

An undated photo of Hedwig Anuar at her desk at the National Library. Hedwig Anuar Collection, National Library Singapore.

HEDWIG ANUAR

First Lady of the National Library

Hedwig Anuar was not only known for being the director of the National Library, she was also an activist and advocate for women's rights.

By Timothy Pwee

In 1946, an 18-year-old student by the name of Hedwig Aroozoo wrote an essay on "School Libraries" where she noted that it is "greatly to be deplored that Singapore has only one public library".¹

Some two decades later, that student, now Hedwig Anuar, was in the position to do something about that deplorable fact when she became the director of the National Library of Singapore, a position she would hold for 23 years until her retirement in 1988.

In that time, Anuar, the first Malayan to head the library, oversaw an expansion of the library, first with part-time libraries and later fulltime branch libraries located in housing estates around Singapore. No meek civil servant, Anuar was an activist and a strong advocate for women's rights, and also one of the founders of the women's rights group AWARE, the Association of Women for Action and Research.

Love for the Written Word

Hedwig Elizabeth Aroozoo was born 19 November 1928 in Johor Bahru to a Eurasian Catholic family, the second daughter of Percival Frank Aroozoo and Agnes Danker. Her father was a teacher at Outram School (1918–38) and then headmaster of Gan Eng Seng School (1938–55).

It is perhaps not surprising then that Anuar developed a love for reading at an early age. In an interview with *Straits Times* in 1985, Anuar said she could not remember a time when she could not read and started on political works in her father's extensive library at age 10 in 1939.²

Anuar studied at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Johor Bahru and then at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore. In 1947, she entered Raffles College to read literature. Raffles College became the University of Malaya in 1949, so when she graduated in 1951, it was with a first class honours degree from the newly renamed university.

As the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) had depleted her father's savings, Anuar taught at the People's Education Association and tutored other students to get by while studying. This did not stop her from getting involved in college life: she joined the Literary Dramatic and Debating Society and was active with the students' union, becoming known as the "Lady President", a title she detested.³

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Anuar also became involved in politics in university. Just before the end of her honours year in January 1951, there was a wave of arrests in Singapore and Malaya for possession of Malayan Communist Party literature. Among the detainees were former Malayan Democratic Union leaders like John Eber and Devan Nair as well as several University of Malaya students including James Puthucheary.

Anuar was among the members of the students' union who visited the detainees. "Every Saturday I would apply for a pass from Special Branch to visit the detention camp on St John's Island," she said. "We would get the pass from Special Branch, and go to the Portmaster's Pier to catch the launch to St John's Island. And we bring food and books for the detainees. The British were quite liberal. They allowed the detainees to have books from the university library."⁴

Life in the United Kingdom

Despite her first class honours, Anuar was not offered a post in the government's administrative service but in teaching. As a result, she decided to join the library of her alma mater, the University of Malaya, as a library assistant.⁵

It did not take long for her to become active in her chosen profession, joining with a colleague, Wilfred Plumbe, to overcome the objections of University Librarian Ernest Clarke to convene the Malayan Library Group in 1955. This society became the Library Association of Malaya and Singapore in 1958 where she was appointed its secretary.⁶

In a 1980 letter to Wee Joo Gim, president of the Library Association of Singapore, Plumbe acknowledged Anuar's role in the formation of the group. He wrote: "It was Hedwig who had the brains and the drive and the ability, even at that time, to shape the incipient profession and plan development on a national scale."⁷ For her contributions to the library profession in Singapore and Malaysia, Anuar received the Library Association of Singapore Lifetime Contribution Award in 2007.

In 1955, Anuar was awarded a training grant and studied librarianship at North Western Polytechnic in London. When she arrived in London, she got involved with the community of Malayan students there. Most of them were already friends and acquaintances. More importantly, one of her good friends, John Eber, was the secretary of the Malayan Forum.⁸

The forum was started in 1948 by Tunku Abdul Razak Hussein, Goh Keng Swee and Maurice Baker. It formally became an organisation in October 1949 as a place for young Malaysians in the United



(Left) President Yusof Ishak presenting the Public Administration Medal (Gold) to National Library Director Hedwig Elizabeth Anuar at the 1969 National Day Awards investiture ceremony. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

