

TRUE CRIME CLASSICS

# PULAU SEANG THE EXPERIMENT THAT FAILED

ALEX JOSEY

PULAU SEANG

a  
true  
story

In 1965, 18 convicted criminals were sentenced to death for murder—a haunting testimony to the failure of a bold experiment on Pulau Senang to reform seasoned criminals in a gaol without bars. Right to the end, Daniel Dutton, director of the model penal settlement, could not believe that the men he had befriended and worked so hard to rehabilitate would want to destroy him. Too late he realised the extraordinary hold secret-society leaders had over their men.

*Pulau Senang* reconstructs the events that led to the tragedy and the trial, and throws light on a question that has never been answered satisfactorily—Why did the experiment fail?

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Author of Lee Kuan Yew: The Crucial Years

For Review only

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## **PROLOGUE**

THIS IS A TRUE STORY,  
ALTHOUGH PARTS MAY READ  
LIKE FICTIONAL HORROR.

It happened in the 1960s in the newly self-governing state of Singapore, a small tropical island of some two million people. Having thrown off the shackles of British colonialism, the democratic nationalists confronted the communists and narrowly defeated them in a bloodless battle. Almost at once, the new government had to face a serious secret society menace. Hundreds of gangsters were arrested and thrown into jail without trial. Hopefully believing that most men could change their way of life if given a chance, the Government bravely experimented with a scheme to rehabilitate these gangsters, all of whom had sworn oaths of loyalty to their secret societies. The idea was to make an islet off the main island a prison without bars, to be supervised by Daniel Dutton, a God-fearing, fist-swinging, wild Irishman devoutly dedicated to the belief that man's inherent evil could be exorcised by hard work. Under his active direction, the gangsters created an island paradise. But they soon turned on Dutton and murdered him and his assistants, and in less than an hour, savagely destroyed all they had sweated so long to build. Why? The question has never been satisfactorily answered.

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In a massive trial before an Australian-born judge and a seven-men jury, more than 60 gangsters were charged with rioting and murder. Never before in Asia, or since, has there been such a trial. Eighteen criminals, most of them in their 20s, were found guilty and hanged.

Many decades later, remnants of secret societies still exist, but Singapore has become a state where law and order is firmly established. The Government practises its own form of socialism which works well. Free enterprise is encouraged. The State subsidises healthcare, education and housing. Drug addicts are patiently helped, so are selected secret society gangsters. But the bold experiment that failed was never repeated. Once was enough.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This is the true story of an idealistic belief, translated into actuality for a short while in the early 1960s, that violent, lawless men could find their own way back to decent society were they given a proper chance to work and create. The argument was that these men had drifted into crime because they'd never had an opportunity to know disciplined creative work.

Hundreds of them in Singapore were given this chance in 1960. Inside a few months, hitherto work-shy gangsters (hardened criminals most of them, unproven murderers, extortioners, callous robbers, psychopaths, rapists), transformed a deserted tropical island into an attractive, busy settlement with roads and water supply, huts, workshops, canteen, dormitories, laundry, community hall. Practically all the criminals were members of secret societies. Having built a comfortable settlement with their own hands, within 40 minutes one sunny afternoon, they deliberately destroyed it and murdered the man largely responsible for making the scheme possible. With him died three of his assistants.

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The island was called Pulau Senang. In the Malay language this means 'the island of ease'. As a rehabilitation settlement, it was a noble experiment that failed. Why? Why did the gangsters destroy it, having toiled and sweated in the tropical sun to build it? No completely satisfactory explanation has been forthcoming. One belief is that the leading secret-society chief on the island ordered the destruction of the settlement to prove that he was more powerful than the Government. During the trial of this man, Tan Kheng Ann, alias Robert, alias Robert Black alias Ang Chuar (and 58 others), witnesses said that the decision to kill the man in charge, 39-year-old Prison Officer Daniel Stanley Dutton, was because Dutton had tormented them beyond endurance. Breaking point had been reached when he ordered 13 carpenters to work overtime to complete the construction of a pier which could be worked on only during certain tides. When the carpenters refused, Dutton ordered them back to Changi Prison, thus blighting their hopes for rehabilitation. Witnesses said this decision inflamed the rest of the men and triggered off the revolt. Another belief is that the secret-society chief had tormented the opposition to Dutton and had been waiting for just such an opportunity before giving the order to attack and burn the settlement to the ground.

