

C. NORTHCOTE
PARKINSON
BRITISH
INTERVENTION
IN MALAYA
PUSTAKA ILMU

LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
KATA DAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

BRITISH INTERVENTION IN MALAYA 1867-1877

BY
C. NORTHCOTE PARKINSON

SHAMSUL BAHARIN BIN MAT AKAS



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PERDANA

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THIS is the first volume to be published of the Malayan Historical Studies. This is to be a series of histories and historical monographs covering the story of what we now call Malaya from the earliest recorded times down to the year 1957. The series, which will not be numbered, should comprise finally about twelve volumes. The order of publication will follow no chronological order, nor would an exact sequence be possible, the volumes dealing not only with different periods but with different aspects of the subject. Economic history can thus be dealt with in one volume, historical geography in another.

There can be no pretence at finality in the volumes of this series. Much of the work will have been done by authors working somewhat in isolation and without more than occasional access to the archives and libraries upon which their researches should ideally depend. Much of the story will be reinterpreted, no doubt, by subsequent historians for whose monographs and theses there will remain ample scope. But this work of the future will be a less formidable undertaking if there already exists a series of this kind. It will provide the future scholar with a background knowledge, lacking which he might not even know where to begin. The immediate object must be to establish what happened, when and where.

Two problems have been encountered in the compilation of this first volume and they are problems which are likely to recur in others. The first of these relates to the documentary material. The Straits Settlements records preserved in Singapore are those most readily available to the Malayan student of modern Malayan history. Upon these sources much of the work must depend. It is necessary, however, to supplement this archive material by reference to the Parliamentary Papers, as also where necessary to the best source of all, the files preserved in the Public Record Office. The Parliamentary Papers are available in print but arranged in a way which makes them difficult of reference. In the Public Record Office the archives are systematically grouped and numbered, but to give the P.R.O. reference in such a work as this would be misleading, for those were not the archives mainly used. The reader is asked to believe that the transcription has

been carefully done. He is further to understand that the dates of the correspondence will lead him most readily to the actual documents, of which the best copies are undoubtedly in London. The author's practice in this volume has been to quote very fully from the sources, leaving the reader free to draw his own conclusions, which may, of course, differ entirely from those reached in the present work.

The second problem concerns the English rendering of Malay and Chinese names. The exact way in which these are represented in English is of concern to the philologist or linguist, who may wish to suggest how the word was originally formed or how it should now be pronounced. The historian is little interested in the word except as a means of identifying a character or place—itself often a matter of extreme difficulty. Some scholars, while conceding this, would urge that there should at least be consistency of spelling throughout. But the difficulty here is that the documents, in this case, reveal no such consistency among those living at the time. To alter the documents would be heresy and would, in any case, give a totally false impression of their authors' erudition. It might even introduce a new source of confusion over identifications already quite difficult enough to establish. To leave the documents as they stand, on the other hand, correcting each spelling in a footnote or subsequent reference would introduce a note of laborious pedantry such as would annoy more readers than it would impress. So, with apologies to the experts, much inconsistency has been retained. In other volumes of the series, less heavily documented, a more consistent policy may well be found practicable.

The author of this first volume is indebted to previous historians, whose works are quoted, as also more especially to former pupils from whose unpublished works he has been glad to draw both for facts and conclusions. Chief of these are Mr. George Bogaars, M.A., whose dissertation on *The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company* has been most useful, and Mr. M. A. Mallal, M.A., whose dissertation entitled *J. W. W. Birch: causes of his assassination* (1952) has proved extremely valuable. The author has also relied on the academic exercises written by Mr. T. Chelliah, Mr. Wee Choon Siang, and several others. Work such as theirs will undoubtedly be of use to other historians contributing to this series. Theirs and other academic exercises are to be found in the Library of the University of Malaya. The author has to make acknowledgement to the following publishers for permission to quote from these works published by them: Messrs. George Allen &

