Part of the exercise of rewriting Malaysian history involves correcting the perspective of the subject. It is seldom realised that the present generation is often so misled by recent developments that their view of the past is badly coloured by anachronistic ideas. This has particularly affected historical interest in the eastern Peninsula states for it is assumed that those states must have always been always backward compared to the western Malay states. The result, therefore, is a now, obvious imbalance in Malaysian historiography despite attempts, lately, by scholars to fill in the gaps as rapidly as possible.

Also, whenever there is a call for changes in history syllabuses, the usual complaint among school teachers is that they are unable to find material on the less conspicuous topics of Malaysia history. Such complaints are based purely on impressions. The diligent teacher of Malaysian history will soon find that there is a large corpus of published material on numerous aspects of this country's history.

It is mainly to illustrate this point that an attempt is made here to present some vivid pictures of students of Malaysian history.

Alexander Hamilton (1719-1720)

One of the early English visitors to Kuala Trengganu was that well known trader — Capt. Alexander Hamilton. He was in Kuala Trengganu before the present ruling house was founded. Hamilton called at Kuala Trengganu, probably late in 1719, either on his way to or from Siam and he recorded that Trangano stands pleasantly near the Sea, on the side of a River that has a shallow Bar, and many Rocks scattered to and again within the River, but Room enough in many Places to moorc small Ships very securely, to keep them safe from the Dangers of the Winds or Floods. There may be about one thousand Houses in it, not built in regular Streets, but scattered in ten or twenty in a Place distant a little Way from another's Villa of the same Magnitude. The Town is above half-peopled with Chinese, who have a good Trade for three of four jonks yearly, besides some that trade to Siam, Cambodia, Tunqueen and Sambas. When I came back from Siam with my Cargo unsold, as I mentioned before, 1 came to Trangano to dispose of what I could of my Goods, and to procure a new Cargo for Surat, the kind King [Sultan Abdul Jalil of Johore] assisted me in doing both, with all the Readiness and Cheerfulness imaginable.

Hamilton, who had in fact earlier visited Johore in 1695 and 1703,
the Sea. The Hills are low, and covered with ever-green Trees, that accommodate th Inhabitants with Variety of delicious Fruits, such as Lemons, Oranges, Limes, Mangoes, Mangostans, Rambostans, Letchees and Duncans: And in the Vallies, Com Pulse, and Sugar-canes, The Ground is cultivated by the Chinese, for the Malayas [sic] cannot take that Trouble.

The Product of the Country is Pepper and Gold, which are mostly exported by the Chinese. About 300 Tuns are the common Export of Pepper, and we have it almost for one half of the Price that we pay for Malabar Pepper. From the Month of October till March, their River is shut up by the Bar, which fills up by the Impetuosity of the great Seas sent on that Shore by the Northeast Monsoons; but in the Months of July and August their Seas produce the finest Fish that ever I saw or tasted. There is one Sort exactly like a Salmon, both in Shape and Taste, but the Fish is white, as the Salmon is red. Their Poultry are large, plump and sweet, but Beef is scarce, except Buffalo Beef, and that is plentiful enough.

Capt. Joseph Jackson (1764)

Hamilton's interest in Kuala Trengganu was by no means an isolated phenomenon. English commercial interest in this part of the world had increased markedly by the early 18th century. In 1737, the Dutch reported the arrival in Malacca of two English private trading ships bound for Kuala Trengganu and the return of one of them from Trengganu later the same year. By the middle of the 18th century, Kuala Trengganu was a regular port of call for East India Company ships seeking provisions enroute to China. In either late 1763 or early 1764, a British Man O' War, Panther, called at Kuala Trengganu and brought back a letter from Sultan Mansur Shah I to Madras. This was immediately followed by Capt. Joseph Jackson calling at Kuala Trengganu in the East India Compar charter vessel, the Pitt. He arrived there on 14th June 1764. Capt. Jackson's report throws some further light on the state of Kuala Trengganu at that time. The greater part of his report, however, dealt with the need for the Company to establish a more permanent base in Trengganu. He only very briefly remarked that 6

Trangano appears to be very healthy and pleasant, large and very populous, abounding in good Provisions of all Sorts, and a fine River with Sixteen Foot Water over the Barr, and within Water enough for ships of any Burthen. The Chinese have a large Settlement and carry on a considerable Trade here. These the King said he would put under any Restrictions We pleased or sent them all away if desired.

