

The Examiner (London),  
Saturday, March 11, 1865

*Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India: being a Descriptive Account of Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, and Malacca; their Peoples, Products, Commerce, and Government.* By John Cameron, Esq., F.R.G.S. Smith, Elder, and Co.

This is truly a good book, and moreover, at the present moment, a very opportune one, for the valuable settlements which the author so well and so fully describes are on the eve of being transferred from the Indian administration, with which they have no natural connection, to the Colonial, with which they have a very intimate one. Mr Cameron, although no oriental scholar, yet comes to the work he has undertaken with an ample store of general knowledge, and with sound and liberal views on all economic and financial questions. He is not eminent as an archæologist, philologist, or ethnologist, but he is an excellent observer of what he sees in his own person, and what he sees clearly he narrates in very good English. His book indeed, although abounding in solid matter, is not only instructive but entertaining.

After a brief outline of the settlements of which Mr Cameron gives an account, and drawn mostly from his own pages, we shall, for the most part, allow him to speak for himself. The British possessions within the Malayan Archipelago, usually known as the "Straits Settlements," consist of two islets, Singapore and Penang, and two patches of inconsiderable extent on the western shore of the Malayan Peninsula, viz., Malacca, ninety miles distant from Singapore, and Province Wellesley, opposite to Penang. These all lie within a true Mediterranean sea, about 500 miles in length, with a breadth varying from 50 to 100 miles, the northern barrier of which is formed by the Malay Peninsula and the southern by the island of Sumatra. The possessions named are not only tropical, but equatorial, for Singapore is hardly 80 miles from the equator and Penang but little more than 300. Within the Mediterranean sea thus formed varying winds prevail, the westerly monsoon being partially felt at its western end and the eastern partially at its eastern extremity. This almost land-locked basin is free from dangerous storms, and the cyclones which visit other tropical and sub-tropical regions of the east are wholly unknown in it.

The total population of the settlements enumerated appears by the last census to be 290,000, all but some 25,000 having sprung up since the earliest of the settlements came into our possession, eighty years ago, and by far the greater part within the last forty years. The export and import trade of the united settlements amounted in 1863 to seventeen millions sterling, twelve millions of which have been the creation of the last thirty years. Thus, commercially, they rank as emporia after Bombay and Calcutta, and far above Madras, with its 23,000,000 of inhabitants, but no harbours. The revenues, local and general, amount to about a quarter of a million, and suffice to cover all expenditure, civil, military, naval, and police, although some of these are on a scale of unprecedented and unpardonable extravagance. This result is the more remarkable since, for forty years, there has existed no impost on ship or cargoes. Such being the financial condition of these settlements, when transferred to the Colonial department they will form the only colony out of forty-seven that costs that much oppressed parent "nothing," while they furnish a trade exceeding that of the whole of her West India possessions put together.

The greater part of Mr Cameron's book is bestowed on Singapore, by far the most important settlement. He thus, with a proper appreciation of the picturesque, describes its scenery:

A great deal has been written about the natural beauties of Ceylon and Java, and some theologians, determined to give the first scene in the Mosaic narrative a local habitation, have fixed the Paradise of unfallen man on one or other of those noble islands. Nor has their enthusiasm carried them to any ridiculous extreme; for the beauty of some parts of Java and Ceylon might well accord with the description given us, or rather, which we are accustomed to infer, of that land from which man was driven on his first great sin. I have seen both Ceylon and Java, and admired in no grudging measure their many charms; but for calm placid loveliness I should place Singapore high above them both. It is a loveliness, too, that at once strikes the eye, from whatever point we view the island, which combines all the advantages of an always beautiful and often imposing coast-line with an endless succession of hill and dale stretching inland. The entire circumference of the island is one panorama, where the magnificent tropical forest, with its undergrowth of jungle, runs down at one place to the very water's edge, dipping its large leaves into the glassy sea, and at another is abruptly broken by a brown rocky cliff, or a late landslide;

over which the jungle has not yet had time to extend itself. Here and there, too, are scattered little green islands, set like gems on the bosom of the hushed water, between which the excursionist, the trader, or the pirate, is wont to steer his course. "Eternal summer gilds these shores;" no sooner has the blossom of one tree passed away than that of another takes its place, and sheds fresh perfume all around; as for the foliage, that never seems to die. Perfumed isles are in many people's minds merely fabled dreams, but they are easy of realization here. There is scarcely a part of the island, except those few places where the original forest and jungle have been cleared away, from which at night time, on the first breathings of the land winds, may not be felt those lovely forest perfumes, even at a distance of more than a mile from shore. These land winds—or, more properly, land airs, for they can scarcely be said to blow, but only to breathe—usually commence at ten o'clock at night and continue till within an hour or two of sunrise—they are welcomed by all; by the sailor because they speed him on either course, and by the wearied resident because of their delicious coolness.