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Unwin Ltd., *British Malaya*, by Sir Frank Swettenham; Messrs. Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., *Footprints in Malaya*, by Sir Frank Swettenham; Messrs. John Lane, The Bodly Head, *The Real Malay*, and *Malay Sketches*, by Sir Frank Swettenham; Messrs. John Murray, Ltd., *Life of Sir Andrew Clarke*, by R. H. Vetch, and *About Others and Myself*, by Sir A. E. H. Anson. For assistance with the maps the author is indebted to the Geography Department of the University of Malaya. It was originally hoped to reproduce directly the contemporary maps of the Malay States; maps or sketches made by men involved in the events themselves—McNair, Swettenham, Peyton, and Daly—and reproduced in the Sessional Papers. When reduced in scale, however, these maps were insufficiently legible. Each was accordingly redrawn and is now reproduced in a form which, while preserving the essentials of the original, is no longer an exact copy. While many place-names have been enlarged, no attempt has been made to impose either consistency or modern usage on the spelling. The country here represented was not merely unsurveyed but largely unexplored.

Thanks are also due to the President and Committee of the National Liberal Club for permission to reproduce the frontispiece illustration. This is from the painting by H. Barraud which hangs in the club entrance hall and which portrays, among others, the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Kimberley and the Rt. Hon. Hugh Childer: men who played a leading role in the events with which this book is concerned.

The author must express his thanks, finally, to those who have made this publication feasible: the Asia Foundation, the University of Malaya Press, and the Oxford University Press. Without generous support from all those concerned the Malayan Historical Series would be impossible to publish, or even plan. It is the hope of the historians engaged on this project that the efforts they make will justify all the help that has been given.

C. NORTHCOTE PARKINSON

University of California
January 1960



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INTRODUCTION

This is the story, in some detail, of the ten vital years during which Perak, Selangor, and parts of the Negri Sembilan were absorbed into the British Empire. The interest of this story must centre on the Malay States themselves, but it has for its background the Empire considered as a whole. If we take, for the moment, the broader view, we shall find a vast pattern in which the Malay States have their place. It is a pattern of conquest but neither aimlessly nor boundlessly aggressive. The conquest is that of the main trade route between Europe and Asia and its progress is marked by successive and seemingly inevitable steps, one deliberate stride after another carrying the British flag from the home ports to the upper reaches of the Yangtze-Kiang. A mere recital of chronological sequence must destroy any idea of accident or inconsequence. The old route to and from the East ran via St. Helena, Cape Town, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, and Penang. To these possessions were added Ceylon, Malacca, Mauritius, and Singapore. The system was extended to Hong Kong in 1841, which was then linked with Singapore by the addition of Labuan and North Borneo. With the opening of the Suez Canal the old Mediterranean route guarded by Gibraltar and Malta was linked with Bombay by additional bases at Cyprus, Alexandria, and Aden.

The development of this vast network was the work of a British aristocracy which, at the time this story begins, was still firmly in power. The British aristocracy was mainly characterized by its peculiar co-ordination of commercial, maritime, naval, military, and colonial policy. This was achieved to some extent through such institutions as Parliament, the Stock Exchange, Lloyds, and the Baltic, but more through social relationships and a pattern of life created and strengthened in public schools, universities, clubs, race-courses, and the hunting field. Society, though stratified, was not so compartmented as to prevent an effective co-operation towards a common aim. Social convention sometimes checked a too open discussion of what the aim was supposed to be but this did little, in practice, to hinder its achievement. It is generally easier to sense the general purpose than to trace the exact means by which it became the accepted policy. The



Map 1. A Map of the Malay Peninsula

connexion between the obvious intention and the desired result is often a little vague. It is reasonable, however, to assume that a connexion there must have been.

When we are told that the British were compelled to intervene in Malaya, after for so long refusing to do so, we must remember that a similar explanation must be found for other events in the same series. If it was a growing state of chaos in Perak which induced the British to interfere, we must suppose that comparable and unprecedented disorders dragged them into Penang, Malacca, Madras, Colombo, Aden, Cyprus, Malta, Gibraltar, Ireland, and Wales. Even were this curious coincidence to be established in every case, we should be left to wonder why this fervent love of order should have brought the flag to those particular places and not to others, like Albania, where British commercial interests were less obviously involved. There is a point beyond which mere coincidence cannot be made to go. It is true, nevertheless, that events seem genuinely accidental to those most nearly concerned in them. A governor exceeds his authority, there is some delay over reproving him, an unpopular decree coincides with a religious festival, a crowd is collected and excitement mounts, the troops are called out but the commandant is ill, a junior officer panics, a volley is fired, the innocent are killed, the situation becomes critical, more troops are sent for, and the whole territory is annexed. Were the story considered merely in isolation (as the local officer sees it) we should have to attribute much of it to accident. The order was ambiguous, the telegram lost, the expert on leave, and the great man sick. With only a small change in circumstance the whole course of events might have been different. This seems plausible until we look at the larger pattern again. Then we realize that accident merely decided the hour and place for the inevitable. On the larger map the sense of coincidence is lost. All we can see are the footprints of a steady and inexorable advance.

