

THE SCOTS MAGAZINE,

For JANUARY 1803.

CONTENTS.

	Page		Page
ORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS.			
Memoirs of Archibald Campbell Marquis of Argyle	3	Ode to Beniglow	55
Analysis of the word Character On the Uses of History	12	The Keswick Intemper	56
Ascendote of Mallet, the poet	13	Stanzas, written on the Birth-day of a Friend in the West Indies	56
On Deformity	17	The Departure	57
Providence; a Fragment	22	Verfes on the Elk	57
On an Established Religion	23	IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT.	
Extracts from the Journals of a Tour through France, and part of Italy	28	Proceedings in House of Lords	58
Original Letter of Charles I.	30	in House of Commons	53
Critical Letter of David Hume	31	MONTHLY REGISTER.	
LITERARY EXTRACTS.			
An Account of the Ministry at the Accession of George III. from Hume's History of England	33	FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE.	
The final suppression of the Je- suits, from the same	35	France, Switzerland, Sweden, Tur- key	59
Extract from Professor Stewart's Account of the Life and Writ- ings of Dr Reid	37	Gibraltar, St. Domingo, East In- dies	60
Vanderkemp's Natural History of Cuba, <i>continued</i>	41	BRITISH INTELLIGENCE.	
Account of Acerbi's Travels	44	Disturbances in Ireland	60
A Description of a Swedish enter- tainment	47	LONDON.	
Foreign Literary Notices	50	Loss of the Hindostan	61
Scottish Literary Notices	53	Special Commission for Trial of Colonel Despard	61
POETRY.			
By let us a' to the Fashion	54	EDUCATION.	
		Representation of the City	61-5
		Messing of Brighton Society	66
		Count of judicary	68
		Report of the Weather	74
		LISTS—Marriages, Births, Deaths, &c.	

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AN ACCOUNT OF BORNEO.

BY MR. JOHN JESSEY.

From the Asiatic Researches.

AS I am the first servant the Company ever had, or even European, which, for a number of years, has visited this part of the island of Borneo, I have presumed to lay before you every, even the minutest particular, which has occurred to my knowledge worthy your observation, that you may be the better enabled to form a just idea of your connexions here, and to judge with precision what measures may, hereafter, most readily effect the objects you have had in view, by an establishment in this quarter.

The chief and council of Balambangan, in the beginning of the last year, addressed a letter to the state of Borneo, informing them of being arrived at Balambangan, and expressing their wishes to enter into alliance with them. In consequence of this invitation, an ambassador arrived from thence in June; and I had the honour of being appointed to return with him, to open an intercourse there, and to enter into such engagements as might appear most to the Company's advantage.

I arrived here in the month of August, and found them unanimous in their inclination to cultivate the friendship and alliance of the honourable Company; in consequence thereof, I made it my first care to discover the motives which principally induced them thereto, that I might be the better enabled so to frame my treaty, as to keep them dependent in such particulars as they most essentially stood in need of; which I then found to be, and have since been confirmed therein, was protection from their piratical neighbours, the Sooloos and Mindanuos, and others, who were making continual depredations on their coast, by taking advantage of their natural timidity. To relieve them, therefore, in this particular, and to induce them the more readily to consent to my subsequent proposals, I stipulated by one

of the articles, that (if attacked) the Company should protect them; and having thus gratified them in their principal want, in return I demanded for the Company, agreeable to the tenor of my instructions, the exclusive trade of the pepper, as I well knew it was the grand object they wished to attain; and I therefore also made it my study to be thoroughly acquainted with every particular relative thereto. I was informed the quantity that year was 4000 peculs, cultivated solely by a colony of Chinese settled here, and sold to the junks at the rate of 17.2 per pecul, in China cloth called congongs, which, for want of any other specie, are become the standard for regulating the price of all other commercial commodities at this port. Although I was well convinced it could never answer the Company's purpose to pay so high a price for the pepper, especially where the quantity was so small, I notwithstanding in the treaty made a point of securing to them the exclusive trade of that article, to be paid for in merchandize, at such rates as might indemnify them at present, in the inconvenience of the high price, to the end that it might divert the channel of the junk trade from this to Balambangan, (their grand inducement for coming here being thus removed,) which, together with my having bound the state to oblige all their dependents to make plantations, whereby the quantity would not only be greatly increased, but, from their having no other purchasers, the Company would be enabled to fix such prices as would give ample encouragement to the planters, and soon reimburse the expences, which were necessitated to be borne at the beginning of the undertaking; and the more so, as in consequence of their industry, becoming yearly richer, they would find our protection but the more indispensably necessary.