He then hastened to add:

In short the very great Advantage that appears to me from the Trade of this place ... seems to be equal or superior to either the Coast of Choromandell or that of Malabar, as to Pepper you will say you have sufficient Quantity from Bencoolen for the China Market, but in that Case you may always sell it to the Amoy Junks, for as much as you can sell it for at Canton.

Jackson actually promised Sultan Mansur that within a year the English would establish a settlement in Trengganu. And Madras, in 1766, sent a private trader, William Powney, to maintain communications with Trengganu. But London soon discouraged any further progress and it was probably not until 1772 that another Englishman, Edward Monckton, visited Trengganu subsequent to his mission to Kedah. 7 We need not, however, concern ourselves here with Britain's political and economic problems at that time and turn instead to other reports on Kuala Trengganu, this time, by French visitors to that port.

Jean-Francois de Surville (1769)

At the time when the English were undecided whether to initiate
closer political and commercial relations with Trengganu, the French were also toying with the idea of gaining a firmer foothold in that state. In fact, when Hamilton was in Kuala Trengganu, a French ship, under the command of Pedro-villamont Garden had also called at the port and apparently the Frenchman promised Sultan Abdul Jalil that the French would undertake to establish a station in Trengganu. But nothing materialised. In 1755, another French vessel, under a certain Le Blanc, called at Kuala Trengganu but no record is known to exist as regards that visit. In 1769, however, the St. Jean Baptiste, commanded by Jean-Francois de Surville, arrived at Kuala Trengganu and this time the Frenchmen left behind some very interesting reports of the port. The First Officer, Capt. Labe, wrote:  

The town is badly built with rough wooden huts, some with tiled roofs, others with roof and house covered with coconut leaves, they are raised on piles 8 or 9 feet high, there are bamboo ladders to climb up. The King's palace is the same thing, there is just one small brick house which serves as a powder store in the same enclosure, the whole enclosed by a kind of palisade of heavy planks 20 feet high which have almost all fallen over because of lack of attention. There are three bazaars, one for the Malays, another for the Siamese and the largest for the Chinese: their street is a pleasant one, their houses better built than the others and in the front they have their shops where you can find Chinese and European goods.

Lieut. Pottier De l' Horme, whose account was the most comprehensive, gave a more graphic description of the istana:  

The King's palace is the town fortress- It is the only house with any appearance. It is longer than it is wide, surrounded by its out buildings and an enclosure made of wooden planks 1/2 to 2 inches thick and about 15 feet high. This palace is situated on the southern bank of the river a short distance from the other houses. Entrance to it is forbidden when the King is away. There is all around and 4 or 5 feet from this enclosure a fairly thick hedge that constitutes the total fortifications of this citadel. When you enter the river you find on the right bank a wooden square building with 3 embrasures on each side for small cannons, a little further up you find a similar fort: these are all the defences of this town. The King has a few guns in the courtyard of his palace but none is mounted.

His description of the general appearance of Kuala Trengganu differs little from that of Capt. Labe's:  

Tronganon is a fairly large and very populous place, but the houses have a repulsive appearance: they are made of wood and thatched with palm tree leaves. There is no orderliness in the way they are arranged or built. Since there are numerous Chinese a street is allocated to them: it is the only passable one, it is well laid out, the houses are very clean and the shops fairly well stocked.

The larger proportion of the reports dealt with various aspects of Trengganu society — its economy, the Chinese immigrants, weights and currency as well as something of its juridical system. On the whole, it may be said that the Frenchmen came away favourably impressed by the commercial situation in Kuala Trengganu. They felt assured that the local administration was able to maintain political stability and was well disposed towards foreign traders except the Dutch who were then established at Malacca where they attempted to control the entire trade of the Peninsula.

For the period between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, no similar record on Trengganu has been published. It should not be construed, however, that European
trade with Trengganu had come to an end. Possibly a diligent search of existing archives will reveal many more interesting reports. For the moment it will have to be assumed that the next interesting report on Kuala Trengganu was made by an Englishman called W. Medhurst.  

