For most of my academic life, I have studied Southeast Asia. Influenced, like other historians, by changes in the world at large, as well as by changing professional approaches and by the opening-up of new resources, I yet remain much affected by my initial approach to the history of the area. It was through a study of British policy. That, of course, has advantages, and it also has some disadvantages, which have been recognised by me and pointed out by others. More recently, I have reflected on the position of the British in the world, particularly since the late eighteenth century, and have offered, in a book called The Sun Never Sets (Delhi, 1986), what might be called a view of the British empire from the point of view of a Southeast Asianist, by comparison with the more normal approach from the direction of Africa, India, or one or other of the settler Dominions. Probably I was taking on too much, but that may be something that ageing historians should do, rushing in where research students fear to tread. I was also affected, indeed, by another long-standing interest of mine, originally deriving from and since sustained by a teaching commitment, the origins of the world wars. This study, indeed, it is possible profitably to juxtapose with the history of empire, since in some sense they were what I have called wars of British succession, wars to determine what power or powers should succeed the British who had enjoyed primacy in the nineteenth-century world. The specialist in me could well ask why Southeast Asia, barely touched by the first war, was so profoundly affected by the second, and why indeed Southeast Asia itself so profoundly affected the course of the war that began fifty years ago this year through being a focus of interest, not now only of Britain, but also of the United States and Japan.

In talking of wars of succession, however, I talk of succession to Britain's power, rather than to its territorial empire. This I believe is a fundamental distinction, which has to be understood if the nature of Britain's primacy and of the wars to replace it is to be understood. It also helps to explain the nature of Britain's policies, which are one focus of my lecture tonight. My other focus — and I rush in again, if perhaps in so distinguished and learned a company, with a little more caution than in my essay — is on Malaya. Again perhaps risking offering a Southeast Asianist's view of empire, I nevertheless think that understanding British policy in Malaya helps to explain the priorities in British policy in general. At the same time, I will argue, understanding that general policy is part of an explanation of Britain's policy in Malaya.

Britain's power in the world from the late eighteenth century did not rest merely on territorial dominion. Indeed its power may be described as falling into two circles of interest. One circle was drawn by the enveloping ambit of its world-wide commerce. The other was sketched out by the ambit of its political and territorial control. The two were not coterminous. Though it might be supported by the second, the first was larger and also more important to the British, particularly as their industrialisation, preceding that of other powers, got under way.
Drawing such a distinction helps to deal with the problem of periodisation. The chronicler of the advance of Britain’s power will find that the chronicling of its territorial empire proceeds at a different pace, as well as covering, even at its greatest extent, a smaller portion of the world. The two are related, not in a simple way, but in a range of ways. There are, perhaps, two chronicles to be written in consultation and to be read together. The decline and fall of the empire has often been taken to be the explanation for the decline of British power. The relationship is different. Though one has sometimes stood as a symbol for the other, the relationship of the two chronicles is in fact complex.

The distinction may help in dealing with other problems in the history of British imperialism and in assessing explanations of and generalisations about its nature. The concept of collaboration is clearly a useful one. No empire has been without its indigenous local collaborators, though their motives have not always deserved the pejorative tone the use of the word has implied since the second world war. But the concept is almost too useful. Other exertions of power are unlikely to be successful without collaborators. Indeed, it may be that it is only when collaboration is either not forthcoming or current collaborators are ineffectual, that a formal territorial or political control is required and that in the British case only then territory fell out of the first circle into the second. There may be some kind of continuum between the pre-imperial and imperial phases. Indeed the second phase may not occur, and the first thus be a misnomer.

There may also be some continuum into a late imperial or post-imperial phase. The collaboration concept has again proved useful in explaining British policy. If collaborators have seen an interest in working with the imperial power, they or their successors might see an interest, personal or otherwise, in continuing to do so when the relationship has been put on a new footing, post-imperial or post-colonial. British optimism about such a prospect could be the more easily generated if the main thrust of policy was after all contained within the first circle. It was a matter of creating conditions in which the territory concerned could find its way back into the first and chief circle of British interests. Ultimately it might be part of a system of at least theoretically sovereign states whose internal governance and modes of interstate diplomacy guaranteed the measure of stability that commercial interests required.

