

Part I

The Nineteenth Century

Economics prompted the East India Company to put down roots in Southeast Asia as its trade with China grew. Easy access to Indian textiles and opium gave it profitable products to trade in Malaya, and the increasing power of the British Navy brought protection. British territorial power in Southeast Asia expanded quickly after Francis Light sailed to Penang Island in July of 1786. The Dutch turned over Melaka in 1795, and the Sultan of Kedah was forced to part with additional land in 1800, which became Province Wellesley. Then in 1819, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, another ambitious East India Company employee, leased Singapore Island from a local territorial chief to serve as a free-trade port. The carefully negotiated Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 assigned the Malay Peninsula to the British as a “sphere of influence.”¹ By the early nineteenth century, these separate towns and their hinterlands served as naval bases and ports of call for the India-China trade.

Multiple European and local rulers coveted more land and economic influence in Southeast Asia, but the British managed to consolidate and expand their authority in the early nineteenth century. Working through the East India Company, British administrators attacked and then administered the large and immensely rich island of Java from 1811 to 1816, annexing new land and raising taxes. Nevertheless, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars they returned Java to the Dutch, and in 1824 agreed via treaty to share local territory: the British gave up claims to Sumatra and the islands south of Singapore in return for a free hand on the mainland. In 1826, the British state successfully pressured the Thai government to settle outstanding border conflicts, trading recognition of Thai influence in the Northern Malay states (Kedah, Petani, Kelantan, and Terengganu) for secure borders with Burma and Thai acceptance of growing British power in the rest of the peninsula. In 1829, the

¹ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2nd ed. (Houndsmill: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 111–112, 125; C. E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles of the Eastern Isles* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984)

settlements of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore were merged into the Straits Settlements and run from India until 1867, when they became a separate colony. Governing authority of the Straits Settlements passed in 1858 from the East India Company to the British Colonial Office.²

British intrusion into western Malaya was limited until Penang and Singapore merchants, who had invested heavily in the region's tin mines, organized to ask for British protection of their investments. The Colonial Office ignored their repeated complaints about gang fights among the Chinese and mini-civil wars among the Malays, choosing not to intervene. Then a new Governor, Sir Andrew Clarke, arrived in the colony in 1873. He decided, after talking with leading investors and with the President of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, that the British should act to keep the peace. Soon Clarke found a golden opportunity in Perak, where Raja Abdullah, who aspired to be the sultan, had been passed over by the chieftains who had the right to elect the new raja. Abdullah, who had long been an ally of leading British and Chinese investors in Perak tin mines, wrote to Clarke, offering to accept a British advisor in Perak if he were recognized as Sultan. Clarke happily accepted the bargain, negotiating the Pangkor Treaty in 1874 with Abdullah, who – at least in the English version of the treaty – obligated himself and his successors to accept a British Resident whose advice “must be asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom.” Clarke pressured the rulers in two other states, Selangor and Sungai Ujung, to accept similar deals.³ Moreover, the Colonial Office accepted Clarke's decision, moving without objection into effective political control of the most economically developed areas of western Malaya.

The Pangkor Treaty gave the British – in their opinion, anyway – the right to control the political, legal, economic, and financial affairs of Perak, although Perak's Sultan formally continued in place. The treaty set a pattern that was later extended to the remaining territories of Negeri Sembilan (1887) and Pahang (1888), all of which were loosely unified with Perak and Selangor as the Federated Malay States in 1896. Although each state supposedly remained independent with a “sovereign” ruler, British Residents made all the important decisions and controlled the civil service, police, tax collection, and all non-Islamic courts. A Resident-General based in Kuala Lumpur coordinated the separate

² M. C. Ricklefs, *A New History of Southeast Asia* (Houndsmill Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 142, 151, 187–188; Sir Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London and New York: John Lane, 1907), pp. 81–82

³ Andaya and Andaya, pp. 147–154, 157–158; Ricklefs, pp. 175–176; Khoo Kay Kim, *The Western Malay States, 1850–1873* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1972)

state governments. Technically a system of indirect rule, the administrations of the Federated Malay States closely resembled those of the directly ruled Straits Settlements, whose Governor was also the High Commissioner of the other British controlled areas. In both colonies, District Officers, who worked with Malay and Chinese headmen, supervised local affairs.⁴

