Preface

Although recognised as one of the greatest of Malaya’s administrators, Sir Hugh Low, third Resident of Perak, has been strangely neglected by writers of Malayan history; the only references to him are brief notes in the general histories by Swettenham and Winstedt, and occasional passages in Malayan travel literature. Yet he was a naturalist, traveller and administrator of great achievements, deserving a historian’s attention.

The student of Sir Hugh Low is faced with serious source difficulties; it has not yet been possible to trace his private papers, and with the destruction during the war of most of the records of Perak, and the disappearance of the CSO records in Singapore for that period, documentation of his Perak administration must be seriously defective. There survives, however, the first volume of the journal he kept during his Perak Residency. This journal (now in the Federal Secretariat in Kuala Lumpur), covers his first eight weeks in Perak, from 19 April to 15 June, 1877. In this period he met most of the officers of the Perak establishment, and all the important Malay and Chinese leaders; he also made two journeys of inspection, to Upper and Lower Perak, when he became familiar with the chief problems of his administration. He committed to his journal full comments on the persons and problems with which he had to deal, as well as outlines of the policies he proposed to follow. The journal is useful not only as a record of routine administration at a critical stage of the history of the Native States, but as an introduction to his whole Perak administration.

It was standard practice for Residents and district officers to keep official journals which were regularly forwarded to headquarters. Where communications were slow, or where officers had to be away on tour for long periods, these journals supplemented regular correspondence. The manuscript in the Federal Secretariat is obviously a file copy, the original probably having been sent to the Colonial Secretary’s Office in Singapore. It is imperfect. Names are misspelt and sometimes distorted almost beyond recognition; in parts textual errors and omissions render whole passages meaningless. I have tried to preserve the sense with as little textual interference as possible, but occasional corrections have been necessary. Where names are recognisable the spelling has been left intact, but where serious distortion has taken place the name or word has been restored in the modern spelling. All such departures from the text, and the insertions necessary to restore the sense, have been placed in square brackets. Textual gaps are indicated by asterisks.

My thanks are due to the several people who assisted with the editing of this journal; Professor Parkinson of the History Department of the University of Malaya for suggesting the subject and so readily providing facilities for research; the staffs of the Raffles Museum, Journal Malayan Branch [Vol. XXVII, Pt. 4, 1954] Royal Asiatic Society
Taiping and University of Malaya libraries for help with material; Raja Razman of Kuala Kangsar, and Inche Mohamed Zen of Taiping for help with photographs; Dr. Graham Irwin, of the University of Malaya, for his generous loan of Sarawak and Labuan material; K. M. Foong for drawing the map on page 8; and finally, the many correspondents who have so freely helped with suggestions and information.

12 July, 1954. Emily Sadka

Note on Sources

Much use has been made of the material in Parliamentary (Command) Papers C. 1111 of 1874, C. 1320 of 1875, C. 1505 of 1876, C. 1709 of 1877, C. 3285 of 1882, C. 3429 of 1882 and C. 4192 of 1884, the last three containing correspondence on slavery in the Protected States. Reference was also made to the Governor's Despatches to the Secretary of State; to the Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements and the Minutes of the State Council of Perak; to the Straits Settlements Blue Books and Government Gazettes (chiefly for the Residents' Reports printed therein); to printed and manuscript proceedings of the Enquiry into the Complicity of Chiefs in the Perak Outrages, 1876; and to miscellaneous articles in the Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. The few surviving Perak State records for this period, now in the Taiping Museum Library, include useful miscellaneous establishment and pensions lists, published in "Perak Affairs, 1874–1879," and "Perak Estimates, 1877".

Abbreviations.

