RAJA JAMES BROOKE AND SARAWAK: AN ANOMALY IN THE 19TH CENTURY BRITISH COLONIAL SCENE

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(The text of a lecture given to the Branch on 18th January 1972)

To the reading public a hundred years ago the name of Raja James Brooke and his oriental kingdom of Sarawak, then a medium sized principality on the northwest coast of Borneo, conjured up visions of dark impenetrable jungles; tropical rivers and mangrove coasts infested with the fiercest and most barbaric of pirates; and a pagan headhunting primitive people, ruled over by a Malay sultan and a court of Malay chiefs who had over long years of decline and corruption been reduced to only slightly more respectable status than the pirates. Brooke was usually presented in a highly romantic light—the best type of British export, the humanitarian colonial who helped penetrate the barbaric darkness of remote Borneo and who was holding the thin precarious line of civilization. Joseph Conrad and later, Somerset Maugham, added to the romance and colour surrounding the Borneo and Malay world of which Brooke was an important part.

Much that went to make up this mental picture of Borneo in the English reading world was fact. There were pirates aplenty. The Sultanate of Brunei had declined to a low state of impotence and corruption. Brunei was by the nineteenth century one of those decaying Moslem states of the Malay world about which the historian Lennox Mills wrote,[1]

> The rule of the Malays was as weak as it was cruel and oppressive; individually brave, they were unable to prevent their state from crumbling to pieces before their eyes . . . . The Malay nobles appear to have divided their time between intrigue and dissipation at Brunei Town, and the oppression of their Dayak subjects . . . .

Many of the Dayaks were indeed the fierce headhunters that were depicted in the nineteenth century accounts. And James Brooke

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[1] L. A. Mills, *British Malaya 1824-67,* (Singapore 1925), p. 284.

entered the Borneo scene in 1839 very much the idealist-humanitarian, nineteenth century liberal, gentleman adventurer, in the colonial tradition of such forerunners as Francis Light of Penang and Thomas Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore and sometime British governor of Java. Even much of the colour and romance painted by the early travellers and story writers bears up under the careful scrutiny of the historian.

James Brooke came from stock which had produced a seventeenth century lord mayor of London. His father and uncle were civil servants in the East India Company, and James lived until aged 12 near Benares on the Ganges in British India where he was born in 1803.

Brooke himself entered the military service of the Company after a somewhat indifferent education which involved only two years of formal schooling in the Norwich Grammer School. He was severely wounded in a campaign of the first Anglo-Burma war in 1825, and after a prolonged convalescence resigned from the Company, largely, we are led to believe, because of disenchantment with its conduct of eastern affairs and because of widespread corruption among Company servants.

When in 1835 Brooke's father, then a retired *nabob* living in Bath, died leaving him a comfortable fortune of £30,000, James bought a schooner and fitted out an expedition to Borneo and the Celebes Islands, an area in the East Indies with which he was familiar from earlier voyages and from exhaustive reading of the accounts of George Windsor Earl and Stamford Raffles.

Brooke's schooner sailed in December 1838 under the colours of the Royal Yacht Club. He looked forward to satisfying his adventurous curiosity about Borneo and perhaps doing some trading. He particularly wanted to penetrate to the interior of Borneo, and had in mind exploring up the rivers which flowed into Marudu Bay, on the northern end of the island. He was a private voyager, but the colours of the Royal Yacht Club commanded respect in naval and colonial circles and he was well received in Singapore where he arrived in May 1839.

There he was given a pseudo-official mission to perform in Borneo. Several Singapore-based vessels had recently been shipwrecked or plundered by Bornean pirates and their crews sold into

slavery. One of the Brunei princes, Raja Muda Hasim, had shown a rather more friendly attitude toward European traders out of Singapore than had the pirate chiefs. Brooke was commissioned to make contact with Hasim and see what he could do to make English ships welcome in the rivers of Borneo. Brooke was given a letter from Governor Bonham addressed to the Sultan of Brunei, Omar Ali Saifuddin.

Sarawak in those days was the southernmost part of the Brunei sultanate, little more than the Malay village of Kuching and the Sarawak River. The local Malay chiefs had for some time been in rebellion against the extortionary rule of the Brunei governor, and Raja Muda Hasim had been sent to suppress the rebellion but without much success.

