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CHAPTER VII

THE PIRATE CONTROVERSY

When James Brooke was created Raja of Sarawak in 1841, the British commercial world assumed that as soon as he had set up a government he would be asking for financial support. The *Singapore Free Press* pointed out in an editorial that the means of a private gentleman were insufficient for the purpose in hand, and that the new enterprise could succeed only if full publicity were given to it in India and in England.³⁶⁴ It was generally taken for granted that under judicious management Sarawak could become a useful new market for British manufactures and a profitable field for British capital investment.³⁶⁵

Brooke knew that his personal fortune was inadequate but, unlike the merchants, he regarded his new kingdom not as an estate to be worked for profit but as an instrument placed in his hands by fortune for the purpose of raising a native population in the scale of civilization. For this reason, although anxious to obtain financial support, he flatly refused to accept it other than on the terms he himself laid down. One cannot but admire Brooke's high principles, but it is less easy to sympathize with his naive assumption that British capitalists could be persuaded to invest money in Sarawak primarily to improve the condition of the inhabitants and only secondarily in the hope of obtaining dividends.

One member of the commercial world who certainly did not share the White Raja's scruples was his London agent, Henry Wise. From the beginning of his association with Brooke, Wise was sure that if once the White Raja could be made to see the immense commercial possibilities of Sarawak, he would soon abandon his altruistic attitude and agree to entrust his affairs to the capable hands of business men. In taking this view, Wise was the victim of a triple misconception.

³⁶⁴ Issue of January 13th, 1842.

³⁶⁵ G. F. Davidson, for example, devoted a lengthy appendix in his book, *Trade and Travel in the Far East* (1846), to a description of the methods he considered Brooke should adopt in order to attract capital and labour to Sarawak.

In the first place, he completely misjudged the White Raja's character, for Brooke was never really interested in trade or profit-making and, like many Victorian gentlemen, rather looked down upon those who were. "Wise . . . builds much upon my ignorance of business matters", Brooke drily remarked to his friend, John Templer, on one occasion, "and because I am no merchant he concludes I have no sense".³⁶⁶ Secondly, Wise was very much in error in believing Sarawak capable of producing a rapid return on investments. And, thirdly, he seems to have genuinely misunderstood the true nature of Brooke's grant from the Sultan of Brunei. In a letter to Lord Haddington of April 1844, he asserted that the Sultan, imbued with "an anxious desire for a more close and intimate connection with the British Government", had ceded "a valuable portion of his territory at Sarawak . . . for the purpose of forming a commercial establishment".³⁶⁷

To some extent Brooke was himself responsible for raising false hopes in his agent's mind. During the period when the chief concern of both was to obtain British Government recognition for the new settlement, he often made use of expressions which seemed to indicate — to Wise, at any rate — that fortunes were almost to be picked up in Borneo for the asking. "For the country", he wrote in September 1841, "what shall I say? I could not wish a richer; its soil is fine, and admirably calculated for the culture of rice, coffee, nutmegs, or cotton".³⁶⁸ On another occasion he told his agent: "I do not myself see why this opening should not lead to results similar to India itself".³⁶⁹ Finally, and most significant of all, it was Brooke who first put forward a proposal that a company should be formed to develop the resources of Sarawak. Early in 1843 he instructed Wise to investigate the possibility of forming a public company with a capital of "from £ 300,000 to £ 500,000", and recommended that "plantations, diamond mines, etc., and a monopoly of antimony and opium" should be held out as inducements to prospective shareholders.³⁷⁰

Wise deduced from these instructions that the way was clear for the exploitation of Sarawak and, since he himself was to share in the profits, considered that his fortune was as good as made. With great

³⁶⁶ *Letters*, i, p. 284.

³⁶⁷ Wise to Haddington, April 12th, 1844. (*Borneo Papers*, p. 28. My italics).

³⁶⁸ Brooke to Wise, September 24th, 1841. (*Ibid.*, p. 10).

³⁶⁹ Brooke to Wise, March 14th, 1843. (*Ibid.*, p. 11).

³⁷⁰ Wise thought of forming a 'Borneo Company' at about the same time, but the first definite proposal along these lines came from Brooke. (Cf. Brooke to Templer, April 14th, 1843: *Letters*, i, p. 256).

enthusiasm he set about the task of interesting the City of London in a Bornean development project. In doing so, however, he used methods which caused Brooke to suspect that a commercial 'bubble' was being promoted. "I trust [Wise] has not committed me by garbling or high colouring my statements", he wrote to Templer in April 1843. "I fear it because . . . he has so evidently misconstrued my meaning and expressions about commerce. This annoys me, because I thought I had been guarded enough to prevent any rash commercial speculation".³⁷¹ As time went on Brooke's suspicions were confirmed, and he decided to put a stop to these exaggerated descriptions of Borneo once and for all. "I wish you", he told Templer, "to state plainly and roundly my opinion . . . that the N. W. coast of Borneo offers no immediate opportunity for British manufacture, beyond the quantity yearly supplied from Singapore".³⁷² Wise, however, continued to use the most extravagant language in the course of his promotion campaign.

The White Raja's determination to prevent the exploitation of Sarawak by speculators became even stronger when the Royal Navy began taking action against the Borneo pirates. As his prestige grew as a result of the exploits of Keppel and Sir Thomas Cochrane, so his need for assistance from the commercial world declined. He ultimately came to the conclusion that a public company would not, after all, be required to ensure the security of Sarawak and that, if he were ever to carry out his true mission of civilizing his subjects, he must break free from the distractions of trade. One of the clearest statements of his views on this point is contained in a letter he wrote in March 1846. "I can in no wise participate", he said, "in profits which may arise out of the formation of a company, or any other project started in England, for it is incumbent on me to continue independent in order to judge correctly the measures calculated to benefit this country, and a correct judgment is only to be formed when all prospects of pecuniary advantage have been discarded, excepting such as flow naturally in the course of time and improvement".³⁷³ All that Sarawak really needed for stability, he decided, was a safe and steady revenue. In 1846 he succeeded in putting his finances on a more or less satisfactory basis,³⁷⁴ and

³⁷¹ Brooke to Templer, April 13th, 1843. (*Ibid.*, p. 249).

³⁷² Brooke to Templer, August 1843. (*Ibid.*, p. 281).

³⁷³ Brooke to Wise, March 1st, 1846. (*P.P.*, 1850, X, p. 1244).

³⁷⁴ Soon after Brooke became Raja of Sarawak, he commuted all taxation into a single revenue, to be derived from the export of antimony ore. An opium farm was added later, together with some other small levies, such as an annual rice tax on the Dyaks. Before long, however, the funds collected by

from then on did everything he could to frustrate the commercial penetration of his kingdom.