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>JSBRAS</td>
<td>Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Singapore, 1878–1922).</td>
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<td>JMBRAS</td>
<td>Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Singapore, 1923, continuing).</td>
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<td>PEP</td>
<td>Perak Enquiry Papers, 1876. (In Raffles Museum Archives).</td>
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<td>Précis of Evidence</td>
<td>Enquiry into the Complicity of Chiefs in the Perak Outrages, 1876. Précis of Evidence.</td>
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<td>SSGG</td>
<td>Straits Settlements Government Gazette.</td>
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Journal Malayan Branch [Vol. XXVII, Pt. 4]
Sir Hugh Low, a biographical note

Hugh Low was born on 10 May, 1824, at Clapton, in England, of a family with horticultural interests*. He was educated at private schools. At the age of nineteen he went to Borneo on a botanical tour, and there came under the patronage of Rajah James Brooke. In 1848 he was appointed Secretary under Brooke to the newly formed government of Labuan, and held various posts in the Labuan administration (including that of acting Governor) for the next twenty-nine years. In 1877 he was appointed British Resident in Perak, an appointment which he held until 1889, when he retired. One of his last public services was to negotiate a treaty of protection with Brunei in 1888.

He was created a K.C.M.G. in 1883, and a G.C.M.G. in 1889. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society, the Zoological Society and the Society of Antiquaries. He was a well-known traveller, and the first European to climb Mount Kinabalu (in 1851); he subsequently climbed the peak again on two subsequent occasions in 1858.

He married twice. In 1848, at St. Andrew's Church, Singapore, he married Catherine, daughter of William Napier of Singapore and Labuan, who bore him a son and a daughter. She died in 1851, and in 1885 he married Anne, daughter of Sir Robert Percy Douglas of Carr House, Monkseaton, Northumberland.

He died at Alassio, on 18 April, 1905.

Publications

"Sarawak, its inhabitants and productions", xxiv+416 pp., Richard Bentley London, 1848.


"Selesilah (Book of the Descent) of the Rajas of Brunei", Journal of the Straits Branch, Royal Asiatic Society, No. 5 (Singapore, 1880), pp. 1–35.

(Hugh Low's photographs provided many of the illustrations for "The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo", by H. Ling Roth, London, 1896, which was indebted for most of its material to the posthumous papers of Hugh Brooke Low, his son by his first wife).

*His brother Stuart carried on the business, which still continues under the name of Stuart Low & Co.

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Introduction

Hugh Low arrived in Perak three years after the introduction of British influence. In those three years the first British Resident had been murdered and the whole experiment of indirect British control in Perak was compromised. Low is generally regarded as the administrator who rescued Perak and the "residential idea" and who succeeded in reconciling the Malays to the presence of the British after others had failed. His introduction to Perak is perhaps best understood against a background of Perak affairs from the period of the Pangkor Engagement in 1874.

Perak rule before the British intervened appears in all contemporary accounts to have been in the last stages of disintegration. As in all Malay States, settlement lay along the rivers, particularly along the Perak river and its tributaries, which held the bulk of the Malay population; here also lived the Sultan and the important chiefs. But there were new and growing colonies in the rich ricelands of the Krian and Kurau rivers (on the Perak—Province Wellesley border) and in the tin-mining districts of Larut, only seven hours by sea from the British settlement of Penang. Tin in Larut attracted Chinese miners, and the rich alluvium of the lower Krian and Kurau attracted Malays from the already settled areas of Province Wellesley and even from Kedah and the Siamese province of Patani. Before the British formally intervened in Perak, Chinese and Malays from British settlements were pushing across its frontiers, bringing with them problems with which the Perak authorities were wholly unable to deal.

Centralised administration was unknown in Perak. A number of hereditary chiefs shared the palace dignities, the functions of state and the territorial power, and were constitutionally entitled to certain dues; usually customs levies and tolls in their districts and certain extraordinary monopolies, such as the gambling revenues, the monopoly of salt and attaps, and capitation and produce taxes. In brief, the Perak constitutional structure combined an imposing and complicated system of precedence and ceremonial with a primitive administrative system in which taxation and justice were delegated to chiefs who held unchallenged authority over their own villages.

The weaknesses of this system, whereby the position of the Sultan depended largely on personality and the prestige of office, were clearly apparent in Malay Perak. There the great chiefs enjoyed local autonomy and jockeyed for power unchecked by their overlord. In 1871 they actually set aside the legitimate heir in favour of a more popular candidate. The latter was the Bendahara Ismail, a prince not in the direct line, but supported by most of the chiefs of Upper Perak.

