

# A History of SINGAPORE

H. F. PEARSON

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SINGAPORE



Statue of Sir Stamford Raffles in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall

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H. F. Pearson

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and "People of Early Singapore"*

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## PREFACE

SINGAPORE has twice been a great city. Once, in early times, it is believed, kings fought to establish and maintain its power; now it is one of the foremost ports of the world, and it is governed by ministers elected by the people. Between those extremes lies nearly a thousand years of history, some of it empty, some of it made lively by action and change. In this book an attempt has been made to bridge the gap, by telling the story of the city's internal progress and of the events in countries both near and far which have made Singapore the mart and meeting-place of the East.

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## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Preface	5
1 The Spice Route	9
2 The Rulers from India	17
3 The Ancient City	24
4 Closing of the Silk Route	32
5 Men in Armour	39
6 The Merchant Adventurers of England	46
7 Sir Stamford Raffles	54
8 The Princes of Johore	61
9 Men of the East India Company	68
10 Raffles and the People	75
11 New Plans for Singapore	82
12 The Two Treaties	89
13 The Rise of Hongkong	96
14 Singapore and the Americans	103
15 The English Rajah of Sarawak	109
16 Steamships come to the East	116
17 End of the Company's Rule	124
18 Back to the Old Spice Route	132



	<i>Page</i>
19 The new Sultans of Johore	139
20 A Governor brings Peace to Malaya	146
21 The Five Commissioners	153
22 The Seeds of the Rubber Tree	160
23 The Coming of the Japanese	167
24 The British return	176
25 Singapore stands alone again	183
Index	191

## Chapter I

### THE SPICE ROUTE

THE story of Singapore begins many hundreds of years ago, when the island was covered from end to end with jungle, forest, and mangrove swamps. No one visited it, except perhaps a fisherman or two from the mainland. The mainland was that narrow strip of land, called a peninsular, stretching northwards into Asia. To the south, as far as the equator, lay countless islands.

Today we call the mainland Malaya, and the islands the East Indies or Indonesia, but in those early days neither the mainland nor the islands were known by those names, because the people who lived in them did not think of themselves as belonging to a country. Some of them lived in clearings in the jungle, and others on river banks, in small communities which seldom met each other. Our story starts with those who lived on the river banks, for they were the first to meet strangers from other lands, to learn new customs, and to find out how to read and write. They have become the people we now call Malays.

The rivers on which they lived were separated by many miles of jungle, and the only way of getting from one river to another was by sea. These people, however, could make only small, frail boats, called *prahus*, and did not go very far. They lived all their lives on the same river and the only people they knew were those who lived with them. They built houses of bamboo and matting, taken from the jungle, and were a happy, carefree

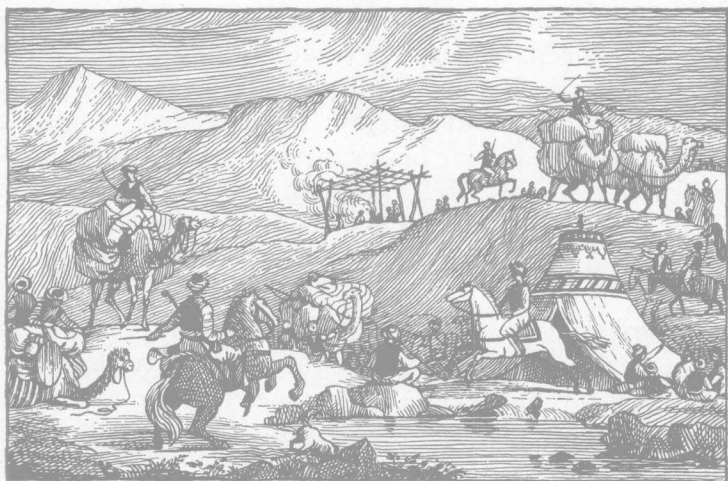
people. They wore very few clothes, and did not have to work hard, for it was warm and sunny every day and there was plenty of fish and fruit to eat. So easy was their life that they might have stayed as they were for ever, but, far away in Europe, a change was taking place that was to alter their way of living.

The people of Europe had once been wild tribesmen who roamed over the land, fighting and plundering. Now many of them were wealthy landowners, or merchants in the cities, and they had grown tired of wearing coarse woollen cloth or the skins of animals and wanted clothes made of finer material.

On the opposite side of the world, in China, the people had already learnt to make silk, as you can see from this picture of a Chinese lady standing beside trays of silk-



worms. She was Si-Ling, wife of a famous Emperor called Huan-ti, who lived in 2640 B.C. One day in her garden she watched a silk-worm spinning, and she had the idea that what the silk-worm could wind she could unwind. She did this and used the thread to make silk cloth. Towards the beginning of the Christian era silk cloth was carried to the people of Europe, and they bought though it was very expensive.