Such a policy inevitably aroused resentment in the business world. J. R. Logan, the editor of the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, who was willing to give Brooke full credit for humanitarian motives, strongly disapproved of his attitude to commercial enterprise. "With the feelings which lie at the bottom of [his] views", wrote Logan, "we entirely sympathize, but we would earnestly deprecate any attempt to enforce that seclusion from promiscuous contact with Europeans which Sir J. Brooke evidently deems it desirable to carry out to a certain extent, if practicable. We think it so impracticable that we might as well attempt to oppose a law of nature".³⁷⁵ As an absolute ruler Brooke was of course free to dictate what policy he chose in Sarawak, but protests from the commercial world became more vigorous when he sought to apply similar restrictions to areas of Borneo which were not under his immediate control. Under the terms of Articles II and III of the Treaty of 1847 with Brunei — a treaty Brooke had negotiated — British merchants were entitled to trade and acquire property within the Sultan of Brunei's dominions, and merchants taking advantage of these facilities naturally expected to be given protection and support by the official specially appointed by the Government for that purpose, Brooke himself.

The first clash between the White Raja and British speculators occurred as a result of the discovery of antimony ore near the Bintulu, a river which was subject to the Sultan of Brunei. In November 1847 the Singapore firm of Gliddon & Co obtained a ten-year mining lease of this area in exchange for an annual royalty.³⁷⁶ They applied to the

these means were found to be inadequate, and he instructed Wise to arrange for a syndicate to take over the antimony and opium monopolies on a five-year lease. The offer was accepted by the firm of Melville & Street, who agreed to pay an annual royalty of £2,500. But during the commercial crisis of 1847-8 this firm, like so many engaged in the eastern trade, went bankrupt, and in 1849 the antimony and opium monopolies reverted to Government. The following year the antimony mines were leased to a new syndicate, R. and J. Henderson & Co., and the opium farm was taken over by a member of Brooke's staff at Kuching, and run as a state enterprise. These arrangements remained in force until the Borneo Company began operations in 1856. (*Letters*, iii, pp. 14 and 123. *P.P.*, 1850, X, pp. 1242-7). The revenues of Sarawak, however, did not meet expenses until after 1850, when a great influx of Chinese from Dutch Borneo occurred. (Spenser St. John, *The Life of Sir James Brooke* . . ., p. 65).

³⁷⁵ J. R. Logan, 'Borneo', *Journ. Ind. Arch.*, 1848, p. 496.

³⁷⁶ Gliddon & Co to Rear-Admiral Inglefield, December 7th, 1847. (C.O. 144/2).

Admiralty³⁷⁷ for ratification of their lease, but were told that no decision could be given until Sir James Brooke had had time to go into the matter on his return from Europe. An examination of the antimony fields, however, convinced them that the ore could not be landed at Singapore under \$ 1.65 a pikul, at which price mining operations would be uneconomic, and they lost interest in the scheme.³⁷⁸

In the meantime an independent adventurer named Robert Burns had prevailed upon the Singapore representative of Hamilton, Gray & Co to lend him sufficient capital to obtain a concession in the same area. Burns was a grandson of the poet and had already gained considerable experience in Borneo, where he had shown himself to be an explorer of no mean ability. He was the first European to make an excursion into the far interior of the Sultanate of Brunei, and contributed a valuable description of the Kayan people to the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*.³⁷⁹ Of his character it is difficult to form a just estimate. The quality of his writing shows that he was far from being the "disreputable adventurer" of the Sarawak histories, and the fact that he succeeded in living for some time among the wild Kayan argues that he can hardly have been as tactless and overbearing as has sometimes been suggested. On the other hand he undoubtedly had a fiery temper, was crude and predatory (particularly where women were concerned), and by the standards of his time was not an ideal representative of western civilization in the Eastern Seas.³⁸⁰

Burns arrived at Brunei early in 1848. After an argument with the Sultan and his ministers, he secured an antimony concession and proceeded to look over the ground at Bintulu. He had been there a month when a letter arrived from A. C. Crookshank, Brooke's deputy at Kuching, advising the chiefs of Bintulu that they need not work the antimony mines unless they and their peoples genuinely wished to do so.³⁸¹ But Burns persuaded the chiefs to pay no attention to this letter.

Soon afterwards Brooke himself returned to the East, clothed in his new dignity of Governor of Labuan. On the way through Singapore

³⁷⁷ From December 1846 (when Labuan became a British possession) to September 1848 (when its Government first began to function) the Admiralty were responsible for the administration of British policy in north-western Borneo.

³⁷⁸ Gliddon to Hume, November 25th, 1851. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 452).

³⁷⁹ R. Burns, 'The Kayans of the North-West of Borneo', *Journ. Ind. Arch.*, 1849, pp. 138-52.

³⁸⁰ Cf. Tom Harrison, 'Robert Burns — the first Ethnologist and Explorer of Interior Sarawak', *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, November 1951, pp. 463-77.

³⁸¹ Crookshank to the Chiefs of Bintulu, January 5th, 1848. (*P.P.*, 1852-3, LXI, p. 347).

he told Mr. Nicol, the representative of Hamilton, Gray & Co, that the time was not opportune for working antimony at Bintulu,³⁸² and when he reached Kuching he sent a letter to the chiefs which was couched in far stronger language than Crookshank's had been. "I request that in future", he wrote, "whenever an Englishman [sic] does wrong like Mr. Burns, my friends will order him out of their country, and hold no intercourse with him . . . Every English trader must obey the Government of the country in which he carries on his business . . . Let the traders, therefore, in my friends' country, be confined to their own business; and if they represent themselves to be great people, possessed of power, or talk as Mr. Burns talked, my friends will know that they speak falsely, and are men without shame".³⁸³

This letter was conveyed to Bintulu by the East India Company's steamer, *Phlegethon*. When its contents became known, the chiefs refused to have anything more to do with Burns, and he was obliged to return by the steamer to Singapore. He later went back to Brunei in order to recover his lease money, but lost his temper when discussing terms with the Sultan and behaved generally in such an insulting manner that he would almost certainly have lost his life then and there had the Brunei p^hengerans not been afraid of Raja Brooke's vengeance.³⁸⁴ After this incident the Sultan wrote to Brooke to say that he would be grateful if Mr. Burns were dissuaded from visiting the antimony fields again.³⁸⁵ Burns retired to Labuan and spent some time trying to persuade the fishermen there to ferry him over to Bintulu, but they were all too much in awe of the White Raja's displeasure to agree. He then chartered a merchant schooner and began trading along the coast. Before long, however, he was in trouble again, on one occasion for defaulting on debts and on another for assaulting the captain of his own schooner. His chequered career came to an abrupt end in September 1851, when he was murdered by pirates in Marudu Bay.

Robert Burns may well have been something of a scoundrel and a 'general undesirable' and it is possible that if Raja Brooke had not engineered his expulsion from Bintulu blood would have been shed.

³⁸² An unnecessary warning, as it turned out, since Nicol had already decided that the Bintulu speculation was a bad one. (Nicol to Brooke, March 30th, 1852: *P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 545).

³⁸³ Brooke to the Rajas of Kayan and Kinneah (n.d.). (*P.P.*, 1851, XXXVI, pp. 5-6). See also *Maemder*, ii, p. 92.

³⁸⁴ 'Minutes of a Conversation between Mr. Low and Pangeran Makota', January 11th, 1849. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, pp. 546-8).

³⁸⁵ Sultan of Brunei to Brooke, Rabi' II, 1266 (1849). (*Ibid.*, p. 548).

