

LITERATURE.

Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India. By JOHN CAMERON, Esq., F.R.G.S. With Illustrations. London: Smith, Elder, and Co. 1865.

This work gives a descriptive account of Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, and Malacca, together with their population, products, commerce, and government. It is carefully compiled from the best sources of information, supplemented by personal investigations, and shows throughout a thorough acquaintance with all the subjects on which it touches. The author is deeply impressed with the value of the Straits settlement to Great Britain, as a centre of commerce with the adjacent countries, and also as a basis of political influence over the rapidly developing nations of Eastern Asia. He has also an honest admiration for the physical beauty and amazing fertility of these territories, which he anticipates will be at no distant date transferred to the immediate authority of the crown. Under the impulse of these animating feelings he writes with some enthusiasm, but it is an enthusiasm that never leads him beyond probabilities resting upon facts; and when he ventures upon political criticisms or suggestions, they are made in a spirit of candour and tolerant liberality which adds to their weight. Our Indian readers are aware that the Straits settlement was founded under the rule of the old East India Company, as an offshoot of their vast Oriental empire, convenient as a trade entrepôt and station for maritime intercourse. It was quite natural, as well as convenient, that the government of India, which fostered and protected the infant settlement for these purposes, should retain it under tutelage whilst it subserved no other, but now that, in addition to the subordinate uses of the settlement, it is fast assuming a maturity of its own, and rising day after day into commercial and political individuality, the time seems approaching when it should be emancipated from the inferior authority and enter into direct relations with the crown. The author supports this view with reasons that appear to be irrefragable, but for these we must refer to the volume itself. The amount of knowledge which the British public possess concerning the Straits settlement is, we suspect, a very homœopathic dose. If among a hundred pretty well read men we find one who knows where Singapore is situated, he would probably be able to tell us that it is a port of call somewhere in the Indian seas, and no more. We cannot, therefore, but feel that a book like this, which gives us a true view of this important colony, is a substantial and most valuable addition to our knowledge of the British Empire. The colony comprises the island of Penang, otherwise called Prince of Wales' Island, which includes Province Wellesley, the town and territory of Malacca, and the island of Singapore. All these lie on the northern boundary of the Straits of Malacca, and although not at present very extensive, those of them that abut on the mainland are capable of indefinite expansion. Singapore was purchased from its native possessors by the East India Company in 1824, and two years afterwards it was associated with Penang, and both were incorporated with Malacca under one administration. The first settlers on the island must have taken up their new abodes with fear and trembling, and many misgivings. Every collection of huts along the strait that separates Singapore from Johore was a nest of murdering Malay pirates, who watched the Europeans as cats watch mice, and thought no more of shedding their blood than would the cats of shedding the blood of their natural prey. Happily, a pretty continuous retribution, sharply and strongly administered, has in our day rather spoiled the industry of these Malayan gentlemen. In addition to this ever-present danger the colonists were under the direction of a set of very wise and well-fed old nabobs in Leadenhall-street, whose will was law, but who sometimes exercised that will without the necessary accompaniment of knowledge. These were the gentlemen who, finding that white pepper sold more readily than black pepper in the home market, sent out a ukase commanding their servants to pay more attention to the cultivation of white pepper, and not to plant any more black pepper plants, profoundly ignorant all the time that both kinds of pepper were produced by the same plant, the difference being caused by the methods of preparation. We cannot altogether credit the story of the steel files and the white ants, though there is little doubt that things quite as ridiculous must have been done by men who, without any acquaintance with the country or its circumstances, undertook to conduct the affairs of a colony twelve thousand miles distant. The spirit of enterprise soon created in the island of Singapore a city and suburbs, planted farms, reared villas, and gave to the whole island an appearance of English comfort and neatness, glorified by the rich colours and marvellous fruitfulness of the tropics. Mr. Cameron gives us a coloured illustration of the harbour of Singapore and another of the town, and if we may judge of the reality from the representation of it, the island must be a place of strange beauty. Nor is there wanting in the town that ever-changing variety which is supposed to be necessary to stimulate the sense of pleasure. Singapore is a meeting place for specimens of almost every nationality under the sun. The harbour swarms with prahus, sampans, lorchaes, pukatats, tongkongs, junks, no longer devoted to purposes of piracy but to the peaceful pursuits of industry and commerce. Some are engaged in gathering in the harvest of the seas where the waters vie with the land in exuberant productiveness, others are occupied with the transport of persons and goods, and a large number are in the timber trade. This is a branch of commerce which has developed itself in an extraordinary manner in the Straits, and we read of great rafts passing through them like floating islands, having houses and populations upon them like those that