

## FROM MERGUI TO SINGAPORE, 1686-1819;

A neglected chapter in the naval history of the  
Indian Ocean.

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The student of the history of South East Asia is constantly confronted by examples of its neglect by English historians. The explanation of this lies partly in the conditions under which in the past English work on the subject has been done. In contrast with the excellent co-ordination achieved by the French at such centres as Hanoi or the Sorbonne, or by the Dutch at Leiden, English researchers have for the most part ploughed lonely furrows; they have often been self-trained amateurs doing a spare-time job. There has been small demand for their output and great difficulty in getting it published. But the fact that the work actually produced has rarely found its way into the main stream of historical knowledge in this country is largely because until quite recently public interest in the outside world has normally been attracted to other regions. Only when some dramatic situation or occurrence has caused the spotlight to be focussed upon some part of South East Asia, has the unfamiliar scene been lighted up for a brief space, before receding once more into obscurity when the excitement has died down. So it is with the standard history books. Their references to South East Asia consist largely of facts of this nature. There are sudden patches of light in between long periods of darkness. The effect of this is twofold. In the first place the facts, which so suddenly emerge from the gloom, are rarely seen in their proper setting, against their real historical background. In the second place it means that a picture of the policy and activities of certain familiar figures, such as for example Louis XIV, or Dupleix has been built up, which is incomplete, since it does not take into consideration the fact that they were deeply engaged in important schemes and undertakings inside the blacked-out area.

The story, which lies behind the seizure of the island of Singapore by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819, is particularly instructive in this connection, since it illustrates, in more ways than one, the force of the above remarks. To the nonspecialist student of history both Raffles and Singapore appear suddenly like a bolt from the blue; the acquisition of the island is a stroke of genius, which, together with the policy involved, originated in the mind of the man who came, saw and conquered. The truth on the other hand is that, without detracting in any way from the greatness of Raffles's achievement, it can only properly be seen as the culminating point of a long series of plans and efforts going back to the reign of James II. The central fact running right through this period was the need for a naval station on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean. Quite apart from any other considerations, and these will appear in due course, the search for such a station was dictated by the effect of the monsoons on shipping in the Bay of Bengal, where most sea fights took place when the centre of gravity in European struggles in the Indian Ocean shifted from the west coast of India to the Coromandel Coast. Ships could remain in the Bay and repairs be safely executed on the harbourless Coromandel Coast during the South West monsoon. But when in the middle of September the changeover to the North East monsoon began, fleets must retire to a safe port elsewhere to avoid the hurricanes of October and November, while seriously disabled English ships must go all the way round to Bombay for repairs. This was a very difficult operation even for well-equipped ships, so that many bound from the Coromandel Coast for Bombay had to sail to Achin at the North West tip of Sumatra or into the Straits of Malacca to await the end of the monsoon. There was thus a dangerous period of several months when the British stations on the Coromandel Coast and British merchant shipping in the Bay were practically at the mercy of an enemy who might get a squadron there before the British could do so.

The need to find a practical solution of this problem was first brought home to the East India Company when it became aware of

the full nature and scope of Louis XIV's ambitions in the area of its own operations. At first the activities of Colbert's *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* aroused little apprehension in English breasts, but when during the sixteen-eighties France made an all-out bid to acquire political control over Siam with the aid of the Greek adventurer, Constant Phaulkon, who was the dominating spirit in King Narai's Government from 1682 to 1688, the danger signal was hoisted. And it was the prospect of the French controlling Mergui, Siam's one and only harbour on the Indian Ocean, that caused the English company to awake to the full seriousness of the situation.

Mergui is to-day an almost forgotten little Burmese port in the south of the province of Tenasserim where it shelters behind an innumerable fringe of islands which are the haunts of the elusive Sea Gypsies. The province to which it belongs was for centuries disputed territory between Siam and Burma, and changed hands more than once. Burma conquered it finally in 1766, but before that for more than a century and a half it belonged to Siam. The Sianese prized it highly, for it provided a short overland route of immemorial antiquity linking the valley of the Menam with the Indian Ocean and thus enabling merchants to avoid the dangers of the long voyage round the extremity of the peninsula.

