INTRODUCTION

OUR TROPICAL POSSESSIONS IN MALAYAN INDIA

JOHN CAMERON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY WANG GUNGWU

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INTRODUCTION

When a book first published a hundred years ago is reprinted, we may well ask, is the book a literary classic? Does it illuminate the past as no new book can do? Is the reprint a centenary celebration? Or is the book merely out of print? When these questions are asked of John Cameron’s *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India*, the answers are not at first impressive. It is difficult to decide if Cameron should be remembered for saying that ‘on the average one man per diem falls a victim to tigers’ or for telling us that a Singapore breakfast in 1864 consisted of ‘a little fish, some curry and rice, and perhaps a couple of eggs, washed down with a tumbler or so of good claret’. It is easier to note that Cameron was a poor historian. His chapters on history (Chapters I, xi and xiii) do not bear close scrutiny and the modern reader familiar with the history of the Malay peninsula may well smile at some of his suppositions. His use of ‘Malayan India’ in the title suggests a slight lack of perspective, even for his own times, on the eve of the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office in London.

But then history was not his purpose. Cameron, as editor of the *Straits Times* in Singapore, was bent on describing ‘the condition of life in the tropical garden’ and making his reader ‘sensible of the importance of Singapore to such a nation as Great Britain’. To this end, the book must be accounted a considerable success. Apart from the lyrical passages which must have stirred some hearts young and old in Victorian England, Cameron was able to talk in dollars and cents about the success of the great port. And if he wrote vividly of the horrors of the Chinese coolie
traffic, he could also relax with sherry and bitters and
describe band evenings on the esplanade. His best
chapters are obviously those on subjects he knew most
about, Chapter vii on commerce and Chapter viii
on government. Here he provides the reader with a
sharp and balanced picture of the strength and weak­
nesses of the Straits Settlements. He even tries to be
fair to the Indian Government which had badly
neglected the interests of these Settlements.
Also significant is that, 45 years after the foundation
of Singapore, Cameron was not really unjust in allo­
cating almost 300 pages to Singapore while giving not
much more than 90 pages to Penang and Malacca.
For Singapore had become a jewel to the trading
British and, if we are to believe Cameron, possibly
three times more important than the other two settle­
ments. The reasons for this are clear. From the start,
‘the central and convenient position of the station’
and ‘the entire exemption from commercial impost
or taxes on trade’ had given the island an advantage
which nothing the rival colonial powers had tried to
do could reduce. Although there had been ups and
downs in the entrepot trade, Singapore had never
stopped expanding at an exceptional rate. Perhaps
Cameron can be forgiven his prophecy about that
trade which must strike us as particularly relevant
when we look at the position of Singapore today.
But so vast is the population of the Archipelago and of the
native states on the eastern continent, that, as one port is
withdrawn from the supply of Singapore, another will be
ready to take its place; and this must go on for the next century at
least, provided always we keep its port completely open and
trade unfettered [my italics].
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The tropical colony of the Straits Settlement, which is probably about to pass from under the government of India to be added to the list of direct dependencies of the Crown, is one which in many ways will merit the solicitude of the Imperial Government. Its
administration is a high and important trust, which if boldly, and yet wisely conducted, will go further to preserve the predominance and permanence of British interests—commercial and political—in the Eastern Archipelago, and the adjacent native continental States—if not, indeed, in China itself—than any other means which the Imperial Government can employ. Founded under the rule of the old East India Company, and fostered from its infancy by a policy which, if faulty in many other respects, was at least well suited to protect and encourage a settlement ere it attained inherent strength enough to stand by itself, the Straits Settlement has grown to an importance incompatible with such tutelage. It remains to be seen how the progress of its maturer years will be advanced or retarded by the wise or unwise government of English statesmen.

Hitherto but little has been given to the world concerning it, and to the great bulk of untravelled Englishmen it is known only as a distant Indian station, where manufactures are sold and produce bought under the sweltering heat of an equatorial sun. Indeed, an existence there is viewed as an exile of the worst description, to be compensated only by the wealth which it is reputed to bring. But those who have endured that exile can tell a far different tale of the condition of life in the tropical garden; and those at all acquainted with the high roads of Eastern trade, have but to view the position of the island of Singapore on the chart, to become sensible of its importance to such a nation as Great Britain; an importance which