

# JOHOR

*Local History, Local Landscapes*

1855 - 1957



P. Lim Pui Huen



*The timelessness of early morning on the Straits of Johor.*

# JOHOR

1855 – 1957

Local History, Local Landscapes

P. Lim Pui Huen

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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**thinkCITY**

REJUVENATING THE CITY TOGETHER



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*State Government Secretariat (now Sultan Ibrahim Building)*

# Foreword

The novel *Evening Is The Whole Day*, by Malaysian author Preeta Samarasan, has a description of Peninsular Malaysia like no other: “There is, stretching delicate as a bird’s head from the thin neck of the Kra Isthmus, a land that makes up half of the country called Malaysia. Where it dips its beak into the South China Sea, Singapore hovers like a bubble escaped from its throat”. Johor is that beak, caressed by the waves of the waters from three sides: the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca, and the narrow Straits of Johor. It has a rich and exciting history and has developed into a unique state so diverse and different from the others in many ways with its own unique “conjunctures, confluences, and contestations”.

That history and its development into one of the most prosperous states in Malaysia has not been well known because history is often about dramas and disasters. This book, like no other, tells us its story and evolution through historical maps and photographs, and by recounting the sagas of many different communities from numerous geographical regions and how they evolved into making the state as developed as it is now. Of particular interest were the insights into how its capital city, Johor Bahru, blossomed into its present strength. JB (as it is popularly known) depended on two key platforms: first, as the base of the royal court, and the cradle of Johor’s forward-looking stance; second, as a commercial hub for which the city took full advantage of its location, with a bridge that spanned the Straits of Johor and connected to Bukit Timah Road that led directly to the global entrepôt of the city-state Singapore.

Think City joined this remarkable journey in June 2016 at the behest of Khazanah Nasional Berhad, which was engaged in major initiatives in JB. It was tasked particularly through community and state partnerships to assist in triggering the rejuvenation of JB together in ways that developed its unique heritage and also bring value-added development.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines heritage as what we must never forget to remember: “Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today and we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration, our touchstone, our reference point, our identity”. Think City hopes to play a key role in the city’s greater awareness of its heritage as an integral part of its rapid transformation into a global city.

We are also particularly honoured to collaborate with Datin Patricia Lim, an internationally renowned librarian who is also an historian and a community leader in social welfare. This book, a reissue edition, will certainly boost knowledge and inspire more people to engage in strengthening Johor’s sense of place through understanding its unique history, heritage, culture, and people. There is so much more we can learn about Johor’s past, and books like this serve as a valuable repository of collective knowledge and history as we speed towards a culturally, socially, ecologically equitable and just modernity.

**Dato’ (Dr.) Anwar Fazal**

Chairperson, Think City Sdn Bhd, and recipient of the Right Livelihood Award,  
popularly known as the “Alternative Nobel Prize”

27 May 2019

# Preface

The State of Johor came into being when Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim planted his flag at Iskandar Puteri and declared his sovereignty over his domain. Although the new state was founded at a time of imperial domination, the Temenggong, his son Sultan Abu Bakar and his grandson Sultan Ibrahim were able to establish a modern political and legal framework for governance that was nevertheless firmly rooted in Malay tradition. Development opened up the jungles with the introduction of commercial agriculture and the building of roads and railways that culminated in the construction of a causeway to the port city of Singapore. The village of Iskandar Puteri was transformed into the bustling metropolis of Johor Bahru. Johor today shows the same energy and push towards progress and development.

This book traces the history of Johor during the period when it was a distinct political entity, that is, from the time it was founded in 1855 until 1957 when it became a component state of the Federation of Malaya (now Federation of Malaysia).

The story is told through antiquarian maps and old photos and through the lives of the diverse people who made Johor. I have benefitted from interviews with many Johoreans who obligingly scoured their memories, peeled photographs from their walls and subjected themselves to long sessions over many cups of tea. When I look at their names listed on the Acknowledgments page, I am saddened that many of them are no longer with us, but their memories have been captured in the book for our benefit. Because of the detail and clarity of their memories, the publication has become a reference book on Johor.

This book was published in 2009 and has been out of print for several years. I am much indebted to Think City for sponsoring this reprint especially to its Chairman Dato' (Dr.) Anwar Fazal for writing the Foreword. I also wish to thank his staff, Daniel Lim and Faezah Ayub, for seeing the book through to publication, and Dr. Neil Khor, now with UN-HABITAT, who was Think City COO when the reprint proposal was initiated.

I hope this reprint will renew the readers' sense of heritage and enhance the awareness of the past in their lives.



# 1

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## Historical Continuity

### From Johor Lama to Johor Bahru

Johor is one of the younger states in Malaysia but boasts an ancient heritage. The State of Johor came into being in 1855 when Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim gained sovereignty over the State and Territory of Johor and founded his capital at a place known as Tanjung Puteri. The site chosen was a shallow cape that pushed gently into the waters of the Straits of Johor. The new capital was given the name Iskandar

Puteri. The founding of Iskandar Puteri marks the rise of the modern State of Johor and the return of Malay authority, the *kerajaan* or Malay kingdom, to southern Peninsular Malaysia after an absence of more than a century. The founding of Iskandar Puteri therefore reaffirms the underlying continuity of Malay history.

