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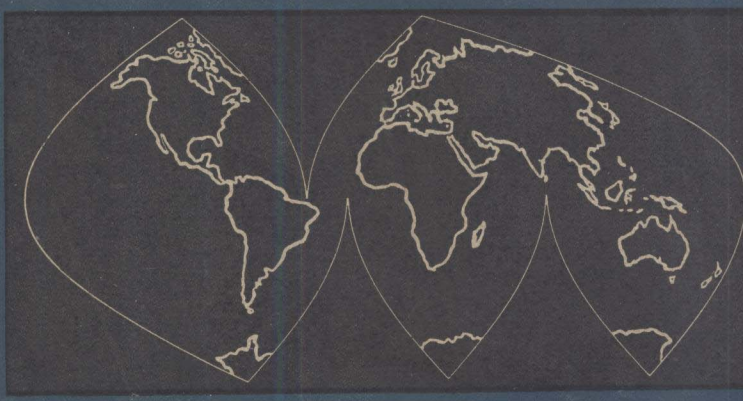

SAUL ROSE

BRITAIN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Saul Rose

1962
CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

BRITAIN IN THE WORLD TODAY

BRITAIN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

By the same Author

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SOCIALISM IN SOUTHERN ASIA

Published by the Oxford University Press
for The Royal Institute of International
Affairs, 1960

Also in the series

BRITAIN AND CHINA

by Evan Luard

BRITAIN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Saul Rose

1962
CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

Published by
Chatto & Windus Ltd
42 William IV Street
London W.C.2
*
Clarke, Irwin & Co Ltd
Toronto

Printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd
London Fakenham and Reading

To M.

Acknowledgement

For their help in bringing this book to completion my grateful thanks are due to the Leverhulme Trust and its Director, Sir Miles Clifford, K.B.E.; to the Warden and Fellows of St. Antony's College; to all those authorities from whose knowledge I have profited, particularly Mr. Francis Carnell and the authors listed in the select bibliography; to Mrs. Anne Liley; and to my wife. For the defects that remain I alone am responsible.

St. Antony's College,
Oxford

S. R.
February, 1962

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Maps

INTRODUCTION

"CROSSROADS" is a word which comes readily to mind when considering south-east Asia. It is very much an in-between region, whether viewed from land or sea. It lies between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, between Asia and Australasia, between the Indian subcontinent and China. Indo-China, the name of part of the region, could be applied to the whole. The term "south-east Asia" carries a similar connotation—of the hyphen between south and east.

During its long history the crossroads has seen a great deal of traffic. Although the discovery of Java Man—the remains of the earliest known form of human being—suggests that it was one of the birthplaces of mankind, the region has been moulded largely by external forces. For thousands of years successive waves of migrants moved down from the Asian continent towards the south, driven by the hostility of nature or their neighbours, or perhaps drawn by the warmth and luxuriance of the tropics. They made their way from the interior of the "heartland" down towards the Malay peninsula, some settling, some moving on along the island chain that constitutes Indonesia, until they reached the Philippines or even Australia. The last major influx occurred some 4,000 years ago with the arrival of the people who still constitute what may be described as the basic population of the area—the Malaysians—but they were not very numerous. Although the mountain ranges run broadly north and south, the broken terrain and the dense malarial jungles impeded movement, and the migrations were a trickle rather than a flood. In comparison with India and China the region remained thinly populated until the fairly recent proliferation in Java.

At the beginning of the Christian era trade with India and China was well established. References are to be found in ancient Indian writings—the Ramayana and the Puranas—while the Chinese annals record the reception of embassies bearing tribute. Except in Tongking, which bordered on China, the Indian impact was much the stronger. The Indians brought with them Hinduism

and Buddhism, Sanskrit and other aspects of their culture. The great temples of Borobodur in Java and Angkor in Cambodia are awe-inspiring monuments to its quality. Traders settled and became the nucleus of Indian influence. The kingdom of Funan in Cambodia was said to have been founded in the first century A.D. by a Brahmin. The adjacent kingdom of Champa which rose in the next century was also "Indianized", as was Langkasuka in the north of the Malay peninsula.