British political control of Malaya went hand in hand with rapid economic development, spurred by heavy British and Chinese investments. Trade and production grew rapidly as international demand for primary commodities exploded. Since membership in the British Empire brought easy access to world markets, industrial agriculture seemed a sure economic bet, particularly after massive state spending on roads and railways improved land transportation. Malay customary rules for land tenure were annulled and replaced by a European system of land registration, leasing, and sale, clearing the way for massive transfers to outsiders. Entrepreneurs turned more and more land into sugar, pepper, and coffee plantations, tin mining increased in scale, and rubber cultivation spread. Towns multiplied. The Malayan frontier beckoned to risk-takers, whether they were Chinese, British, European, South Asian, or Malay. Ethnicity mattered less than connections and cash, and capital rushed into Malaya from multiple sources. A sweet smell of prosperity beckoned immigrants and reconciled local people to the new and thriving colonial economy.

The expansion of colonial control has often been told as a story of heroic resistance against foreign intrusions, resulting in bloody repression. That story does not describe the Malayan experience, where opposition was relatively weak and short lived. To be sure, some Malays fought against the British seizure of power. The first British Resident of Perak, J. W. W. Birch, was stabbed to death by a group of Malay chiefs while he was bathing in a river a few months after his arrival. The exact reasons for the attack are still debated, but Birch had moved to take over tax collection and had sheltered runaway slaves, insisting that Malay rulers had to accept British policies. Moreover, the British governor had threatened the Perak Sultan with deposition if he opposed British control of finances and legal matters. The British responded to Birch's murder with massive force. Not only did they convict and hang three of the culprits, but they also sent Sultan Abdullah and several other chieftains into exile. At least 1,500 soldiers arriving from Hong Kong and India pursued the conspirators and spent six months quashing minor rebellions in nearby states. The availability of well-armed troops in the region, as well as British ships to

⁴ Ricklefs, pp. 176–177; Andaya and Andaya, pp. 185–186

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transport them, meant that resistance by small bands of mercenaries was futile.

For the rest of the century, armed attacks on the British were limited. After the British had manoeuvred the Pahang sultan to accept a British agent charged to open up the territory to “commerce and civilization,” continued disputes over power and rights in that state led to the brief Pahang War, an intermittent campaign of ambushes and minor skirmishes. One of the regional chiefs, Abdul Rahman, launched an uprising in 1891 to defend his own position as well as to oppose British policies, and he found some local allies. Nevertheless, Sikh troops brought in from nearby states eventually defeated the rebels, some of whom were exiled and others amnestied. By combining direct repression with generous pensions to Malay rulers and territorial lords, the British consistently dampened opposition and negotiated peace. Yet violence and opposition come in multiple forms, many of which left little trace in national records. The expropriation of land, corporeal punishment, and forced labour could be brutal and were deeply resented, even if they did not produce rebellions. Peasants could argue with state officials, squat illegally on vacant land, or challenge rent payments. Labourers could feign sickness, strike, or run away. The absence of open resistance is not evidence for social harmony or uncontested acceptance of colonial rule. Court cases, newspaper reports, arrest records, and local legends testify to a muted but continued undercurrent of opposition to the social order administered by the British.

By the end of the nineteenth century, British imperial jurisdiction extended far into Malaya and deep into local settlements. Much of the western peninsula had been drawn into a profitable export economy that brought very unequally distributed costs and benefits. The extension of British colonial control required taming the land and its peoples, a process which involved many Chinese, Tamils, Sikhs, Arabs, Malays, and relatively few British officials and settlers. Part I of this book looks at the starkly contrasting styles of British colonial rule that developed on the plantations and in the towns of western Malaya.

1 The Birth of Plantation Colonialism in Malaya

The English word “plantation” fuses together agriculture and empire, anchoring one in the other. From the seventeenth century, plantations were estates but also colonies. In 1631, Captain John Smith offered advice on the “pathway to erect a plantation,” for the “increase of God’s church, converting Salvages [sic] and enlarging the King’s Dominions.” Farming and colonization went hand in hand.¹ Just as British landlords through their properties brought rural Ireland and Virginia within the effective boundary of the Empire, so too did expatriate planters turn the Malay Peninsula into British territory. They worked in partnership, however, with the East India Company and other colonial officials who granted them title to their properties. Both the Dutch East India Company in Melaka and its British counterpart in Penang claimed ownership of the land as they consolidated their control. They soon established systems of individual ownership and leasing as defined in European law and practice.² Under the new regime, plots had surveyed boundaries, titles, and rents, set by trading companies which saw land as a commercial commodity. Those with cash or political connections gained immediate advantage over local Malays, who had merely occupied land which belonged, by custom, to their rulers. The story of colonial agriculture in the region began as one of dispossession, but then shifted to a tale of transplantation. Colonial rule took root in Malaya along with planted canes, pepper vines, and nutmeg trees.