In 1686 Phaulkon drew Louis XIV's attention to Mergui. In a letter to the King's confessor, Père de la Chaise, S.J., in which he urged military intervention in Siam, he wrote: "I feel bound to make known to the Most Christian King the importance which attaches to the station of Mergui in the Tenasserim province; since it is the best harbour in this part of the East on account both of the salubrity of its climate and of its situation, the nature of which makes it easy to defend. It possesses unusual facilities for building and repairing ships: it commands the straits of Malacca, Achin, Bengal, Ceylon, Pegu and the Coromandel Coast..... The English have the government in their hands. I should much like to see the civil, military and maritime administration vested in the hands of some trusted servant of His Most Christian Majesty, acting in the

name of the King of Siam. It would be necessary for me to hold control, in order to guide all matters in conformity with the interests of the Most Christian King. I should be glad for the Royal Company to come and settle there. The King could also establish big depots for shipbuilding; this would lessen the distance from France, which would no longer be an obstacle either to the progress of religion or to the interest of the French nation."

In the previous year Louis XIV's ambassador, the Chevalier de Chaumont, had obtained from King Narai at Ayuttia a treaty granting to the French the tin monopoly of the island of Puket, better known as Junkceylon, on the western side of the Malay Peninsula, together with the cession of the district of Singora on the eastern side. This new move was made with the object of preventing the English East India Company from seizing Mergui. Phaulkon knew, or guessed, that such a scheme was in the air. Mergui was the headquarters of an unruly crowd of English interlopers. Phaulkon was in the bad books of the Company. Worse still, in a war that was in progress between Siam and the Indian kingdom of Golconda some of the English at Mergui, in command of Siamese ships, had committed acts which had led to reprisals on the part of the Company, and the Fort St. George Council at Madras was preparing measures for bringing the culprits sternly to heel. One of these, of which Phaulkon was unaware, was the occupation of the island of Negrais, just south of the entrance to the Bassein River at the western end of the Irrawaddy delta, as a base of operations against Siamese shipping in the Bay of Bengal. The first reference to the island is in a minute of the Fort St. George Council dated 12th July 1686. It records that "having no place for the Rt. Hon'ble: Comp'as: Ships to ride out the Monsoon" it is "worth further consideration to have a Settlement there".

The Negrais plan was the first to be tried out, but it miscarried completely. Owing to delays in obtaining provisions the large expedition fitted out to seize the island was not ready to sail until the change of monsoon towards the end of September rendered

such a voyage hazardous, and it was accordingly cancelled. Late in October a single sloop was despatched "to make a discovery of the place", but after battling for twelve days against contrary winds and currents was forced to return to Madras, and the project was abandoned.

Some months later the Fort St. George Council sent Captain Anthony Weltden with two frigates to blockade Mergui and to summon all the Englishmen there to leave the Siamese service. On July 14th 1687, while negotiations were in progress, the Siamese made a surprise attack on the ships from their shore batteries, sank one and massacred all the Englishmen they could lay hands on ashore. Meanwhile James II, learning that a powerful French squadron of seven ships under the Marechal des Farges had left France for Siam carrying 1400 troops and 300 artificers, had been prevailed upon by the Company to send secret instructions to Governor Elihu Yale of Madras to seize Mergui before it should fall into French hands. These arrived in August 1687, before Weltden's return with the story of his sorry failure, and Yale at once despatched a frigate to Mergui, hoping that thus reinforced he would be strong enough to compel its surrender. On 22nd September she sailed unsuspectingly into the harbour and was forced to surrender to the French Governor, Dubruant.

