

Sarawak, Borneo, in 1941

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The Chief Secretary's Files

Abstracted and edited by

Gathorne Cranbrook

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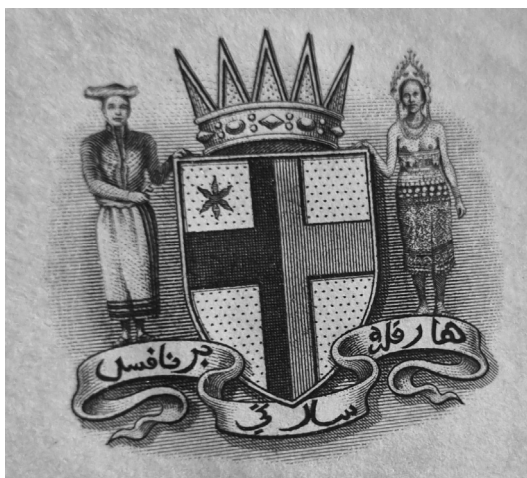
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The armorial of Rajah Brooke. The motto, in Malay, is ‘*Haraplah salagi bernafas*’, a translation of the Latin original, ‘*Dum spiro spero*’ – ‘While I breathe, I hope’. Coincidentally, the Latin version is also the motto of the Scottish clan MacLennan and the U.S. State of South Carolina. The supporters are (dexter) a man in Sarawak Malay dress, and (sinister) a girl in Dayak (Iban) ceremonial dress.



Rajah Sir Charles Brooke (1829-1917)
(stock image)



Rajah Sir C. Vyner Brooke (1874-1963):
(Ranee Sylvia’s favourite photograph)¹

¹ See Ranee Sylvia, Lady Brooke’s autobiography (1970) *Queen of the headhunters*.

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PREFACE

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Early Sarawak: Sultan Tengah. the first and only Malay Sultan

Local folkloric history has related that a political entity with the name ‘Sarawak’, based on the river of that name, first emerged at about the year 1599 CE, under the short-lived rule of the State’s only Malay Sultan – by name, Tengah, a younger brother of the concurrent Sultan of Brunei². Sultan Tengah has been attributed with the creation of an advisory group of Malay dignitaries (Datu Patinggi, Datu Shahbandar, Datu Amar. and Datu Temenggong).

It was told that Sultan Tengah married a princess (*Puteri*) of Sambas, a neighbouring sultanate situated on the Kapuas river, and their descendants remained in that adjoining State.³ Sovereignty of the Sarawak river and coast, and the potential value of this ‘province’, therefore reverted to the Ruler and Sultan of Brunei.

Sarawak in context

The State of Sarawak⁴ extends from one to five degrees of latitude north of the equator and thus forms the north-western sector of Borneo, the world’s third largest equatorial island⁵, Sarawak has a long coast, bordering the South China Sea. The annual rainfall in most parts exceeds 3,300 mm.

² Larsen, Ib (2012), The First Sultan of Sarawak and His Links to Brunei and the Sambas Dynasty: A little known Pre-Brooke History, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 85 (2):1-16.

³ Sambas is now included in the province of West Kalimantan (Kalimantan Barat), Indonesia.

⁴ Sarawak is now one of 13 States united in the federal monarchy of Malaysia,

⁵ The two other, larger equatorial islands are New Guinea and Madagascar.

Largely unaffected by the south-west monsoon that dominates the seasonal cycle of much of South Asia, the seasonality of Sarawak is more strongly controlled by the incidence of its alternative, the north-east monsoon. Normally blowing from October through December, this wind creates an annual season (known locally as *musim landas*) marked by increased rainfall and rough seas. None the less, in the Brooke era – long before the construction of the present network of highways and minor roads – year round, the sea provided the only route for communication and services, such as the carriage of mail, goods and passengers, linking the towns and bazaars, and Government offices, at coastal ports or (like the capital city, Kuching) on the banks of the rivers that discharged to the South China Sea.

These rivers, large and small, extended ship-borne traffic to the interior. For example, steamships from Singapore delivered goods and passengers directly to Kuching, some 30 km from the at the Brooke dockyard⁶. The coal mines near the town of Simunjan, which were being opened up when visited by A.R. Wallace in 1866, were reached by the comparatively short tidal river Sadong, which gave its name to the colliery.

Inland of the long shore of the South China Sea, the interior of Sarawak is hilly, rising to an irregular line of peaks that form the watershed and the international boundary with the Indonesia, represented by the Provinces of North, East and West Kalimantan, all of which, before 1945, were part of the more extensive Netherlands East Indies.

Across most of Sarawak, the annual rainfall exceeds 3.30 metres, and daytime temperatures peak at about 32°C in the lowlands, with no seasonal variation. This combination of wetness and warmth creates a perennially humid climate which supports a natural inland vegetation of evergreen tropical rain forests. This forested environment was celebrated by Spenser St John⁷, in his book on travels in northern Borneo in the nineteenth century, and later described botanically by Dr Tim Whitmore⁸. As public interest in adventure and exploration grew, Sarawak became widely known through

⁶ The Brooke Dockyard was officially opened by Ranee Muda Sylvia, wife of the then heir apparent and later 3rd Rajah, C. Vyner Brooke, on 31st May, 1912 (*Sarawak Gazette* 1912, vol 42, no. 605).

