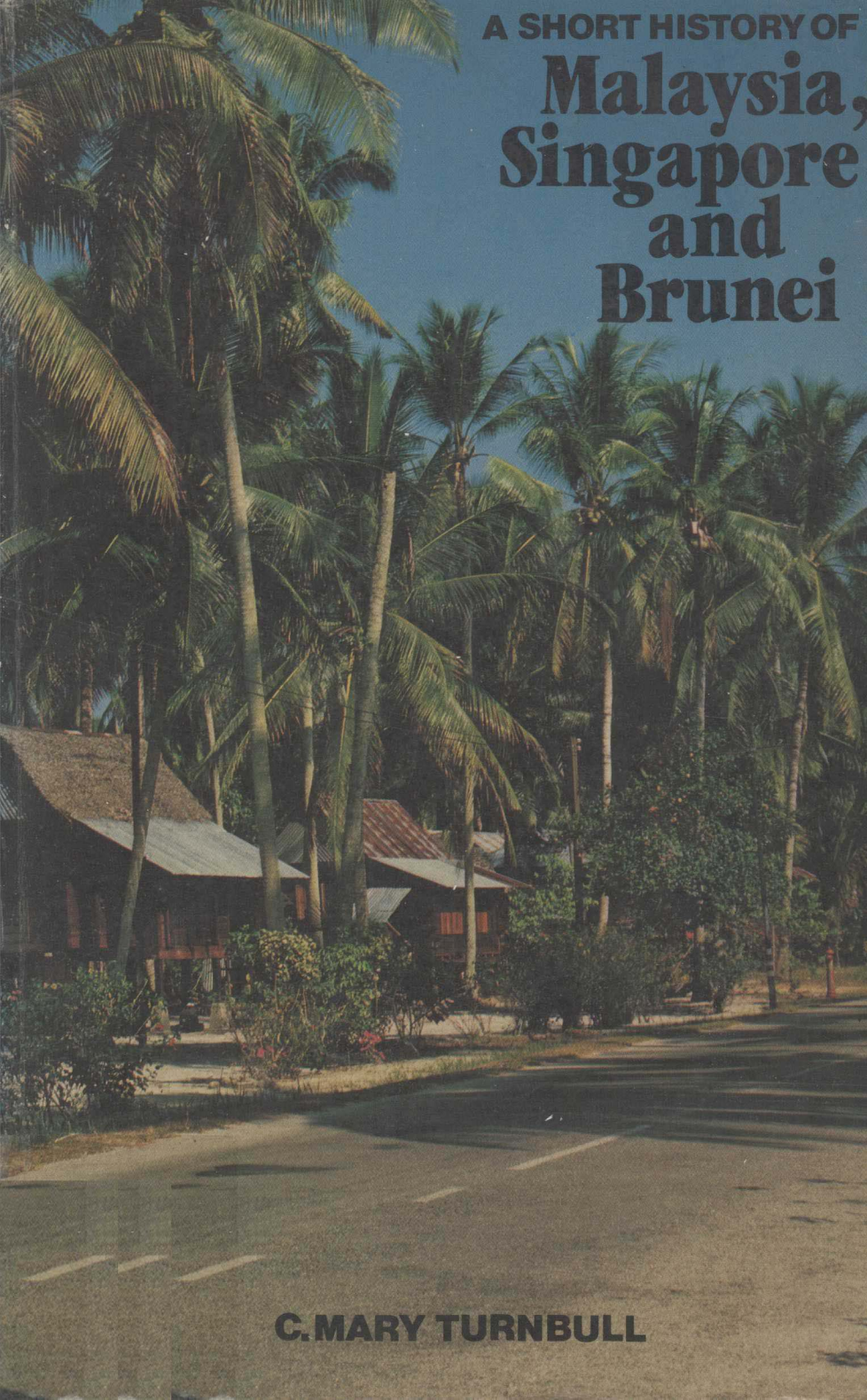

A SHORT HISTORY OF Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei

C. MARY TURNBULL

A Short History of MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE and BRUNEI

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Department of History, Monash University

For Susie and Penny

Foreword

Tradition persists into the present, and long-established patterns of ancient society are reflected in contemporary behaviour. In this book, therefore, 'modern' history is regarded in the context of the longer history of the country, and reference is made to early Asian trade and the rivalry of maritime and land-based kingdoms.