M. Medhurst (1828)

Unlike all the other previous visitors, Medhurst called at Kuala Trengganu not for commercial reason but to try to propagate Christianity among the Chinese there. In effect, he was interested in all the Chinese living on the east coast of the Peninsula from Pahang to Senggora. However, as he was merely a passenger aboard a Chinese barge, he had no control over its destination and he was unable to visit Kelantan which he very much wanted to. Medhurst recorded:

Sept. 4th [1828] Passed by Calintan, without entering the river, and was thereby prevented from seeing the place, and sending some tracts up to the numerous body of Chinese, which reside in the interior. Very little is known about Medhurst but from his own account, it is evident that he had once lived in Malacca, probably during the first (1795-1801) or second (1807-1818) British occupation of that old citadel. Medhurst was literate in Chinese and hence his missionary activities were largely confined to the Chinese.

It is somewhat unfortunate that Medhurst should have been a missionary because his religious beliefs completely coloured his perspective of those who did not belong to the same faith. He ridiculed the Chinese and Islam and had little that was favourable to speak of Trengganu. One example may be given of the superior air with which he viewed the local people. Reporting a conversation he had with a son of the Sultan, Medurst wrote:

He asked me where I came from, and what was my business in Triangano, but he did not pay much attention to my answers, being so much taken up with his gun, the lock of which was of a peculiar construction made in Triangano, and he wished to know if they could make such in Europe. I said that they could make any thing in Europe that was made in Triangano.

But, putting aside Medhurst’s personal sentiments, his report is interesting in my respects. It contains useful information on the Chinese in Kuala Trengganu. For example, he said:

Being at liberty, I went among the Chinese, who amount to some hundreds, dwelling principally in strong brick built houses, which have every appearance of being erected many years ago. The women and children all speak Chinese keep very much to themselves, and mix less with the Malays than in other places.

He further noted:

The Chinese females in Triangano double the number of the males, and the children are more numerous still; all these speak Chinese and I was struck with hearing infants lisp out the language with a correctness of tones it takes us foreigners years to acquire.

But, Medhurst did not explain why there should be more women than men among the Chinese in Trengganu. However, the presence of a large number of women does help to explain why the Chinese in Trengganu were able to live as a distinct unit instead of having closer social intercourse with the indigenous population.

Medhurst allocated much space to discussing the subject of
major interest to himself. He reported at great length the discourse on religion which he had with the Chinese as well as the Sultan (Abdul Rahman Syah 1826-31). Although Medhurst tended to scoff at Islam, it is evident for his report that the ruler of Trengganu took a great interest in religious disquisitions. Medhurst was questioned not only about Christianity but also the religious beliefs of the Chinese. On one occasion,

... the Rajah provided me [Medhurst] with a supper, after which he came himself to my room and ordered all the cleverest men among the Chinese to be assembled together, that we might debate on the subject of religion.\(^{18}\)

It was at this meeting that a Malay translation of the Testament was produced. Apparently this had been procured from Singapore. On another occasion, Medhurst discovered that the Sultan had a Malay translation of the Bible which had been acquired from a Mr. Thomsen of Singapore and this prompted him to remark:\(^{19}\)

... [it] rejoiced me to find that the books circulated by our Missionary brethren at their several stations do find their way to Mahometan countries and Mahometan Courts, where the brethren themselves can seldom go; and that the books when thus dispersed are not destroyed or thrown away, but preserved with care, and perhaps read with attention.

The picture which Medhurst had painted of the great interest shown in religion by the ruler of Trengganu is consistent with present knowledge about the very deep influence which Islam exerted on Trengganu society. Clifford was to make the same observation many years after Medhurst. Altogether, it seems more than likely now that it was in Trengganu that Islam first took root in the Malay Peninsula.\(^{20}\)

Medhurst had little to say of the physical character of Kuala Trengganu and what little he said was unfavourable: \(^{21}\)

The river of Tringano is not so wide as that of Pahang, but the town lies nearer the river's mouth. The Malay town, into which we first entered is large and populous, but dirty and filthy in the extreme; — the houses nearly all the attap, and the streets very narrow. The two market-places which we went through were stocked principally with women who appear to be the chief buyers and sellers, in like manner as I have witnessed it on Java. After winding through half of this dirty town, we arrived at the custom house, where I was introduced to the native Shah bandar. He was smoking his hookah, in the midst of a number of Chinese and Malays...

