conservation*

Plans are well in hand for our symposium which has generated much interest from the region and beyond. I had very productive meetings in Hanoi in April with Dr Lan, who is the Hanoi Chief Architect, staff from the National Institute for Urban and Rural Planning and members of the Peoples Committee of Hanoi. They are working closely with us to plan a week of intense investigation, discussion and discovery.

Participants will have the opportunity to see Hanoi and meet their Vietnamese colleagues in a manner denied even the most perceptive tourist. And more importantly, they will be able to play a part in the conservation and planning of one of Asia's oldest and most beautiful cities.

The style of the symposium will be strongly practical and interactive, using the city of Hanoi as a model and case study.

The opening session will introduce the planning issues and infrastructure problems faced by Hanoi. Dr Lan will present his master plan for the city, written papers on comparative approaches to urban planning and conservation from other historic cities will be distributed. Work teams will be formed, and planned outcomes for the week discussed.

For the next three days teams will work in the field on various issues such as infrastructure (water, sewage, power) transport and traffic, housing, environment, and heritage/conservation/community action. Each team will be led by an experienced professional, who will collate daily the results of their work in a visual form suitable for display. On the last two days all outcomes will be displayed and discussed, before being drawn together in an overall document for publication.

It is expected that many team members would maintain contact and continue discussion beyond the symposium.

As places are limited, because of the nature of the meeting, early application is strongly advised. If I can help with any further information please contact me. I look forward to working with AWPNUC members in November.

Penny Ramsay
Hon. Secretary, AWPNUC
33 Hurtle Square, Adelaide SA 5000
Fax: 61 - 8 - 223 4847

You will be proud to know that the PHT is a founding member of AWPNUC. We encourage you to attend the Hanoi Symposium. Do call at the office to collect the registration form (We have been distributed 12) and the AWPNUC newsletter (Congratulations Penny! Shibu Dutta's drawings are just great) that comes with it. ■

PHT Antique-Collectors Club Meeting

Sunday 18 September, 3.00pm
120 Armenian Street

This informal gathering is for us to get to know one another and to elect a Pro-Tem Committee. We will discuss the club's objectives and activities. Feel free to air your views. Please contact me to confirm your attendance.

Monday - Friday : 10.00am - 12.00noon
3.00pm - 5.00pm

Please be punctual. Thank you

Michael Cheah
Tel: 04 - 2292203

Donations

On 15 August, the Comte de Ribes, Chairman of the French plantation management company SOCFIN, visited Penang with his grand-daughter Alix, the company's General Manager Mr J D C Diamond, and two friends from France. We took the party on a tour of Suffolk House, the Cheong Fatt Tze, the Syed Alatas, the Chung Keng Kwee, and the Protestant Cemetery. The next evening, at a little dinner we gave them at Park Inn, the Count presented us with an RM20,000 cheque. In return we gave him a copy of Dato' Lim Chong Keat's 'Penang Views' and one of Khoo Si Nin's 'Streets of George Town', both of which he said were 'beautiful' and was clearly delighted to have.

There were no press write-ups of the event because the Count did not want any publicity. He said he wanted to make the donation as 'a good friend of Suffolk House'.

MDK Consultants, the organizers of the Star/Sparkling Ribena Treasure Hunt, donated RM10,000 towards our cultural tours programme and Museum shop project. ■

New Members

Inagaki Michiko	Mabel Choo
David Neo	Lee Chenk Hock

Members can nominate, vote, and stand for elections

TKTan