The history of Malaysia poses special problems. The national boundaries of modern Southeast Asia are a comparatively new creation. For the most part they are artificial products of European empires. But, though recent, they help to determine the way we look at the past, leading us to think in terms of a series of national histories — histories of Burma, Indonesia, Vietnam, Kampuchea. These national histories may serve to strengthen a sense of national identity in the countries of Southeast Asia, but they are nonetheless a distortion of the past. For the greater part of the history of Southeast Asian societies it would be more correct to think in terms, not of nations, with clear territorial claims, but rather of political centres, with power radiating out from a series of royal capitals — Pagan, Ayuthia, Angkor — or from smaller principalities, until in the nineteenth century external pressures re-shaped Southeast Asian politics and created new national frameworks. Malaysia may appear especially as an artificial creation. Only the accidents of British and Dutch empire determined that an international boundary should run through the Straits of Melaka, or that one part of the island of Borneo should be Indonesian territory and another part Malaysian territory.

This book sets the three countries studied in a long-term context. If history must have a utilitarian purpose, it is hoped that an emphasis on the more distant past will lead students to a more subtle and sympathetic understanding of the character of modern Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei.

J. D. Legge,
Monash University.

Author's Note

My connection with Southeast Asia began in 1952 when I was appointed to the Malayan Civil Service at a time when the Federation of Malaya was battling to overcome the Communist Emergency and at the same time striving for political independence from colonial rule. This kindled an interest in the country's past history and induced me in 1955 to return to academic life, where for nearly a quarter of a century I have been researching into the history of Malaysia and Singapore. The first sixteen of those years were spent teaching history at the Universities of Singapore and Malaya, where I was privileged to witness at first hand the dramatic events leading to the formation of Malaysia and the separation of Singapore to become an independent state.

I am grateful to the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, which made it possible for me to undertake research in Singapore and Malaysia during the long vacation in 1975 and to spend some time at the Public Record Office in London in the summer of 1976.

In acquiring and reproducing the illustrations I am indebted to the Arkib Negara Malaysia, the Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur, the Muzium Brunei, the Information Department of Sabah, and the National Portrait Gallery, London. I am particularly grateful for help given in collecting photographs to Tan Sri Datuk Mubin Sheppard, Hon. Secretary of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, and to Mr David McCredie, Curator of the Sabah Museum.

The maps were prepared by the Geography Department, University of Hong Kong, and I am grateful for their assistance.

Over the years I have benefited from the advice of people too numerous to mention here, but I owe a constant debt to my husband, Leonard Rayner, who has a longer experience of the region than my own. Dr Ron Hill kindly read the early sections of the book and made valuable suggestions.

As General Editor, Professor John Legge has been a source of sustained but gentle encouragement, and I am grateful for his patience and guidance which have seen the manuscript through a long period of gestation.