Once we have turned, however, from the local gossip to the world atlas we are at once in danger of making the opposite mistake. We see the great trade route, surveyed, charted, lighted, buoyed, and patrolled. We realize that it is flanked by naval bases, frequented by shipping lines, and safeguarded by diplomacy. We conclude that it must have been planned. From this reasonable conclusion we go on to picture a conclave of imperialist warmongers, huddled round a map and deciding what part of it should next be painted red. For a plan to succeed it must first be defined. But such a cartoon as this

is palpably false, for the plan must take generations to execute. There are no means by which one generation can bind the next. A plan, therefore, of large-scale maritime strategy can hardly extend beyond the individual's expectation of office. If the plan were merely his, it would die with him. And that, to infer from the results, is exactly what it has not done.

Apart, however, from the logic of the case, we know from both history and experience that no long-term imperialist plan has ever been made in Britain, not at least by those in a position to carry it out. That is not how things are done. The decision to advance or stand fast, made in the light of recent events, is influenced by many things apparently insignificant in themselves. A Colonial Office official is seen to lunch with his friend in the Foreign Office. A letter is written to *The Times*. A retired governor is invited somewhere for the week-end. Certain shares rise or fall. A banker is seen to look grave and an admiral shakes his head. The trend of opinion is suddenly obvious and the Cabinet decision is rarely opposed to it. In the long run it is the trend of opinion which decides the matter, or else it is the trend of events which decides the opinion. The general tendency matters more than governments or individual statesmen. It is by no means easy to oppose.

This book deals with the history of Malaya during a period in which such a trend is very apparent. It will be seen that secretaries of state and governors were powerless beyond a certain point. Instructions issued in accordance with the trend of the period were obeyed, exceeded, exaggerated, and praised. Instructions intended to reverse the trend were queried, shelved, misinterpreted, and forgotten. The people who mattered in the Straits Settlements were resolved to establish British influence over the Malay States, thus opening for themselves a new field for investment and trade. They readily found allies in England who would support their policy. They were consistently opposed by those who saw what their intention was—to conquer Malaya at the expense of the British taxpayer and keep all the profit to themselves. Their motives were repeatedly and bitterly exposed by their opponents. Nor were they consistently supported by the home government, even when that was led by as good an imperialist as Disraeli. But they had the tide under them, the flood-tide of British expansion, and there was little that anyone could do to stop it.

From a first glance at the evidence it would be natural, though

mistaken, to trace the whole movement to the Singapore Houses of Agency. But further study will reveal a closely knit system of which commerce formed only a part. Malayan waters were dominated by the Royal Navy, with warships in the Straits, gunboats in the estuaries, and launches penetrating the rivers and creeks. In studying the story of what actually took place, the reader will continually be aware of sea power. Whether in the foreground or background of events, the white ensign is always there. Almost as significant, moreover, at times, is the part played by the red ensign. Troops owed their mobility to the P. & O. and British India Lines and even the local tonnage was taken up when needed. Upon the mail steamships, moreover, depended the regular communication between Hong Kong and Singapore, between Singapore and Penang, between Penang and Colombo. Throughout the whole story of British intervention there is nothing more striking than the effective co-operation of officers and men in the different services, whether military or civilian. They were all soldiers in the last resort.

