

Sir Shenton Thomas

A Noble Life of Distinguished Service

By Elaine Cheong

One of the 11 treasures of the National Museum of Singapore is a portrait of Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements (1934–1942). The portrait was painted by the renowned Chinese artist Xu Bei Hong (1895–1953) in July 1939. Xu trained at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he studied oil painting in the European realistic style.

The governor sat for Xu twice, and during the first sitting Xu painted only his head. After the second sitting, Xu completed the portrait using the ceremonial attire the governor had left as visual references. These included the tunic, with its gold and silver embellishments, epaulettes, brass buttons, court sword and belt and a white helmet bedecked with red and white plumes.

Behind this portrait, his stiff posture conveying the tensions created by the imminence of war, unfolds the compelling story of Shenton Thomas' life before, during and after the Japanese Occupation.

In 1934, after a successful stint as governor of the Gold Coast, Africa, Sir Shenton accepted the appointment of Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Malay States. King George V, the monarch of the British Empire, described the posting as "The Blue Ribbon of the Colonial Service".

The new governor succeeded Cecil Clementi and had the daunting task of righting strained relations with the local people. His forthright, sincere manner and willingness to listen to anyone with useful advice to offer endeared him to everyone. The *Malay Mail* reported: "Malaya has at last found, in Sir Shenton Thomas, a man who has not only the willingness to consult others, but appears peculiarly suited by disposition and personality to do so."

On 15 February 1938, the governor declared the British Naval Base in Singapore open – a base deemed essential for the protection of the British Empire's Far Eastern interests. This event occurred precisely four years to the day before the British destroyed the base, to prevent it being used by the enemy, and surrendered Singapore to the Japanese.

The day after the British Army's surrender to General Yamashita, Sir Shenton broadcast his last message from the Singapore (Radio) Broadcasting Station. He urged the civilian population to help restore order, to assist the wounded and bereaved, and thanked them for their resilience and fortitude.

This courageous man and his wife, Lucy Marguerite

(Daisy) Montgomery, had decided to stay in Singapore during the war. Prior to being interned in Changi Prison as a prisoner of war, the caring governor wrote a note instructing E.J.H. Corner of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, "To hand over to the Japanese Authority the historical, scientific and cultural records and libraries in Singapore, especially at Raffles Museum and Library". Professor Corner described him as "the only Englishman, other than myself, who foresaw to preserve records and libraries, cultural and scientific archives and specimens, marking him out as far above the other administrators then in Singapore" (From *Shenton of Singapore* by Brian Montgomery, 1984).

The governor-turned-prisoner-of-war was later moved to Formosa (Taiwan) and then Manchuria, where he stayed until the Japanese surrender in 1945. From then onwards, he lived happily in London and died peacefully at

home on 15 January 1962, in his 83rd year, survived by his wife Daisy, who lived till 1978.

Shenton Way, a broad and important thoroughfare in the heart of Singapore's financial district, is named after Shenton Thomas. This was decided by the Singapore Municipal Commissioners to mark their gratitude for his distinguished service and for his decision to stay with the people of Singapore.

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Portrait of Sir Shenton Whitelegge Thomas, by Xu Beihong, 1939; photo by Ben Yu

