A Short History of Malaya

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BACKGROUND

Malaya is the southernmost extension of Asia, the tip of land to be rounded by the voyager between India and China, the unavoidable coastline. It is, strictly speaking, only the west coast that is unavoidable. For half the year the seaman need not approach the east; for the other half he cannot. It is during the northeast monsoon that the bars on the eastward-flowing rivers are virtually impassable and the whole east coast a lee shore. As a result, the sailing vessel from China has usually bowled in before the monsoon, dropping anchor only after finding shelter, either in the Singapore Straits or up the Straits of Malacca. The trade even of eastern Malaya has tended to pass through the western ports. These ports, five in number, front on one of the great sea highways of the world. It is narrower in practice than it looks on the map, the sandbanks hemming it into a narrow channel opposite Malacca and a channel narrower still opposite Selangor. This highway is all but inevitable as the route between India and China; only to be circumvented by a long detour, an overland journey or a transhipment at the Isthmus of Kra or Mergui. It is also the highway between China and Europe, provided only that the trade goes via the Red Sea or Persian Gulf. Should the trade be diverted to the route round the Cape, the European trade will pass the Straits of Sunda and so come nowhere near the Malayan coast. This has happened more than once and could easily happen again. Even when it does, the Straits of Malacca retain a certain importance. They are worth controlling.

The obvious place from which to control the trade-route is Malaya itself, for it is the Malayan shore which the seaman will tend to hug, partly because of navigational difficulties and partly

because that is the shortest way. Two areas suggest themselves, one in the Straits of Singapore as the place where the local trade from the Malay Archipelago will come to meet the ocean trade where it comes farthest to the south; the other in the Straits of Malacca at its narrowest, where there is no alternative route at all. The former area loses much of its value if the European trade goes by the Straits of Sunda, for it is then no longer the nearest point to the spice islands at which the long-distance trade must call.

Malaya occupies, then, a strategic position of some value, with interest tending to centre on Johore, on Selangor, or sometimes on the Kra Isthmus. Judged merely from the atlas, Malaya might seem a land of destiny, a centre for empires and a site for warring dynasties. Seen at closer range, Malaya seems less promising. It is a land of jungle-covered hills, intersected by muddy winding rivers and fringed by mangrove swamps. When the jungle is felled, it reveals so poor a soil that erosion is apt to begin before anything can be planted. Over vast stretches of the land, trees remain the only possible crop. Flat arable land is the exception but occurs in various places, notably in Kedah which has a different landscape altogether. But the poorness of the soil is only one disadvantage. Another is sickness. Malaya has been defended, in general, by mosquitoes; for long noticed as a nuisance but more recently known to be a danger. Possible intruders have always had a dread of 'pestilent swamps' and even perhaps a dim realisation that virgin jungle is, from the point of view of sickness, less dangerous. But actual intruders discovered at an early date that felling the jungle may bring on the sickness more usually associated with the swamp. While not suspecting the mosquito, they knew that the sickness was there.

Lack of agricultural produce and the presence of malaria has not left Malaya unpeopled but it has always limited the population to those with some special reason for being there. As various peoples have moved into or from the Malay Archipelago stray groups have remained in Malaya. These vary from the 'aboriginal' tribes to all those different peoples now defined as 'Malay'. This word is used to describe any Muslim who is not manifestly Indian or Chinese and the Malays comprise, in fact, a range of ethnic groups ranging from semi-aboriginal peoples in the Negri Sembilan to the seafaring Bugis of Selangor.

The aborigines proper are food-gathering people and jungle-dwellers. The Malays, by contrast, form small communities along the rivers or on the coast. Malaya offers a pleasant life to people whose wants are few. With fish and game, bananas, coconuts and a little rice, there is no call for excessive labour. Besides, Malaya lies between one and six degrees from the Equator. This makes it a hot country, although (to be fair) not nearly as hot as many places in a higher latitude. Hard manual labour can be done in Malaya but it is not an activity for which the country seems ideally designed. Many people regard Malaya as better suited for leisurely gossip, study of the scenery or philosophic contemplation. Even piracy, which was formerly common, is essentially a lazy man's trade.