The historical roots of the State of Johor can be traced to the old Kingdom of Johor that succeeded the Melaka sultanate as the paramount power in the Malay world. After the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511, the Melaka sultans re-established themselves on the Sungai Johor as a still formidable power to be reckoned with. In 1699, the last sultan of the Melaka line was assassinated, and as he died without an heir, the throne passed to the sultans of the Bendahara line. Then, in the 1700s, the sultans

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*(Facing page) Founding Iskandar Puteri.*

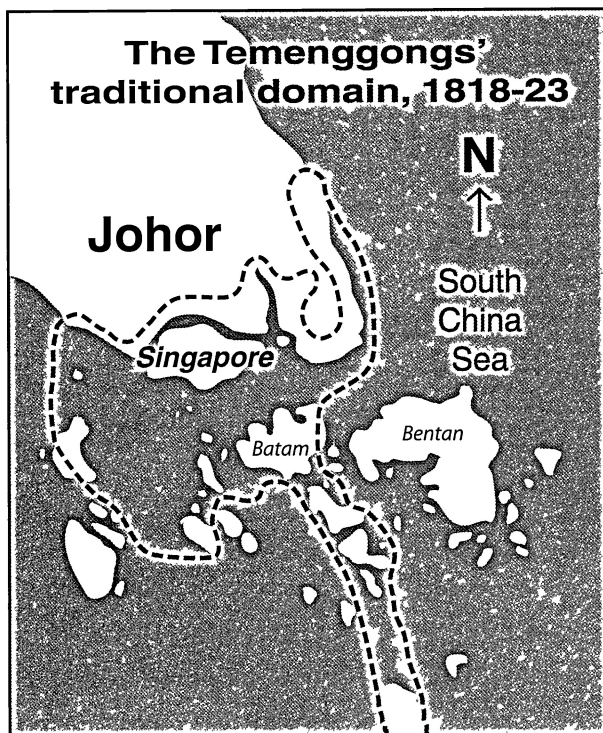
*In 1855, Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim, accompanied by his son, Ungku Wan Abu Bakar, founded the city of Iskandar Puteri, which was later renamed Johor Bahru. The founding of Iskandar Puteri marks the beginning of the modern State of Johor.*

*This artist's impression of the scene has been recreated in a painting by Razalli Lesut and hangs in Persada Johor, the Johor International Convention Centre developed and owned by the Johor Corporation. JCorp is a government-linked corporation that is one of Malaysia's leading conglomerates. The author would like to acknowledge her grateful thanks to JCorp for sponsoring the painting and permitting it to be reproduced in this book. (Photo of the painting by Razali Talhar)*

abandoned Sungai Johor and the centre of power shifted to the Riau-Lingga Archipelago where, with the help of Bugis warriors, they re-established themselves as the Johor-Pahang-Riau-Lingga empire. By the end of the 18th century, however, the empire was on the decline and was unable to resist the intrusion of the Dutch and the British. When the Dutch occupied Riau, Temenggong Abdul Rahman moved from his island home of Bulang to Singapore.

At the time, the Temenggong's traditional domain consisted not only of Bulang and other islands in Riau, but also Singapore and its surrounding islands, as well as territories on the southern portion of the Malay Peninsula. Not long after he moved, Sir Stamford Raffles came to Singapore seeking to establish a base for the East India Company along the east-west trade routes in order to rival the expansion of the Dutch. As there was a succession dispute in Riau, Raffles brought the rival claimant to the Riau throne to Singapore and recognised him as sultan.<sup>1</sup> By signing a treaty with the newly declared Sultan Hussein Mahomed Shah and Temenggong Abdul Rahman in 1819, Raffles founded Singapore and gained a strategic position for the British in their trade with China and with East and Southeast Asia. The founding of Singapore led to a shift of power in the Malay world and also led indirectly to the emergence of modern Johor.

Starting from their initial trading post, the British progressively strengthened their position in Singapore, and in 1824, a treaty was signed between Sultan Hussein, Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Resident John Crawfurd, by which Singapore was ceded to the East India Company in perpetuity in return for monetary compensation. Five years after the British arrived, both Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman had been edged out of



*The traditional domain of the Temenggongs of Johor comprised southern Malay Peninsula, Singapore and certain islands in the Riau Archipelago.*

the picture. It was a low point from which Sultan Hussein and his family never recovered. However, Temenggong Abdul Rahman's son Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim managed to rebuild his family's fortunes by exploiting the economic riches of the jungles of Johor. As the same resources were also claimed by Sultan Hussein's son Ali, tensions inevitably arose which were only resolved in 1855 when the British negotiated a treaty between the two parties. Under the terms of the treaty, Tunku Ali received the title of Sultan but transferred the sovereignty of Johor to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim and his heirs except for a small territory between the Muar and Kesang rivers.<sup>2</sup>

The old Kingdom of Johor had extended over eastern Sumatra and the southern Malay Peninsula to the Riau-Lingga Archipelago. But with the Dutch firmly entrenched in Riau and the British in Singapore, the kingdom was in fact divided between the two European powers, a division subsequently confirmed by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London signed in 1824.<sup>3</sup> The 1855 transfer of sovereignty represents another shift in continuity that led to the rise of a new polity, the State of Johor.