We find, therefore, on the British side an agreed policy of intervention. What resistance did this arouse? How did Malay patriotism react to this foreign threat? It is clear, first of all, that an effective resistance was almost impossible. Malays and Chinese alike lived on rivers, down which went their produce and up which came their food. The effect of a naval blockade was immediate and decisive. Even were there no actual starvation, food shortage would prevent the assembly of any considerable force in any one place. As a country, the Malay Peninsula proved extremely vulnerable to sea power. Its defenders could never concentrate an army of more than a very few hundred and even that would tend to disperse before anything had been achieved. Although this was not realized when our period began in 1867, it was widely known when the period ended ten years later. It was also known by then that the native inhabitants were divided against each other by race, by geographical barriers, and by mutual dislike. Any hostility there might be between Malays and Chinese was as nothing compared with the hostility revealed by the Chinese towards each other. Nor were the Malays very closely akin as between one district and the next. The aboriginal Malays, the Bugis, the Rawwas, the Mandelings, and Sumatrans were alike in little save religion. They did not readily combine.

Opposition from the Chinese was most unlikely even had they all belonged to the same province and the same secret society. The

resident Straits Chinese were on the British side and fervent in their demands for intervention. The immigrant miners intended only a brief stay in the tin-fields, few residing permanently enough to have any political views or ambitions. All they wanted was peace and order and this the British alone could supply at a reasonable price. As for the Malays, they were vaguely resentful but proved quite unmilitary in character. They had among them known killers, feared by the rest and of legendary prowess. But the Malay royalty had little tradition, it seemed, of personal leadership, and even minor chiefs often preferred to direct operations from a safe distance. Individuals and groups might show considerable courage, but the actual fighting seems often to have been unenterprising and static. Expenditure of ammunition was usually more a matter of noise than marksmanship, and casualties were few.

On the subject of Malay resistance, such as it was, two views have been expressed. It was thought by some at the time that the coincidence of disorders in Perak, Selangor, and the Negri Sembilan pointed to a conspiracy, a concerted movement against Western influence. Such a movement, it was believed, drew inspiration from the Achinese and might well spread to Pahang or even to Johore. Sir Peter Benson Maxwell, by contrast, a stern critic of imperial policy, asks whether there was any such conspiracy and replies in effect that there was not. The truth would seem to be that there was a general movement but that it did not amount to a conspiracy. The Malays lacked organization or even any effective means of contact. What they caught from each other was not a plan but a mood. There was a vague feeling of resentment among the chiefs, a similar reaction in each to the threat which was sensed by all. They lacked the knowledge of how to convert resentment into action. There was among them (as among the British) a trend of opinion but it was too feeble to delay, even momentarily, the general movement of the time.

The only force which might have held up the forward movement was the force of disease. Past invaders of Malaya may have been checked by the local mosquitoes and the British and Indian troops may be counted fortunate to have escaped (as they did) with quite a moderate sick list. Their relative immunity was due, it would seem, to their accidental avoidance of what is now considered the worst time of year. The Perak and Sungei Ujong Wars may be said to have begun on 3 November 1875. On 19-21 March the main body of troops re-embarked for India. Had they been operating on the flat

coastal plains, they would have encountered the local mosquitoes at their most active period in November-December. In fact, however, they pushed inland rapidly, moving through inhabited lands at some distance from the coast. These operations would bring them to the territory of *Anopheles maculatus*, the principal vector of malaria in the Malay Peninsula, in later years to be called 'the scourge of the rubber estates'.¹ But the activity of this vector is subject to seasonal variation, the number of mosquitoes reaching a peak at some time between February and June and causing a wave of malaria about a month later. Such waves have been commonly observed in April-May and sometimes again in September-October. If there is a close season it is November-March and that was exactly the period of the campaign. More recently, it was the exact period of the Japanese campaign in Malaya (6 December-15 February). This was purely accidental in both instances and the British of 1875-6 did not even recognize the mosquito as anything more than a nuisance. The malaria parasite was to be first identified by Laveran in 1880 and first traced to the mosquito by Ross in 1897. In the meanwhile, Major McNair feared only the 'miasma that rises from the ground', trusting to his mosquito net to exclude it. Had he but known, his net was even more valuable than his medical armoury, which comprised pyretic saline, chlorodyne, quinine, and brandy—not to mention Lea and Perrin's Worcester sauce, 'a splendid stomachic'.²

While the campaign was thus well timed from the medical point of view, this is not to say that mosquitoes would be wholly absent. It so happened, however, that the use of quinine (or cinchona bark), fashionable from 1633 to about 1804, 'forbidden by all authorities' from 1804 to 1840, had become orthodox practice again by about 1850.³ The result was that the troops of 1875 were liberally supplied with quinine, which remained the standard and effective treatment until about 1932. There can be no doubt that the health of the troops was largely due to the use of this drug, neglect of which was one cause of Penang's heavy mortality earlier in the nineteenth century.

