

A window on Perak

Looking at Perak's past through the simple postcard. **BY Ilsa Sharp**

In this frenzied digital age, who can be bothered to mail a postcard? Holidays are so short, air travel so speedy, that the traveller often is back home before the card has arrived.

Besides, today's tourist is equipped with high-resolution video cameras and portable Internet to show friends countless personalised images of his/her travels even before returning home. The time-honoured postcard message, "Having a lovely time, wish you were here", or "The fourth window from left on the second storey is our hotel room!", no longer cuts the mustard. The post today is a twilight industry.

So it takes quite a mind-shift to cast yourself back to the dawn of the postcard age in Europe during the late 1860s, and understand what a path-breaking innovation these little rectangles of card then seemed to be.

This handsome 336-page, large-format monster of a book makes that mind-shift pleurably nostalgic. This is the largest collection of Perak postcards ever seen in a single volume. It's a worthy companion to Areca Books' 2003 publication, *Penang, Postcard Collection 1899-1930s*, by two of the same authors of this Perak collection, Khoo Salma Nasution and Malcolm Wade.

Penang-based Khoo Salma and husband Abdur-Razzaq Lubis' well-known heritage and publishing credentials need no introduction here. Co-author Malcolm Wade is the owner of most of the postcards featured. Yorkshire-born, he served with the British Army in Singapore, finishing up as a senior technical instructor at the Malaysian School of Signals, and ending his last tour of duty in Kuala Lumpur in 1967. Back in England, his interest in "things Malayan" has never abated, as demonstrated by his postcard collection.

One of the glories of this book is that the authors' expertise is brought to bear on every image, each one carefully sourced, dated and historically interpreted. It's absolutely not a mind-numbing catalogue, more like a rolling story that you can dip in and out of at your leisure.

Postcards took off in the 1890s when postal rates turned in favour of privately produced picture postcards. Here's one of the floods in Ipoh.



A postcard of the Taiping Post & Telegraph Office. Established in 1876, it was the first in Perak.



Postcards took off in the 1890s when postal rates turned in favour of privately produced picture postcards. By the early 20th century, they were being mailed in their hundreds of millions worldwide. They quickly became sought-after collectibles.

The earliest "undivided" postcards are obvious, with their reverse side reserved for the address, and the sender's message scrawled briefly around the image on the front of the card, cramped for space. Cards after 1902 feature the familiar "divided back" that accommodated both the address and the sender's message, leaving an unimpeded view of the front-side image.

Areca Books' Penang postcards book outlines postcard history, whereas this Perak volume instead exhaustively details the postal history of Perak, including the opening dates for all Perak post offices (Taiping was first, in 1876; Ipoh not until 1891), and examples of postmarks.

Balancing the dry recital of historical postal statistics, there is the romance of surprisingly efficient but ingenious early postal systems carrying the mail across

difficult jungle and mountain terrain, ranging from elephants, bullock and pony carts, to human "dak runner" relays and steamboats. The fastest delivery achieved in 1884 from Penang to Taiping was seven hours, without use of the railways that speeded deliveries after 1885.

Efficiency was maintained by the 1901 imposition of a then substantial \$2 (Straits dollar) fine on delivery contractors for every hour the mail was late. The postal network spawned an elaborate bureaucracy, supporting many jobs, as smartly uniformed (but often barefoot) postal officers struggled to keep manual track of postal items, diligently recording their every movement from village to village. You can sense the pride in the Post as a bulwark of the economy and indeed of civilisation itself, as you view the postcard images of Perak's splendid old custom-built Post Office buildings.

All the "usual suspects" are here: images of standard colonial icons, from the sporting clubs, pleasure gardens, hotels and rest houses to the banks, railway stations, courthouses, government residencies and police stations. It would have

added perspective perhaps if the text could have let us know more about which of them still stand, or what now stands in their place.

Shots of people are in the minority, but evocative when they occur: all those serious, unsmiling faces with fixed eyes, and frozen poses.

Special sections focus on key topics such as the tin and rubber industries of Perak. Another, devoted to postcard images of Perak's orang asli communities, gives pause for thought about little known and partly lost ways of life. Thanks to author Lubis' own Mandailing descent (a north Sumatran community), postcards relevant to Perak's Mandailing community are also intriguingly documented. **E**

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