Elsewhere he continued: \(^{22}\)

The town wears on all sides the appearance of an old settlement, for many of the buildings are falling into decay. The Malay town is very large, containing in its immediate vicinity about twenty thousand inhabitants who live nearly all in attap sheds. The old brick buildings I saw, were the Mosque (in good repair) and the custom House, the latter of which is so dirty and filthy, that one would rather suppose it the common sewer of the city. There were many small Malay prows in the river, two Siamese junks; and a cutter belonging to Tringano, that was about to proceed to Singapore. In the summer moths the trade is very brisk.

Despite the continual emphasis on the dirty appearance of the place, Medhurst's description of Kuala Trengganu in fact conveys the picture of a trading centre which was still thriving in 1828. The reference to the mosque as one of the two brick buildings in the town and "in good repair" suggests once more that the government of Trengganu accorded very high priority to Islam.

G.W. Earl (1833)

Five years after Medhurst's visited to Trengganu, George
Windsor Earl, a man of many talents, together with a British merchant, Robert Hunter, went on a trading voyage to the east coast of the Peninsula. They called twice at Kuala Trengganu and once at Kuala Kelantan. The first visit to Kuala Trengganu was rather brief. In fact, Earl did not accompany Hunter on shore. The ship itself was anchored about a mile and a half from the mouth of the Trengganu river. Hence Earl recorded:

The town was hidden from our view by the trees, and only a few huts were to be seen on the sandy point near the river. On this point two very extraordinary looking forts, or batteries, had been constructed — indeed, I do not know what name military men would give them. They were each composed of four strong posts, about four feet high, fixed firmly in the ground, having a thick wooden platform on the top, covered with thatch like a house. On each of these, a long twelve or eighteen-pounder carriage gun, and a pile of shot were placed. These forts would be useful in defending the mouth of the river in the event of an attack from the sea; but a land force would soon dislodge the garrison, for the guns would be of no use unless they were tumbled down on the heads of the besiegers.

In the afternoon "an immense fleet of prahus, about an hundred in number" came in from the sea. There were Trengganu fishing boats. Indeed, it is rather well known now that Trengganu had always had a very large fishing population. It is in fact the only Malay state where a large concentration of the population is found along the coast line.

Earl and Hunter next proceeded to Kelantan but Earl was of the opinion that

Calantan is inferior in importance to Tringanu, but gold-dust, pepper, rattans, and hides, are exported in considerable quantities.

Chinese sampan-pukat (a long open boat) from Singapore, however, frequently called at Kelantan and it appears that this was a very important aspect of Kelantan's trade at that time.

Earl and Hunter returned to Trengganu a few months later after visiting Siam. This time, Earl was able to make a more careful observation of Kuala Trengganu. Of the town itself, he said:

The town consists of a large group of huts, composed of wood and thatch, heaped together without any order or regularity. The part inhabited by the few Chinese who were not driven away by the tyranny of the former Sultan, can boast of some appearance of regularity, the houses and shops forming a small street, but the Malay habitations are all detached from each other. The dwellings of the Sultan, and of two or three of the principal pangerans or nobles, are built of more substantial materials than the rest, indeed the former may be called a fort, for it is surrounded with a paggar, or bamboo fence, and is defended by several long brass Idahs [cannon].

Earl described the government as "aristocratical" with the highest authority vested in the Sultan but the "pangerans or loads" held actual power. He also found that Islam had a very strong hold on the people and those who were mainly instrumental in spreading the religion were the Arabs who formed a sizeable community in Kuala Trengganu.

Earl confirmed that fishing was perhaps the most important occupation in Trengganu:

Catching and curing fish forms the principal employment of the inhabitants. The dried fish are disposed of to the natives of the interior, in exchange for inland produce, gold-dust, and pepper; and these are again exchanged by the people of Tringanu, for rice, tobacco, cotton-goods, &c. the produce of foreign countries. Although rice forms the principal article of food, it is not cultivated, the Malays being little disposed to agricultural occupation, and preferring the more precarious subsistence to be gained by a maritime life.
However, the Malays were said to be shrewd in business transactions. They would "adopt a mode of bargaining by means of the fingers, which precludes the bystanders from discovering what is going on." And they would "frequently offer five dollars for an article worth twenty, and should the vender put himself into a passion, they will tease him with like offers, in the hope that he will give them the goods at the cheapest rate for the sake of getting away." 29