⁷ Spenser St John served in Sarawak from 1828, until being appointed as British Consul General in Brunei in 1856. In 1863, he was transferred to be British consul in Haiti. His influential two-volume book, *Life in the forests of the Far East; or, Travels in northern Borneo*, was published in 1863.

⁸ T. C. Whitmore (1998) *An Introduction to Tropical Rain Forests*. 2nd edn. Oxford University Press.

the acclaimed writings of Alfred Russel Wallace⁹, who described this land as home of the great red ape, the orangutan.¹⁰ Other publications, more ominously, tended to depict Sarawak as the haunt of human head-hunters.¹¹

Surprisingly, this land of exceptional inhabitants – animal and human – was an independent country governed by Englishmen with the family surname of Brooke. The Brooke rulers of Sarawak, self-styled Rajahs, were honoured by the British monarch, who accorded them titles of knighthood and, ultimately, in 1911, the elevated rank of Their Highnesses, thereby placing the Brooke Rajahs on equal footing with the rulers of the independent States of British India, or the Sultans of the States of Malaya, and – nearest of all – the Ruler of the adjoining State, His Highness and Yang di Pertuan, the Sultan of Brunei Darussalam.

Origin of the Chief Secretary's files

The collation, sequestration and preservation of these files was intentional. In the year 1941, in distant Sarawak, news of the progress of the war in Europe perturbed Rajah Vyner Brooke and senior expatriate officers of his Government. Responsible administrators, they pondered the best means to safeguard documents of strategic importance. Reaching a conclusion, on 10th June, 1941, from his office in Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak, the Chief Secretary – the senior officer of the Government of the third (and last) ‘White Rajah’¹² of Sarawak – telegraphed his colleague the Resident¹³ at Limbang, the most distant outstation of Brooke rule, requesting him to take

⁹ A. R. Wallace was co-originator, with Charles Darwin, of the theory of evolution by natural selection.

¹⁰ Wallace, A. R. (1865). *The Malay Archipelago: the land of the Orang-utan and the Bird of Paradise*. London, Macmillan and Co., became a classic travelogue, running to many editions.

¹¹ For instance: Furness, W. H. (1902), *The home life of Borneo headhunters*. Philadelphia, J. O. Lippincott; and Haddon, A.C. (1901), *Head-hunters, Black, White, and Brown*. London, Methuen & Co. and E. Mjöberg (1929) *Durch die Insel des Kopffjager*, Leipzig, F. A Brockhaus.

¹² The term ‘White Rajahs’ was coined by the official historians, S. Baring-Gould & C.A. Bampfylde, (1909) *A history of Sarawak under its two White Rajahs*. London, Sothoran.

¹³ In the time of the third Rajah (Sir C Vyner Brooke GCMG, who ruled 1917-1946), Sarawak was administered through five large Divisions, each headed by an appointed officer in the position known as ‘Resident’. Each Division comprised several Districts, in the charge of ‘District Officers’ who were assisted by locally recruited ‘Native Officers’, often men well-respected by the local community.

delivery of a cabinet containing documents “concerning Brunei Pengirans’ claims”. The topic was familiar to both men, so there was no need for further explanation. The Chief Secretary wrote, simply, that, ‘it had been decided to send to Limbang:

all papers and correspondence on the subject of payments to certain Brunei Pengiran¹⁴ and their descendants’

In the style of the autocratic regime of the Brooke Rajahs, the Chief Secretary felt no need to explain the grounds for this decision. The bombing of the US fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (7th December, 1941) had yet to happen, but the progress of the war in Europe was already perturbing expatriate officers of the Brooke regime. It was not unreasonable for the senior officer of Rajah Brooke’s Government, in Kuching, to consider, as a safe repository, the most distant office of a dependable colleague, the Resident at Limbang, the furthest north-east Division (Chapter 14).

At the time of the collation and consignment of these files, the contents were evidently judged by senior officers at the centre of the Government of Sarawak to be necessary to authenticate the rule of the Brooke Rajahs, and also, for current administrative purposes, to record the financial arrangements by which Brooke rule, legitimately secured, was subsequently sustained by continuing periodic payments (annual or monthly) to ‘certain Brunei Pengirans or their descendants’, and also to the current Sultan and Ruler of Brunei.

For conciseness, it was under the subject of “Brunei Pengirans’ claims”, that the filed documents were collated, stored together in a Roneo filing cabinet, and shipped to a leading commercial agent in the British colony of Labuan Island, for forwarding to the furthest outpost of the national Government of Sarawak, at Limbang.

Subsequent movements of these files have remained conjectural. The collection came to light again in 2008, when the widow of a distinguished

¹⁴ *Pengiran*: a hereditary title held by adults of either gender who were concurrently or historically related to the Royal family of Brunei Darussalam. ‘These nobles formed a stratum which perpetuated itself by patrilineal recruitment’ (D.E. Brown, 1970. *Brunei: The structure and history of a Bornean Malay Sultanate*. Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Museum, Start Press). Particular ranks were *Pengiran Muda*, the title held by the offspring of a Sultan, or a person of close affinity; and *Pengiran Anak*, awarded to grandchildren of a Sultan, and held by the following five generations.

Sarawak businessman cleared the family house prior to its sale. In the attic, unexpectedly, she discovered a small, brown suitcase containing files that have proved to belong to this collection of papers, collated in 1941 on the common theme of ‘payments to certain Pengiran of Brunei and their descendants’.