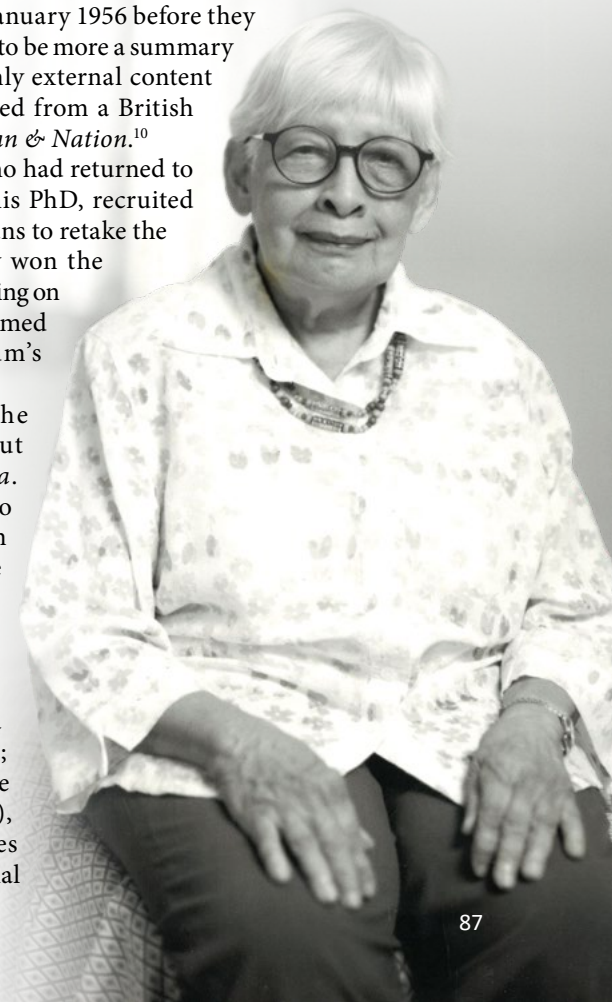
(Below) Hedwig Anuar, 2014. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

Kingdom to discuss the future of Malaya and various political possibilities.⁹

After they left (Tunku in 1950 and Goh in 1951), Eber's group had taken over and reduced it to being their own mouthpiece. A survey of their last issue of the forum's newsletter, *Suara Merdeka* (Voice of Freedom), in January 1956 before they were voted out showed it to be more a summary of the news, with the only external content being an article reprinted from a British paper, the *New Statesman & Nation*.¹⁰

Goh Keng Swee, who had returned to London in 1954 to do his PhD, recruited Anuar and other Malaysians to retake the forum from Eber. They won the elections in a special meeting on 12 February 1956 and formed a majority on the forum's council.

Anuar became the secretary and set about editing *Suara Merdeka*. Noticeably, there was no disruption in publication and the February issue came out with news of the takeover. It also reprinted a satirical piece, "When Malaya Ruled Britain", by S. Raja Ratnam (S. Rajaratnam; future Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore), which reversed the roles with Malaya as the colonial



Hedwig Anuar (far left) with the first women arts and science graduates of the University of Malaya, 1950. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



power over a colonised Britain.¹¹ This was quite a change in content quality from the previous issue.

While in London, Anuar met law student Anuar Zainal Abidin and they got married in 1957, after which she took on her husband's name. Upon attaining her library qualifications in the same year, she returned to Singapore to serve her bond with the University of Malaya and gave birth to her son Azmi.

Contributions to Reading, Libraries and Archives

Anuar was sent to the University of Malaya's Kuala Lumpur campus to start a library there. However, the Raffles National Library Director, Leonard M. Harrod, retired in January 1960 just as the new National Library building on Stamford Road was being completed, leaving the library in Singapore without a director. The Singapore government urgently needed a local director for the move of the library from the old premises it shared with the Raffles Museum. Being one of the few qualified local librarians, the Singapore government requested for her to be seconded to Singapore for 14 months as the Raffles National Library's interim director.¹²

One of Anuar's earliest achievements was the move from the old building to the new that she organised. Known as Operation Pindah, it became a legend in the history of the National Library.¹³ For it, Anuar even "rolled up her sleeves and physically assisted in the human chain of transporting books from one building to another, at least from director down to library attendants division for staff".¹⁴

There was no money set aside for the move, which took two weeks. "Each staff member had to carry a small bundle of books tied with a string and then pass it up the staircase of the library... There were people stationed up and down the stairs to pass the books up the staircase into the library," Anuar told the *Straits Times* in 1999.¹⁵

In 1961, when her stint as interim director ended, Anuar left for London to join her husband after being apart for four years. Unfortunately, the separation

had taken its toll and their marriage broke down. Anuar returned to Singapore alone and in the same year became assistant librarian at the University of Malaya Library in Kuala Lumpur. She gave birth to her daughter Shirin in Singapore in 1962.