Munshi Abdullah (1838)

Just about five years from Earl's visit to Kuala Trengganu the now very well known Munshi Abdullah arrived. His Kisah Pelayaran, 30 a record of his voyage to the eastern Peninsula, is still easily available as it has been reprinted a number of times. It is therefore unnecessary to deal with it at any great length here. Suffice it to to say that the Munshi was a very biased commentator on Malay society. He provided readers with no proper analysis of Trengganu's socio-political system but merely pointed out its dissimilarity with the western idea of government. He was rational enough in his arguments but could not understand that social change never followed from common sense, and, naturally, lacking any knowledge of sociology he saw no function whatsoever in the pantang larang which he so severely criticised. Abdullah was also too much of a literary man — a writer more than a reporter. One can hardly avoid the suspicion that he tended to dramatise his experiences. 31

However, when Abdullah was not talking about the way of life of the Trengganu people but confined himself to describing the geography of the place, the information he conveyed differed little from that given by earlier visitors to Kuala Trengganu. A brief summary of it has been given elsewhere and it may be reproduced here: 32

Houses sited in a haphazard manner, many of them with a small shop on the front verandah with women in charge; each house claiming two or three coconut trees; lanes narrow and crooked; piles of dried coconut husks underneath most houses to drive away mosquitoes; no schools; a large Chinese quarter with a Capitan China who spoke fluent Malay and dressed in Malay costume; fishing the main occupation of the male Malay population, who are described as being otherwise idle; the Sultan's place made of stone and a flag pole on Bukit Petri; the Kor'an taught to small groups of boys; and very beautiful fishing boats... .

Trengganu's exports were "gold, tin, coffee, pepper, betel nut, silk cloth and fine sarongs interwoven with gold and silver thread, and minor products such as rotan, damar and buffalo ghee." The main imports were opium, thread and European cloth. 33

Skinner's Geography (1884)

Since the beginning of the 19th century, especially after the opening of Penang (1786) and then Singapore (1819), followed by the growth of the tin mining industry, there had been such extraordinary developments in the western Malay states that by the middle of the century, the portion of the Peninsula facing the China Sea became almost completely eclipsed by the area facing the Straits of Malacca. Even then it would be hardly true to say that Kuala Trengganu declined at this juncture. Both Earl and Abdullah testified that it was still a busy trading centre in the 1830s.
But, British economic interest in the Peninsula was beginning to change significantly by the 1860s. Although Singapore continued to have close commercial ties with the eastern Peninsula, as far as London was concerned, commercial economics had become secondary in importance to industrial economics and hence the tin producing states were of more consequence than the trading centres of the east coast states. Within a period of twenty years, beginning from about 1860, a new phase of urbanisation was taking place in the mining areas. There was no similar development on the eastern side of the Peninsula and hence Skinner, writing in 1884, said of Trengganu:

... nearly the whole country is one continuous jungle, with less development, either of its minerals or its commerce, than perhaps any other of the Malay States. The inhabitants consist almost entirely of Malays and some wild tribes, with a very few Chinese, who carry on the little that is now done in the way of trade or mining. The total population of the State was computed at 37,500 in 1856. Of this number, the town of Kuala Trengganu... was then estimated to contain 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants... A most destructive fire took place in August, 1883, which is said to have destroyed nearly 2,000 habitations. The town has been much deserted since, and the population of the whole country has, it is believed, declined considerably, and does not exceed 20,000 at the present time, many having been attracted away to Kelantan. The place is but little visited, and the small quantity of gold and tin produced come, it is said, from the Pahang mountains... 

It is certain that Skinner himself did not visit Trengganu but he had compiled his Geography from several sources and therefore his remarks clearly mirrored the climate of opinion prevailing in the economically conscious Straits Settlements. It was probably at this point that Kelantan began seriously to challenge Trengganu as the most progressive state on the eastern Peninsula. It is not possible here to launch on a comparative study of subsequent development in the two states. Recent studies by undergraduates have shown that educational developments made great strides in Kelantan at the end of the 19th century and, by the 1920s, when exciting literary advancements were clearly observable in Kelantan, Trengganu still showed no sign of any significant social change.

