

## Singapore Goes Off the Air

by Giles Playfair

New York, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1943, 273 pages  
Obtainable through Inter-Library Loan

Reviewed by Jerry Berg  
38 Eastern Avenue  
Lexington, MA 02421  
[jsberg@rcn.com](mailto:jsberg@rcn.com)

Giles Playfair's *Singapore Goes Off the Air* is an account of the author's nine weeks as Director of Talks and Productions of the Malaya Broadcasting Corp. (MBC) in Singapore. Giles was the son of Sir Nigel Playfair, English actor, producer and director of the day. Giles had been a publicist in the BBC overseas department, and for a while the assistant editor of the BBC publication *London Calling*.



*Singapore Goes Off the Air* is actually four stories in one. The first recounts the 15-week journey from Liverpool to Singapore aboard the *S.S. Themistocles*, sailing by way of Jamaica, Panama, Sydney and Batavia (now Jakarta). Playfair was accompanied by his American wife, Carol, and his stepdaughter, Amanda. (Amanda departed for the United States in Jamaica.) They arrived in Singapore on December 9, 1941, two days after Pearl Harbor and the day after the United States and Great Britain declared war on Japan. The second story details the author's life in Singapore, and the third describes his departure for Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies) under the sounds of Japanese artillery.

The author's descriptions of British colonial life are informative and entertaining, especially his comments on Singapore club life; life in the Raffles Hotel where he resided; Singapore's poor defenses, general unpreparedness for war, and lack of strong political leadership; the British views of Singapore's Asian population, and vice versa; and that minority of Singaporean Britains who "regard the war as an unwarranted intrusion on their pleasures" and whom Playfair viewed as "worse than useless."

Also of interest are Playfair's descriptions of Singapore at war, including Japanese air raids, which, for a time, could be viewed safely from afar. "Compared with the German mass efforts they are mere pinpricks," mainly just "excessively inconvenient." (British understatement is in full display throughout the book.) They got worse, however, and eventually Singapore was operating under blitz conditions. The Japanese landing in Malaya seemed to have taken everyone by surprise. Said Playfair, "It was something I'd been led to believe could never happen, would never even be tried."

For DXers, the most interesting part of the book is the fourth story, told in parallel with the second and the third, which describes the facilities and operation of the MBC, an initiative of the British and Malayan governments that was born in 1941 out of the old commercial station, the British Malaya Broadcasting Corp., Ltd. The MBC was unconnected with the BBC but its goal was no less world class: to provide a broadcasting service not only for Malaya but for all the Far East. The MBC chairman was Eric Davis, the CEO was W. R. Reid, and the Director of Engineering was Danny Weigall (whose signature appears on the MBC QSL letter below). At the high point, the station had almost 300 personnel and broadcast four simultaneous transmissions in 13 languages.



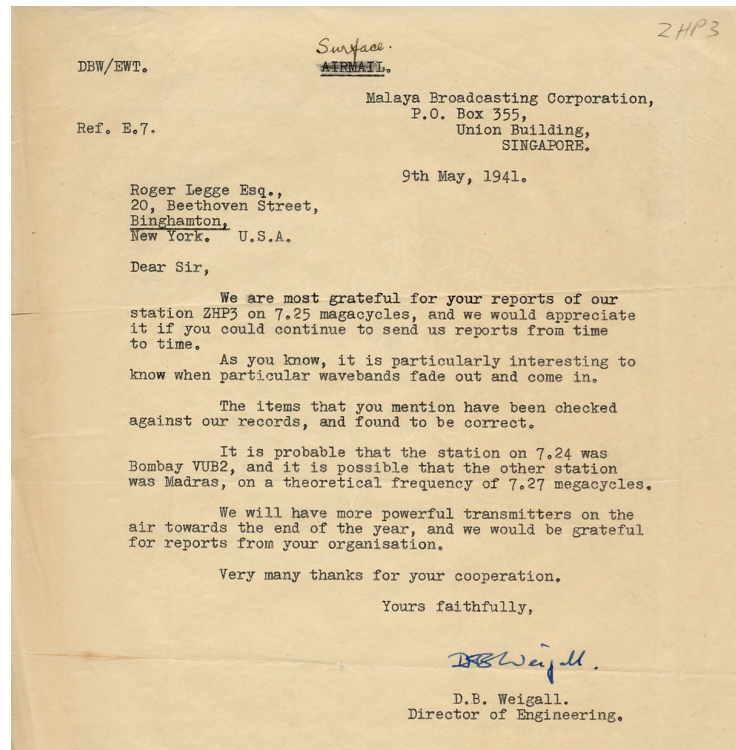
The author described his view of the MBC mission:

It's got to be the voice of Britain in the Far Eastern War. It's got to be a first-class agency of offensive propaganda. It's got to sustain morale. It's got to instruct. In moments of severe stress it's got to preserve an illusion of normalcy. In the event of severe raids, it's got to be the sole provider of entertainment just as the BBC was during the worst days of the London blitz. In short, it's got to fulfill all those functions, both of attack and defense, which make a well-equipped radio station essential in the conduct of modern warfare. (p. 80)

As to the BBC, Playfair thought it completely out of touch with events in the Far East.

