

Speech by NUS President Prof Tan Chorh Chuan
Launch of President S.R. Nathan's book, *Why Am I Here?*
University Hall Vista, 27 April, 2010, 3.00pm

Your Excellency President S.R. Nathan and Mrs Nathan,
Dr Lee Boon Yang, Chairman, Keppel Corporation
Mr Wong Ngit Liong, Chairman NUS Board of Trustees
Mr Choo Chiau Beng, CEO, Keppel Corporation
Distinguished Guests,
Colleagues and Friends
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon!

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the launch of President S R Nathan's debut book titled, "Why Am I Here?" The NUS Centre for Maritime Studies and our partner in this initiative – Keppel Corporation – are truly honoured to have worked with President Nathan on an intensely personal, yet nationally important piece of narrative. President Nathan, I would like to express our appreciation to you for giving us the privilege of publishing your book.

At one level, the book is a valuable record of a fascinating and important part of Singapore's maritime history. At another level, readers of the book will be instantly engaged in President Nathan's narration of his experiences in dealing with the struggles and problems of the seafarers – a gripping story through the eyes of a Seamen's Welfare Officer who would one day become the President of Singapore. Through the pages, readers will also become acutely aware that President Nathan's great compassion and kindness in dealing with seamen's problems was often the critical factor in reaching solutions. It is this same instinctive and almost uncanny ability to understand people and their problems that creates such a deep impression on those who have come into contact with him.

Ever modest in his ways, it took much persuasion before President Nathan agreed to publish his book, certain that “nobody would read it”. We know that is hardly true as the book makes a compelling and inspiring read.

“Why Am I Here?” stands out for its personal touch and the lightness with which President Nathan writes about his rather difficult experiences. In a key chapter which inspired the title to the book itself, the young Nathan faced many formidable challenges as a Seamen’s Welfare Officer. He had very little guidance and assistance from his superiors. Yet, he never gave up – driven by a deep sense of duty as well as courage, to help the helpless around him.

NUS is particularly proud that President Nathan is our very own alumnus – a graduate from our predecessor institution, the University of Malaya in Singapore. In an interesting way, this book reminds us of the rich tapestry of Singapore’s history and the key role that our University played through the leadership and work of our graduates and alumni. Beyond President Nathan’s numerous contributions to Singapore and society, President Nathan also encapsulates the sterling values and qualities, a sincere willingness to serve, humility and courage, that are an integral part of our University’s rich tradition, and that serves as a timeless beacon for the entire NUS community into the future.

As the Chancellor of NUS since 1999, President Nathan has extended his strong support to our University’s initiatives and student activities. He has graced countless University events, and hosted many University activities at the Istana. For all these, the NUS community is indeed grateful. This book brings out new dimensions which further deepen our respect, appreciation and pride in our Chancellor.

In closing, I would like to extend, on behalf of the NUS community, my warmest congratulations to President Nathan on this publication which brings out powerful life lessons in an extraordinary way. I would also like to thank Dr Lee Boon Yang, Mr Choo Chiau Beng and Keppel Corporation for the wonderful partnership that has resulted in the publishing of this book. “Why Am I Here?” is more than a documentation of the Singapore seafarers’ community in the 1950s. It is an invaluable contribution to the Singapore story. Thank you.