Reviewed in the pages that follow and, for the longer term, available for consultation in an academic institution¹⁵, this small archive included documents related to purchases of the right to govern areas of land (and water¹⁶), by negotiated capital sums and subsequent recurrent payments, annually or monthly. By these purchases, and subsequent associated payments, the rule of the Brooke Rajahs was legitimised for more than a century (1842-1946). During this period, under Brooke rule, the full territorial extent of the present Malaysian State of Sarawak was permanently secured, and has remained so, with unaltered land bounds.

Legality of the assignment of rights

As indicated by the Chief Secretary’s message to Limbang in 1941, many of these documents related to claims for benefaction, submitted by Brunei subjects, most of whom were Pengiran, i.e., hereditary nobles. In most cases, the ancestors of these claimants, had assigned their property rights to the Brooke Rajah, in exchange for capital payment and subsequent periodic revenue.

In a note on the ability to transfer such rights, dated 18th June, 1932, the Legal Adviser to the Sarawak Government wrote:

A casual study of Brunei history leaves the impression that even the sovereign rights were regarded as being freely assignable regardless of the heirs.

The correctness of this opinion was supported by the absence of later challenges to these transactions. The ‘claims’ of Brunei Pengiran, collated

¹⁵ It is intended that these historic documents, having survived so fortuitously, shall be deposited for permanent safe-keeping in the library of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.

¹⁶ Like the first award of the Sarawak river and coast, many later territorial extensions of Sarawak, during the Brooke era, were defined in terms of river catchments or riverside landing stages (*pangkalan*).

in these files by the Chief Secretary, were for shares of the agreed awards of monetary compensation.

* * *

In the time of the Brooke Rajahs, the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, which had at one time exercised sovereign authority over much of north and north-western Borneo, was progressively reduced to two enclaves, enclosed on the landward border by Sarawak territory. The situation in 1942 was shown by a map, published at the start of the Japanese occupation (Plate 2),

Before the development of a modern highway system, i.e., throughout the Brooke era, the sea route provided the only means of connectivity, both of goods and passengers, between urban centres, and between the administrative offices of the Sarawak Government¹⁷. Travel by sea was the only means of reaching the capital city and seat of government. A little more distant was the island of Labuan. A short boat journey connected Brunei with Limbang, Sarawak. Purchased from Brunei in 1846, Labuan was included in the British colony of the Straits Settlements, governed from the office of the High Commissioner in Singapore.

* * *

Individual accounts of the unparalleled story of Sarawak during the Brooke era have been related in autobiographical mode by the Rajahs themselves¹⁸; also, by the wives of two, 'Ranees' Margaret de Windt and Sylvia Brett.¹⁹ The story of Sarawak has been more independently recounted by

¹⁷ In the time of the third Rajah (Sir C Vyner Brooke GCMG, ruled 1917-1946), Sarawak was administered through five large Divisions, each headed by an appointed officer with the title 'Resident'. Each Division comprised several Districts, in the charge of 'District Officers', generally expatriate by origin, who were assisted by 'Native Officers' – usually respected members of the local community.

¹⁸ J. Brooke, 1853, *The private letters of Sir James Brooke KCB, Rajah of Sarawak, narrating the events of his life from 1838 to the present*. London, R. Bentley. Also, C. Brooke, 1866. *Ten years in Sarawak*. 2 vols; London, Tinsley Brothers.

¹⁹ Sylvia, Lady Brooke (1970), *Queen of the headhunters*, Sidgwick and Jackson; and Margaret of Sarawak (1987), *My life in Sarawak*, Oxford. James Brooke did not marry.

historians²⁰, and even embellished by a fictional adventure involving the scandalous Flashman.²¹

The whole territory of today's Sarawak, of the 21st century, was assembled during Brooke rule. Yet no previously published history has examined the variety and complexity of the agreements and other financial arrangements by which successive Rajahs legitimately acquired, and subsequently retained the right to govern Sarawak's long maritime coast, with the rivers and forests of the interior and the diverse peoples of this tropical land.

Territorial gains were invariably complemented with agreed supplementary payments, many of which were perpetual in nature, and repeated monthly or annually. The cession of large areas, such as rivers and their tributaries, often with adjoining coast, were negotiated with the Sultan or Government of Brunei, and incurred large payments by the Rajah Brooke. More numerous were accessions of permanent and heritable rights to smaller localities. The vendor in such cases was frequently a member of the Pengiran class of Brunei nobles. Associated payment often included dues to the sovereign Ruler of Brunei, in perpetuation of a pre-existing grant to the vendor or an ancestor.

The subsequent repercussions of transactions of both kinds were combined under the topic of "claims of various Pengiran", co-ordinated this collection of files from office of the Chief Secretary, and other senior officers of the Government of Sarawak, collated in 1941, the closing year of the effective rule of the Brooke Rajahs, before the wartime occupation by Japanese forces.

