

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Vicki Mary Bowater-Wright, *Malaysia Terima Kasih*, Bowater-Wright Associates Limited, Auckland, 1985. Pp xx, 263.

It has been recognized in recent years that as a destination, Malaysia has not received adequate exposure in the tourist market. In an effort to push Malaysian destinations out of the shadows of the more established destinations in the region, the government through its national carrier (MAS) and the Tourist Development Corporation (TDC), has embarked on an extensive promotional programme through its foreign embassies and information offices. Besides distributing information material, and organizing promotional tours and exhibitions overseas, both the TDC and MAS also provide sponsorships for travel writers to visit Malaysia and to help promote the country in the travel media. *Malaysia Terima Kasih* is a product of such efforts.

The book fits into the category of biographical travelogues and in many ways is reminiscent of Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (London, 1883) and its contemporary, Emily Innis' *The Chersonese with the Gilding off* (New Edition, KL, 1974). Like Ms Bowater-Wright, both Miss Bird and Mrs. Innis were women in their forties who had travelled extensively in the country. Temporal contexts aside, these three volumes represent snapshots of the physical landscape, the multiethnic character of the people and a foreign observer's disposition to both the exotic and the universal aspects of the host society. It would be interesting to have an extended comparison on how each of these writers respond to the encounter situations at different times. But to describe their approaches in a sentence, one might say that Miss Bird was a meticulous scholar, Mrs. Innis a pessimistic expatriate-observer, and Ms Bowater-Wright a disorganized and lavish propagandist.

Malaysia Terima Kasih is intended to be, "... a personal look at Malaysia ... from the viewpoint of someone who has come to Malaysia and loved what she found, mostly, through people, their different backgrounds, cultures and lifestyles" (oval text p. 2). Weighing 1.97 kilograms and measuring 34 cm × 27 cm × 2.5 cm, this book is a heavy reading for the inert tourist-to-be, literally and figuratively. It is the most bulky travelogue ever produced on Malaysia and seems to be a likely candidate for encyclopaedia or atlas racks, rather than a handy travel pathfinder that one can pass around. Apart from repetitions and excessive superlatives, space is not used to advantage. The author for instance, devotes one whole page to tell the reader that she is called "Vicki" (p. 260). There is some 7 cm

margin on each side of the text, which is unnecessarily wasteful considering the purpose for which the book is commissioned, i.e. simply to promote visitation to the country.

Little attempt is made to observe the elementary convention in writing. There is no foreward (title page, preface, table of contents etc.) or backward (index, bibliography or appendix) indications of the text and even pagination is poorly organized. The flair for the unorthodox is worth pursuing if it produces an overall effect, but a slipshod presentation is not likely to appeal to members of the hurried leisure class among whom reading time is precious.

Sketches and graphic illustrations in books should serve two purposes, either ornamental or if they can add clarity or humour to the text. Bowater-Wright's sketches are a far cry from Kong Wing's or Lat's (local cartoonists) fresh lines. As an example, the sketch of the terrace, Hilton (p. 34), while is a good choice of perspective, is badly crowded with unnecessary and misplaced shadings — the plate on the table looks more like a durian. There are altogether some forty coarse sketches and doodles. The main weakness appears to be the lack of professionalism, especially in the placing of contrast effects. Captions are also inserted in messy longhand. The overall effects of these shoddy sketches and insertions, is more of distractive eyesores than illustrative. Some of the photos are good, but in the company of the above illustrations, and especially in comparison to other travel materials published by the New Straits Times or Apa Productions, their quality can not be overstated.

The book is heavy reading not because of the complexity of the subject but rather the style of presentation. Besides the lack of plan format, the headings are not consistently listed, there is no proper hierarchy of titles. For example "Long Pasia" is written in bold capitals whereas the same forms are also used for "Sabah" and "Malaysia". This may be less of a problem if the reader (who is supposed to travel with the traveller), is informed of the route of the journey in advance. Bowater-Wright's uncharted journey starts with Sabah, which to her credit is a refreshing change to the usual Peninsular-centred reports. She then jumps on the cockpit (she also tells at some length about her flying exploits) to Kelantan, to Johore Baharu and back to Langkawi and then again to Sabah.

Factual errors are few although she did mention that Port Dickson is Teluk Intan (p. 172). There are parts that might insult the common intelligence. For example, she asks "How does a day start in Kuala Lumpur?" and goes on "... as the sun rises, the birds, and also one can hear occassionally the sound of the monkeys ..." (p. 24). If the reader expects to see some themes emerging from this personal account this is not a helpful source, but one is left with a strong impression that Malaysia is a peaceful paradise "The richness for me is in the people — their willingness to be friendly, their warm response to smile ... and the way in which they intermingle" (p. xiii). "It is true to say that Malaysians of all races are open

hearted, warm people, who delight in welcoming strangers to their homes” (p. 1)!

Perhaps because the author shuttles around in “my twin otter” with fleet Commander Ooi as “my guide” (p. 73) often in the company of state dignitaries like the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister of Sabah, and top businessmen and lives in “my home” (Hilton Hotel, p. 48), she is oblivious or screened from the problem that the ordinary tourist might encounter such as traffic jams, noise, air pollution and signs of ethnic separation. To be fair to the author, her assignment is to “sell” Malaysia and by emphasizing on the latter issues it might have been a bad promotional strategy. Selling fantasy through deception is indeed an old art among most travel writers. But unless properly concealed overemphasis on the fantasy may easily backfire especially when the reader is told of the princely circuit the travel writer takes. When something is too good to be true it always begs further question. Ordinary intelligence expects problems and the ugly sides even in the paradise.

The title *Malaysia Terima Kasih* is a poor corruption of the national expression “thank you”. For the red carpet treatment she has received it is more proper to say *Terima Kasih Malaysia*. It is usually the taker who says thank you and not the other way round.

For all the shortcomings the patient reader will undoubtedly get the feel of Ms Bowater-Wright somewhat zig-zag odyssey. The style is intimate and the narrative conveys a predicament of a visitor who, throughout her journey is encapsulated in the “environmental bubble” of the most affluent tourist. Whether this is the intended objective of the sponsorship is not certain. Surely the most affluent tourist are only a small segment of the market. As the TDC visitor surveys’ have repeatedly shown there are more of the budget-conscious mass tourists to woo.

Considering that the cost of her journey alone amounted to some \$300,000 ringgit (not to mention the cost of publication of the initial 6000 copies), there is clearly a need for closer scrutiny of consultants’ credentials as well as statement in requests for proposals.

Personal accounts and travelogues such as this book are rarely subject to critical review since they are meant to be a record of subjective impressions and often carry little polemics. However when such publications are officially sponsored (and even launched by a cabinet minister), it becomes necessary to raise questions as to whether money which comes from the public coffer is well spent or whether there are locals who could do a better job at cheaper cost. Tourism after all is meant to earn foreign exchange. For a writer who is equipped with a secretary, two push button direct international lines, two TVs, in her “home” in the Hilton (p. 46); and unlimited ride on MAS, Ms Bowater-Wright surely owes the government and Malaysians a better job.

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