

# For Review Only

THE ISTANA  
1867-2017

The  
ISTANA



This definitive publication on the Istana grants us access to the grand old building like never before. Authoritative, well-researched text and stunning photography guide us on an intimate and detailed tour through the history, architecture and grounds of the Istana, while introducing us to the people that were part of the journey along the way.

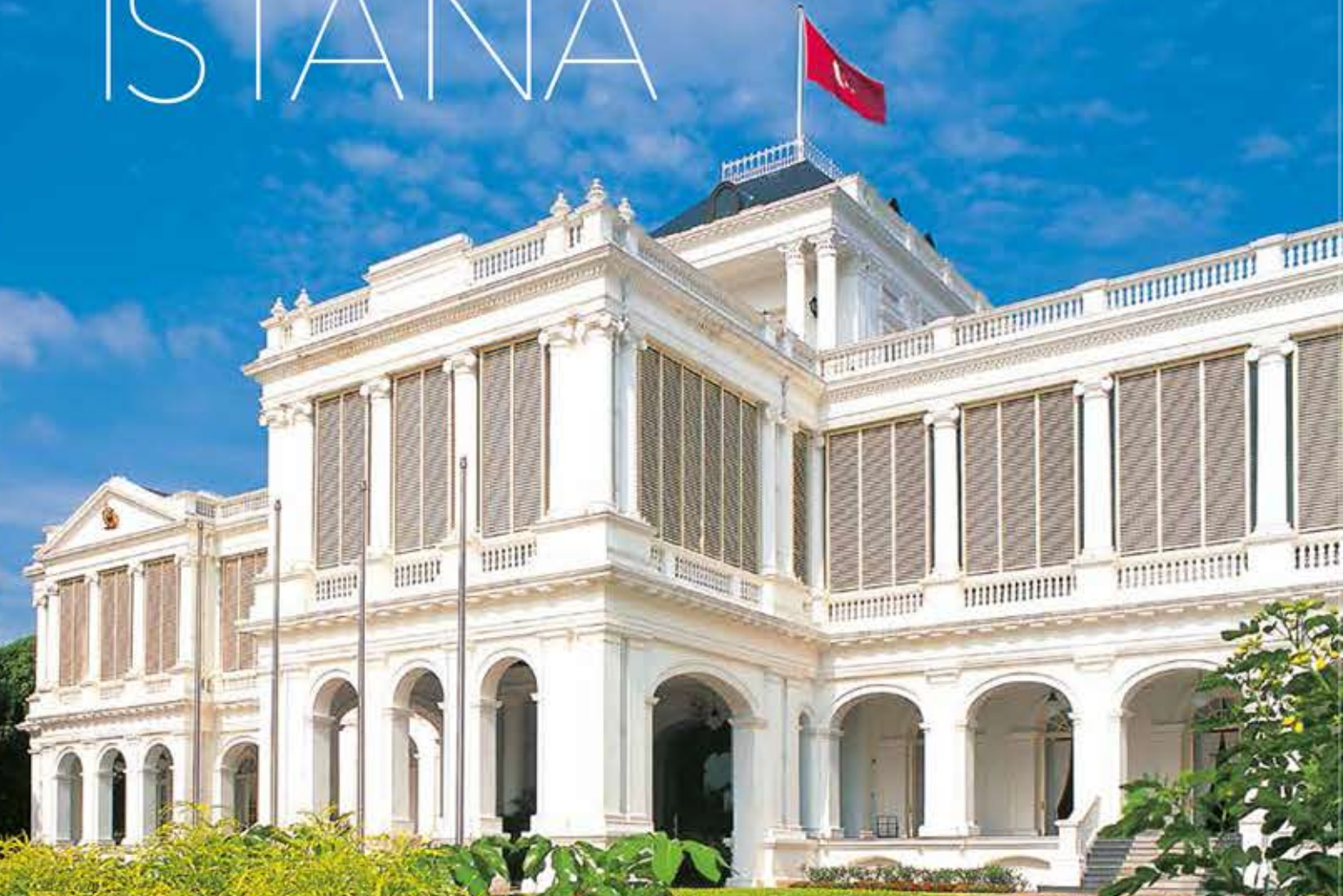
As a working palace, the Istana is tradition firmly rooted in the present and while its form and functions may have evolved over the past 150 years, the Istana has always been entwined with Singapore's larger history and today stands as a true palace for the people.

