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On A History of Modern Malaya

Review Author: Nicholas Tarling

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ON A HISTORY OF MODERN MALAYA

A HISTORY OF MODERN MALAYA. By K. G. Tregonning.
London: University of London Press, Ltd., 1964. 339 pp.

This book, the author tells us, grew out of his lectures to the Honours class at the University in Singapore, where he has been lecturing since 1953. Now and then his mode of addressing his readers seems still to pertain too much to that of the lecturer on the podium. Let us remember, he writes, the greatness of 15th century Malacca; "Let us also remember the causes of its collapse, and avoid the errors committed then" (p. 44). At another point the author appears even to enter the pulpit: "to have no God is to have no hope" (p. 68). Let us recreate a multiracial society (p. 185); let "us" constantly check and repair the foundations of the state lest the superstructure collapse (p. 207). These injunctions suggest that the book, like the lectures, is intended for young Malaysians. But an eavesdropper may perhaps notice that Professor Tregonning's interest in writing a history for young Malaysians has at a number of important points led him to distort the past, only a balanced view of which can really be of service in the present.

In a remark in his preface that echoes van Leur, Professor Tregonning complains of predecessors who "have viewed Malaya from the office of the colonial powers, or from the deck of a foreign ship. I would have you stand with me on the beach watching him [whoever "he" is] arrive". Later he deplores the practice of dividing Malayan history into Portuguese and Dutch phases. "Historical writing is perhaps less open to factual errors than many others, for the historian is trained to be accurate; but it is always prone to bias, and the bias in nearly all the earlier works on Malayan history is a European one" (p. 45). The Portuguese and the Dutch share the stage with others, he says. This can be admitted. But in attempting to redress the balance, Professor Tregonning has at times simply overturned it.

Most of the book, it seems, was written in 1960, though a footnote (p. 146) refers to an article published in 1961, and a closing chapter covers more recent political events. Professor Tregonning has thus not been able to utilise some valuable publications, such as Mrs. Meilink-Roelofs's *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago* (The Hague, 1962). This might have warned him of the danger in simply denying the significance of the Portuguese, which, it seems, is what he tends to do. In some sense, no doubt, the 16th century was an Achehnese period in Malayan history (p. 46). But so to describe it is surely to over-emphasize Achehnese influence. In any case, it was the Portuguese capture of

Malacca that cleared the way, as it were, for the rise of Acheh. Its success, too, seems to have owed something to the utilisation of Portuguese cannon. The attainment of a balanced view of such events is surely a more complex process than the author implies.

He is at pains, too, to minimise the impact of the Dutch. He omits to consider its indirect effects. Undoubtedly their campaign for control over pepper played a part in undermining the power of Acheh, and ought to form a part of the explanation of its declining influence in Malayan history. Generally the entrepot policy of the Dutch and their maritime "police" contributed more than the author will apparently allow to the decline of the Indonesian and Malaysian empires of the period and to the growth of piracy. And if he is at pains to emphasise the role of the Bugis in the 18th century, Professor Tregonning ought to stress that their commercial success was linked with that of the British Country Traders. He stresses the Bugis descent of the 19th century Temenggongs of Johore in a way that hardly squares with the account and genealogy given by Sir Richard Winstedt, and by implication reduces the part the British played in fostering the commercial and political advance of that state. In this connexion, the author is betrayed by "bias" into "factual error". W. H. Read is described as a "Malayan" (p. 131), which, if not an error, is a curious contribution to the attempt at appraising the interaction of alien and indigenous influences in the history of Malaya. More seriously, it is surely mistaken to describe him as "a close friend of the ruler of Johore" (p. 133). Rather their opposition is a major feature in Malayan politics in the mid-19th century period. And, incidentally, Read did not struggle for the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office because of his distaste for inexperienced young civil servants fresh from India (cf. p. 132), so much as because of his intense dislike of Governor Blundell, aged (indeed with far too many, if illegitimate, children) and rather soured in Tenasserim than fresh from India.

In his treatment of the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824, Professor Tregonning is again betrayed by bias into factual error. It did not, we are told, "alter in any significant way the internal position of the Malay Peninsula" (p. 91). Later the author plays down the importance of the transfer of Malacca that did in fact occur (p. 102). But he fails to point out the broader significance of the treaty. The withdrawal of the Dutch removed, as Fullerton recognised, a barrier to the advance of the Thais, and it was a reason for the forward policy that Governor adopted. For the superior authorities, indeed, it was a reason for non-intervention, and the author rather contradictorily admits that the treaty of 1824 was one of the reasons why the west coast states subsequently "turned in upon themselves and sank, into a fratricidal decline" (p. 136). Young Malaysians—perhaps

more than anyone else—must surely realise the vast importance of a treaty that separated the Peninsula from the Archipelago in an unprecedented fashion. At least they should not be told that the “equator” was used as a dividing line (p. 103). The promise the British made in article 12 related rather to islands south of the Straits of Singapore.

There are some other slips in spelling (Forest for Forrest, p. 71, Ibbotson, for Ibbetson, p. 111), and usage (“uninhabited” occurs several times, and “inter-Asian” is sometimes used for “intra-Asian”). There are some further factual errors. For instance, “Paramesvara” was not the name (p. 22), but the title of the founder of the Malacca sultanate. Deli is not an “island” (p. 49). The Dutch East India Company was not founded in 1596, but in 1602, two years after the English Company (p. 53). Wellesley’s determination to leave the spice islands and reoccupy Balambangan followed upon the treaty of Amiens and not upon the renewal of hostilities (p. 94). M. Greenberg is the author of the book mentioned in footnote 7 on p. 101, and the quotation made in the text involves an unindicated omission. The description of the negotiations for the Borneo Protectorates of 1888 is inaccurate (p. 159). Weld visited Brunei in 1887, but the agreement was negotiated by Low the following year. Separate arrangements were made with the Rajah of Sarawak and the Company. No reference is made to the agreement with the rulers preceding the formation of the Federal Council of 1909 and its assumption of legislative power is exaggeratedly called “illegal” (p. 218).

Rather strangely, the developments of the postwar period receive somewhat slight treatment.

It is disconcerting not to be able to praise a well-meaning book by an experienced author. The best parts of it seem to be those dealing with the development of the tin industry and of public health and education. Occasional remarks lead one to believe, too, that Professor Tregonning could offer, if materials are in fact available, a stimulating history of Malaysian seafaring craft through centuries of change and adaptation.

NICHOLAS TARLING