C. Mary Turnbull
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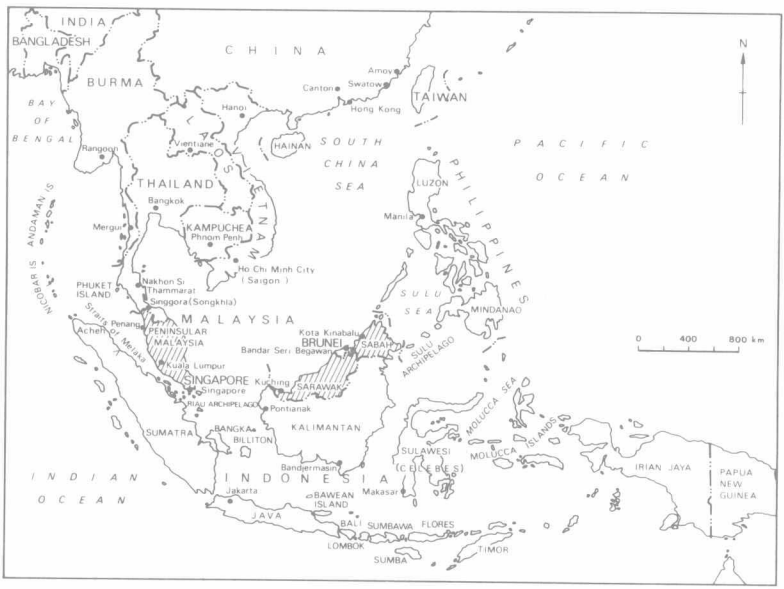

Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Present day Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are the successor states to the former British colonies and protectorates in Southeast Asia. The Malaysian federation is a constitutional kingdom, formed in 1963 and comprising eleven states in the Malay pensinsula, namely Penang, Melaka, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Trengganu and Johor, together with the two states of Sarawak and Sabah in northern Borneo. Singapore is a separate republic, which from 1963 to 1965 formed part of Malaysia, while Brunei remains a sultanate under British protection, but due to acquire independent sovereignty in 1983.

These distinct units emerged by historical accident rather than geographical or ethnic unity, since colonial rule cut across former links with parts of the Indonesian archipelago and with southern Thailand. At their closest points the Malay peninsula and the Borneo states are separated by 650 kilometres of the South China Sea, which represents more than a mere physical gulf and has meant major historical, cultural, social and economic differences. Yet, in some ways, the sea links more than it divides and the connections between these states transcend the temporary past subjection to British colonial rule and continued membership of the Commonwealth. While the Malay peninsula is physically part of mainland Southeast Asia, it is closer to maritime Southeast Asia in its climate, vegetation, ethnic and linguistic background, its social organization and economy.

The term 'Malaysia' acquired its current precise political connotation only in 1963. The word was apparently first coined in the 1830s and by the end of the nineteenth century was in general usage to describe a geographic-zoological-botanical region comprising the Malay peninsula, Singapore, Borneo, Sumatra and Java. In the twentieth century the term was sometimes employed to denote the indigenous people of the region, including some from the more easterly islands of the archipelago, and in 1937 Rupert Emerson used it to cover Malaya and the Netherlands Indies.[1]

Though small in size and in population, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are significant and complex in their heterogeneous racial composition, their long exposure to outside influences and cultures, and their place in the modern international economy.

The study of the region's history presents considerable difficulties. Little is known of the period before the fifteenth century when

geographical factors inhibited the growth of large centres of population. There are few stone inscriptions, a dearth of physical remains, and the climate did not favour the survival of tangible evidence, either in the form of buildings or written records. The oldest extant indigenous historical work, the *Sejarah Melayu,* or *Malay Annals,* dates at the earliest from the sixteenth century.

Historical evidence in more modern times is uneven and heavily weighted in favour of official and Western activities. A number of Malay histories described the glory of fifteenth century Melaka and the period of confused politics which followed. Of the immigrants who flooded into the Malay peninsula and to a lesser extent into Borneo in the British colonial period, the Europeans wrote prolifically of their experiences, the Chinese, Indians and Indonesians very little.

From the early twentieth century a small group of colonial scholar/administrators used some of the Malay texts to reconstruct the history of the individual Malay states, but most Western 'professional' historians, joined after the Second World War by increasing numbers of Western-trained local historians, tended at first to concentrate on official European activities in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, a time of dramatic and rapid change, supported by comprehensive authoritative documentation.

