MALAYA'S FIRST BRITISH PIONEER

THE LIFE OF FRANCIS LIGHT

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(Formerly Unofficial Member of the Federal Council of the Federated Malay States)

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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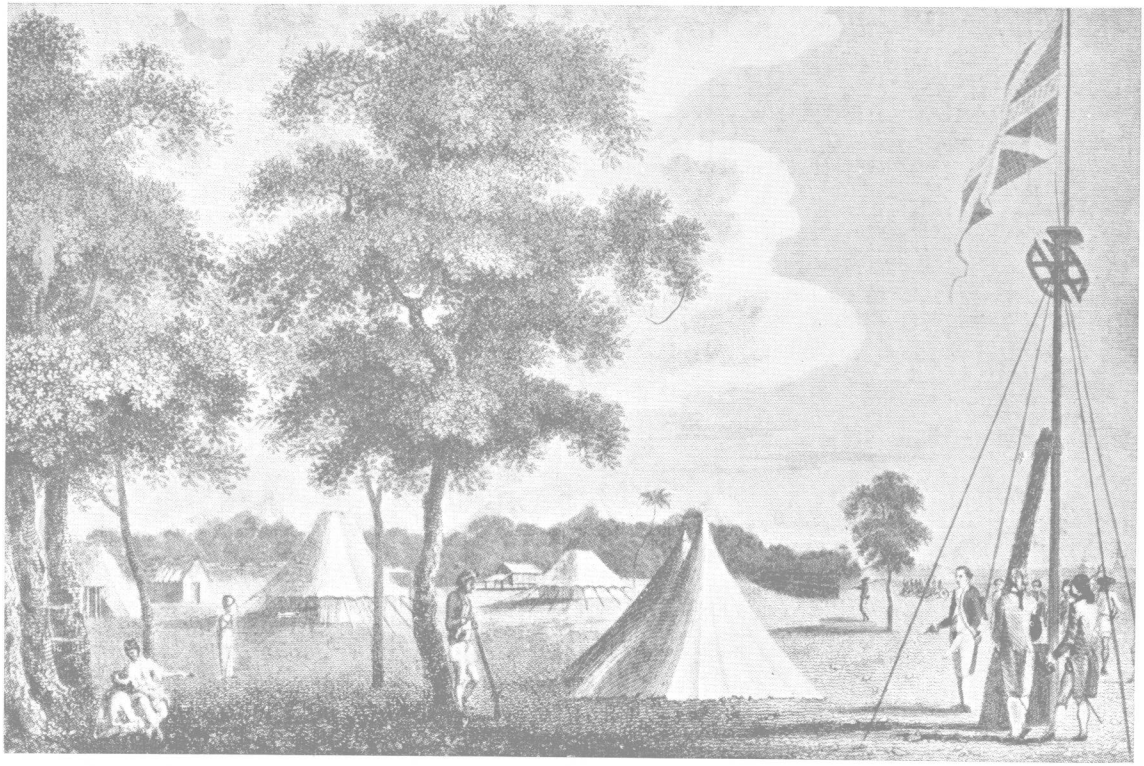

CAPTAIN LIGHT (AT THE FLAGSTAFF) PROCLAIMING THE INSTRUCTIONS OF THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL

PREFACE

MALAYA is one of the most striking examples of the administrative genius of the British people in moulding and bringing a region where anarchy and rapine had prevailed for centuries to conditions of peace and prosperity. Of the two pioneers of this great work the name of one only, Stamford Raffles, is at all familiar; that of the other, Francis Light, is almost unknown.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Holland had succeeded in acquiring control of the commerce of the whole of the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. In due time the rest of these rich lands would inevitably have fallen under its sway had not Francis Light secured, in 1786, the island of Penang for the East India Company. This bold act not only barred the way to further Dutch enterprise, but it created the spear-head against the gradual spread of Dutch influence. And it gave Stamford Raffles the opportunity, which his enterprise and foresight seized, to secure in 1819 the island of Singapore, which led to the subsequent extension of British influence throughout the Peninsula. But had Light not taken the first step, the Straits Settlements would never have existed, nor the Malay States have come under British protection.

