My Grandfather, the Prince of Tin

Around 1883, aged 20, my maternal grandfather, Charles George Ogilvie, left his home in north eastern Scotland to make his way to British Malaya. By then he had already worked on a sugar plantation in the West Indies, having found passage by banana boat with two friends from Aberdeen Grammar School when they were only 17 years old. Clearly driven to explore the opportunities that the British Empire then offered a young man, it is impossible to imagine the hopes and aspirations that Charles experienced during his sea crossing to Malaya, but if he set out with the intention of making his fortune, he was to prove remarkably successful. This is a glimpse of his extraordinary story.

The Kinta district of Perak (north of Kuala Lumpur) had known tin mining for centuries, but the industry had suffered during the Perak War of 1875-76. It was also the case that some of the areas richest in tin were inaccessible except by river. Ho Tak Ming, in his excellent book *Ipoh: When Tin was King*, tells us that the short distance between Taiping, the administrative capital of Perak, and Kinta, today an hour on the motorway, then took a journey of around 2 weeks to complete, involving a trek to Port Weld, a steamship to Penang, another to Durian Sebatang and a boat ride up the Perak and Kinta Rivers.

However, industrial advances in more developed parts of the world brought fresh impetus to the search for newer, and more productive sources, and the rich alluvial deposits of Kinta proved an effective lure. As the 1880's got underway, miners began arriving in their droves, and Ipoh, until then a small *kampong* consisting of riverine *atap* huts, began the start of an extraordinary transformation as it grew to become the beating heart of the Kinta tin industry. Before too long the world's most productive tin mines were to be found there.

Charles first took up employment as an Inspector of Mines, but he was a natural speculator, an entrepreneur at heart, and soon he had no financial need to continue his government work. Not long after his arrival, Charles invested in a mining concession outside Ipoh. He had hit upon what was later to be described as the 'deepest and richest mine in the Peninsula' (Kinta Monthly Report 1889). The success it brought him earned him the sobriquet 'the Tin Prince', and in a poem titled *The Kinta Alphabet* and published in the Taiping paper, the Perak Pioneer, in 1895, one line read: 'O is for Ogilvie, the *Sorakai** Millionaire'.

If chance had played any part in his choice of concession, it appears to be through good management that he made it successful. European miners, greatly outnumbered by Chinese, often failed to make their mines productive. While it was easier for Europeans to acquire the land, keeping down the labour costs (Chinese coolies) proved more challenging. It was noted that those Europeans who learned to combine European with Chinese systems of actually working the mines – and Charles' name was specifically mentioned in this context – were far more successful than those employing European methods alone. His admiration for Chinese mining methods was described in a letter to which he was signatory (1901), complementing not the 'Prince', but the 'King of Tin', the *Towkay* Foo Choo Choon, on the running of his mine.

He may have found success, but life cannot always have been easy. The rapid growth of Ipoh gave rise to problems with transport, sanitation and violence. Sickness in tropical climes was always a threat, and there is a report in the Straits Times (1902) of Charles experiencing a bad fever, but it is followed by another referring to him looking much better for his 'change at sea'. Going to sea to recover from illness was certainly practiced at the time Raffles was living in Southeast Asia, perhaps this too was a sea trip purely for medicinal purposes.

On the more positive side, there is much evidence of Charles' social and sporting life. In 1898 he was elected President of the recently formed Ipoh Club. He played cricket and for years this was enjoyed on a rough piece of land beside the Police Barracks where, it is recorded, their bar consisted of a bottle of whisky and a goblet of water kept under the staircase of the barracks. In 1897, although a major recession in the tin industry was underway, Charles organised a committee comprising 7 Europeans, 4 Malays and 4 Chinese to raise money to buy land for a recreational area in Ipoh. The move was intended to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, but must also have been welcomed by the sportsmen. He went on to captain the cricket team.

In 1903 the Ipoh Golf Club and the Ipoh Gymkhana Club both came into being. Charles was a director of the former, and an active participant in the latter, as a race horse owner, a presenter of prizes, and when he fell off his pony, Flea, and broke his collarbone while riding the course!

In the mid 1890's added as

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The tin recession was a stimulus for diversification, and the first direction that some of the miners, including Charles, turned was towards coffee. A collapse in international coffee prices, combined with the invasion of a pesky caterpillar, brought these ventures to an end as fast as they had begun, and this is the time that investors were to turn to rubber. The rubber tree (indigenous to Brazil) had only arrived in the area in 1877 when a number of seedlings were successfully grown in the Botanic Gardens in Singapore. The Malay climate and soil were ideal for the trees. At the same time as coffee proved a poor investment, burgeoning international demand was pushing rubber prices up, and Charles, among others, decided to invest. He named one of his plantations Strathisla, for his home in Scotland. Ironically if you do a google search today for Strathisla, all you will find in Malaysia now is a Tamil language school by that name.

Charles married his first wife, Jean Littlejohn George, in Penang in 1890, and they had one son. When Charles' brother Thomas had died, he had schooled and then provided work for four of Thomas's sons in his Malayan businesses. The stories of this next generation are both fascinating and, in some cases, tragic. Their son, Chaelis, died in a car crash in 1936, two nephews received Orders of the British Empire for services to the tin industry and to game conservancy, at least one was enrolled in the Malay State Volunteer Rifles during WWI, they were prisoners of the Japanese during WWII and one had the extreme misfortune to be among the first Europeans murdered by terrorists in the Malayan Emergency of 1948. Jean died in 1910, and Charles married my grandmother in 1911. She came out to visit once, when it was recorded that she was fascinated by the beautiful country and the delightful Malay people. This seems to be the end of his time spent in Malaya, though the business interests continued.

When Charles planted coffee he also grew coconuts. As my paternal grandfather was a planter in Jamaica, where he grew both bananas and coconuts, I have to wonder if the spark that lit the relationship between my parents when they first met after WW2 was the discovery that both of their fathers were coconut farmers. My family's interests in Jamaica continued into the 1970s, and I do share one of life's more unusual experiences with Charles Ogilvie – as a young child I too travelled to the West Indies on a banana boat. I have been living in Singapore for five years now, but my personal connections with tin, coffee, coconuts, bananas and rubber have faded with the dying embers of Empire.

**Sorakai* is the name of a gourd, which presumably grew in the area of Charles' tin mine

1,298 words plus 17-word footnote

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