An Untapped Historical Source: 
Rest House Register Books 
by ROBIN W. WINKS

The professional historian knows that there is no printed or written word that is not a source of historical evidence. Written history does not come solely from the records of the Colonial Office or of major governmental ministries, from the private papers of prominent politicians, businessmen, and military figures, or from the minute books of large companies. Too often the amateur historian believes that all of the major sources for history now rest safely in archives, neatly bundled and tied with string, carefully catalogued. Such is not the case. Not only do many major collections of papers remain yet to come to light (assuming they have not, in fact, been destroyed completely)—where are the private papers of W.F.D. Jervois, for example, papers which would tell us so much about the British intervention of 1874?—but there also are valuable sources of historical information which remain known to all and yet unused and unprotected precisely because they are not recognized to be sources of information of use to the historian. How often has an historian who wished to prove residence in a given city by a figure prominent to his narrative found such proof in an old gazetteer? How often in the future may the historian find an old telephone directory useful in precisely the same way? In my own research I have found just such gazetteers of immense value; I have found a crucial point of identity settled by reference to an old theatrical poster that someone had thought to keep among other, more obviously valuable, papers; and I have been able to clear a man of an old, long historically-accepted charge of complicity in an event which, in fact, he was ignorant of, by reference to a set of carefully preserved nineteenth century railway timetables. Since no one knows what question the historian may need to ask in the future, no one can determine whether particular material will prove to be of value to him or not. But it is a safe assumption for the historically-minded to make that the printed word, wherever it appears, and in whatever form, is of value. School annuals and newspapers, company reports, the most ephemeral of magazines, throw-away advertisements, even menus, with their ready evidence for the economic historian of the price structure of foodstuffs in mid-twentieth century Malaya, are of value.

One such source of potential information are the various register books maintained by the Rest Houses throughout the Federation. There are seventy Rest Houses; I have visited sixty-two of them. Not all maintain such register books, but most do. Normally the book currently in use is brought to one to sign shortly after arrival; books for previous years are usually kept at the Rest House, in unlocked drawers or book cases, for travellers to consult if they wish to do so. Most of the register books ask for comments at the end of the stay, and Malaysians seem to have taken advantage of this opportunity to express themselves, often in blunt terms. A study of these register books can prove most interesting, and I hope that they ultimately will be protected by being placed in the Federation’s Archives. Although I have examined dozens of these books, I will comment on only two to illustrate my point.