

MALAYSIA

A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule

BY

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Harvard University*

with a new introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

Today this book is recognized as a classic. It was not so regarded in 1937 when its publication was greeted with a chorus of hostile criticism from former British members of the Malayan Civil Service. Sir Frank Swettenham, former Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States, wrote of it:

The author of this book with the barbarous title . . . deserves every possible credit for his astonishing industry in collecting and recording the immense amount of information set out in over 500 large pages of print. Whether the effort was worth while must be determined by individual readers, and what was Mr. Emerson's object in setting himself this task, must remain a speculation, for he gives no guide beyond describing his work as 'A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule'. An ordinary reader might well believe that the study is confined to what the author describes as Indirect Rule, with the Malay States filling about five sixths of the picture and the Netherlands East Indies the other sixth. When one comes to grips with the immensely longer and more important part of the book, namely, the Malay States, it is rather surprising to find that the greater part of this formidable study is occupied with the very detailed account of what has been called the policy of 'Decentralization', a word almost as repellent as 'Malaysia' . . . To give this local and embittered controversy,—which began in 1920 and we all hope ended in 1932—the dignity of a record in the shape of a large volume, itself full of highly contentious writing, seemed needless, and naturally raises the question of what was the author's object in writing it. Possibly an impartial reader, struck by the constant reference to Imperialism, and specially to British Imperialism coupled with capitalism, might conclude that the author, seeking to ride a tilt against all Imperialism . . . had seized upon the case of the Malay States as an admirable text on which to preach a sermon. If so, he chose a singularly unfortunate instance of Imperial rapacity from which to draw his moral and adorn his tale.

Invited by *The Straits Times* to comment on the book, a former Chief Secretary of the F.M.S. Government, Sir William Peel, said that it was useful for reference 'but is somewhat marred by a bias against Imperialism which amounts to unbalanced prejudice lacking in judgment and perspective. . . . It can scarcely be denied that British colonisation has often been carried out in a large measure for the benefit of Imperial trade and capitalist interests rather than for the benefit of the indigenous races in the Colonies concerned. But the latter have not been neglected and this is especially so in Malaya. Mr. Emerson is scarcely fair in his statement that the lot of the Malays has "changed for the better only slightly, if at all". Communications have been vastly improved—a boon appreciated by all classes to a greater extent than many people may realize'. It was, one may interject, scarcely fair of Sir

William Peel to cite Professor Emerson inaccurately, for his statement referred not to the Malays but to the aboriginal inhabitants of the Peninsula.¹ And as to Sir Frank Swettenham's strictures concerning the subject of Decentralization, we can now be grateful to the author for choosing this problem for study in preference to others for he was able to make use of sources which are no longer available; moreover the 'barbarous' title has recently been adopted as the name of the newest of the Southeast Asian national states.

A fairer appraisal was accorded the book by Sir Richard Winstedt who was General Adviser to Johore at the time of the author's visit to Malaya, but he was none the less critical of a number of its conclusions: 'So much is imperialism in any form in the author's mind that he even lays "at the door of the British a major share in the responsibility for the mass invasion of Chinese in the tin areas after the middle of the nineteenth century" (p. 116). How the British were to close the door of a British colony to Chinese passengers bound for the then foreign hinterland is not suggested, and Mr. Emerson appears to have confounded a geographical with a moral problem.' It is a point well taken, but it should be noted in fairness to Professor Emerson that contemporary Malay opinion on this question is very much on his side, for, no matter with what justice, many educated Malays hold the British responsible for the communal problem in Malaya today.

When it was first published it was obviously possible for British members of the Malayan Civil Service to see *Malaysia* as something of an anti-imperialist tract; indeed, only recently one of Professor Emerson's compatriots adduced the book as evidence of the anti-imperialist tradition in American writing on Southeast Asia.²

¹ Thus pp. 13-14: 'That the Malays are not the earliest inhabitants of the Peninsula is indicated by the remnants of more primitive peoples, who, driven back into the dark jungles and the mountains by the superior culture and force of the Malay invaders, cling with tragic insistence to their aboriginal nomadic life. . . . In the days of Malay rule these people led a miserable and hunted life, and with the assertion of British control over the Malay States their lot has changed for the better only slightly, if at all.'

² L. A. Mills, 'American Historical Writing on South East Asia', *Historians of South East Asia* (ed.) D. G. E. Hall (Oxford University Press, London, 1961), p. 289. Elsewhere (p. 290) Mills writes: 'Professor Rupert Emerson's writings, e.g. *Malaysia, A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule*, were the product of painstaking documentary research and investigation in South East Asia. They were accurate and detailed, and the author tried to be scrupulously just to the colonial governments. On the whole they were reliable and impartial; but every now and again an emotional hostility to imperialism coloured his presentation.'

However anyone who has been conditioned by the climate of opinion in Malaya since *Merdeka* is likely to be struck not by the severity as by the mildness of many of the author's judgments about colonialism. It is, perhaps, not without significance that only in the last few months the book has been criticised by an Asian writer as being an apologia for British rule in Malaya.³ Readers of this reprint may decide the issue for themselves.

If time has had the effect of blunting some of the original critical force of *Malaysia*, it has redressed the balance in a more subtle way. For among other reasons the book owes its present reputation to the entirely fortuitous circumstance that it was written at the high noon of imperialism in Southeast Asia, and thus represents a final assessment by an uncommitted and astute observer of aspects of British and Dutch colonial rule in Malaya and Indonesia before the Western régimes were overthrown by Japanese conquest. *Malaysia* stands in its own right as an historical document of singular importance which is enhanced by its clarity of expression, its coherent and often brilliant argument, and by its dependence upon an enormous range of oral and printed sources. These factors help to explain why in the field of Malayan political and historical studies *Malaysia* now ranks as a classic; but of equal importance is the fact that the book is stamped indelibly with the personality of the author whose passionate dedication to his field of study is evident on every page. In this respect *Malaysia* invites comparison with Clive Day's *The Dutch in Java*, which was published thirty years earlier. The two books are, perhaps, the most notable contributions made by American scholars to Southeast Asian historical and political studies down to World War II.⁴

Professor Emerson's choice of a field of study was somewhat arbitrary. He had graduated from Harvard University in 1921, and six years later, after a further period of study there and at the London School of Economics, was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. In the same year (1927) he was appointed Instructor in Government at Harvard, and in 1928 published his

³ D. P. Singhal, 'The Writing of Asian History', *Hemisphere*, VII, 7 (July, 1963), p. 10.

⁴ It is curious that Day's book is not mentioned by L. A. Mills in his essay 'American Historical Writing on South East Asia', *Historians of South East Asia*, pp. 286-300.