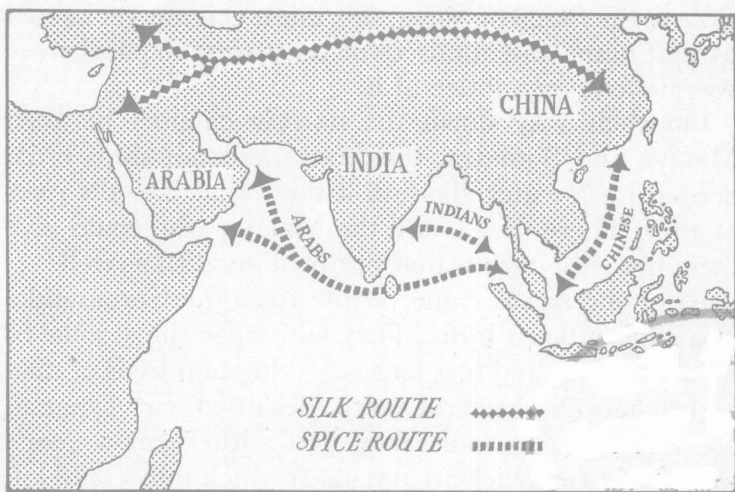
The silk cost so much because it had to be carried a long way, over what was called the Silk Route, which you can see on page 13. Merchants set out from China and travelled thousands of miles through Tartary and Astrakhan to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The merchants travelled in parties, called caravans, using horses and camels to carry both themselves and their goods, as you can see in the interesting picture above. Many died on the long journey that led over snow-covered mountains and hot, dry deserts, or were killed by fierce bands of robbers. Because this route was over the land, through Central Asia, the merchants did not come near Malaya, and the Malays went on living peacefully in their river valleys.

There was, however, something ~~else~~ the people of Europe wanted besides silk, especially those who lived in the cold northern lands. Every year, as winter came, they

had to kill many of their farmyard animals, their cows, pigs, and sheep, because they had nothing to feed them on. During the winter the people had to eat dried meat, which was tough and tasteless. They needed something to make the meat taste better, such as pepper and spices, but those things do not grow in Europe. Pepper grows in India, and spices on islands even farther to the East, particularly in the Moluccas, which were called the Spice Islands.

At first spices were taken from the islands to China by sea, which was only a short voyage, and were then carried over the Silk Route to Europe. But the men who carried them made such huge profits that merchants in Arabia wondered if it would be possible to bring spices to Europe by sea. So they sailed eastwards, searching for a market where they could buy spices. During their early voyages they went only as far as India, where many of them settled. They went no farther because they could not be sure of finding a wind to take them home again.

They did not at that time know about the monsoons. The monsoon winds blow across Malaya and the East Indies. During the winter months, from October to March, the lands of eastern Asia are cold, and the wind blows from those lands towards the equator. This is called the north-east monsoon. During the summer months, from May to August, the lands of eastern Asia are warmed by the sun, and the wind blows towards them from the equator. This is the south-west monsoon. You can see the direction of the monsoons in the map on page 27. You will also be able to see that a ship which sailed from west to east on one monsoon, need only wait until the monsoon changed to sail back to the west.



The routes taken by the early merchants between Europe and the East

By the fourth century A.D., the Arabs had learnt the secret of the monsoons. They found that by using the south-west monsoon they could sail across the Indian Ocean and through the channel between Malaya and Sumatra, which leads to the China Seas and the Spice Islands. They then waited for the north-east monsoon, and returned the same way, to land their cargoes on the shores of the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf. This route became known as the Spice Route.

If you look at the map above you will see what happened.

The merchants of the Silk Route had gone far to the north of Malaya, but, as the black squares show, the merchants of the Spice Route had to sail round its coast to reach the East. When they did so, they had to pass

close to the island of Singapore, but it was not yet known by that name and hundreds of years were to pass before anyone took any notice of it.

On their way down the narrow channel between Malaya and Sumatra, the Arab merchant ships often needed fresh water. To find it they went into the river mouths. There they found the Malays, who could give them not only fresh water, but fruit and fish as well.

After the Arabs came people from the Coromandel Coast in southern India. They built huge ships, some of them two hundred feet long, carrying hundreds of men and thousands of tons of cargo. Because their voyage to the East took so long, they had with them a year's supply of food, chickens and goats which they could kill on the way, and vegetables grown in boxes of earth on the deck.

For nearly six hundred years the Arabs and the Indians called at the Malay villages. They stayed only long enough to take on supplies before they sailed to China. By the tenth century, however, junks from China, carrying silks and spices, began to sail westwards. They, too, called at the Malay villages for supplies, and there they met the Arab and Indian merchants.

Year after year, as merchant ships came from East or West on the monsoons, they met beside the same village and exchanged their goods. Because they had such long voyages to make, and because the monsoons were not always in their favour, it was difficult for them to come into the anchorage at the same time. This meant that the Arab and Indian merchants might have to wait in the river for several months before the Chinese junks



appeared, and they might miss the monsoon which was to take them home.

They found that the best way of getting over this difficulty was for some merchants to live in the Malay villages. Then Indian and Arab merchants could buy merchandise from Chinese junks whenever they came into the harbour, and have it ready for the ships of their countrymen when they arrived. The Chinese could do the same for their ships.

The foreign merchants usually built houses like those of the Malays, standing on posts. They lived together in groups. In this way some of the small Malay river villages became well-known ports.

The Malays had at first stared in wonder at these merchants from other lands, with their strange ways and great ships. They heard tales of Europe and China and of the marvels of their civilisations. A new world was opening up for the Malays, and it was the men of one of the three merchant races who were now to lead them away from their simple lives on the rivers.

## ACTIVITIES

### *Questions*

1. What did the island of Singapore look like at the beginning of this story and who visited it?
2. How did the people whom we now call the Malays live?
3. How did the Chinese learn to make silk?
4. Where were spices grown?
5. Which were the three races of traders whose ships met beside the villages of the Malays?



*Things to do alone*

1. Collect together pieces of material and see if you can tell which are made of silk.
2. Write about the clothes worn by the people of Europe and about the food they ate.

*Things to do together*

1. Make up and act a play about Chinese, Arab, and Indian merchants meeting at a riverside village.
2. Bring peppercorns and spices to school and ask your teacher how they grow.

*Specially for those who live in Singapore*

Visit part of the island which is still as wild as it was in this story and write about what you have seen.