In the meantime, the Singapore government arranged to contract experienced expatriate directors to take charge and develop library services for two years. Anuar was subsequently appointed Assistant Director (supernumerary) at the National Library in 1962 to the second expatriate director, Priscilla Taylor. After the latter completed her contract and left in 1964, Anuar took over as director of the National Library in 1965 and was eventually confirmed to the position in 1968.

Anuar felt it was important to ensure that the library met the needs of younger readers. For this, she recruited her sister, Eleanor Smith née Aroozoo, who had studied at Loughborough College on scholarship and qualified as a librarian in 1957. Eleanor moved from the Teachers' Training College library to head the National Library's children's section in 1960.¹⁶

In 1966, Anuar started the young people's service for the 15 to 19 age group, today known as the Young People's Collection in the public libraries, targeting teenagers aged 13 to 19.¹⁷

To make library services widely available, Harrod had opened part-time branch libraries in community centres and social welfare centres, and started preparations for a mobile library service, a library on wheels. In 1957, the purchase of a van for the mobile library service was made possible by a grant from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

In September 1960, Anuar launched the mobile library service to schools just two months before the opening of the new Stamford Road building. This service would serve rural areas by visiting schools and community centres. However, with the opening of more branch libraries around Singapore, usage of the mobile library service dropped and it eventually ceased in 1991.¹⁸

Anuar also initiated the process of building fulltime branch libraries rather than continuing to operate part-time branch libraries with limited opening

hours. Starting with Queenstown Branch Library in 1970 and Toa Payoh in 1974, this would steadily grow into a network of six such fulltime branch libraries by her retirement in 1988. The collection of vernacular language books (Malay, Tamil and Chinese) was also expanded to cater to Singapore's general population.

One of Anuar's final initiatives as director was the computerisation of the library's card catalogue, as well as the membership database and the borrowing system in the 1980s. While the initial report on computerisation was released in 1975, it was only in October 1987 that the first library was computerised – the Queenstown Library. The National Library on Stamford Road was computerised in August 1988, just before Anuar retired in November that year.¹⁹ As a result, book borrowing took a matter of seconds instead of minutes. By the time Anuar retired, membership with the National Library had grown from 43,000 to over 330,000.²⁰

Her work in developing libraries was not limited to Singapore. In 1960, the Library Association of Malaya and Singapore was split into two entities: Library Association of Singapore and Persatuan Perpustakaan Tanah Melayu (Library Association of Malaya). As one of the few respected and qualified librarians in Malaya, the Malayan government requested her services in drafting a plan for developing the public libraries in the Federation of Malaya.

Anuar accomplished this task in a year with a whirlwind tour through the states, interviewing library and government officials daily. The annex

Hedwig Anuar giving Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Defence and Member of Parliament Phua Bah Lee a tour of the mobile library bus at the Tampines Community Centre, 1979. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



of the report lists the 235 officials she spoke to and institutions she visited across Malaysia in three months (1 May to 22 July 1968).²¹

In recognition of her services, Anuar was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Gold) by the Singapore government in 1969.

Aside from her contributions to the National Library, Anuar was also responsible for the creation of a national archive for Singapore. Historian K.G. (Kennedy Gordon) Tregonning, Raffles Professor of History at the University of Malaya, credited Anuar with pushing for the creation of the archive as a separate unit rather than just being a department in the library. She was also instrumental in liaising with Dutch archivist Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven, who had been the director-general of Malaysia's National Archives from 1963 to 1966, and was appointed by UNESCO in 1967 to help set up Singapore's archive.²²

A milestone was reached in August 1968 when the National Archives and Records Centre (NARC) was formed, taking over the management, custody and preservation of public archives and government records from the National Library. Anuar was appointed the first director of the NARC and held the post until 1978, while still concurrently the director of the National Library.