**mc** Marshall Cavendish  
Editions

150 YEARS  
THE ISTANA  
1867-2017

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# The ISTANA

THIRD EDITION



The arcaded verandah lends shade and shelter while ensuring thorough ventilation. Suspended from the ceiling of the verandah at regular intervals are bell-shaped white opaline glass pendants that impart a touch of muted elegance.



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## FOREWORD



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The Istana marks its 150th anniversary this year, in the same year that Singapore is also commemorating its Bicentennial. This is a good moment to reflect on how far we have come as Singaporeans, and how the Istana's evolution reflects our shared history as one people.

From the building's hybrid design and the historic events that have taken place within its walls, to the way the grounds serve as a living record of Singapore's botanical and trading heritage, the Istana embodies Singapore's rich multicultural tapestry and longstanding identity as a regional hub.

Over the years, the Istana has received many distinguished foreign leaders and hosted many significant state events. It is also the site of Singaporeans' collective memories, where many outstanding contributors to our society have been honoured and recognised. Since the first Open House in 1960, the Istana has also been opened to public five times a year, attracting tens of thousands of visitors each time.

More recently, the Istana has played host to many community groups at picnics and garden tours. We have also invited the help of dedicated volunteers to guide visitors, help tend the gardens, and organise activities for the disadvantaged.

I am glad that, over time, we have made many beautiful memories here at the Istana. This book tells its story and the many people who are a part of this story. I hope the book will inspire more to appreciate the Istana's place in the heart and history of Singapore.

**Halimah Yacob**

*President of Singapore*

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## THE HISTORY

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The British Union Jack still flew from the central tower of Government House during the twilight years of colonialism after the Japanese Occupation.



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## 1822: THE FIRST GOVERNMENT HOUSE

Although Stamford Raffles, an administrator of the British East India Company, is regarded as the founder of modern Singapore, the total period of time he actually spent on the island was quite brief. His longest – and final – stay in Singapore occurred in 1822, lasting some eight months. During this time, he commissioned the construction of a dwelling that eventually became the first Government House, the precursor of today's Istana.

More than two years after first landing in Singapore in 1819, Raffles returned to the island for a last visit in October 1822. He arrived from Bencoolen (now Bengkulu City, Indonesia), where he had served as the Lieutenant Governor. In poor health, he wanted a home conducive to recuperation, and settled on a site on Bukit Larangan (present day Fort Canning). The hill lay within the increasingly bustling township that had grown up along the Singapore River, and was free from the fevers and dysentery of the rural areas, while its elevation ensured cooler temperatures.

The spot also had a rich history – it was believed to be the seat of the ancient kings of Singapore. Bukit Larangan means Forbidden Hill, and this name may have originated from a



Above: Sir Stamford Raffles, who founded Singapore in 1819, had his home at Government House. It was sited on Forbidden Hill and the slight elevation was thought to make the air cleaner and more congenial to his weak health.

Opposite: The first Government House took in a wide vista from its elevated position and overlooked the original St Andrew's Church, then without tower or spire.



royal practice of forbidding commoners to ascend the hill. Its northern slope was purportedly the burial place of Iskandar Shah, one of these kingly figures. In a letter, Raffles mused that “if [his] bones must remain in the East, they would have the honour of mixing with the ashes of Malay kings”.

Following the arrival of the British in Singapore in 1819, Resident William Farquhar had planted a flagstaff flying the British flag on Bukit Larangan, partly to dispel rumours of ghosts and hauntings. Raffles’ bungalow was sited close to this flagstaff, and it was designed and constructed by George D. Coleman, a young Irish architect.

### GEORGE D. COLEMAN

Coleman became a consequential figure in Singapore’s early architectural and urban development. As an architect, he was responsible for iconic buildings such as the Armenian Church and the Old Parliament House (now The Arts House). As the first Government Superintendent of Public Works, he constructed North Bridge Road and South Bridge Road. Singapore’s Coleman Street and Coleman Bridge are named after him.

Building commenced in the last week of December 1822, and a mere fortnight and \$900 later, the bungalow was completed. It was 100 feet wide and 50 feet deep, and had rough plank walls and a thatched roof of attap palm fronds.

Reviews of the new dwelling were mixed. Some praised its picturesque surroundings and panoramic view of the town’s Commercial Square (later renamed Raffles Place and still the heart of Singapore’s financial district). Others felt it was cramped and ramshackle, comparing it unfavourably to grander establishments owned by some of the island’s European inhabitants.