But it was at least doubtful if the White Raja's treatment of him was consistent with the duties of a British consul-general. Brooke made no attempt to prove or disprove the accusations against Burns before ordering his summary ejection, and the question suggests itself — Who was the White Raja of Sarawak that he should pick and choose between those who were eligible to trade under the privileges of the 1847 Treaty and those who were not? As the *North British Mail* indignantly demanded: "Why should not Mr. Robert Burns be as free to explore, to open mines, to establish trading relations in the Archipelago as Sir James Brooke? What was Sir James Brooke but a poor friendless adventurer when he began his career in the Eastern Seas? Is Borneo to be less accessible to the enterprise of British subjects since than it was before? So long as Mr. Burns does not poach on Sir James Brooke's manor, we do not see why the latter should be suffered to interfere with him".³⁸⁶

The whole matter may be summed up by saying that whether the White Raja's handling of the Burns affair was morally justifiable or not, it was undoubtedly questionable at law. Few would cavil at his statement of general principles when he wrote: "Better would it be to abandon our settlements and our trade in [the Eastern Seas] and to leave the native population to its miseries and its own wild sense of justice, than to expose it to the unrestrained licence of European speculators".³⁸⁷ But by applying his exclusion policy indiscriminately he was laying himself open to the charge that he was using his official position as Governor, Commissioner, and Consul-General in order to benefit his private position as Raja of Sarawak.

Brooke might have been able to carry through his plan to bar speculators from Borneo had he confined himself to chasing away adventurers like Burns, who had little influence or backing. But when he became involved in a similar dispute with Henry Wise over the exploitation of Borneo coal he was matching himself against a much more formidable adversary. The circumstances surrounding the long battle between Brooke and Wise were immensely complicated, but may be briefly summarized as follows.

In August 1846 the Sultan of Brunei granted Brooke a concession to work "the whole of the coal found in the country extending from

³⁸⁶ Issue of October 7th, 1851. (F.O. 12/12). It must be remembered that a paper like the *North British Mail* was in honour bound to support a grandson of Scotland's national poet whether he was a scoundrel or not.

³⁸⁷ Brooke to Earl Granville, January 5th, 1852. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 461).

Mengkabong as far as Tanjong Baram" in return for an annual payment of \$ 2,000 for the first year and \$ 1,000 for each subsequent year of operations.³⁸⁸ This constituted a practical monopoly of all coal then known to exist on the mainland of northern Borneo. Brooke had no intention of mining it himself, but had the agreement drawn out in his own name because the Sultan was unwilling to grant a concession to anyone else.³⁸⁹ In November, on Brooke's behalf, Wise offered this concession to the British Government, who declined it, but stated that there would be no objection to a private firm taking up the option.³⁹⁰ The following October Brooke transferred all his rights in Borneo coal to Wise unconditionally.³⁹¹

Meanwhile the coal beds on Labuan were attracting attention. The previous April Lieutenant Heath, of H.M.S. *Wolf*, had made a detailed survey of the various seams on the island and had reported favourably on them to Rear-Admiral Inglefield, his Commander-in-Chief.³⁹² Inglefield contracted with a beachcomber named William Henry Miles to supply Labuan coal to the Royal Navy in the Far East at £ 1 a ton.³⁹³ By scratching at surface outcrops Miles succeeded in producing a small quantity of very inferior coal, which was duly loaded into the bunkers of H.M. Ships calling at the island and later provoked blistering criticism from the engineers who were obliged to use it.

It was at this stage that Wise conceived an ambitious scheme to make a 'corner' in Borneo coal. His first step was to gain control of the fields in Labuan. In January 1848 he secured a thirty-year lease of all coal lying under the surface of 500 acres of land — a sufficient area for his purpose — for a rental of £ 100 plus a royalty to government of 2/6 a ton on output in excess of 1,000 tons per annum.³⁹⁴ Next he applied to the City of London for the necessary capital to promote a Borneo mining company. He approached R. and J. Henderson and Co, but they would not accept his terms. Other firms were also tried without success. He eventually persuaded Messrs. Melville and

³⁸⁸ 'Grant of the Sultan of Brunei', August 23rd, 1846. (*Ibid.*, p. 628).

³⁸⁹ Brooke to Templer, August 24th, 1846. (*Letters*, ii, p. 152).

³⁹⁰ British Government permission for the private exploitation of Borneo coal had already been given tentatively in October 1845.

³⁹¹ Brooke to Wise, October 6th, 1847. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 628). Governor Bulwer to Earl Granville, May 23rd, 1873. (*F.O.* 12/48).

³⁹² See Forbes, *op. cit.*, pp. 318-22. Forbes was a member of the survey party.

³⁹³ Agreement of September 7th, 1847. (*C.O.* 144/2).

³⁹⁴ Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners to the Colonial Office, January 26th, 1848. (*P.P.*, 1847-8, XLII, pp. 258-9).

Anstruther to enter into partnership with him, and with their assistance founded the Eastern Archipelago Company, of which he became the managing director.³⁹⁵ In July he sold his rights in both Labuan and Brunei coal to this company on terms which were astonishingly favourable to himself, in view of the fact that he had paid nothing for them in the first place. In 'compensation' for the surrender of his rights, he was to receive: £ 6,000 within four months of the final organization of the Company, £ 3,000 per annum for ten years from the same date, £ 10,000 worth of shares, £ 2-10-0 % of all bonuses and dividends declared, except when the total annual dividend was less than £ 7-10-0 %, and a salary of £ 800 a year plus bonuses and percentages, the whole not to exceed £ 1,800 in any one year.³⁹⁶

Brooke watched these developments with increasing concern. It was most undesirable, in his opinion, for the monopoly of such a strategically important commodity as coal to be in the hands of one man. He also considered that a royalty of \$ 1,000 per annum was an absurdly small sum to be given to the Sultan of Brunei as compensation for the surrender of all the coal in his dominions. Moreover, he further maintained, the grant he had obtained in 1846 was never intended to be exclusive, but only permissive; it conveyed a right to mine coal, not to monopolize it.³⁹⁷ Wise disagreed strongly with this view, and both he and Brooke appealed to the Colonial Office, supporting their claims with different translations of the original document of cession.³⁹⁸

This argument was in full swing when Brooke learnt with dismay that he had another and more personal reason to be dissatisfied with his London agent. When the firm of Melville & Street went bankrupt during the commercial crisis of 1847-8, Brooke lost nearly £ 10,000, and he ascribed this disaster, probably correctly, to Wise's faulty handling of his affairs.³⁹⁹ A year and a half earlier, moreover, a number of letters from Brooke to John Templer containing uncomplimentary references to his London agent had chanced to fall into the latter's

³⁹⁵ Brooke to Grey, November 24th, 1851. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, pp. 803-4).

³⁹⁶ C.O. 144/10.

³⁹⁷ Brooke to Wise, November 20th, 1848. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 632).

³⁹⁸ Brooke to Sir John Pakington, July 22nd, 1852. (*P.P.*, 1852-3, LXI, pp. 349-50).

³⁹⁹ Brooke to Earl Desart, April 10th, 1852. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXI, p. 820).