Within a few years after Francis Light assumed control of Penang Island, he made multiple land grants in perpetuity to British and Chinese traders on easy terms. Local employees of the East India Company in Penang bragged of their success in “smoothing the path and lessening the risk to

¹ Captain John Smith, *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England* (London: John Haviland, 1631), pp. 1–2

² Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780–1830* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2007), pp. 135–136, 221–223

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the adventurous planter.”³ Penang was soon dotted with small estates producing pepper, gambier, clove, and nutmegs for the world market, using Chinese labour. Exporting was easy because of the port, but demand for land soon outran its supply.⁴ Nearby, the green hills of the Malayan mainland beckoned alluringly to the military adventurers and merchants who settled in Penang. After the Sultan of Kedah leased the small mainland district of Prai to the East India Company in 1800, the British gained a second foothold on the peninsula, adding to their control of the once-powerful city-state of Melaka.⁵ This territory, which P. J. Begbie dismissed in 1822 as unreclaimed jungle land filled with tigers, soon acquired the look of cultivation.⁶ Land and military power translated into opportunity in this sparsely settled, frontier region.

James Low, a Scottish officer in the Madras army who was posted to Penang, saw attractive prospects in the mainland territory, which he toured during military expeditions in the 1820s. After Low was appointed Superintendent of the Prai area, then known as Province Wellesley, he acquired title around 1832 to recently abandoned land parcels, several of which he turned into nutmeg plantations.⁷ He also owned large estates planted in coconuts and rice. His detailed descriptions of the area make clear his enthusiasm for tropical agriculture, as well as the link he saw between empire and development. “No sooner is a new road here opened through the forest, than both sides are speedily peopled and cultivated.”⁸ Convicts dispatched from India provided cheap, unfree labour, and they

³ James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 1

⁴ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2nd ed. (Houndsmill: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 110–112; D. J. M. Tate, *The RGA History of the Plantation Industry in the Malay Peninsula* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 19–23; James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya, 1786–1921* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), pp. 1–2, 7–8

⁵ The Dutch ceded control of Melaka and their other eastern territories to the British in 1795 to keep them out of French hands, moving back into Melaka between 1818 and 1824, when they relinquished it formally in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty that recognized the Malay Peninsula as a British sphere of interest and gave Java and Sumatra to the Dutch. The treaty also confirmed Dutch control of islands south and east of Singapore. Andaya and Andaya, *Malaysia*, pp. 112, 125

⁶ P. J. Begbie, *The Malayan Peninsula*, Oxford in Asia Reprints (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 381

⁷ Province Wellesley, as it came to be called, stretched about thirty-five miles from the state of Kedah in the north to Perak in the south. Mangrove swamps and lowlands along the coast rose gently to a few inland hills cut by a few rivers which gave entry to the interior of the peninsula. Its population rose from about 24,000 in 1824 to around 47,000 in 1836, most of whom were farmers. T. J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, 2 Vols. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971) Vol. 1, pp. 100–105

⁸ Low, *British Settlement*, p. 235

were quickly put to work building bridges, roads, and simple police stations, which gave administrators a visible presence in the new British territory.⁹ All signalled security to a wave of enthusiastic planters, whose estates produced spices, coconuts, indigo, and tapioca for the global as well as the regional market.