Things being fixed on this basis—the Englishman and the Borneyan, becoming thus mutually necessary to each other, I flattered myself the event might have produced a solid and real commercial advantage, as well to the Nation as to the Company, and the more so, as from the great probability of the hill people being soon induced also to plant, who, by receiving cloth as the price of their industry, would naturally increase the consumption, and render our manufactures with them a necessary of life; these being by far the most numerous, and the aborigines of the island: another advantage accruing therefrom is, that having once connected these people in interest with the Company, and familiarized them to our customs, the inhabitants of the sea-coast would be unable (were they inclined) to obstruct or molest the prosecution of the Company's views. These were the motives which first induced me to secure to the Company, in the treaty with the Borneyans, the exclusive trade to the pepper, although, at that time, on seemingly disadvantageous terms; how far I may have acted with propriety, remains with the Company to determine.

I now come to say something of the characteristics of the different sects of the inhabitants.

The Borneyans who inhabit the sea-coast are Mahomedans, and, as they say, are originally an emigration from Jhore, but are ignorant of the chronology; they extended their dominions over these coasts, Palawan, Manila, and other parts of the Philipinas; and even Sooloo, as Mr Dalrymple observes, was formerly a part of this empire. From these extensive conquests, and the unconnected traditions I have had from them, I am inclined to think they were originally a warlike people; but, as most other empires, when arrived at a pitch of grandeur, have generally declined to nearly their original state, from a want of that vigorous and active government which is so essentially necessary in supporting all acquisitions obtained merely by force of arms, this appears to be the case with that of Borneo; and I am the more convinced of it, from that entire indolence and inactivity I found them immersed in; on my arrival, being to-

tally degenerated from that courage and enterprise which seems to have marked the character of their rising ancestors; and deprived of their influences, in all their former dominions situated to the northward of Borneo.

From what I have been led to say relative to this state, it may be seen they are enervated and unwarlike; added to which, they seem to be envious of the private property of each other to a great degree; but, on the other hand, I have found them fair in their dealings; cool and deliberate in their resentments, even where the object is in their power; candid in their intentions; strangers to what we call the world, although not deficient in the innate faculty of the understanding, as they seem to have in great perfection such mechanical arts as are met with in these countries, particularly in the foundery of brass cannon, wherein they excel all the Asiatics I have seen on this side, or have heard of on the other.

That they are constant in their attachments, I think I may say, from their behaviour subsequent to the unhappy capture of Balambangan; for although threatened by the Sooloos, in case they should supply us, and that at a time when many of their boats were trading in the verge of Sooloo districts, they set them at defiance, and generously afforded such assistance as lay in their power.

With respect to the Idaas, or Mooroots, as they are called here, I cannot give any account of their disposition; but, from what I have heard from the Borneyans, they are abandoned idolaters: one of their tenets, so strangely inhuman, I cannot pass unnoticed, which is, that their future interest depends upon the number of their fellow-creatures that they may have killed in any engagement, or common disputes, and count their degrees of happiness hereafter to depend on the number of human skulls in their possession; from which, and the wild disorderly life they lead, unrestrained by any bond of civil society, we ought not to be surprised if they are of a cruel and vindictive disposition. They are, as yet, near to a state of nature, but have a great share of innate cunning; of which I had a striking instance in the following circumstance:

Two of their principal chiefs, induced by curiosity, came one day to the factory; they plainly told me they came to see a white man, and should judge of my treatment of them then, what inducement they might have to cultivate an intercourse with me; pleased with the prospect, however faint, of having thus met with an instrument through which I might encompass, in time, what I have ever esteemed my capital object, I endeavoured to ingratiate myself by giving them small presents of different assortments of goods, and expressed a desire to see them again: One only of them shortly afterwards returned, with some provisions, which I learnt he had first been endeavouring to sell to the junk, and even then demanded of me such an exorbitant price as I could not think of complying with.

They are represented, however, as industrious in cultivating their paddy plantations, and in following such other employments as are known amongst them; but having no purchaser for their commodity but the Borneans, who treat them very indifferently, the intercourse, of consequence, is not carried to any extent.

Their arms are long knives and foam-pittans, a tube of wood, about six feet long, through which they blow small arrows, poisoned at one end, having at the other a small bit of cork wood, just big enough to fill up the hollow of the tube, the least touch of which where blood is produced, is certain death, unless immediately counteracted by the medicine they make use of.

Their dress, at present, is nothing more than a girdle, or long slip of stuff, made of the bark of a certain tree, which turns between the thighs to cover their nudities, one end of which hangs down before, the other behind.