On the same subject there is a good deal more, which we have not room for; but we cannot help quoting the following account of the view presented to the stranger on his first approaching Singapore from the west:

But though the old strait displays more wildness of tropical scenery, it can scarcely be said to exceed in loveliness the side which faces the present thoroughfare of shipping. The harbour of Singapore is formed of an extensive bay on the southern coast of the island about equidistant from its extremities. The approach from the eastward is comparatively tame in appearance, coconut plantations extending along its coast for miles, with here and there a little fishing village standing out in relief; yet the contrast between the dark foliage of the trees and the snowy whiteness of the sandy beach is very pleasing. It is at the western entrance, through New Harbour, however, that the greatest measure of beauty is to be found. This is the side from which Singapore is approached by those who come from home to take up their sojourn there; and no wonder that they enter their new home predisposed in its favour, for the scene is one very rarely to be surpassed in the world, certainly not in the English East Indies. In making this harbour, the steamer enters between the large island and a cluster of little islets, standing high out of the water with rocky banks, and covered to their summits by rich green jungle, with here and there a few forest trees stretching their tall trunks high into the air, and crowned at their tops by small compact clumps of leaves and branches. On several of the most lovely points of this entrance, residences, or rather watering-places, have been built by some of the merchants, which add to, rather than detract from, the beauty of the scene, their snow-white walls and porticoes peering out from the rich foliage which surrounds them, or looking boldly down from some chaste eminence which they surmount. One of the most beautifully situated of these is Bukit Chermin—(Mirror Hill.) It stands on a conical promontory overlooking the entrance to New Harbour, and in sailing past it the image which is reflected from the glassy water beneath is but little less perfect than the original above. Under the vessel's keel, too, as she passes slowly over the shoaler patches of the entrance, may be seen those beautiful beds of coral, which in their variegated colours and fantastic shapes appear to vie with the scenery above. As soon as the passage between the main island and these small islets is half-way passed, and New Harbour reached, Mount Faber, the summit of which only has been hitherto visible, is seen to the full view. It has been cleared of jungle, and its sides, as also those of the neighbouring hills, are sereed from top to bottom in a peculiar manner, not unlike potato-fields at home, but in larger furrows; these are the pinneries belonging to the Tumongong, and from which Singapore is chiefly supplied with this its staple fruit. On the very summit of Mount Faber stands a flagstaff, from which vessels approaching from the west can be seen at a distance of sixteen miles; it also repeats the signals of the town flagstaff at Fort Canning, and so great is the commerce of the Straits, that from sunrise to sunset they are both plentifully decked out in bunting.

The climate of Singapore, and the climates of Penang and Malacca fall little short of it, is very faithfully described. The range of the thermometer throughout the year being from 71° to 92°, the usual heat of the day being about 83°. Thus Mr Cameron writes:

Within seventy-seven miles of the equator it might be expected that the climate of Singapore would be ill suited to Europeans. Such, however, is not the case. Neither is the high temperature nor the extreme humidity of the atmosphere found to interfere seriously with their health or even with their comfort. So green and beautiful is all around, that heat which would be intolerable in an arid plain or sandy desert is there scarcely appreciated, and is borne without difficulty. In Singapore time ceases to be reckoned by summer and winter; there are no seasons, not even a wet and a dry season—all is constant mid-summer; and this extreme equableness, while its most remarkable feature, is, after all, perhaps, the greatest objection to the climate. It has the effect of slowly enervating the system, and unfitting it to withstand any acute disease that should overtake it. No bad effects, however, should be felt from a residence of six or seven years, and it has been maintained by all the best medical authorities in the Straits that, after such a residence, one year in a cold bracing climate is sufficient to completely restore whatever vigour may have been lost, and fit the European for another term of residence of similar duration.

Mr Cameron, however, ought, we think, to have explained the cause of this remarkable salubrity of Singapore, with so much heat, moisture, rank vegetation, and even morass. It is, we conceive, the perfect ventilation by land and sea breezes which does the work—the latter especially blowing frequently a six or seven knot breeze, and never allowing the air to stagnate to the production of malaria. That such is the cause is sufficiently proved by the existence in Penang of a few unventilated *culs de sac*, so poisonous as to generate fevers as malignant as those of Vera Cruz.

One of the most singular and striking characteristics of our Malayan possessions consists in their miscellaneous and heterogeneous populations. A score of nations speaking at least as many languages are here assembled, forming, in short, a living ethnological museum. They are very graphically and very faithfully described by Mr Cameron. The Malays are the most numerous, but although they have their uses are by no means the most useful class of the inhabitants. They count over all the settlements 140,000, are all immigrants, and their simple language, easy of acquisition by strangers whether as to words or pronunciation, is the common medium of communication.

