

# What You Didn't Know About the STRAITS TIMES

The first fake news. The illegal postwar edition. Newsmen turned presidents. The *Straits Times* has had an interesting 180 years.

By Irene Hoe

## 180 Years Ago

There has been much speculation about the origins of the *Straits Times*. According to Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke and Roland St J. Braddell in *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, the Armenian merchant Marterus Thaddeus Apcar, of the firm Apcar & Stephens, planned to set up a newspaper in Singapore and ordered printing equipment from England. But Apcar died and fellow Armenian Catchick Moses took over the equipment and invited Robert Carr Woods, an English editor from Bombay, to be the first editor of the paper.<sup>1</sup>

While it has been surmised by some that Apcar had ordered the press to publish a newspaper in English, C.M. Turnbull wrote in her book, *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times*, that it was more likely Apcar had planned to publish books in Armenian for the community in Singapore. However, following the collapse of Apcar & Stephens in 1845, Moses acquired the printing equipment, hired Woods and started up the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* at No. 7 Commercial Square, in present-day Raffles Place. The paper's first print run was far from impressive: at just eight folio pages and "printed with new type, on fine English paper", it sold for half a Spanish dollar.<sup>2</sup>

Woods promised somewhat grandiloquently in his opening editorial: "Convinced that the Press has a noble object for its end, believing it to be an engine of power capable of ameliorating the condition of mankind, we approach the task our new undertaking imposes on us with delicacy and diffidence."<sup>3</sup>

Then a weekly newspaper, which appeared only on Tuesday mornings, the *Straits Times* was not even Singapore's first. By the time the newcomer

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was first published on 15 July 1845, Singapore already had newspapers for more than 20 years. The pioneering effort was the *Singapore Chronicle*, which made its debut on 1 January 1824.<sup>4</sup>

In 1835, the *Chronicle* was sold, and in October that year, a rival, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, popped up. Two years later, the *Chronicle* published its last issue on 30 September 1837, leaving the field wide open for the *Free Press* until the *Straits Messenger* appeared on 16 April 1842. But when the *Messenger's* owner died in 1843, so did his newspaper.<sup>5</sup>

Within four months of the *Straits Times's* debut, it was publishing twice a week, albeit as a smaller-sized paper. But by the end of the paper's first year, Woods could not convince Moses that the *Straits Times* was commercially viable. When Moses put the paper up for sale in September 1846, there were no offers.<sup>6</sup>

## Fake News

Fake news likely had its beginnings in Singapore much further back in history than you would ever imagine. In fact, the first likely instance of fake news happened in the *Straits Times* not quite a year after the paper made its debut.

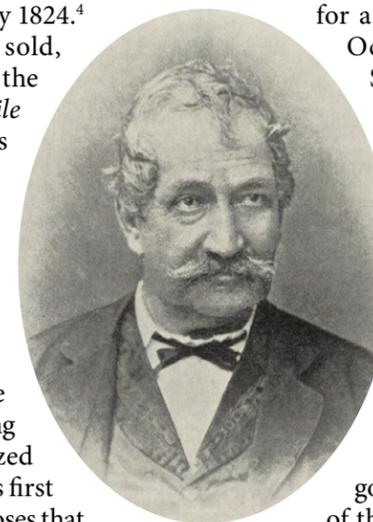
It was June 1846 and as Turnbull described in *Dateline Singapore*, as an American ship sailed across the harbour, several merchants paid a boy to "dash into the newspaper office dripping wet just as the paper was going to press, with a tale that he had swum ashore bearing a letter from the captain giving the prices at recent opium sales in Calcutta". This "news" was apparently meant to stir panic in the commercial sector.<sup>7</sup>

And the fakery? The ship had actually been on its way from Bombay, not Calcutta, and the "news" deliberately misspelled the ship's captain's name. But the story was irresistible. Woods published the "scoop" on 13 June 1846 only to discover that it was a fake.<sup>8</sup> He then put up a notice at the office of the *Straits Times*, offering a \$50 bounty for exposing the "scoundrel" responsible.<sup>9</sup>

## World War II

The fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 led to the renaming of Singapore as Syonan-to and the disappearance of the *Straits Times*

Armenian businessman Catchick Moses (pictured here) and Robert Carr Woods, an English editor from Bombay, founded the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* on 15 July 1845. Woods was the paper's first editor. Image reproduced from Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Singapore*, vol. 1 (Singapore: Printed by Fraser & Neave, Limited, 1902.), facing p. 344. Collection of the National Library Singapore (From National Library Online).



for a spell. But although the Japanese Occupation (which ended only in September 1945) put a temporary stop to publication, the lights stayed on in the offices of the *Straits Times* because the Japanese used the newsroom to publish their own English-language version of a newspaper.