Imperialism may not characterise the period from the late eighteenth century. The chronicle is rather that of the exertion of British power to the extent required not by imperial purpose but by the prescription of Britain’s economic interests. That is at once broader and more limited: broader in the sense that those interests concerned the commerce of the world at large, more limited in the sense that they did not necessarily require the establishment of territorial control. What they prescribed was the minimum conditions under which commerce might be satisfactorily carried on. Those would include stability within and among political entities and the avoidance of protectionism and political obstruction to a free trade. There was no disposition beyond that to intervene to make the world anew. If these conditions were satisfied, indeed, commerce would help to civilise the world, and a stable world of mutually trading states would emerge. Empire, in the sense of territorial control, was necessary only if the goal could not be realised by more modest means. Even then the goal remained the same, empire a transitional arrangement.
These were presumptions associated with the first circle of British interests. In general those prevailed. Alliance prevailed over federation; free trade over protection. But interests from the second circle affected the exertion of British power. In some respects they were after all connected. Even interests in the first circle required a measure of protection internationally: there were trade-routes and strategic points d'appui. World-wide stability was as necessary as internal stability: the latter might help to produce the former and so it was presumed would the civilising affects of trade. But even in the long term protection for trade would be needed, and in the transition it was certainly necessary. The development of commerce would not at once produce order: it might more immediately produce internal instability, a threat even to larger strategic interests.

Less directly connected with interests in the first circle were others in the second circle. In particular these were associated with India. British rule there, which had begun to expand in the late eighteenth century even as the American empire was being lost, depended on dominion and control, direct and indirect, and it gave rise to a complex of interests, values, and attitudes that were often at odds with those associated with the commercial and industrial interests of Britain itself. Yet India could also serve those interests. It could help to preserve security and stability in Asia, providing men and resources. It could make up deficiencies, temporary or lasting, in Britain's commercial interests, providing at one time goods for trading to China; providing, at another, markets for British goods when competition reduced them elsewhere.

Another, but related, way of conceiving Britain's relations with the outside world is in terms of a framework within which collaborative relationships, economic and political, could develop and be maintained. There would be some presumption that collaborators could always be found if the framework were upheld. At times it might be necessary to adjust it; but peoples would always want to trade. The concept could be extended to cover Britain's relations with European states. Indeed its relations with the rest of the world were in a sense designed to develop towards the European pattern as the European pattern extended over the rest of the world: a pattern of nation-states, international relations, alliances, mutual trade. At least ad interim, there was a diversity of relationships; but they might all be seen to be moving towards the same destination, albeit at different stages in the process. What was unacceptable was a dramatic change of the framework itself. Adjustments within it, even of it, were possible. But even partial collapse would undermine confidence in the whole. Apprehension of systemic change might indeed reduce flexibility within the framework, and as Britain's power declined in the outside world, a kind of inertia often overcame its colonial policy. Maintaining the framework as a whole remained the first preference.

The collaborator theme is useful in analysing any particular occasion on which power was exerted by the British overseas; useful, too, in marking changes in the mode in which it was exerted. The mode conceived in relation to the white dominions could be transferred to India; it became the practice to think of the post-Boer War South Africa settlement when dealing with collaboration in Burma after the Second World War. But there is another aspect to the concept. It is concerned with the
leadership of a society, and the value of understandings with local elites rests indeed on their ability to mobilise popular support or at least neutralise popular opposition. In fact it contained an inbuilt contradiction. If they were too closely tied to an imperial power, the elites might lose their local influence; but if they were insufficiently influential, they would be useless to the imperial power. No doubt all colonial powers realised this or were brought to realise it: the Dutch in Indonesia, the Japanese in occupied China. Possibly the British were particularly inclined to assume that an elite was influential, and looked for one that seemed to be recognisably landowners and/or gentlemen. Other elite elements they often considered less trustworthy, particularly if western-educated, and there was always a tension between the recognition of the importance of conciliating an elite and the belief that imperial rulers would be recognised and accepted by the masses as fairer and less oppressive. Generally the British hoped to take collaborators with them within their dominions and accepted changes outside if they were not too revolutionary. Drastic change in the framework, however, might undermine confidence not only among the British, but also among their collaborators, actual or would-be.