1. See Appendix B. For a general account of the Perak Constitution see Winstedt and Wilkinson, "History of Perak" Appendix D, in JMBRAS, Vol. 12, part 1, 1934.

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among them the influential and wealthy Mantri, the ruler of Larut. Perak now had a Sultan living among his followers in Upper Perak, and a Pretender, the Raja Muda Abdullah, with his followers in Lower Perak; and there was a third claimant still, Raja Yusuf, who had been passed over for office because of his unpopularity with the other chiefs. All three of them manoeuvred against each other, particularly in the Krian, before 1874 regarded as the Sultan’s personal estate. In the years before Pangkor, Krian was infested with agents and adventurers trying to collect money on behalf of the different chiefs.

Malay administration, barely functioning even in Malay Perak, broke down completely in Larut. Authority in Larut had been delegated to a minor chief, Che Long Jaffar, and later to his son Ngah Ibrahim, Mantri of Perak. They held the district from 1850 on grants giving them sole concession rights and sole administrative authority. Under this authority Chinese from Penang entered the country to work the mines. The Chinese population, according to one estimate, had reached 26,000 by 1874, out of a total population of 33,000 for the whole of Larut. The Penang Chinese had by then become the capitalists of Larut, advancing money to work the mines, provisioning their own labour force and finally conducting their own secret society wars, financed again from Penang. Larut was practically an autonomous Chinese province, defying all attempts at control by the Mantri.

The struggle for the Larut mines between the two Chinese societies lasted in its final stages from February 1872 till British intervention in January 1874. The two societies, expelled in turn from Larut, retired to Penang to mount fresh assaults. In mid-1873 a land and river war was being fought on the Larut coast, a permanent threat to the peace of Penang and to shipping in the Straits of Malacca. For the sake of peace in the Straits, something had to be done about Perak.

In September 1873 a new Governor, Sir Andrew Clarke, was about to leave England to take up his appointment. The Secretary of State for the Colonies addressed to him, in typically cautious terms, a suggestion that a solution to the troubles of the British in the native states might be found in the appointment of a British Resident to guide the Sultans. Clarke wasted no time. He arrived in Singapore on the first of November 1873 and within three months had carried out a Perak settlement. The “key to the door” was the Raja Muda Abdullah, who for the last year had been soliciting support from anyone who would listen. He now came to Singapore to canvass for help.

2. Report of HBM Assistant Resident, SSGG, 3 April, 1875.
3. There were two main groups, one largely consisting of Cantonese and known as the Ghee Hin or Si Kwan (a geographical appellation referring to their districts of origin in China), the other group consisting mainly of Hakkas and known as the Hai San or Go Kwan (Five districts). The Hai San mining area was around Taiping, the Ghee Hin round Kamunting, three or four miles to the north of Taiping.
against the Mantri and Ismail and was prepared to accept a Resident in return. Settlement of terms was arrived at in the Pangkor Engagement of January 20th, 1874.

The settlement was in two parts. The Chinese conflicts were ended by negotiations supervised by the British and a British Commission was sent to Larut to supervise mining boundaries. The settlement of Perak proper was contained in the Pangkor Engagement, which recognised Abdullah as Sultan and provided for a British Resident to advise him.

The Engagement was a piece of emergency diplomacy which secured an immediate settlement and a basis for British intervention; but—full of ambiguities and contradictions as it was—it could hardly provide a stable settlement of the problems of Perak. Clarke was prepared to recognise Abdullah, and to secure recognition Abdullah agreed to accept—in the comfortingly distant future—an adviser who would uphold his authority in Perak against all threats, particularly against Ismail and Yusuf. But Ismail, who was the accepted Sultan and was supported by the three chiefs of the first rank, was not present at Pangkor, neither was Yusuf. The recognition of Abdullah was described by the succeeding Governor in these terms,

"In a British vessel, with a British man-of-war alongside, we collected together some Perak chiefs, to 'elect' a Sultan, when we just put down one who was absent and set up another who was present, that other being the wretched individual I have now described."