Louis XIV, however, in sending over des Farges's expedition, had over-played his hand. The Siamese were seriously alarmed, and when in March 1688 King Narai became suddenly critically ill, an anti-foreign conspiracy staged a successful revolution. Phaulkon was executed, the French were attacked and in November of that year des Farges had to evacuate his force to Pondicherry, where Dubruant joined him after making a forcible escape from Mergui. And although in the next year he made a lame attempt at frightening Siam into a reconciliation by seizing the island of Puket, the threat of Siamese reprisals on seventy French prisoners in their hands, and their dogged refusal to negotiate, caused him to abandon the enterprise, this time for good.

France was now at war with the Grand Alliance, and at sea was faced by the united fleets of Britain and the Netherlands. Louis XIV had to drop his pet scheme of converting Siam to Christianity and founding a new French empire in the East, but not until he had made one further effort. In 1690 Seignelay, Colbert's son and successor at the Ministry of Marine, despatched a squadron to the Indian Ocean. Its campaign was full of object lessons. It sailed up the Coromandel Coast inflicting damage on English and Dutch shipping, and attacked Madras, though without success. Then having proceeded as far as Balasore, it turned, crossed the Bay and took shelter at Negrais to carry out repairs and obtain provisions. But Negrais was only a barren island, Mergui was hostile, and in January 1691, unable to find a suitable harbour on the eastern side of the Bay, it turned homewards. Thus was the way left open for the Dutch to capture Pondicherry in 1693. They had already supplanted the French in Siam, but only as traders, since that country's experience of French methods had made it deeply suspicious of all Europeans.

Nevertheless, when the Peace of Ryswick brought the restoration of Pondicherry to the French, they attempted once more the hopeless task of securing a footing in Siam. An envoy, Père Tachard, travelled to Ayut'ia via Mergui in 1697, and after much delay was accorded a royal audience. But it was to no purpose. A French ship also, which called at Mergui in 1700 to ask permission to establish a repair depot there, met with stubborn refusal. A few years later, when the French East India Company was in difficulties, and its trade was taken over by a company of St. Malo merchants, the Court of Versailles was asked to make a further effort to obtain the use of Mergui. The matter was referred to the French missionaries, who were still active at Ayut'ia. They in their turn consulted Dr. Charbonneau, the senior French resident there, who replied: "The Siamese value Mergui too highly ever to part with it except under compulsion." And there the matter ended. When next the question of a French port on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean came up, it was raised by Dupleix, and

his eyes were fixed upon Burma, where the English of Madras had already begun, in a somewhat half-hearted fashion, to make use of the abundant supplies of excellent teakwood which could be obtained at the port of Syriam.

Syriam was Burma's chief port for about three centuries until the foundation of Rangoon by King Alaungpaya in 1755. It lies just below Rangoon and is to-day the site of the Burma Oil Company's refineries. The East India Company had a short-lived factory there from 1647 to 1657; Dutch competition forced its closure. It continued to be used, however, by English private merchants, mainly from Madras. After the Dutch withdrew their factories from Burma in 1679, Fort St. George for some years made spasmodic efforts to negotiate a trading agreement with the Court of Ava, but without success. The private trade, however, began to assume some degree of importance, and through it Madras was able to procure supplies of Burma teak. Then, in 1689, two years after the failure of their attempt on Mergui, the Fort St. George Council decided to make trial of Syriam as a repair depot, and sent the frigate *Diamond* there for the purpose. But it was not until some ten years later that, as a result of Edward Fleetwood's mission to Ava in 1695, steps were taken to establish a permanent dockyard. Even then it was a haphazard sort of business. A "Chief of the English Nation" was appointed from among the Madras free merchants, resorting annually to Syriam in September and returning in the following April or May. He made the English factory his headquarters, hoisted the English flag and supervised in a general way such repair work as might come along; he would make arrangements for the necessary labour, timber and stores. The system lasted for twenty-five years, during which the Company, doubtful of the Burma trade ever becoming a paying proposition, left the field open to the private trader. But it proved an unsatisfactory method of dealing with ship-repairs, and in 1724 a resident contractor was placed in charge of the work. He was a professional shipwright, worked on a commission basis, and was dubbed "English Resident".