The memory of Francis Light has not been kept altogether green and his remarkable personality stands in need of fuller appreciation than it has hitherto received from historians of Malaya. The only account of his life in book form is a useful but brief sketch by Mr. A. Francis Steuart, entitled *The Founders of Penang and Adelaide*, published in 1901. *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago* contains, however, a quantity of useful data, particularly in the series *Notices of Penang*, edited by the erudite J. R. Logan; these appeared during the first half of the nineteenth century, and provide many details of the earlier history of Light's Settlement. The Malayan

Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society published in 1925 a valuable and penetrating treatise by Mr. L. A. Mills entitled *British Malaya*, 1824-1867, which contains a tribute to the achievement of Francis Light. In addition, there have also appeared under the ægis of the Society the following articles: in 1894, *A Memoir of Captain Francis Light*, by Mr. A. M. Skinner, C.M.G., published on the occasion of the centenary of his death; in 1923, *Early Days in Penang*, by the Rev. Keppel Garnier; in 1929, *A Contribution to the Early History of Penang*, by Mr. F. G. Stevens; and in 1935, *The History of Malaya*, by Sir Richard Winstedt, K.B.E., C.M.G., F.B.A., D.Litt.(Oxon).

Sir Frank Swettenham in *British Malaya* (London, 1906) and Messrs. A. Wright and T. H. Reid in *The Malaya Peninsula* (London, 1912) have devoted space to the story of the acquisition of Penang; the latter work containing a full account of Francis Light's first attempt, in 1771, to secure the island.

I have made a careful study of the official documents and correspondence in the India Record Office bearing upon the events of the period. Where possible, I have given Light's story in his own words, a method which I think ensures a more literal accuracy and does greater justice to the man than could be accomplished by paraphrase. It has been my endeavour to formulate a connected and detailed story of the almost insurmountable difficulties which his dauntless spirit eventually overcame before illness and anxiety drove him to a premature grave.

My grateful thanks are due to Mr. A. Francis Steuart for various material details of the Light family; to the late Mr. Robert Young, who spent many years in Penang and was a keen student of its early history; to the late Mr. V. B. Redstone, F.R.Hist.S., F.S.A., for information regarding Light's early life in Woodbridge; to Miss M. I. Redstone and Mrs. Carthew respectively for permission to reproduce the painting of the old Quay and the original Grammar School building at Woodbridge; to the Woodbridge Library for allowing a

photograph to be taken of the pane of glass with J. Lynn's and Francis Light's signatures; to Mr. G. Cornwallis-West for leave to make excerpts from his series of articles entitled the "Private Papers of Admiral Cornwallis" in the *Daily Telegraph*; to the Malayan Information Agency for access to their Library; to the Librarian of the India Office for perusal of its "Records"; to Dr. C. O. Blagden for much help and advice; and to the Editor of the *Penang Gazette* for details of the statue to Francis Light.

The account of the naval engagement related in Chapter X has been compiled mainly from the Log-books of the British ships in the Public Record Office.

Finally, I am especially grateful to Sir Richard Winstedt for scrutinizing my MS., and for his ungrudging help, with many valuable suggestions which I have incorporated in the text.

