



Memory Lane

A stroll down bustling Jalan Malioboro in Yogyakarta brought back memories for **Colin Miller**

Recently I came across Harold Forster's *Flowering Lotus, A view of Java in the 1950s*. The going was rather heavy until I read the passage, "...on the pavement before the shop fronts of Malioboro, stalls displayed an astonishing variety of fountain pens, sunglasses and ..."

Suddenly the author fired off in my mind vivid memories of Yogyakarta's main street, Jalan Malioboro. The colours, patterns and shapes of the astonishing variety of goods displayed, the rainbows and kaleidoscopes all came rushing back.

So I was delighted when it was decided, about a week later, that the family holiday was to be in Yogya. In a moment of inspiration, I decided to pack Forster along with the guide-books, hoping to gain insight from his views and maybe just to follow his footsteps up Jalan Malioboro.

With the family safely ensconced around the hotel pool, off I went in search of memories—his and mine. Turning into Malioboro, there were all the crowded stalls, mountains of

shoes, toys and sunglasses—pretty much as I had remembered it and Forster had described it. From one end of the street to the other, stalls were selling just about every kind of thing that induces impulse buying.

In the hour before sunset I was only able to walk a short distance, yet one thing I noticed immediately was the absence of stuffed animals. Years ago I had reacted strongly to the sight of turtles and various Javanese mam-

mals and birds up for grabs. In the fifties, Forster described the smell of durian [sic] in the air, the clothing hung next to gaudy pin-ups and the Sultan's picture next to those of Hollywood blondes. Now a new Sultan sits in the palace and his picture rubs shoulders with that of Mick Jagger. This short first day's outing also revealed the increased sophistication of stall-keepers. Instead of the "Hello mister" pitch I remembered, sellers now hit you with the line: "Hey, what a great hat (or earring), where did you get it from?" But I must admit that I fell for it the first time and it took me several minutes to extricate myself from a conversation with a young man who was keen to sell me a shirt, which he said would do wonders for my chances with the local girls.

Not far along from the shirt of my dreams was an old man sitting on the ground before several crudely-drawn symbols—knife, flame, and tree. I watched as a group of young girls approached him and knelt down in front of him. He took each of their hands in turn and as he finished with the reading of their palms, he spoke in a passionate, rapid-fire way. At first startled, his supplicants were soon smiling and laughing at the revelation of their past and the prediction of their future. They each passed the old man small change and went on up the street laughing and gossiping about what had been revealed.

Not really knowing what to think of this whole episode, I hung back, not wanting to present myself to the old man—fear of fortune tellers walking on my grave, I suppose. Just as I was

For sale: masks (top), key chains and wooden horses add to the street's colour



about to turn and leave, he looked up at me and smiled, inviting me to sit with him. Caught between curiosity and fear, I fled back to the safety of the hotel.

That first night, I read once more of Forster's Malioboro of the fifties. There, in among the baskets of fruit and rolls of batik that he had described, I noticed he had written, "... small groups surround the fortune tellers". While I wasn't surprised fortune tellers populated the street 40 years ago—almost obligatory I would have thought for an eastern bazaar—I was surprised that I found myself going back to the old man to find out something about him.

I hadn't really intended to have my fortune told, but not long after I sat down my palm was being read and I was choosing cards. The old sooth-sayer spoke rapidly at the fall of the cards, as I had heard him do the day before. I didn't understand everything that he said, but I heard enough of ambition, strength of character and success to settle my nerves and to ask about the old man's life.

Pak Darmowiyoto told me he had been on Jalan Malioboro since the beginning of the seventies, coming each day, an hour by bus from Klaten in central Java, to practice *ramal*, the Javanese art of fortune-telling. I was slightly disappointed; foolishly, I had started to think that maybe Forster had met him. Did he just tell people what they wanted to hear? Given confidence in their own fated success, did they just go out and be successful? Was he just receptive to people because he sat all day and watched them go by? Were his predictions so general that anyone would have lapped them up?

I don't know, but when I asked about his secret, he objected strongly to the description "trick", saying he could see people's fates in their faces, people's lives were reflected there.

He said he had learned *ramal* from his parents, spending his childhood following them through the villages and towns of east and central Java. This cheered me—silly, I know, but I thought that while Forster couldn't possibly have met this old man, he might have met his parents. Fired with enthusiasm by this encounter and the



They're a happy crowd on Jl Malioboro

possibility I had crossed Forster's path, I decided to try to track down all the places he mentioned in his book.

The Oen restaurant is no longer on this jumble-sale street but there, not far from the railway station, was the Garuda Hotel, where Forster and his wife spent their first year in Yogya. After some thought, the doorman—who started at the hotel as a bell boy in the late 60s—was able to tell me that the hotel's longest serving employee had started a few years before him. While it was obvious that no-one could remember the Forsters, I asked about the "canopies over the stairways, glowing with multi-coloured glass". The doorman smiled happily and led the way to part of the original 1911 structure, where the canopies still glowed.

Stimulated by the sight of this old structure, I set out to find other old buildings Forster had described. On the opposite side of the street, not far from the Garuda, I was delighted to stumble on the Putra Barber Shop. The sight of the old-time chairs startled me and suddenly I was in the shop asking questions and wondering aloud if Forster had had a haircut there.

A chain-smoking barber told me the shop was established in 1929 and that it was known as the Coeffeur Tan Kim Ling until 1954. He knew all of this because he had started cutting hair at the shop in 1952, when he was 17 years old. Just about the time Forster would have been looking for his first



haircut. He must have cut Forster's hair, I thought. Circumstantial evidence, admittedly, but it all added up. Forster could only have been one of a handful of Europeans in Yogya in the fifties. He lived across the street for a year. Even if the Garuda had its own barber shop, surely he got bored and sought out others?

The barber said he couldn't remember, claiming that it was a long time ago. He wasn't impressed with my interest in the past and seemed unhappily resigned to answering my questions; pleasing the tourist, I suppose.

Out on the street again, I started to notice all the changes since my last visit. McDonalds is on Jalan Malioboro now, and there's a new shopping mall. Change is a constant, yet I had found many of the things I remembered and I had found many things I would have missed if it hadn't been for Forster's memories. G

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