Review


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This is the fullest account yet of the last years of the British empire in Malaya. It is based on the archival materials and private papers in Britain and Malaysia that have been open to the author and has taken into account all published literature in the relevant languages, some through translations preserved in the official records. Unlike most histories of the imperial end-game, it is not primarily concerned with the travails of decolonization, or with what the British were doing on the eve of departure. Instead, it pays more attention to the interplay of the locally ambitious as they prepare to inherit the newly independent state and also to the varied responses of Malaya’s multiracial population. What is even more remarkable, it is skillfully written to weave the hundreds of strands into a distinctive narrative.

After a thoughtful introduction about the complexities of writing such a history, the book opens with a short account of the idea of a Malay polity from its origins in the Melaka empire to British intervention in the Malay States during the nineteenth century, and then to the trials and experiments of a broader Malay identity during the period of the Japanese Occupation, 1941–1945. In the midst of dismay and hope for the three years and eight months of that Occupation, various groups of local and migrant Malays and other immigrant races had time to think about life without the British. This was long enough for them to project images of their future in the context of a much changed Asian world, but not so long a time that they could have forgotten the feel of British protection and rule.

Thus followed in September 1945 what the author calls ‘the Malayan spring’ for the new freedoms that the people were offered when the British military authorities first returned. The confusing two years after that was a difficult story to tell. It would have to take in the changes in imperial politics in Britain, India and elsewhere in the region. How the anarchic conditions in post-war Southeast Asia had affected the regrouped Anglo-Malay structures would need to be explained. Also, how the struggle for power in China, once again spilling over to touch the overseas Chinese, impacted on their lives would have to be carefully weighed. And, not least, account would have to be taken of the shadow of ideological conflict gathering over the Allied victors, notably the United States and the Soviet Union, and this would include its influence on a new generation of anti-colonial leaders.

The author manages to give a rare coherence to the numerous strands in this story in two chapters of tight argument and succeeds in encapsulating it.
ing the main theme under the rubric, ‘The revolt of the periphery’, which he uses as the title of the third chapter. In a single phrase, he reminds us of the enormous effort the British made to re-create a centre of authority out of the Malayan Union they had crafted and how, failing that, they had to re-negotiate a new if even less stable centre, the Federation of Malaya. That they were able to do this with what had been a fractious cluster of Malay sultanates and their even more divided local elites was masterly.

But that story has so far been told without adequate weight given to the many ‘revolts’ that were fermenting among the populations redistributed during the Japanese occupation. These were not merely new urban proletariat but also newly dispersed and restless peoples on the forest periphery. With that broader context more fully analysed, Dr Harper has highlighted the desperate but flexible measures taken by the British to rebuild a governance structure that could weather the variety of assaults heaped on them. His story underlines how inadequate they were to handle situations they could not have expected but, in the telling, he also shows where luck and determination did make the difference at crucial moments. In Malaya, as elsewhere, a few British officials improvised their way from 1945 to 1948 through what might have been overwhelming problems. Their use of miscellaneous friends and allies during this period did not always produce the results they wanted, but it gave them time to make a new start after 1948 to put together a Malaya they could live with, which is more than could be said for several other places the British had set out to decolonize.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover more familiar territory, notably, the war against terror and the building of what the author prefers to call ‘the late colonial state’. Here the well-known story is briefly dealt with. The author concentrates on astute descriptions of the inter-communal relations of the country and showed how such differences were exploited to fight off the threat of total revolt. Of particular interest is the emphasis given to questions of land use and settlement among the Chinese and the complex loyalties the squatters had with traditional triad gangs and the two modern political parties of the Kuomintang and the Malayan Communist Party.

The author is at his best when reconstructing the steps taken by British officials to build the strongest possible state under conditions of war and to try to get this completed before they had to leave. In particular, the task of getting the economy to grow so that the restive labour force could be gainfully employed must be considered a remarkable achievement. The fine margins of paying for an expensive jungle war while earning enough hard currency from the commodity exports of rubber and tin might have been given fuller accounting, but there is enough to explain a key factor in British success. This is the early demonstration of the integral strength of capitalism in international trade, something that clearly persuaded many wavers among the local ‘men of prowess’ to turn away from socialist alternatives. In this way, the political manoeuvres among them that followed became better focused, and British efforts to persuade communal leaders to accept nation-building compromises gained greater credibility.

