

# OBITUARY

## SIR ROBERT SCOTT

### Inspiring influence in occupied Singapore

Sir Robert Heatlie Scott, GCMG, CBE, died on February 26. He was a great public servant and a legendary figure of the Second World War in Singapore. He was 76.

He was born at Peterhead on September 20 1905, eldest son of T. H. Scott, a civil engineer. When he was still a boy the family moved to Trinidad following the father's work. There he completed his schooling begun in Inverness. He was a clever but rebellious student. He used to tell of the happy occasion on which he was saved from further corporal punishment when the first blow of the cane coincided exactly with the initial shock of a serious earthquake. He nevertheless scored a precocious triumph by winning at the age of 15 a scholarship to New College, Oxford. The college refused to accept him at that age and he taught at his school for two years before coming to England.

At Oxford he briefly tried mathematics before changing to law, was called to the Bar, and then decided to enter the Consular Service in the Far East. In China he met and married another Scot — Rosamund Dewar Durie. He served in Japan, Manchuria, Peking, Canton, Chungking, Shanghai and Hongkong and added to his knowledge of the Chinese language by learning Japanese, German, Dutch, French and some Russian. During his career in China at that time he often fell foul of the Japanese. At the beginning of the Second World War he was conducting British propaganda in Japan but in 1941 was transferred to Singapore to set up a branch of the Ministry of Information. As the crisis deepened in Singapore he became a member of the Governor's War Council consisting of the three Service chiefs. From contemporary accounts he outshone the others in vigour and imagination in the face of the impending catastrophe.

When the city fell he attempted to get away on the last boat to leave. His wife had gone on ahead to Australia. Then began a period in his life which gave him his place in history. The ship was intercepted by a Japanese destroyer. He volunteered to row across to the warship with some others in an attempt to persuade the enemy captain to allow the refugee ship to proceed. The sea was rough and the warship opened fire before the lifeboat could reach her. There were few survivors. Scott succeeded in reaching Sumatra where he was briefly in hiding until he was returned as a prisoner to Singapore.

After a period in solitary confinement he was put in Changi jail with other civilian prisoners. But Scott was always regarded with suspicion by the Japanese who equated the Ministry of Information with intelligence and spying. He quickly became a leader in the camp. Discipline was not unduly aggressive initially and the inmates did much of their own administration. Contact was maintained with those outside. Towards the summer

of 1943 the Japanese became apprehensive about the activities within the camp and were planning a careful raid to crack down on them. But in late September matters came quickly to a head. A commando daringly led by Captain Lyon reached Singapore from Australia undetected and blew up tankers in the harbour. The Japanese mistakenly thought that the raiders had accomplices in the camp. Scott was assumed to be the ring leader and he was found to have a radio.

For weeks he was terribly beaten and tortured but no confession was ever obtained. He was put on trial by the Japanese and eventually sentenced to six years in Outram Road prison. Throughout this ordeal Scott conducted himself very calmly and established a moral and intellectual ascendancy over his prosecutors who found his arguments and predictions most disturbing.

A duel of words and wits developed between Scott and his chief tormentor Colonel Sumida. An observer said that no one who saw it would forget the smile that passed between Scott and Sumida at the latter's war crimes trial after the Japanese surrender. There was no doubt who was the victor but there was no malice between them.

During part of his time in Changi he was held in solitary confinement at the top of the prison tower where from time to time he could be seen by his fellow prisoners in the yard below. He became known throughout the city as "the man in the tower" and was a symbol to the British and Chinese of defiance and resistance.

Years later as one walked with Scott through the streets of Singapore he was constantly greeted by Chinese survivors from the camps.

His wife in Australia was all this time unaware of his fate and drew a widow's pension. When the Japanese surrendered the prisoners in Changi made their own way towards the harbour as best they could. On the way Scott encountered Ian Morrison, *The Times* Far Eastern correspondent who had just arrived with the British forces in the city. Morrison expressed surprise and told Scott he had written his obituary in his book... *Malayan Postscript* published in 1942. Scott replied that one day he would repay the compliment. In fact he did so when Morrison was killed in the Korean War.

Scott was a principal prosecution witness in the war crimes trials which were then staged in Singapore. His testimony was given without rancour and with such fairness that all were astonished — not least the accused. In fact Scott never subsequently showed any animosity towards the Japanese. Some years later with the help of the British Ambassador in Tokyo he arranged a meeting with some of his former gaolers. After a slow start it proved a great success.

After his release he returned to the United King-

dom where his convalescence was shortened by an insensitively heavy demand for back income tax, levied when the authorities found that he was in fact alive. From 1950-1953 he was Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Office with responsibility for the Far East. This period included all the problems of the Korean War. From 1953-1955 he served as Minister at the Embassy in Washington. In 1955 he was made KCMG and sent to Singapore as Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in S.E. Asia — a regional post with civil and military responsibilities. By a cruel trick of fate his only son, a Royal Marine officer, was drowned in a training accident on the day of his investiture.

His appointment in South East Asia was greeted with warm approval by the people of the area and by British Colonial officials and Service chiefs with whom he worked in great harmony. He was an invaluable source of good advice locally and helped Whitehall to understand the changing attitudes of old and new countries. He travelled widely seeing old friends and making new ones amongst the post-war leaders.

He became suddenly ill in 1957 and had to return to London for a serious operation from which characteristically he made a rapid recovery and returned to duty. He was made GCMG in 1958.

His unusual experience of both civilian and service affairs persuaded the Government to appoint him in 1960 the first civilian head of the Imperial Defence College. He was outstandingly successful and moved on naturally to the Ministry of Defence in 1962 as Permanent Under-Secretary.

Scott would have been the first to admit that he was never thoroughly happy in this new role which did not suit his character and individualistic manner of work. It was also an unhappy period of inter-Service rivalry. Those who served with him overseas and in Whitehall will always remember his tolerance, originality, his peace of mind, ease of manner and his preoccupation with essentials. All his business was conducted with a sense of fun heightened by his habit of drafting directly and inexpertly on to a portable typewriter. Modesty unhappily prevented him from writing a fascinating autobiography. He retired in 1963 and went to live near Peebles in a cleverly converted railway station on the banks of the Tweed which over subsequent years he and his artistic wife made into a charming house and garden.

His great energy and zest for life ensured that in his Scottish retirement he was as active as ever. Absorption with family and friends, counselling young offenders, salmon fishing, his duties as Lord Lieutenant of Tweeddale — all these and many other interests kept him constantly and happily on the go. A memorable man.

He is survived by his wife, daughter and two grandchildren.