In these early times, when the skills of navigation and shipbuilding were less developed, traders tended to take a short cut overland by the Kra isthmus rather than sail round the Malay peninsula; and this may account for the location of the earlier Indianized states. Later, as techniques improved the longer sea route became less intimidating, and other Indianized empires arose among the islands to the south—first, Srivijaya, based on Sumatra, which lasted from the eighth to the fourteenth century, when it was overthrown and supplanted by the empire of Majapahit, based on Java, soon to be eclipsed in its turn by the rise of Malacca. Meanwhile, the movement down from the north continued. The Burmese descended the Irrawaddy valley to the lowlands, overcame the Mons who were already there, and established their kingdom at Pagan. The Thai followed them on a more easterly track, and set up their capital at Ayuthia, exerting such pressure on the neighbouring Khmers as to compel them eventually to abandon the splendour of Angkor to the encroaching jungle. Further east still, the Annamites filtered down the Indo-Chinese peninsula. All these groups contributed to the ethnic kaleidoscope which was to make south-east Asia the habitat of "plural societies".

In addition to these overspills there were two major incursions into the region by Imperial China. In the thirteenth century the armies of the Mongol dynasty overran Annam and invaded Burma. That indefatigable traveller Marco Polo was an eye-witness to the victory of the Mongols over the Burmese. A Mongol expedition penetrated southward as far as Java but was obliged to withdraw. The Ming dynasty which succeeded the Mongols in the fourteenth century was also expansionist at first. Annam was conquered, and Chinese fleets exacted tribute from Java, Sumatra and Malacca. Then the policy of seclusion was adopted and once again the region was subjected to influences coming from the West.

Just as, earlier, Indian traders had brought with them Hinduism

and Buddhism, so in the fourteenth century Gujerati or Bengali traders brought Islam. The new creed took root and flourished where it was adopted by local rulers, the most important convert in the fifteenth century being the ruler of Malacca. The rapid growth in the wealth, power and influence of that port helped to carry the faith far and wide on the Malay peninsula and in the archipelago.

Throughout the fifteenth century trade from the East to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf was in Muslim hands. The goods were transported overland to the Mediterranean coast for distribution to their European destinations. This meant that all consignments changed hands several times in transit. The European voyages of discovery aimed partly at finding a way to circumvent this cumbersome and costly method of commerce, at a time when the flow of trade through the Middle East was threatened by the rise of the Ottoman Turks.

The Portuguese were the first to succeed in turning the flank of Africa. The arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in India in 1498, in search of Christians and spices, heralded the era of European dominance in Asia. The first steps for the Portuguese were to secure command of the seas and establish bases. The capture of Goa in 1510 provided an effective centre from which to control the Indian trade, and the conquest of Malacca in the following year extended their sway to south-east Asia. For the remainder of the century the Portuguese were able to sustain and develop their monopoly of trade, and the conquest of Malacca in the following year extended where Spain succeeded in gaining a foothold. The effort placed a great strain on the resources of that tiny country and their supremacy could not be maintained. When the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal were united under one crown, the Netherlands rose in revolt; and in their struggle for independence the Dutch sought to break the grip of the Portuguese on the East Indian trade.

It was in this setting that the English made their appearance in south-east Asia.

EXPANSION

I

RECONNAISSANCE AND RETREAT

AS the sixteenth century and the reign of Queen Elizabeth I drew to their close, the exuberant energy of the Elizabethan era spilled over into yet another area of the globe. In their search for trade some London merchants turned their eyes towards south-east Asia. In the year 1599 a group of them petitioned the Queen for her assent to a voyage to the East Indies, prompted as they said by the success of their Dutch competitors:

> ". . . divers merchants, induced by the successe of the viage performed by the Duche Nation, and being informed that the Duchemen prepare for a new viage, and to that ende have bought divers ships here, in Englande, were stirred with no lesse affection to advaunce the trade of their native countrie than ye Duche merchaunts were to benefite theire commonwealthe, and upon that affeccion have resolved to make a viage to the East Indies."

In response to this petition a royal charter was granted, and the East India Company came into being on December 31, 1600.

The quest for Eastern trade had been proceeding throughout most of the sixteenth century, and attempts had been made to find the north-west or north-east passage to China. Drake's voyage round the world (1577–80) was not merely for the purpose of plundering Spanish treasure ships: its ostensible object was discovery and trade in the Pacific. Drake touched at Ternate in the Moluccas and brought back a cargo of cloves and a treaty with the king of the island. In England even more importance was attached to the treaty than to the treasure.

At first, the English interest in trade with the Indies was marginal. What the English merchants were looking for was not so much a supply of the produce of the East as a market for English manufactures, especially woollen goods, which were not likely to find a ready sale in the tropics. Hence the search for markets in colder climes, particularly China. This preference, however, should not be pressed too far: for there were some products of the Indies which were in constant demand in England, notably pepper and