

Ronald B. Perkins is the last of his kind. Almost 60 years ago he left Swansea to make his fortune planting rubber in Malaya. While one by one his compatriots have died, Perkins remains, upholding the style of the colonial rubber planter. Report: *Rob Hughes*. Photographs: *Robin Moyer*

## LAST STAND ON SMILING HILL

The house on Smiling Hill is a period piece to Britain's colonial past. So is the man who laid it out and who now whistles away ageing bachelorhood under its expansive roof. From the water tower on a clear day Ronald Perkins can see Sumatra across the jade green Malacca Straits. When his memory clears he scans back half a century, recalling the day he abandoned the Swansea coalmines to seek adventure and fortune in Malaya.

Perky is the last stand. He lives, as fully as his 83rd year can take, the role of Somerset Maugham's "whisky-swilling" rubber planter in the Far East. Contemporaries have gone, but his mind plays tricks. There are times he is convinced the chaps are here sharing his slightly peeling grandeur. The veranda reverberates again to their marathon drinking parties. Maugham knew barely the half of it.

With the doors flung open to night breezes and the imagined revelry in full swing, this splendid villa becomes more than one last planter's keepsake, more than the museum guarding heirlooms of the Perkins family down 300 years from South Wales to Port Dickson.

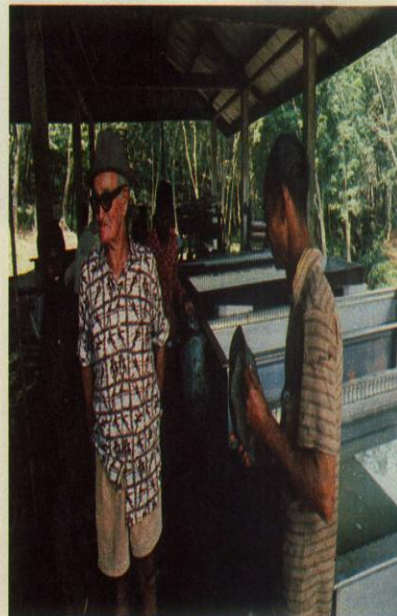
They are a matching pair, Perkins

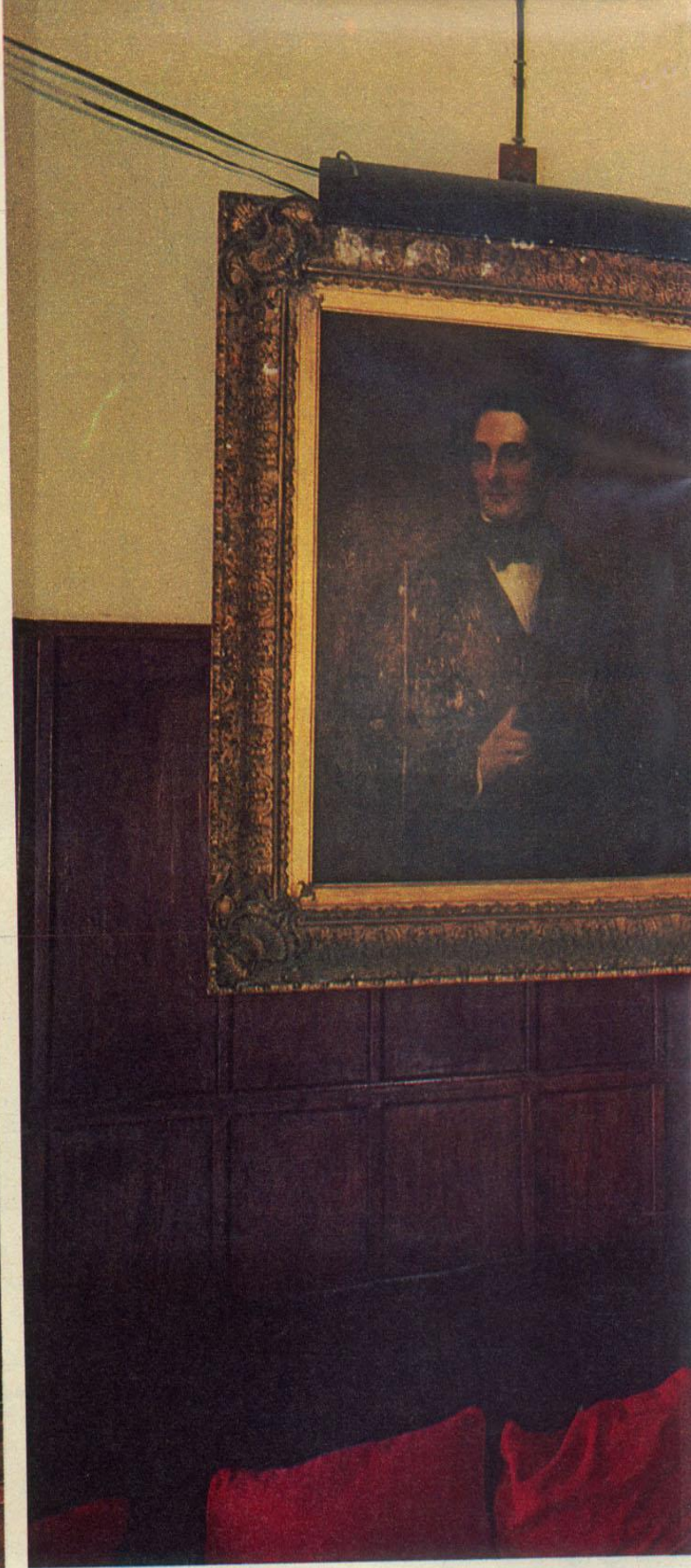
and his white colonial manor; proud, reserved, as quintessentially British as the Jaguar car in the drive.

