

It was Taboo

Munshi Abdullah, a Malay scribe whose first-hand accounts are regarded as reliable, noted:

Colonel Farquhar asked 'Why is it called the Forbidden Hill?' and the Temenggong replied, 'There is a story dating from the kings of ancient times, that it was on this hill that their palace was built. So it was forbidden for any man to ascend the hill except at the ruler's command or summons. For this reason it was known as the Forbidden Hill. Behind it is a stream known as the Forbidden Stream, for it was the place where the consorts and the wife of the king used to bathe, and no one was allowed to approach.'¹⁴

The royal decree established the hill as taboo to the common class. Yet, almost 700 years after the last king had fled the hill in defeat by external forces, the palace sacked and left in ruins, the locals avoided the unoccupied hill even more sedulously. This time, it was for fear of its spectral inhabitants.

"One day Colonel Farquhar wanted to ascend the Forbidden Hill ... The Temenggong's men said, 'None of us have the courage to go up the hill because there are many ghosts on it. Everyday one can hear on it sounds as if hundreds of men. Sometimes one hears the sounds of heavy drums and of people shouting.'¹⁵

The hill imposed with more than its physical presence. It became an aural container for

the locals, a daily echo of the violence that purportedly took place on its soil in the late 14th century.

At that time, Singhapura was a prominent port city, and had established trading and diplomatic ties with powers as far as China. The *Malay Annals* trumpeted, "The country of Singhapura is of great extent, and frequented by merchants innumerable from every quarter, and its ports are very populous."¹⁶

These were also tumultuous times. Aggressive powers to the island's north and south, the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya and the Javanese Majapahit Empire respectively, raided the island repeatedly to claim it as its own. The Singhapura rulers successfully resisted these attacks, securing themselves through a strong naval power, commandeering from the hill behind defensive walls.

Singapore was so impervious to external threat that her fall ensued only because of a betrayal. A royal minister, enraged that the king had shamed his daughter by a public execution, invited the Javanese to attack. The legend continued that 200,000 soldiers riding on 300 junks, together with smaller vessels in numbers beyond calculation, arrived on the island. And even such a show of strength was not sufficient to conquer Singapore. The royal minister further sabotaged his people by withholding rice from the troops, and even personally opened the island's fortifications to let in the enemies.

"and Java entered into the town, and commenced an amok or indiscriminate carnage ... and blood flowed like an inundation; and this is the blood which still marks the plain of Singhapura"¹⁷ According to the legend, the blood stained the grounds of the Singapore plain extending up to the hill, turning the soil red and casting a curse on it. Rice, the locals' staple food, could no longer grow on the land.

Forbidden Stream

Water from the Forbidden Stream, together with inland streams and wells, sustained the local population.¹⁸ In 1822, a small reservoir was built on the hill to supply water to ships that called at the port.¹⁹

Though the explosive rise in population meant that water from the hill could no longer be depended upon as a primary source, the residents remembered it as an abundant yield of potable water. In 1877, a stop-gap measure was suggested on the forum of the national newspaper to counter the problem of limited water supply on the island, “Gentlemen of experience tell us that if wells were sunk at the foot of Prinsep’s Hill, Fort Canning, Government Hill, and Pearl’s Hill, they would undoubtedly produce excellent water.”²⁰

In 1926, a service reservoir was constructed at the hill-top, as the main water storage and distribution centre for the city area. Covering “practically the whole of the top of the hill”, over nine and a half acres, the 7.6m deep service reservoir was believed to be the largest in the world.²¹ It was a covered reservoir, capped with finished turf, and even in 1928, was envisioned to be an “unsurpassed ‘lung’ for this crowded city, possessing many advantages to be utilised as gardens.”²² Indeed, the public happily used the ground and local league soccer matches were held.²³

This reservoir is still in use today, a highly-restricted zone. Red signs warning that “trespassers will be shot” line the fence around the reservoir. It is rumoured that the water from the hill flows to the nearby Istana, which is the official residence and office of the President of Singapore.

Historical Garden of the Future

In 1822, the Experimental and Botanical Garden, from the eastern slope of the hill extending downwards, was established over 48 acres of land. Nutmeg, cocoa, clove and other economic crops were planted. Though the garden was closed after the death of Raffles, the tradition of husbanding the hill into bountifulness continues.

Topping the hill’s crown today is Fort Canning Park, spread over 18 ha of land managed by the National Parks Board. It was formerly known as Central Park in the 1970s, made up of King George V Jubilee Park at the foothill facing Tank Road and River Valley Road, and the land occupied by the British Armed Forces, which includes the fort.

On 1 November 1981, Central Park was renamed Fort Canning Park, a brand name that re-asserts the site’s shared history with the English. In 1989, \$25 million was earmarked for the redevelopment of Fort Canning Park, “to offer walks into Singapore’s past”, where “visitors can trace Singapore’s history back to the 14th century” and for it to become a “historical park of the future”.²⁴

A cultivated forest experience is part of the scheme. More than 1000 trees, represented by over 100 species, are grown in the park. Every tree is identified, numbered and radio-tagged; its development conscientiously tracked.