It was in Sarawak that Brooke, on the 15th August 1839, met Hasim and his brother Bedruddin who impressed him with their "overawing and stately demeanour", and their above average intelligence and political acumen. They were not at all the ordinary dissipated Malay chiefs that proliferated in the environs of the Brunei court. Brooke was made welcome and carried on conversations about Malay politics and trade. He than continued his voyage to Celebes and again returned to Kuching in the summer of 1840.

Without going into the details of Malay intrigue and procrastination that surrounded a most fascinating episode of British colonial history, suffice it to say that within a year Brooke had successively: convinced himself that it was worthwhile attempting to settle the rebellion in a just and fair way; had thrown the considerable weight and prestige of his expedition behind Hasim; had negotiated an end to the rebellion, which characteristically included a fair and humane amnesty for the rebellious chiefs; and had accepted in the bargain the governorship of Sarawak. Brooke wrote a lively account of the proceedings for his journal entry,[2]

> Under the guns of *Royalist*, and with a small body of men to protect me personally, and the great majority of all classes with me, it is not surprising that the negotiation proceeded rapidly to a favourable issue. The document was quickly drawn up, sealed, signed, and delivered; and on the 24th of

[2] R. Munday, *Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes from the Journals of James Brooke, Esq.* (John Murray, London, 1848), Vol. I, p. 271.

> September 1841, I was declared Rajah and Governor of Sarawak amidst the roar of cannon, and a general display of flags and banners from the shore and boats on the river.

Some observers in Singapore pronounced Brooke's new position a sentence rather than a reward. Nevertheless the new Raja set about vigorously organizing the state and establishing a rule of law, roughly based upon the Bengal code and local *adat* or customary law. In 1842 he visited the sultan in his ramshackle wooden palace in Brunei Town, an unattractive clutter of Malay huts built on stilts over a sluggish tidal stream. From the sultan he obtained confirmation of his appointment. The following year it was made hereditary, in perpetuity, and in 1846 the sultan executed a deed of cession of Sarawak to Brooke and his heirs. In subsequent years Brunei ceded additional portions of territory to the Brooke dynasty of white rajas, until by 1890 the state of Sarawak reached approximately its present size.

This, in a somewhat sketchy way, is how Raja James Brooke acquired control of an oriental state almost as large as England and sparsely inhabited by a conglomeration of frequently fierce pagan peoples, a few Malays and some Chinese. In the remaining part of the paper I want to consider ways in which, to my mind, Sarawak under Brooke rule stood out as an anomaly in the British colonial experience.[3]

II

First, let me consider Raja Brooke's position in his own state of Sarawak. Brooke considered that he had been prevailed upon by the Malay chiefs to become their raja, that they chose him. He described, in his journals, the scene upon the occasion in 1842 when the Sultan's confirmation of his appointment was proclaimed in Sarawak.[4]

> When we returned from Borneo the Sultan's letter giving me the country was read in public, and when finished we had a scene. Muda Hassim, who was standing, asked aloud, whether anyone dissented; for if they did they were now to make it known.

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[3] For a study of the growth of British influence in Borneo see L. R. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo* (Hong Kong University Press, 1970).

[4] R. Munday, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-24.

No one dissented, whereupon

> Muda Hassim then drew forth his sabre, and raising it, proclaimed in a loud voice, that any one who contested the Sultan's appointment, his head should be split in two. On which ten of his brothers drew their krisses and flourished them . . . .

As we have seen James Brooke acquired Sarawak as a private individual; but there is little question but that elements within the Brunei court, centered upon Hasim and Bedruddin, which came to be known as the "English party" wished to bring the British into an alliance with them to further their own political ends, and they saw Brooke as an agency by means of which this goal might be pursued. Although given a pseudo-political mission by the Singapore authorities Brooke undertook no official duties for Britain until 1844 when he was appointed[5] "agent near the person of the Sultan of Borneo", a "special and temporary office", and was commissioned to find a site for a naval station along the northwest coast of Borneo.

When Labuan was purchased from Brunei and created a British colony Brooke became its first governor in 1847. The same year he negotiated a consular treaty with the sultan and was named consul to Brunei. His dual appointment from the Foreign and Colonial Offices came largely as a result of the reputation he enjoyed in England as a result of his successful battles against Borneo pirates. Not only was he popular with officers of the Royal Navy in the East who aided him in his anti-piracy warfare on the coast. His exploits had also been well publicised at home. In 1847 he returned to England, the hero of the day. He was fêted, given the freedom of the City of London, presented at Court at Windsor Castle, where the Prince Consort found him an interesting conversationalist, and was knighted.

