



Love and war

A BRITISH ENGINEER LIVING
IN MALAYSIA HAS TAKEN A
PIECE OF OUR HISTORY AND
TURNED IT INTO A BOOK

by **Bissme S.**

BRITISH engineer Paul Leslie Smith has been living in Malaysia since 1990, spending the first five years working in Miri, Sarawak, before being transferred to Kuala Lumpur.

During his sojourn in Miri, the 47-year-old bachelor developed a keen interest in the town and its history. Coupled with a desire to stay out of bars whenever he had to travel around for business, Smith decided to try his hand at writing.

"You have to be consumed with passion to sit in a hotel room night after night, punching the words into a laptop, and thank goodness, I was," he recalls during a recent interview after the launch of his debut effort, *Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story*.

The book centres on a fictitious love story between a British man and a Chinese/Melanau woman in Sarawak. When the Japanese invade Borneo during World War II, the couple suffer under the harsh regime.

Smith's greatest challenge in putting the book together is finding time to write it. "Probably, about half the book was written in hotel rooms around the world as I travelled on business," he says. In the end, he took six months off from work to complete the novel.

Smith interviewed some 20 people in Miri who had lived through the war. They include a 82-year-old Chinese businessman who moved him to tears with his tragic tale.

"He told me how they had a fine, thriving town before the Japanese arrive," Smith recalls. "Then he said the Japanese spent three years beating them, raping them, killing them and leaving them with nothing."

He also met an old Chinese woman who was forced to be a comfort woman. But not everyone hated the Japanese.

Smith met one particular man who had



worked for the Japanese as an apprentice in the oil fields. "Because he was treated well, he has nothing bad to say about his Japanese colonial masters," Smith says, adding that the man surprised him by singing the Japanese national anthem.

His research made the war experiences so real in the book that it motivated a reader, an expatriate living in Kuala Lumpur, to track him down.

"Her father had gone to Burma to fight during the war," he says. "She was only three days old then and her father never returned. The ghastly deaths of the prisoners of war described in my book really distressed her. She feels that was how the father she never knew might have died."

Smith hopes his book will inspire Malaysians to love their history more. "It saddens me that Malaysia does not make more of its wide and varied history."

Smith's interest in Asia was sparked by the stories of the war in Burma his father told him when he was a child. His father's stories created a strong desire in him to see this part of the world. So when an opportunity to work in Asia came up, he didn't hesitate to take it.

Now, after having spent some two decades here, Smith has come to regard Malaysia more like his home.

He would love to see Malaysia build a new national museum near KLCC so that it will attract many visitors. The museum should be more interactive, he stresses, adding that "it should have a mock of the spice port of Malacca in the 1400s - the biggest port in the world at that time".

He also feels tourists should be shown how rubber trees are tapped and given some glimpse as to what takes place in tin mines. "Every tourist would want to see these and every school child in Malaysia should visit the museum," he adds.

Now that Smith has been bitten by the writing bug, he is hard at work on the sequel to *Rainforest Tears*. He has taken several of the main characters from the book and set them in a story during the turbulent period of Malaya's Emergency.

The sequel will see the death of colonialism, the rise of a nation and the fight against communism - enough drama to keep the readers glued to the pages.