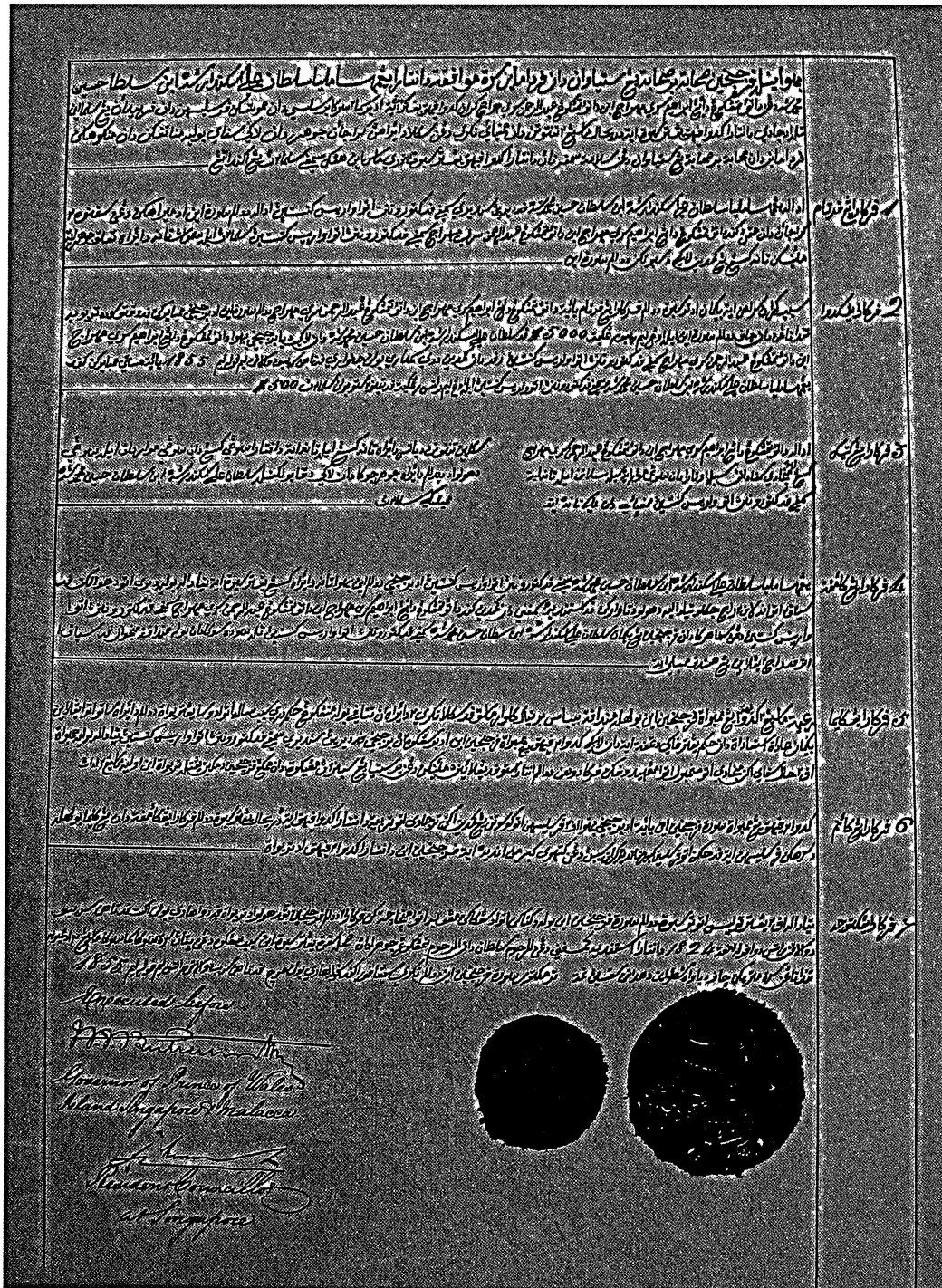
As Iskandar Puteri was, at the time, only a village on the edge of the straits, the new State of Johor was administered from Telok Blangah in Singapore where Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim and

his officers lived. But a new administrative centre, the Istana Besar, was built and on the first day of January 1866, the Istana Besar was officially opened and Iskandar Puteri renamed Johor Bahru or New Johor. The government moved over from Telok Blangah so that the year 1866 marked the beginning of effective government in Johor.

The "City of Johor" used to refer to the capital of the old Kingdom of Johor on Sungai Johor. The name of the new capital was no doubt chosen to resonate with the name of the old capital which then became known as Johor Lama or Old Johor. The name Johor Bahru is therefore another reminder of the historical relationship between the earlier Kingdom of Johor and the present State of Johor.

When Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim died in 1862, he was succeeded by his son Abu Bakar. However, the title of Temenggong was not a royal title and the ruler of Johor was at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the rulers of the other Malay states. But when in 1885 he was recognised as Sultan of Johor according to a treaty signed with Britain, the glory and grandeur of the Malay kingdom and *daulat*, that mystical and uniquely Malay quality of kingship, were from that time onwards restored to the State of Johor.