At the end of the 1840s, then, Brooke found himself the possessor of three posts. He was Raja of Sarawak in his own right, and an officer of the Crown as Governor of Labuan and Consul to Brunei. The nature of his responsibilities in the three positions very soon created a conflict of interest situation and in 1854 he resigned his crown appointments.

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[5] Aberdeen to Brooke, 1 November 1844, Foreign Office Series 12, Volume 2 (FO 12/2).

The issue of Brooke's status revolved around, firstly, the question of whether or not a subject of the Queen could hold the position as a sovereign prince of a foreign state; and, secondly, whether Brooke was in fact an independent ruler or a vassal of the Sultan of Brunei.

The issue, however, was not a burning one in the ministries of Whitehall. Despite the fact that Borneo was of concern to Britain as the guardian of the eastern flank of the South China Sea route to the China coast, and was to assume, gradually, more strategic value as first France and later Germany began colonial operations in the area, at mid-century Britain possessed a colony and naval station at Labuan and a ("good strong") consular treaty with Brunei which gave her a certain measure of control, if she chose to indulge it, in Brunei's relations with foreign states. Most of the Colonial and Foreign Secretaries in London, until the 1870s were not very interested in defining precisely Raja Brooke's status.

For the most part, Whitehall grudgingly approved of Brooke's "civilizing influence" in Borneo. Lord Palmerston, Foreign Secretary in 1846, offered naval support for the suppression of piracy, and during a later term of office gave standing orders to the Eastern squadron to visit Sarawak at regular intervals. But the Foreign Office generally held to the view that "it is not the policy of Her Majesty's Government that British subjects should possess territory on the mainland of Borneo".[6]

Lord Clarendon, when Foreign Secretary in the mid-1850s, came close to disavowing Brooke's position in Sarawak. In 1853 the Raja took issue with a Foreign Office statement that seemed to assume that Brooke was a vassal of Brunei. Clarendon minuted,[7]

> It seems to me that the various documents tend to prove how cautiously the government abstained from recognizing his (Brooke's) independence although in various ways the anomalous character of his position has been admitted.

But Clarendon did not leave it at that. When in 1855 Spencer St. John succeeded Brooke as Consul in Brunei he suggested to the Foreign Office that he also be accredited to Sarawak as an independent state. The Raja agreed and insisted that the new consul must receive his exequatur from him. This act would render the desired

[6] FO to Admiralty, 24 July 1846, FO 12/4.
[7] Clarendon minute upon Brooke to FO, 27 September 1853, FO 12/13.

recognition. But Clarendon would not agree. He consulted the Law Officers and concluded that while it was legally possible for the Queen to permit one of her subjects to assume the sovereignty of a foreign state and to so recognize him, it is to be done only in exceptional circumstances. Brooke could not be recognized. Lord Clarendon wrote to St. John on this occasion,[8]

> Her Majesty's Government entirely agree with you in thinking that British interests in Borneo are so closely interwoven with the prosperity of Sarawak that whatever injuriously affects the latter must also be injurious to the former. Therefore Her Majesty's Government hardly believe that Sir James Brooke will place himself in direct antagonism to Her Majesty's Government by refusing to allow you to act within the territory which is subject to his rule, and thereby compel Her Majesty's Government to make known to the natives that no British subject can exercise sovereign authority without the permission of his sovereign, which permission has not been obtained by him, and that consequently he is acting against the law of England; whereas if he avoids insisting upon a recognition of his independent sovereignty which is inconsistent with his position as a British subject, his supreme authority at Sarawak upon whatever basis it may rest, whether upon the grant of the Sultan or the choice of the people, will remain undisturbed and unquestioned.

Although on this occasion Lord Clarendon had his way, it is interesting to note that the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston did not agree. He wrote later,[9]

> The question seems to be rather between the sultan of Borneo and the raja of Sarawak than between the latter and the sovereign of England. But so far as we are concerned there does not seem to be any strong reason why we should not deal with Sarawak as an independent state, and if it is so, we might ask for an exequatur from the powers that be.

III.

This then posed the question that bothered ministers and undersecretaries for more than three decades in their dealings with

[8] Clarendon to St. John, 9 April 1856, FO 12/23.
[9] Palmerston memo., 6 August 1856, FO 12/23.