are familiar to the dwellers on the banks of Canadian rivers. Our author speaks highly of the enterprise and ability of the Chinese at Singapore; they are clever, industrious, and cleanly, and these qualities recommend them to the chief occupations in the place. They are engaged as bank tillers, coopers, carpenters, blacksmiths, keepers of refreshment houses, and have besides a good share of meaner employments. There is almost everything necessary for happiness in Singapore, and yet it has its drawbacks—first of these, to an European, is the heat, which is occasionally intense, the latitude being nearly equatorial, but even this is somewhat more tolerable than it is on the mainland, for the waters which surround the island act in some measure as a refrigerator. Another drawback is that the place is infested with tigers. The appearance of these fierce brutes in the island is not yet satisfactorily accounted for. No tigers were seen there for several years after the settlement had been founded. They made known their presence in 1835, by a sudden attack on a surveying party, which, however, escaped at the cost of a good fright. The author conjectures that the tigers in Singapore must have swam across the Straits from the mainland of Johore. It is strange that they should thus leave the large forests and jungles for the limited thickets of the island, and yet Mr. Cameron's hypothesis is supported by many likely circumstances, amongst others by the fact that a tiger was actually caught in a fishing net, the farthest out of a series that extended from the shores of the island. It is terrible to think that these creatures have been lured from the mainland by their appetite for human blood, for in every species of prey except man the forests of Johore are incomparably richer than is Singapore. The tiger is like all cruel natures a coward, and always attacks its prey stealthily from behind. The author is of opinion that a tiger will not attack a man face to face, and the Malays hold the same belief. A good anecdote is told of a Malay man, who is said to have argued one of the savage beasts out of his bloodthirsty intentions. The man was passing by a jungle with his son, about eight years of age, upon his back, when he saw a tiger; he said a few words which arrested the brute, and then moved slowly backwards to a tree, up which he told his son to climb. He then drew his knife and began to harangue the tiger, alternately advancing and receding, until the tiger, either convinced by the man's logic or tired of his tedious oration, or it may

be afraid of his knife, left him in disgust at his uncalled for proceedings. The black mail levied upon the settlers by these horrible brutes was some years since about 200 human lives annually, but it has much increased recently, and may now probably be set down at a life a day. This is a frightful tax, and there seems no remedy for it at present. So long as jungles are on the island it will be utterly impossible to extirpate the tigers, but it would take three times the revenue of the place to eradicate the jungle for one year, and such is the force of vegetable life there that in a year or two the jungle would be almost as thick as ever. The author gives an excellent résumé of the history of the island, and of its aboriginal inhabitants, with an account of their customs and traditions. They must soon disappear in a new compound population springing up from the admixture of many elements. Malays, Chinese, Mohammedans, Hamlets, Klings, Bengalees, Eurasians, have all taken root in Singapore, and must in time blend together, being limited within such narrow bounds. The author thinks that the population of the island will not increase much beyond what it is at present—that is, 91,000 souls, because, he says, the island has no internal resources. We must differ from this conclusion, and in doing so we would remind Mr. Cameron that the absence of internal resources never yet has set limits to the population of a maritime and trading community. The great importance of Singapore as a commercial entrepôt for all the nations of the East appears to us to guarantee its increase not only in population but in wealth and influence, and we are fully justified in this view by its history during the past forty years. This will appear reasonable if the central position of the island be taken into consideration, together with its long-established character as a commercial exchange and mart for the whole Indian archipelago, and the bordering empires of the Indian Ocean, as well as for Europe, and America, and Australia. Imports to the amount of six and a half millions arrived at Singapore in the year 1863 from the following countries and provinces:—Great Britain, North America, Continental Europe, Australia, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, China, Ceylon, Siam, Java, Borneo, Celebes, Sumatra, Malayan Peninsula, British Burmah, not to speak of sundry miscellaneous imports. Now, it is evident that all this vast mass of merchandise was not wanted by the 91,000 people who dwell in Singapore, in addition to the produce of their own island, which is abundantly sufficient for their wants. What, then, becomes of these imports? This question brings us to the very point of the inestimable value of the island to a great trading nation like England. The chief part of the cargoes that arrive at Singapore are either reshipped to other markets, or sold in bulk with freightage to brokers or principals from different ports. It is easy to see the advantage of this to all parties. The buyers from other countries find in Singapore a wider field to choose from, and have whatever advantage may arise from the competition of sellers; while the sellers, on the other hand, have a certain market and are sure of the highest price their merchandise will fetch, without the dangers and losses that wait upon delay. Let us suppose a merchant in England shipping for Java, or Borneo, a cargo of piece goods, on information that they were wanted there and would fetch a high price, by