Above: The view from the top of Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill) overseeing Boat Quay and the old harbour.

Opposite: Southern central Singapore in 1833 as captured on a map based on a survey by George D. Coleman shortly after he was appointed Superintendent of Public Works and Land Surveyor. The Irish architect also designed the first Government House, where Sir Stamford Raffles lived.





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Raffles left Singapore for good in 1823, barely five months after moving in. John Crawfurd, who succeeded Farquhar as Resident, moved in, and undertook some renovations – the first of many subsequent repairs, refurbishments and additions made by Singapore’s colonial administrators. In 1836, this building became the Government House when the centre of administration for the Straits Settlements shifted from Penang to Singapore, but plans and petitions for a more presentable alternative continued to recur.

The fate of this Government House was only sealed in 1859. Two years earlier, a mutiny against British rule had erupted in the garrison town of Meerut, India, and spread to other parts of the country. This turn of events underlined for Singapore’s colonial authorities their need for a more robust defence against threats both foreign and domestic. The latter might include unrest sparked by local pirates, Chinese secret society members, and Indian convicts.

In this context, the sweeping view from Bukit Larangan became a strategic advantage for military fortifications. In 1859, the first Government House was demolished. The site was renamed Fort Canning (after Charles John Canning, who had served as the Governor-General of India during the quelling of the 1857 Indian Mutiny), and became home to seven 68-pounder cannons facing seawards.