For one cause and another, therefore, there was little resistance to the British, even from the mosquitoes. They were able to establish an effective control. In its political aspect this assertion of influence

¹ J. W. Field and others, *The Institute for Medical Research, 1900-1950*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, pp. 127-77.

² J. F. A. McNair, *Perak and the Malays*, London, 1878, p. 419.

³ Field, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

INTRODUCTION

was characterized by a contrast between the aims and the means. In general policy there was an altruistic element which, if it is over-estimated in books of the past, may well be overlooked in the books of the future. The colonial officials of Victorian days honestly desired to bring justice instead of misrule, prosperity instead of want, health instead of sickness, confidence instead of fear. Many of them were men of private means, demanding little in return. In their desire to abolish debt-slavery they were disinterested, enlightened, and kind. Nor would it be fair to conclude that the merchants were intent only on trade. They had more than economic reasons for desiring to see their customers at peace. As for the British Cabinet, its aims were never more lofty than in the age of Gladstone, Disraeli, and Queen Victoria.

If the aims were pure, the means were not. There were those who, in seeking to spread civilization, order, and law, did not hesitate to prevaricate, conceal, and confuse. In the story which follows it will be found that the British fighting men of this period were not much more honourable than the civilians of that age or any other. As against this, they were genuinely humane. Their opponents, when defeated or outmaneuvered, were treated with surprising generosity and more often pensioned than killed. By the standards of the twentieth century, the conduct of Victorian warfare was almost incredibly civilized. It left remarkably little bitterness among the protagonists and less still among the people at large. It was war as waged by gentlemen.

It should be emphasized, finally, that the Malayan patriot of the future who seeks to identify patriots of old Malaya will seek in vain among the characters of this story. Some of them were admirable in statesmanship, courage, and persistence, but Malaya as we know it did not exist. It remained for the British to invent it.

CHAPTER I

ON 3 April 1867 the Governor of the Straits Settlements was writing to the Secretary of State for the Colonies as follows:

My Lord

I have the honour to report that on the 1st instant I was sworn in as Governor and assumed the administration of the Straits Settlements.

The ceremony of reading the Charter and Governor's Commission and the taking the Oaths was performed in the presence of a very large assemblage containing almost every European in Singapore and a great number of Natives. All places of business were closed and by general consent the day was observed as a holiday. The Chinese inhabitants went to considerable expense in illuminating their part of the town and in giving a public display of fireworks and throughout the community there was evinced a desire to testify in the strongest manner their satisfaction with the change which has been effected.¹

Following an official termination the Governor signed his name: H. St. George Ord.

His term of office had begun, coinciding with the transfer of the Straits Settlements from the control of the Government of India to the direct control of the Crown through the Colonial Office. The fireworks which saluted this event were justified as marking the successful conclusion of an agitation which had begun in 1857 at the time of the Indian Mutiny. The story of this agitation has often been told and its causes analysed.² Mills has shown³ that its origins can be traced back to 1848 or earlier. But the Mutiny, itself discrediting the Indian Government, was accompanied by a rigid Press control which was automatically and pointlessly applied to the Straits and followed by a rumoured likelihood of the mutineers being deported to Singapore. Worse still was the possibility of these dangerous prisoners being accompanied by a Sepoy regiment to guard them—such warders being regarded as even less desirable than the prisoners themselves.

¹ Straits Settlements No. 3, 3 Apr. 1867.

² See Parliamentary Papers on the transfer of the Straits Settlements. See also *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, by C. B. Buckley, Singapore, 1902, vol. ii, pp. 754-80; and *British Malaya 1824-1867*, by L. A. Mills, Singapore, 1925, pp. 263-75.

³ Op. cit., p. 263.

This book tells in great detail the history of the crucial ten years (1867-1877) in the course of which Perak, Selangor and parts of Negri Sembilan were absorbed into the British Empire. It analyses the factors which led the British to intervene in the Malay Peninsula, and discusses the personalities of the men, both British and Malay, involved.

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PUSTAKA ILMU