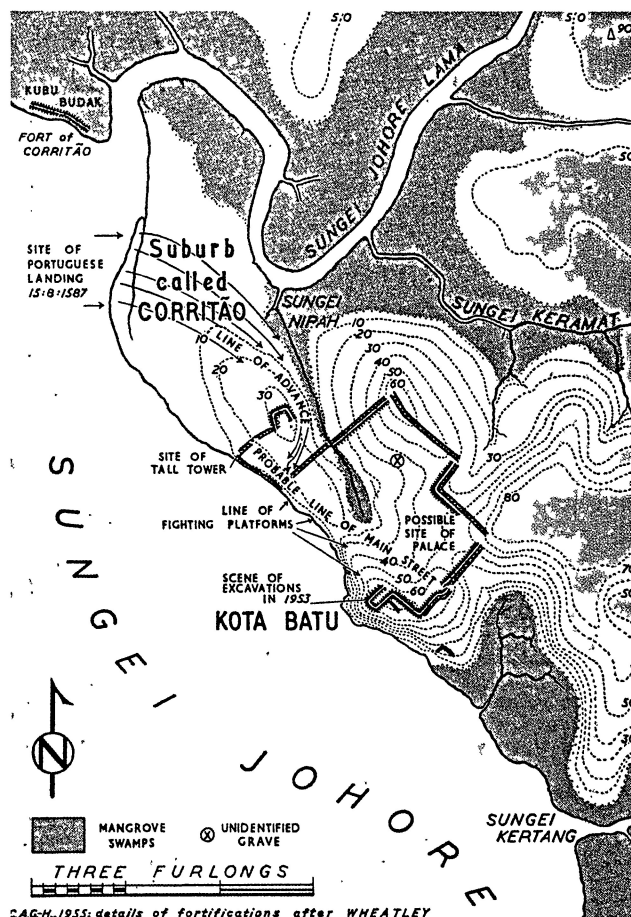
This book describes the history of Johor, and in particular the growth of its capital city, Johor



Treaty signed on 10 March 1855 between Sultan Ali and Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim by which Ali was recognised as Sultan and the sovereignty of Johor was ceded to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim and his heirs except for the territory between the Muar and Kesang rivers.

Bahru, from 1855 to the achievement of Malayan independence in 1957. It covers a time when the State of Johor was a separate and distinct political entity. During this period, Johor benefited from the wisdom and foresight of three remarkable rulers. Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim, who ruled from 1825 to 1862, established the State of Johor and founded Iskandar Puteri. He opened up Johor to development, and placed its economy on a firm footing (see also Chapters 2 and 3). Sultan Abu Bakar, who ruled from 1862 to 1895, laid the foundations of the state, established its political and legal framework, set out the outlines of the city of Johor Bahru and built many of the heritage buildings (see also Chapters 4 and 7). During the long reign of Sultan Ibrahim from 1895 to 1959, the growth of the state was consolidated, the economy expanded, and Johor Bahru developed into a modern metropolis (see also Chapters 8, 10, 11 and 16). During his reign, Johor was at last drawn into the ambit of British colonial advance. In 1910, the appointment of the General Advisor, with powers equivalent to the British Resident in the other states, brought Johor into line with political developments in other parts of Malaya.

The book shows Johor's progress from colonialism to independence, from a "protected Malay state" to a component state within a



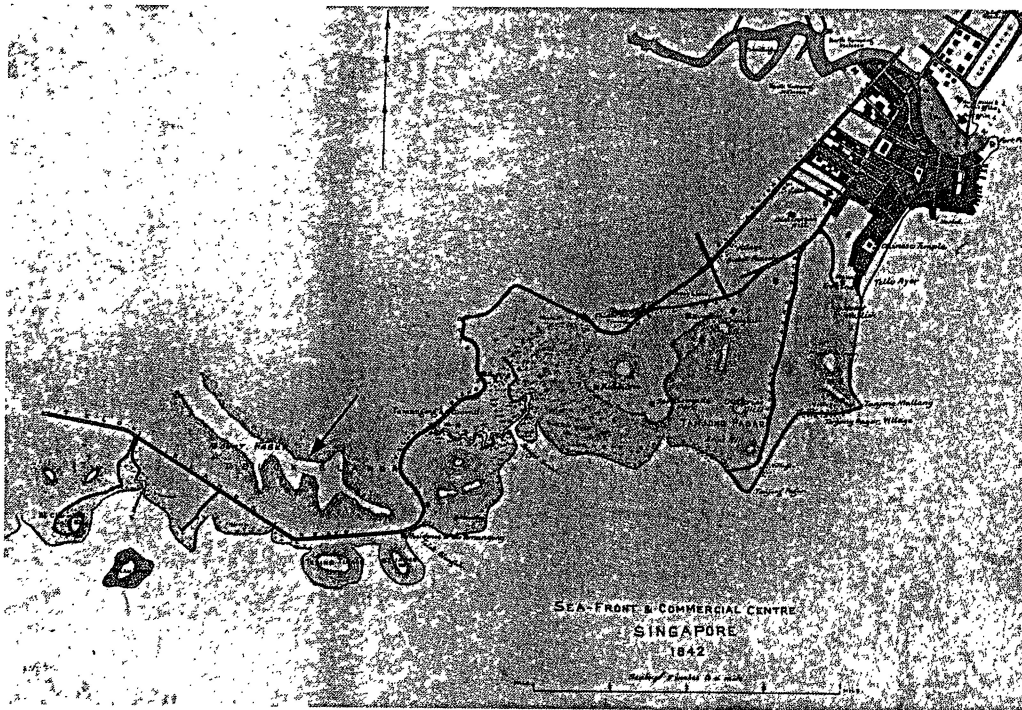
*Johor Lama showing the fortified area. The present-day kampung is located at the area marked "Suburb called Corritão".*

sovereign nation, the Federation of Malaya, now the Federation of Malaysia.