The closest equivalent to these agreements in English property law was a perpetual Leasehold tenancy. Indeed, at one time, while emphasising that sovereignty remained in the hands of Brunei, the British Resident, used the

²⁰ A selection of histories to be drawn upon includes: S. Baring-Gould & C.A. Bampfylde, 1909, *A history of Sarawak under its two White Rajahs*, London, Sotheran; E. Hahn, 1953, *James Brooke of Sarawak*; London, Arthur Banner; S. Runciman, 1960, *The White Rajahs: A history of Sarawak from 1841 to 1946*; Cambridge University Press; D.A. Miller, 1972, *Charles Brooke in Sarawak*; Ohio University Library; R. Payne, 1987, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, Oxford University Press; R. H. W. Reece, 1993, *The name of Brooke*; N. Barley, 2003, *White Rajah: a biography of Sir James Brooke*, Little Brown.

²¹ G. MacDonald Fraser, 1979, *Flashman's Lady*, London, Pan Books.

term 'tenant' to define the standing of the Rajah as personal owner of rights (and obligations) at Pandaruan, Brunei (Chapter 3).

A similar concept prevailed in local culture. In documents in these files relating to agreements between Brookes and the Brunei holders of ancestral rights to property, Malay correspondents most often used the word *pajak*. This term defines a lease of the usufruct of land or other fixed property (for example, fruit trees), with no change of ownership. Unstated sentiment, represented by the concept of *pajak*, almost certainly underlay many of the claims made by Brunei Pengiran that constituted the common theme of this collated collection of files.

An archive re-discovered in 2008

Unknown for many years after its compilation in 1941, this collection of collated files came to light in 2008. In that year, the widow of a distinguished Sarawak businessman, who had died in a tragic helicopter accident, cleared the family house prior to its sale. In the attic, she discovered a small, brown case containing this collection of files from earlier years in Sarawak, notably the era of rule by three successive members of the English family of Brooke, the so-called 'white Rajahs' (1842-1946), and a short period at the start of the succeeding era of British Colonial administration (1946-1962).

Made in Czechoslovakia

The small case bore a single external identifying sign, a gilt trademark to testify its origin in Czechoslovakia. The central European country of this name was formed in 1922 and, some seven decades later, in 1993 divided into two Republics, Czech and Slovak. The trademark therefore served to fix a 70-year time limit for the original manufacture of this small case, and also – with less certainty – some indication of the date of its importation into Sarawak.



Figure 1. The trademark of Czechoslovakia on the case containing these files. See centrefold for this image in colour.

The contents have proved to be a collection of dated documents, held in files from the Chief Secretary's office, and other offices of the Government of Sarawak while under Brooke rule.

Acknowledgement

The lady who found these files had no idea how they came into the possession of her deceased husband, who had never mentioned them. Knowing my involvement in research at the Sarawak Museum, and my wider interests in other matters in Sarawak, she handed the small case to me, and invited me to deal with its contents appropriately.

I take this opportunity to state my sincere thanks for this expression of confidence. The outcome is the appraisal in the following pages, finally completed in February, 2024.

* * * *

Civil life in Sarawak

The common theme of the filed documents concerned claims from Pengiran of Brunei, arising retrospectively from the accession and retention of additions to the territory of Sarawak, and later claims to agreed periodic payments. Also included were communications with, or from, the concurrent Sultan, in one case reflecting His Highness's concern for the egalitarian treatment of the holder of this office, all his property-owning subjects. Of related interest were inclusions that reflected the diversity of existence, at that time, among the people of Brunei and as experienced in Sarawak by officers in the service of the Rajah Brooke.

The Sarawak officers involved were, first and most frequently, the Chief Secretary. The holder of this office lived and worked at the capital Kuching but, in some cases, was also prepared to travel to other places for face-to-face meetings and discussions. For instance, in 1924, Chief Secretary J. C. Moulton, in Kuching, proposed by telegram to the Manager of the Brooketon colliery, in Muara Damit district, Brunei, that Sibü would be a convenient mid-distance point to which they could both travel by Government vessels, in order to meet for discussion of important matters (Chapter 8):

Can you use "*L' Aubaine*" to meet me Sibü any day next week to discuss details for immediate action

Secondly, contributing to the documents in these files were senior outstation officers (Residents) of the Fourth Division (at Miri) and Fifth Division (at Limbang). Also among documents in the files were messages from the Secretary for Native Affairs (*Setiausaha Hal Ehwal Bumi Putera*), stationed in Kuching. The work-load of these leading officers of the Brooke Government included advice on responses to the claims submitted by individual subjects of Brunei, many of whom belonged to the class of nobles with the hereditary title of *Pengiran*.

In several instances, the matter came to the attention of the Rajah, himself, or a family member (notably Tuan Muda, Rajah Vyner's brother Bertram Brooke, or, for a short time, Rajah Muda, Anthony Walter Dayrell Brooke, son of Bertram Brooke. In regal style, these members of the Brooke family tended to use red ink to add their remarks to the record.

* * *

The documents reviewed and abstracted

Internal evidence has confirmed that these files were collated in 1941 and deliberately selected to be stored together in a Roneo filing cabinet, and shipped to Limbang for safe-keeping. The review in the following pages²² is introduced by a brief history of Sarawak. The subsequent pages follow the chronology of the documents., and subsequent events, as recorded in these files.

The filed documents included communications between Sarawak of the Brooke era and the Royal Court of Brunei. A greater number of documents recorded interactions with Brunei subjects who currently, or in previous generations, possessed heritable property that was situated in outlying areas of Brunei suzerainty, with associated rights amounting to local self-governance. These properties were transferred to Brooke rule, at different times and under varying circumstances, and thereby became assimilated within a consolidated nation of Sarawak. The accompanying agreements entailed sequential periodic payments (annually or more frequently) to the vendors and frequently, by the nature of pre-existing commitments, also to the Ruler of Brunei Darussalam.