**Hugh Clifford (1895)**

To return to Kuala Trengganu in the late 19th century, we may now consider the very lengthy and comprehensive report prepared by Hugh Clifford who entered Trengganu from the interior on an expedition in pursuit of the Pahang chiefs who staged a resistance movement against the British administration in Pahang. Clifford touched on almost every aspect of Trengganu society paying particular attention to the situation in Kuala Trengganu. Invaluable though his document is, there are serious inaccuracies as Clifford could not help but judge Trengganu on the basis of western values and systems. Clifford wrote disparagingly on the indigenous political system and his attitude towards Islam is reminiscent of Medhurst's comments. He imagined numerous abuses where few actually occurred. He could not accept the idea that a deeply devout ruler could govern his kingdom effectively. To him all forms of tax collection in the past were evil practices.
paid tribute only to the manufacturing skill of the Trengganu people.

The principal articles of manufacture in Trengganu then were silks, cotton fabrics, weapons such as knives, daggers, swords, spears, pruning-knives and choppers, metal ware and wood work. The Trengganu Malays were also experts boat-builders but few of the boats were exported. Clifford described Trengganu as "the Birmingham of the Peninsula" and he was of the opinion that "the natives are more ingenious than the Malays of any other part of the Peninsula" though "their genius is imitative rather than creatives." 38

There were altogether three major occupational groups in Trengganu. Apart from the manufacturing group, there was also an agricultural group. They were chiefly employed in the cultivation of rice, maize, tapioca, yams, gambir, coconuts, sugar-cane and fruit trees. Agriculture was basically of a subsistence type for one third of the rice consumed in Trengganu was imported from Siam and the Straits. 39

Trengganu had perhaps the largest fishing population of all the Malay states. They "inhabit a string of villages which stretches along the whole of the Trengganu coast-line, work very hard during the months between March and November, and in that time are enabled to win a sufficient sum to keep them in comfort in the close season when the north-east monsoon renders fishing impossible." During the off-season, the fishermen built and repaired their boats and houses, made the mended their nets, did a little planting or performed odd jobs. They were certainly a very diligent group. 40

Kuala Trengganu in the late 19th century was not what it was in the 18th century. Its export trade was still important. These comprised manufactured goods, jungle produce such as getah, camphor, agilar wood, rattan &c. as well as fish. But Clifford said hardly anything about Kuala Trengganu as a port. This is perhaps testimony that it no longer enjoyed the pre-eminence it did more than a century ago. It does not mean, however, that Kuala Trengganu had become a dying settlement for despite the calamity of 1883 it was still one of the most populous towns in the Peninsula. Clifford himself commented: 41

The population of the valley of the Trengganu river is about 45,000 souls, only 500 of whom inhabit the country above the Kelemang falls, the remaining 44,500 being crowded into the space between the falls and the sea. Of these, about 12,000 occupy the capital and the villages in the immediate neighbourhood. The country between the falls and the capital thus accommodate a population of about 33,000 souls, and is, therefore, one of the most thickly populated portions of the Peninsula.

There is further evidence that Kuala Trengganu was keeping abreast of time albeit rather gradually. On the eve of the 20th century, it was visited by an expedition from the Cambridge University.

W.W Skeat and F.F. Laidlaw (1899)

Of the two members of the expedition — Skeat and Laidlaw — who made some observations about Kuala Trengganu, Skeat was clearly more impressed by what he saw. He said: 42

In the course of the next few days he [Che’ Taib of Kampong Losong] took us
round all the many kampongs of which the capital was composed, and we saw all manner of crafts being followed from boat making to embroidery. Kuala Trengganu appeared to be a hive of industry, and we were truly astonished at the range of activities, and in parts at the high quality of the work. ... The shops, we noticed, were well supplied with bread, light beers, soda, cheroots and similar European wares, as well as with an extensive assortment of Malay goods and, above all, Chinese and Indian articles. The streets, except round the Istana, were ill-kept and destitute of drains. Yet even here the local talent for craftsmanship showed itself clearly in the well-built bridges across the creeks. We also saw a few wooden lamp-posts, which must have been unique among the east coast states at the time of our visit.