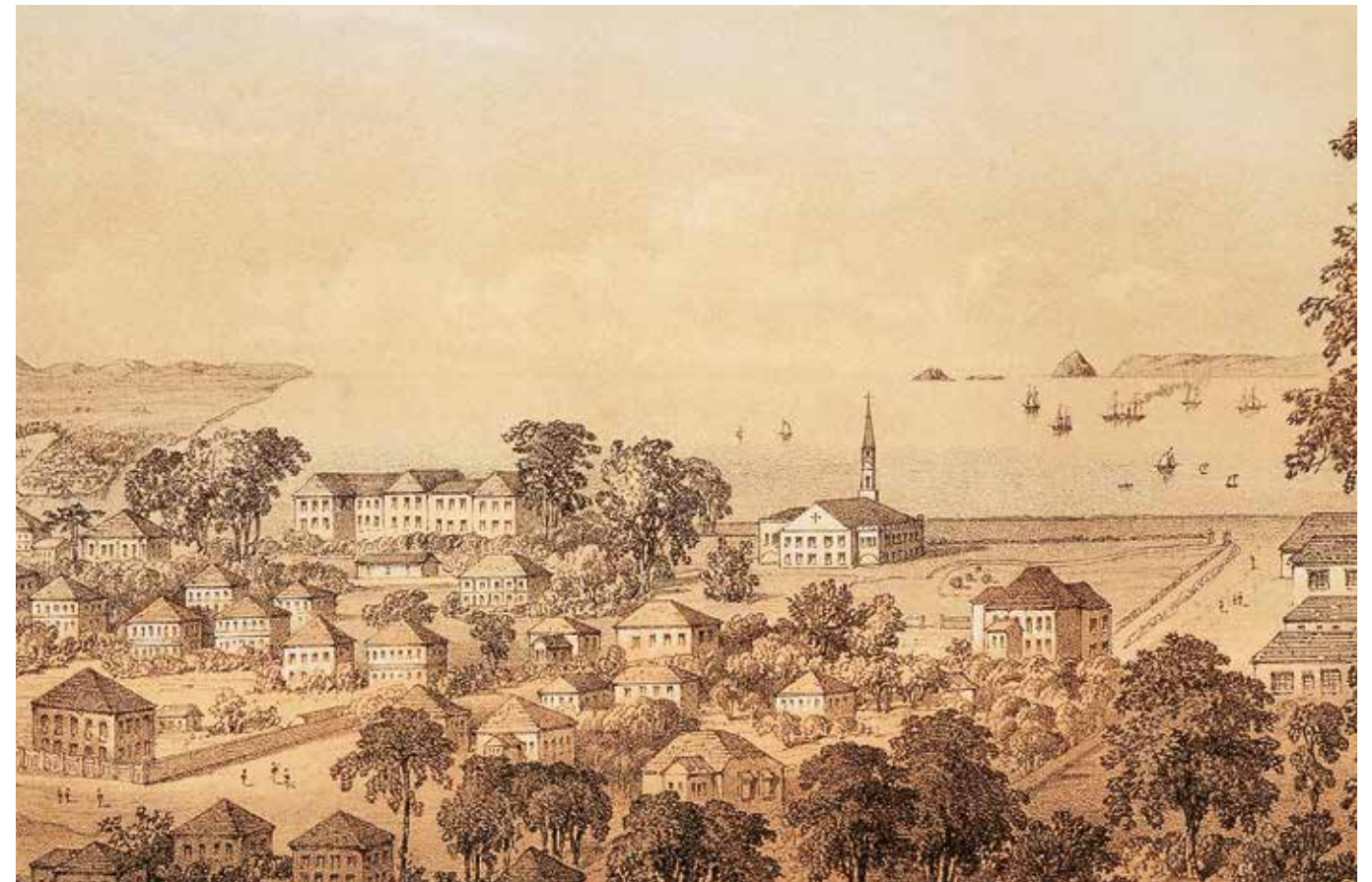
## 1869: A NEW HYBRID EMERGES

In 1867, Singapore became a Crown Colony as a part of the Straits Settlements, which also comprised Melaka and Penang. This meant that the Colonial Office in London now controlled its administration, rather than the government of British India. Harry St George Ord became the first Colonial Governor of the Straits Settlements, and put plans for a new official residence into motion.

First, he found a site – a little over 100 acres of a former nutmeg plantation, belonging to the estate of merchant Charles Robert Prinsep. The undulating plot was approximately 40 metres above sea level, and bounded by



Colonel William Farquhar was appointed Singapore’s first Resident shortly after its founding by the British and he ran the island in Sir Stamford Raffles’ absence.



Top: Paintings from the 1830s to 1840s depict views of the hill on which Government House was built. The top left image shows the perspective north of the Singapore River and Presentment Bridge (c. 1822, the first bridge built over the Singapore River, also known as the Monkey Bridge). The top right image captures the original Armenian Church (erected in c. 1835-1836) and on its right the Christian burial ground where early Europeans and Chinese Christian settlers were interred.

Bottom: Raffles described the view from the location of his future house, which included such sights as St Andrew’s Church and the bay in the distance, as “of unequalled beauty and interest” in a letter to the Duchess of Somerset. Such a view is envisaged in the 1852 painting.

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## A TOUR OF THE ISTANA

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Flowerbeds form part of the formal Front Lawn of the Istana. Many of the flowers are cultivated in the Istana's own nursery for decorative and landscaping purposes.



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State guests arriving by car will get their first glimpse of the Istana before being escorted into the foyer.

## ARCHITECTURE

The Istana Main Building sits on top of a 40m-high hill that was once described as “the most commanding spot on the island”. On a clear day, one used to be able to glimpse the Indonesian islands and the hills of Johor, Malaysia from this spot. These days, the view is very different – the skyscrapers of the central business district now take centre stage on the horizon. Just outside the Main Gate of the Istana domain, the hustle and bustle of traffic and pedestrians along Orchard Road is further testament to how much Singapore has developed over the past 150 years.

Gazetted together with Sri Temasek as a National Monument in 1992, the Istana embodies the history and evolution of this fast-changing city state. The Main Building’s architecture reflects its colonial roots, with hallmarks of a classical British style that was widely adopted for civic buildings beginning in the 18th century. The 28m-tall central tower is topped with a slate mansard roof, and flanked by colonnaded wings, each terminating in pediments. The frontage employs a classic Palladian hierarchy, with a row of Doric pilasters, architraves, cornices and arches at the base, followed by Ionic columns, a continuous cornice and balustrade on the next tier, and Corinthian columns and dormer windows on the highest tier.



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This architectural style had begun to evolve when the British brought it to India, and the Main Building illustrates how it also adapted to Singapore's tropical context. Besides a layout that echoed that of a traditional Malay house, with the entrance porch leading to rooms on either side, the Main Building borrows from other features of regional architecture. It rests on dwarfed arches and piers that elevate it over a metre above the ground – much like houses built on stilts, this enables better air circulation and ventilation. Deeply recessed verandahs, hooded openings and overhangs, and louvred windows and shutters also help to temper heat and reduce glare.

The building was well appointed from the start, with a foundation of 15 feet, and the front block sitting on granite plates. Underground drainage was installed, and roof cisterns supplied water to the bathrooms. In 1869, when the building was completed, a princely sum of \$6,500 was spent on furnishings, which were mostly imported from England. Subsequent governors added their own decorative touches, in the form of furnishings, china, cutlery, carpets, decorations and linen.

