

# *The Malayan Union*

*James de V. Allen*

Monograph Series No. 10

Southeast Asia Studies

Yale University



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## FOREWORD

With the cessation of hostilities after World War II, there were those in Britain who still thought that it would be possible to re-create the British Empire, not only in those areas which had not come under direct attack, as in west and central Africa, but also in south and southeast Asia. The last was especially important, for the Malayan peninsula, Singapore, and Borneo had been occupied and administered by an enemy power, and genuine postwar reconstruction would be needed. Change, or the appearance of change, obviously was essential. Administration could be made more efficient, simpler, and more centralized through some form of union. Yet the first proposal seriously put forward — that of the Malayan Union, described here in detail for the first time — departed in many significant ways from the prewar developmental patterns already established for the area. The result was a curious episode in both Malayan and British imperial history, an episode given added significance by contemporaneous developments in Ceylon and the Gold Coast.

Dr. Allen presents, as fully as source materials now permit, the story of the rise and fall of the Malayan Union. He modestly refers to the Union as "an incident in British imperial history" but the range of his account makes his study rather more than a mere interlude in the short record of decolonization. We have far too few studies of decision making, of bureaucratic manipulation, and of interaction between levels of administrations to generalize about the Colonial Office immediately following the war, but this wholly admirable monograph provides us with one such study, succinct, significant, and in the end satisfying.

Not the least among the attractions of Dr. Allen's work is the clarity with which he shows us the historian at his craft. Some scholars choose to provide the reader with little more than their data and their conclusions, unwilling to follow the byways of thought far enough to show why, indeed, such paths remain less useful. Dr. Allen unfolds his line of reasoning crisply, logically, so that

we may see the researcher as he sets about his housekeeping chores — sorting, discarding, weighing, qualifying. He deals with evidence and with personalities scrupulously without failing, by nuance as well as by declaration, to provide judgments about the men on the spot — Onn bin Jaffar, MacMichael, or Gent. Dr. Allen writes uncommonly well and, as one who remembers tiffin with the author at the monstrous neo-Moorish Station Hotel in Kuala Lumpur can attest, he tells a tale well too. Here is one such tale in the making of modern Malaya.

ROBIN W. WINKS

Yale University  
May 1967

## PREFACE

The Malayan Union was officially promulgated on 1 April 1946. On 25 July of the same year it was announced that the title would be changed to Federation of Malaya, and the Federation formally came into existence in 1948. That a proposed constitutional reform of such dimensions should have suffered such a rapid demise is remarkable, and it was an event which attracted a certain amount of more or less contemporaneous comment in academic as well as other publications.<sup>1</sup> There has, however, been relatively little in the way of objective historical appraisal since.<sup>2</sup>

In some respects this is understandable. The official correspondence between the Colonial Office and its officials in Malaya and Singapore will not, of course, be released until 1975-1976. Over a question so controversial as the Malayan Union it may be assumed that secrecy will be especially well preserved. The student of imperial history, in particular, hesitates to commit himself to

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1. V. Purcell, "A Malayan Union: The Proposed New Constitution," Pacific Affairs, 19 (March 1946), is of course prospective. D.K. Rees-Williams, "The Constitutional Position in Malaya," Pacific Affairs, 20 (June 1947); G. Hawkins, "Reactions to the Malayan Union," Pacific Affairs, 19 (September 1946); I. Morrison, "Aspects of the Racial Problem in Malaya," Pacific Affairs, 22 (September 1949); and F.G. Carnell, "Communalism and Communism in Malaya," Pacific Affairs, 26 (June 1953), are among other articles which either discuss the Malayan Union or touch upon it.
  2. T.H. Silcock and Ungku Abdul Aziz, "Malayan Nationalism," in William L. Holland, ed., Asian Nationalism and the West (New York, 1953), and Enid Lakeman, Report on Malaya, (published by the McDougall Trust, London, at about the same time), treat the subject with historical perspective, but both were written when the shadow of the event was still rather large. Usha Mahajani, Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya (published in India for the Institute of Pacific Relations, 1960), has an unexpected amount of historical material on the Union and its collapse. The Journal of Southeast Asian History, 1, No. 1, which includes Radin Soenarno, "Malay Nationalism, 1900-1945"; Joh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock"; and Ishak bin Tadin, "Dato Onn, 1946-1951," is another valuable source.