The circumstances of this loss are not clear. Brooke never recovered any damages. St. John once remarked cryptically of his hero, "Mr. Brooke never knew what was the true state of his affairs". (Spenser St. John, *The Life of Sir James Brooke* . . . , p. 65).

hands.⁴⁰⁰ This gave Wise a further reason for bearing a grudge against the White Raja. Each decided that he had been disgracefully treated by the other, and in November 1848 Brooke broke finally with Wise, after an association lasting more than ten years.⁴⁰¹ From being the staunch supporter and able advocate of Sarawak, Wise immediately became its most bitter enemy, and the dispute over Borneo coal continued more fiercely than ever.

The Eastern Archipelago Company, which began mining operations early in 1849, was a dismal failure from the outset. Shortsightedness on the part of the directors was the main cause of its difficulties. They could not be persuaded to supply their manager at Labuan with sufficient capital to set the enterprise on its feet. On June 20th, 1849, for example, the paid-up capital of the Company was £ 51,455. Yet on November 2nd of the same year its Labuan manager was obliged to ask the local Government Treasurer for a loan of \$ 600 in order to pay his workmen's wages. Wise, however, laid all the blame for the Company's slow progress on the Labuan Government, and particularly on Governor Brooke, whom he accused of vindictiveness and petty obstruction. Once again both sides carried their dispute to the Colonial Office.

On examination many of Wise's charges against Brooke turned out to be either frivolous or based on plain untruths, but on at least three occasions he scored victories over his opponent by persuading the British Government to reverse rulings Brooke had already given. In April 1850 the Colonial Office consented to a rise in the price of Labuan coal being supplied to the Admiralty, though Brooke was strongly opposed to any change.⁴⁰² The following November Earl Grey decided an argument about the exact limits of the Labuan coal lease in favour of the Company and against Brooke's advice.⁴⁰³ And at the end of 1851 the Foreign Office supported Wise's interpretation of the Brunei

⁴⁰⁰ Admiral Sir Henry Keppel, *A Sailor's Life under Four Sovereigns*, Vol. ii, p. 63. Jacob, *op. cit.*, Vol. ii, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁰¹ In 1838 Wise, then a partner in the firm of Gardner, Urquhart & Co, had helped Brooke to fit out the yacht, *Royalist*. When he became the White Raja's London agent at the end of 1841, he withdrew from this concern and founded the house of Melville, Wise & Co, which later became incorporated with Cruikshank, Melville & Co. In August 1845 Wise withdrew from this partnership also in order to devote his full attention to Bornean affairs.

⁴⁰² Minute by Earl Grey, April 26th, 1850. (C.O. 144/6).

⁴⁰³ Grey to Brooke, November 21st, 1850. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 789). Minute by Herman Merivale. (C.O. 144/4).

coal concession in preference to the White Raja's.⁴⁰⁴ These were minor triumphs in themselves, for they brought about no improvement in the fortunes of the Eastern Archipelago Company, but they had a detrimental effect on the relations between Sir James Brooke and the British Government, which were already showing signs of friction.

Brooke's period of office as Governor of Labuan was perhaps the least successful episode in his otherwise spectacular career. The real trouble was that in accepting the position he had taken on more responsibility than one man could bear. He was already the Raja of an independent kingdom — a task which would have kept most men more than fully occupied — and his duties as British Commissioner and Consul-General involved him in a great deal of travelling. During the whole of 1849 he spent only thirty-nine days at Labuan itself.⁴⁰⁵

But, apart from this, it must be admitted that the White Raja, by both character and past experience, was ill-suited for an appointment in the public service. He was too fond of having his own way and too impatient of interference in his plans. He also never lost sight of the fact that Great Britain would never have achieved her present position in Borneo if it had not been for his efforts and his sacrifices. Captain Keppel, who loyally supported Brooke on every other occasion, had little favourable to say about his administration of Labuan. "Never, my dear Wise", he told the former agent in September 1849, "did you ever make such a mistake as when, with indefatigable labour and perseverance, you raised that misshapen, useless structure, the Labuan government; I believe the Eastern Archipelago Company would have been thriving had that government never been formed... My friend Brooke has as much idea of business as a cow has of a clean shirt. Napier⁴⁰⁶ is no better... Scott, the Civil Engineer,⁴⁰⁷ is a clever, first-rate man; he has done the only good that has been done, and is the only person that ought to have been sent out... I can assure you that I am not sorry to be moving away from this station".⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ Foreign Office Memorandum of November 28th, 1852. (F.O. 12/35). Minute by Herman Merivale. (C.O. 144/7). Earl Granville to Brooke, December 31st, 1851. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 669).

⁴⁰⁵ Evidence of Earl Grey before the Select Committee on Army and Ordnance Expenditure, June 14th, 1850. (*P.P.*, 1850, X, p. 653).

⁴⁰⁶ Lieutenant-Governor William Napier, who was later dismissed by Brooke, perhaps unjustly and certainly on inadequate evidence, for inefficiency and peculation.

⁴⁰⁷ J. Scott (more properly the 'Government Surveyor') who later became Governor of British Guiana.

⁴⁰⁸ Keppel to Wise, September 2nd, 1849. (C.O. 144/6).

It would be quite unfair, however, to ascribe all the early difficulties of Labuan to incompetent administration. Brunei was hostile to the new colony from the first, partly for reasons of commercial rivalry,⁴⁰⁹ and partly because slaves from the mainland often sought sanctuary at Labuan in the hope of gaining their freedom. An outbreak of malaria also gave the colony a bad name, and the merchants of Singapore were slow to take advantage of its possibilities as a trading centre. But the fact remained that during Brooke's governorship Labuan fulfilled none of the purposes for which it had been founded, and cost the British Exchequer an average of £9,000 a year to maintain.

The White Raja returned to England for health reasons in the spring of 1851. Soon after his arrival he instituted legal proceedings against the Eastern Archipelago Company for fraud. He eventually won this case and the Company's charter was revoked, but from every point of view it was unfortunate that the instigator of the action had been the Governor of Labuan. The Company were able to claim, with considerable justification, that the duties of a British governor did not include attacking the only commercial concern which had so far been established in his colony, and which he had been specifically instructed by the Colonial Secretary to protect.

Between 1847 and 1851, by trying to exclude European speculators from Borneo and by pursuing the Eastern Archipelago Company all the way from the coal mines of Labuan to the Court of Queen's Bench in London, the White Raja drew upon himself the hostility of a powerful section of the British commercial world.⁴¹⁰ By following courses of action which suggested that when the interests of Sarawak were involved he was liable to forget his responsibilities as an official of the British Government, he damaged the reputation he had won for impartiality and strict personal integrity. Only if these two considerations are borne in mind is it possible to understand the astonishing virulence of the attacks which he now had to face, both in the press and in the House of Commons, against the measures he and the Royal Navy had been taking to suppress piracy along the north-west coast of Borneo.

By the middle of 1849 six years had gone by since Captain Keppel's

⁴⁰⁹ Brooke to Palmerston, January 9th, 1851. (F.O. 12/9).

