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RAJAH BROOKE AND HIS CLAIMS.

The Chamber of Commerce of Birmingham has taken a sound common-sense view of the merits of Sarawak and the claims of Sir James Brooke, very different from that taken by the London and Liverpool petitioners and orators. It declined signing the London memorial, and carried an amendment for inquiry, which substantially amounted to shelving the question. The opponents of Sir James Brooke took, indeed, very similar views of the merits of Sarawak with ourselves, and they are to us the more valuable, since they were delivered before our own publication. His supporters, on the contrary, made but a slender, sorry, and we are obliged to add, even ridiculous display. Here is a specimen: one of them, and this not in a hasty speech, but in a deliberate letter read to the Chamber, insisted that Sarawak was peculiarly fit for the production of certain staples not one of which it has ever produced, and among others he assured the meeting that the soil is well adapted for the cultivation of "white pepper," which being black pepper blanched, the worthy public instructor might just as well have said that Sarawak was peculiarly well adapted for the growth of "blanched almonds." Then, he insisted that Borneo may be made as valuable to us as Java is to the Dutch, forgetting that the best half of Borneo already belongs to the Dutch,—that of the small population of the remaining half which includes Sarawak, the majority are arrant savages, while the Javanese, ten times as numerous, are industrious, civilised men. The Rajah's principal supporter "admitted that he looked upon Sir James Brooke "as a nineteenth-century buccaneer," but that still he ought to be supported "in the interests of civilisation," while he thought "a few thousand pounds well spent in "getting rid of him." That was not at all friendly! We exhibit these samples only to show how small is the knowledge, wisdom, and discretion of the men that thus thrust themselves forward as the advisers of a Government.

But we continue our exposure, to repeat Lord Macaulay's expression, of the "sordid ignorance," which has been displayed on this subject in quarters where knowledge ought to have been expected, and which really astounds by its magnitude and its crassitude. When the stranger of a temperate climate and a cultivated land, a cockney of London or Liverpool for example, sees for the first time, or hears for the first time, of a country near the Equator covered with a huge forest of evergreens, as is the case with Borneo, he jumps to the conclusion that the land which produces it must necessarily be of eminent fertility. There cannot be a greater mistake. Heat and moisture which abound are quite sufficient to produce monster trees in the very sand, and with the help of a little mud in the very sea. Such a forest, instead of an advantage, is a flagrant impediment, for the very clearing of the land from it is an effort of skill and labour beyond the feeble power of the savage in his first efforts at progress. Hence it will be found that civilisation has everywhere commenced in open plains free from the impediment of forest. It is so in the Indian Archipelago as in other parts of the world. Java, Sumatra, and Celebes have grassy plains free from forest, and their inhabitants have made a decent progress in civilisation. Borneo, the Malay Peninsula and New Guinea, contain, between them, some half million of square miles of continuous forest, and their native inhabitants, fewer in number than their wild beasts, are all savages. A copious forest near the Equator is, then, no more a proof that the land that bears it is fertile, than abundant duckweed is evidence of purity and salubrity in stagnant water. We do not conclude that the bleak mountains of Norway are fertile and suited to the production of wheat and flax and hemp, because they produce pines "fit to be the mast of some great admiral."

But Borneo, although poor in the vegetable kingdom, is rich in the mineral. True, but with two exceptions, the mineral wealth of Borneo does not extend to Sarawak. The diamonds of Borneo are not found in Sarawak, and its gold, which to a small extent had been worked, has been discontinued to be so through the expulsion of the Chinese, the only people competent to the labour of mining. The valuable coal fields of Borneo are not in Sarawak, but 300 miles north of it in one direction, and 500 south of it in another. The coal within the territory of Sarawak has been tried and found wanting, being small in quantity, inferior in quality, and far from water transport. The shareholders of the Borneo Company will tell any one so who will take the trouble of asking. The only mineral in which Sarawak is rich is antimony, certainly not one of the most important, and this was discovered and brought to market seventeen years before Sir James Brooke ever saw Borneo. All that he has done with it is to make a monopoly of it, and hence to diminish quantity and enhance price—a clear proven and confessed assault and battery on free trade and political economy.