Whatever the character, however, of the inhabitants of Malaya, there have never been many of them. Even with considerable immigration from China and India, the population is quite small even today. The idea of any past or present Malayan Nation using the strategic position of the land to establish a world power or empire has been negatived almost throughout history by this lack of numbers. There are not, there never have been, enough people in Malaya to achieve a lasting political supremacy in the area which the peninsula seems to dominate. For only one fleeting period was any such supremacy asserted. Normally, Malaya has been virtually controlled by external influence, based on the nearest areas capable of supporting a considerable population. There has also been a tendency for it to fall into two spheres of influence, the one generally centred on Johore, the other on the Isthmus of Kra; the southern area controlled from Sumatra, Java or India; the northern area controlled from Siam. A completely independent Malaya, with a population comparable to the present, could only be the result of a nice balance of influence between adjacent and stronger powers; too nice a balance, perhaps, to last for long.

There has been little real warfare in Malaya, mainly perhaps because the sources of its tin and gold (possible objects for an invader) are too inaccessible to be worth the trouble. This has not prevented intermittent strife between local kingdoms. But lack of communications other than by water has limited the size of each kingdom to a single river system and the same lack of communications has limited the scope of each in attacking any other. Campaigns on any large scale have tended to dwindle away through malaria, dysentery, malnutrition and boredom.

Naval campaigns would seem to have been rather more feasible but Malaya has never had the material resources of sea-power, whether in timber, sailcloth, cordage or iron. Canoes have always been plentiful but ships have usually come from somewhere else.

Boat design, moreover, has been influenced by geographical factors, for while the coast of Malaya offers the shelter of its rivers, these are protected, almost without exception, by shallow bars of sand or mud, impassable to vessels of any size and shifting annually to the confusion of anyone not actually resident on the spot. Small shallow-draught vessels have therefore been the rule in Malay waters, with a decided preference being shown for those that can be paddled when the wind drops — as it usually does when most required.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CAPE ROUTE OPENS

It used to be held that the earliest local civilisation was that of Langkasuka, in Kedah. Some now deny, however, that Langkasuka was in Malaya at all. The truth may well be unearthed more by the spade than by the pen. From records we learn more of a Malaya mostly dominated by the successive empires of Srivijaya and Majapahit, centred respectively on Sumatra and Java. The latter empire rose in the 14th century A.D., by which period northern Malaya was already under Thai control. The Chinese had, meanwhile, established their sea-power over an area extending down to Borneo.

Malacca, the first Malay Kingdom of which we have any considerable knowledge, was a dependency of Thailand but sought in 1403-11, to form an alliance, on tributary terms, with China. Encouraged by the Chinese, the kings of Malacca renounced their allegiance to Thailand and extended their control over adjacent river kingdoms and notably Pahang, the source of the gold. Converts to Islam, probably in the 14th century, the rulers of Malacca now spread Muslim doctrines throughout the peninsula. By 1450, Malacca was a Muslim power based on a town and harbour and of sufficient importance to give its name to the Straits and even to the Peninsula. It flourished in a political vacuum caused by the simultaneous decline of Majapahit and Thailand. It was probably itself declining by the time the Portuguese first heard of it.

It was during the decline of the Malay kingdom, after 1511, that Raja Bongsu wrote that history which people have since named the Malay Annals. It was written less as a history than as a genealogy and guide to court etiquette. It remains, nevertheless, a principal authority for the Malay period and one

which we cannot ignore. Even if we treat with caution a work which begins with an account of how Raja Iskandar, the Two-Horned, son of Raja Darab, a Roman of the country of Macedonia, invaded India, we must admit that even such a prologue contains a measure of truth. Alexander of Macedon might have queried the details but he could not have denied the whole story. In the same way, the so-called Annals contain much that is true about Malaya itself, mixed as it may be with much that is improbable or obscure. About the kingdom of Malacca the facts rightly emphasised are its close connection with Pahang, its diplomatic and commercial relations with China and its recurring friction with Siam.

We learn thus from the words of Raja Bongsu that Mansur Shah sent an army round by sea to drive the Siamese out of Pahang; a State which was then made subject to Malacca and placed, indeed, under the rule of one of Mansur Shah's sons. Even under the weaker rule of Mahmud Shah the Pahang ruler was still installed by an envoy from Malacca, and when Pahang was again threatened by Siam and Ligor, it was Malacca again which came to the rescue. One can hardly resist the conclusion that Pahang was a principal source of the gold for which Malaya was once famous, and that Malacca was (for at least half the year) the port from which the gold was finally shipped. There is consistent evidence of a policy to keep the Siamese out of Pahang, Perak and Selangor; and some at least of the fighting took place in Ulu Muar. That one overland route into Pahang followed the Muar River is tolerably certain and the accounts of fighting there are at least consistent with the theory that Ulu Pahang was the prize for which the armies fought. It is also perhaps significant that Sultan Ahmad, after the fall of Malacca, withdrew to Ulu Muar and so into Pahang. We might reasonably regard Malacca as the terminus (for practical purposes) of the two main land routes across the peninsula. It is clear, nevertheless, that the sea route via the Straits of Singapore was also in use except during the north-east monsoon. There is evidence indeed of considerable activity at sea and of a superiority established by the Malacca craft over those of Pasai and Pahang.

