The Catholic Church in Malaya

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by

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Part One

MALAYA

GEOGRAPHY

The Malay peninsula is the most southerly projection of the South-east Asian mainland. It extends southwards from the Isthmus of Kra between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. Sumatra lies to the south-west beyond the Straits of Malacca. The peninsula contains three political units: South Thailand; the Federation of Malaya, which is made up of eleven states; and the State of Singapore.

Malaya, comprising the Federation of Malaya and the State of Singapore, is bordered by Thailand in the north, the China Sea on the east, the Straits of Malacca on the west, and Indonesia on the south. Situated between 1° and 7° latitude north and 100° and 105° longitude east, the Federation of Malaya covers an area of 51,000 square miles. It is slightly larger than either New York State or England proper without Wales. Singapore and the surrounding islets cover only 225 square miles.

Topographically, the Federation has ranges of mountains running down its centre for about 400 miles from the Thai border in the north to Negri Sembilan State in the south. The higher elevations are in the north central area, culminating in heights of over 7,000 feet above sea-level. The highest mountain in Malaya is Gunong Tahan
(7,186 feet) in Pahang State, and the second highest is Gunong Kerbau (7,160 feet) in Perak State. Towards the south the ranges diminish in height. A quarter of the country has an elevation of more than 1,000 feet. These ranges form the watersheds of many rivers, which flow down to either the Straits of Malacca or the China Sea. The two principal rivers are the Perak River and the Pahang River, the latter being as long as the River Thames in England.

About four-fifths of the country is covered with dense jungle; only one-fifth of it is developed. The developed areas are mainly along the west coast. Malaya’s coastline extends over 1,000 miles. The west coast is characterized by long stretches of mangrove forests and muddy flats frequently indented by picturesque bays, fringed with coconut palms and casuarina trees. To the north lies the island of Penang otherwise known as Prince of Wales Island, whose panoramic beauty has been eulogized by many tourists. The east coast is noted for its long stretches of sand and surf which lend it a beauty perhaps incomparable in the tropics.

CLIMATE
The climate of Malaya is characterized by abundant rainfall, high humidity, and, on the whole, uniformly high temperature. There are no variable seasons as in the higher latitudes. The whole year is one long summer frequently broken by periods of rainfall. The North-east Monsoon and the South-west Monsoon bring most of the rain. The average annual rainfall is about 100 inches. The driest place in Malaya, Jelebu in Negri Sembilan, has an average rainfall of 65 inches, and the wettest place, Maxwell Hill,
Perak, has an average of 198 inches per annum. The average maximum temperature in the plain is about 89°F. and the minimum about 71°F. In the Cameron Highlands the extreme temperatures recorded are 79°F. and 36°F.

FLORA AND FAUNA

The flora and fauna in Malaya are similar to those in Borneo, Sumatra, and Java. There are recorded over 8,000 species of flowering plants and 2,500 species of trees in Malaya, which exceed the number of those of Burma and India put together—an amazing richness of vegetation. The fauna of the Malayan mountains is very like that of the Himalayan Mountains in India, and observers note with great interest some similarities between the birds and insects of Malaya and those of West Africa. Besides these, there are 130 varieties of snakes, 800 species of butterflies, and 200 of dragon-flies.

ABORIGINES

In cosmopolitan Malaya the aborigines of the country are left in the background. The Malays, Chinese, and Indians are immigrant races which have occupied the peninsula and have driven the aborigines into the interior. Politically, socially, and economically, the aborigines are the most backward race in Malaya. They are generally known as the Sakai, which in Malay means slave or serf; consequently they resent the term. They were, however, good material for the slave-trade which was prevalent up to a century ago, and even today there are aborigines in a state of semi-slavery in some Malay villages.
There are many tribes of aborigines in Malaya. These have different languages, customs and cults. They can be divided into three main classes: the Negritos in the north, the Senoi in the centre and the Proto Malays in the south.

The Negritos are the most backward, living under rock shelters and temporary leafy roofs, soon to be abandoned for other forest abodes where game is to be found for food. Their weapon is the bow and arrow, although some use the blow-pipe with which the Senoi and Proto Malay hunt game, invariably the monkey. This is an instrument five to seven feet long, made of bamboo, from which a reed-like missile tipped with poison can be blown with amazing accuracy.

The Senoi are taller in stature and fairer in complexion than the Negritos. Their houses are built on stilts and have roofs made from palm leaves, and in some communities there are longhouses in which several families dwell. The more civilized Senoi adopt the Malay dress, but others wear very little clothing.

The Proto Malays are similar to the Senoi except in their language, which resembles Malay with a few derivations from foreign tongues. They are of the same race as the Filipinos. Generally the Senoi and Proto Malays live on hills and mountain slopes, where clear springs of water are found and there are fewer mosquitoes. Some, however, dwell on lowlands and on the sea-coast. Those living near the sea are called Orang Laut (sea-gypsies); those settling in the interior call themselves Orang Darat or Orang Bukit (hill-tribes).

The Malayan aborigines in their jungle and mountain fastness are kind, simple and hospitable, but those in touch with civilization are less truthful and tinged with the vices of the world.
Churches and their missionaries have always played an active and significant role in the opening and development of new countries. The Portuguese expansion into this part of the world was promoted as much from religious as from commercial motives, and the Catholic Church, which holds the distinction of being the first Christian Church in Malaya, has been of considerable importance to the history of this country.

In this book, *The Catholic Church in Malaya*, Rev. Felix George Lee gives a comprehensive chronological account of the spread and development of the Catholic Church in Malaya from its foundation since the conquest of Malacca in 1511, to the present day, when Catholic churches and missionaries can be found in practically every town in Malaya.

The first part of this book is devoted to a brief outline of the background to Malaya—geographical, demographical, political and historical.

It is believed that *The Catholic Church in Malaya* is the first work to deal with the subject in such detail; it should prove of great interest to all who are concerned with the history and development of Malaya.