Johor was also fortunate in having the services of a number of able and dedicated men who served the rulers with distinction and whose names will appear in the chapters that follow. The peace



*View of the former residence and administrative centre of the Temenggongs at Telok Blangah.*



*The residence of the Temenggongs of Johor at Telok Blangah, 1842.*

and progress they fostered attracted a diverse but industrious population who contributed to the development of the state. In the words of Dato' Abdul Ghani bin Othman, Mentri Besar of Johor:

*Johor was built up by a combination of several unique factors: an enviable location, visionary leaders, and the energy and enterprise of many people.*

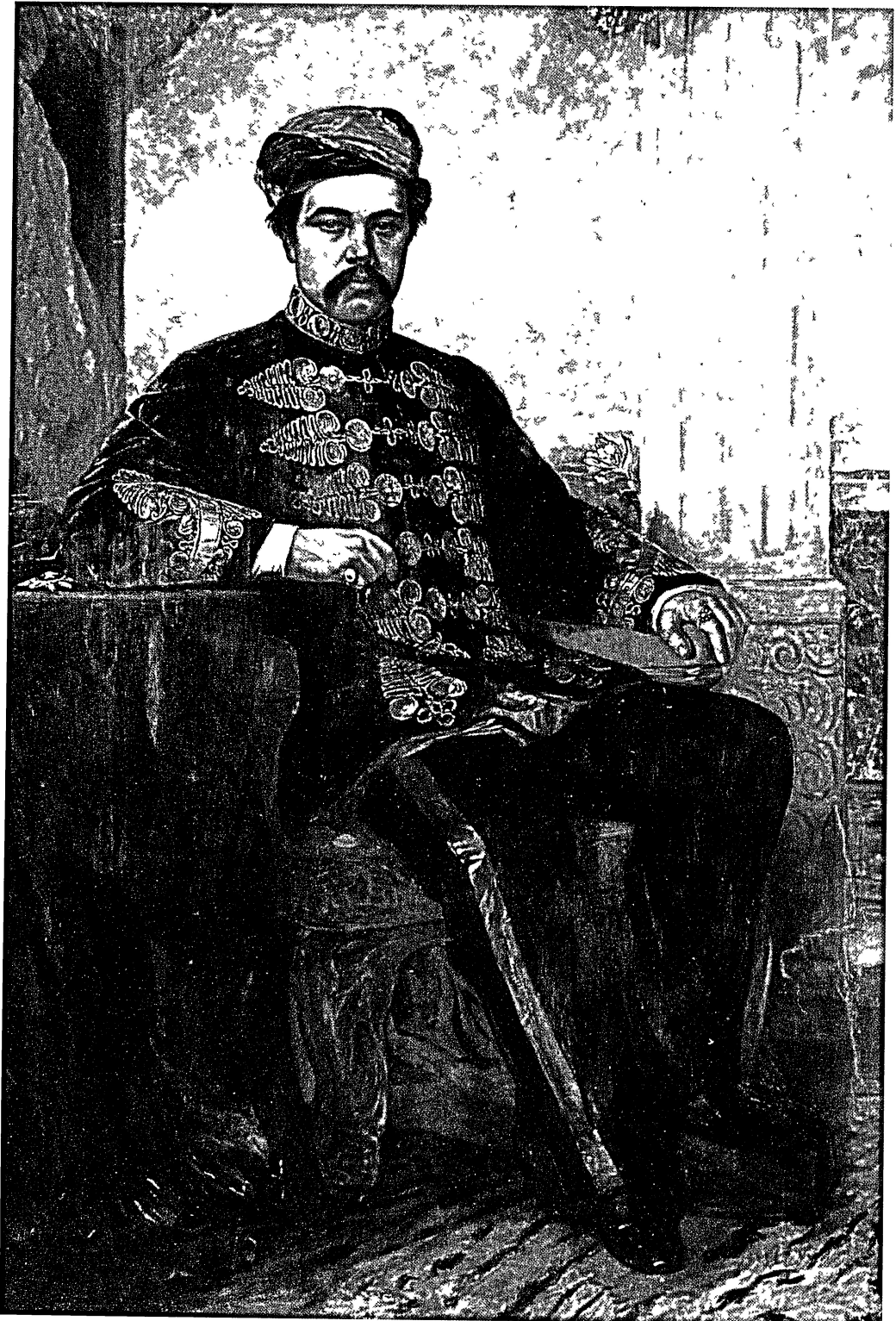
In the short span of just over a hundred years, a sparsely populated jungle-covered territory has become one of the most populous and prosperous states in Malaysia. Johor Bahru has grown from a village on the shoreline to a fast developing and vibrant city. This book draws out two themes in the history of modern Johor: firstly, the theme of continuity from the past to the present; and secondly, the theme of harmonious growth and dynamic development.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Sultan Mahmud died in 1812, leaving two sons, Hussein and Abdul Rahman. Backed by the powerful Bugis faction at court, the younger son, Abdul Rahman, was proclaimed Sultan.
- 2 After Sultan Ali died in 1877, the chiefs of Muar elected Sultan Abu Bakar their ruler. Muar was then incorporated into the Johor territory.
- 3 The Treaty of London drew an invisible line through the Straits of Melaka and the Straits of Singapore, which in effect divided the Malay world into British and Dutch spheres of influence.



*Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim, 1810–62.*



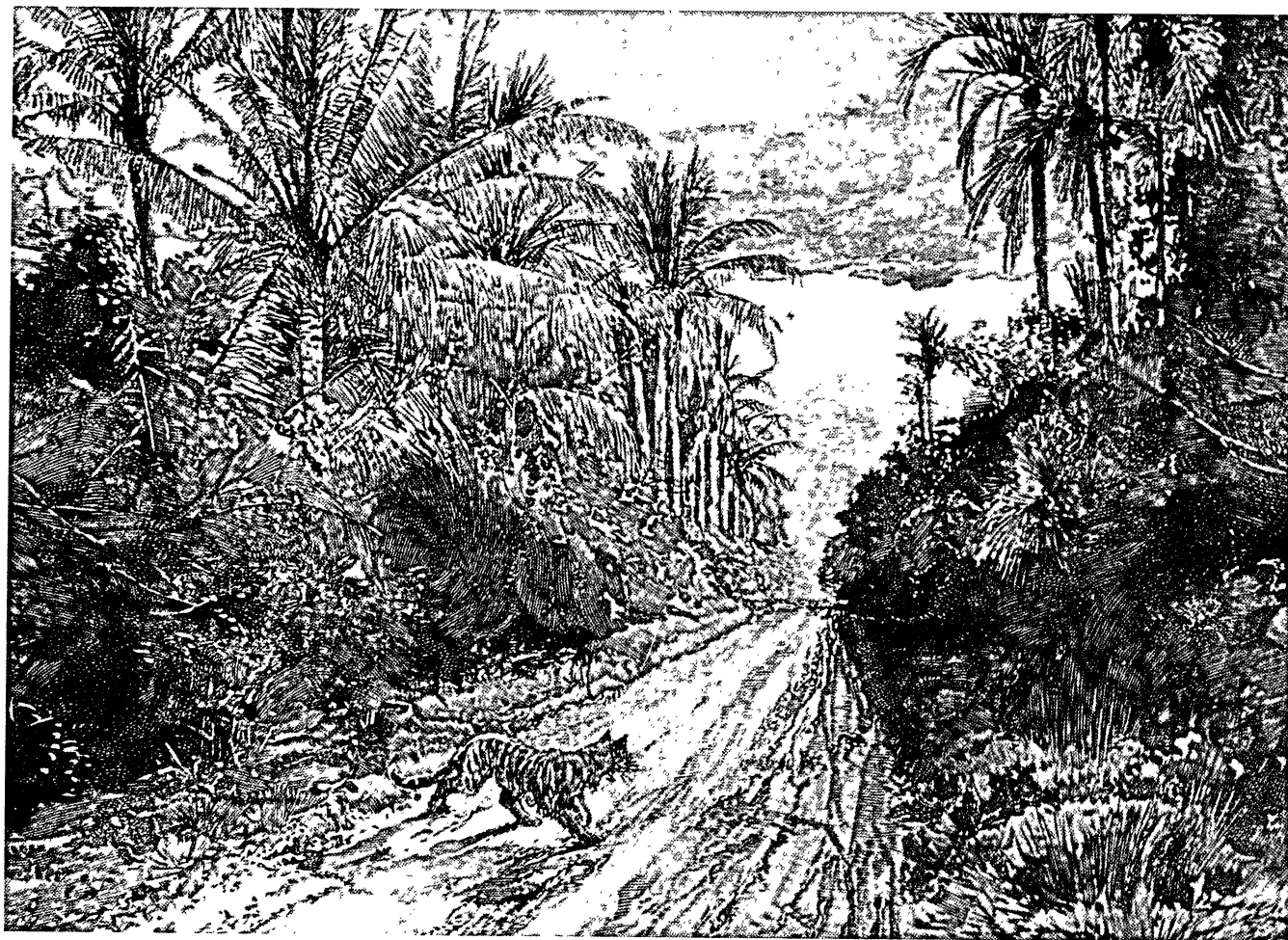
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Historical Continuity



*(Above) Sultan Ibrahim, 1873–1959.*

*(Facing page) Sultan Abu Bakar, 1833–95. When Sultan Abu Bakar succeeded his father, he was known by the title Temenggong Sri Maharaja of Johor. He adopted the title of Maharaja in 1868 and attained the title of Sultan in 1885. He is referred to as Sultan Abu Bakar throughout this book.*



*A tiger takes a stroll near the shoreline.*

## 2

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# Opening Up Johor

When Iskandar Puteri was founded, Johor was covered with jungle so dense and so impenetrable that rivers provided the only access into its deep and dark interior. Where land and sea met, there were muddy swamps and thick mangrove forests. In 1825, when John Crawfurd, Resident of Singapore, made a journey through the Straits of Johor, he wrote about the “unruffled sea” and the “endless wood of the most magnificent timber”. But he also noticed there was an absence of human life. Apart from a small village at Johor Lama, the inhabitants were mainly jungle dwellers who were rainforest collectors, and sea people who lived along the rivers and coastal waters.