When the Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached India in 1498 they were entering a world which was new to them but familiar to traders of the eastern Mediterranean. The trade contacts between Italy and India had been fairly

continuous and there was no real difficulty over finding an interpreter at Calicut. But whereas the Italians had long since come to a commercial understanding with Islam, the Portuguese lived still in the mental atmosphere of the crusades. They had barely succeeded in ejecting the Muslims from Portugal. Shakespeare's merchant of Venice waited anxiously for his uninsured cargoes,

From Tripolis, from Mexico, and England
From Lisbon, Barbary, and India.....

and obviously cared nothing whether he did business with Christian or Muslim. He may, it is true, in later life have avoided business with Jews but he was in other ways tolerant enough. The Portuguese attitude was different; and it is fairly clear that the Muslims of Asia knew just how different it was. Pilgrimage to Mecca allowed of a great deal of gossip round the shrine between Muslims of Barbary, India and Malacca. There was, they knew, little likelihood of a friendly trade agreement with the Portuguese. More than that, it was fear of the Portugese and Spanish which hastened the conversion of the Malays to Islam, a process perhaps hardly begun in 1445 whereas the Portuguese were already at the Cape by 1487.

The essence of the Portuguese plan was to deflect trade into an entirely new route by a process which would bring ruin to Muslims and Italians alike. The dismay expressed at Aleppo would be echoed at Venice where the question "What news on the Rialto?" would soon elicit only the gloomiest reply. The exchange of goods between East and West had followed a long-established path from China and the spice islands to Malacca, from there via Ceylon to the Malabar Coast and from there into Europe via the Red Sea or Persian Gulf, to be distributed from Venice or Genoa. Malacca had been the place where the cargoes for Malabar had been finally made up, fulfilling the present (and perhaps the previous) function of Singapore. What the Portuguese did was to strangle the trade westwards from Malabar and divert it into the new route round the Cape. They did this by establishing a naval supremacy based on Goa. But they were not content with that. To monopolise the trade in spice and silk they had to follow it to its sources in the Moluccas and China and secure the ports of first shipment. Malacca was a vital centre in the trade system and they captured it in 1511, pursuing their career of conquest to Macao and into the Malay Archipelago. The Malay dynasty of Malacca was expelled but

not destroyed, Sultan Mahmud still retaining a kingdom which included Riau and Johore. One of his sons ruled in Perak and another built a new capital on the Johore river. Recent excavation at Johore Lama has revealed that it hardly survived its capture by the Portuguese in 1587. Its fall was one incident in a long desultory struggle but it was not by the Malays that Portuguese Malacca was chiefly threatened. Other European ships were arriving in the Indian Ocean. The brief and brilliant period of Portuguese supremacy was coming to an end.

The Dutch and English appeared at much the same time, round about 1600, and were as jealous of each other as of the Portuguese. The English would perhaps have contented themselves with a share of the trade, but the Dutch, more realistic, wanted the Portuguese monopoly for themselves. It was the English who established themselves in Malaya, opening a factory at Patani in about 1612. But the Dutch aimed at the overthrow of all rivals. By 1630, they had largely, though not entirely, driven the English from the East Indies. In 1641, after repeated naval successes, they captured Malacca itself.

An important feature of the Dutch period in Malaya was the route which the Dutch followed in the voyage to and from Europe. Whereas the Portuguese had made their way by the old route from Malabar, entering the Malay Archipelago or the China Seas via the Straits of Malacca, the Dutch, from about 1620, struck boldly across the Indian Ocean from the Cape and so reached the Straits of Sunda. More than that, they discovered that the best route lay far to the southward in a wide sweep, which brought them incidentally to western Australia. Coming to the East Indies from a different direction, and returning homeward by the same route, they based their activities on Batavia in Java and made that the port of shipment for the eastern trade. When they finally captured Malacca, it was not because they wanted the port for its own sake. They had already choked the life out of it. What they wanted was to ensure that no other power should try to revive the corpse. Malacca might be useful in a minor way as a centre for coastal trade. It might even be used as a base from which to attack the English in India. But Malacca had for them only a negative value, and in Malaya they showed little interest at any time.