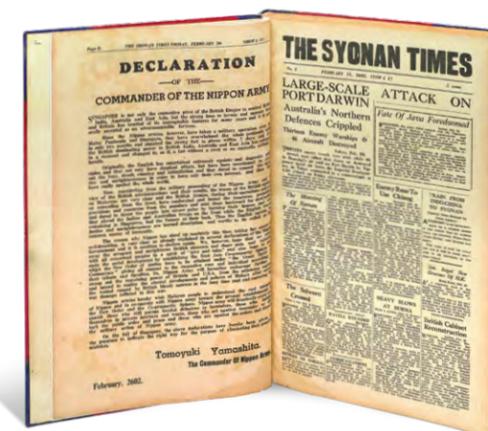
They called the initial version the *Shonan Times*, with the first issue published on 20 February 1942. It was renamed the *Syonan Times* the very next day.<sup>10</sup> To get the wartime paper going, the Japanese employed several of the technicians who had worked for the *Straits Times* and also hired several local journalists to produce the paper in English.<sup>11</sup>

The publication was renamed the *Syonan Sinbun* on 8 December 1942, commemorating the first anniversary of the war, and then the *Syonan Shimbun* on the second anniversary. This name remained until the last issue on 4 September 1945.<sup>12</sup>

## First Issue After the War

It would not be until 7 September 1945 that the *Straits Times* would once again reappear in print. It looked neither like the newspaper of today nor the prewar version. This issue was, however, illegal as the British Military Administration (BMA; the interim administrator of British Malaya from August 1945 to the establishment of the Malayan Union in April 1946) had reserved all newsprint for the official *Malayan Times*.<sup>13</sup>

Undeterred by the post-surrender looting and mayhem, a team of *Straits Times* journalists and other determined technical crew members



During the Japanese Occupation, the first issue of the *Shonan Times* was printed on 20 February 1942 at the former premises of the *Straits Times*. On the very next day, the paper was renamed the *Syonan Times* pictured here. The paper then became the *Syonan Sinbun* on 8 December 1942 followed by the *Syonan Shimbun* on 8 December 1943. This name remained until its last issue on 4 September 1945. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

The first issue of the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* published on 15 July 1845. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



The first issue of the *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* (as it was originally named) rolled off the presses in July 1845. Back then, it competed with the only other English-language newspaper, the *Singapore Free Press*.

Over the last 180 years, the newspaper has accompanied Singapore's growth from colonial outpost to modern city-state. Along the way, the *Straits Times* has not simply been a witness to these changes; it has also been part of the story. Here are some facts about the *Straits Times* of which most people are probably not aware.

located a working linotype machine and managed to run off 10,000 copies of the paper, in defiance of the BMA ban.<sup>14</sup>

The revived paper was printed in an abbreviated format. But perhaps the most consequential change was that the news, rather than advertisements, was printed on the front page. So it was that the reborn newspaper carried these main headlines: “Singapore Is British Again!” and “King’s Message to Malaya: Peace, Security and Happiness”.<sup>15</sup>

Several of the journalists then set off with copies of the paper piled high in a car commandeered for the purpose to Changi Camp. There, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander of the South East Asia Command, was speaking to former prisoners-of-war when Hugh Savage, one of the editorial staff, shouted, “Straits Times! Straits Times! Today’s news today!” Mountbatten asked to see the paper and was delighted with it. He told the journalists that “it was a splendid effort and they should carry on with the good work”. When Savage explained that “this was probably the first and last copy... Mountbatten gave orders that they should continue publication and report any interference to him”.<sup>16</sup>

The postwar editions of the *Straits Times* survived on the efforts of skeleton staff – some almost literally skeletal after internment during the Occupation. Not before and not since have the newspaper’s staff suffered this way. Seven of the paper’s 16 European staff had died and many media employees died trying to escape from Singapore, or perished as prisoners-of-war on forced marches.<sup>17</sup>

### Maria Hertogh Riots

To journalists in hot pursuit of news, the Maria Hertogh story in 1950 was the perfect story. A world war. A family torn apart. A tortured international tussle over a 13-year-old Dutch Eurasian girl renamed Nadra by her adoptive Muslim mother

and then married off to prevent her from being reunited with her biological parents.<sup>18</sup>

Incensed by news coverage in the English- and Malay-language newspapers, people took to the streets. Violence ensued. As Turnbull summed up the tragedy in *Dateline Singapore*: “Mobs roamed the streets, dragging Europeans and Eurasians out of cars, beating them up and killing them. The army was called out.”<sup>19</sup> The violence that took place between 11 and 13 December 1950 remains an indelible stain on Singapore’s history.