Just as this new system was getting under way, Dupleix, who had been at Pondicherry since 1720, drew French attention to the importance of Syriam in a *Memoire sur la situation de nos établissements en 1727*. His efforts resulted in the establishment of a French shipyard there along the same lines as the English one. From about 1720 both were experimenting with the construction of teak ships, the French with more success than the English. By 1737 they had built two large ships and two brigantines. These were so successful that plans began to be made for the extension of the dockyard. Before these could be carried out, however, the Mons of Lower Burma rose in revolt against their Burmese overlords, the country was plunged into chaos, and in 1742 the French had to abandon their dockyard altogether. The English did not attempt to build large ships; their dockyard turned out a number of sloops, a galley and a brigantine. Their workmanship was bad, their cost excessive and the instructions given by Fort St. George disregarded. Hence by the time the Mon rebellion brought shipbuilding to a standstill, the disappointed Council had passed orders for the work to be transferred to the more efficient Parsi yards at Bombay. In 1744 the last English Resident returned to Madras after the Mons, annoyed at the Company's neutrality policy, had set fire to the dockyard and demolished it.

Until the end of the War of the Austrian Succession neither side was in a position to resume activities in Burma. Meanwhile, La Bourdonnais's capture of Madras in June 1746 provided a striking demonstration of the vulnerability of the Coromandel Coast stations during the temporary absence of a protecting fleet when the opposing side had one at its disposal. At Syriam, while the English were represented only by a few private traders, French interests had been left in the capable hands of the Italian missionary Pere Vittoni, who made himself a *persona grata* with the Mons. Hence, when the Mons, having successfully reestablished their old independent kingdom, with Pegu as its capital and Syriam its port, began to dream of conquering the Kingdom of Ava itself, it was to Pondicherry that they turned in their search for a European ally from whom to obtain the supplies of firearms that were estimated to prove the decisive factor in the struggle.



In 1750 Dupleix as Governor of Pondicherry received the Mon envoys and, without hesitation, promised all the help he could afford. So it happened that a few weeks after one agent, Bussy, had set out to establish French influence in the Deccan, another, Bruno, left on a similar mission for Burma. He arrived in Pegu in July 1751. There in return for promises of French aid he negotiated a commercial treaty. Then he returned to Pondicherry to assure his master that with five or six hundred well-equipped French troops — not Indian sepoys — it would be a simple matter to gain control not only of Syriam but also of much more. Dupleix wrote home pressing for adequate reinforcements to undertake the venture. To him it was no longer a scheme for a repair depot on the eastern side of the Bay, but an audacious and exciting plan for building a new French empire. It is only when one sees the whole picture, which at this moment involved Lower Burma as well as the Carnatic and the Deccan, not to mention Mauritius, that the real scope of Dupleix's master plan can be grasped. It displays a higher conception of the function of naval strategy than historians, who confine their view to India, have seen fit to concede to him. Had France been able, and indeed willing, to play the part indicated by him, the history of the Anglo-French struggle for power in India might have been very different. To his deep chagrin, however, the Council of the Indies summarily rejected the proposal. In a letter dated 2 January 1753 he was told that the shipbuilding concessions at Syriam made by the Court of Pegu to Bruno were sufficient; anything on a bigger scale involving military commitments would be certain to provoke a further contest with the British.

On the British side there was no failure to realise the full implications of any move by Dupleix in Burma. Even before Bruno's mission the wary Thomas Saunders, Governor of Fort St. George, had reported home a rumour that the French had designs on the island of Negrais, and had urged the Company to forestall them by planting a settlement there. The response of the Directors was immediate: in a despatch dated December 1751, long before news of

Bruno's doings could have reached London the project was given full sanction. Saunders in the meantime had not been inactive. As soon as he heard, from Madras merchants frequenting Syriam, of Bruno's visit to Pegu, without awaiting a reply to his letter, he sent a small expedition to survey the island, and opened negotiations for its cession to the Company. But the Mons were hostile to any such idea, and to make matters worse Bruno reappeared in Pegu in November 1752 as Dupleix's resident agent, and his influence was at once supreme. So Thomas Saunders, who had at first hesitated to carry out the Directors' orders, since the survey party had reported very unfavourably on Negrais, put all doubts aside and went ahead with preparations to occupy the island.