Unlike the nomadic tribes (says our author) of the aborigines, the Malays of the peninsula have always been lovers of good order and an established government. In their independent states they have first a sultan, who is all powerful; under him there are datuks, or governors, selected from among the men of rank, and under these again there are pangulus, or magistrates, all standing very much in the relation to

the people as our own nobility stood in feudal times to the people of England. They are, therefore, easily governed, and, sensible of the benignity of English law, they form the most peaceable and probably the most loyal portion of our native population.

Mr Cameron's account of the Chinese is both full and accurate:

I now pass (says he) on to the Chinese population, which, though entirely the result of immigration since the British settlement in the Straits (except at Malacca), stands next to the Malays in the census of the colony—numbering over 120,000—at the three stations. They are by far the most industrious, and, consequently, the most valuable people we have in these possessions—the development of the internal resources of which is almost entirely due to them. In Singapore all the gambier and pepper produced is of their growth, and the sago is of their manufacture; in Penang and Province Wellesley also, the chief plantations are in their hands or worked by them; and in Malacca all the tin, all the sago, and all the tapioca is of their production. Unlike the Malays, they are ambitious and become rich; and though this ambition has generally its origin in the desire to return to China in affluent circumstances, yet our possessions not the less benefit by their labour, and while many never attain the full realization of their aspirations, others as they grow rich become attached to the country and its laws, seek wives from among the comely daughters of the soil, and abandon all idea of returning to their native land. The proportion, however, of those who may be said to have permanently settled down is small, and the yearly addition to the Chinese population from birth altogether insignificant. The number is kept up entirely by immigration. During the months of December, January, February, March, and April, fleets of junks crammed with Chinese coolies arrive at all the ports in the Straits from the different provinces of China. In Singapore the arrivals for the first four months of the present year (1864) were 8,560 males and 109 females—and for the whole year about 14,000, which is not much above the average of other years. Were this immigration in no way counterbalanced, the Chinese population of the Straits would soon become enormous, but it may be estimated that those who yearly return to China number quite two-thirds of the arrivals. The manner in which this Chinese immigration is carried on, and the contracts by which the men are bound down, I have already mentioned; they are often unsatisfactory enough, but those upon which the females are brought into the country are, according to all accounts, still more deplorable: young girls from twelve years old and upwards being retained in forced courtship to a population where the males are as fifteen to one of the females. Thanks, however, to the demand for labour and its high reward on the one hand, and to the demand for wives on the other, neither condition of bondage endures long. The character of the Chinese has frequently been described, and no change of scene or circumstance seems materially to affect it. They have attained a high civilization of their own sort, and this keeps, and I think always will keep, them distinct from the other peoples with whom they mingle. I have met them in the most out-of-the-way islands in the Archipelago, where, perhaps, a dozen of them had formed a settlement, and had gradually monopolized the trade of a people numbering many thousands, without any concession in dress, in religion, or in manners; they were the same in every respect as are to be found in Java, in the Straits, and in the sea-ports of their own country. There are good and bad among them; the best have had points, and the worst a few redeeming ones; it is only as their character and manners affect them as an element in the population of the Straits that I have anything to say.

In a note to these quotations, the author tells us, as illustrations of Chinese character, that a Chinese who arrived in Singapore thirty years before a poor day-labourer, died last year, after many deeds of charity, worth two millions of dollars at the exchange of the day, little short of half a million sterling, while a countryman of his failed for 178,000*l.*

The natives of India settled in our possessions amount to about 28,000, and consist chiefly of people of the Coromandel coast, and, in smaller numbers, of those of Bengal. Mr Cameron has but a poor opinion of them, and, compared to Malays and Chinese, they are not an agreeable people, being both untruthful and litigious.

Next in the population tables of the Straits (says our author) come the natives of India, chiefly Klings from Madras and the Coromandel coast, and Bengalese from Calcutta. The Klings are by far the most numerous, and are a conspicuous element in the population. They immigrate much as the Chinese do, but, leaving one British territory to come to another, the terms of their engagements are usually reasonable and just; latterly the arrivals of this class under the coolie system have very much decreased in number. The occupations sought by these people are numerous, and some of them distinct. They are traders, shopkeepers, cooks, boatmen, common labourers, hack-carriage runners, and washermen; the two latter occupations are almost entirely monopolized by them. They are industrious and persevering, and consequently valuable to the Settlement; but they have failed to obtain any measure of good-will either from the Europeans or the other native races in the Straits. The dislike of the European is due to an insolence of manner, which is either natural to them or acquired in the pursuits they adopt. As hack-carriage runners, the bargainings and bickerings they have about their fares are not well calculated to encourage a respectfulness of manner. Neither is their appearance prepossessing; they are very black, often ugly, and go about nearly naked.