Periodic renovations over the years helped to ensure the Main Building kept up with the times and always presented its best face to the public. In 1913, the first electric lamps were installed, and electric fans replaced the manually operated punkahs. Other modern amenities, such as a lift and a refrigerator for the kitchen, would soon make their appearances in the years that followed.

In 1914, a two-storey annexe was added to the rear of the east wing. The annexe was designed in a classical style, with features such as large casement windows and decorated plasterwork, to ensure it was in harmony with the Main Building. In 1936, a third storey was added to this annexe, to house staff accommodation and offices. The year 1940 saw \$108,600 worth of repairs made, along with the addition of more rooms in the Main Building. Repairs made immediately after World War II were undertaken by



Above and opposite: While the interiors of Government House supposedly paled in comparison with the dwellings of the rich Chinese merchants of that period, its location "in the midst of a beautiful park", as characterised by the wife of the First Earl of Brassey, more than compensated for its perceived inadequacies.

## VIEWING PLEASURE

A significant change during the refurbishments in 1940 was the conversion of the front porch roof into a flat terrace. Today, this terrace serves as a balcony from which one can enjoy a panoramic view of the grounds.



Japanese prisoners of war. In 1954, the addition of yet more offices and other renovations cost \$182,000.

The most extensive overhaul took place from 1996 to 1998, during which original features were restored or replaced, the interiors were redesigned and a three-storey extension added. Great care was taken to retain and enhance the architectural character of the building while also sprucing it up.

For instance, modern fittings such as mechanically activated louvres and air-conditioning were introduced, and glass walls were consequently added to the external verandahs. The original flooring of white Java marble on these verandahs, which was damaged, was replaced with white granite imported from Spain. Bell-shaped opaline lights whose glass shades were mouth-blown in Austria were added, alternating with three-bladed period ceiling fans for a touch of understated elegance. New automatic

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sliding glass doors were installed for the front porch, paired with a new gate left open at all times as a symbolic gesture of welcome.

In 2017, the Function Lawn underwent a year-long upgrading exercise – its wooden trellises have been replaced with metal ones, and a new drainage system and lightning conductors have been installed.

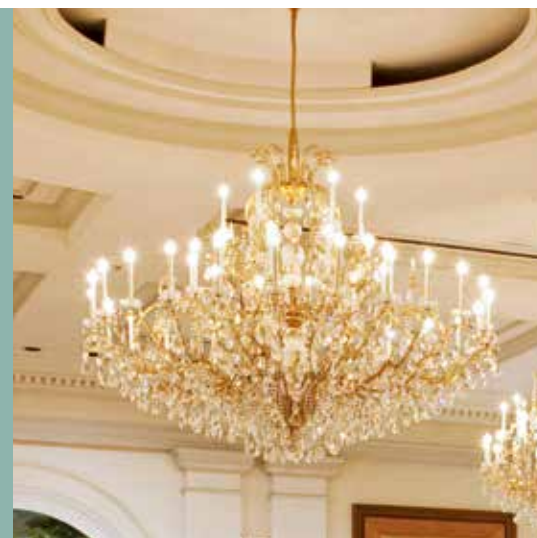
## Ground Floor: Entry Foyer and Atrium

With its polished white marble floor and walls lined with Ionic pilasters and Doric columns, the foyer gives a first impression of formal grandeur, which is accentuated by the row of polished strass full-lead-crystal chandeliers on the ceiling, done in an 18th century design known as Maria Theresa.

Look a little closer, however, and you'll spot some endearing homegrown touches. The Guardian of the House takes pride of place on the landing of the foyer's central white marble staircase (which sports a deep red Axminster woven runner carpet with a flake design). The ceiling's plaster mouldings feature familiar tropical fruits. Chinese and Peranakan furniture and artefacts, such as a circular teak table of Straits Chinese design, also help to create a sense of place.

### LET THERE BE LIGHT

The curving arms and glittering crystal prisms of these Maria Theresa chandeliers provide much of the illumination and adornment in the Main Building. Their metal parts are gold-plated, then encased in flat glass strips to soften their hard edges. The chandeliers are complemented by strass crystal lights fitted on the walls.



A prestige guard in the number one uniform of the Singapore Armed Forces watches over the entry foyer of the Istana.

