

Biographical Notes

Maurice Baker (1920 – 11 July 2017) – Academic/diplomat

Maurice Baker was an academic and Singapore diplomat, and best known for rebuilding Singapore's ties with Malaysia when he was High Commissioner during two sensitive periods.¹

He was born in 1920 in Kedah to an English father – Maurice Baker – and a Tamil mother, Letchmi. Baker was named after his father.² He did not know his exact date of birth although it was registered as 24 March 1920 years later when he had to attend school.³ Baker senior was from Surrey, England and came to Malaya in 1912 as a civil engineer.⁴

Given the nature of Baker senior's work, the family moved around. Baker started his education in Kuantan in 1926 before the family moved to another town in Pahang called Mentakab. There, Baker did not attend school as there was no school in the village. He only resumed studies a year later when a school was built.⁵ In 1930 when the family moved to Perak, Baker was enrolled at ACS Ipoh afternoon school where he completed his matriculation class in 1937.⁶

Between 1938 and 1941, Baker attended Raffles College in Singapore, studying to become a teacher. He was awarded a first class diploma and a Queen's Scholarship.⁷ But the outbreak of the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) disrupted his plans. He returned to Cameron Highlands where his mother and younger brother were located and stayed there for the duration of the war.⁸

When the war ended, Baker returned to Singapore to visit his father who was interned at the Sime Road Camp. Then he found a job at the Raffles Library, before going on to become a teacher at Choon Guan English School.⁹

In 1947, Baker left for England to take up his Queen's Scholarship¹⁰ where he attended University College, Leicester¹¹ and later read English Literature at King's College, University of London.¹²

While pursuing his studies in the UK, Baker became involved in the independence movement for Malaya and Singapore. He was president of Malayan Students' Union (1948), and had organised The Malayan Forum with Abdul Razak Hussein and Goh Keng Swee. He was also editor of the *Suara Merdeka* newsletter.¹³

In 1952, Baker returned to Singapore with an honours degree in English and a certificate in Education from the Institute of Education in London.¹⁴ Earlier that year, he had married Barbara Edwina

¹ "President, PM Lee pay tribute to late pioneer diplomat", *The Straits Times*, 13 July 2017, p. 8.

² Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Maurice Baker*, accession no. 000095, reel 1, retrieved from https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/df93057c-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad

³ Baker, Maurice, *A time of fireflies and wild guavas*, Singapore: Federal Publications (1995), p. 1.

⁴ Baker, *A time of fireflies*, p. 2; Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Maurice Baker*, accession no. 000095, reel 1.

⁵ Baker, *A time of fireflies*, pp. 13-14, 20.

⁶ Baker, *A time of fireflies*, p. 29, 56.

⁷ Baker, *A time of fireflies*, p. 69-70.

⁸ Baker, *A time of fireflies*, p. 123; Baker, Maurice, *The accidental diplomat: an autobiography of Maurice Baker*, Singapore: World Scientific (2015), p. 3.

⁹ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 31-32.

¹⁰ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 36.

¹¹ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 39.

¹² Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 44.

¹³ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 49, 62.

¹⁴ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 49.

Balhetchet, a Eurasian from Singapore¹⁵ with whom he had two sons.¹⁶ Mrs Baker was the daughter of W A Balhetchet, medical superintendent of Kandang Kerbau Hospital.¹⁷

After his return from the UK in September 1952, Baker taught at Kuo Chuan Girls' School, Bartley Secondary School and Victoria School before being asked to be a tutor at the Department of English of the University of Malaya (Singapore campus).¹⁸ He became a full time lecturer at the University in 1955.¹⁹

Around 1964, Baker formed the Malaysian Staff Association of the University of Singapore, as a breakaway from the Academic Staff Association to serve the needs of the local staff.²⁰ He was elected president.²¹

In 1967, Baker was appointed Singapore High Commissioner to India²² and concurrently Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Nepal.²³ In 1969, he was recalled to become High commissioner to Malaysia (1969-1971)²⁴ following the May 13 racial riots in Malaysia.

In 1971, Baker returned to the University of Singapore to take up position as Head of Department of English following the resignation of Professor D J Enright.²⁵ He held that position until 1977²⁶ when he was appointed as ambassador to the Philippines (1977-1980).²⁷ He took up a second stint as High Commissioner to Malaysia between 1980 and 1988.²⁸

After he retired from public service, Baker was appointed pro-chancellor of the National university of Singapore (1989-2000).²⁹

Baker passed away on 11 July 2017 in Singapore at the age of 97.³⁰

¹⁵ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 69, 72

¹⁶ "Pioneer-generation Singapore diplomat Maurice Baker dies, aged 97", *The Straits Times*, 12 July 2017.

¹⁷ "Untitled", *Straits Times*, 29 August 1952.

¹⁸ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, pp. 76-77, 80.

¹⁹ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 80.

²⁰ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 89.

²¹ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 89.

²² Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, pp. 93,98-99.

²³ "S'pore ties with Nepal", *The Straits Times*, 21 May 1969.

²⁴ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 151.

²⁵ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 198.

²⁶ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 199.

²⁷ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, pp. 199, 201.

²⁸ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 231.

²⁹ Baker, *The accidental diplomat*, p. 277; "Pioneer-generation Singapore diplomat Maurice Baker dies, aged 97", *The Straits Times*, 12 July 2017.

³⁰ "Pioneer-generation Singapore diplomat Maurice Baker dies, aged 97", *The Straits Times*, 12 July 2017.