Sarawak. Was Brooke an independent sovereign prince, or was Sarawak a vassal state under the suzerainty of the Sultan of Brunei? And if a vassal, was it quite proper for a subject of the Queen to occupy such a position?

The Raja was anxious to make Sarawak over to Britain as a colony or a protectorate and so ensure the continued political stability of his state and the progress of his people. Very much in the tradition of Raffles in his Java period from 1811 to 1816, Brooke sought the extension of British interests in Southeast Asia, not merely for the sake of commerce and trade, but for the civilizing affect that the presence of British rule of law entailed. Like Raffles he found little to admire in Dutch colonial rule either in Java or Borneo. He wrote,[10]

> If the British public be indifferent to the sufferings of this unhappy race, now for the first time made known to them . . . they are not what I believe them to be, and what they profess themselves.

It was necessary to establish "a proper British influence" in Borneo.

> . . . . I conceive that policy dictates these measures at the present time, because in case of any delay it will no longer be in our power. From the distractions of Borneo, some European state must very shortly interfere in their concerns, and the supremacy of the Dutch government would be the knell of the British trade which now is carried on, and effectually stop all measures of improvement.

And later, to tempt British strategists, he added,[11]

> We shall have a post in time of war highly advantageous as commanding a favourable position relative to China—we shall extend our commerce—suppress piracy—and prevent the present and prospective advantages falling into other hands—and we shall do this at a small expense.

When ministers in London answered with a cold "no" to all of Brooke's requests for a colony or a protectorate the Raja became angry and bitter. He threatened to sell Sarawak to Belgium or

[10] James Brooke, *A Letter from Borneo,* (pamphlet published by L. and S. Sealy, London, 1842), copy in FO 12/1.

[11] James Brooke, Memorandum on piracy, 31 March 1845, FO 12/3.

France, and in 1859 he "broke-off" relations with Britain, upon which the Foreign Secretary, Lord Russell commented,[12]

> Tell Brooke that the people of Sarawak are welcome to any independence they can achieve and maintain but that a British subject cannot throw off his allegiance at pleasure.

And Spencer St. John noted[13] that "the Raja's correspondence during this year with Her Majesty's Government was not pleasant, and ended, apparently, in complete estrangement".

Over the years Brooke had acquired a respectable following of supporters in Britain and Singapore, among whom were some influential figures such as Lord Grey, Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford, and the late Victorian philanthropist, Miss Angela Burdett-Coutts, later Baroness Burdett-Coutts. His friends now took up his cause and lobbied Whitehall from the Prime Minister's office down.

Britain refused to extend a colonial or protectorate status to Sarawak on practical political grounds. Henry Layard, an undersecretary in the Foreign Office, wrote that a protectorate was declined because of the "inconvenience of such relations between this country and a foreign territory", because Sarawak "would not be of sufficient value politically and commercially", and because Brooke's title was not "sufficiently clear".[14]

Brooke's friends persuaded the Government to have another look at Sarawak, and in 1861 Lord Elgin, who was about to depart as the new viceroy of India, was instructed to investigate the prospects and potential of Sarawak. He delegated the task to Colonel Cavenagh, Governor of the Straits Settlements. In due course Cavenagh and Elgin provided an optimistic assessment of Raja Brooke's state and suggested making Sarawak a lieutenant-governorship under Singapore. "I am disposed to think", wrote Lord Elgin,[15]

> that the acquisition of Saigon by the French and the persistent endeavor of the Dutch authorities to cripple British trade . . . give enhanced importance to the preservation of the independence of Sarawak as a matter affecting British interests."

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[12] See correspondence between the Foreign Office and Raja Brooke between 26 November and 17 December 1859, FO 12/35.

[13] Spencer St. John, *Life of Sir James Brooke, Rajah of Sarawak*, (Edinburgh, 1879) p. 327.

[14] Layard memorandum to Lord Elgin, 2 January 1862, FO 12/35.

[15] Elgin to Russell, 8 January 1863, FO 12/35.