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A PALACE FOR  
THE PEOPLE

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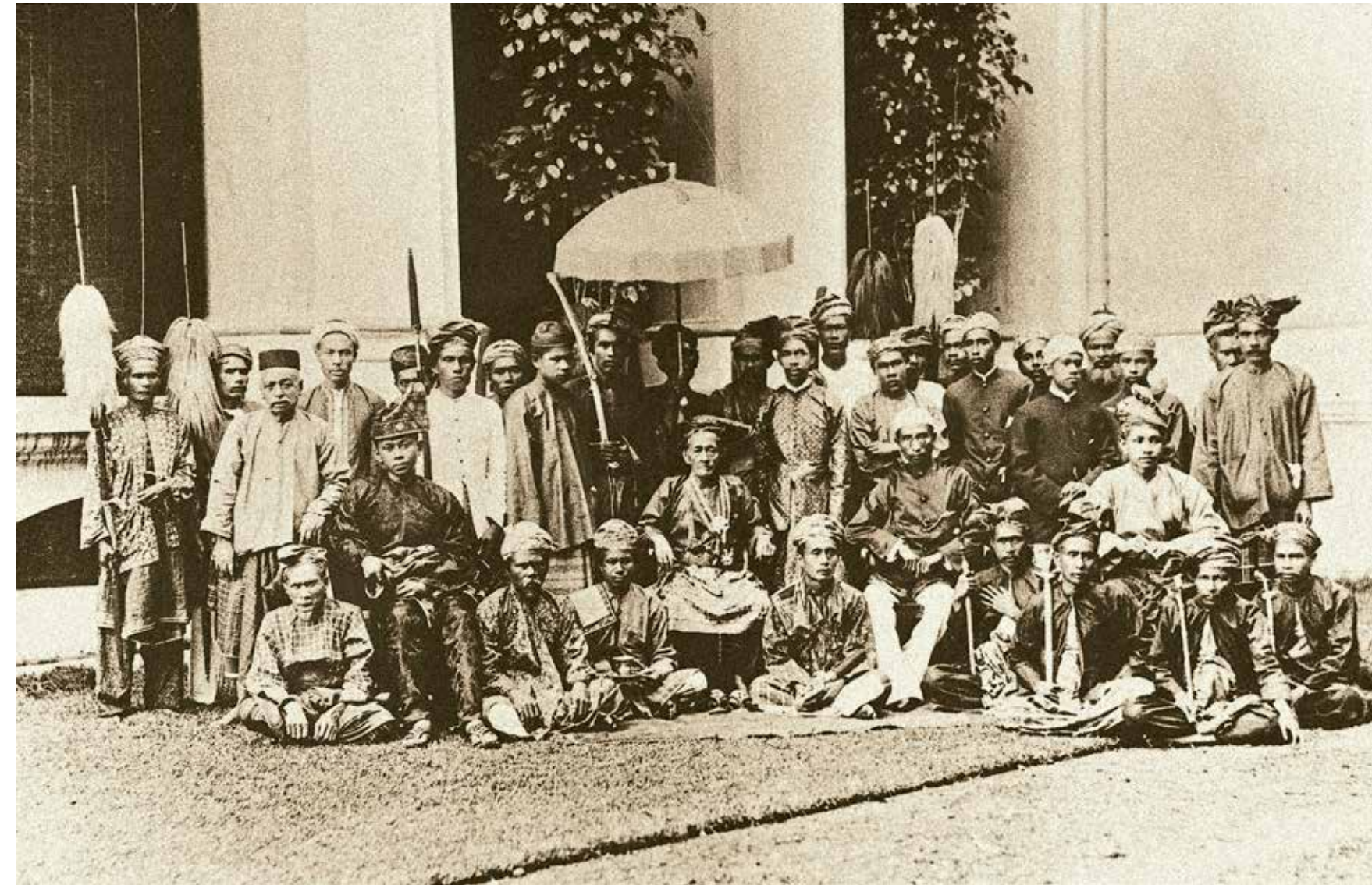


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## SOCIAL HUB

The Istana has had no lack of distinguished visitors. In fact, back when it was known as Government House, its first VIP guest was the Duke of Edinburgh, and his impending visit in 1869 even became part of the justification for increasing the building's construction budget by \$20,000, to provide for amenities such as doorbells and stables that would make the premises more fit for royalty. The picturesque Rain Tree-flanked Edinburgh Road that serves as the Istana's driveway is named after this first guest.

