





P Carpenter, del.

Vincent Brooks lith.

SINGAPORE AT SUNRISE FROM THE HILLS WESTWARD.

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OUR TROPICAL POSSESSIONS

IN

MALAYAN INDIA.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA



OUR TROPICAL POSSESSIONS IN
MALAYAN INDIA

JOHN CAMERON
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WANG GUNGWU

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Introduction
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INTRODUCTION

WHEN a book first published a hundred years ago is reprinted, we may well ask, is the book a literary classic? Does it illuminate the past as no new book can do? Is the reprint a centenary celebration? Or is the book merely out of print? When these questions are asked of John Cameron's *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India*, the answers are not at first impressive. It is difficult to decide if Cameron should be remembered for saying that 'on the average one man per diem falls a victim to tigers' or for telling us that a Singapore breakfast in 1864 consisted of 'a little fish, some curry and rice, and perhaps a couple of eggs, washed down with a tumbler or so of good claret'. It is easier to note that Cameron was a poor historian. His chapters on history (Chapters I, XI and XIII) do not bear close scrutiny and the modern reader familiar with the history of the Malay peninsula may well smile at some of his suppositions. His use of 'Malayan India' in the title suggests a slight lack of perspective, even for his own times, on the eve of the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office in London.

But then history was not his purpose. Cameron, as editor of the *Straits Times* in Singapore, was bent on describing 'the condition of life in the tropical garden' and making his reader 'sensible of the importance of Singapore to such a nation as Great Britain'. To this end, the book must be accounted a considerable success. Apart from the lyrical passages which must have stirred some hearts young and old in Victorian England, Cameron was able to talk in dollars and cents about the success of the great port. And if he wrote vividly of the horrors of the Chinese coolie



traffic, he could also relax with sherry and bitters and describe band evenings on the esplanade. His best chapters are obviously those on subjects he knew most about, Chapter VII on commerce and Chapter VIII on government. Here he provides the reader with a sharp and balanced picture of the strength and weaknesses of the Straits Settlements. He even tries to be fair to the Indian Government which had badly neglected the interests of these Settlements.

Also significant is that, 45 years after the foundation of Singapore, Cameron was not really unjust in allocating almost 300 pages to Singapore while giving not much more than 90 pages to Penang and Malacca. For Singapore had become a jewel to the trading British and, if we are to believe Cameron, possibly three times more important than the other two settlements. The reasons for this are clear. From the start, 'the central and convenient position of the station' and 'the entire exemption from commercial imposts or taxes on trade' had given the island an advantage which nothing the rival colonial powers had tried to do could reduce. Although there had been ups and downs in the entrepot trade, Singapore had never stopped expanding at an exceptional rate. Perhaps Cameron can be forgiven his prophecy about that trade which must strike us as particularly relevant when we look at the position of Singapore today.

But so vast is the population of the Archipelago and of the native states on the eastern continent, that, as one port is withdrawn from the supply of Singapore, another will be ready to take its place; *and this must go on for the next century at least*, provided always we keep its port completely open and trade unfettered [my italics].



The original *Our Tropical Possessions* is not now available and I think that the book does illuminate the past, brightly and carefully, and that it is a worthy centenary reprint. On early history and about the various peoples who came to live under British rule, Cameron was not only inaccurate but also deserved the epithet 'fabulous' that W.E. Maxwell used of him on the margins of his copy of the book (signed 1878, now in the National Archives Library, Kuala Lumpur). But his enthusiasm and genuine affection for the last years of 'the dependency of a dependency' can hardly be surpassed. It is as if, for Cameron, a kind of freedom was near.

WANG GUNGWU

University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
December 1964



OUR TROPICAL POSSESSIONS

IN

MALAYAN INDIA:

BEING A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF SINGAPORE, PENANG,
PROVINCE WELLESLEY, AND MALACCA; THEIR
PEOPLES, PRODUCTS, COMMERCE,
AND GOVERNMENT.

BY

JOHN CAMERON, Esq., F.R.G.S.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

LONDON:
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P R E F A C E .