H. P. C.

FOREWORD

In most colonies Francis Light would long ago have received the tribute of a biography: in Malaya he has been overshadowed by the figure of Raffles, the founder of Singapore. This book is the first adequate study of his career and of his work as the founder and original administrator of the island of Penang. But it is more than that. For it is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of European commercial rivalries in Malayan waters. In particular its contents provide a most interesting chapter in the history of the East India Company and of the effort of traders to develop the art of colonial government. That chapter throws light on our political relations with Malay rulers, to which recent events have made of topical interest. In the eighteenth (as in the two following centuries) those relations were rendered needlessly difficult by "persons ignorant of the manners and customs of the country." With such ignorance no one could charge Francis Light. For though he lacked the scholarly tastes of Stamford Raffles, he spoke Siamese as well as Malay and it is doubtful if even the founder of Singapore was more expert in the ways of Eastern trade and diplomacy. Those ways so often denounced as tortuous have been in fact no more so than the ways of the East India Company or Whitehall. Was Light himself disingenuous in the representations he made to induce the Sultan of Kedah to cede Penang to the British? The question has been often debated. But the evidence here set forth shows Light not dishonest but too sanguine and single-minded to take thought for the possibility of London holding different views from those of the man on the spot. London's attitude in the time of Light was based on an altruism too temporary, accidental and premature to withstand the temptation of Victorian imperialism: it was Kedah's misfortune that this passing altruism cost her twenty years

of misery and warfare. History is largely a record of fallibility and vacillation.

What makes these pages fascinating is that depicting the absorption of a determined leader of men in a great task, regardless of encouragement, health and fortune, they contrive to clothe the bones of history with the flesh and blood of human interest. Although in actual fact nothing is known of the superficial characteristics of his person, here is the real Francis Light.

RICHARD WINSTEDT.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

Plans for a Settlement in Malaya

DURING the latter half of the eighteenth century a marked expansion occurred in commerce carried on by the East India Company with Canton, in South China, where it had succeeded in obtaining a practical monopoly of the silk trade. But voyages of the vessels engaged in the trade were seriously hampered by the lack of any re-fitting station under English control between India and China. Malacca and Batavia, the two most conveniently situated ports, were in Dutch hands, and, apart from the aversion which our seamen felt from being forced to use foreign ports, the charges imposed were ruinously high. The Directors of the Company therefore decided at this period that a good and convenient harbour must be secured for the "succour and support of their ships engaged in the China trade." But this was not the sole motive; the Company had long hoped to recover a share, at least, of its once flourishing spice trade, from which it had been driven out by the Dutch. And there was a third consideration, that of naval strategy. Finally, and by no means least, there was the desire to stem the growing power of the Dutch in the Malay Peninsula.

The movements of ships in eastern seas in the days of sail were so completely at the mercy of the monsoons or trade-winds that to apprehend clearly the main reason prompting the policy of the East India Company to secure a suitable harbour, it is necessary to realize how their ships' voyages were affected by the incidence of the monsoons. During the south-west monsoon—which sets in about April or May and lasts until August or September—the ships could remain safely in the Bay of Bengal, and any necessary repairs could be under-taken on the sheltered Coromandel coast. With the change

to the north-east monsoon—which occurs about November and is generally accompanied by violent storms—it was dangerous for ships to remain off the coast of India. They were forced therefore to seek more sheltered waters, and as the Company possessed no harbour on the western coast of the Malay Peninsula—which affords ideal protection from the north-east monsoon—their vessels were compelled to sail round to Bombay, involving long voyages, protracted delays and great expense. Frequently, however, men-of-war, disabled in action in the Bay of Bengal, could not reach Bombay and had instead to limp eastwards to Acheen (Acheh) in Sumatra, or the Straits of Malacca, and, putting in at some Malay port, where no facilities existed for repairs to big ships, bide their time while their crews did what was possible to refit the vessels.

The first definite step by the Company to acquire the much needed base occurred in 1763 when the Madras Council sent a Mr. Kinloch to Acheen to endeavour to persuade the Sultan of that independent kingdom to permit the establishment of an English Settlement. This mission failed. Then Captain Forrest, who appears to have held a roving commission from the Company and had landed at Acheen in 1762, visited it again two years later, but he also received short shrift from the Sultan, who, to quote the disappointed Forrest, was no exception to the " cruel and offensive tyrants " who had always ruled this warlike kingdom.[1] In 1766, Forrest travelled southward to the Straits of Sunda, but found no suitable harbour.