The jungle-covered coast, although uninhabited, was not unknown. The Straits of Johor, called Selat Tebrau in Malay, had been known to Arab and Chinese

seafarers for centuries as one of the passageways on the sea route between east and west. It was also known to the maritime people of the Malay world for whom the seas and rivers were the equivalent of the roads and highways of today; stories about various places on the maritime highway were part of Malay folklore and tradition.

One such place was Tanjung Puteri, the cape formed by low hills that rose above the dense growth of mangrove and jungle to thrust itself gently into the sea. According to legend, Tanjung Puteri was named after the beautiful Puteri Mayang Selida, a lovely fairy child who was found in a hollow in the rocks. When she grew up, she appeared to the Sultan of Johor in a dream. He went to search for her, and having found her, took her in marriage. Tanjung Puteri is so named because that was where, it is believed, she

went ashore. One of her sons was said to have been Bendahara Skudai who is remembered as “a great chief, a man of title” and who, according to tradition, was the ancestor of the rulers of Rembau and of Sungai Ujung, both in present-day Negri Sembilan. In his *History of Johore*, Sir Richard Winstedt retells some of the legends about Puteri Mayang Selida and Bendahara Skudai. Whether he was indeed her son is uncertain but Bendahara Skudai was certainly a prominent figure not only in the history of Johor but also in the history of Negri Sembilan. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, Bendahara Skudai was said to have founded a settlement at Skudai. This town is situated upstream of Sungai Skudai, the river that used to mark the western limits of Johor Bahru before the present-day growth of “Greater Johor Bahru”.

However, at the time Iskandar Puteri was founded, there were only a few huts on the edge of the water where fishermen and charcoal-makers lived. Accompanied by his officers and men, Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim had sailed up and down the coast looking for the most suitable site for the new state capital. It must have been with a bold sense of vision that he chose Tanjung Puteri. We can imagine how the Temenggong and his party landed near the shore, waded through the squelching mud and sharp roots of mangroves, struggled through

rough grass and bushes, scrambled over stones and gravel, to climb the hill for a better view. We can also imagine how, when they reached the top, they could not but have been impressed by the magnificent view of the sea and the whole panorama of the surrounding area which opened before their eyes. To mark the event, a flag was erected on the hill which was named Bukit Bendera or Flagstaff Hill. Today, the flag of Johor still flies from the same spot on the hill which is now known as Bukit Timbalan.

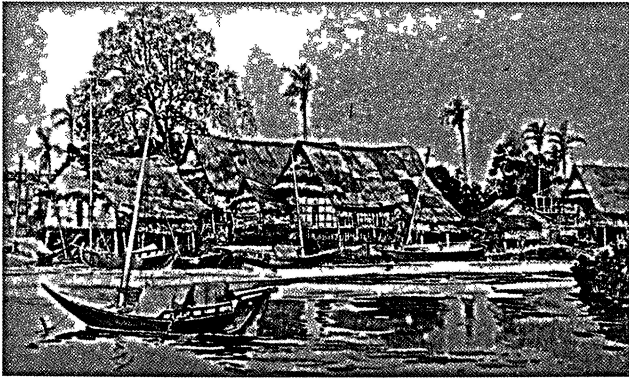
An account of the founding of Iskandar Puteri is recorded in the memoirs of Mohd Salleh bin Perang, who became better known by his title Dato' Bentara Luar.

*It was at this time (A.D. 1855) that Marhum Ibrahim began to open up Johor and wished to found a settlement at a place named Tanjung Puteri, which is where the state capital is now located. So a building was constructed there; that first building was located on the hill which has been used as a place to station the military, and the government flagstaff stands there today. The place was given the name “Iskandar Puteri”, but as yet there were no businesses, nor any traders, living there, the only dwellings being one or two houses for the people supervising the work in progress there at the time.*

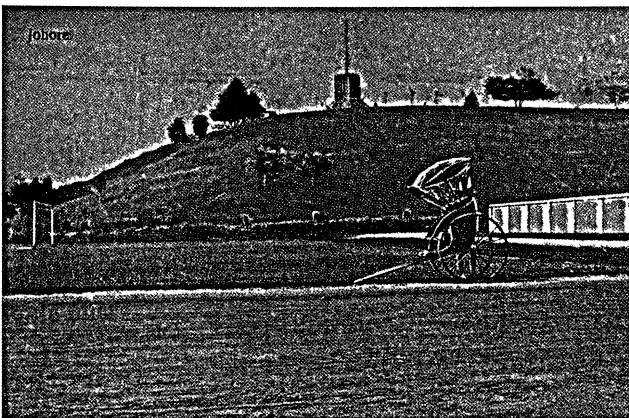
The virgin jungles of Johor were its earliest resource. The wealth of the rainforest provided Johor with many kinds of jungle produce such as dammar, rattan, wood-oil, camphor, ebony, wax,