On 26th April 1753 Negrais was seized by an expedition under the command of a young Company's servant named David Hunter. It was a tragic mistake. The adverse report submitted by Captain Thomas Taylor in the previous year proved only too true. It was flooded during the wet monsoon, malaria-ridden and totally unfitted to play the role of a naval station. That it ultimately became a stumbling-block to the achievement of Dupleix's aims was largely due to circumstances which could not have been taken into account at the outset. No one then knew that Dupleix's proposal had been turned down by Versailles. Late in the next year Dupleix himself was removed from office, and although Bruno showed himself to be a man of ability and resourcefulness, the Pegu Court needed far greater material help than he was able to squeeze out of Pondicherry, faced as it was by the prospect of a new war with Britain in the near future.

The decisive factor, however, in the situation was the rise of a champion of Burmese nationalism in the far north, whose threat to the Mon Kingdom, no larger than a man's hand in 1753, rapidly became a tempest which overwhelmed the unsteady bark of Mon independence, this time for ever. The Negrais settlement therefore was tolerated by the Mons as a possible alternative channel of supply should the French one prove inadequate, and a means of putting

pressure on Bruno, should he essay a double game. Then in 1755, when the Burmese leader Alaungpaya made a lightning thrust down the Irrawaddy, and at a blow recovered central Burma and almost the whole of the delta region, it became his one hope of obtaining the artillery and military stores without which he could not hope to reduce well-defended cities such as Syriam and Pegu.

Thus, almost willy-nilly, Bruno and the British found themselves on opposite sides in a conflict which they were powerless to control. Bruno, having discovered too late that he was backing the wrong horse, and having failed to accomplish a changeover to the Burmese side, made a desperate effort to save the situation at Syriam, which Alaungpaya began to besiege in February 1756. Had the assistance, which Pondicherry at last managed to send him, only arrived in time, the city would have been saved, and in the circumstances the hold of the Burmese on the Mon country would have been seriously jeopardised. But it arrived two days too late, when Syriam had fallen and Bruno was a prisoner in Alaungpaya's hands. The Burmese monarch forced his captive to send a false message decoying the French ships up the river, they were neatly run aground by the pilots sent to meet them, and with all their personnel and contents fell into Burmese hands. It was a providential windfall for Alaungpaya, without which he might not have completed the downfall of the Mon kingdom in the following year by the capture of Pegu.

From the moment when Syriam fell in July 1756 the Negrais settlement's *raison d'être* ceased to exist. Alaungpaya regarded it solely from the point of view of its value as a source of military stores. The Company, however, with the Seven Years' War on its hands, had none to spare. Hence in March 1757 the decision was taken in London to abandon it. There was long delay before this could be acted upon; Lally's operations placed the British on the defensive in the Carnatic throughout the whole of the year 1758 and culminated in the siege of Madras from December of that year until the following February. It was left to Calcutta to pull Madras's chestnuts out of the fire. While this operation was in progress, the

Burmese took advantage of the withdrawal of the main garrison to swoop down upon the practically undefended settlement, destroy its buildings and massacre the remaining staff.