⁴¹⁰ The directors of the Eastern Archipelago Company included the Earl of Albemarle, Sir James Campbell, Mr. Hamilton Lindsay, Captain Nairne (a director of the P. & O. Co), and Captain Bethune, R.N.

assault on the Saribas, and five since his expedition against the Sĕkrang. Both these pirate communities had consequently had ample time to forget the lesson they had received from the 'gallant Didos' and had relapsed once more into indiscriminate marauding. As a result, when in September 1848 Keppel and Brooke returned to Sarawak in H.M.S. *Maeander* on their way to establish the Government of Labuan, they realized that the work of suppressing Dyak piracy would have to be undertaken all over again. The Sultan of Brunei appealed for their assistance,⁴¹¹ and they both publicly pledged themselves to crush the Saribas and the Sĕkrang as soon as the arrival of the dry monsoon of 1849 made "boating operations" possible.⁴¹² But to Brooke's dismay the *Maeander* was ordered to China almost immediately, and plans for large-scale expeditions against the pirates had to be temporarily abandoned.

The White Raja did what he could with his own resources to keep them in check, and demanded fresh naval support. After an acrimonious correspondence with Rear-Admiral Sir Francis Collier, C.-in-C. of the Far Eastern Station, who considered that the Navy had more important work to do elsewhere, he eventually secured the services of H.M.S. *Albatross* (Commander Farquhar),⁴¹³ and on July 24th, 1849, a powerful force set sail from Kuching for an assault on the pirates of Saribas. In addition to the boats of the *Albatross*, the expedition included H.M. Brig *Royalist*, H.E.I.C.S. *Nemesis*, the steam-tender *Ranee*, Brooke's personal war-prahu (the *Singh Rajah*), and seventy native prahus manned by 2,500 Dyak auxiliaries.⁴¹⁴

Information had been received that a large *bala*, or pirate fleet, was making its way back to Saribas after a raid on the River Rajang, fifty

⁴¹¹ Sultan of Brunei to Brooke (n.d.). (*P.P.*, 1850, LV, pp. 32-3).

⁴¹² Brooke to Palmerston, February 2nd, 1850. (*Ibid.*, p. 30). Spenser St. John, *The Life of Sir James Brooke* . . . , p. 170.

⁴¹³ In June when it seemed likely that the *Albatross* was about to be withdrawn without firing a shot, Brooke protested to Collier: "I was not aware until I perused your recent communication that Her Majesty's Ships were commissioned for non-employment in the public service". (C.O. 144/3). This is Brooke at his worst. It was certainly no way for the Governor of a small British colony to address a Rear-Admiral Commanding-in-Chief, least of all Sir Francis Collier, whose choleric temper is sufficiently indicated by the following story: "He had once been summoned before a bench of magistrates, and having uttered a great oath the chairman fined him five shillings for swearing. He looked grimly at the bench of three magistrates, drew a gold coin from his pocket, threw it on the table, and said, 'D - - - your eyes all round, and that will make up the sovereign' ". (Spenser St. John, *The Life of Sir James Brooke* . . . , p. 146).

⁴¹⁴ *Maeander*, i, pp. 148-50.

miles up the coast to the north. Brooke and Farquhar decided that their best plan would be to ambush this fleet on its return, and disposed their forces so as to cover all possible entrances to the enemy's strongholds. On the night of July 31st the pirates fell into the trap. 88 Saribas prahus were destroyed and about 300 pirates killed outright; a further 500 died later in the jungle or after reaching their homes. Spectacular destruction was caused by the steamer, *Nemesis*. At the height of the action she drove right through the struggling mass of prahus, catching up boats and occupants in her paddle-wheels and crushing them to a pulp. The total casualties on the British side were "two natives killed and about six wounded".⁴¹⁵

Such was the famous 'Battle of Batang Marau', the greatest blow ever struck at Dyak piracy, and the immediate cause of the attack upon the policy and reputation of Sir James Brooke.⁴¹⁶ For the next four years every aspect of the White Raja's rule in Borneo was to be the subject of the most intense controversy, both in England and in the East. Singapore society resolved itself into 'pro-Brooke' and 'anti-Brooke' factions, the *Free Press* supporting and the *Straits Times* opposing him. In London the *Times*, the *Westminster Review*, and other papers declared in his favour, while the *Daily News*, the *Spectator*, and the *Examiner* were against him. In the Houses of Parliament the problems of Borneo were discussed with an interest never shown before.

Criticism of the White Raja took two main forms. He was attacked in his private capacity as sovereign of Sarawak, and in his public capacity as a servant of the British Crown. Of the two, the campaign to destroy his personal reputation was the more violent and the less justifiable. It was led by the prominent Radical, Joseph Hume, and carried on in the press and on public platforms chiefly by spokesmen of the London Peace Society and the Aborigines Protection Society. Louis A. Chamerovzow, for example, the secretary of the London Peace Society, published a violent attack on Brooke in 1851, entitled *Borneo Facts versus Borneo Fallacies*. Equally intemperate were *A Naval Execution*, by 'W.N.', and *Adventures of Sir James Brooke, K.C.B., Rajah of Sarawak, "Sovereign de facto of Borneo Proper"*,

⁴¹⁵ Farquhar to Collier, August 25th, 1849. (*P.P.*, 1850, LV, p. 18).

⁴¹⁶ An exaggerated account in the *Straits Times* of an engagement between the *Nemesis* and a Balanini fleet in 1847 had already aroused some unfavourable comment, but it was the action at Batang Marau which provoked the real assault on Brooke's Borneo policy.

late Governor of Labuan, by George Foggo. Many of the accusations made in these works were taken up by contemporary newspapers and periodicals, apparently without any attempt at verification. None is worth refuting in detail. The authors betray a total ignorance of Bornean affairs and many seem to have had no qualifications for undertaking the task of explaining them. Foggo, for instance, was 'Secretary to the National Monuments Association'.

The burden of complaint in these publications and manifestos was that Sir James Brooke had started an unholy crusade against "innocent natives" and "peaceable traders" in order to advance his private interests. He was a "butcher" who had "murdered the savages into subjection". He had created pirates where there were only poor uncivilized Dyak tribes engaged in occasional civil war. He had persuaded the Royal Navy to suppress these harmless children of nature not because they merited punishment but because they had refused to submit to his tyrannical rule.

This whole indictment rested on the assumption that, properly speaking, there was no such thing as a Dyak pirate. Neither the Saribas nor the Sĕkrang, it was pointed out, had yet learnt the use of firearms; they therefore could not be regarded as pirates since they were obviously not a danger to European shipping.⁴¹⁷ It was certainly true that Dyak methods of warfare were unsophisticated by western standards. The Saribas *bala* demolished by Farquhar, for example, had only four small brass guns in the whole fleet,⁴¹⁸ and Brooke himself noted in a letter to Lord Palmerston: "Should these pirates become possessed of musketry, which is but too probable, the result must be deplorable".⁴¹⁹ But it was quite absurd for Hume and his supporters to argue that because the Saribas and the Sĕkrang were not a menace to large European ships they were harmless to small native trading-prahus. His contention that Brooke's 'victims' were only engaged in legitimate civil war was equally preposterous. Their depredations extended for hundreds of miles along the coast, and their attacks were made indiscriminately on Malays, Chinese, Dyaks, or anyone else who had the misfortune to cross their path and had not the strength to resist them.