Since the creation of the Malaysian federation in 1963 and the independence of Singapore two years later, history writing has been in a state of flux. In Singapore energies were devoted to the present and future rather than looking at the past, particularly a past which was so closely associated with colonialism. In Malaysia the special difficulties in creating a sense of nationhood in a plural society, where the nationalist movement in peninsular Malaysia had been based so much on a sense of *Malay* nationalism, introduced an element of sensitivity into many broad historical issues.

A new generation of historians reacted against the over absorption of past studies with government activities and came to realize that many of the most significant historical developments took place outside of official circles. They paid more attention to neglected Malay sources, to local and oral history, and to the story of economic, agricultural and commercial processes. The result has been somewhat fragmented, but the disparate evidence from a variety of sources, together with studies in geography, anthropology and archaeology, are combining to change our views and understanding of the history of the region, to affect our understanding of the nature of its society and why it evolved in this particular way. There are still enormous gaps in our knowledge, but perhaps the time has come to pull up the history of the region and examine the roots.

.. Emerson, R. *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule*. Macmillian, New York, 1937; reprinted Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1964.

CHAPTER 1

Land and People

Land

Lying between latitudes 1° and 7° north of the equator, the Malay peninsula and northern Borneo enjoy a uniformly hot, wet climate. The southwest monsoon, prevailing from May to September, and the northeast monsoon, blowing from October to April, bring some seasonal differences in rainfall but little in temperatures, which are high but not excessive, rarely rising much above 33° Celsius by day and sometimes falling by as much as 11°C at night. Nearly everywhere rainfall exceeds 2000 mm a year, and there is no marked dry season, but some regional variation. Northern Borneo and the east coast of the peninsula receive their heaviest rainfall at the height of the northeast monsoon in November–December, but the west coast and interior of the peninsula are wettest in the transition inter-monsoon periods.

Some 40 per cent of peninsular Malaysia is rugged mountain terrain and nearly three-quarters of the country is more than 330 metres above sea level. The main range stretches from the Thai border to inland Melaka parallel with the west coast, a formidable barrier with many 1700 metre peaks. The northern part of the country comprises a complex mountain mass, covering much of Kelantan, Trengganu and north Pahang, not so high as the main mountain range but including Gunong Tahan, peninsular Malaysia's highest peak, which is over 2400 metres. The west coast plain stretches unbroken for 900 kilometres from Perlis to Singapore, reaching a maximum width of sixty kilometres in Perak. East coast plains are narrow and not continuous, but the southern portion of the peninsula consists of low undulating hills and plains.

Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei are separated from Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) by a mountain divide, which reaches its peak in Mount Kinabalu in Sabah, at 4500 metres, the highest mountain in Southeast Asia outside of West Irian. While most of Sarawak consists of lowlying plain, Sabah is more mountainous, with a very narrow western coastal strip and disconnected if larger plains in the north and east.

People

Of Malaysia's 350 000 square kilometres of territory, east Malaysia, comprising some 200 000 square kilometres, forms the largest part but

carries a minority of the population. According to the last census taken in 1970 nearly 9 000 000 of Malaysia's ten-and-a-half million people lived in the peninsula, mainly in the west coast states, compared with a little under a million in Sarawak and 650 000 in Sabah. These proportions remain today, although the total Malaysian population has probably risen to about twelve million. More than two million people are concentrated on the 560 square kilometres of Singapore island, whereas Brunei with a land area ten times as great supports only 145 000 inhabitants.

The region is one of longstanding and widespread migration and immigration, which have produced a very mixed population. Apart from small minorities of Chinese, Indian and Arab traders, up to the early-nineteenth century most settlers were of Malayo-Polynesian stock. But in the period from the mid-nineteenth century until the Second World War the composition of the population changed dramatically, with a flood of immigrants from China, the Indian sub-continent and Ceylon, most of whom came to work in the tin mines or on the gambier, pepper, sugar, coffee and rubber plantations. While most intended to remain only a few years before returning to their homelands, many put down permanent roots in the Malay peninsula and northern Borneo, but they continued to remain distinct from the Malays and other peoples indigenous to the peninsula and the archipelago, the *bumiputras* of post-independence times.