In the light of this experience it is not to be wondered at that at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, when the Directors issued orders for a search to be made for a suitable naval station on the eastern side of the Bay, neither Negrais nor the new port of Rangoon came under consideration, notwithstanding a pressing invitation from Alaungpaya's successor for the Company to settle at the latter. Not so the French. The prisoners taken when Syrian fell performed useful service in the Burmese army, and some of them, notably Pierre Milard, who became Captain of the Royal Guards, rose to positions of some responsibility. Through Milard's instrumentality a French envoy from Pondicherry named Lefèvre was able to report in 1768 that he had obtained from King Hsin-byu-shin very favourable terms for planting a dockyard at Rangoon. Little is known of the history of this venture, save that the French built a number of teak ships at Rangoon, one of which, the *Lauriston* of 1500 tons, operated with success against the British in Indian waters during the war of American Independence. During that war, however, as a result of the capture by the British of the French settlements in India, the Rangoon depot was closed.

One interesting sequel to the French agreement with Hsin-byu-shin was the renewal of their contact with Mergui, which had by then fallen into Burmese hands. The naval base at Mauritius developed close relations with the port, which at times caused the British Indian authorities no little concern until they were brought to an end by the capture of Mauritius in 1809. Besides being used by French ships as a repair station, it provided also a base for commerce raiders operating against British shipping.

The British search for a naval station led them first to consider the possibility of the Sunda Straits between Java and Sumatra for this purpose. The reasons for looking so far to the south indicate

the growing importance of new factors. The Dutch monopoly over the trade of the Indonesian archipelago was beginning to show obvious signs of breaking down, and a harbour which would combine the advantages of a repair station with those of a trading centre for the archipelago was now considered necessary. After the Dutch had compelled the Sultan of Bantam by the treaty of 1684 to expel all other Europeans from his territory, the British had settled at Benculen on the west coast of Sumatra. But the place was too far away from the principal trade routes to develop any commercial importance. Then there was the matter of the China trade. Benculen was the only British port between Calcutta and Canton. But the direct route lay through the Straits of Malacca, and again and again British ships in need had to seek the shelter of a Dutch port, and there were loud complaints of exorbitant charges. Nor were the Dutch always a friendly power, so that there were obvious dangers in their control over the Straits of Malacca and Sunda.

Early in the eighteenth century a partial solution of this problem had been sought through the occupation of the island known as Pulo Kondor lying off the western mouth of the Mekong. Even before the end of the previous century it had attracted the attention of both the English and the French East India Companies. In 1686 an agent of the latter named Véret, who had been commissioned to look for a factory site in that area, reported on it in somewhat extravagant terms. Since all the commerce of China, Tongking, Macao, Manila and Cochin China with the Indies had to pass close by it, he wrote, it possessed the combined advantages of the Straits of Malacca and Sunda. The British, however, forestalled the French by planting a settlement on the island in 1702. Its history was short and inglorious. The Macassar troops of the garrison, annoyed at being retained there beyond the term of their contract, mutinied and put all the Europeans to death save two, who made their escape in a small boat to Johore in Malaya. No attempt was made to resettle there, though the immense growth in the importance of the China trade during the eighteenth century caused more and more pressure to be brought upon the Company to establish a port that

would link up the trade of India with that of the Far East. Quite apart from any other considerations neither Rangoon nor Mergui was of any use for such a purpose. In the new period which opened with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763 they were looking for a place further south which would not only provide a good repair station, but would also serve as a port of call for ships engaged in the Far Eastern trade and enable them to keep an eye on the narrow straits and on the privateers and pirates, who, with the weakening of the Dutch monopoly, were swarming in the waters of the archipelago and elsewhere.

By 1766 it was agreed that there was no suitable site in the Sunda Straits. Then during the next four years efforts were made to find one south of the Straits; but they also proved fruitless. Various people had their own pet schemes. Alexander Dalrymple, for instance, the compiler of the *Oriental Repertory*, had in 1761 made a treaty with the Sultan of Sulu for the cession of the island of Balambangan, off the north of Borneo, and in 1768 was to have headed an expedition from Madras to settle it, but instead was dismissed the Company's service for publishing without authority the plans for making it an emporium for the products of China and Indonesia. Four years later a settlement was indeed made there, but it was discovered to be in the heart of a pirate-ridden region, and came to an ignominious end in 1775, when it was sacked by the marauding subjects of the donor himself.