Clarke also "consented to the ultimate appointment of a Resident at the Sultan's court". Clause six laid down that the Resident's advice "must be asked and acted upon in all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom" and clause ten provided that "the collection and control of all revenues and the general administration of the country be regulated under the advice of these Residents."

In the clauses relating to Residential functions too, the Engagement contained the seeds of trouble. It concealed the intended role of the Resident in equivocal phrasing, which provided for control and called it advice. It took a secular view of the scope of Malay religion and custom, regarding these as separate from government, while in fact Malay government was regulated by custom and tradition. Taxation and justice and local controls were all sanctified by custom, and these were the very departments which the local memoranda had most criticised and which the Pangkor Engagement put under the discretion of the Resident. Finally, the settlement recognised one of three claimants without securing their recognition by the other two, or by their supporters, so that the Resident found himself accredited to a Sultan whose right was denied by half his subjects, and who could not guarantee the support of the Perak chiefs for the British programme, whatever his own attitude might be.

4. Precis of Evidence, Appendix 1, Abdullah-Clarke, 30 Dec., 1873.
5. Appendix 1.
6. There were traditionally four of these offices, but one was then vacant.
Two Residents were appointed—Captain T. C. S. Speedy to Larut and J. W. W. Birch to Abdullah's court in Lower Perak. Speedy took office immediately; he was already in Perak as the Mantri's chief officer and commander of his troops, and was familiar with the district. His nominal Malay authority, the Mantri, was discredited; he had alienated both Chinese factions by his equivocations in the Larut wars, and had suffered great loss of prestige at Pangkor, when his overlord Ismail was ignored and he himself, was made responsible for the costs of the Larut wars. He was further overshadowed by the British Commission which disarmed the tin districts in January 1874 and settled mining boundaries and machinery for staking claims. Speedy found himself administering what was virtually a Chinese province, unhampered by the Malay precedents which were to plague Birch. By the end of a year, as his 1874 report indicates, he had an establishment officered by Europeans, with separate departments for the revenue, mines and roads, each under a European officer. There was a magistrate's court in Taiping where he sat with the Treasurer, and where justice was administered according to the Indian Penal Code. He had also a strong police establishment stationed at the chief villages and mining centres. Finally he had the disposal of a revenue of $101,554, collected and accounted for by his own officers.

Birch's case was different. Nothing in his training had particularly fitted him for pioneer diplomacy in a native state. His experience had been in Ceylon, where he had served for 24 years before coming to the Straits Settlements as Colonial Secretary in 1870. His experience there had taught him that native rulers were “perfectly incapable of good government, or even of maintaining order, without guidance and assistance from some stronger hand.” He was inevitably an enthusiastic advocate of British control of the native states—by the establishment of permanent Residents, as outright annexation was excluded by the Colonial Office. A sense of mission, however, was unlikely to achieve much without skill in diplomacy, experience and understanding of the Malay, or knowledge of the language. Birch's experience of the Native States before 1874 consisted of a mission to Selangor in 1871, when his peremptory behaviour to the Sultan provoked the criticism both of the Governor and the Colonial Office.

On Birch's first visit to Perak in April 1874 he was faced with his first great diplomatic problem; how to cajole Sultan Ismail and the Upper Perak chiefs into recognising Abdullah and giving up the Perak regalia without which Abdullah could not be properly installed. Neither Ismail nor Yusuf, the other pretender, saw any reason why they should give up their claims. Abdullah, anxious at first that Ismail should accept Pangkor, whereby his own position was confirmed, soon became equally anxious that he should remain detached from an
Engagement which was becoming daily more burdensome. A futile meeting between the Sultans was staged at Blanja in January 1875, but was doomed to failure by prearrangement. Another meeting held in September, this time with the Resident and Governor, failed to bring in Ismail. After the Governor left, the Sultan and his followers decided to ignore the Resident and the Pangkor Engagement altogether and proceeded with the appointment of their own men to Perak offices.

In his general policy Birch ran into difficulties which his instructions did not help him to solve. The Colonial Office was studiously non-committal, regarding the whole scheme as experimental and unwilling to be drawn into undefined responsibilities. But Clarke's instructions were forthright. The Resident might tolerate minor irregularities, but was to put down, "by force if necessary, all unlawful exactions of whatever nature so as to secure that whatever revenue is collected shall be for the State alone." Birch now had a mandate to intervene radically in the affairs of Perak.