He waits on the porch steps, not a tall figure but erect as a guardsman. The off-white safari suit is rumpled and belted. A carved walking stick rests over his arm, a brown trolley high on the forehead, brown socks down at the ankles. He has a rosy hue, keenly pointed features, and evidently still a prospector's eye which instantly sights the Dewars whisky bottle poking through a visitor's bag.

Saying, for the first time, that he never nowadays touches a drop before sundown, Perky leaves his housekeeper Ah Liang to attend to the guest's thirst while he personally ushers the bottle to a safe place. Ah Liang and her husband, the cook Al Heng, cater for his comforts; Xavier Edison, a trusted Indian secretary, tends business affairs; a Malay chauffeur and gardener complete the staff. They preserve a cameo of the old empire in which Brits were lord and paymaster and the rest served. But the bonds have melted over decades: Edison has been with Mr Perkins for 38 years, Ah Liang and Al Heng for 20, and

At home with his mansion above the Malacca Straits (left), and on his remaining plantation, New Mun Estates (below), Perkins is at peace with his world





Served, this time by his smiling cook, Al Heng, Perkins is surrounded by slightly peeling grandeur, by teak woodwork and Persian carpets, by family heirlooms dating back three centuries. From his study he can survey ships that pass through the South China Seas. His collection of portraits includes one signed by Queen Adelaide, wife of King William IV. And in the arched hallway, central to all the rooms in the house he himself designed, hang imposing oil paintings. The large portrait to the left is of Dr Harris Dunsford, Perkins's great, great, great grandfather and physician to Queen Adelaide, who became godmother to his daughter. Looking down with a smile that still bewitches members of the Singapore St David's Welsh Society, is The Lady in Pink, Perkins's great, great, great grandmother

out of dependency and loyalty has grown unquestioned affection.

It is difficult to visualise the serene Ah Liang without her smile. She raised her family here and has three grandchildren starting out in life in the ample servants quarters.

Ah Liang's timing is intuitive. Perky calls, she is there. He forgets to say there is a luncheon guest, she provides. When Soda, one of his pair of alsatians, died she allowed just sufficient time for his grieving before buying a replacement. No thoroughbred like her companion

Whisky, the new Soda nonetheless regally shares canine monopoly of Persian rugs in the great hall while waiting to accompany the master down to the beach.