A rhetoric of progress through colonial cultivation underlay the dreams of early British travellers as they crossed Malayan terrain via elephants, looking for adventures and opportunity. Taming the land, they thought, would require the intertwining of empire with export agriculture. Europeans in the area in the 1830s insisted that British-ruled enclaves differed from Malay-governed states not only in political security, but also in their prospects for development. Thomas John Newbold, an officer in the Madras Light Infantry posted to Melaka in 1832, contrasted the attractive, well-run port towns of Penang and Melaka with Perak's "straggling villages" surrounded by jungle and the thick forests of Sungei Ujong in nearby native states. Elephant tracks, rather than proper roads, linked interior settlements. In Newbold's view, "cultivation" and industry came not from Malays but from outsiders: Chinese immigrants, Bugis from Sulawesi, and Minangkabau from Sumatra. Local population was scanty, since many had fled the "despotic" rule of the rajas and occasional threats from the kingdom of Siam.¹⁰ His hope was that if British control were extended, these backward places could be modernized too. While on a mission to Perak in 1826, James Low pronounced the soil "extremely fertile" and the climate "favourable for the production of sugar, indigo, and other tropical plants," although he thought that Malays were incapable of carrying out such projects themselves. Low recommended "the example and protection of a civilized and humane European nation to ameliorate their condition and . . . to induce settled aims of industry."¹¹ The military officers posted from India to Malaya enthusiastically supported the extension of British rule, and they identified empire with export agriculture. Their own entrepreneurial activities demonstrated easy shifts from governance to plantation ownership. Focusing on the Penang Sugar Estates and their neighbours, this chapter explores the dependence of plantations on the colonial state.

⁹ The East India Company transported convicts from India to Penang and Singapore from 1800 to 1858. This export of unfree labour parallels the British government's practice of exiling felons to North America and Australia during roughly the same period. Anand A. Yang, "Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2003), pp. 179–208

¹⁰ T. J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account*, Vol. 2, pp. 23–25, 28, 75

¹¹ James Low, "Observations of Perak," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, Vol. 4 (1850), pp. 497–498, 504

Planting Sugar

The prospect of cheap land and a job also drew immigrants to Malaya from South China, where periodic famines, floods, and high rents gave labourers ample reason to emigrate. Unlike the British government, which encouraged emigration to its colonies, the Qing state tried in the eighteenth century to enforce exit controls, but was unable to do so effectively. After 1728, imperial laws required merchants to have trading licences and to post bond to guarantee their return. Permanent settlement overseas was tolerated at best, and the state offered no protection to the adventurous men willing to travel for work. This was an era, however, of limited border controls and no passports, so the stream of Chinese coming to Penang did so unofficially as part of an ethnic diaspora regulated by kin networks and merchant organizations.¹²

Chinese immigrant farmers started sugar growing in Malaya as early as 1810.¹³ Bringing with them agricultural techniques from South China, Teochew farmers from Guangdong moved into coastal areas of Province Wellesley, transforming muddy lowlands near the sea into cane-growing fields.¹⁴ The largest group settled in Batu Kawan, an isolated area of mangrove swamps surrounded by water; they used simple tools and hand labour to grow cane, which they then crushed in bullock-driven rolling mills. The resulting juice was immediately boiled, clarified, drained, and dried to produce a rough grade of brown sugar for sale in the region. James Low estimated that by 1835 they had opened about 900 acres to sugar planting. Khaw Loh Hup, a Teochew immigrant, arrived as a poor apprentice in Batu Kawan and within a few years earned enough to buy his own property there and later to buy more property in the Krian district. His eldest son, Khaw Boo Aun, expanded the family sugar business in both Province Wellesley and Perak, and quickly became a powerful figure among the local Teochew.¹⁵ The family was in the right place at

¹² Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 29, 37–38

¹³ *Penang Gazette*, 4 September 1841, quoted in Tan Kim Hong, “Chinese Sugar Planting and Social Mobility in Nineteenth Century Province Wellesley,” *Malaysia in History: Journal of the Malaysian History Society*, Vol. 24 (1981), p. 25

¹⁴ James Low, who worked for the East India Company in the Straits Settlements for over twenty years, estimated that by 1835 over 2,000 Chinese worked on sugar plantations in central and southern Province Wellesley, growing cane and processing it into refined sugar with simple crushing mills, boiling pans, and clarifiers. Low, *British Settlement*, p. 49; Sucheta Mazumdar, *Sugar and Society in China: Peasants, Technology, and the World Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Tan, “Chinese Sugar Planting,” pp. 24–38

¹⁵ Tate, *RGA History*, pp. 18, 114–116; Lee Kam Hing and Chow Mun Seong, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of the Chinese in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1997), pp. 57, 59–60

the right time: sugar prices were rising, the region was relatively empty, and land was cheap to rent. In the early days of the industry, small loans and savings were enough to launch a Chinese-style plantation, which required little more than hand tools, boiling pots, and a draft animal to help crush the cane.¹⁶