The terrible cost of the Maria Hertogh riots: 18 dead, 173 injured, hundreds arrested, including the rioters and members of the Nadra Action Committee formed by a radical politician who headed the Singapore Muslim League and was editor-in-chief of two newspapers. And a scar that for some had yet to heal.<sup>20</sup>

In the aftermath, the Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the riots ruled on 7 August 1951 that the riots erupted as a result of the Muslim community’s anger over the decision of the court to return Maria to her birth parents and the interim decision to keep the young girl in the Roman Catholic Convent of the Good Shepherd to await her return to the Netherlands. The judges also noted the instigatory contribution of the sensational press coverage and the actions of the Nadra Action Committee.<sup>21</sup>

Maria and her biological mother left for the Netherlands on 12 December 1950. Maria died of leukaemia on 8 July 2009, in Huijbergen, the Netherlands.<sup>22</sup>

Although the *Straits Times* did not directly cause the riots, it was “partly to blame for the events leading up to the riots”. Sensational coverage of the custody case by English-language newspapers of the day, including the *Straits Times*, was cited as a major factor in causing the riots. In the Legislative Council, Progressive Party leader C.C. Tan berated the press for “its irresponsible manner and utter disregard of the hatred and passions which they were helping to inflame”.<sup>23</sup>

On 18 December 1950, the *Straits Times* published a notice that it would stop printing discussion of racial and religious aspects of the case in its correspondence columns “to assist in promoting the return of a calm and normal atmosphere in Singapore”. As Turnbull wrote in *Dateline Singapore*: “From that time the paper’s policy was to tread warily and avoid inflaming racial or religious passions. The experience of the Hertogh riots provided a more effective and lasting lesson than restrictive legislation.”<sup>24</sup>

Maria Hertogh and her foster mother Che Aminah leaving the Singapore High Court on 24 November 1950. Justice Brown reserved judgement in the custody case. Source: *The Straits Times*, 25 November 1950, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

### Times House

Commercial Square, later renamed Raffles Place, was the birthplace of the newspaper. In 1903, the *Straits Times* moved to Cecil Street and then subsequently acquired additional premises on Anson Road. But the site most people have associated with the “moving story” of the newspaper was Times House, where the Straits Times Press office and its varied branches were housed for 44 years.<sup>25</sup>

Back in 1952, the newspaper’s 20-year-old overworked Crabtree rotary press was printing two million copies a month. The following year, the company bought a \$500,000 replacement, also a Crabtree, that could print 40,000 copies of a 24-page newspaper in an hour.<sup>26</sup>

By the mid-1950s, some 110 years from its unlikely and almost accidental start in 1845, the company’s operations – including its printing works – had outgrown its antiquated premises on Cecil Street and Anson Road. The decision was made to move its overcrowded operations to a single site. The company bought land at the junction of Kim Seng Road and River Valley Road and in 1958, moved in and consolidated all its operations at 390 Kim Seng Road. It later had to house its magazine offshoot, Times Periodicals, on Thomson Road.<sup>27</sup>

By the 1970s, the company’s growth necessitated the construction of an extra multistorey building which would house, among other things, the newsroom of a new financial daily, the *Business Times*, on 1 October 1976. This paper had grown out of the four-page *Times Business* section in the *Straits Times*.<sup>28</sup>

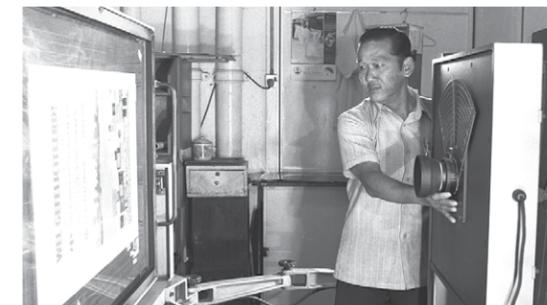
Times House was also the birthplace of the afternoon tabloid *New Nation*, first published on 18 January 1971.<sup>29</sup> The paper met its untimely end with the last issue on 13 November 1982 so that a rival, the *Singapore Monitor*, could enter the afternoon newspaper market.<sup>30</sup>

On 4 August 1984, Singapore Press Holdings Limited was incorporated and formed through a merger of Straits Times Press Limited, Singapore News and Publications Limited and Times Publishing Berhad. In 2002, the newspaper operations of Singapore Press Holdings moved to Toa Payoh.<sup>31</sup>

It was also in this “newspaper maternity ward” that the *New Paper* was born in 1988, before being reduced to a freesheet in 2016 and then, in December 2021, virtualised and reduced to a digital publication.<sup>32</sup> Late in October 2025, it was announced that the *New Paper* would merge with the news website *Stomp*.

