

The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942

BRIAN P. FARRELL

Stroud, Tempus Publishing, 2005

446 pp., ISBN 0-7524 2311-8 (£25.00 hardback)

Singapore Burning: Heroism and Surrender in World War II

COLIN SMITH

London, Viking, 2005

xiii + 628 pp., ISBN 0-670-91341-3 (£25.00 hardback)

The Battle for Singapore: The True Story of Britain's Greatest Military Disaster

PETER THOMPSON

London, Portrait Books, 2005

x + 470 pp., ISBN 0-7499-5068-4 (£20.00 hardback)

'Why do we need another book on this?' asks Brian Farrell at the beginning of *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*. In the light of the extensive literature and the publication of three additional works on the subject, it is a pertinent question. By 1998 no less than 168 books had appeared in English on the fall and occupation of Singapore. It is improbable that the official enquiry, which Churchill promised but never instigated, would have stemmed this flow of publications, but, in its absence, the reasons for the loss of the so-called impregnable fortress became subject to special pleading and enveloped in myth, mystery and misinformation. While participants justified their actions or criticised those of others, until official papers were released historians tended to focus on the interwar years during which the naval base was developed as a major component of imperial defence. When, however, British government files for 1941-42 were opened in 1993, the Malayan campaign came under renewed scrutiny.

Leading the charge was Peter Elphick, a master mariner turned historian, whose *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress: A Study in Deception, Discord and Desertion* came

out in 1995. Although parts of this book digressed into byways (as in the disproportionate space devoted to the intelligence activities of John Becker), or provoked bitter recriminations (notably the account of wholesale desertion by Australian troops), or were dismissed as preposterous (such as the significance attributed to Patrick Heenan, the Japanese spy), Elphick's mission to expose what he regarded as a fifty-year cover-up stimulated research in British and Australian archives and also on the Japanese material that had survived the war. Scholars now sought explanations for Japanese success and British failure, instead of looking for scapegoats and apportioning blame. They moved on from the facile stereotypes and glib judgments of hindsight to a more thoughtful treatment of the dilemmas and dangers facing decision-makers at the time. While historians have continued to examine the tiffs and tactics and the blunders and blind-spots of political, military and colonial leaders (Churchill, Dill, Brooke-Popham, Duff Cooper, Percival, Tom Phillips, Heath, Shenton Thomas, Tojo, Yamashita, Tsuji Masanobu, Fujiwara Iwaichi, and so on), they have done so in the contexts of diplomacy, empire and war, and also by reference to the experiences of fighting men, civilian expatriates and Malayan residents. The sixtieth anniversary of the fall was marked by the publication of Alan Warren's *Singapore 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat*, which embodied this broader approach, and by an international conference held in Singapore whose proceedings were published in 2003 as *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited* edited by Brian Farrell and Sandy Hunter. Also inspired by the anniversary, Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn brought out *Did Singapore have to fall? Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress* (2004, see *JICH*, 32, 3 (Sept. 2004), 158-59). In the same year, the Singapore University Press published the late Henry Frei's ground-breaking work, *Guns of February: Ordinary Japanese Soldiers' Views of the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore 1941-41*, which drew upon written and oral memories to inform a western readership for the first time of the varied experiences and subsequent reflections of Japanese combatants.

What do Farrell, Smith and Thompson add to our knowledge and understanding of this episode, and how do they differ from each other? Between them they have gathered together an immense amount of information and each claims to present fresh

and comprehensive evidence to dispel misconceptions and provide a definitive account of the campaign. Yet they are unlikely to have pronounced the obsequies on a topic which, as Hack and Blackburn have written, is subject to a 'never-ending post-mortem'. Some may be perplexed by the failure of these authors to engage fully with the work of other historians or to explain precisely how they are adding to previous research. Moreover, none cites sources as extensively as one might expect of an historian who is bent on establishing a copper-bottomed thesis. Even Farrell, who is a commanding presence in this field, has relegated his full set of notes and references to a website and provided readers of his book with only a list of sources. As regards interpretation, the explanations offered by the three authors seem similar and feel familiar in all essentials. This degree of consensus is perhaps a mark of the current state of the subject, since it is now, as Thompson puts it, 'relatively simple to list the reasons for the defeat'. If so, the trick lies in listing them in the right order or giving each its due weight. Be that as it may, the ground which the authors hold in common may be summarised as follows.