*The village of Iskandar Puteri.*



*Malay houses over the water at Iskandar Puteri.*



*Where it all began – the flagstaff marking the spot where Iskandar Puteri was founded.*

lime, aloewood, eaglewood and sandalwood, all of which were traditionally collected by the jungle people. Then, in the 1840s, when gutta-percha was discovered to be the only material suitable for protecting submarine cables, an unexpected demand for gutta-percha opened up and gangs of labourers were sent to the jungles of Johor to cut the trees and collect the substance. With the enthusiastic search for gutta-percha, called *getah taban* in Malay, *menaban* became a popular occupation. The trade in gutta-percha was worth \$150,000 to \$200,000 (in the currency value of the time) and was managed largely by Johor officers based in Telok Blangah. The political centre of Johor was then in Singapore and Iskandar Puteri was administered from Telok Blangah where Abdullah bin Tok Mohamed Tahir, better remembered as Encik Long, was Menteri to Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim.

The jungles of Johor produced another valuable resource – timber. With a seemingly inexhaustible quantity of timber available, a steam sawmill was set up in 1860 at the mouth of Sungai Segget, by a Scotsman named James Meldrum who had decided to come east to seek his fortune. His biographer W. Murray, paints us a charming picture of early Iskandar Puteri:



*When Dato Meldrum paid his first visit to Johore, the Kranji end of Bukit Timah Road was only newly made. The opposite shore was jungle and marshy ground, and a Malay hut stood on the site of the present Istana. ... After an examination of the coast, Dato Meldrum fixed on Tanjong Putri as an ideal spot for the proposed mill.*

The logs were cut in the jungle and tied into large rafts which could take as long as six months to put together and were large enough to carry six to ten men and their families. They were 500 to 600 feet long, 60 to 70 feet broad, and could contain up to 2,000 logs skilfully tied together by rattan. The rafts were then floated down the straits to Iskandar Puteri, to the water's edge, and then hauled up to the steam engines of the sawmill to be cut. The sawmill was Johor Bahru's first industry and its timber

was exported to China, Mauritius, Java and other countries, and was especially important in India where it supplied sleepers for the Indian railways. The site of the sawmill was until recently occupied by the Customs and Immigration checkpoint.

The continuous growth of Iskandar Puteri showed the wisdom of choosing Tanjong Putri as the site of the new state capital. Not only was it set in the scenic and tranquil landscape of the Straits of Johor but its potential for growth was quickly recognised. According to young Mohd Salleh bin Perang, who in 1858 had been appointed head clerk to Raja Ahmad, the Resident, "traders poured into

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*(Above) Timber from the jungles was Johor's earliest resource. The trees were cut in the jungle, the logs tied into large rafts and floated down to the sawmill at Iskandar Puteri.*

Johor”. He also said: “Iskandar Puteri was like a tree just sprouted from the ground, with its leaves and branches growing every day more profuse.”

Shops and houses soon grew up around Sungai Segget where the harbour was small but adequate. The river was deep enough for the entry of tongkangs and the sailing boats of the island traders while sea-going vessels could dock at the jetty by the sawmill. Iskandar Puteri was conveniently situated approximately at the midpoint of the straits opposite the end of Bukit Timah Road which had been completed by 1845, and thus provided Iskandar Puteri with easy access to the entrepôt of Singapore.

Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim is regarded as the ruler who established modern Johor as it was in his lifetime that the State of Johor came into being and Iskandar Puteri was founded. By placing Johor's economy on a firm footing, he made it possible for the newly established state to progress and flourish. It was left to his son and successor Sultan Abu Bakar to build on the foundations he laid, to become known in his turn as the founder of modern Johor.

In his *History of Johore*, Sir Richard Winstedt describes Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim in these words:

*Courageous, wise, energetic, Tun Ibrahim was the founder of his family's political and material fortunes, though his career has been overshadowed by time and the more spectacular achievements of his son.*

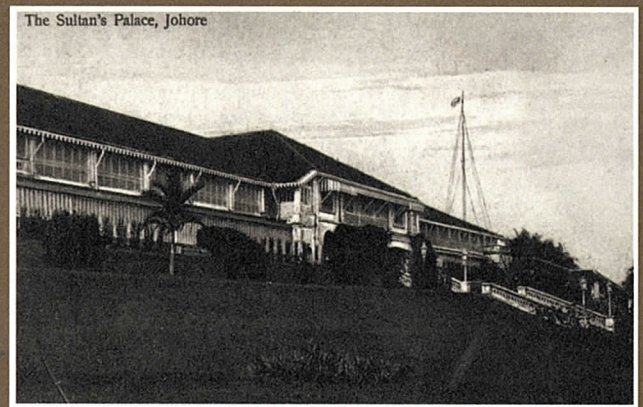


*James Meldrum established a sawmill at Iskandar Puteri in 1860. The Johor Steam Sawmill was located at the mouth of Sungai Segget where the Customs and Immigration checkpoint stood until recently.*

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