In the meantime Brooke's friend St. John, the Consul in Brunei, provided strong evidence to support Sarawak's claim of independence. In correspondence between the Sultan and the Foreign Office, Raja Brooke's relations with Brunei were the subject of discussion. Lord Russell in 1861 asked the consul if it was true that Brunei looked upon Sarawak as an independent state. He had been told that the Sultan honoured the Raja with a twenty-one gun salute whenever he visited Brunei Town. St. John replied that the Sultan did indeed consider Sarawak independent of Brunei. St. John also produced minutes of an interview he had had with the leading chiefs of Sarawak in which they unanimously confirmed that they had chosen the Tuan Besar, James Brooke, to rule over them in place of the harsh and tyrannical chiefs of Brunei, and that they owed no allegiance to the Sultan of Brunei.[16]

When, then, St. John's tour as Consul in Brunei ended in 1862 Brooke's friends, with a concerted lobbying effort, prevailed upon the Palmerston government to appoint a consul to Sarawak as distinct from Brunei. In August 1863 the Cabinet approved the appointment "as the most direct and least formal method of recognizing it as an independent state". Whatever in the way of reservations Lord Russell may have held concerning Brooke and Sarawak he was aware that the appointment meant recognition. He minuted some time earlier,[17]

> If we appoint a consul I suppose he must be appointed to reside in the territory of the rajah of Sarawak as an independent sovereign.

And later, when Russell was urged to inform Raja Brooke "that the Cabinet had consented to recognize Sarawak by appointing a consul there", the Foreign Secretary instructed his undersecretary,[18] "We may write to Sir James Brooke to say that he has reason to believe it". The Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, concurred.

However, bureaucratic procedures now took over, and the Consul's instructions directed him to procure his official acceptance from

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[16] See L. R. Wright, *Origins of British Borneo*, pp. 75-76; and St. John, "Minutes of an interview with Sarawak Chiefs", 25th October 1855, FO 12/22.

[17] Russell minute on a memo. by Brooke, 13 August 1863, in the Layard Papers (British Museum), ADD.MSS. 38989, f. 244.

[18] Russell minute, Layard Papers, ADD.MSS. 38989, f. 245.

the "local authorities" rather than from the sovereign prince of Sarawak, as was usual. Thus the anomalous status of Sarawak in the view of some officials remained, and this technicality provided an opportunity for a subsequent permanent undersecretary in the Foreign Office to declare that Brooke had not been recognized as a reigning prince. Julian Pauncefote opined in 1877,[19]

> Raja Brooke has not forfeited his claims of British nationality by accepting the position of ruler of Sarawak and as a matter of constitutional law it is competent to Her Majesty to recognize him as a sovereign prince but no such recognition has yet taken place.

James Brooke died in 1868, happy at having received his country's recognition, and confident that it was merely a step toward the desired British protectorate. In this he was prophetic. Although a formal protectorate was not granted until 1888, Britain made it quite clear by a pronouncement late in 1868 that her paramount interests on the northwest coast of Borneo constituted it a British sphere.[20]

Raja James Brooke was presented at court on two occasions, in 1847, and again in 1857. His nephew and successor, Charles Brooke, visited England in 1869 and asked to be received officially. He was told that he might write on his card and be presented as "Mr. Brooke, Raja of Sarawak". The second white raja was incensed and refused to appear until finally, in 1874, he was presented as "His Highness, the Raja of Sarawak", and granted a place just below the Indian maharajas in the order of precedence at Court.

Until 1888, Britain's empire building in Borneo was done largely by proxy, by Englishmen indeed, but by the agency of political structures and vehicles outside the direct control of Whitehall. That was the role of the Brooke raj, and later of the chartered company that ruled North Borneo, so far as they were a part of the British empire. One of Brooke's friends, John Abel Smith, M.P., was quite accurate when in 1866 he noted rather sourly,[21]

> The English government is quite alive to the importance of Sarawak to British interests, but as long as Raja Brooke

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[19] Pauncefote minute, 2 January 1877, FO 12/43.

[20] FO to Hennessy, 2 December 1868, FO 12/34A.

[21] Owen Rutter (ed) *Rajah Brooke and Baroness Burdett-Coutts*, London, 1935, p. 272.

governs it so well and cheaply for them, they will do nothing for him or Sarawak.

When first France and then the United States and Germany showed signs of intruding into Borneo, or when they came close to a potentially threatening position over the important British lines of empire north and south through the South China Sea, or when the Foreign and Colonial Offices in London felt the hot breath of imperial competition, it was then that the offshore colony of Labuan and a by now weak little consular treaty with Brunei were found to be inadequate to justify, in the international arena, Britain's position in Borneo. Sarawak along with North Borneo and Brunei were incorporated into the British empire as protected states. Still for many years Britain assumed no responsibility for the internal administration of Sarawak, and adamantly refused any expenditure of imperial grants for the privilege of colouring these areas pink on the imperial maps of the world.