The Dutch ruled such of Malaya as served to enforce a State monopoly in the export of tin. Following a policy laid down in

Batavia, they did little more than that. Their main energies were needed for protecting their more vital monopoly of the spice trade. But from 1650, their strength was hardly equal even to this. Wars in Europe were using up the reserves of what was in any case a small country. They were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain any sort of equality with the rising powers of France and Britain. And their East Indies monopoly was saved in the end less by force of arms than by the extent to which the French and British had committed themselves in India. The Dutch period in Malaya is less important for what they did than for what they knew. It is mainly from Dutch sources that our knowledge of 17th century Malaya must derive. We know, incidentally, that they failed to protect Johore from a Sumatran attack in 1673 and that the royal line in that branch soon afterwards became extinct. Ruling in Malacca, the Dutch claimed what was left of the royal overlordship for themselves. What unity there had been was lost and each river state lapsed into the political independence which matched its geographical isolation.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS

The British East India Company defeated its French rival company with the help of the Royal Navy, which gradually established a supremacy in the Indian Ocean between 1661 and 1763. The East Indies Squadron, based on Madras and Bombay, drove the French back on distant Mauritius. As an indirect result, the Company's officers found themselves (rather to their own surprise) the effective rulers of the Mogul Empire. The Dutch struck northwards from the Malacca Straits in 1759 in an effort to prevent this supremacy being reached. Their day was over and their blow was at once too weak and too late. They fell back on Java and upon a monopoly of the spices which the world was by now less eager to buy.

The peace of 1763 left the East India Company free to exploit its victory. This it did by developing a new branch of trade with China. The British had by now begun to acquire that taste for tea which has ever since remained so inexplicable a characteristic of that people, and much of the Company's commercial energies went in fetching tea from Canton together with the porcelain from which to drink it. This created a simultaneous demand for sugar, some of which came from India. Some of the Company's ships went direct by the Straits of Sunda, others via the India ports. The Dutch could do nothing to hinder this development of trade. All they could do was to resist the encroachments of private traders among their own islands and even here their success was incomplete. Traders with guns and opium were not easy to exclude.

One of these gun-runners was Francis Light, who appeared on the Malay coast in about 1770. Discovering that Dutch

influence did not stretch as far north as Kedah and that Siamese influence did not stretch as far south, he urged the East India Company to found a settlement in that area. In his eyes, no doubt, such a step would have been the beginning of a steady advance into the Malay Archipelago, with the Dutch empire destroyed in the process. That, however, was not part of the Company's policy, the directors already having a far larger empire than they knew what to do with. Light might have implored for ever in vain had not the War of American Independence (1775-83) come to alter the whole situation.

The French had rebuilt and reorganised their Navy in the years following 1763 and came nearer to victory in this war than they were ever to come again. The most brilliant of their admirals was the one they sent to India, Suffren, and his British opponents only just avoided defeat. At the crisis of the war, in 1782, Suffren wintered his squadron at Acheen in Sumatra and came very near to making a permanent base in the Mergui Archipelago. His appearance in these waters during the North-East Monsoon, when everyone expected him to be refitting at Mauritius, caused a consternation which lingered even after the war had ended. It was felt at the Admiralty and India House that a British base at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca would afford needed protection to India. The advocates of such a base were looking northwards to Calcutta and westwards to Ceylon but their demands coincided with those of Francis Light and his friends. After some vacillation, the island of Penang was chosen and leased from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. Light was the first Governor and remained in office until his death in 1794.

With the foundation of Fort Cornwallis and Georgetown in what was now renamed Prince of Wales Island, the story of British Malaya may be said to begin, and Penang flourished sufficiently to encourage greater hopes for the future. A new war with France, resulting from the French Revolution, began in 1793, just before Light died, and continued with little interruption until 1815. One effect of the French Revolution had been to destroy the discipline, the morale and the officer corps of the French Navy, which gave far less trouble than had the efficient fleet of Louis XV. As for the Dutch, their collapse in Europe left their East Indies possessions an easy prey. Of these, Malacca, the most isolated, was easily captured in 1795. With this fort and territory in British hands, the growth of British Malaya advanced a further stage. Soon afterwards, in 1800, an extensive tract of land was obtained opposite Penang and named Province Wellesley. It

might have seemed then that a widespread and rapid extension of territory might be expected.