But the main attention of the Company was directed towards the Straits of Malacca. In 1771 the Directors instructed Madras to inquire into the nature of the trade that certain private firms were carrying on with Achin, Kedah and other places in that neighbourhood, and to send an accredited agent to treat with the Sultan of Achin concerning the possibility of opening an official factory at his capital. It was in this way that Captain Francis Light, later the founder of Penang, began to exercise an influence upon the Company's policy. An ex-naval officer, he was at the time a merchant captain in the service of Messrs. Jourdan, Sullivan

and De Souza of Madras trading in the Straits of Malacca, where he had acquired an intimate knowledge of the Malay world. His correspondence with his friend Andrew Ross shows that he had become keenly aware of the need for a strong British naval station which could control the Straits of Malacca and keep a watch on Dutch activities. In one letter, written in 1769, he had drawn attention to the island of Bintang, south of Singapore, as the most desirable place for such a purpose.

In 1771 he was in Kedah. The Sultan wanted help against the neighbouring state of Selangor, whose forces had invaded his territory. At Light's suggestion he wrote to the Governor of Madras asking for the support of the Company, but received only a polite, non-committal reply. Shortly afterwards in a letter to his firm Light disclosed that in return for help the Sultan was willing to grant the seaport of Kedah to the Company. Then, finding the Madras authorities still unresponsive, and fearing lest news of the offer might leak out to the Dutch and lead to their intervention, he wrote on 17th January 1772 direct to Warren Hastings urging acceptance of the offer without delay. Finally Madras decided to send not one accredited agent but two, one to Achin and the other to Kedah, both with practically identical instructions.

Both missions failed. The Sultan of Achin was too deeply suspicious of the "ulterior designs" of the British even to listen to the proposals laid before him by Charles Desvoeux. In the case of Kedah the boot was on the other foot; the Company refused to listen to the Sultan's proposals. His one aim was to obtain military assistance against Selangor, and although Light negotiated an agreement in such terms and skilfully persuaded the Madras agent, the Hon. Edward Monckton to initial it, the horrified Madras authorities flatly refused to confirm it, offering as their excuse a baseless rumour that the Sultan of Selangor in anticipation of trouble had called in Dutch aid. Monckton went on from Kedah to try his luck with the rulers of Trengganu and Rhio, but to no purpose. The "stuttering boy", as the disappointed Sultan of Kedah dubbed him was not in

a position to bind the Company to the one condition without which no Malay ruler would grant the facilities sought. Light in disgust at the Company's timidity left Kedah and settled on the island of Junkceylon as a private trader on his own account. The Company on the other hand attributed its failure to Light's lack of experience in diplomacy.

For twelve years (1772--1784) the project languished. Warren Hastings was too harassed with other affairs to pay attention to it; and although Light saw him personally in Calcutta in 1780, and this time urged the occupation of Junkceylon, neither troops nor money could be spared. The renewed war with the French was soon to furnish him with fresh object lessons, if he needed any, of the dangers to which the Coromandel Coast was exposed in face of a strong French naval policy, especially when it was directed by a commander as able as the redoubtable de Suffren. Between February and September 1782 he and Sir Edward Hughes fought a series of four indecisive engagements, after which the French fleet went off to refit in Achin Roads. Hughes remained off the Coromandel Coast, intending to stay there as long as possible in case his opponent decided on yet another attack. In the middle of October, however, his squadron was so severely damaged by a hurricane that he was forced to leave for Bombay. Before he could return in the following year, de Suffren had driven British commerce out of the Bay of Bengal and had nearly succeeded in blockading Calcutta. Moreover, while the struggle between de Suffren and Hughes was in progress, the French *Arrogant* and the British *Victorious* fought an action after which the former put into Mergui to refit while her rival had to go to Bombay.