a topic for which the main sources will be available only to the next generation. On the other hand, for many people the Malayan Union and its collapse represented something far larger than could be contained in the Colonial Office files. In Malayan history it will surely emerge as an event whose importance was only possibly exceeded by the things which seem to crowd it out of the history books -- the Japanese occupation of 1943-1945, the Emergency which began in 1948, and the declaration of independence from Britain in 1957. To the Malay community in particular it came as an earthquake and brought about something little short of a revolution. And even for the student of imperial history it must be admitted that there are some advantages to be gained from utilising now material which may not be available in thirty years' time. It may be that enough can be garnered to piece together the story, not without gaps -- perhaps not even with total accuracy -- but with sufficient completeness to indicate which way the truth lies. Interviews, confidential papers, private letters -- a great number of these are available today which may not be available then, and this material should be used to create what will be at worst a useful starting point for future historians, at the best a reasonably faithful reconstruction of what occurred.

At any rate it is the aim of this monograph to consider, on evidence at present available, the Malayan Union as an incident in British imperial history. I have set myself to answer two principal questions: why was it attempted and why did it fail (and fail so quickly)? These, it will be perceived, are just those questions to which we should least expect to be able to find answers outside the Colonial Office files. The scheme was Whitehall's invention, it was at Whitehall's insistence that the proposal was kept a total secret until 1946, and it is largely Whitehall's face which is being saved by the withholding of evidence about the collapse. Nevertheless, I have been able to gain access to a certain amount of material which was not used by my predecessors in this field, including some of the source of which I am unfortunately not at liberty to disclose; and from this and from interviews with a number of people who were without exception willing to help to their utmost I have been able to work out what I believe is an adequate answer, for the time being, to both questions. Outstandingly important among the sources of which I have made use have been the papers of Sir Cecil Clementi (High Commissioner 1929-1934),<sup>3</sup> the papers of Sir

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3. These are in the private keeping of his widow, Lady Clementi, Holmer Court, Holmers Green, North Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, Great Britain. Hereafter called Clementi Papers.

George Maxwell, now part of the collection of the British Association of Malaysia housed in the Library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, London,<sup>4</sup> and the papers of Dato Abdullah bin Mohammed of Johore Bahru. Since these are not easily accessible, and in view of the tentative nature of the opinions expressed in the text, I have quoted extensively from all three in the footnotes. To those who made them available to me, and to those whom I interviewed,<sup>5</sup> my grateful thanks are due. I should also record my debt to those to whom I circulated various drafts of the monograph while it was in preparation for their comments, and especially to the Secretary of the British Association of Malaysia, Hugh Bryson, for his generous advice and assistance, unceasing even when he found himself quite out of sympathy with my views. For these views and opinions, I am entirely responsible.

JAMES deV. ALLEN

4. The former British Malaya Association, which became the British Association of Malaya and is now the British Association of Malaysia. Its library, in its office, Grand Buildings, Trafalgar Square, and its collection of papers housed with the Librarian, Royal Commonwealth Society, Northumberland Avenue, are of great value. The Maxwell Papers, as they will be referred to, form part of a larger collection which I will call the BAM Papers. References to these, as to the Clementi Papers, will detail the files as they were numbered when I saw them in early 1964.

5. A partial list of those interviewed, with the place and the date, is provided below:

C. R. Howitt	London	18 February 1964
M. C. Hay	Burpham, Sussex	March 1964
Lord Milverton (former A. F. Richards)	London	3 March 1964
E. D. Shearn	London	4 March 1964
W. S. C. Corry	London	10 March 1964
E. V. G. Day	London	12 March 1964
Sir Richard Winstedt	London	23 March 1964
Yoshitomo Tokugawa	Tokyo	5 May 1964
Dato Nik Ahmad Kamil	Kuala Lumpur	14 September 1964
Inche Khir Johari	Kuala Lumpur	21 September 1964
Dato Ismail Mohamed Ali	Kuala Lumpur	15 October 1964

Dato Abdullah b. Mohammed	Johore Bahru	14 September 1964 and 15 January 1965
Dr. Awang b. Hassan, M. P.	Johore Bahru	15 January 1965
G. Hawkins	Penang	3 February 1965
Justice Mohd. Suffain	Kuala Lumpur	April 1965
Dato Hj. Mustapha Albakri	Kuala Lumpur	21 April 1965
Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj	Kuala Lumpur	19 April 1965
Tuan Hj. Mubin (M. C. ff.) Sheppard	Kuala Lumpur	9 September 1964
Malcolm MacDonald	Nairobi	25 June 1965 and 29 June 1965