### Just Peter

In its 180-year history, the newsrooms of the *Straits Times* and its associated newspapers have been ruled by a plethora of editors, but none have had the



(Top) Staff at work in the Production Department, Times House, 1975. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

(Above) Times House on Kim Seng Road, 1977. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

impact or the longevity of Peter Lim Heng Loong and the man who succeeded him, Cheong Yip Seng. Between them, they racked up 86 years with the Straits Times Press and its successor organisations.

Officially, Lim spent 33 years as a journalist. The telltale signs were already there as early as 1957 when he represented Singapore at the New York Herald Youth Forum. However, aviation was his first love and if he had his way, he would have stuck with the Malayan Air Training Corps and become a fighter pilot. But he was grounded by shortsightedness and got diverted into journalism.

Lim was a reporter, a noted columnist with the newspapers and, unusually, continued to report and write even from overseas while many editors would have been content to assign such work to a senior reporter or an overseas correspondent.

During most of the 1960s, Lim was an active unionist, becoming chairman then secretary-general of the Singapore National Union of Journalists. He even led workers on a strike, perhaps the first to do so, and eventually led the papers as editor-in-chief. He had also served on the employee panel of the Industrial Arbitration Court, and was named as a Friend of Labour by the National Trades Union Congress.

In the 1970s, Lim became chief editor of the *New Nation*. Then in 1978, he ascended to editor-in-chief of the *Straits Times* and a member of the board of directors. In 1987, he was named chief editor to plan and launch the *New Paper*.<sup>33</sup>

Lim’s leadership there lasted until August 1990 when he left the corporation that had metamorphosed into Singapore Press Holdings, or SPH. He left “for a

### COURT SITS TILL SEVEN AT NIGHT

AS Maria Hertogh Adabi left the Singapore High Court last night after Mr Justice Brown had reserved his decision on her future, a waiting crowd of about 1,000 people broke through a police cordon and surged around her.

For seven minutes Maria, protected by constables who once joined hands around her and kept the crowd away, was the centre of a scene rarely witnessed outside a Singapore court.

#### Batons Drawn

The court had risen at seven o'clock at night—another rare occurrence—and the crowd had been waiting since four o'clock to see this 13-year-old Dutch girl. The flashes of Press photographer's bulbs as Maria came out of court on the arm of her foster-mother, Che Aminah, was the signal for the throng.





President Wee Kim Wee (left) chatting with old press and media friends at the Singapore Press Club's pre-dinner cocktail reception at Shangri-La Hotel, 1985. He was once the editorial manager of the *Straits Times*. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no.19980006027 - 0067).

different lifestyle”, says his curriculum vitae. And what a lifestyle change it was. It included what no one – least of all, the man himself – had expected. At 80, he wed his longtime partner, Lindy Ong.

Throughout Lim's decades in the newspaper business, there was one constant. He was never “Mr Lim”. Straight off, he was known simply as “Peter”, perhaps deliberately to set himself apart from his polar opposite, the man he had succeeded as editor-in-chief, T.S. Khoo, who had always been “Mr Khoo”.

When Cheong Yip Seng took over as editor-in-chief of English and Malay newspapers in January 1987, he also eschewed the “Mr”. He was simply “Cheong”.<sup>34</sup>

### From the Press Room to the Istana

The place of the *Straits Times* in Singapore's history isn't just engraved in newsprint. How many newspapers can claim to have contributed three of a nation's nine presidents? The distinguished gentlemen are former editorial manager Wee Kim Wee, Singapore's fourth president; former executive chairman S.R. Nathan, its sixth president; and former chairman Tony Tan Keng Yam, its seventh president.