A few years later, when Sir Andrew Clarke became the Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1873, he and his wife turned Government House into a social hub for European visitors stopping over in Singapore en route to China. For those with large retinues, additional accommodation was found at Hotel d'Europe. Originally located at Hill Street, it was then known as one of the finest hotels in Southeast Asia (along with Raffles Hotel), and – adding to its cachet – was even perceived as an annexe to Government House since it hosted so many sojourners who were invited to Lady Clarke's soirées. The doors of that grand old hotel were shuttered in 1932 and the building was later demolished, making way for the Supreme Court.



Calling at Government House quickly became an essential part of visiting foreign dignitaries' schedules. The Sultan of Selangor, Abdul Samad called on the Governor in 1890 with a large entourage of courtiers and attendants in tow.

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To welcome these guests, the Government House often staged elaborate festivities. In 1882, brothers Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales attended a fancy dress ball thrown in their honour, which saw 4,000 paper lanterns strung from trees, and the building's façade lit up with gas jets. The princes even climbed to the summit of the house to enjoy the enchanting illuminations. Others were entranced by the grounds' lush greenery. During her stay in 1876, English botanical artist Marianne North wondered how other guests could be content with the usual English pastimes of lawn tennis and croquet when there were such fascinating tropical plants at hand to study.

A considerable number of staff was naturally required to maintain a household that could graciously host such guests on a regular basis. The employees of Government House lived on the grounds, and some of their job titles reflected the times. For example: there were punkah pullers, who manually operated the framed cloth fans that kept residents cool before electricity was introduced, and syces who were responsible for taking care of the horses. With the advent of newer technology came newer jobs, such as telephone operators.

For many years, these staff members were pretty much the only Asians at Government House, apart from the occasional emperor or sultan who came to call. That began to change during the 20th century, albeit slowly. In 1918, in a ceremony held at Government House, Tan Teck Neo, known for her charitable works, became the first Chinese woman to be conferred the title of Member of the British Empire.

## HOME GROUND

In the 1920s, some Government House staff shifted to quarters outside the grounds, at Mackenzie Road and McNair Road. But many continued to live here, along with their families, and there was even a kindergarten on the grounds for the young children of staff. It was only in the 1970s that staff quarters were phased out completely.



At the helm during the transitional post-World War II years was Sir Franklin Gimson, who would be remembered as a slow but meticulous administrator by his staff, a sizeable community in 1951 judging by this group portrait.



In 1918, Tan Teck Neo, also known as Mrs Lee Choon Guan, was the first Chinese woman to be conferred the title of Member of the British Empire at a ceremony officiated by Sir Arthur Henderson Young.

## TAN TECK NEO

The daughter of Chinese businessman Tan Keong Saik, who has a road in Chinatown named after him, Tan Teck Neo married Lee Choon Guan, a prominent business and community leader. In 1915, she founded the Chinese Ladies' Association, which is now known as the Chinese Women's Association, one of the most longest standing philanthropic organisations in Singapore. During World War I, she was a Red Cross volunteer in England. Later in life, she became the patron of Singapore's Po Leung Kuk, a society for the protection of women and girls.

When Sir Laurence Guillemard became the Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1920, Asian members of the local elite became regular attendees at Government House functions. By 1935, when a garden party was held in honour



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of King George V's Silver Jubilee, the guests in attendance included those of many different races and ethnicities. The following year, lawyer and community leader Song Ong Siang became the first Chinese man in Malaya to be knighted, receiving the Badge of Knight Commander of the Civil Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, in Government House's grand ballroom.

During the Japanese Occupation, Supreme Commander Hisaichi Terauchi moved in, and the building also housed other senior Japanese army officers, as well as chefs flown in from Japan to prepare meals for the new occupants. Guests during this period included Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo.

