

The Malayan Trilogy

By [Allan Massie](#)

The late Victorian writer of light verse J. K. Stephen looked forward to the day "when the Rudyard ceases from Kipling/ And the Haggards Ride no more". Anthony Burgess's Malayan Trilogy may be said to be about that day. If Kipling and Haggard were poet and propagandist of Empire, Burgess was the amused chronicler of its end. For the invitation to adventure and the stern call to duty, he substituted the Comic Spirit. His Malaya is a land of misunderstanding and confusion, where hopes are indeed dupes and fear, if not out-and-out liars, prove to be ill-founded. Comedy thrives on failure of communication, as when, for example, in *The Twelfth Night*, Olivia loves Viola believing her to be the boy Cesario, and, as Cesario, Viola cannot openly express her love for the Duke Orsino, who himself loves Olivia precisely because he does not know her. In Burgess's Malaya, nobody really understands anybody. This is of course part of its charm.

It must be admitted that his Malaya is not one that many Europeans who spent far longer working there than he did would recognize, any more than they recognized or accepted the Malaya of Somerset Maugham's short stories. Their Malaya was one of decent hard-working planters and civil servants who didn't spend their time boozing in *kedais*, mixed little socially with Malays, Indians, Tamils or Chinese--except perhaps well-to-do Chinese merchants--and who lived an almost completely European life, mostly decorous and often not very exciting. It should be said too that their wives, though denied occupation, mostly adapted happily; many loved Malaya, and continued to do so long after they had returned "home".

None of this means that Burgess's Malaya isn't equally authentic. His Europeans are all, one way or another, misfits. Many don't want to be in Malaya, and can't think why they are there. They would like to get away, but can't raise the cash, unless, like Nabby Adams, the 6 ft 8 inches police officer, who is the dominant figure in the first novel, *Time for a Tiger*, their creator is generous--and sentimental--enough to let them win the lottery.

It is right that Nabby should do so. "A comedy," says the Beggar in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, "should end happily", and so he commands a reprieve for the highwayman MacHeath. In just the same way, Burgess reprieves Nabby.

Nabby is a character whom any stern moralist would find despicable. He is a liar, a cheat, a sponge, a bore and an alcoholic. But he bores only other characters, not the reader. He has a superb vitality--on the page; he lives splendidly even as he groans out his hangovers and skulks the back-streets in search of a drinking-shop where his credit will extend to the necessary morning beers. Burgess clearly delights in Nabby, as Shakespeare in the equally despicable Falstaff; and, as with Falstaff, we forgive Nabby because we too delight in him.

Nabby dominates the first novel, and may be said to unbalance it, for he is peripheral to the themes developed in the trilogy. (But then it's by no means certain when Burgess conceived the books as a trilogy. Each is complete in itself, and can stand by itself.)

The trilogy's central figure, hero or anti-hero, is Victor Crabbe, come to Malaya with his second wife, the blonde Fenella, as a teacher. (Burgess himself was an education officer in the Colonial Service, and his portrayal of the schools Crabbe teaches in is authentic.)

Crabbe is very much a product of post-war England. In a Fifties novel set at home he would doubtless have qualified as an angry young man. He comes to Malaya as an idealist, though it is democracy and racial harmony that he is ready to preach rather than the old message of empire. He believes it is his task to help prepare his young pupils for the independence of Malaya which is fast approaching; but he finds himself slandered as a Communist (which indeed he had been at university), not by his British superiors but by students and fellow-teachers. So he is caught up in a comedy of errors.

His marriage is a comedy of errors too, if a painful one. Fenella is his second wife. He killed his first, accidentally; his car hit an icy patch of road and ran into a river. He escaped; she was drowned. He can't escape the memory and the guilt. Fenella resents his absorption in memory, resents Malaya, longs for Home, and can't understand why he is determined to stick it out.

The disharmony of the Crabbes' marriage mirrors the disharmony of Malaya. This becomes apparent in the second novel, *The Enemy in the Blanket*. Crabbe is now headmaster of a school in the feudal northern state of Negeri Dahaga. "History? The State had no history. It had not changed in many centuries. The British had hardly disturbed the timeless pattern". But change is coming to this land where power is only nominally in the hands of the Sultan; in reality "Dahaga was ruled feudally by an hereditary officer called the Abang."

The present Abang is a civilized man with a taste for motor-cars and blondes (he soon has his eye on Fenella): improbably, he has read George Orwell. But he knows his time is up. "There was this new thing--politics; there were these cries of *Merdeka!*" (Independence, Freedom).

"A new class was arising--small intellectuals, failed B.A.s., frustrated lawyers, teachers with the gift of the gab... It was, in a sense curious that the end of colonialism meant also the end of a grotesque seigniorship in Dahaga. In another sense it was not--The births were much given to anomalies... But there would be no anomalies in the new regime..."

Meanwhile, fortunately for the Comic Spirit, anomalies abound. Ah Wing, the Crabbes' ancient Chinese cook, who likes to believe his new master is a bachelor like his old one, innocently sends food to his son-in-law, a Communist guerrilla in the jungle. Hardman, the near-albino lawyer, university contemporary of Crabbe, marries a Malay woman for financial security, even though he has to be converted to Islam to do so. Crabbe is unfaithful to Fenella, with a woman he does not care for, but only pities. His real infidelity, she comes to realize, is his loyalty to his first dead wife.

So she too plumps for *merdeka*.

How do people very different from each other live together? That question is posed by the Crabbes' marriage and by Malaya itself.

"But," said Crabbe--we are now in the third novel *Beds in the East*--"apart from the Communists, I don't think we can doubt that the component races of Malaya have never made much effort to understand each other. Odd superstitions and prejudices, complacency, ultra-conservatism--these have perpetually got in the way of better understanding. Moreover, the idea of a community--a single community, as opposed to many communities--never seemed very important during the period of British management... each race was content to keep alive fragments of culture imported from its country of origin. There never seemed any necessity to mix. But now the time has come... There must not merely be mixing, there must be fusion."

"'Confusion,' said Vythilingam, nodding agreement.

Confusion indeed. The Comic Spirit delights in it, and the trilogy is essentially a comedy, with a vast and varied cast, presented to us with enormous exuberance which, however, is made endurable and agreeable, as unmixed exuberance rarely is, by the undercurrent of melancholy that runs through it. This is after all a world where nothing ever comes right, except by chance, and chance is as ever blind to merit and good intentions.

Burgess attempted something very remarkable and ambitious: the picture of a whole society at a moment when tradition, accepted codes of morality and of belief, are all thrown into the melting-pot. The book--for the three should now be read as one--owes something to Norman Douglas's Capri novel, *South Wind*, which sets out to make murder acceptable to a Bishop--a very Burgessian theme. Douglas too portrays a society where what has been unthinkingly accepted is now challenged, and does so with the wit and serenity that Burgess displays. Some of the passages which fill in the historical and political background of Malaya and especially of Dahaga are reminiscent of Douglas's own expository narrative. The same note of amused irony is struck. But the canvas of the Malayan Trilogy is much larger than that of *South Wind*, the variety of characters incomparably greater, the theme more complicated, and its elaboration more intelligent.

The trilogy has been so thoroughly imagined by its author that it takes possession of the imagination of the reader.

There are few novels in which the writer is so constantly aware of his characters. Someone once remarked of Henry James that it was very strange that he didn't seem to know what his characters were doing when they were out of the room. Burgess always knows what his are up to, what they are saying, how they are misbehaving, even when not present to our view; and this accounts in great measure for the vitality of this comic masterpiece.

