

RECORDS AND RECOLLECTIONS

1889-1934

BY

J. H. M. ROBSON

Edited, with an Introduction, by

J. M. Gullick

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INTRODUCTION

John Henry Matthews Robson was born in England on 8 May 1870, the eldest son of Rev. Dr Robson of Guildford. He first arrived in Kuala Lumpur at the end of 1889, after a brief period as a management trainee on a Ceylon tea estate.¹ For the next half century, Robson lived and worked as a government official, a newspaper editor, a businessman, and a prominent figure in public affairs in Selangor. In 1942, he was interned in Singapore, where he died on 20 July 1945 'after ailing for the last three years'.²

During his seven years (1890–6) in the Selangor civil service, Robson held a sequence of district posts. During his time in Kuala Langat, he had the opportunity of observing the daily routine of Sultan Abdul Samad, and came to know the ruler, then approaching 90.³ His last post before his retirement from the civil service was District Officer, Kuala Lumpur, and in that capacity he had charge of the state Registry of Titles. If he had pursued this career, he would undoubtedly have risen higher, and might well have become a Resident.

However, his flair and his inclination for journalism were becoming apparent. A selection of the articles which he had contributed to the *Singapore Free Press* was reprinted in 1894.⁴ At this stage, Robson had not yet found his touch. The construction of stereotypes, such as 'the Chinese

¹ Appendix II/1.

² T. P. M. Lewis, *Changi, the Lost Years: A Malayan Diary 1941–1945*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Historical Society, 1984, p. 261.

³ Appendix II/3.

⁴ J. H. M. Robson, *People in a Native State*, Singapore: Singapore Free Press, 1894.

Towkay', etc., produced rather stilted results, whereas Robson's talent was better suited to bringing to the printed page a picture of individuals, with all their peculiar oddities. His study of the Malay policeman, reprinted here,⁵ is one of the better ones.

Meanwhile, the need for a news medium of some sort in Selangor was becoming apparent. In 1892, Robson was one of a group of enthusiasts who founded the *Selangor Journal*, a fortnightly magazine intended to be 'a mirror of the times'. In addition to local news and gossip, it provided a modicum of historical and general reading. The journal was printed on the government press, the first in Selangor, imported in 1890. Until then, the government had sent its notices, etc. to be printed in the official *Straits Settlements Gazette*. John Russell, the new 'Government Printer', was a professional—he had worked for *The Illustrated London News* before his arrival in Selangor. Although his plant was far from satisfactory, Russell had spare capacity which could not be filled by local commercial work. Robson's friend and colleague, Walter Skeat, proposed to Ernest Birch, then acting as Resident, that the journal be produced on the government press 'to supply a want, to fill a gap'. Birch, and his successors, W. H. Treacher and J. P. Rodger, 'gave the scheme every encouragement and assistance' in the teeth of 'the general prediction [of] a short existence [for] this venture of amateurs in journalism'.⁶ Although Russell did the general editing of the Journal, he acknowledged that it had owed much to Skeat, Travers, and Robson—'a valued and frequent contributor'—and other local contributors, writing on topics as varied as planting methods and racing news. How much

⁵ Appendix II/2.

⁶ J. Russell, 'A Valediction', *SJ*, 5, 1897, pp. 432-4.

Robson wrote is difficult to determine, since—unlike some other contributors—he did not append his initials or a transparent *nom de plume* to what he wrote. It is reasonable to suppose that Robson learnt from Russell the practical skills of editing a periodical and getting it out on time. If so, it was an invaluable apprenticeship.

In Chapter 6 of this book, Robson tells how, in 1896, he founded, with the minimum of resources, the *Malay Mail*, as a daily newspaper. He had valuable advice and help from the experienced journalists who edited the Singapore newspapers. But he grappled single-handed with reporting for, editing and producing a newspaper. His preliminary account (p. 170) of several short-lived newspapers which appeared in Selangor and Perak in his time illustrates the inherent difficulty and risk of such enterprises. It seems that one of the lessons which Robson was quick to grasp was that he needed the support of a regular readership, especially businessmen with their advertising, and must reflect rather than antagonize their views. 'Insufficient revenue to cover expenses' would end the life of a newspaper 'no matter how ably [it] is edited' (p. 171).

By 1902, Robson's 'newspaper enterprise' was sufficiently well established and it had been converted to a limited company. He might, like Jennings in Ipoh with the *Times of Malaya* (p. 170), have continued to give all his working time and energy to editing and managing his newspaper. Instead, however, he employed a sequence of professional journalists for the day-to-day work, and was able to widen his own opportunities. He continued, nonetheless, to act as managing director of the limited company which he had formed to take over his newspaper, and was an influence on its editorial policy, as well as an occasional contributor. He also found useful business associates in the Hampshire brothers, both at