Wee dropped out of school in 1930 to join the *Straits Times* as a clerk. He got his big break in journalism when he was asked to report on sports after office hours. In 1941 he left the paper for the United Press Associations (UPA), which later became known as UPI, or United Press International.<sup>35</sup>

When the Japanese invaded Malaya, Wee worked in the Air Raid Precautions Unit. During the Japanese Occupation, he peddled miscellaneous goods in Kampong Bahru. After the war, it was back to journalism at UPA where he became the office manager and chief correspondent before quitting the agency in 1959 to rejoin the *Straits Times* as deputy editor.<sup>36</sup>

In 1966, with Malaysia and Indonesia caught up in the violent throes of Konfrontasi (Indonesia's opposition to the formation and existence of the Federation of Malaysia; 1963–66), Wee went to Indonesia to interview Lieutenant-General Suharto and broke the news that Indonesia intended to end Konfrontasi.<sup>37</sup>

Wee retired from the *Straits Times* in 1973 when Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam asked him to serve as a diplomat. So Wee was appointed high commissioner to Malaysia (1973–80) and then ambassador to Japan and the Republic of Korea (1980–84). Following these stints, Wee served two terms as president of Singapore from 1985 to 1993. He died on 2 May 2005.<sup>38</sup>

Singapore's sixth president has the shortest name of the nine. Everyone referred to him as SR and few ever used his full name, Sellapan Ramanathan. Still, the one with the shortest name served the longest stint as president, from 1999 to 2011.

Nathan is also Singapore's only president to have been expelled from school – twice – and also possibly the only one to have run away from home. A lengthy career in the civil service from 1955 included a spell with the National Trades Union Congress and stints in the Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs ministries. His name burst into the headlines in 1974 when he was with the Defence Ministry. In what became known as the *Laju* hijacking incident, Nathan led a 13-member delegation that accompanied the terrorists on a flight to Kuwait to secure the release of the ferry's crew and guarantee the terrorists' safe passage.<sup>39</sup>

In 1982, Nathan left the civil service to become executive chairman of Straits Times Press and then Singapore Press Holdings, before leaving in 1988 to serve as high commissioner to Malaysia (1988–90) and then ambassador to the United States of America (1990–96). Then came the 12 years of his presidency, and a rather hyperactive “retirement” during which he wrote several books, became a distinguished senior fellow at the Singapore Management University and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Nathan died on 22 August 2016.<sup>40</sup>

Tan entered politics in 1979 and held various key ministerial posts before retiring as deputy prime minister in August 2005. He was appointed executive director and deputy chairman of GIC, and later chairman of Singapore Press Holdings. In June 2011, Tan resigned from his posts in GIC and Singapore Press Holdings to contest the presidential election. He served as Singapore's seventh president between 2011 and 2017.<sup>41</sup>

These are not the only connections between journalism and the Istana. The first was Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Malay for “Head of State”) Yusof Ishak, the first journalist to become the official occupant of the Istana. He was Yang di-Pertuan Negara from 1959 to 1965, before being installed

as independent Singapore's very first president in 1965. He served until his death from heart failure on 23 November 1970.<sup>42</sup>

Yusof Ishak started a sports magazine, then joined the daily *Warta Malaya* before leaving in 1939 to co-found the *Utusan Melayu* daily in Kuala Lumpur. He returned to Singapore to chair the Public Service Commission at the invitation of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. His portrait still adorns Singapore's currency notes.<sup>43</sup>

The journalism connection with the Istana doesn't end there. Current President of Singapore Tharman Shanmugaratnam's wife, Jane Yumiko Ittogi, briefly worked as a leader/feature writer with the *Straits Times* in the 1980s before returning to law.<sup>44</sup>

### Whither the Straits Times?

At one point in its history, the *Straits Times* strode across the media landscape in Singapore like a Colossus. As the main English-language paper, it was the paper of record, and anyone who needed to learn about what was going on in the country simply had to read the paper. As a result, advertisers flocked to the newspaper because it was, at the time, the most cost-efficient way to reach potential consumers.

The newspaper was flush with cash, and the newspaper itself, especially its Saturday edition, was so thick that they had to break the newspaper up into several discrete sections.

Those glory days are over thanks to the rise of search engines and social media, which offered advertisers an even cheaper and more targeted way to reach consumers than display ads in the daily broadsheet. Singapore Press Holdings, the parent company, has been delisted from the Singapore Exchange. The newspaper business has been transferred to SPH Media Trust, a company limited by guarantee that is privately managed.

The fate of the *Straits Times* is not unique though. Newspapers around the world are struggling due to the loss of revenue thanks to the rise of the internet. As it has done in the last 180 years, the *Straits Times* will have to adapt to new circumstances if it is to survive to see its 200th anniversary. ♦



The Straits Times, 2 May 1966, 1 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

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