As soon as the Treaty of Versailles was signed, therefore, Hastings himself began to take positive action. Achin, Rhio, the Andamans and the Nicobars all came under review as possible sites for an eastern harbour. In 1784 a second agent, Kinloch, was sent to Achin, while another, Forrest, went to Rhio. But the Sultan of



Achin was as hostile as ever, and refused outright to consider the British proposals. Meanwhile the Dutch, thoroughly alarmed by their naval weakness vis-à-vis the British in the "Fourth English War" were engaged upon a series of efforts to restore their supremacy in Indonesian waters. Forrest therefore was forestalled at Rhio by Van Braam's squadron, which forced its Sultan to accept Dutch control.

It was at this juncture that Light came forward with his suggestion of Penang. It was only a week's sail from the Coromandel Coast, and had the advantage over Junkceylon of being closer to the Straits of Malacca. The time he carried his point. But the Directors, in sanctioning the occupation of the island, did not regard it as a solution of the naval question. To them it was a move towards breaking the Dutch monopoly, of helping Malay rulers to resist "Dutch attempts to enslave them" and of securing the greater safety of the China shipping. Naval opinion for another ten years considered the Andamans preferable as a base. It was only when Britain became involved in war with revolutionary France that it changed in favour of Penang. The French invasion of the Netherlands and the issue of the "Kew Letters" of February 1795 led to the British occupation of a large number of Dutch forts and factories, including those on the west coast of Sumatra, Malacca, Amboyna and Banda. Penang and Benculen were used as bases for the naval expeditions carrying out these operations. And when in 1797 it was decided to send an expedition commanded by Colonel Arthur Wellesley to destroy Spanish shipping at Manila in the Philippines, Penang was its rendezvous. Wellesley himself sent a highly favourable report on the place to the Government of India. Every effort was made to divert the trade of captured Malacca to Penang, and in 1800 in order to develop its harbour the territory opposite to it on the mainland was purchased from the Sultan of Kedah and became Province Wellesley. The height of the boom period in the hopes cherished for it was reached in 1805 when it became a fourth Indian Presidency.

Then came gradual disillusion. Raffles, who arrived there as Assistant Secretary in September 1805, was not long in realising that it lay too far to the west of the Archipelago ever to become a great trading centre for the island. The pirate-infested waters of the

Straits were a grave deterrent to native shipping while so far as the Dutch empire was concerned, Penang was "outside the gates". Malacca lay in the narrowest part of the Straits, and in 1808, when he visited the city, he was shocked by the efforts that were being made to destroy it as an emporium in favour of Penang. As a naval base also Penang was a disappointment: dockyards could not be built and there was no suitable local timber. So that although in 1810 it was the centre from which Raffles organised the conquest of Java, the plan for making it a naval station was abandoned in the following year.

By that time Raffles as Lieutenant Governor of Java and its dependencies was already at work on a scheme which envisaged the permanent substitution of British for Dutch rule throughout those regions. When later this had to be scrapped because of the decision of the Home Government to restore the Netherlands Indies to the new Kingdom of the United Netherlands, and the disappointed empire-builder was relegated to Benculen, the fresh scheme which began to take shape in his fertile brain envisaged the acquisition of a station that should be 'inside the gates', nothing less than one which should command the southern entrance to the Straits of Malacca. And when he won over the Marquess of Hastings to the project, his first choice of an objective was the island of Rhio. But the Dutch beat him to Rhio, just as in 1784 they had forestalled Warren Hastings's agent Forrest. This time, however, they were outwitted by their opponent, for on 29th January 1819 he hoisted the British flag on the island of Singapore, a far better site in every way. "What Malta is in the West, that may Singapore become in the East" he wrote home.

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*FOOTNOTE.* Several other schemes came under consideration before Raffles clinched the matter in this way. Thus in 1818 Governor Farquhar of Penang was forestalled at Pontianak in Borneo by the Dutch; he also proposed a base in the Carimous, but this was rejected. See C.D. Cavan, *Early Penang and the Rise of Singapore*, J.R.A.S. Malayan Branch (1950).