He further recorded: 43

On our way home this morning we noticed men bringing sand up from the shore and depositing it in cloth bundles at the end of the street. The Sultan had ordered the fishermen at the Kuala to do this, because he wished to improve the road. Here and there, in other places, the roads showed evidence of having been widened already. The wooden creek-bridges were (as has been stated) good, and there were even two or three small break-and-stone bridges, which was more than we had seen elsewhere on the east coast, Trengganu, in fact, showed more European influence than the other Malay states. A Victoria, a dog-cart and several horses were landed by the Neera on her arrival at Trengganu even during our visit: pneumatic-tyred bicycles were already being used by the Sultan’s entourage, and a few rickshaws had just been imported.

The Sultan mentioned was Zainal-Abidin III (1881-1918) whom Clifford considered ineffectual. Laidlaw, however, was less impressed with Kuala Trengganu for he commented: 44

The town of Trengganu did not seem to me as attractive, or as prosperous, as the Kelantan capital [Kota Bharu]. The houses were more ramshackle, and less well arranged. The streets lacked the shady vegetation that made some of the paths in Kota Bharu so pleasing.

There is, however, no major contradiction between the two obser-

Vations. Skeat’s description of Kuala Trengganu is, at any rate, more detailed. What is more interesting is that several years later, Graham had this to say of Trengganu: 45

On government there was practically none. The Sultan, having alienated most of his powers and prerogatives to his relatives, passed his life in religious seclusion and was ruler in no more than name. The revenues were devoured by his relatives ... There were no written laws, no courts and no police. All manner of crime was rampant, the peasantry was mercilessly downtrodden, but the land was full of holy men and the cries of the miserable were drowned in the noise of ostentatious prayer.

A comparison between Skeat’s report and Graham’s comments is highly instructive because it illustrates once again the need for students of history to exercise extreme caution even in the use of contemporary records. It need not be assumed, of course, that Graham meant to distort facts. For one thing Graham was probably not familiar with Trengganu as he was the Siamese Adviser in Kelantan. But his basic problem very likely arose from his inability to reconcile himself to any kind of societal system not consistent with the type prevailing in the contemporary industrial societies of Europe. This, however, is not the main concern of this paper. It remains now to take an overview of the various reports earlier referred to.

Overview

These reports present more than just a graphic picture of the physical appearance of Kuala Trengganu over a period of about two centuries. They establish beyond any doubt that in the 18th century Kuala Trengganu, as a tra-
The traditional Malay socio-political system. Of the many interesting features of the indigenous Trengganu society which received comments from the various visitors, a few deserve special attention if only because little is yet known about them. One of the most illuminating of these relates to the traditional economic system. It is clear, particularly from the reports of the Frenchmen, that in the earlier days the economy of the state was a royal monopoly. Hence, Lieut. Pottier De l'Horme said of the Trengganu ruler: "He is his kingdom's only merchant."

The king, of course, hardly participated directly in commercial transactions. It was well within his authority to appoint agents to deal with all forms of economic exchanges and these agents often included foreigners such as the Chinese merchants in Kuala Trengganu. In practice, the fundamental principle of the system required that economic transactions between the local people and foreigners must have the sanction of the ruler. It would be interesting to investigate how far the same system was in vogue in all the other Malay states, at least up to the beginning of the 19th century. It was a system disapproved of by British traders who were fervently in favour of free trade. The merits and demerits of the system need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that the economic system was an inalienable part of the total socio-political system which endowed the ruler with absolute authority. The late 19th century witnessed the gradual disintegration of this authority economically and politically but not socially. This disintegration resulted from the forced introduction of extraneous practices into what was formerly a more purely Islamic situation where human life and endeavours tended to be viewed as a cohesive whole.

One other aspect of the traditional Trengganu society deserves further comments. This concerns the administration of justice. In view of the adverse comments by Clifford and Graham which have to some extent influenced recent writings on Trengganu, it is pertinent to draw attention to the remarks of the Frenchmen who actually witnessed an instance when justice was meted out to a criminal found guilty of murder as well as thay of other visitors to Kuala Trengganu. Capt. Labe was so impressed that he remarks: Such a justice shows that the King has a good administration in his state, so that foreigners have no worries there. Medhurst, however, felt that the situation was unsatisfactory. He wrote:

The administration of justice at Tringano is lax in every respect — if a native is caught in the very act of stealing, he is only required to give back the article stolen, and receives a reprimand, which settles the affair, but if a culprit is caught in the fact [sic] a second time he then loses a hand and foot, which is cut off immediately at the joint of the wrist or ankles, and some medicine being applied the wound heals in the space of a fortnight. The relations however very generally make away with the unfortunate individual by poison, rather than lie
has not been clear to students of Malaysian history that until at least the 1840s, the Chinese population on the eastern states was more numerous than that in the mining states, that is, before the opening of Larut and Kuala Lumpur. The various reports on Kuala Trengganu are therefore extremely revealing. All the earlier reports speak of a very large Chinese settlement there. No real statistics, however, are available but the rough figures provided by Medhurst helpful: 53

On a review of the voyage, I find that three boxes of books and tracts have been distributed, in five settlements [excluding Kelantan], each of which settlements may contain on an average several hundred Chinese colonists, with about as many thousands at the mines in the interior; altogether the Chinese settlers on the east coast of the Malayan Peninsula cannot fall short of fifteen thousand, and the Malays may be about 100,000.

There is no way one can ascertain how many Chinese were in Kuala Trengganu but it is significant to notice that all the visitors remarked that the largest Chinese settlement on the east coast was located at Kuala Trengganu. Earl, in 1833, however, found that many of the Chinese had left the place. He attributed it to "the tyranny of the former Sultan", that is, Sultan Daud whose successor was Sultan Mansur II (1831-36). Earl possibly overstated his case. It may be more accurate to say that many of the Chinese probably left because, after the death of Sultan Abdul Rahman (1826—31), Trengganu experienced a period of political instability. Sultan Daud, in effect, ruled for only about six weeks. The main participants in the succession dispute which ensued after Sultan Abdul Rahman's death were Sultan Mansur II and his nephew, Tengku Omar. The latter eventually seized power in 1839. At any rate, the 1830s undoubtedly marked the end of Chinese population concentration on the east coast states; thereafter, the Chinese turned completely to the area of the Malacca Straits.

It is possible, on the basis of the material contained in the several reports, to deal at greater length on the nature of the society in Trengganu in general and Kuala Trengganu in particular but sufficient has been said to show how necessary it is for students and teachers of Malaysian history to read beyond the standard works as they are wont to do. Research is an indispensable part of the process of acquiring knowledge and in a situation where historical writings have not fully matured, as in Malaysia, there is always a need to correct and re-correct perspectives. A faulty perspective of the past often leads to a misunderstanding of the present and most students of history will agree that it is the present, after all, that we are primarily concerned with in order that the future may be better shaped.

1 The present royal house of Trengganu was probably founded in 1726-27 (A.H. 1139). See Misbaha, Sejarah Trengganu, Kuala Trengganu, 1966 (?), p. 51.


3 Ibid., pp. 81-2.

4 Ibid., p. 83.

Ibid., p. 76.

I have not seen Monckton's report.


Ibid., p. 147.

Ibid., p. 152.


Ibid., p. 3.

Ibid., p. 15.


Ibid., p. 19.

Ibid., p. 13.

Ibid., p. 37.


Ibid., p. 185.


Ibid., pp. 91-5.

Ibid., pp. 95-8.


Ibid., p. 153, Earl, many years later, made the same observation. He said, "The Sultan and the pangerans form a sort of commercial company, and monopolize the whole of the foreign trade, the people not being permitted to purchase a single ganton of rice that has not passed through their hands," (The Eastern Seas, p. 185). Clifford arriving in the 1890s found that the monopoly sistem was still in voyage. ("Expedition etc." pp. 74—5).


See W.A. Graham. "Trengganu" in Encyclopaedia Britannica (11th Edition) 1910-11, p. 483. For further views on Graham's comments see J. De Vere Allen, op. cit, Allen based his comments on the journals kept by the first British Agent in Trengganu — Conlay.

John Dunmore (tr.), op. cit, p. 153, Earl, many years later, made the same observation. He said, "The Sultan and the pangerans form a sort of commercial company, and monopolize the whole of the foreign trade, the people not being permitted to purchase a single ganton of rice that has not passed through their hands," (The Eastern Seas, p. 185). Clifford arriving in the 1890s found that the monopoly sistem was still in voyage. ("Expedition etc." pp. 74—5).

**Note:**

4. J. Dunmore (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 150. The others were less direct in their praises but their opinions were not different.


52. The *Eastern Seas*, p. 186.