Pulau Senang Rehabilitation Settlement originated in the mind of a political prisoner of the British. Though he admitted that he was well-treated himself in detention as a pro-communist subscribing to the violent overthrow of

colonialism, Devan Nair was horrified at the conditions in the prisons for convicted criminals, and for criminal suspects detained indefinitely without trial. He was determined one day to do something about this.

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## DANIEL DUTTON'S BELIEF

In Singapore at the time was Prison Officer Dutton, a strong man who believed that work was the salvation of all. Dutton's stubborn faith was that even hardened criminals, secret-society gangsters, could be saved, brought back into the community again to become useful citizens. His almost fanatical belief was that men usually went astray through idleness. They needed a chance to work, to create. Given this opportunity, with persuasion, guidance, supervision, and helpful discipline, they could find their own way back to decency. Dutton believed this: few men were naturally evil: they wanted a chance to create. Dutton died a terrible death trying to prove he was right. "All our evils can be conquered by hard work: we can sweat the evil out of us," he told me. I knew him well. He was an Irishman born in Walthamstow, London. On Pulau Senang they called him the 'Laughing Tiger'. In the East, everyone, including gangsters, respects a tiger. Dutton refused to arm any of his staff. He was a powerful man and ruled with his fist. If a prisoner was insolent, he would knock him down with a blow. "If I report him for insubordination, he knows he will have to go back to Changi and that will be the end

of him. He'll rot there. So he takes my punishment and behaves himself."

Dutton had shown me round the island a few weeks before he was murdered. He reckoned that 63 of the 440 men then on the island were murderers, though none of them was convicted in court because witnesses were too frightened to come forward. Secret-society men were feared. Dutton knew that if these men—Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians—decided to attack him and his staff (never more than 20 strong), they could organise a mass escape.

"They don't want to escape," Dutton told me with confidence. "They volunteered to come here, to get away from prison routine. For the first time in their lives they've got a steady job. There are no cells here. Everybody does a full eight hours' work, gets twice as much grub as they would in jail, and goes to bed healthily tired. They are too busy to scheme. We keep them too occupied in interesting work, and in leisure, for them to have either the time or inclination to plot revolt. They wouldn't get very far anyhow. This island is 15 miles off Singapore, remember?"

Dutton's fatal blunder was in overlooking the possibility that the 400 men on Pulau Senang, or at least a militant group of them, did not follow the usual pattern of logic either in thinking, or in response to their own actions. They plotted to destroy Dutton and the settlement, but few of them made any attempt to flee the island. Instead, they stayed to celebrate, sang songs and awaited their inevitable fate.

Dutton landed on the island (227 acres) in June 1960,

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with 50 prisoners. Each man had food rations and two blankets. They brought a few tools. Pulau Senang then was no more than a tree-and-scrub-covered rock in the South China Sea which had a reasonable layer of fertile soil and two or three fresh-water wells. "Let's see you sweat your way to respectability," demanded Daniel Dutton. He worked with them as they hacked their way through the undergrowth. Within a short while, Pulau Senang was a busy, orderly island with hard-surfaced roads carrying jeeps and small trucks, drainage, workshops, reservoirs, farms, pig-sties, a sports ground, a tiny radio programme. There were showers, a steam laundry, ample electricity and piped water, fresh vegetables and fruits.

To his fellow prison officials, Dutton was recognised as an amazing Robinson Crusoe. Gifted with an ability to make practically anything with his hands, Dutton set out to prove in practical manner, his contention that creative work can be more interesting and satisfying than crime. Give Dutton a few wheels, some scrap metal and a piece of wire, and he could make a dynamo, a motorcar, a circular saw, a lathe, or a steam laundry. A born leader (he was commissioned in Greece when he was 18, and dropped into occupied Yugoslavia), Dutton had the knack of inspiring enthusiasm.

Showing me round the island, Dutton was shyly approached by one of the prisoners. The man wore nothing but shorts and sandals. There were secret-society tattoo marks on his body. He wanted Dutton to inspect a small engine he had built.