Hume and the others who assailed the White Raja on personal

⁴¹⁷ Speech by Joseph Hume of July 10th, 1851. (*Hansard*, Ser. iii, Vol. 118, Cols. 443-7).

⁴¹⁸ Deposition of the native Siup. (*P.P.*, 1850, LV, pp. 33-4).

⁴¹⁹ Brooke to Palmerston, March 6th, 1849. (*Ibid.*, p. 14).

grounds damaged their case by embellishing it with wild exaggerations and wholesale distortions of the truth. Their speeches and writings reveal that they did not understand the real situation in Borneo, and they were far too ready to believe everything to Brooke's detriment that was reported to them. By quoting garbled extracts from his private journals,⁴²⁰ and by relying on the evidence of incompetent and inaccurate witnesses, they weakened an indictment which, with the use of greater subtlety, could have been made very much more formidable. Brooke realized this, and commented shrewdly: "They are asses to have pushed the attack with such perceptible malignity and personality; a cooler tone would have answered their purpose better".⁴²¹

Hume was on comparatively firm ground, for example, when he charged the White Raja with unnecessary cruelty. Many observers were appalled at the apparently heartless manner in which hundreds of savages had been struck down by British guns on the coasts of Borneo without having the means or the opportunity to fight back.⁴²² Brooke's employment of Dyak auxiliaries also came under criticism;⁴²³ the communities from which they were drawn, it was claimed, were indistinguishable from those against which they had been sent. Some of his friends undoubtedly did him considerable harm by publishing highly-coloured accounts of the scenes of carnage which accompanied many of his expeditions. Horace St. John, for example, writing in 1852, at the height of the controversy, gave the following description of Keppel's assault on the Sëkrang: "A great conflict took place,

⁴²⁰ Brooke gave his journals to Captain Keppel with instructions that they were to be published if it were considered desirable. Keppel submitted them 'in the raw' to Mr. Jerdan, the editor of the *Court Journal*, who allowed Wise to see them. (Keppel, *A Sailor's Life under Four Sovereigns*, Vol. ii, pp. 31 and 63). When the proof of the first edition came from the printers, Wise persuaded the publishers to suppress it, on the ground that the journals as they stood would cause a scandal. He later claimed that he saved the White Raja's reputation by deleting several passages which gave especially grim details of operations against the Borneo pirates. This claim has been generally believed, but a comparison of the suppressed edition (a copy of which is in the British Museum) with the published version shows that the only important deletions made by Wise were some of Brooke's more outspoken criticisms of the Government of the Netherlands Indies.

⁴²¹ Jacob, op. cit., Vol. ii, p. 29.

⁴²² Cf. A. Audiganne, 'Politique coloniale de l'Angleterre: expédition de Bornéo', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1846, pp. 645-70.

⁴²³ Cf. D. C. Steyn Parvé, *De handelingen van Sir James Brooke op Borneo, getoetst aan de officiële Engelsche bescheiden en de bestaande traktaaten*, pp. 140-65, and the 'Letter from fifty-three merchants of Singapore', to J. Hume, January 1851 in *P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, pp. 489-92.

thousands being engaged on both sides — a mass of boats drifting along the stream, while the Dyaks were spearing and stabbing each other, decapitated trunks, and heads without bodies — scattered about in ghastly profusion. The result of all these operations was most satisfactory”.⁴²⁴

Brooke was ruthless in his treatment of the Saribas and the Sĕkrang but he cannot fairly be accused of inhumanity. There were numerous occasions on which he restrained his followers from unnecessary brutality, and he always tempered justice with mercy whenever he considered that circumstances warranted it. But he believed that tribes like the Saribas could be persuaded to abandon their marauding practices only by being taught to respect the power of a British fleet. “A system of piracy”, he wrote, “can only be put down by a system of repression; it requires knowledge, and a course of alternate severity and conciliation to effect it”.⁴²⁵ There can be no doubt that this policy was the right one. After Farquhar’s attack of July 1849 the Saribas abandoned piracy altogether, and settled down to trade and agriculture.⁴²⁶ They would never have deserted their traditional occupation if it had not been for the grim lesson of Batang Marau.

The real instigator of the personal defamation campaign against the White Raja was his discarded agent, Henry Wise, who supplied Hume and others with most of the ‘evidence’ which was presented on their side during the controversy. Bitterly resentful at not being allowed to speculate freely in Borneo, Wise suddenly discovered in 1849 that Brooke’s operations against the pirates, against which he had made no murmur of protest during the preceding five years, were “dreadful proceedings . . . unjustifiable on the ground of justice and humanity”.⁴²⁷ It was Wise, too, who initiated most of the complaints which were made against Brooke’s actions as a servant of the Crown, and in the long run these caused more damage to the White Raja’s standing with the British Government than all the vituperative assaults on his private character.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁴ Horace St. John, *The Malay Archipelago: its History and Present State*, Vol. ii, p. 292.

⁴²⁵ J. Brooke, ‘Memorandum on Piracy’, July 31st, 1852. (*P.P.*, 1852-3, LXI, p. 346).

⁴²⁶ Spenser St. John to Lord Malmesbury, September 21st, (*Ibid.*, p. 374).

⁴²⁷ Wise to Lord John Russell, November 26th, 1849. (*P.P.*, 1850, LV, p. 1).

⁴²⁸ It is not possible to indicate here more than the essential features of Hume’s case against Raja Brooke. His accusations fill scores of folio pages in the *Parliamentary Papers* from 1850-54. A summary of his views may be found

Criticism of Brooke in his capacity of British Commissioner and Consul-General in Borneo and Governor of Labuan was expressed at various times by Gladstone, Cobden, Bright, Sidney Herbert, and the Earl of Ellenborough, as well as by Joseph Hume and several other political figures of less importance. Unlike Hume, none of these statesmen was biased against the White Raja personally. Cobden's primary object, for example, was to force the British Government to abandon their policy of allowing the Royal Navy to be used to further the White Raja's aims. In a letter to John Bright of December 1849, after deploring the "sentimental mania which gave Brooke all his powers of evil", Cobden wrote: "It shocks me to think what fiendish atrocities may be committed by English arms without rousing any conscientious resistance at home, provided they be only far enough off, and the victims too feeble to trouble us with their remonstrances or groans . . . The Peace Society and the Aborigines Society are shams if such deeds go unrebuffed. We cannot go before the world with clean hands on any other question if we are the silent spectators of such atrocities".⁴²⁹ Gladstone's purpose, too, was to discredit the administration which had sanctioned Brooke's policy, not to attack the White Raja's character. He blamed the Admiralty and the Foreign Office, not Brooke, for the "butchery" which had occurred at Batang Marau. In his opinion, British ships should not have been allowed to participate in the action in the first place. He declared that Sir James Brooke was "a man of philanthropy truly Christian", and refused to support Hume's demand for a public inquiry on the grounds that it was framed in such a way as to hold the wrong party responsible.⁴³⁰

Strangely enough, interest in Bornean piracy was first aroused in the House of Commons by a matter which had no direct connection with Sir James Brooke at all. Early in 1850 a number of extremely heavy claims for head-money were submitted to Parliament in respect of naval operations on the coasts of Borneo and nearby islands, and Radicals like Cobden, Bright, and Hume were quick to rise in protest against what they regarded as a disgraceful waste of public funds. In accordance with an Act of 1825, the crews of H.M.

in the pamphlet he published in 1853, entitled *A Letter to the Right Honourable the Earl of Malmesbury . . . relative to the Proceedings of Sir James Brooke, K.C.B., etc., etc., in Borneo*. (Copy in the India Office Library).