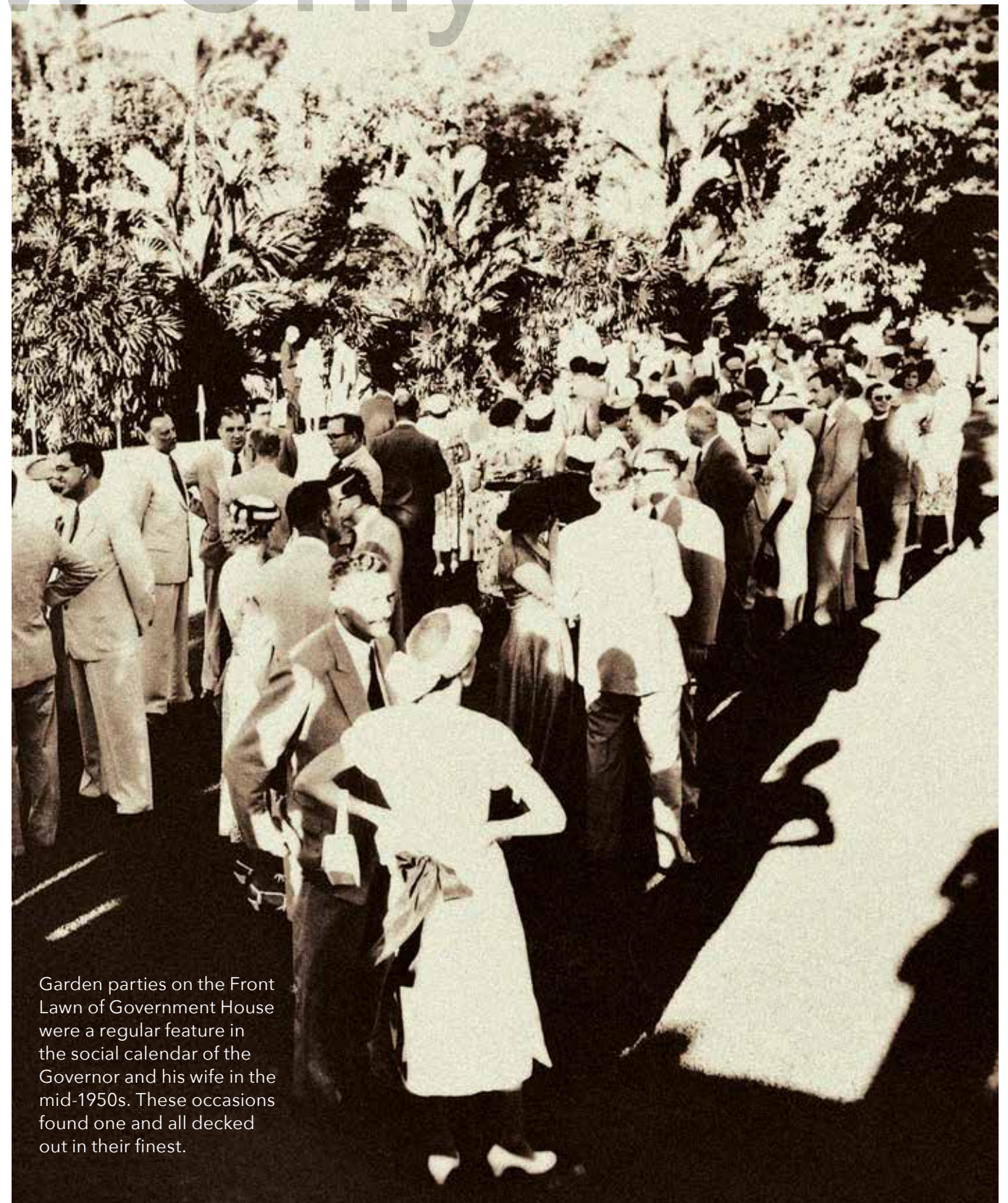
After the war, events at the Government House resumed their British character, but there was evidence of greater inclusivity. In 1952, guests at a garden party held in honour of the visiting Duchess of Kent and her son, the Duke of Kent, included 30 social welfare workers, half of whom were Asian. In 1953, to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, 3,500 pupils from both English and vernacular schools were invited to the grounds to enjoy film screenings, puppet shows, and acrobatic performances. Six days later, 48 fisherfolk from the Southern Islands of Pulau Bukom Kechil and Pulau Seraya toured the premises, and met the Governor at a reception held in Government House.



Sir Laurence Nunns Guillemard threw open the doors of Government House to members of the Asiatic community.

## SONG ONG SIANG

A recipient of the prestigious Queen's Scholarship in 1888, Song was a top student who studied law at the University of Cambridge, and became the first Chinese barrister admitted to the Singapore Bar. He was one of the community leaders who set up the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, and one of the earliest members of the Chinese company of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry in 1901. In 1915, he became the first Chinese man in Malaya to be promoted to the rank of captain.



Garden parties on the Front Lawn of Government House were a regular feature in the social calendar of the Governor and his wife in the mid-1950s. These occasions found one and all decked out in their finest.