Let me now turn explicitly to Malaya. Earlier I used to speak of British policy there, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, in terms of paradox. Here, I argued, Britain was predominant for a century or so from the late eighteenth century. Yet its settlements and possessions were few: apart from Burma, only the three Straits Settlements and Labuan, with protectorates, increasingly defined from the 1870s onwards, over peninsular states in Malaya and over Sarawak, Brunei, and North Borneo. Given the extent of British power, this must be explained by considerations in British policy: the British set the agenda. The fact was, I suggested, that for a large part of the period Southeast Asia figured in imperial policy only because of its relationship to other areas of British interest. It was India, China, and Europe, that determined British policies in Southeast Asia in general, and in Malaya in particular. And if settlements were made in Malaya, I argued, it was because Malaya was affected by those considerations.

One of the ways in which the western parts of Southeast Asia first assumed importance in imperial policy was in relation to India. The establishment of British dominion there — especially the early struggles with the French — gave Britain a strategic interest in the area. It was a motive behind the foundation of Penang, acquired from the neighbouring Sultan of Kedah in 1786, without the expected quid pro quo of aid against his enemies, as the East India Company did not wish to become involved with Siam, which had claims over the northern Malay states and which was likely to enforce them after the Burmese invaders had been decisively defeated and a new dynasty established in Bangkok. And there was another complication: the Chinese.

Malaya was important secondly in relation to China. One of the features of the eighteenth century — and one of the aspects of Britain’s economic success — was the development of trade in China tea — a product increasingly in demand, but hard to pay for before the industrial revolution improved Britain’s ability to penetrate the China market. The solution was to import Indian opium. Meanwhile another possibility was to take part in another trade within Asia, the Archipelago trade to China,
trade in jungle and marine products and in tin. It was an important feature of British policy in the area in the late eighteenth century: another motive for acquiring Penang; a motive also for the attempt to acquire Riau. In the early nineteenth century, it declined as a motive, with the overwhelming success of the opium trade. What still remained important was the route to China. Malaya was important as flanking a major route, through the Straits of Malacca. This was a powerful argument for the acquisition of Singapore just 170 years ago and its retention.

In another way, again, both India and China tended to limit British involvement in Malaya. In the early phase, the Company was most anxious to maintain friendship with Peking, so as not to be turned out of Canton. This was a powerful argument for limiting British activity on the peninsula, especially where Siam had claims, for it owed a degree of allegiance to China and involvement with China might ensue. A change in the attitude to China followed in the 1830s: the first opium war followed, the acquisition of Hong Kong, the opening of more ports. But good relations with Siam were preserved. The Bowring treaty was concluded in 1855, and, with the French establishment in Indo-China after 1858, Siam was seen as a buffer state.

There were indeed European factors in the making of British policy in Southeast Asia. One necessary source of Britain’s power overseas was security in Europe. The continent must not be dominated by any one power. Minor powers, like the Dutch, were therefore important to Britain in Europe, and that affected its treatment of them overseas. It was caution here that led to the settlement at Penang, placed on the periphery of the Dutch sphere. The Dutch possessions were conquered in the 1790s and 1810s, but only as an aspect of the struggle with France, then predominant in the Dutch homeland. In the agreement of 1814, they were (save Ceylon) to be restored, even Malacca in the Straits. The restoration would be a guarantee of Dutch integrity and friendship in Europe, a constituent in the balance of power and an insulation for the English Channel. So far as the security of India, and of the route to China, was concerned, the hope was that the Dutch—a minor power—would not be a major menace to it, while their consolidation would help to exclude major powers from strategically important areas. Singapore was established only because Raffles persuaded the Government that the Dutch might be a strategic threat, as well as a menace to British traders in Penang and in Java. And it was retained—despite Dutch protests—only because the Free Traders, anxious to breach the Company’s China monopoly, had begun to use it. The result was the treaty of 1824, by which the Dutch withdrew from Malacca and the peninsula, and a sort of a line was drawn down the Straits, and between Singapore and Riau.