Although the above letter gives the MBC address as the Union Building, Playfair says the MBC offices were in the Cathay, a "miniature skyscraper," steel and concrete, which dominated the city. On the fifth floor it housed one small studio, but the main MBC studios were five miles away at Thomson Road. All of the English-language programming was produced there. And the MBC chairman had an impressive house on Mount Rosie, a mile or so from Thomson.

[The studios] are housed in a sort of flimsy bungalow affair and they're neither blastproof nor soundproof. Moreover, with public transportation at a standstill during air raids, Thomson Road is virtually cut off from the town after dark, and short of cadging a lift from a long-suffering colleague your only certain means of turning up at the studios for an evening's broadcast is to arrive before sunset. You then hang about for a few hours until your program is due and pray for a miracle in the shape of an empty seat in a private car or a really adventurous taxi driver to get you home again. (p. 105)



DXers would be happy to know that a program assistant sat at Thomson Road every night to keep a log of broadcasts, telephone calls, etc.



Playfair was a relief announcer and a producer of drama, music and feature programs, and thus had much hands on experience at the station. Live entertainment, especially plays with amateur casts, was his specialty, and these were produced right up to the end, if at a reduced level. A month before the Japanese took over, MBC was still offering two plays a week, three musical features, plus talks, readings and other features. The use of pseudonyms was common, and Playfair himself used four, appearing on air at various times as John English, Anthony Boston, Brian Golding, and Mark Caffyn. A week or so before his own evacuation, Playfair was still intent on putting on at least one play a week. “[S]omehow the complete abandonment of my drama plans would represent a defeat which I just can’t stomach at the moment.” (p. 165) On February 8, three days before his last-minute departure, he and a colleague were rehearsing a reading of “The White Cliffs,” a poem by Alice Duer Miller, while Japanese planes were overhead.

The effort to project some semblance of order on air became increasingly frantic. Playfair and some other station personnel were evacuated by boat on February 11, 1942 amid Japanese air raids and increasingly desperate conditions. They did not know what their final destinations would be, and at least one boat containing MBC personnel was captured by the Japanese. Advised chairman Davis: “I’ve made arrangements for money to be advanced on behalf of the MBC in any part of the world where you are likely to land. . . . If you find yourself in India, call on the nearest office of All India Radio. If you find yourself in Australia, get in touch with the Australian Broadcasting Commission.” (p. 245) Three days later in Batavia he was reunited with his wife, who had arrived there over a month before. From there they went on to Australia.

Now the MBC staff was scattered around the globe.

We have no longer any connection with each other. We are serving different masters in different kinds of work. But I like to think that we are still united in the feeling that we are but killing time, however profitably, until the moment comes when the engineer will be at his

control board again, the microphone will be on its table, the red light will flicker and shine and the announcer will tell the world, "This is the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation . . . ." (p. 267)

An interesting event was the dispatch of a skeleton staff of MBC personnel to Batavia to prepare to broadcast on MBC frequencies in the event the Singapore station was put out of action (and as a means of early evacuation of some MBC personnel). This took place on February 1, 1942. Soon the Singapore staff were in daily contact with their counterparts in Batavia. The MBC apparently did conduct some regular broadcasts from Batavia starting at 6 p.m. on February 10, for on that day the Batavia unit announced: "This is the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation calling in a test transmission. This is the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation calling in a test transmission. We would like our listeners to know that from six o'clock this evening we will be broadcasting a complete schedule of programs. Our revised schedule is as follows . . . . And may we wish all our listeners the very best of luck." (p. 215)

The Japanese completed the takeover of Malaya, including Singapore, on February 15. Under the Japanese the MBC became Radio Shonan. Among the post-war Thomson Road progeny were the British Far Eastern Broadcasting Service (called the "Voice of Britain" after June 1946), and, in 1948, the well-known BBC Far Eastern Station.