As with the library, Anuar led the NARC in establishing ties with regional institutions and joining the Southeast Asian Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA) in 1969. She was also a member of SARBICA's executive board and was its chairman from 1973 to 1975.²³

Beyond the library and archives was Anuar's contribution to the formation of the National Book Development Council of Singapore (known as the Singapore Book Council today) in 1968. The council



(Left) Hedwig Anuar created the Young People’s Section in 1966 to bridge the gap in reading materials between the children’s and adult collections. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

(Below) Hedwig Anuar led the computerisation of the library’s card catalogue, as well as the membership database and the borrowing system in the 1980s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



had representatives from the Ministries of Culture and Education; higher education institutions; teachers’ unions; the associations for publishers, booksellers and librarians; and the National Library. The immediate project for the council was the Festival of Books at the Victoria Memorial Hall in June 1969. This event would become the premier event of the publishing industry till the late 1990s.²⁴

Anuar strongly felt women should be empowered, and worked towards it. At the Society for Reading and Literacy, Anuar conducted classes for older women to learn simple conversational English. The “Women Learning English”, or WISH programme, took place in libraries and community centres.²⁵ “There are women who don’t go anywhere except home and market. They cannot read street signs, bus and MRT stops because they are in English,” she said. “They cannot make simple phone calls or fill up forms. If they can read and write in English, they can be more independent, they can move around on their own.”²⁶

The Activist

When the graduate mothers’ scheme unveiled in 1984 gave priority of school choice to the children of graduate mothers, there was much unhappiness among women. Zaibun Siraj and Vivienne Wee of the National University of Singapore organised a forum on women’s issues titled “Women’s Choices, Women’s Lives”. The speakers, all professional women, included Anuar.

This forum sparked discussions about the portrayal of women, the problems facing working mothers, discrimination against women and gender stereotypes. This led to the formation of AWARE a year later to abolish discrimination against women, promote equal rights and opportunities for women, and address questions of gender inequality. Ever the wordsmith, Anuar was the one who gave the association its name.²⁷

After she retired, Anuar became AWARE’s president from 1989 to 1991. She also took charge of the library and maintained its newspaper cutting collection, a standard feature of libraries before the advent of the internet. Margaret Thomas, another former president of AWARE, described her as playing the role of elder statesman. “Hedwig was an oasis of calm as the arguments flew back and forth... Hedwig listened as we argued, sometimes with a slightly pained expression on her face.”²⁸

For her efforts in pushing for women’s rights and her involvement in women’s issues, Anuar received the Woman of the Year award in 1993 from *Her World* magazine. She was inducted into the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame in 2014.²⁹

Professionalising Librarians

Anuar was uncompromising in her drive to develop professional librarianship locally. To this end, she pushed the development of professional associations, local training and formal education.

One of the library heads who served under her, Wong Heng, credited her with obtaining overseas scholarships for staff to gain their professional qualifications leveraging the Colombo Plan and the British Council. Wong Heng himself was a recipient of one of those scholarships. Aside from that, Anuar worked with the Library Association of Singapore to

start a part-time Postgraduate Diploma in Library and Information Science course in 1982.³⁰ By the time she retired in 1988, this course had produced 54 graduates from three batches.³¹

While Anuar did try her best to establish a local library school, it did not happen till after her retirement. In 1991, Temasek Polytechnic and the National Book Development Council started a Certificate in Library and Information Studies course for para-professionals, which has since stopped. Two years later, Nanyang Technological University started a part-time Master of Science in Information Studies.³²

The life of Hedwig Anuar is closely intertwined with the postcolonial development of Singapore’s libraries and literacy. She was recruited to head the development of library services at a time when Singapore was starting on its journey towards independence. But she never restricted herself to being a bureaucrat; instead, she established relationships and built networks with various people and organisations to promote reading, writing, publishing and even women’s awareness in Singapore. The world-class library system in Singapore today exists thanks to the strong foundation laid by Anuar during her time as the director of the National Library. ♦

NOTES

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Hedwig Anuar was given a “Books of Honour” salute by library staff at her retirement dinner, 1988. *Hedwig Anuar Collection, National Library Singapore.*

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