Large areas such as, in 1882, the Baram river with its tributaries, were added by formal agreements of cession concluded with the Sultan of Brunei. More

²² See note 19, above.

numerous, as illustrated by documents in these files, other agreements related to smaller places that were legitimately added to Sarawak territory by purchase from Brunei subjects. These property-owning Pengiran voluntarily – even, sometimes, eagerly – offered the Brooke Rajah the opportunity to purchase heritable rights to specified places within the traditional suzerainty of Brunei. Quantified examples of agreed commutation of existing periodic payments showed that contemporary opinion valued capital value at 10 times the annual income.

Also included in these files were examples of different aspects of official and social relations of expatriate officers of the Sarawak service, interacting with the Rajah or with each other, and – more significantly – with members (male or female) of the property-owning class of Brunei Pengiran, and other property-owners, with whom it was their job to deal fairly and equitably. Several Brunei Pengiran were trusted by the Resident with whom they had unofficial advisory roles (for instance Pengiran Sabtu, Chapter 13), and at least one non-noble official of the Brunei court (*Jawatan* Abu Bakar) was valued as an intermediary by Rajah Charles Brooke who, incautiously, pledged the assistance of his Government in future, in a variety of contingencies (Chapter 3).

Several documents in these files reflected this pledge made by Rajah Charles Brooke, to this particular Brunei official and his descendants. In response to the genuine pledge, during the rule of Rajah Sir C. Vyner Brooke, a claim was made later by the children of *Jawatan* Abu Bakar. Alarm was roused in Kuching, in respectn of the potential damage inherent in this pledge. Eventually, in exchange for the surrender of the original, handwritten document (now in this file – Plate 7), the Sarawak agent in London was asked to buy a gold watch and chain. These objects, traditional marks of high esteem in Britain, were shipped to Kuching and duly presented to the eldest son of the *Jawatan* (Chapter 3).

Copies of the original written pledge (*surat keterangan*) were circulated among related contacts. Someone in this circle of recipients contrived an imitation, with significant changes. This was used in fraudulent attempts to obtain payments from Rajah Vyner. This deceit was not successful (Chapter 5), but the attempts were evidence of the attitude of certain Brunei subjects towards the Brooke Rajahs, whom they saw as potential sources of funds at a time of financial pressures.

Petitions by hopeful Pengiran continued to be received (and filed, with the official responses) through the 1930s up to 1941. In the early years of World War II, preceding the Japanese invasion in 1942, the closure of the colliery and the 'extra-territorial' settlement Brooketon, at Muara Damit, Brunei, occupied much time and attention from officers of the Sarawak Government at all levels. (Chapter 8). The London agent himself (C. Willes Johnson) made the long journey to be present in negotiations, presumably to protect the interests of the Rajah as much as those of Sarawak. His intervention in discussions was welcomed by the Chief Secretary.

Finally revealed by these files was the solution decreed by Rajah Sir C. Vyner Brooke in 1941, to resolve persistent and repetitive petitions from Brunei Pengiran descended from Raja Muda Hashim. Members of this family were aggrieved by the disparities of wealth and status between themselves and the concurrent Rajah Brooke, which they interpreted (not unjustly) as the consequence of the award of the governance of Sarawak to James Brooke, originally proposed by their deceased ancestor. Imitating an initiative introduced in Brunei, the Rajah's solution was the creation of 'Political Pensions' in place of the existing obligatory payments for the acquisition of rights in these instances, and other comparable cases.

Influence on Colonial policies

The latest documents in these files originated in 1962, by which time expatriate officers of the Colonial regime had become aware of the agreements by which the Brooke Rajahs had achieved the enlargement of Sarawak as first awarded to James Brooke, and had subsequently sustained the right of governance over the enlarged territory. The new candidates, young officers of the British Colonial service, applied themselves to learning the languages and customs of the people of Sarawak. Their attitude was reflected in the documents added to this collection of files which, somehow, had safely been preserved during the Japanese occupation and brought back into use in the office of His Excellency, the Governor.