⁴²⁹ Quoted in John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, Vol. ii, pp. 55-6.

⁴³⁰ Speech of July 10th, 1851. (*Hansard*, Ser. iii, Vol. 118, Col. 485). See also W. E. Gladstone, 'Piracy in Borneo and the Operations of July 1849', *The Contemporary Review*, 1877, pp. 181-98.

Ships engaged in operations against pirates were entitled to a reward of £ 20 for each pirate taken or killed during an attack, and £ 5 for every 'piratical person' not taken or killed but known to have been alive at the beginning of the battle.⁴³¹ The Act was designed to encourage the suppression of piracy in the West Indies, and was passed at a time when numerous freebooters were operating in that area under letters of marque purporting to be issued by certain of Spain's insurgent South American colonies.⁴³² The scale of awards laid down may have been appropriate to the conditions of the West Indies in 1825, but it seemed startlingly generous when applied to the results of naval engagements in the East Indies twenty years later.

For their services at the Battle of Batang Marau Commander Farquhar and his men received £ 20,700. The calculations were made as follows: 500 pirates 'destroyed' at £ 20 per head equals £ 10,000; 2,140 pirates 'dispersed' at £ 5 per head equals £ 10,700; total, £ 20,700.⁴³³ Farquhar was promoted for his efficient handling of the operation, and his personal share of the head-money awarded was £ 2,757. This was handsome pay for one night's work by any standards, especially as the British part of the force had sustained no casualties and had really been in very little danger. The Earl of Ellenborough complained in the House of Lords that head-money was being paid out for the destruction of Borneo pirates armed with spears and swords at a rate which was "four times the amount . . . given to those who captured or destroyed ships and vessels in action with a national enemy".⁴³⁴

The head-money system was also regarded with suspicion because on most occasions the only witnesses of the Royal Navy's battles with pirates in the Eastern Seas were the sailors themselves. Since no one could look over their shoulders, the temptation to submit inflated figures of enemy casualties must have been strong indeed. In at least one case it seems to have been irresistible. When H.M.S. *Samarang* had a brush with some prahus off the coast of Halmahera in June 1844, her crew were awarded £ 11,900 head-money. Evidence collected later suggests

⁴³¹ 'An Act for encouraging the Capture or Destruction of Piratical Ships and Vessels', 6 Geo IV, Cap. xlix.

⁴³² William Senior, *Naval History in the Law Courts*, pp. 100-1.

⁴³³ 'Certificate of Recorder of the Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca', October 8th, 1849. (*P.P.*, 1850, LV, p. 24). Head-money return, referring to operations of July 31st, 1849. (*P.P.*, 1851, LVI, Pt. i, p. 155). Buckley, *op. cit.*, Vol. ii, p. 509.

⁴³⁴ Speech of April 18th, 1850. (*Hansard*, Ser. iii, Vol. 110, Col. 483).

not only that the number of enemy was exaggerated, but that in all probability some of the prahus attacked were not pirate vessels at all.⁴³⁵ According to contemporary Dutch accounts the vessels engaged by Belcher's force were *korra korras* which belonged to the Residency of Ternate and were returning home after making their annual *politietogt* (police-trip) to the coasts of New Guinea. Belcher claimed that 350 'pirates' were killed in the action off Halmahera, but the figures given by the Dutch Resident of Ternate (who presumably would have had no reason for scaling them down) were 16 killed and 40 wounded.⁴³⁶

The Act of 1825 was repealed early in 1850, and replaced by one a good deal less accommodating. Soon afterwards the House of Commons was presented with a bill for £ 100,000 representing the amount of head-money earned by the Navy during the previous year's operations. Payment was agreed to, despite strong protests from the Radicals.⁴³⁷ Brooke, as the author of the policy which had made these awards possible, received a large measure of the blame, though he himself did not benefit from them financially.

The White Raja also came under fire from Hume, Sidney Herbert, and others for combining the Governorship of Labuan with private trading activities at Sarawak. In Herbert's opinion, this "could not be otherwise than prejudicial to the interests of the Crown".⁴³⁸ Brooke's defence was that he had not personally been involved in direct commercial transactions since leasing the Kuching antimony mines in 1846 — two years before taking up an appointment in the public service — and that all profits derived from the sale of antimony had been, and were still, devoted to the expenses of the State of Sarawak.⁴³⁹ Earl Grey had already explained to a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1850 that at the time the Government had seen no valid reason why Brooke should not retain possession of Sarawak concurrently with holding public office,⁴⁴⁰ but Brooke's critics were not satisfied. They produced a wealth of evidence, supplied by Wise, which seemed to

⁴³⁵ Marryat, *op. cit.*, p. 54. William Senior, 'An Early Victorian Windfall', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 1911, pp. 80-3. Cf. Rutter, *The Pirate Wind*, pp. 133-43.

⁴³⁶ Resident Helbach to the Governor of the Moluccas, June 11th, 1844. (*Buit. Zaken*, No. 3133).

⁴³⁷ 'Debate on the Navy Estimates', May 23rd, 1850. (*Hansard*, Ser. iii, Vol. 111, Cols. 294-311).

⁴³⁸ Sidney Herbert to Brooke, July 1st, 1852. (*Letters*, iii, p. 130).

⁴³⁹ Sir James Brooke, *A Vindication of his Character and Proceedings...*, p. 17. Brooke to Templer, October 11th, 1850. (*Letters*, iii, pp. 14-15). Templer to Hawes, July 2nd, 1850. (*P.P.*, 1850, X, p. 1242).

⁴⁴⁰ *P.P.*, 1850, X, p. 655.

show that the White Raja had discriminated unfairly against British merchants who attempted to trade freely in Borneo. Gliddon, the one-time speculator in Bintulu antimony, for example, accused Brooke of "trafficking jealousy and unscrupulous malevolences".⁴⁴¹

Nevertheless, up to the end of 1852 all Hume's efforts to persuade the House of Commons to order an official investigation into the affairs of Borneo ended in failure.⁴⁴² In December of that year, however, Lord Derby's Government fell, and a coalition headed by the Earl of Aberdeen took its place. The new cabinet included Gladstone and Sidney Herbert, both critics of the White Raja. When the new Prime Minister consented to a Commission of Inquiry in March 1853, it was assumed by Brooke's friends that he had done so because of pressure from Gladstone and Herbert, and because the support of Hume and the Radicals was needed if the coalition were to survive. The White Raja, it has been said, was "thrown to them [i.e. the Radicals] as a peace-sop".⁴⁴³ The truth was, however, that Aberdeen and his Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Clarendon, had a sufficient reason of their own for wanting an inquiry into Bornean affairs.

