THE
LAKE CLUB
1890-1990
The Pursuit of Excellence

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COMMISSIONED BY THE
ROYAL LAKE CLUB OF KUALA LUMPUR

PERPUSTAKAAN
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THERE is a saying that when two Englishmen meet, they form a club (if there are three, they will form a colony, and if four, an empire). If this suggests that the forming of clubs was a peculiarly English habit, then this would be most unjust to the other inhabitants of this planet who also throughout history have ganged up into exclusive groups, associations, or (secret) societies in pursuit of their particular interests. But if taken in the context of colonial Malaya a hundred years ago, it has a ring of truth about it. For throughout British Malaya—and for that matter British Borneo, or British anywhere else—wherever a British community existed, there was sure to be a club. 'What havens they were in those early days,' sighs an old-timer expatriate in reminiscence. 'If it consisted of only one room, it was a place that oozed friendliness and sympathy.' The club was the focal point of the life of the expatriate community. It was an exclusive and multi-purpose place, where the tuans could relax, read, gossip, play games, consort with their own kind; above all, it was a place where they could let down their hair—which they did—free from the prying gaze of their alien subjects save for the discreet eyes of the club 'boys', who in any case themselves grew into something of a caste apart. As the social hubs of the colonial masters of the land, these white men’s clubs acquired an aura of exclusivity and superiority which left its mark on the

**Twenty-eight Prominent Residents**

KUALA LUMPUR, 18 August: On Saturday evening last, the new 'Lake Club' held its inaugural meeting. The Resident was present and the proceedings were enlivened by the attendance of the band. The building is not yet complete as the upper storey has yet to be superimposed. The attraction of the billiards table—one of Thurston's—combined with cards and real melody, rendered the evening very pleasant to all parties. A 'buffet' supper closed the 'soiree' and the company separated at an early hour.

*Strait Times*, 18 August 1890

The Lake Club c.1920, its dignity enhanced by the long avenue from the lake, flanked by palm trees. The remnants of these trees are still to be seen maintaining formation leading up to the new clubhouse.
wider society beyond. For a European, to be a member of the club was the badge of his acceptance in society (albeit European society). Not to be a member was to be a social outcast. For the outsider, the word 'member' came to be absorbed in the vernacular as a piece of slang, meaning to be part of the in-group, a usage that survives till today.

There were clubs and clubs. The great colonial centres of Singapore and Penang had long had their clubs, and being more advanced and sophisticated than the pioneer white settlements in the Peninsula, had proliferated to cater for specific purposes such as cricket, golf, and the turf. In the 'native states', where life was lived at a simpler level, the existing clubs remained small, all-purpose affairs, including at Kuala Lumpur where the first club, the Selangor Club (or, as it came to be known, 'The Spotted Dog'), was founded in 1885. But by 1890 Kuala Lumpur was coming of age, marked appropriately enough by the establishment of a municipal council (known by the not very impressive title of the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board). The foundation of the Lake Club towards the end of the same year symbolized the dawn of a new era in the town’s social development.

For by 1890 Kuala Lumpur was becoming a busy place. It was no longer the shanty settlement of rough-and-ready Chinese tin miners that it had been ten years before when the new colonial state administration moved lock, stock, and barrel from dreary, muddy Klang and encamped on the opposite side of the river to the Chinese town. The fetid unpaved alleyways twisting between the dark, fire-prone plank-and-atap shacks of Yap Ah Loy’s Kuala Lumpur started to give way to wider streets and rows of regular two-storey shophouses of brick, whose pseudo-Western façades screened traditional interiors. The town finally lost its virginity and was made to mate with the outside world by the penetration of the railway (from Klang) and the electric telegraph (from Malacca) in 1886. Next, the jungles on its outskirts began to wilt before the inroads of thousands of coffee bushes, planted by fortune-hunting Westerners who thought their millennium was about to arrive.

As a result of these things, by 1890, even if the great majority of Kuala Lumpur’s 20,000 odd souls were still Chinese and still dependent on the white metal for their livelihood, there was now a leavening of other races and other occupations. The railway and the coffee estates had brought in Tamil and Javanese labourers, and the clapboard offices of the colonial administration had absorbed their quota of Jaffna-Tamil and Eurasian clerks. Living in their kampong enclaves there were also clusters of Malays, some belonging to the country, others the families of those policemen from Malacca who had come to serve the new administration, yet others from afar who had come to seek the crumbs of fortune which Kuala Lumpur might have to offer. There was also, of course, the score or so of towkays who had made their fortunes in tin or through the government ‘farms’, including the new Capitan China, Yap Kwan Seng, and the legendary Loke Yew. To this small galaxy of the Chinese rich came to be added a small but growing group of merchants, like Loke Chow Kit and Thambosamy Pillai and others, including a brace or so of Europeans, who were starting to pave their fortunes catering to the needs of this growing affluent class as well as to those of the small dominant group of white men in their midst. And that small dominant group, the leaders of which were ensconced in neat wooden bungalows in the low hills surrounding the newly opened Lake Gardens, formed a miniscule community which totalled barely 100 individuals.

