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THE JOURNAL

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Penang: the Fourth Presidency of India 1805–1830

Vol. 1: Ships, Men and Mansions

MARCUS LANGDON

Penang: Areca Books, 2013. xxvi, 493 pp. ISBN 978-967-5719-07-3

This major study of the history of early Penang, or Prince of Wales Island, when it served as the East India Company's Fourth Presidency government after Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, is based on a decade-long examination of unpublished primary sources, notably the Straits Settlements Records in the British Library and a similar series in the National Archives in Singapore. The study also employs a range of contemporary printed sources, including the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*. Its author is a British-born Australian amateur historian who first visited the island in the mid-1970s, attracted by a family legend relating to an ancestor employed in the Penang Botanical Gardens. The word 'amateur' in the present context is hardly appropriate as the book is unquestionably one of the most professionally conceived and well-written works published in an area of Malaysian history.

The study is divided into four self-contained 'books' dealing with Penang's role as a shipbuilding centre, its principal administrators, Government House and other buildings, and the beautiful Suffolk House, whose complex history and contested origins are fully explored. These subjects are in turn set in a broad framework so that other related historical topics are also brought into discussion. Thus, integrated into a detailed account of the failure to establish Penang as a fully equipped naval dockyard, due principally to a lack of financial investment and adequate supplies of suitable timber, there is a related account of the increasingly successful shipbuilding industry in Bombay, where teak ships of the largest dimensions and quality were beginning to challenge the traditional oak-built ships of England. In this wider context other topics are examined, such as the strategic decision taken by the Admiralty in London to separate the East Indies squadron into two divisions east and west of Point de Galle. In the section containing biographical accounts of the early administrators of the island, beginning with Francis Light as the first 'Superintendent', there are recorded the principal events of each administration so that one is afforded a basic chronology of this period of Penang's history.

In the introduction to the book, Mr Langdon sets out briefly the reasons for the British settlement on the island in 1786, including the desire to provide a safe and sheltered anchorage for ships east of the Bay of Bengal during the north-east mon-

soon as well as an intermediate port of call for the repair and refreshment of the ships engaged in the China trade. The Directors of the East India Company in giving their initial approval for the settlement also laid particular emphasis on extending British commerce 'amongst the Eastern Islands, and indirectly by their means to China', as well as 'effectually' breaking the Dutch spice trade. This commercial motive has perhaps been overemphasized in earlier studies, and although fully recognized by Mr Langdon, who cites Francis Light's succinct statement in 1787 that the official requirement was for the island to be both 'a Naval Port with a Port of Commerce', nevertheless places his emphasis on Penang's role as a naval port for the decision to make Penang a presidency government. This, in part at least, is explained by the relative change in the balance of power in the region between Great Britain and the Netherlands in the two decades between the founding of Penang and its elevation to presidency status, particularly the weakened position of the Dutch in the Melaka Straits and in eastern Indonesia, and the decreasing importance of the spice trade in the commercial calculations of the East India Company.

The third and fourth sections of the book offer definitive accounts of the principal early buildings in the island and represent in themselves an important contribution to the architectural history of Malaysia. Mr Langdon hopes to carry forward his history of Penang by publishing two further volumes examining such subjects as Fort Cornwallis, Fires in George Town, The Free School, St. George's Church, The Spice and Botanical Gardens, The Library, Battling the Sea, The Aqueduct, The Newspapers, Administration of Justice, The Jail, The Hospital and The Public Wharf. If these volumes match the high standards of the present one, Pinang will enjoy a historical record superior to many regions of Malaysia, and even Singapore, whose detailed nineteenth-century history from 1830, when Penang lost its presidency status, still remains to be written.

The present volume is beautifully produced with many original illustrations, and reflects great credit on the Penang printers, Phoenix Press, and the publishers Areca Books, whose stated ambition is to publish quality scholarly works on Malaysia's history and cultural heritage.

JOHN BASTIN

The Genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, 1945–1965

GREG POULGRAIN

Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2014. i-xi, 1-335 pp. Bibliography, index, ISBN: 978-967-0650-15-1

It is appropriate to state at the onset that the present paperback version of *The Genesis of Konfrontasi* is a reprint of Greg Poulgrain's famous work on the origins of Confrontation, and the involvement of relevant players in the formation of