That stroll along his private stretch of red sand, followed by a swim towards the equator, has been his daily habit since Perkins bought Bukit Tersen, Smiling Hill, 34 years ago. The two-and-a-half acres had been part of an old plantation managed by him. The house he based on Clovelly, another estate manor, adding the servants' wing when he could afford to, and later a water tower.



Observing local custom he engaged a *Bomah*, a Chinese geomancer, to ensure no ill spirit should bedevil his property. "The *bomah* thought this the most propitious site he'd seen," says Perky. "but he said the layout should be moved 15 degrees to the right. So that is what I did." The practical benefit is that nature's four winds can be drawn into the hall, creating the cooling system.

The hall is central to everything. It fans out through polished teak archways to the dining room, the book-lined study, the majestic staircase. Four main

bedrooms have balconies extending around the building, overlooking the Straits to the west, a Malay regiment parade ground east.

Downstairs, history hangs from every wall. Innumerable insects have met their end inside glass bookcases. They lie in dust, having attempted no doubt too rich a diet of Conrad and Kipling, Greene and Maugham, Dylan Thomas and Jane Austen . . . and Perkins, RB, whose *State Surveying*, first published in 1939, is into its fifth edition. "Compulsive reading, I assure you," he says.

Elsewhere in the study, inlaid in the wood panelling, is Dutch marquetry, three-centuries-old, left by an uncle who edited the *Calcutta Statesman*. In the dining-room water colours of Lake Windermere and Loch Ness are faced by Queen Adelaide—a signed portrait of the wife of William IV, dated 1823. Her physician, Dr Harris Dunsford, married into Perky's mother's family.

Queen Adelaide in sepia is no match for the Pink Lady in oils. She, the great, great, great grandmother of the householder, looks down from the

entrance with a look which brings tears to the eyes of the St David's Welsh Society. They muster in Singapore each Crimean Armistice Day, November 11, hoping to be invited back to Port Dickson where Perky lays on Welsh rabbit, wine, whisky and song.

There are about the hall muskets that have fired in anger and mementoes left by travellers — a polished miner's lamp, a bust of Sir Stamford Raffles, a monkey cutely carved out of coconut shell.

Atop the crimson-carpeted stairs the arms of Bromsgrove School, ➤ 43

## PERKINS continued

Worcestershire, where the Perkins boys were sent for expensive educations, exhort *Regi Deo Vici-no*, God for King and Country. The family crest answers back *Toujours Loyale*. Perky's commission into the Malay Regiment stands beside his father's Boer War commission and a photograph of his mother receiving the OBE for Red Cross work in France during the Great War.

Dylan Thomas remembered her in verse for performances of Electra in her garden in Sketty, Swansea. And when the big house he built on the other side of the world is quiet, Perky thinks of her too. He recalls specifically the chance meeting and the impulse which took him away from her.

"It was near to Christmas, 1928," he begins. "In the Kardomah Cafe in Swansea, I met the father of Archie Hill, a rugby- and tennis-playing friend.

"Where's Archie?" I asked.

"Gone out to Malaya planting rubber."

"My mind flew to pirates and daggers. I pictured Archie walking along with bags of seed, casting them in rows as he walked.

"Says he's having a mar-

vellous time,' Mr Hill told me, 'riding his motor cycle on roads cut through jungle, seeing lions and tigers and elephants.'"

Young Perkins turned out to be the type of chap Dunlop was keen to recruit. Public school, could handle a rugger ball (essential if the team being moulded under Scots full back Danny Drysdale was to knock the blocks off the team from rival planter Guthrie). Unattached fellows who knew how to play hard were the sort to stick it out in Malaya. And, by the by, Perky had experience in land surveying and mine engineering.