Nor was the attitude of the Company's officials at Bencoolen helpful to these projects. In a despatch dated the 17th January, 1770, the Governor of that settlement expressed strong disapproval of the idea of founding a station in the Straits of Malacca: " Whatever advantages may be derived from a settlement on the east side of the island (Sumatra) it must be so remote from here by the length and difficulty of the navigation as to be an improper situation for a head

[1] *A Voyage from Calcutta to the Mergui Archipelago*; London, 1792. Accompanying the account of the visits to Acheen is an engraving, on page 60, of the " King of Acheen giving audience to Captain Forrest in 1764."

settlement on this coast. Jamby, which is opposite to Moco-Moco, our most northerly pepper settlement, and all to the southward of Jamby, on the east side are the Dutch in possession of." Fear of their Dutch rivals was well implanted in the minds of the Bencoolen (Bengkulen) officials.

A year later, the Directors of the East India Company in London renewed instructions to the Madras Council to try once again to secure a settlement in or near the Straits of Malacca. It was even suggested that another attempt might be made to obtain a concession at Acheen.

While the letter containing these instructions was still on the high seas Captain Francis Light, who had established a trading station in the State of Kedah, outlined a project which eventually solved the problem that had baffled the efforts of so many others.

CHAPTER II

Francis Light's Project

THE exact date of the birth of Francis Light is unknown, but his baptism is recorded on the 15th December, 1740, in the Register of the parish church of Dallinghoo, a village near the ancient town of Woodbridge, at the head of the river Deben's estuary, in the county of Suffolk; his mother was Mary Light and his father William Negus, of Melton, near Woodbridge; an elder son of the same parentage had died in infancy. Negus was a large landowner in Suffolk, son of Colonel Francis Negus of the Foot Guards, Avener and Master of the Buckhounds to King George the First, as well as being Commissioner for the Office of Master of the Horse and member of Parliament for Ipswich. Colonel Negus had acquired large estates at Dallinghoo and Melton through his marriage with Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of William Churchill, M.P. for Woodbridge and patent printer to the King. The records of Dallinghoo in the Davy MSS. in the British Museum contain numerous particulars of the Negus family, but there is no mention of the Light family. In all probability his unmarried mother, Mary Light, was of humble origin.

William Negus provided his son with a good education at Seckford's Grammar School at Woodbridge, where he had as companions the sons of other Suffolk squires; in those free living times no stigma attached to illegitimate children. No records are extant of the boy's capabilities as a scholar, but an intimate and very human personal relic has survived in the form of two roughly scratched signatures of " F. Light "

and " James Lynn " on a pane of glass in a mullioned window of the old school building.[1]

Until the advent of steam in the early nineteenth century Woodbridge, in common with most towns situated on estuaries, was a busy port. The picturesque brigs and hoys sailed regularly up the Deben with coal and other commodities, taking away agricultural products from the local mills. Ship-building on a considerable scale was carried on, even two men-of-war being constructed.

Watching the busy scenes and mingling with the mariners doubtless aroused young Light's latent spirit of adventure, and this in the years to come was to fructify in his subsequent career of high enterprise in the distant East.

So Light entered the Navy in 1759 as a midshipman in H.M.S. *Captain*. After a few months he was transferred to H.M.S. *Dragon*, where he was rated on the ship's Muster as an A.B. On changing over to H.M.S. *Arrogant* in 1761, he appears once more as a midshipman.[2]

Among Light's shipmates on the *Arrogant* was James Scott,[3] with whom he became closely associated in his career in the East. The *Arrogant* was one of many ships engaged in convoy duties between Portsmouth and Gibraltar, for the French were heavily preying on our commerce and contesting the maritime supremacy we had attained at this period. With the conclusion of peace in 1763 the *Arrogant* was paid-off, and Francis Light, in common with a large number of young officers, found himself unemployed. Brief as had been his naval service, he had evidently earned a share of prize money, for on the point of sailing for India two years later he made a

[1] This relic was fortuitously discovered. Scratchings had been observed on the window panes, but no particular attention had been directed to them. Some years ago closer scrutiny revealed that the markings represented lettering upside down; the position of the pane had been reversed at some period with the result that the scrawled characters had been rendered illegible to casual notice. The panel has now been framed and removed to the Seckford Public Library. A tablet to the memory of James Lynn, who remained Light's steadfast friend in after life, is in St. Mary's, Woodbridge Parish Church.