Europeans followed in the footsteps of the Chinese. The Penang-based Brown family of spice planters opened a sugar estate in the southern part of Batu Kawan in 1846, initially using Chinese labour, boiling equipment from India, and a factory foreman trained in Mauritius.¹⁷ These men launched a new industry at a favourable moment in a plausible place. Caribbean sugar producers found African labour much harder to obtain after the British stopped the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, and they lost their comparative advantage in the sugar industry after the formal end of slavery in the British Empire in 1838. Shortly thereafter, Parliament ended West Indian tariff privileges, permitting sugar grown in Mauritius, India, and, later, Bengal and all its dependencies, to enter the British market on the same terms as Caribbean sugar.¹⁸ Sniffing the scent of opportunity, would-be planters searched for new sugar-growing land. The Malay Peninsula was one of the territories they chose. Joseph Balestier, who from 1837 served as the American Consul in Singapore, quickly became both a booster of export agriculture and a planter himself, opening a sugar estate on the island.¹⁹ He and several of the other leading planters there, including Governor Murchison, constituted themselves as the Singapore Agricultural and Horticultural Society to encourage the growing of export crops. Their paeans of praise for plantations were similar to those of James Low, based more to the north. Another active booster was Leonard Wray, who had been a planter in Jamaica and Bengal and who came to Malaya in the 1840s looking for land. He soon became a spokesman for a burgeoning sugar industry. If planters could find low-cost labour and import the latest technology for their factories and fields, he predicted that they could “produce sugar at a rate as cheap as (if not cheaper than) any planter in the world.” In the Malayan future, he envisaged rectangular fields crossed by canals and cultivated with steam ploughs. Steam engines would drain the swamps and power refineries.

¹⁶ Tan, “Chinese Sugar Planting,” p. 33; Tate, *RGA History*, p. 117

¹⁷ Low, *British Settlement*, p. 49; Donald Davies, “Roughing It in the Sugar Estates,” *The Sunday Gazette*, 27 August 1972

¹⁸ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); J. H. Galloway, *The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from Its Origins to 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 121–130

¹⁹ J. Balestier, “View of the State of Agriculture in the British Possessions in the Straits of Malacca,” *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, Vol. 2 (1848), p. 141

His book, *The Practical Sugar Planter: a Complete Account of the Cultivation and Manufacture of Sugar-Cane*, went through several editions, advising landlords of the best techniques and equipment.²⁰ With the demand for sugar rising, adventurers of many sorts turned swamps into sugar plantations, albeit without much machinery. Joseph Donadieu, who came from Mauritius looking for contract coolies, stayed to open up the Jawi and Val d'Or estates.²¹ By 1850, planters in Melaka, Singapore, Province Wellesley, and northern Perak had begun to try their luck with sugarcane along the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, and the industry was launched internationally under the protective umbrella of the British Empire. What these planters had in common was a taste for adventure and an optimism about the gains to be had from bringing "jungle" land into cultivation. They were hard men who did not mind getting dirty to turn a profit. The sheltering umbrella of empire offered planters, whatever their nationality, cheap land, police protection, and access to the British market. British control fostered a multi-ethnic group of planters and labourers who remade the Malayan landscape as they cleared fields and planted cane.

Absentee landlords offered an alternative model to the small-scale estates of European adventurers and Chinese immigrants. Edward Horsman (1807–1876), a Member of the British Parliament, became the largest investor and sugar grower in West Malaya during the 1850s. Horsman, a Liberal politician who had ambitions much bigger than his trust-fund income would support, began to look in the 1840s for promising investments at a time when the Malayan sugar industry was being promoted by local planters. Perhaps his interest was piqued by his elder brother, I. D. Horsman, who had worked for the East India Company and who had explained strategies for trading with Asia.²² He also knew men in London who had gotten rich on the profits of Caribbean sugar estates. Working through an attorney in Penang, Horsman bought land in Province Wellesley from the East India Company, amassing almost 12,000 acres by 1857. The core of his holdings (see Map 1.1) consisted of six estates – Caledonia, Krian, Victoria, Golden Grove, Jawi, and Val d'Or – the latter two having been opened up by Donadieu, whose holdings had been sold after pirates murdered him in 1850. Horsman contributed borrowed capital but little else to his estates, being much more

²⁰ (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1848), pp. 133, 139

²¹ Tate, *RGA History*, p. 116; Davies, "Roughing It in the Sugar Estates

²² I. D. Horsman Letters, "I. D. Horsman to Mr. Mercer," 4 November 1841, 30 November 1841, 28 December 1841, D/RA/A/3E/12 (Buckinghamshire Record Office)