Mrs Perkins was rather taken aback by the speed of things. Ronald may have been 25, but she had brooded on the train ride back from London after his interview at St James's Square. She was losing not one son but both. His young brother Lionel had signed up with the Asiatic Petroleum Co in Bangkok, from where an uncle had never returned after marrying a governor's daughter. "Mother was a little bit upset," muses Perky, "after I told her I was sailing in a fortnight."

It was goodbye, mother. Goodbye to the family metals business he had never considered. Goodbye to the underground shafts at Pontedhalas pit. And goodbye to a young beauty of the valleys who chose another suitor.

The P & O steamer Malwa was not the last word in luxury cruising. She creaked below decks where makeshift plates covered torpedo holes. She creaked for 28 days between coal stops.

Once in Malaya, waking by bugle blast on Dunlop's Bahau estate, six junior field assistants like Perkins tumbled out of wooden bungalows in pre-dawn darkness. Up on the road they conducted a roll-call among 1200 labourers, mostly Tamils from southern India. "The healthy ones cried '*Ajah*' - present," recalls Perky. "The sick ones got a shot of quinine and were pronounced hale."

The coolies were paid by how much they brought in, assistants a salary of 200 Malay dollars a month, rising by 25 dollars a year with a further 25 dollars for learning the Tamil equivalent of "put your backs into it". A dollar was worth 28 pence; three dollars bought a bottle of whisky.

Weekends were normal labour days for coolies. For the chaps, after muster, came rugby

or golf. Later, in the ambience of Malay's longest bar at the Sungei Ujong Club, Perkins discovered "the most beautiful women around were Siamese, not Malay".

Saturday nights habitually blurred into Sunday mornings, returning in the nick of time to take muster. Just once it backfired. Perky and Teddy Prior reached the plantation at 4.30am - too early for the bugle call, too late for bed. Instead they snored through muster in the car. They were "gated" for three months.

## 'We were called bloody fools standing up for those bloody Nips'

Sundays were the days young planters took turns to host "curry tiffin". A story retold a thousand times still brings tears to Perky's eyes. "A neighbour forgot he'd invited us and went off somewhere else," smiles Perkins. "We disposed of his beer and whisky. Then we felt peckish, so we drove his chickens across the front lawn, shot them with his .303, and ordered his cook to make curry."

Cruel humour, but plantation pitfalls were utterly humourless. Perkins twice survived malaria. He then endured three years in Japanese war camps.

On June 20, 1942, the inevitable postcard reached Sketty: "I am a prisoner of war. Not wounded. Very fit and well treated. Don't worry. All my love, Ronald."

Lieutenant Perkins knew better than most the bare necessities of life in pitilessly cramped, hot, diseased confinement. It was a matter of spirit as much as substance. Inside Changi camp, Singapore, he planted spinach to fight vitamin deficiency. He led university and drama groups, and still has the hand-drawn poster of his production of *Night Must Fall* in which he played, as always, "an old nurse - the handsome young fellows played the pretty girls".

Months afterwards, PoWs were railroaded by the thousand to build the Burma-Siam link. He "luckily" ended up at Chungkai, the Thai end of the line. As anti-malaria officer he

supervised crop-growing, drain digging . . . and grave digging. He re-entered the camp to tidy graves a week after war's end. "In our absence," he reveals, "Thais had attacked the graves with great vigour - extracting bottles, tin boxes and compasses." Thais from the same community as those fêting the released prisoners.

And he, too, had to desecrate a body, to retrieve a box containing a vital theory on a beri-beri cure. "I dug down to the very bones of the poor corpse," he whispers. "I could find no tin. A friend had a go and he got it."

He was then 42, twice as old as some hundreds worked to death by the Japanese. He lost three planter friends, and Archie Hill, so far as Perkins knows, never came out of Singapore. Three months after the war he returned to the Far East. He had shared Liverpool's tumultuous homecoming ("welcoming us as heroes instead of the miserable capitulators of Singapore we were"). He had cherished the first sit in an upholstered chair in three years, and the "inestimable pleasure of a walk through English countryside".