Yet, it is with the affairs of this small expatriate community that the story of the Royal Lake Club is primarily concerned for three-fifths of its first century.

The Lake Club was formally inaugurated on Saturday, 16 August 1890 by a group of twenty-eight persons who constituted the cream of the cream of local expatriate society.

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1 'Native state' was a term often used in official parlance and by Europeans in general when referring to the Malay States of the Peninsula as opposed to the Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements—Singapore, Penang, and Malacca.

2 Monopoly rights over the licensing and collection of dues from such activities as opium smoking and gambling farmed out by the colonial administration for a specified period to the highest bidder: to hold the farm was the key to gaining a fortune.
Kuala Lumpur c.1887. View taken looking eastwards over the town, with the original Malay mosque standing on the site of the Gian Singh Building on Benteng today. Yap Ah Loy's first brick shophouses can just be discerned centre right.
The Padang (then known as The Parade Ground) in the late 1880s, with the old Selangor Club in the right foreground, and the old Government Offices on Bukit Aman where the Royal Malaysian Police Headquarters are to be found today.
The Kuala Lumpur terminus of the Klang-Kuala Lumpur railway line, c.1891. The old railway station, described by Robson 'as little more than a glorified shed', stood on the present site of the Dayabumi Complex. It was replaced by a new building on the site of the present railway station, in 1892. The line going off to the right crossed the river for Pudu and Ampang.
Despite this and the fact that from the outset the Lake Club was clearly the most exclusive club in town, the actual circumstances and motives which led them to take this particular course of action are not entirely clear. There are, of course, a number of theories as to what happened and why, including the one that its founders, all members of the Selangor Club, were seeking a refuge from the mismanagement and doubtful company provided by that institution; or, more specifically, to escape the wiles of the Club's secretary, Count Bernstorff, whose aristocratic title did not tally with a penchant for misappropriating funds. But while it is true that the Austrian Count did one day decamp from the Selangor Club and from Kuala Lumpur in somewhat of a hurry, leaving behind a large hole in that Club's finances, one discovers that he was also one of the earlier members of the Lake Club, which disposes of this particular theory.

In any case, it so happens that most of those who joined the new club retained their membership of the old. Indeed, one wonders what was the need for a second club in Kuala Lumpur at all, which, for all its pretensions as the capital of a flourishing 'native' state, was still little more than an overgrown township. But that was the point. Kuala Lumpur's society was now felt to be too small for its expatriate leaders, who began to feel the need to set themselves more distinctly apart from the rest of humanity, including some of their own kind.

Miniscule as it was, that white expatriate community was remarkably diverse. There was one broad division, that which existed between those who were part of the government service and those who were not, but within each of these two main groups there were also subdivisions. Amongst the officials, the great divide was between seniors and juniors. The official hierarchy was headed by the British Resident, who was also the leader of expatriate society as a whole. Being not only the head autocrat in a regime of petty autocrats (albeit subject to the rule of law) but also the employer of half the expatriate community, the Resident exuded great power and influence. The handful of officers who were immediately close to him—the Secretary to Government, the Treasurer, the Commissioner for Lands and Mines, the Chief of Police, etc.—shared something of the Resident's great power and glory and were held in corresponding awe. Then came their immediate subordinates, also wielding little empires of their own, such as the District Officers, followed in turn by their European assistants, including the most recent recruits to the service.

The unofficial element in the expatriate community was more fluid and volatile, but it also had its distinctions. Its senior members consisted of the relatively affluent few who had established themselves, by hook or by crook, as successful coffee planters or as successful entrepreneurs (for instance, as surveyors, contractors, or purveyors of merchandise)—in fact, the two were often combined or interchanged. A few, who could be numbered on the fingers of one hand, belonged to the traditional professional classes—a lawyer or two, a couple of doctors, a bank manager. Another distinct group was formed by the small but growing band of technical men, mechanical and electrical engineers (the latter a very rare breed indeed), who proved ever more indispensable as society itself entered the technological age. Below these came an equally indispensable but socially inferior group of people—bearing in mind the intense class consciousness of British society and its preoccupation with breeding and accents—who served as fitters, mechanics, and engine-drivers, and even as prison warders. Finally, there was a floating expatriate population of fortune hunters who fitted into no particular social category, pushing their luck, promoting schemes of one sort or other which they hoped to sell to the government or other interested parties, or offering a variety of services, often enough of a somewhat dubious nature.

This microcosm of Western society, because it was so small, was highly integrated in the sense that virtually everybody who was part of it knew everybody else, and that most people—except for the fitters, mechanics, engine-drivers, and prison warders who lived a social life of their own—were members of the Selangor Club. It was also a very hierarchical society, or tried to be, the tone being set by the officials themselves who were very conscious of the need to protect the authority and dignity of their positions. This was not
A view of the Sydney Lake (named after Frank Swettenham's first wife, whose maiden name was Sydney), taken in the 1890s. The presence of the Lake Club set in the midst of the Lake Gardens deterred most of the inhabitants of Kuala Lumpur from taking the air there during the early years.