In some respects, I was clear, these European considerations were by the nineteenth century only reinforcing in Britain a more general disposition against intervention and the acquisition of empire. Of this the Radical attitudes—aroused, for instance in opposition to Raja Brooke—were, as it were, only the more extreme professions. Not only Chinese and Indian considerations tended in some respects to enforce this attitude in Southeast Asia: so also did the general feeling that India was more than a sufficient political burden.

So I argued in the past. Now I see—and invite you to see—the larger context
more fully: it offers a fuller explanation of the paradox. Reflection on the development of Malaya is enhanced by considering the nature of Britain’s policy as a whole and vice-versa. It was concerned, of course, with its own security in Europe; it was concerned to trade with other countries; it was not concerned to rule them, India being an exception to prove the case.

Earlier I also argued that there was a tension between the metropolitan view of British policy, and the local view, which was often more disposed to intervention and assumption of control. I saw Malaya as an example of this and indeed suggested that some of the peculiar features of the Anglo-Malayan relationship derived from it. For in some ways those factors I have mentioned gave Britain a limited concern with Malaya; in some ways they limited its concern with Malaya. They gave it the Straits Settlements: they did not encourage intervention on the peninsula; on the contrary they restrained it. It is in this context, I argued, that we should view the development of British policy on the peninsula. It was mostly the work of local officials, the Governors of the Settlements and their subordinates, concerned to restrict Thai and expand British influence. It could not be a matter of direct intervention or acquisition: such their superiors would certainly prevent. But to some extent they were able to operate indirectly. Already before the 1870s, therefore, they had developed a certain amount of British influence, operating through some of the rulers of the Malay states, those with whom they had most contact, above all the ruler of Johore. It was, as I argued, in this phase, between the 1820s and 1870s, that the tradition of indirect rule, of maintaining and modernising the Malay states, of upholding the framework of Malay rule, developed.

The Colonial Office, in control over the Settlements after 1867, authorised intervention in the west coast states in the 1870s. But that intervention bore the impress of the previous history of British policy. First of all, it was in the west coast states that were most disturbed, and not in others. Secondly, its motivation was not simply to deal with those disturbances, nor to protect the trade of the Settlements, but to avoid the intervention of others in an area flanking the route to China and its guardian Singapore. Thirdly, the intervention took the form of appointing residents, expecting the rulers to follow their advice: it was simply an extension of the notions of indirect rule already abroad on the peninsula and actually working in less disturbed states, under the control of influential rulers, like Johore. In practice, those Residents came increasingly to govern. That there was no great difficulty in pretending that they were advising was due to the fact that initial resistance had been quickly quelled, following the murder of the first Perak resident, in the so-called Perak war of 1877. The notion of advice could thus be preserved simply because it was not the practice. And as I have argued, political traditions and practices from the pre-intervention peninsula lasted into a period of growing economic and political involvement in Malaysia.

Both before and after 1867, I now suggest, it may be useful to see the British as undertaking a limited extension of their control in pursuit of their essential aims, the maintenance of conditions under which they might trade. Other local ambitions might overlap this aim; the aim remained. Even the metropolitan authorities might
come to believe a further step should be taken, as they did in 1873—4. But the step was again in search of effective collaborators in an area that had become unstable. Malaya was refitted into the framework of British power through the link between ruler and Resident. It was a peculiar and special relationship of great historical significance for Malaya. But it was also, as I now see it, an example of a larger British policy that viewed the world, to adapt Van Leur’s phrase, from the deck of a trading ship and from the desk in a manufacturer’s office, that limited the urge to rule, that sought—and sought with optimism—support from local elites in pursuing its objectives. A biblical phrase once used by Robert Meade, under-secretary at the Colonial Office, is characteristic: ‘sufficient unto the day’. The work on colonial defence of Nadzan Haron, of the Universiti Kebangsaan, gives us other examples of a limited British policy.