The true motive, however, of this occupation of Malacca was to prevent it falling into the hands of the French. Nothing came of the French threat via Egypt in 1797-98 and it was not, in fact, until 1803 that the French gave much cause for anxiety in the East, nor until 1804 that a major action took place in Malayan waters. This was the Battle of Pulo Aur, brought about by Admiral Linois' attempt to intercept the China convoy on the coast of Johore. This failed, but came near enough to success to arouse anxiety for the future. Was India itself safe? Linois was no Suffren but it was generally agreed that the time had come to use Penang for its true defensive purpose. It should be made a Presidency (equal to Madras or Bombay). It should have a Governor and Council. It should have a dockyard and an Admiral.

The result of this decision was that Rear-Admiral Sir Thomas Troubridge sailed from Portsmouth on April 24th, 1805, with his flagship, a frigate and a convoy of Indiamen. With him embarked the new rulers of Penang, the Governor, the Members of Council, the Colonial Secretary, and (among the small fry) Mr. Thomas Raffles. Their mission was to found a new capital city round Fort Cornwallis. The Admiral's mission was to take over half the East Indies Squadron and base it on a still theoretical dockyard at Penang. A new era was to dawn in the Straits of Malacca. Or was it? Various things went wrong almost immediately; a first discovery being that there was no timber for ship-building nearer than Rangoon. Worse still, however, was the fever which wiped out most of the civil servants just as fast as they were felling the jungle so as to plant pepper. The French did not go into action (at least not then) but the mosquitoes did. The dockyard was found to be out of the question and Troubridge was recalled in 1807, his flagship foundering with all hands on the voyage to the Cape. There were 167 seamen invalided home from Penang in 1809 alone, to say nothing of all those that died.

The rapid wastage of civil servants (they are cheap, after all) brought rapid promotion to the few that survived. Notable among these survivors was young Mr. Raffles, now Colonial Secretary at Penang, and even he fell sufficiently ill to be sent to Malacca on sick leave in 1808. As for the rest, it has been pointed out that of 34 appointed to Penang between 1805 and 1825, twenty had died by 1829. Of the rest, a high proportion were invalided home. But the abandonment of these ambitious

1525

plans for Penang made it all the more important to deprive the Dutch of Batavia, which the French might otherwise use as a base. Java was still nominally in Dutch hands but the Netherlands were under Napoleon's control. So Lord Minto, the Governor-General of India, organised an expedition for the capture of Java and appointed Raffles to prepare the way for it diplomatically. Java was duly conquered in 1811 and Stamford Raffles (as he now preferred to call himself) was appointed Governor. For his promotion he was partly indebted to his own brilliance and hard work but still more perhaps to his knowledge of Malay. Almost alone among the available officials, he had come straight out to Penang from England without previous service in India. He did not see the Javanese as Bengalis or Tamils unaccountably ignorant of their own language. He saw them as Malays; as, in fact, the only Asian people he knew anything about.

British rule in Java could not last. The Netherlands Indies had been occupied when the rightful Dutch Government had been turned out by the French. The restoration of that government, in any form, could not be associated with the loss of the territories upon which its economic stability would largely depend. So the eventual defeat of Napoleon in 1815 was followed by the return of Java and its dependencies to the Dutch. Sir Stamford Raffles was relegated to Bencoolen in Sumatra and watched from there, with growing indignation, the process by which the Dutch re-established their jealous monopoly. Seeing the Straits of Sunda again in Dutch hands, he pleaded with the Indian Government to secure at least the Straits of Malacca. With Malacca returned to the Dutch and no base further south than Penang (known to be useless), the British would again have no port on the route to China. His arguments finally carried the day, and he was authorised to form a new settlement somewhere near the southern entrance of the Straits. He did so at Singapore in 1819 amid a storm of protest from the Dutch. In the negotiations which followed it was finally agreed that the Netherlands should accept Bencoolen in exchange for Malacca and seek no influence beyond a line drawn just to the south of Singapore. The result (if not the expressed intention) of this compromise was to give the Dutch a free hand in Sumatra and the British a free hand in the Malay Peninsula. Whatever influence the Dutch Governor of Malacca had claimed as successor of the Malay Kings was now transferred, in effect, to the British East India Company. The Straits Settlements had come into being, with the Malay States forming their potential hinterland.