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# SABAH THE FIRST TEN YEARS AS A COLONY

1946—1956

By

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## SINGAPORE STUDIES ON MALAYSIA

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This monograph by Mr. Baker was originally an M.A. thesis submitted to Stanford University. Apart from its intrinsic interest, it is a compilation that should be of great use to the increasing number of people studying South-East Asia in general and the Malaysian territories in particular. Written as it was at a timber centre in North Borneo in 1958, it is an indication of the useful research that can be done in the field, and it may encourage others to work in North Borneo itself.

This paper is the first in a series of *Singapore Studies on Malaysia*, which will include work done here in the University of Singapore as well as at other centres of South-East Asian Studies.

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## PREFACE

On July 4, 1956, the people of the Philippines celebrated the tenth anniversary of their independence from the United States of America. Eleven days later the people of the Philippines' nearest neighbour quietly celebrated the tenth anniversary of their becoming a colony of Great Britain. This striking contrast in stages of political evolution largely arises from the differing lengths of time that the two countries have been under European influence. The Philippines had had four centuries of European domination, in the last half century of which Americans had devoted their enthusiasm and the resources of their country to the education of the Filipinos and to the economic development of their land. North Borneo has been under European control for less than eighty years and for most of that time was the territory of a chartered company. The British North Borneo Company's servants may rarely have lacked devotion to the land and its peoples, but they seldom had sufficient resources at their disposal to educate the people or develop the country to the full.

The possibility of achieving political and economic advancement was greatly enhanced when North Borneo passed under the direct rule of Great Britain. This monograph will show what has been made of the opportunity. When I told a friend that I was writing about the postwar development of North Borneo he replied, "Has there been any?". It must be admitted that when one views the political and economic revolutions effected in the same ten years in other Asian countries, progress in North Borneo may seem imperceptible. But the achievement of these years must be measured in terms of North Borneo's own past: progress in Borneo is measured in small units such as a few more miles of road, a few thousand more pupils at school or another district given a nominated council. It is not a dramatic or an exciting story, but perhaps many peoples would prefer their own history in these years had been less dramatic and less exciting, if they could have enjoyed the same freedom from fear and from want that has been the good fortune of the peoples of North Borneo.

MICHAEL BAKER.

Wallace Bay,  
North Borneo.  
1958

### Introduction to the New Edition.

This work was first written under the title "The Colony of North Borneo. The First Ten Years 1946-56". It is here reprinted substantially unaltered, except that the title has been amended to reflect the change in the country's name and status consequent upon independence as the State of Sabah within the Federation of Malaysia.

The decade covered (with a forward glance to 1958) is not so arbitrary a period as the round number might suggest. It is, in fact, the period of postwar rehabilitation which has since given way to the period of development. The ten postwar years were not confined simply to rebuilding exactly in the image of the past, but the keynote throughout was "rehabilitation", a word no longer heard.

To someone, like the writer, returning to Borneo in 1963 for the first time since 1958, two changes were immediately visible — the modernized aspect of the towns and the presence of armed forces. The amount of new building that has gone on, particularly in Jesselton, is most striking. The Signal Hill Flats, the Jesselton Airport, the Tawau Customs House and Wharf are but a few of the new landmarks. The skyline edges ever upwards — buildings of more than two storeys, once a rarity, are now common in all the main towns.

After the departure of the Liberation Armies in 1946, Sabah enjoyed such internal peace and external security that the presence of military forces within her borders was unnecessary. Troops first made their reappearance in a series of exercises in 1957 and 1958, and in 1960 the Training Area at Kota Belud was established. Subsequently, however, it became necessary to employ troops, together with naval and air units, on more serious missions, first on anti-piracy duties along the east coast and, from the end of 1962, against armed incursions from Indonesia. Since the Brunei rebellion of 1962 army, navy, and air force personnel, British and Malaysian, have been much in evidence in Tawau and Labuan, though life in other major centres continues unruffled.

Military necessities have recently given fresh urgency to the building of roads in Sabah, but considerable progress, albeit small in relation to the country's needs, had already been made in the five years since 1958, during which the total mileage increased from just over 700 to some 1,150. The 1959-64 Development Plan