

The Malayan Civil Service

Serving Malaya For Over 200 years

Courtesy of [OSPJA](#)

by Roderick MacLean in conjunction with other MCS Colleagues

[Glugor House, Penang](#)

When the Settlement of Penang was founded in 1786 it was a dependency of the Government of Bengal and administered by covenanted officers of the East India Company. This pattern continued when Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819 and when the Company took control of Malacca from the Dutch in 1824. The three Straits Settlements continued to look to it until it was abolished in 1858. Control was then passed to the India Office and the Viceroy until 1867. The Colonial Office then took over and officials from the Indian Establishment were gradually replaced by officials appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The British then became increasingly involved, initially much against the British Government's will, with the internal affairs of the Malay States which formed the hinterland of the three Settlements. This situation was formalised by the Pangkor Engagement of 1872. This led to the appointment of British Residents in Pahang, Perak, Selangor and the loose federation later to be called Negri Sembilan and their joining together to form the Federated Malay States in 1896.

By the end of the 19th century separate civil services administered the Straits Settlements and the FMS as the federation was usually called. However, they increasingly came to be regarded as a single service with a common establishment. With the inclusion of Johore and the three northern States under British suzerainty in 1910 a single service evolved providing an administrative cadre to serve in both Malaya and Singapore.

In 1920 the Secretary of State accepted recommendations that a single Malaya wide service should be recognised. The style Malayan Civil Service (MCS) was formally adopted. From its inception Malays were eligible to become members and they usually achieved this by promotion from the Malay Administrative Service (MAS).

The Service remained a small cadre and by 1940 it numbered only 200 officers. Of these 40 lost their lives during the Pacific War. Some died as members of the Forces, others as prisoners on the Burma Railway and from Japanese brutality. They are commemorated by a plaque subscribed for by their colleagues and installed in St Andrews Cathedral, Singapore in 1989.

Post-war the number of MCS officers increased considerably to meet the demands on the administration created by the 'Emergency' and needs of the economy. Many of those appointed by the Colonial Office had served in the military administration which ran the country to the end of March 1946 but they came also from an ever-increasing number of Malaysians of all races, many of them new graduates. Those appointed by the Colonial Office were transferred to the newly created Overseas Civil Service to provide a future to those who wished to continue in the Colonial Service after independence. The latter was achieved in 1957. Malaysianisation was achieved very successfully by 1963. The Senior Administrative Service and the newly created Malayan Foreign Service were merged. Nevertheless the high traditions were maintained.

From pre-war days former members of the MCS met annually in London for a formal black tie dinner. By 1990 it was accepted that a more informal gathering should take place so that wives and widows might take part including female MCS cadets previously excluded. Highly successful lunches were organised in May each year at the Old Ship Hotel in Brighton up to the present day. A debt of gratitude is owed to the various honorary convenors who kept these reunions going and to maintain the camaraderie of a Service which can claim a direct descent over 200 years from those early officials of the long vanished John Company.

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