THE following pages have been written under the belief that the possessions of which they treat are about to come under the direct control of the Imperial Government, and with a view to afford the people of England some glimpse of the great beauty, some conception of the valuable commerce, and some grounds upon which to estimate the importance, in a political point of view, of the tropical country to which they are about to be drawn in the ties of a nearer relationship. And I do not think I have claimed for my subject more attention than it deserves. In point of physical beauty it can have few compeers; its chief port ranks third in the commerce of India; and its geographical position gives it a political importance which must be measured by the value to Great Britain of ascendancy throughout the rapidly developing countries of the Far East.

While the greater part of my book is descriptive, I have in some chapters ventured to offer an opinion on one or two of the chief questions of Government which are likely to be raised hereafter; and even if my conclusions should be faulty, the material from which they are drawn will be found valuable, and afford, perhaps, the basis of as secure a policy—for whether in describing the possessions themselves, their commerce or their government, I have made no statement on hazard merely—much may have been left untold, but what does appear has been the subject of careful inquiry. In conclusion, it may be well to claim the reader's indulgence, in so far that as I now part with the manuscript at a very great distance from the place of publication, I shall not be allowed the advantage of revising or reconsidering what I have written. I trust, however, that the constancy with which I have adhered to facts throughout will confine my short-comings rather to errors of taste and judgment, than permit them to include those in any way likely to mislead or misinform.

JOHN CAMERON.

SINGAPORE, 21st July, 1864.

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THE tropical colony of the Straits Settlement, which is probably about to pass from under the government of India to be added to the list of direct dependencies of the Crown, is one which in many ways will merit the solicitude of the Imperial Government. Its

administration is a high and important trust, which if boldly, and yet wisely conducted, will go further to preserve the predominance and permanence of British interests—commercial and political—in the Eastern Archipelago, and the adjacent native continental States—if not, indeed, in China itself—than any other means which the Imperial Government can employ. Founded under the rule of the old East India Company, and fostered from its infancy by a policy which, if faulty in many other respects, was at least well suited to protect and encourage a settlement ere it attained inherent strength enough to stand by itself, the Straits Settlement has grown to an importance incompatible with such tutelage. It remains to be seen how the progress of its maturer years will be advanced or retarded by the wise or unwise government of English statesmen.

Hitherto but little has been given to the world concerning it, and to the great bulk of untravelled Englishmen it is known only as a distant Indian station, where manufactures are sold and produce bought under the sweltering heat of an equatorial sun. Indeed, an existence there is viewed as an exile of the worst description, to be compensated only by the wealth which it is reputed to bring. But those who have endured that exile can tell a far different tale of the condition of life in the tropical garden; and those at all acquainted with the high roads of Eastern trade, have but to view the position of the island of Singapore on the chart, to become sensible of its importance to such a nation as Great Britain; an importance which

must keep pace with the growth of European intercourse with the populous nations of the East.

Much of the ignorance which prevails in the mother country as to the character and resources of these outlying settlements is to be attributed to the nature of their past government, which separated them as completely from English control, and, of course, from English public interest, as if they had been the possessions of a foreign power. The East India Company, that guided their destinies until six years ago, was never communicative. Nor was the change which took place in 1858, when the Company yielded up its authority to the Crown, likely to bring the affairs of the Straits into any greater notice in England. The settlement continued to be ruled through the council at Calcutta, who, from the affairs of a great empire, could but seldom spare much attention to the necessities of a distant province possessing nothing in common with, and nothing that could much contribute to, the welfare of the mother continent. But, as will be presently seen, from a combination of fortuitous circumstances, the neglect has not been fatal. Singapore, founded on the liberal and enlightened principles understood at the time by so few, but which formed the loadstone of Sir Stamford Raffles' policy, has withstood the evil consequences of neglect, and, aided by the enterprise of its merchants, and by the rare advantages which its geographical position gives it, has gradually, but always progressively, grown into commercial importance, which will be best understood when it is stated that its yearly imports exceed six