* * * *

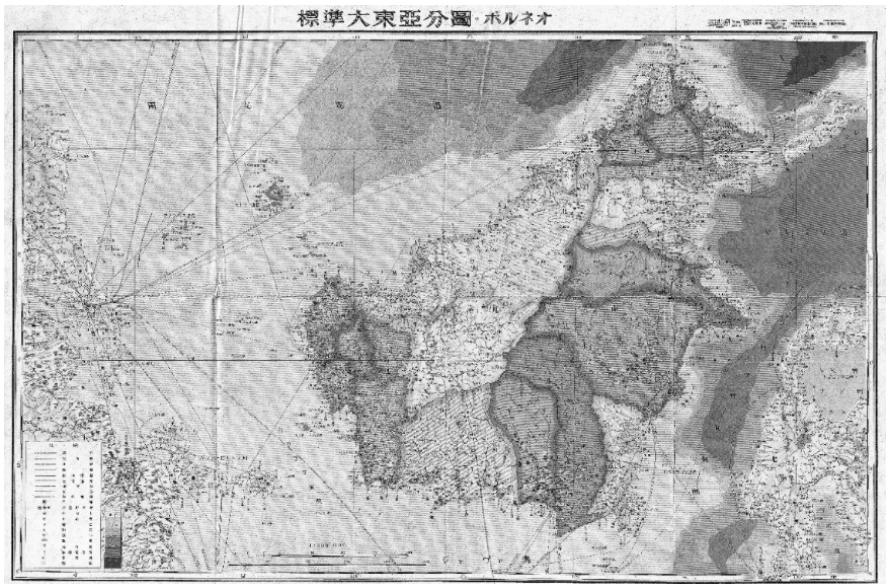


Figure 2. A Japanese map of Borneo dated 1942, a century after the original cession to James Brooke, showing Sarawak in pink, and the surrounding sea in different shades of blue, indicating depth. See centrefold for this image in colour.

After the departure of Sultan Tengah, the Sultanate of Brunei continued to exercise suzerainty over this region of northwestern Borneo. Matters changed significantly in 1841-42, when governance of the province of Sarawak, i.e., the river of that name, its inland tributaries, delta and the adjacent coast, was granted to James Brooke by the concurrent Ruler, Seri Paduka Duli Yang di-Pertuan Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin ibn Sultan Muhammad Jamulal Alam (1799-1852) (Plate 1). James Brooke thereby became the first of three members of this English family to rule Sarawak in succession, the so-called ‘White Rajahs’²³. In succession, these men were Rajah James Brooke, who died in 1868 and was followed by his nephew Rajah Charles; and, ultimately, on his death in 1917, by the son of Rajah

²³ The eldest daughter, Dayang Leonora Margaret married Kenneth Mackay, Earl of Inchcape; her younger sisters were Dayang Elizabeth, who married first (1935) the band-leader Harry Roy, and secondly (1947) Julian Richards Vidmer, and Dayang Nancy Valerie, an actress who died unmarried in 1993.

Charles, Charles Vyner de Windt Brooke²⁴, who became third and last Rajah. Rajah Vyner's three children were all female and thereby ineligible to succeed.

The grant of Sarawak to James Brooke and his successors

In the first instance, in 1841-42, the reigning Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin responded to the initiative of his appointee as Governor of the Sarawak province, Pengiran Bendahara of Brunei Darussalam, by title and name Pengiran Muda Hashim, who had personally made the offer to James Brooke. Pengiran Muda Hashim was a son of Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam and therefore the maternal uncle of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin. For the post in Sarawak, Hashim was promoted to the enhanced title of Raja Muda. It was by this name that he was known at the time of the first arrival of James Brooke, in 1839.

The era of Brooke rule commenced in 1842, was interrupted by the occupation by Japanese military forces from 1942 until 1945 and, ultimately, after liberation, ended in 1946 with the cession to Great Britain and the subsequent installation of the Colonial government. The initial award, signed in Brunei on 1st August, 1842, was in the form of a treaty and an agreement confirming the transfer of authority. This agreement required James Brooke to pay capital sums to the Sultan and other dignitaries, including Raja Muda Hashim. It also guaranteed future revenue payments to them and their heirs or successors.

These combined charges, as capital payments and assurances of future revenue, became the model for a series of purchases completed during the Brooke era. Following the first agreement in 1842, the territorial extent of the State of Sarawak under Brooke governance was progressively enlarged through a variety of transactions with one common feature: each was accompanied by payment. All may therefore be categorised as further purchases of territory and, with the purchase, the right to govern the land and the people residing there.

²⁴ Charles Vyner de Windt Brooke joined the Sarawak Service in 1897 and was appointed, in turn, as *aide-de-camp* to his father Rajah Charles, 1897-1898, District Officer, Simanggang 1898-1901, Resident, Mukah and Oya, 1902-1903, Resident Third Division 1903-1904, President of the Law Courts 1904-1911, vice-president of the Supreme and General Councils 1904-1911. He succeeded as Rajah upon the death of his father in 1917.



Figure 3. Seri Paduka Duli Yang di-Pertuan Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin ibn Sultan Muhammad Jamalul Alam (1799-1852), the Ruler of Brunei Darussalam who granted the governance of Sarawak to James Brooke. The extra digit on His Highness's right hand was a known feature, and was not concealed.²⁵ *Wikipedia*

A historian has written: "If James Brooke was the founder of Sarawak, then Charles Brooke was its builder".²⁶ This critical phase in the history of the State was achieved by consensus, in conformity with custom and the law of Brunei Darussalam. After the first award of the Sarawak river catchment and coast to James Brooke, the extension of the right of the Brookes to govern an expanding territory involved further capital purchases and sequential revenue payments. These sums were paid, sometimes to the Ruler or Government of Brunei Darussalam, but also, in many cases documented in these files, paid to individual Pengiran or their later heirs. In short, the right to govern Sarawak was progressively purchased by a variety of negotiated transactions, which were often followed by sequential revenue

²⁵ Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin succeeded his father Sultan Muhammad Jamalul Alam I, in 1804, as a minor. Until his majority, his great-uncle Pengiran Muda Muhammad Kanzul Alam acted as regent.

²⁶ Joan Rawlins (1969) *Sarawak 1839-1968*. London, Macmillan & Co., Ltd, p. 127.

payments. Cumulatively, during the Brooke era. These sums eventually amounted to a large recurrent charge on the Treasury of Sarawak.

