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Book Reviews

Tan, Kevin Yew Lee (2008), *Marshall of Singapore. A Biography*, Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, ISEAS

ISBN 9789812308788, 612 pages

David Marshall (1908-1995) was one of Asia's most fascinating lawyers of the 20th century. More than that he was one its most fascinating people of any description. He was a criminal defence lawyer of towering presence and ability, who made public prosecutors weak at the knees. He was Singapore's first chief minister in 1955-56, whose brief political career, ending ultimately (and astonishingly) in a lost deposit in the 1963 elections, was described by political scientist Chan Heng Chee as like a "shooting star" which "filled the sky with brilliance and disappeared".

Marshall was an extraordinary character. He was larger than life, and a bundle of contradictions. Generous to a fault but with the sting (in public fora) of a particularly vicious mosquito, a confirmed bachelor who later married and had four children, supernaturally intelligent and a mesmerising speaker but often hopelessly impractical, quick to anger, mercurial, idealistic, unpredictable, and ultimately as unsuccessful in politics as he was successful in the law. Indeed he had several careers or faces – as a teacher at the Law Faculty of the University of Singapore, and in his later years as a diplomat, serving as Singapore's ambassador to France (where he was known as "l'ambassadeur a orchidee" in tribute to the ever present orchid on his lapel, and where his staff reckoned they lived under "marshall law"); also as a civil society activist and doer of large numbers of good works. He was personal friends with the great and the good the world over, from Malcolm McDonald, Edith Summerskill and Louis Blom-Cooper to Jawaharlal Nehru, Han Suyin and Zhou Enlai – and Singaporeans of all stripes and persuasions and races, from Kampong kids to law clerks to the elite of Singapore society; and not excluding the most beautiful women.

While Marshall was without question a great man, his achievements are harder to pin down than his personality. The story of his life, while fascinating both in its breadth and in its detail, leaves one with a sense of sadness that such a sheer force of nature could not have had a longer and more decisive impact on Singapore's politics and legislation, dominated for so long by that diametrically opposite character, and indeed another lawyer, Lee Kuan Yew, whom Marshall excoriated incessantly from the sidelines. Marshall chafed at being ousted from public life for what must have seemed an era as Lee and the PAP consolidated its rule. At one point he was even banned from legal practice for six months over an alleged breach of an

undertaking. It is nonetheless typical of Marshall that he counted several PAP politicians amongst his closest friends and treated even his erstwhile political enemy Lee with great generosity when the Lees visited Paris in 1990. There were great achievements, as Kevin Tan points out – the alleged murderers saved from the gallows, the hundreds of Shanghai Jews liberated to Israel and Russia, the decisive rousing of the Singapore masses against colonialism, the entrenchment of parliamentary democracy and belief in a multi-racial community and responsible government. And yet perhaps his greatest achievement was simply to be his extraordinary self and to be an inspiration to so many others. He was in a way Singapore's alternative founding spirit and to many of a certain generation he simply *was* its founding spirit. It was at any rate remarkable for an Iraqi Sephardic Jew (born David Mashal), a member of Singapore's smallest minority group, to become chief minister at all, especially given Singapore's dangerous racial, ideologically polarised, politics of the 1950s.

Kevin Tan is highly qualified to write this book as a law professor and a historian both of law and politics, and an experienced author having unique access to Marshall's papers via his widow Jean. The book is simply superbly written. It does perfect justice to the man and all those around him, friends and enemies. It maintains a wonderful balance between recording the detail of an important life (this is in itself a legacy – one suspects it will be many decades before Tan's careful and well judged research will seem to need revisiting), and fitting that life into the particular historical and social setting in which it was lived. It is far from a hagiography. Marshall is painted richly and convincingly, warts and all. Just as he is full of praise for Marshall as lawyer, Tan does not shy away from criticising both naivete of Marshall the politician, who allowed himself to be used as a pawn by the communists even as he advocated progressive and humanist positions with unremitting passion. He also adverts to his one-man-show predisposition which ruined the chances of agreement on Singapore's independence in the 1956 constitutional talks – this being the issue on which Marshall staked all and lost, precipitating his resignation after a whirlwind 14 months in office.

What ultimately endears me most to this very admirable book is that unlike Chan Heng Chee's political study of Marshall (*A Sensation of Independence*, Singapore, OUP, 1984), he takes the ideals and the contribution of Marshall as a lawyer as uniquely interesting and important in themselves, not just as background to the politics. The book should indeed be compulsory reading for Singapore law students, for in so many ways Marshall was the lawyerly ideal both in method and in his deep revulsion against injustice of all kinds. In a superb summation Tan contradicts Chan's shooting star image, preferring that of the aurora borealis. In this assessment he is right. The

spirit of David Marshall is not always obvious in modern pragmatic, cut-and-dried Singapore, but it is nonetheless there, and the fact that this book was written and written so well is living proof of that.

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