The civil government of Borneo is vested with a sultain and a superior council, which consist of those pangamans who hold the great offices of the state; such as a bandahara, in whose hands is lodged the whole executive power; degadong, or director of the sultain's household; the tomaogong, or commander in chief, on their occasional war; the pa mancha, or mediator in disputes; and the shabander: to all these are three oran kayos,

de gadong, istitan, and shabandar. There are many others who hold the title of pangarans, but who are called to council only on particular matters.

I cannot better convey an idea of this form of government, than to say it bears a strong resemblance to our ancient feudal system; for although there is more respect paid to the regal power here than any other Malay country I have been in, (for this obvious reason, that the sultain has entirely the power of appointing the great officers of state, and of course can always influence the public councils;) yet, however, each pangaran has the entire sway over his particular dependants, whose cause they never fail to espouse, even where he may stand in opposition to the sovereign authority.

They have no particular laws against treason, murder is capitally punished, except in the case where the master kills the slave; polygamy prevails, as in all other Mahomedan countries, but they seldom intermarry with foreigners: the original law in cases of adultery required the parties to be instantly strangled; but for want of it being properly enforced, and the difficulty such as have a number of adherents, people in power often pass with impunity, whilst, toward the middle or inferior rank of people, it is extended with the utmost rigour. Theft, according to the degree of the crime, is punished with death, or the loss of the right hand. I found in the course of my transactions with them, they have as yet no institutions of a commercial nature, which may be attributed to the want of communications with other nations, the Chinese excepted, who make presents to the head men in lieu of duties. Those of that nation settled here, reap without molestation the fruits of their industry; but the casual traders suffer many losses from there being no law which obliges the debtor to discharge his debt, and the necessity they are under of complying with every unreasonable request of those of any consideration in the place.

Having thus communicated what I know of the characteristics and policy of the Borneans, it will not be improper to observe, that from the plenty and goodness of the timber found

here, the Chinese have been induced to adopt the scheme of building junks, and have found it by experience turn out to advantage, although necessitated to bring the workmen and many of the materials from China. One of the burthen of 7000 peculs (580 tons) was built this year, on the following plan: two nouquedads of junks, and the captain of the Chinese residing here, entered into a contract, whereby the latter, on the one part, agreed to provide the timber, and the former stipulated to bring the artificers and iron work from Amoy. The keel was laid in the beginning of March, and she was launched the 28th of May: the entire cost and out-fit amounting, as I have been informed by the contracting parties, to no more than 8,500 Spanish dollars; which, when allowing for the profits on their congonga, is not more than 4,250 Spanish dollars.

From hence it may be inferred, that should it ever be the Company's intention to establish, in these parts, a marine wherein small craft might be wanted, they could be built on easy and advantageous terms; as I have found, on inquiry of the nouquedads, there would be no difficulty in procuring artificers from China, by the junks, on very moderate encouragement.

The river of Borneo is navigable, far above the town, for ships of a very considerable burthen; and the only difficulty lies at the mouth of it, where the channel is very narrow, for about a quarter of a mile in length, through which there is not above seventeen feet at high water; however, the bottom is soft mud, and the place so completely land-locked, there never can be any surf, and consequently a ship taking the ground can be attended with no bad consequences.

My non-acquaintance with marine matters disenables me from judging, with precision, as to the expediency of making docks here; but from the temporary ones made by the Chinese, wherein they build their junks, and out of which they are floated, I should

imagine they might be made with convenience for vessels of 400 tons; and I am rather encouraged in this opinion, from the banks of the river being a tough clay, and therefore a good foundation, in which it has the preference above Laboan, the shores there being only a quick-sand. The water here flows from eight to nine feet in spring tides.

Chimerical are the expectations of finding in these countries, any people so disinterested as not to be ready to take an advantage which chance may throw in their way, where resolutions are not more biased by dread than attachment; and how unreasonable it is to expect any success in these parts, unless where there is a force sufficient to awe, as well as to protect; for although the chief and council here seem to think the Borneans have infringed their agreement, by not giving us the whole of the pepper, yet neither have we, on our parts, been able to fulfil that of affording the protection, which they have experienced by the loss of their boats, seized by our mutual enemy the Sooloos, to the amount of 20,000 Spanish dollars: this will occasion surprize, as there were not only several vessels on the Balambangan establishment, but likewise two small cruizers sent from Bombay, properly adapted to that purpose: of these, one was upset, being ordered out in tempestuous weather, to cruise for the ship *Louisa*; then expected; the other sent with the same vessel to keep ahead of her all the way to China, and which lost her passage in returning, being obliged to bear away for Malacca, from whence she is this month arrived. The public service, therefore, expected to accrue from them has been rendered totally abortive, by being made subservient to private convenience; and the protection due to the Company's allies having been thus withdrawn, the Borneans cannot, with justice, be accused of want of faith, in not scrupulously fulfilling the engagements on their part.