

Prologue

This book is about people who met at Liverpool's Malay Club over a period of more than half a century. It examines, in particular, the maritime linkages that made possible the formation of the Malay Club and the worlds of connection that the club in turn sustained. Research for the book formally began at the National University of Singapore in 2004, but the genesis of my 'Malay Routes' project lay in a couple of seemingly unconnected events over the preceding three years. First, during a research trip to Kuala Lumpur in 2001, I watched a Malay-language film that implanted in my mind the possibility of a long-standing Malay seafaring presence in England. The main characters in *Dari Jemapoh ke Manchester* (From Jemapoh to Manchester) are two teenage boys, Yadi and Mafiz, who leave behind the sleepy village of Jemapoh in the 1960s in a red Volvo, and head for the great port of Singapore – maritime gateway to lands beyond the Malay world. Yadi dreams of meeting his football idol, George Best, and of watching 'Manchestee Uni-ted'. Mafiz, by contrast, is no football fan, but is motivated to hit the road and sea lanes by the prospect of tracking down his seafaring father (*ayah*). Where is Mafiz's *ayah*? They are not sure, but the last contact was a postcard, from Liverpool ...

The second event, a year after I watched *Dari Jemapoh ke Manchester*, was the funeral of my maternal grandfather which was held in a part of the northwest of England that borders north Wales. My journey back home from Singapore to Manchester airport was filled with sadness and

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regret at not having been able to see my grandfather before he died. Conversations that followed the funeral gave rise to further regrets. Especially for Welsh family members whom I had not seen since my early childhood, the fact that I was living and working in Southeast Asia emerged not only as a topic of conversation but also as a connection to my late grandfather's life. My great-uncle David recalled stories that he had heard from my grandfather about his time in Singapore. Had I not heard those stories before? Certainly I was aware that my grandfather had worked in the merchant navy, shipping out of Liverpool towards the end of the Second World War and into the immediate postwar period. This memory had been sustained by the painting of a Blue Funnel Line ship set against the Liverpool waterfront that was in the room where we always ate during childhood visits to my grandparents' home. But I had rarely asked my grandfather about the seafaring period of his life, blurring historically as it did into a topic that was off limits – the war. I never got to hear my grandfather's recollections of Singapore and a host of other places 'around there' (as my great-uncle David put it) which were overlapping points in our life geographies, many decades apart.

Back at work in Singapore, curiosity about the mid-twentieth-century maritime routes that had taken my grandfather from Liverpool to Singapore reminded me of the possibility of seafaring journeys in the opposite direction. To what extent was Mafiz's father in *Dari Jemapoh ke Manchester* merely a product of filmmaker Hishamuddin Rais's creative imagination? And, if Malay sailors really had sent postcards back to villages in Malaysia from ports such as Liverpool in the 1960s, were any of these men still living in England? Although the seemingly most straightforward way to answer the first of these questions was to ask Hishamuddin himself, unfortunately – for him even more than for me – he was in detention in 2002 under Malaysia's Internal Security Act. By the time that he was released in mid-2003, I had found the answer to the second question: newspaper articles written by the London-based Malaysian journalist Zaharah Othman confirmed that there were indeed Malay ex-seamen living in Liverpool and other former British maritime centres such as Cardiff and London. When I eventually met Hishamuddin in Kuala Lumpur in early 2004, I had already read about some of the ex-sailors whom he had encountered in London in the 1980s – most memorably Man Tokyo, whose knowledge of the Japanese language gained when working in shipyards in Japan during the Second World War had helped him to secure roles in British war films.

Another, more serendipitous, source of information about Malay ex-seamen in the city of Liverpool in particular came through a friend and former colleague at the National University of Singapore. Phil Kelly's family are from Liverpool and, in email correspondence in the period

after my grandfather's funeral in May 2002, I asked Phil if he was aware of a Malay presence in his home town. He wrote back some weeks later to report that his Aunt Valerie ('just retired from many years as the telephone operator at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine') had kindly unearthed several leads for me. These included contact details for Liverpool's Al-Rahma mosque (a reasonable place to seek Malays who, in Malaysia at least, are constitutionally Muslim); the nursing home where a Mr Hassan ('an elderly chap with good English and very knowledgeable') was staying; and a 'Malaysia/Singapore Association' (the Malay Club) housed at 7 Jermyn Street. With this information and inspiration gained from reading Zaharah Othman's newspaper articles – which included mention of meeting Mr Hassan (Arsad Hassan) at 7 Jermyn Street in 1996 – I headed back to the northwest of England, to Liverpool, in December 2003.

During this initial pilot visit to Liverpool, a graduate student from Malaysia introduced me to an ex-seaman known as Dol. Born in Singapore in 1929, Dol had gained seafaring experience working on the



Figure 0.1 Malay deck crew of the MV *Charon*, circa 1947. Photograph courtesy of Fadzil Mohamed.

MV *Charon*, a Liverpool-owned Blue Funnel Line ship that had operated between Singapore and Western Australia in the 1940s. Moving on to work on oceangoing ships, he first arrived in Liverpool as a seafarer onboard the MV *Gladys Moller* on a very cold day in December 1950. At that time, Dol recalled, there were ‘hundreds’ of Malay men like him in Liverpool. By December 2003 only around 20 remained. The lives of these men and other people who met at the Malay Club on Jermyn Street – including descendants of ex-seamen as well as Malaysian student sojourners and their family members – provide a window into Liverpool’s historically shifting urban social geographies.