When Brooke was arranging matters in Brunei after Admiral Cochrane's attack on the capital of July 1846, he took the opportunity of obtaining from the Sultan a fresh title to his kingdom of Sarawak.⁴⁴⁴ "The Lord Sultan", stated this document, "grants the province of Sarawak . . . unto the Tuan Bësar, James Brooke, Esquire . . . to be ruled in accordance with the wishes of the Tuan Bësar . . ." ⁴⁴⁵ No mention was made of annual tribute, though the sums to be paid by the White Raja to the Sultan and other Brunei nobles had been specified in all previous agreements. (The stipulation was retained, however, that \$ 4,000 (Sp) would be paid to Brunei on the demise of Brooke or of his heirs.) From 1846 onwards, therefore, the State of Sarawak was *de facto* independent of Brunei.

A Foreign Office Memorandum of January 1853, however, reveals that the British Government had not yet recognized this change in status. Indeed, until Hume brought the matter to public notice in March 1852, the Government were not even aware that a fresh grant had been made. The Memorandum notes further that Brooke had

⁴⁴¹ Gliddon to Hume, November 25th, 1851. (*P.P.*, 1852, XXXI, p. 458).

⁴⁴² Hume's motions demanding an inquiry were defeated by overwhelming majorities: July 1850, 169 to 29; July 1851, 230 to 19.

⁴⁴³ L. A. Mills, 'British Malaya 1824-1867', *JRASMB*, November 1925, p. 261.

⁴⁴⁴ See pp. 125-6 above.

⁴⁴⁵ Grant of August 2nd, 1846. (Maxwell and Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 186).

acquired his new title before he received an appointment as British Commissioner, and asks: "Would such a commission have been issued had Her Majesty's Government considered him as an independent Prince?"⁴⁴⁶

It seemed to both Aberdeen and Clarendon that Brooke's claim to unrestricted sovereignty over Sarawak, and also the charges which had been laid against him of hindering British commercial enterprise in Borneo needed closer examination. A convenient method of doing this would be by means of the Commission of Inquiry for which Hume and others had been pressing for so long. "The incompatibility of [Brooke's] character of Rajah and Consul", wrote the Prime Minister in a private note to the Foreign Secretary, "his relations with native chiefs, and his employment of British forces in their internal disputes afford reasonable grounds for inquiry. Complaint has been made that the general interests of British commerce have been injured by the position of Sir J. Brooke, and the influence exercised by him in support of his own monopoly . . . Sir J. Brooke should be informed of our intentions, but I would bring *no charges*, although, of course, complaints must be received. On our part, it should be a fair and impartial *inquiry*".⁴⁴⁷ Accordingly, when Clarendon issued instructions for a Commission, he stated that the first question it had to answer was whether the White Raja's position at Sarawak was "compatible with his duties as British Consul-General and Commissioner for Trade, and with his character of a British subject". And he added this warning for the Commission's guidance: "It is to be observed that by no act of Her Majesty's Government has countenance ever been given to Sir James Brooke's assumption of independence, and that his possession of Sarawak has never been considered otherwise by them than as a private grant".⁴⁴⁸

When the Government's decision to hold an inquiry was first announced, Brooke welcomed it, for he felt confident that an impartial investigation would finally clear him from Hume's vindictive charges.⁴⁴⁹ But his attitude changed abruptly when he learnt the Commission's terms of reference, and he protested vigorously to Clarendon that the independence of Sarawak had long been recognized and had never been

⁴⁴⁶ Foreign Office Memorandum of January 16th, 1853. (F.O. 12/14).

⁴⁴⁷ Aberdeen to Clarendon, March 24th, 1853. (*Aberdeen Papers*: British Museum Add. MS. 43188, p. 56).

⁴⁴⁸ Clarendon to Sir Charles Wood, June 21st, 1853. (Jacob, *op. cit.*, Vol. ii, p. 91).

⁴⁴⁹ Brooke to Clarendon, April 4th, 1853. (F.O. 12/13).

questioned by any previous Foreign Secretary.⁴⁵⁰ Brooke was seriously in error here. The truth was that the matter had never received detailed consideration. Even Lord Palmerston, one of the White Raja's staunchest supporters, confessed in 1850 that he found it quite impossible to comprehend the precise nature of the relationship between Sarawak and the Sultanate of Brunei.⁴⁵¹

The Commission "appointed to inquire into certain matters connected with the position of Sir James Brooke" conducted its investigations at Singapore, and was in session from September 11th to November 20th, 1854. It consisted of two members, Messrs. Prinsep and Devereux, both of the East India Company's service. On the charges of trading while holding public office and of obstructing the Eastern Archipelago Company, the Commissioners exonerated the White Raja completely, but they decided nonetheless that his position as ruler of Sarawak was incompatible with his holding office under the Crown — a decision of academic interest only, since he had resigned all public appointments simultaneously with protesting against the Commission's terms of reference the previous September.⁴⁵² Neither Commissioner was in any doubt about the piratical nature of the Saribas and the Sëkrang; but, whereas Devereux believed that the punishments inflicted on them had been "just and expedient", Prinsep thought that Brooke's practice of "acting in consort with savage allies" made it undesirable that he should be entrusted with power to call for British naval support against piratical tribes. The Commissioners also failed to agree on an answer to the most important problem they were called on to solve — the nature of the White Raja's position at Sarawak. Prinsep held that Brooke was "a vassal of the Sultan of Brunei", though admittedly "holding by a tenure very lax and easy to be thrown off altogether"; while Devereux, who was prepared to concede that Sarawak was in fact independent of Brunei, expressed a doubt whether Brooke, as a British subject, could "attain to the position of being an independent ruler of a foreign country".⁴⁵³

Thus, although the White Raja emerged from his long ordeal with his personal reputation undamaged, the findings of the Singapore Commission of Inquiry were unsatisfactory to him and his supporters from every other point of view. Sarawak was now farther than ever

⁴⁵⁰ Brooke to Clarendon, September 27th, 1853. (Ibid.)

⁴⁵¹ Minute by Lord Palmerston, October 12th, 1850. (F.O. 12/8).

⁴⁵² Brooke to Clarendon, September 24th, 1853. (F.O. 12/13).

⁴⁵³ 'Reports of the Commissioners' . . . , *P.P.*, 1854-5, XXIX, pp. 4-21.

from recognition either as a British colony, which he had originally hoped it would be, or as a state in its own right, which he was beginning to realize it would have to become if it was to survive. The mere fact that an inquiry had been held, moreover, had two far-reaching consequences. The interrogations to which he had been subjected not only embittered Brooke towards the British Government, with the result that relations between Sarawak and the Foreign Office deteriorated from this time onward, but also seriously damaged his reputation with his Bornean subjects. Sarawak was soon to be beset by numerous economic and political difficulties and its ruler, deserted as he thought by Great Britain, and abandoned by the Royal Navy, had every reason to be alarmed at the rapid progress which his Dutch neighbours were making in their efforts to extend their rule in western, southern, and eastern Borneo.