Of the oldest indigenous groups, about 35 000 Negrito-Semang, Senoi-Temiar, Semai and Jakun aborigines remain in peninsular Malaya, and a few hundred Punan aborigines in Sarawak. Apart from those Jakuns who live in proximity with Malay peasants and have adopted a sedentary farming life, the aborigines keep to the forests of the main peninsular range and the far interior of Sarawak outside of the mainstream of modern life.

In peninsular Malaysia and Brunei the largest community are the Malays. But they constitute little more than half of the population of the peninsular states, and elsewhere Malays are in a minority, making up only 19 per cent of the inhabitants in Sarawak, 15 per cent in Singapore and less than 3 per cent in Sabah. The Malays are of mixed ethnic background, some having lived in the peninsula and on the northern Borneo coast for more than a millennium, others migrating in more recent times from Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi and other Indonesian islands, but they have adopted the Malay language, have assimilated to similar customs and subscribe to the Muslim faith.

The indigenous peoples of the northern Borneo territories belong to a diversity of linguistic, cultural and ethnic groups. In Sarawak the Sea Dyaks, or Ibans, and Land Dyaks together form the largest community, comprising nearly 40 per cent of the inhabitants, and in Sabah the big-

gest group are the Kadazans or Dusuns, who make up 28 per cent of the population. There are a number of other indigenous communities: coastal people such as the Bajau of Sabah, or the Kedayans, to be found in all three territories but mainly in Brunei; inland people such as the Kelabit and Murut, mainly of Sabah, or the Kenyah and Kayan of Sarawak; or the more widely dispersed Melanau of Sarawak and Bisaya of Sabah and Brunei.

The Chinese make up nearly four-fifths of Singapore's population and are the second largest community in all the other territories: 35 per cent in peninsular Malaysia, 30 per cent in Sarawak, 26 per cent in Brunei and 21 per cent in Sabah, with the greatest concentration in the former Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Melaka and in the west coast peninsular states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Johor. The majority hailed originally from the southern Chinese provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien but belong to different dialect groups: Hokkiens, who predominate in Singapore, Melaka and Penang; Hakkas, who are the largest group in the Borneo territories and the tin mining and agricultural districts of peninsular Malaysia; Teochews, Cantonese and Hainanese.

The Indian minority is settled mainly in Singapore and the west coast Malay states, forming 11 per cent of the population of peninsular Malaysia and 7 per cent of Singaporeans. Pakistanis and Ceylonese are included in the 'Indian' community, which is very mixed. The majority come from south India and speak Tamil, Telugu or Malayalam, with an important minority of northerners made up of Gujaratis, Punjabis and Bengalis.

Much less numerous are the Eurasian population, chiefly living in the former Straits Settlements and tracing their European blood to Portuguese, Dutch and British ancestors; Arabs and Middle Eastern Jews, tiny but significant minorities based mainly in Singapore; Siamese in the northern Malay states; Filipinos in Sabah; and more widely scattered Indonesians.

The peoples of these territories are mixed not only in ethnic and linguistic origin but in customs and religion. The Malays, Arabs, some south Indians, Pakistanis and coastal Borneo people, such as the Bajau and Kedayans, are Muslims. Most Indians and Ceylonese are Hindus. Many Chinese are Buddhists or Taoists, while the Eurasians and many long settled Chinese and Indians hold the Christian faith. Most of the indigenous peoples of Borneo are animists, and Islam has only made headway in the interior in very recent years.

Chinese predominate in nearly all the larger towns in the Malay peninsula and northern Borneo, whereas the bulk of the Malay and indigenous Borneo people live in rural areas. A fair proportion of Indians are urban dwellers but many live on rubber plantations.