Consolidation of Sarawak territory during the Brooke era

His initial appraisal gave James Brooke an optimistic confidence in the productivity of the land of Sarawak. He enlarged about the potential resources in correspondence²⁷:

The soil and productions of this country are of the richest description, and it is not too much to say that, within the same given space, there are not to be found the same mineral and vegetable riches in any land in the world.

The initial grant, agreed in 1841 and signed in Brunei in August, 1842, confirmed the rule of James Brooke in the catchment of the Sarawak river and adjacent coast. The territory under Brooke rule was subsequently enlarged by further transactions, generally described in Brooke records as 'cessions' of territory. New lands added to the original award of the Sarawak river and coast included other, larger river systems, but no change was made to the name of the State. The land ruled by the 'White Rajahs' therefore continued to be named after the comparatively small, branched river system in the south-west of their enlarged territory. The capital city and seat of Government remained at Kuching, within the tidal reach of the Sarawak river, where it had been established by Pengiran Indera Mahkota Muhammad Salleh and confirmed under Raja Muda Hashim.

The later additions to the territory of Sarawak were accompanied by the commitment to additional capital payments and, in most cases, subsequent recurrent income, payable to the Ruler or Government of Brunei, or to individuals (or families) of the Brunei vendors – in effect, lasting commitments equivalent to rent. For the accession of large areas, such as the catchment of a named river from mouth to interior headwaters (e.g., in 1882, the Baram river), the transaction involved the Sultan and Ruler of Brunei, from whom consent was obtained at an agreed price.²⁸ Attendant conditions included capital and sequential recurrent payments, due to the

²⁷ His letter to James Gardner; quoted by J. Walker (2005) *Ideologies of Authority: State and Society in Nineteenth-Century Sarawak. Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 18 (2): 151 -172.

²⁸ These transactions have been enumerated by Alex C. Castles (2003) *The constitutional and legal history of Sarawak: documents and commentaries* Vol 1. *Peoples' law making and Brooke rule*. Kuching, Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia Cawangan Sarawak.

Sultan, or his successor as Ruler (*Yang di-Pertuan*), in effect to the Government of Brunei. At one time, His Highness the Sultan also proposed others whom he considered should be entitled to payment.

As well as the large territorial additions negotiated with the Ruler or Government of Brunei, comparatively small but numerically and geographically significant gains were agreed with property-owning Brunei subjects who themselves (or their antecedents) had been granted enduring and heritable rights over places and peoples within the reach of Brunei sovereignty, by grants known as *tulin*. Characteristically, these lesser additions to the territory of Sarawak were also associated with capital awards to persons, and with assurances of additional recurrent payments in future. The fulfilment of these conditions became the subject of repeated claims, petitions, correspondence, or other documentary records preserved in these files. Without doubt, the formation of this archive confirmed the importance attached to these documents by Chief Secretary Moulton, in 1941. Instances have been abstracted and reviewed in the pages that follow.

Concern was aroused among authorities of Sarawak during the Brooke era by the perpetual and, implicitly, heritable nature of the annuities itemised by the treaty of 1842 and the accompanying agreement in the Malay language. The determination to be recognised, and to receive due monetary compensation, among the descendants of the two sons of Pengiran Muda Hashim, namely Pengiran Muda²⁹ Muhammad Tajudin and Pengiran Muda Besar Chuchu, was well documented in these files (Chapters 7 & 8).

²⁹ As noted above, the title *Pengiran Muda* is confined to the children of the concurrent or a previous Sultan of Brunei, their spouses and offspring.



Figure 4. Tombs of Brooke Rajahs and family members, in Shepstor churchyard, Devon. See centrefold for this image in colour.

Ultimately, in 1905 Sarawak reached the State's present extent (124,450 km²), almost equal to the area of England (130,279 km²), the country that remained the homeland of the Brooke family. All three Brooke Rajahs were honoured by the British monarch with British dignities³⁰. As well as sustaining the possession and governance of Sarawak, each Brooke Rajah also owned property in England. All were accustomed to return to this natal home from time to time, for leave or recreation, while not relaxing close attention to events in Sarawak. All three Rajahs finally retired to England

³⁰ James Brooke was appointed KCB, Knight Commander of the Bath, and Charles and C. Vyner Brooke were both awarded GCMG, Knight Commander of St Michael and St George. James Brooke did not marry, but Ranee Margaret, wife of Charles, and Ranee Sylvia, wife of Vyner, were both thereby titled Lady Brooke.

and, after death, all were interred in the graveyard of the church at Shepstor village in the county of Devon, southwestern England, where their monumental tombs are prominent memorials. (Plate 4).³¹

The petitions from later members of the family of descendants of Pengiran Muda Hashim, addressed to the third Rajah, Sir C. Vyner Brooke GCMG,³² were distinctive among documents preserved in these files. Also notable were documented arrangements with the families of other Pengiran who commuted their entitlement to a recurrent income, in exchange for a capital sum (Chapter 3), or volunteered to transfer their proprietorial rights (*tulin*) to the concurrent Rajah Brooke (as occurred collectively in Limbang: Chapter 12).