The plan to send the main fleet to Singapore in the event of a Far Eastern crisis was militarily unrealistic from the moment it was adopted. Imperial overstretch meant that during the 1920s and 1930s the region was a low priority for top quality commanders, staff and equipment. After the outbreak of war in Europe followed by reverses in the Mediterranean and North Africa, resources could not be spared to support the Singapore strategy. Their allocation was further complicated by the politics of the Commonwealth alliance and Anglo-American relations which in the end necessitated a military gesture by Britain in the Far East, no matter how futile. In December 1941 Britain's naval deterrent, which amounted to a force of two capital ships plus an escort of destroyers, was annihilated for want of air cover. This meant that the army, which had been widely deployed in the peninsula to defend inadequately stocked air fields, unexpectedly assumed responsibility for the protection of a naval base which was now indefensible and redundant. As British, Australian and Indian forces retreated south to Singapore, they were joined by recent arrivals who were poorly prepared for the fray. Since their commanders could produce no alternative to 'muddling through', they were no match for what Farrell has identified as Yamashita's 'driving charge'.

The three authors tell a dispiriting tale which is occasionally relieved by instances of heroism and humanity. Where they differ is in the attention they pay to the leaders and the led. Professor Farrell, who teaches History at the National University of Singapore and has published extensively on the military history of the British empire, traces defeat to systemic problems of military planning whose sound principles were subverted by the politics of imperial defence. He goes on to show how defeat was then turned into disaster by the miscalculations of commanders on the spot. While he by no means neglects the 'poor bloody infantry', Farrell's prime interest is in the decision-makers and his main sources are the records of high policy held at the Australian War Memorial, the India Office Records (British Library), The National Archives (Kew) and the US Army Centre for Military History, to which he has added the private papers of principal players such as Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham and Generals Heath and Percival. Colin Smith and Peter Thompson, by contrast, were journalists before becoming full-time authors. Smith covered many conflicts for the London *Observer*, including the fall of Saigon in 1975. Thompson worked on the *Melbourne Sun* before moving to London to join the *Mirror* group and eventually to edit the *Sunday Mirror*. They have approached the fall of Singapore less as investigative journalists seeking the reason why and more as reporters describing what happened from the observations and reminiscences of those who were there. As far as possible they follow operations through the eyes of the combatants. Their heroes include Ian Stewart of the Argylls, Tim Vigors of the RAF, the campaign's four VCs and Ben Hackney who miraculously survived the Parit Sulong massacre. Smith identifies dignity and humanity on the Japanese side, too, but he and Thompson share a contempt for the Australian general, Gordon Bennett. One senses, however, that, compared with Farrell's full immersion, Smith and Thompson have merely dipped into government papers. They prize above all else interviews with survivors or written testimonies collected, for example, in the Imperial War Museum, Australian War Museum, or regimental archives. They both tend to allow eyewitness accounts to drive their narratives but, since some would have been compiled long after the event, it would have been helpful had Smith and Thompson reflected further on the use of memories as historical sources.

Key words from the titles of these books - fall, surrender and disaster – suggest a preoccupation with the decline and fall of British power. Just as Suez 1956 is said to have marked the end of ‘Britain’s moment in the Middle East’, Singapore 1942 has acquired similar significance for the British empire in Asia. Yet, none of the authors explores in any great depth the extent to which it marked a turning point in either the course of the war or the fortunes of the empire. While Thompson unquestioningly accepts that defeat ‘sounded the death knell for British rule in South East Asia’, Farrell and Smith ponder a little longer on its impact. Farrell contends that Japan’s victory in February 1942 did not determine the outcome of the Pacific War: it became a secondary event for the Japanese and is scarcely mentioned in American accounts. Moreover, Japan’s triumph was soon followed by military reverses while Britain was saved from total eclipse by American support which Pearl Harbor had already secured. Both Farrell and Smith point out that, for all its deleterious effects on British prestige in the world, on British power in Asia and on British relations with Australia, Singapore 1942 neither ended nor initiated the ending of empire. While disaster in Singapore may, as Farrell puts it, have ‘helped the British decide to walk away from their empire’, it has to be remembered that its immediate effect was to strengthen their commitment to a South East Asian empire. It also gave them no end of a lesson in its defence. So it was that, when they returned in 1945, the British re-established a base in Singapore which would remain the centre of their power in the region for the next twenty-five years.

A.J. STOCKWELL

Royal Holloway, University of London