But the planter was not home. Malaya beckoned still, with its trees overflowing, the quarters unchanged, opportunity large as ever. Before throwing himself into it, he wrote a most surprising letter:

To: President,  
War Crimes Court,  
Victoria Memorial Hall,  
Singapore. 21 October 1945.  
Sir,

I read in today's (Straits) Sunday Times that among the senior Japanese officers to be tried before you this week is one Lt Col Yanagita. If this is the officer who was in command of No 2 PoW Camp in Siam I am prepared to testify in court if necessary that I was in the group under Col Yanagita from November 1942 until he handed over command in about November 1944 and that, in my definite opinion, he was always kind and humane to the prisoners in his charge and that he did all in his power to ameliorate their lot. In consideration of this I sincerely hope he will be completely acquitted. I have never spoken to Col Yanagita and I am completely unknown to him.

I have the honour to be, Sir,  
your obedient servant,

Perkins allows a visitor to read the fading copy of that letter. "I did the right thing," he says without being asked. "On the whole, I'm sure it

was the proper thing to do." There is a pause, a setting of the jaw. "I told him the same thing, you know. I hardly saw him in the camp, none of us did. But after the trial he came to the back of the court and thanked me for 'that difficult and dangerous thing'. I told him I did only what I thought was right."

Alone among Japanese commanders Yanagita escaped the death penalty. "He couldn't do a lot, the Japs couldn't get materials up," adds Perkins. "But he would go out of his way to do all that he could. It was terrible up there, but some camps were cruelly run."

After the trial, Perky and another witness for Yanagita went to Raffles Hotel. "I didn't expect to be beaten up," Perkins observes. "But I knew I would be abused. The prosecutors were in Raffles and we were called bloody fools standing up for those bloody Nips."

Personal contact between Yanagita, a Japanese jailor, and Perkins, his British prisoner, began and ended with two sentences in a makeshift courtroom. For some years afterwards Perky received letters from Yanagita's relatives.

Postwar Perkins "experienced no inconvenience whatever". So he says. Communist terrorists and Indonesian Konfrontasi spent a decade and a half trying to inconvenience planters. Their inconvenience, it seems, was kept at bay by a .45 revolver, two Malay marksmen, and a deal of stiff upper lip as Perkins did his rounds as general manager to nine estates.

What Japanese, Communist and Indonesians failed to finish, it sometimes seemed a combination of Dewars whisky and heavy right foot might. Perky cheerfully admits to three demolitions - the MG wedged beneath a Singapore bus, the BMW plunged into the Straits, the Bentley crashed into Port Dickson Yacht Club.

Colleagues marked the cliff-top where the BMW took off as "Perky's Leap", but he recently commandeered the sign. His motoring *coup de grace*, however, remains driving the white Bentley through the outer wall of the yacht club's new billiard hall. "The car was wrecked," he says benignly. "I can't remember being hurt." Pride was stung a little when the regional king, expecting to open the wing officially, wrote to the club's future life commodore: "I understand, old boy, >>>> 48



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you opened the club yourself.”

The chauffeur now jealously guards the unscratched green XJ. “As for me,” reiterates Perky, “I never touch a drop before the sun goes down.”

The difficulty now is the daytime. Mornings tend towards eternity. He re-reads Austen or gazes out at passing ships. It may seem he did his rounds yesterday or the day before, but in reality it was five years ago. The last 218-acre plantation – which he owns in equal partnership with the acting king, the chief justice, and the regional bus operator – is drying up. It is rented to a Chinaman, doubtless destined for more of the blue slate holiday villas mushrooming around the coast.

Edison, his secretary, still lives on the plantation from where he sent his children into the world as a vet and a nurse. He is less a manager of land than of Perky's – Mr Perkins's – affairs. Edison pops in more than is necessary to sign income-tax cheques, square the housekeeping, arrange what Perkins forgets. “The most loyal man you could meet,” Perkins says, embarrassing Edison. “He took only one wife, you know.”