Many recent researchers within Malaysia have contributed to the three themes that follow in chapters 6–8, the bumiputera ideology, the role of
culture in politics and the notion of an ill-defined ‘Malayan’ citizenry. Dr Harper is the first, however, among those writing from ‘the end of empire’ perspective, to take on local responses towards the way the British had framed the questions for the country’s future. To the extent that he has paid more attention to local writings than other British historians of empire, he has given full weight to ‘the making of Malaya’ that constitutes the second half of his book. Whether intended or not, by outlining the multifarious factors that enter into this ‘making’ process, he has underlined the vital importance of the strong state structure that the British succeeded in re-establishing between 1948 and 1957. It is difficult to imagine how the newly independent state would have coped with the deep communal and ideological cleavages that lay so close to the surface had the key elements of that structure not been in place.

Nevertheless, between a Malay majority that demanded responsible British action and non-Malay immigrant voices calling for justice and the chance to show loyalty to the new state, no mere balancing act could be permanent and secure. Here the author has benefited from having more time and opportunity than the officials of the time to read the local writings and offer judgments on what more the British might have done before they left. He does not make unfair criticisms about the tendency of British officials to over-simplify some cultural differences, and exaggerate others, among the major ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Instead, he considers, albeit briefly, several alternative long-term scenarios. The analysis accompanying these accounts exposes the fragility of the ‘agreements’ made by the national leaders in the eyes of those who had to make these understandings work among their local constituents. The presentation also shows up how artificial and premature the idea of being ‘Malayan’ was without a deeper resolution of the cultural and religious conflicts that remained temporarily dormant at the grassroots level of each community.

All this is, of course, very treacherous terrain and it is understandable why earlier imperial historians have shied away from probing such topics to any depth. All praise should be given to Dr Harper for tackling these questions, especially in chapters 6 and 7, as an integrated part of a total history. He has challenged future local scholars, who may know the innate sentiments more intimately, to explore fully the prevalent differences at the time.

Altogether, the author has been very persuasive in depicting the success of the British in leaving a strong state for their successors to build a nation with. This is the hardware contribution, and the authoritarian and hardly accountable power left to future prime ministers is unmistakable. What he has also shown is that the British were perhaps simple-minded, and somewhat too idealistic, about the software they left behind. This is not for lack of trying in their efforts to institutionalize democratic elections, consolidate the rule of law, sell the idea of a civil service that was above politics, and keep the economy open to international development. Together, all these might be said to represent the core of a British political culture that had been honed over a period of more than 300 years.

The author does try to deal with this ‘unfinished business’ of decolonization in his last chapter. It would be too much to expect him to embark on
the larger subject of how that political culture contrasted with the various political traditions of the Malay peoples that would become increasingly assertive. Even more difficult might be for us to ask for comparisons with the mixed value systems brewing among the Chinese communities who were learning from their Great and Little Traditions, and the conflicting efforts at modernity in China, all at the same time. And, not least, there were the important roles played by Ceylonese professionals, Tamil and other south Indian workers, and traders of Muslim, Gujerati, Sindhi, Sikh and Bengali origins. Although their numbers were small, most of them had a better appreciation of British political culture than the other communities in the country.

Yet the contrasts in political culture were major reasons for the uncertainties before and after 1957. Could the various South Asian elites have been better harnessed by the British for their cause during the last years of empire? Among the Chinese, could the peranakan and their extended families, the more successful entrepreneurs and the newly English-educated, who all depended much on the British, have been made more conscious of the value of the political culture that protected their specific interests? And, most of all, could the elites of the Malay States have been persuaded that there was resonance between British and Malay political culture, had it been possible for them to take less contentious approaches towards their respective ‘religions of the Book’?

Dr Harper is fully conscious of the hindsight historians enjoy. He has achieved a flowing account of what happened during the twelve years before Malayan independence without undue use of that hindsight. The history he has written is rich in detail and succeeds in matching analysis with key points in the narrative. It is very much a book written for those who appreciate how difficult the art of history-writing can be. In his introduction, he speaks of ‘history giving voice to the dissonances within the region’s imagined communities’. Malaya is indeed one country where the dissonances are more open and pronounced. The author has surely given us such a voice.

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