the time the ship arrived at its destination circumstances may have totally altered, and his wares may be at a ruinous discount. The only resource in this case would be either to sell at a loss, or to hawk the goods from port to port until a better market were found. The most unmercantile reader will see that there is in all this likelihood of loss, above and beyond that most fatal of all elements to commercial enterprise—uncertainty. Now by sending the goods straight to Singapore all loss and uncertainty are avoided. The seller has his choice of markets whither he may take the goods in his own ship and dispose of them himself, or he can dispose of them to the agents at Singapore; and, in addition to the gain in time and saving of working expenses, obtain good freight for his return voyage. With advantage like these, which accrue to all parties concerned in like measure, we see no reason to apprehend any decadence or check in the prosperity of Singapore. Up to the present time the government of the island has been wise, lenient, and judicious, proceeding on the salutary principle of doing as little as possible to interfere with the peaceful and orderly current of affairs. Whether the government of India has not thought this outlying appanage of its empire of sufficient consequence to engage much of its attention, or that it has had too much to do at home to attend to distant matters, Singapore has up to the present time escaped the evils of exaggerated legislation and over-government. The Council of India have been satisfied with a revenue which just covers the expense of the public administration and police, and nothing has been screwed out of the colony for profits on Leadenhall-street stock. Let us hope that when the island is transferred to the Crown the same judicious *laissez-faire* system will be pursued, and that no meddling and mischievous spirit will tempt Downing-street to interfere and undo the natural development of half a century. In one or two matters we find ourselves compelled to differ from our author. He highly approves of the method of farming the revenues of the island, and defends it with very plausible arguments. Nothing, however, can convince us that to farm revenues is not to give up the people to legalised robbery and extortion. The history of revenue farming in France under the *ancien régime*, and in Turkey at the present day, shows clearly that its tendency is to impoverish the taxpayers, to keep the exchequer at zero, and to enrich the farmers at the expense of both. Mr. Cameron says it would be impossible for European officials to deal with the mixed population of Singapore in any other way, that the direct collection of the revenue by Europeans, ignorant as they must necessarily be of the character of the community, of the deceit and perjury which comes without scruple to Chinese, Malays, and other Oriental peoples, would be simply out of the question. He alleges, further, that the present system of farming the taxes has worked well, and that it would be unwise to disturb it for the sake of a sentimental feeling of justice and order. We do not question the expediency of the present system on the supposition that the chief object of Great Britain is to get in as much money as she can, and to think of nothing else, but we have a strong conviction that the object of the great central nation of the world in planting her colonies in various parts of the earth is something very different, something higher and nobler than the mere motive of gain. We cannot admit that a well-balanced exchequer-sheet and a prosperous commerce are the sole objects of British colonisation. We do think that the extension of a higher civilisation, the establishment of sounder principles of intercourse, and the general elevation in social and political morality of the peoples with whom Great Britain comes in contact, has not a little to do with the colonising spirit that animates her. Rightly understood, the two impulses act in harmony. A commerce cannot be prosperous for very long unless it be conducted on high moral principles, nor can an exchequer be kept constantly replenished unless the taxes that supply it coincide with the general welfare of the people. On all these grounds we think the farming system utterly indefensible. The most profitable forms of revenue at Singapore are those which include the opium tax, the spirit tax, and the gambling tax. The author approves of these taxes, shows that they have been most productive, says *non olet* as he looks at the returns from them, and calls the higher and more far-reaching statesmanship that disapproves of them a maudlin morality. Now, if the safety of the people be the supreme law of the State, then we say that to draw a revenue from vices which degrade and ruin the people is a direct violation of that law; and to delegate the collection of that revenue to persons who feel no moral restraint appears to us to render the violation of the very first principle of government doubly heinous. The farmers, of course, must have their profit, the sub-farmers theirs, and the government must have a net revenue free from all charges; but the whole of this must come out of the pockets of the people over whom the farmers have summary power. The author says the taxpayers can appeal to the European officials, and to the courts presided over by