From the late nineteenth century Britain’s relative power diminished in the world at large. Its economic primacy was lost. But it did not on the whole react by changing the emphasis in its policy. Economic objectives remained primary, and they were still to be sought by seeking stability rather than control. With other powers it sought compromise. Only with Germany, a threat in Europe itself, was there conflict. Britain emerged from the first world war victorious, but greatly depleted in power. Interwar, however, its approach still did not, I believe, greatly change. It was concerned still to make adjustments within a continuing framework, and it tended to assume indeed that if the status quo were in general sustained, the main problem was met. It could come to terms with new ruling groups within Thailand, the Promoters, or the Philippines, Quezon and his colleagues. What could not be accepted was the overthrow of the status quo in general. The framework was, however, difficult to sustain, given the decline in Britain’s power, and the emergence, in particular, of the United States and Japanese navies. Bluff was involved. Confidence in the framework was after all one of its requirements, but not a sufficient one, it turned out, on its own.

If this interpretation approaches accuracy, it both helps to explain British policy in twentieth-century Malaya and is explained by it. Earlier I had continued my stress on paradox. The British, I argued, were now more interested in Malaya for its own sake than in the nineteenth century. The importance of Malaya economically was positively recognised: its rubber and tin made it a major dollar-earner in the increasing imbalance between the sterling and dollar areas. And its strategic importance, if anything, also increased. With the Washington agreements of 1921—2, a sort of power vacuum was created in East Asian waters. Singapore became as it were a forward base for British power in Asia, now essentially an Indian Ocean affair, and it was to be the Asian base for the Navy when the threat was in Asia. But if one paradox were reconciled, another began to emerge. Just at the time as Malaya assumed a new intrinsic importance in imperial policy, there were new problems in colonial policy, above all the problem of political advancement, pressed on by the advance of democracy in England and also by the example of India. In Malaya, however, rapid economic development in a scantily-populated country had produced a plural society, with substantial immigration of Indians, and above all Chinese. In the face of this, it was hard, the British thought, to envisage straightforward democratic development that would not swamp the Malays politically just as the Chinese were
swamping them economically. The fact that Britain now had powerful economic and increased strategic reasons for staying in Malaya made it appear to some simply a matter of divide-and-rule, or maintain-division-and-remain. But this, I argued, was perhaps taking too little account of the well-established emphasis in British policy on the maintenance of the Malay states and the Malay rulers, dating from the nineteenth century.

My belief now is that it also takes too little account of overall British policy. The British tended interwar to avoid initiatives that might in fact show their weakness or call their bluff. They still had considerable confidence that if they could avoid major international challenge, they could find local elites with whom to collaborate. But they were now more cautious about changing them: they might not succeed; their general weakness might be shown up. Malaya was of great importance to them: their interest in it had increased, and they would need it in the future. They would also need to tackle the demands of modernisation and democratisation. Meanwhile, however, they were not urgent. Malaya was a land of different communities that lived apart: a plural society where they did not clash. It was tempting not to tackle the problems that were neither urgent nor tractable. Divide-and-rule is too positive a description. The phrase Meade used in a different context in the nineteenth century again comes to mind: ‘sufficient unto the day’.

This makes the over-confidence of the wartime planning all the more striking. It is of a pattern with the past in the sense that it sought and expected still to find collaborators within an international framework, the purpose of which was to maintain security and stability and favourable conditions for trade. The change the planners envisaged was, however, substantial: too substantial, as ex-Governors pointed out in vain, and Malay reaction emphasised more effectively. The plans were dropped. Other means were sought to the same end, but still stressing elite collaboration in building for the future.

My study of Malaya has always been a source of excitement to me. My attempts to teach about the world wars and about British imperialism I have also enjoyed. But I like to think — and I hope I have persuaded you — that the two areas of study have something to offer each other. I hope, too, that I have offered you at least something in return for the Society’s generosity to me both in publishing my book many years ago and in inviting me back to the capital tonight.