Perky took none. Had he



Punctually at 4:15pm Perkins strolls his private beach before swimming towards the Equator

never contemplated marriage? His remarkably unfaded blue eyes consider the question. “Molly Owen-Harris,” he answers. “There was Molly Owen-Harris, a Swansea girl, rather well off. But I didn't get very far with it . . .”

Brother Lionel, visiting from South Africa, interjects: “I don't think you were all that serious.” “Wasn't I?” Perky responds,

assuming a knowing elder-brother tone. “Anyway, she married some other fellow, and within three months they both died in an influenza epidemic.”

As to his own life, he's quite happy as he is. There follows thoughtful silence, punctuated by the chimes of a grandfather clock. “You're staying to lunch?” he enquires again. He calls “*Makan*”, food, and Ah

Liang is ready with the silver. His afternoon nap ends punctually at 4.15 when, without fail, he goes to the sea.

Down rolling lawns, past monkey jack trees and wooded slope, and then a mile to and fro across the sand, his walk is measured, brisk. The body has few fleshy folds, the legs a reassuring sturdiness. “I'm pushing 40, you know . . . into my second childhood.” He swims gently, persistently through the pleasant shift in warmth where the Indian Ocean meets the Straits.

His guests, he says, always like to bathe. “I've had a conversation with the commissioner of Malaya while relieving myself right here, you know.”

Other guests with whom he might have filled the ocean down the years included Sir Gerald Templer, commander of the British forces during the communist emergency, and Graham Greene. They grew accustomed to Perky's hospitable ways, to his party piece of promising to play his unique gramophone record after sundown. “You might think it Caruso – after a whisky or two!”

There is not sufficient alcohol in the bottle for that. *Malaysia, Our Homeland Adored* is composed and sung by Perky leading the Malay Regiment Eighth Battalion band. To his everlasting amazement it was not adopted as the anthem for Malay independence in 1957.

Perkins, however, was and is a Malay citizen, a Justice of the Peace, fellow of local charities, yacht club commodore, and not-quite-retired planter. He lives in harmony with a now Islamic

country though he has not adapted to the religion.

The erosion of British influence here has been a personal thing to him. “One by one the friends who came out with him have died,” whispers Lionel. “He misses them, he misses them all very much indeed.” Still, his roots are here. He talks of moving to the Cameron Highlands in northern Malaysia, where the temperature is like an English summer's day. But it is talk. He couldn't break his bonds with Smiling Hill where his chattels were fixed 30 years ago.

The approaching dusk is signalled by drinks and mosquitoes. To Perky's evident amusement his sister-in-law Peggy moves about the house spraying the air and offering roll-on insect repellent. “They never bite a God-fearing person,” he says interminably.

His own malaria bouts must have happened when they, the mosquitoes, forgot he was so God-fearing. Peggy's moment of triumph comes when a mosquito draws Perky's blood before he can swipe it from the back of his hand. “Ronald!” she exclaims, “You've been *stung*.” His answer is to pour another stiff whisky, which meets with scarcely more approval from her.

The air, nevertheless, is sweetened by the almond fragrance of frangipani shrubs. At 7pm he calls “*Makan*”; Ah Liang serves dinner. After trying for the umpteenth time to talk his visitor into staying, Perky stands outside his porch, the wave as friendly and somehow as shy as in the morning.

On the rough track down Smiling Hill a night jar calls attention to a faint light. It brings to mind a revealing conversation during the swim. “There's a bungalow out on that headland,” he pointed out. “I've often admired it. The Frenchman who owns it phoned the other day to ask if I'd swap my place for his. Most indignant he was when I said no. But if I were selling, I'd want six million [Malay ringgit, equal to £1.8 million], and all the Frenchman will get is a valuation figure. Perhaps he didn't know I'd heard the government were taking his land.”

Or perhaps he hoped Perky might forget. But, even if he did, Edison would not stand idly by and see his Mr Perkins separated by sleight of mind from his home. Dunlop was right all along: Perky has what it takes to stick it out in the Far East ●

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