"Are you sure it will work?" demanded Dutton in Chinese. "If not, don't waste my time." The prisoner started it up, then anxiously looked into Dutton's face, waiting for the Laughing Tiger's gruff word of praise. Approval given, he went off happily to connect the engine with an expansion project. Work on the island had a practical purpose, a meaning. "He's one of our best workmen," remarked Dutton. "He never did a day's work in his life before he came here, except beat up old women. He never realised what he was capable of doing."

Daniel Dutton believed sincerely that his purpose in life was to make good citizens out of thugs. He was almost a fanatic, but he was not a fool. He knew some could never change, but these he considered sick men. Dutton was not a sentimentalist; yet he had a carefully concealed soft side and was genuinely proud that seven of the warders on the prison island were men he had helped back to society after working 18 months on Pulau Senang. One 'old lag' from the island had gone to the University of Singapore to study social science. In effect, he had matriculated on the island.

In less than two years, 255 tough criminals passed through Dutton's care on Pulau Senang. Of these, no more than 23 had got into trouble again. This low rate of recidivism caused Devan Nair, by then a leading trade unionist believing in democratic socialism, to claim that the "social therapy of Pulau Senang makes the island one of the most successful penal experiments anywhere in the world". Alas, Nair spoke too soon. The settlement was just



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about three years old when Dutton was murdered and the settlement destroyed.

Yet Nair had grounds for his optimism. For when gangsters in the streets were arrested, taken to jail, and not brought to trial, they knew that their only hope of getting back into normal society was through Pulau Senang. After about a year in jail, they could volunteer for manual work on the island. Most of them expected to be there for six months. Upon arrival, the Laughing Tiger saw to it that they were taught the rudiments of a trade: anything from pig-keeping, poultry-farming, carpentering, haircutting, bricklaying, book-binding, sign-writing and boot-making to furniture-making and plumbing. Every month, Dutton reviewed their work. If he was satisfied they were making progress, Dutton would recommend their release to the Work Brigade. If he was dissatisfied, he would recommend they be taken back to jail. Dutton was powerful and the men knew this. He was respected and feared.

Organised on semi-military lines, the Work Brigade had been set up by the government to cater for the unemployed, and for men and women seeking rehabilitation. Usually, men from Pulau Senang were put into the Work Brigade for six months and then released into society, but they could be released earlier if they could satisfy the authorities that they had a job to which they could go.

“Creative work in healthy surroundings. That is what reforms men,” asserted Daniel Dutton, pointing to a group of men working on the farmland. Everyone was paid \$0.30 a day and given a ration of five cigarettes. They

had to save half the money they earned. On their own, they made a collection and asked Dutton to buy them a cinema projector. He did and then arranged for a weekly English-language action film show in the community hall. Not all of them could follow the English dialogue, but to Dutton's amusement, they all seemed to understand the usual message in these carefully selected films: that, in the end, the bad man always got his comeuppance. Dutton told me that most of the 63 murderers he had on the island when I called in, enjoyed the ‘cops and robbers’ films.

Daniel Dutton was the only European on the island. His deputy then was of Ceylonese origin and his two assistants of Chinese origin. Dutton believed in the minimum of supervision: he believed in encouraging prisoners to work hard, in their own way, at their own pace. Dutton had faith in the experiment. At the same time, he normally slept in his uniform, jungle boots handy by the bed. In spite of his ulcers, he was contented. He got a great deal of satisfaction from his job. He had informers on the island. When they told him the gang leaders were plotting to kill him, he laughed at the informers. Right till the end, he could not believe that the people he was trying so hard to rehabilitate would want to destroy him. In any case, he thought he could cope with the situation. Too late he realised the extraordinary power of secret-society leaders.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alex Josey (1910–1986) was a British journalist, political writer and commentator, and biographer, best known for his biographies on Singapore's former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. He wrote over twenty political novels and many political articles on Singapore and Malaysia for various Singapore and international newspapers and journals. He was the first foreign correspondent to be kicked out of Singapore (then part of Malaysia) by the Malaysian government in July 1965, but returned to Singapore after its independence from Malaysia and became Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Press Secretary for ten years. He died in 1986 in Singapore, aged 76.