Sarawak, then, is wholly unfit for a commercial emporium—is an unsuitable station for the protection of trade from pirates or public enemies—is unfit for the growth of valuable tropical products by its sterility or stubbornness of soil, while, being within a couple of degrees of the Equator, it is entirely unfit for the settlement and colonisation of Europeans. But besides these insuperable physical objections, there are political ones hardly less cogent against a protectorate or an occupation. The lord of Sarawak is not, according to the legal opinion of the Royal Commissioners who some years ago inquired into his position, an independent sovereign, but merely a vassal of the barbarian who calls himself Sultan of Borneo. With such a party (in the language of Hindustan, a talookdar) we cannot legally enter into treaty engagements, setting aside the glaring objection that Sir James Brooke, were his sovereignty in other respects ever so indisputable, is a British subject, and consequently that the sovereignty of the territory he has acquired, is already by law the Queen's, should she think it expedient to claim it. Even if all such objections did not hold, it would assuredly be most unwise in us to entangle ourselves in the politics of savages and barbarians innumerable,—of men incapable of keeping the peace towards each other for a single week together.

In the course of the recent discussions on the claims of Sir James Brooke, we observe that the existence of the British colony of Labuan is wholly ignored, which seems strange, since it really possesses every advantage which can, with any truth, be ascribed to Sarawak, without any of its manifold inconveniences. Even Sir James Brooke himself had early come to this conclusion, for in a published private letter to a friend he thus expresses himself: "Labuan, for the ob "jects of the government, as far as I hear them, is superior "to Sarawak,—more central, more commanding,—possess- "ing coal, and isolated."—*Letters*, vol. 2, page 38.

Threats have been repeatedly thrown out of selling the sovereignty of Sarawak to a foreign Power, and thus depriving England of the imaginary treasure. The French and Dutch have been the parties specially alluded to, but if they are discreet, neither of them will have anything to do with Sarawak. The Dutch, indeed, who are the very gluttons of annexation, may possibly be seduced into an acceptance, but not, we should fancy, at the cost of the 50,000*l.* said to have been buried in the fens of the principality. One might suppose that the Dutch nation had already quite enough of Borneo, for it claims the sovereignty of full 1,200 miles of its seaboard, and although that be by far the best portion of the island, all they got by a territory larger than our "three kingdoms" is a heavy normal burden on the revenue of Java, the only paying colony of their Eastern possessions.

But if the Dutch were in actual possession of Sarawak, as they are of the better territory which borders upon it, what possible harm could accrue to us? If ever so much disposed to monopolise, there is nothing in Sarawak to monopolise but sulphuret of antimony, and that is monopolised already. The commercial policy of the Dutch in the East is certainly not all that could be wished in point of enlightenment, but still in liberality it has greatly improved of late years. Thus the once stringent spice trade is now a monopoly only in name, and they have recently established no fewer than four ports, as free to all the world as Singapore. One of these lies within fifty miles of the latter place, and instead of a detriment, has proved a most effectual jackal to it.

Concluding, then, that in the most ordinary exercise of political prudence we are bound to repudiate all connection with Sarawak, what, it may be asked, ought to be done to reward one who has been so long before the public as Sir James Brooke? He is beyond all question a man of talents, of courage, of resource, and of enterprise, although in our opinion these fine attributes were better suited to the sixteenth than to the nineteenth century. Should the Government, appreciating these qualities, with his services in the suppression of piracy and the promotion of commerce, be of opinion, after due inquiry, that he is entitled to a grant of public money, they ought to recommend such grant to the House of Commons. As to remuneration from the national exchequer for his adventure in Sarawak, he is clearly no more entitled to it than any other speculator who engages in an unsuccessful undertaking. His bold enterprise was wholly his own, originally undertaken not only without the sanction, but even without the knowledge of his own Government. When he asked permission to erect the British flag it was expressly refused to him, and as to recognizing him as an independent sovereign, seeing that he was a British subject, that was impossible, since it would have implied something very like treason in the minister that advised, and rebellion on the part of him that accepted. The Earl of Aberdeen carried on a correspondence with the Dutch Government after Sir James Brooke had established himself in Sarawak, and the negotiations arose out of that establishment; but assuredly his lordship made no claim of sovereignty in Sarawak either for Sir James Brooke or for his sovereign. The question was an abstract one. The Dutch laid claim to the sovereignty of the whole archipelago south of the Straits of Singapore, including the entire island of Borneo, and Lord Aberdeen denied and refuted the Dutch Minister's impertinent construction of the convention on which the extravagant pretension was founded. "By no act of her Majesty's Government," wrote Lord Clarendon, "has countenance ever been given to Sir "James Brooke's assumption of independence, and his "possession of Sarawak has never been considered otherwise "by them than as a private grant bestowed by a foreign "sovereign on a British subject."