[2] Details extracted from the Admiralty Musters in the Public Record Office.

[3] A second cousin, once removed, of Sir Walter Scott; his father was a brother of Sir Walter Scott's grandfather.

will " for avoiding controversy after my death " whereby he bequeathed to his father considerable property detailed as " wages sum and sums of money, lands, tenements, goods, chattels and estate whatsoever," as well as legacies to relatives and friends.

We do not know how Light spent the next year or two, but before long the call of the sea once again impelled him to seek adventure afloat. So we find him in January, 1765, embarking at Blackwall in the East India Company's ship *Clive*, John Allen, commander, bound for Madras and Bombay. Light was logged on the list of passengers as a 'Volunteer,' the custom of the Company precluding persons from going to India unless they could show a probability of employment after arrival. The *Clive* was hove-to in the Downs for three months awaiting a favourable wind. Light's will, mentioned above, bears the date of 9th April; presumably, therefore, part of his enforced leisure was spent in drafting this document.

Shortly after reaching India, Light secured command of a Country ship (a vessel owned in India and engaged in trade in eastern waters) belonging to the Madras firm of merchants, Jourdain, Sulivan[4] and De Souza, who, on behalf of an association of traders, were contemplating the creation of agencies at Acheen and Kedah. Light was sent first to Acheen in the capacity of joint agent with a Mr. Harrop. Shortly after their arrival, an emissary from the Sultan of Kedah came in the person of a Nyonya (Malay for a married Chinese or Eurasian woman) who brought an offer of a trading station in Kedah, on the understanding that a force of Sepoys should be provided to assist the Sultan in repelling attacks on his kingdom. (The employment of a woman on this mission was a very unusual circumstance, as women are generally kept in the background where Muhammadans are concerned, and this prompted certain contemporary writers to invest the incident with an element of romance. But the question of the lady in the case must be reserved for a later chapter.) The offer induced Light to proceed to Kedah, where, by the exercise of resource and

[4] Laurence Sulivan subsequently became Deputy Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company.

tact, he quickly attained an influential position with the Sultan and his ministers; a contemporary writer recorded that the Sultan conferred a title of nobility—Dewa Raja—upon Light, who "was held in the highest esteem by the native chiefs."[5]

As the outcome of his negotiations, Light received the definite offer of a concession which he reported to his Madras employers on the 18th August, 1771, in the following terms: "I have the pleasure to inform you that the King of Quedah (Kedah) has granted to you the Qualla (Kuala = estuary) or seaport of Quedah with a fort lying near it to be kept by you in consideration that you will promise to assist him against the people of Salengore.[6] The force it will be necessary to maintain for this service and the expenses of the Factory the King proposes should be divided equally between you and him and that the trade be carried on, on your joint account.

"I must beg leave to acquaint you, gentlemen, that if you do not take advantage of this offer it will be given to the Dutch, and I refer to your consideration whether this port may not exclude the English entirely from trading in the Streights.

"The harbour of Quedah has four fathoms and no bar and may be improved to great advantage to the Company in case of war. In December I will send you a plan of it and inform you of every other particular which the hurry of business now prevents my laying before you."

The stress laid by Light upon the danger of the Dutch securing this valuable concession was significant. It showed that here was practically our last opportunity to prevent the whole of the Straits of Malacca from succumbing to their domination. At about the same time Light wrote also to Warren Hastings[7] and recommended Penang as a "convenient magazine for the Eastern trade."

Important as were these proposals, earlier writers on Malayan

[5] *Journal of an Embassy to Siam*, by John Crawfurd; London, 1828.

[6] Salengore (Selangor) is a Malay State situated to the south of Kedah, on the west coast of the Peninsula.

[7] Hastings was then a member of the Madras Council. He became Governor of Bengal in 1772.