Europeans. Just so. It was also competent to a poor man in former days, whose wife had behaved badly, to apply to all the courts, from the High Court to the House of Lords, for a divorce. The farmers are always Chinese, and these Chinese have secret societies among themselves, bound together by the most awful rites, for the purpose of mutual support among the members in contravention of the public laws and acts of the government, whenever they happen to clash with the interests of the secret societies. The members of these societies are bound to implicit obedience, to do what their superiors order them, and to swear to anything the society thinks necessary. Now we say that to hand the whole population over to these formidable and unflinching bodies is to expose it to systematic plunder and injustice, and that the pretext of an appeal to the English tribunals is a mere mockery. The colony has been on the whole peaceable and orderly, but it was not to be expected that where there are 13,000 Malays whose country we have occupied, 60,000 Chinese with whose country we have been at war twice, and nearly 10,000 natives of India in sympathy with the castes that originated the great mutiny, and only 500 European residents, things would always go on smoothly. The opposition of the national elements no doubt lends a negative kind of security to the handful of Europeans. Malays hate Bengalees and Klings, and are hated by them in turn; whilst hating each other the Chinese are hated by all, and hate them in turn, and from the vast preponderance of the Chinese there might be danger to all other nationalities, did it not happen that there is also anger in Celestial minds, and that the emigrants from different provinces of the Flowery Land hate those from other provinces as cordially as they do the Malays or Klings. It is, however, a miserable tenure by which to hold authority, and may be terminated at any moment. There may arise circumstances which will give the Chinese a common object, and unite them in irresistible strength against Europeans and others. As yet there has been nothing of this kind, and government may by caution avoid it in the future. A riot broke out among the Chinese in 1854, but it was simply a faction fight, such as sometimes takes place even in London, between the boys of Connaught and the boys of Tipperary. The Chinese did not limit their anger to a mere scuffle, however, nor were they content with cracking a few crowns. They fought regular pitched battles, used firearms, took up positions in the field, and before the riot could be quelled great numbers were killed and wounded on both sides. A second riot broke out in 1857, of a much more dangerous character to our authority. A municipal act came into operation giving the magistrate power to inflict, for certain minor offences, a fine of not more than 500 rupees, with discretion to make it as much less as he should see fit. The Chinese imagined that the full penalty was to be inflicted in every case, and especially for gambling, to which they are passionately addicted, they therefore determined to resist the law, and did so, not by violence, but passively, by a universal cessation from business. Mr. Blundell, the governor, called together a few of the most influential of the Chinese, and explained the act; the body of the people were then called together, and he had it explained to them, after which they quietly dispersed, and resumed business. There was no bloodshed on this occasion, and yet we say this riot was of a far more dangerous character than the former one, for it has left to the European residents the ominous lesson that there are some things which have the power to unite the Chinese as one man against the authority of government, and to the Chinese the memory of the success that crowned their union. A minor danger, which occasionally threatens all the inhabitants alike, is the Malay practice of running a muck. The author describes the terror caused by this inexplicable frenzy, and the almost miraculous manner in which the muck runner sometimes escapes from the multitudes that pursue him as they would a wild beast, with no other object than his speedy destruction. This peculiar form of madness is confined to the Malay race, and has never, we believe, been observed in any other. The author thinks it arises from *tedium vite*, blended with a shrinking from suicide. If it be so, how different must the Malays be from the Japanese, among whom the *hari kari*, or privilege of committing suicide by ripping themselves up, is considered a prerogative of nobility. The author discourages Europeans from selecting Singapore as a field of enterprise. As for labourers or skilled artisans, two Chinese workmen will do as much as one Englishman, and for less than half the wages he would require for his maintenance. Then, in respect to commerce, it would be vain for English merchants to compete with the Chinese; the latter have a degree of cunning, persistency, and unscrupulousness before which the more open and fair dealing practices of Europeans must inevitably go to the wall. The style of living at Singapore is like that throughout all our Eastern possessions, abundant and luxurious, and the style of society closely resembles that at Calcutta. The chief portion of the work is devoted to Singapore, as the most important by many degrees of the incorporated colonies of the Straits Settlement, and as the seat of government; but the other colonies are not neglected, there is in the volume a very lucid history of the origin and progress of each of them, with abundant information on their commercial and political value as buttresses of our influence in the far east. The settlement of the French in Cochinchina, and of the Russians upon the Amoor, have brought the Straits colonies into more important relations, not to speak of the old Dutch establishments in Java. It would certainly be surrendering the prestige of Great Britain to permit Singapore and its sister settlements to fall into a state of decadence; but of this there is little danger, since our statesmen both at home and in India are fully awake to their importance. In differing from the author on one or two points we have only taken the liberty which he claims for himself and accords to others, that of expressing our own convictions. We think his suggestions savour too strongly of temporary expediency, and that he does not sufficiently consider, though he is far from denying, that that which is in the highest degree right is that which in the long run proves to be most expedient. We do not on this account fail to appreciate fully the manliness and candour with which he states his views, and the accuracy of his facts.

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