We can afford room for but a very small part of the animated picture which our author draws of the manifold occupations of the miscellaneous population of the Straits settlements:

There is probably (says he) no city in the world with such a motley crowd of itinerant vendors of wares, fruits, cakes, vegetables, &c. There are Malays, generally with fruit; Chinamen with a mixture of all sorts, and Klings with cakes and different kinds of nuts. Malays and Chinamen always use the shoulder-stick, having equally-balanced loads suspended at either end; the Klings, on the contrary, carry their wares on the head on trays. The travelling cookshops of the Chinese are probably the most extraordinary of the things that are carried about in this way. They are suspended on one of the common shoulder-sticks, and consist of a box on one side and a basket on the other; the former containing a fire and small copper cauldron for soup; the latter loaded with rice, vermicelli, cakes, jellies, and condiments; and though I have never tasted any of their dishes, I have been assured that those they serve up at a moment's notice are most savoury, and that their sweets are delicious. Three cents will purchase a substantial meal of three or four dishes from these itinerant restaurateurs. Another remarkable feature of the streets, and one which carries the mind away back to a very early period in the history of our own country, is made up of the letter-writers or penny-a-liners, who take up their stalls at various parts of the town. They are always to be seen in the mornings seated composedly at their desks in the verandahs or out in the streets. On their desks or tables are piled several quires of Chinese straw paper, and a small porcelain tablet contains their ink and writing-brushes; pens of any kind are unknown to them. A large—perhaps the largest—section of the Chinese population can write for themselves, but all are equally endowed with this amiable

feature, that they never forget or neglect the friends they have left behind them in China; and these letter-writers do a large business in making out for the illiterate section epistles which invariably contain the good wishes, and often convey the substantial money gifts, of those who dictate them. When not engaged in taking down the thoughts of others, these penmen generally employ themselves in copying out stock pamphlets, or, it may be, composing original prose or verse suited to the popular taste. But their productions cannot be very deep, for they seem to write away with great facility, even when not copying; and I have never witnessed them in anything like what we term the agonies of composition. As a rule, they are not more intellectual in appearance than their neighbours, though I have remarked one or two who clearly bore the print of letters on their features. The feast times are the busiest seasons with them, when they make out large placards on red paper to adorn the door-posts and lintels of their customers.

The harbour of Singapore, a mere open road, but affording sufficient shelter in a latitude never vexed by a storm, affords a singular contrast to what it was six-and-forty years ago, when it was visited only by an occasional Malay pirate. It has seldom fewer than eighty or ninety square-rigged vessels lying in it, and the last statements we have seen raise them to 150. There are to be seen flying the flags of all the European and American nations that have a seaport, with the flags of Arabia, of Siam, and of Cochin China. But besides these are to be seen a countless native craft, from the Malay prahu up to the Chinese junk built after the model of Noah's Ark. The mere Asiatic articles collected at the emporium for exportation make a list of fifty. Of those we shall name only two, because, although not peculiar to Singapore, their use in trade originated here. These are gambir, now largely used in tanning and dyeing, and gutta percha, of each of which we ourselves, independent of what was supplied to other nations, imported in 1863 to the value of a quarter of a million.

Mr Cameron has fallen into several mistakes in his historical account of the settlements, and even errors as to matters of fact, from imperfect information. Thus, in speaking of the invasion of the tigers which afflicted Singapore some fifteen years after its establishment, and through which it is supposed that there are devoured at the rate of a Chinaman a day throughout the year, he observes:

The force of this blow (that of the fore-paw of the tiger), must be something fearful. I have been told by a gentleman who had travelled a good deal in the peninsula, that he has frequently come upon buffaloes which had been killed and partly devoured by tigers, and in many cases found the frontal bone of the skull, which is nearly an inch thick, smashed in by this crushing blow of the fore-paw.

Now this is so far from being the case that, as is well known from the combats between the two animals exhibited by the Javanese princes, the tiger turns out to be so little a match for the buffalo that it is necessary to cut off the tips of the horns of the buffalo to prevent its instantly killing the tiger. In such contests the buffalo always kills or cows the tiger, while the latter does neither to the buffalo, a brave and powerful yet a docile animal. These, however, are but trifling and venial mistakes in a work of real merit, which we hope will not only be largely read by the public but diligently perused by Ministers of State and members of Parliament about to legislate on the interesting and important subject of which it chiefly treats.