He complained in his first report of the irregularities of the native administration. There was no system either in the imposition or collection of taxes. The revenue of the Perak River derived chiefly from customs dues on all imports, and heavy export dues, chiefly on tin and jungle produce. In addition there was a large number of extraordinary dues, some sanctioned by custom, some quite arbitrary (such as the levy of 10 per cent which Raja Yusuf imposed on the contents of all boats passing his village.) The chiefs were the tax-collectors; they took unregulated commissions, sublet tax farms, and taxed on their own initiative, all apparently without control. As magistrates they pocketed all fines under $25. Birch wished to rationalise the fiscal system, establish a single customs collection by Government officers at the mouth of the Perak River, where he built a revenue and police station at Kota Stia. He wished to reduce the tin duty, abolish extraordinary tin royalties and establish a single opium, gambling and spirit farm over all Perak. Most important, collection of taxes was to be regulated by Government, and no-one else was to tax in Perak.

The chiefs naturally resisted plans which struck at their livelihood, without offering them alternative incomes. Clause 9 of the Pangkor Engagement had provided for a civil list regulating the incomes of the Sultan and chiefs, but this was never implemented. To persuade the Sultan and chiefs to accept a new dispensation was not something that could be achieved easily or quickly, yet Birch seemed unaware that his plans required a long diplomatic preparation. Two days after his arrival he explained his new scheme for Perak—the Krian and Dindings cessions to be completed, a police force to be enrolled to

14. C 1512, No. 70, Jervois—Carnarvon, 1 June, 1876.
15. Clarke had taken the opportunity at Pangkor of extending the British territories of the Dindings and Province Wellesley by further cessions from Perak.

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complement the work of the headmen, taxes on all the rivers to be collected only by Government officers. In early December he burnt a toll-house on the Bidor River belonging to the Panglima Besar. In January he began pressing Abdullah to sign proclamations giving him control of taxes, and appointing him a judge. In April Lieut.-Governor Anson issued a proclamation forbidding the levy of taxes except by the Resident. In June Birch threatened the Shahbandar with deposition and exile if the latter continued to collect at Kota Stia. In July he threatened Abdullah with deposition if he refused to sign the revenue notices and proclamations by the 20th July. On July 25th Abdullah under pressure signed notices appointing the Resident and Raja Dris judges, and the Resident and Shahbandar in charge of taxation. But Abdullah clearly regarded the notices as paper concessions which need not be taken seriously. The next day he confirmed to the Maharaja Lela his right to collect taxes on the Dedap river, and a few days later fined a trader for refusing to pay the old taxes at the Kuala Kinta.

In May 1875, Clarke handed over the government to his successor, Sir William Jervois. But before he left, he complained in a private letter of the "head-over-heels" way in which both Jervois and Birch were going into native affairs, and prophesied trouble. His fears were about to be justified. In September Jervois and Birch pushed through new arrangements for Perak, which they hoped would remove the anomalies in a system whereby the Residents while expected to control, were nominally only to advise. According to the new arrangements, the British officers—henceforth to be called Queen’s Commissioners—were to undertake all the responsibilities of government in the name of the Sultan. It was the intention of the Pangkor Engagement restated in logical terms. This time the British found levers in Raja Yusuf and his son-in-law Raja Idris, who alone of the Malay chiefs supported the new proposals. Abdullah gave in and on September 29th signed a letter making over the administration to the Resident. Birch lost no time in pressing matters home. Next day, he forced Abdullah, under threat of deposition, to sign the proclamations giving the British Resident sole powers of jurisdiction and taxation, and of appointment and dismissal of penghulus. He also drew up notices rationalising the fiscal structure of Perak, most of the changes to come into effect at the end of the month. There was no radical alteration in the tax structure. The most important elements—taxes on imports and exports—were retained, the list of dutiable goods covering nearly every article in use or production in Perak. But the extraordinary duties levied by the chiefs, and their collection rights, were abolished. Birch also proposed to raise additional revenue