Internal evidence in these files has confirmed that it was the common theme of “Brunei Pengirans’ claims”, that prompted the collation of these documents in Kuching in 1941, and also the decision that they should be sent together, in a dedicated filing cabinet, for safe-keeping at the distant office of the Resident at Limbang (Chapter 14).

* * *

Constitutional independence of Sarawak

During the era of the Brooke Rajahs, Sarawak was an independent nation, recognised as such by USA in 1850. While cherishing independence, the Sarawak Government maintained good relations with the British colonial administration of the nearby Straits Settlements and Federated and Unfederated States of Malaya, together overseen by the British High Commissioner at Government House, Singapore. After the signature of a Treaty of Protection with Brunei in 1888, the High Commissioner’s complement included the appointed British Resident, Brunei, whose office and residence were in the British colony, Labuan Island, a short sea journey from Brunei. His nearest Sarawak counterpart (and frequent correspondent) was the Sarawak officer, the Resident of the Fifth Division, whose office, after annexation of the district in 1890, was situated at Limbang, in the

³¹ Nearby Burrator House, in Devon county, was formerly the property of Rajah Brooke, and is now owned by the Brooke Heritage Trust -- www.brooketrust.org.

³² The Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, sometimes transcribed phonetically in Jawi letters as ‘Ji Si Em Ji’.

north-eastern extremity of Sarawak, a short boat-journey from Labuan island or from Brunei port and city.³³

The Rajah of Sarawak also engaged an Agent in London, with an office at Millbank, London S W 1, close to Whitehall and the Houses of Parliament, the centre of Government of the United Kingdom. Several senior officers of the Brooke administration in Sarawak continued in service after retirement, as London Agent, where their experience was valued.

At one stage, the Chief Secretary of Sarawak (J.C. Moulton) threatened to bypass the usual route of communication involving the British High Commissioner at Singapore, and use the Sarawak Agency at Millbank to make a direct approach to the Colonial Office, in London. This drastic measure was not put into practice, but the London Agent undoubtedly had wide responsibilities that were not subject to the authority of the Chief Secretary. Thus, in 1941, when it was decided in Kuching to surrender the colliery and town at Brooketon, Muara Damit district, Brunei, the Agent, C. Willes Johnson, undertook the long journey from London to be present and to safeguard the overall interests of Sarawak (Chapter 8).

During his time in Sarawak, the Agent's assistance was solicited. For instance, on 20th October, 1924, the Chief Secretary wrote to the Astana, Kuching, where Mr Willes Johnson, was staying:

Dear Johnson

When you go to Brooketon will you raise the question of employing Harris (now at Brooketon) as engineer at Sadong on his return from leave?

* * *

These events took place before Sarawak was invaded by Japanese armed forces early in 1942; and occupied until 1945. After liberation by combined allied powers, in 1946 the third and last Rajah, Sir C. Vyner Brooke GCMG, ceded the country to the British Crown. Thus, Sarawak, with neighbouring Sabah, became the final British colonies in South-east Asia. Subsequently, the territorial bounds of Sarawak remained unaltered through the period of Colonial rule (1946-1963). Since 1963, still unchanged in extent, Sarawak has been united with other States (and three Federal Territories) that together form the constitutional monarchy of Malaysia.

³³ Now known as Bandar Seri Begawan.

During the period of their independent rule, the Brooke Rajahs decreed constitutional and administrative entities of a democratic kind, some of which have remained functional in the present Malaysian State. For instance, the antecedents of the present Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (*Dewan Undangan Negeri*) can be traced back, through unbroken existence, to the formation of the State Council (*Council Negri*)³⁴ by decree of the first Rajah of Sarawak, Sir James Brooke KCB, in 1865. A quarter of a century previously, in 1839, the arrival at Sarawak of the same James Brooke precipitated a permanent change in the governance of this region of north-west Borneo.

The arrival of James Brooke

The son of Thomas Brooke of the (British) East India Company's civil service, James was born at Benares (now Varanasi), India, in 1802. As a young adult, James Brooke was also employed for a while in the service of the East India Company (1819-1825), but he was wounded in military action and invalided to Britain.

On the death of his father in 1835, James was bequeathed a substantial fortune³⁵. He purchased an armed schooner, *Royalist*, and with a British crew sailed to the East. Received in the burgeoning colony of Singapore³⁶, James Brooke was commissioned by the Governor, together with the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, to convey a letter and suitable gifts, to be presented, as thanks for the humane treatment of shipwrecked English sailors, to Raja Muda Hashim, known to be the representative of the Brunei Government in Sarawak.³⁷

Having completed preparations, on 27th July, 1839, James Brooke departed from Singapore in *Royalist*, and headed eastwards to the poorly-charted northwest coast of Borneo. Opposite the promontory Tanjung Datu – the westernmost point of Borneo – he turned eastwards to follow the coast until, on 11th August, 1839, he reached the Santubong mouth of the Sarawak river.

³⁴ For a biography of James Brooke before coming to Sarawak, see S. Baring-Gould & C.A. Bampfylde (1989). *A history of Sarawak under its two White Rajahs 1839-1908*. London, Henry Sotheran & Co.

³⁵ Mr Thomas Brooke died in 1835, leaving his son James the sum of £30,000. See Baring-Gould & Bampfylde (*op. cit.*, above)

³⁶ Singapore had been founded in 1819, when Stamford Raffles established a trading settlement on the island.

³⁷ See Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, *op. cit.*, p. 62.