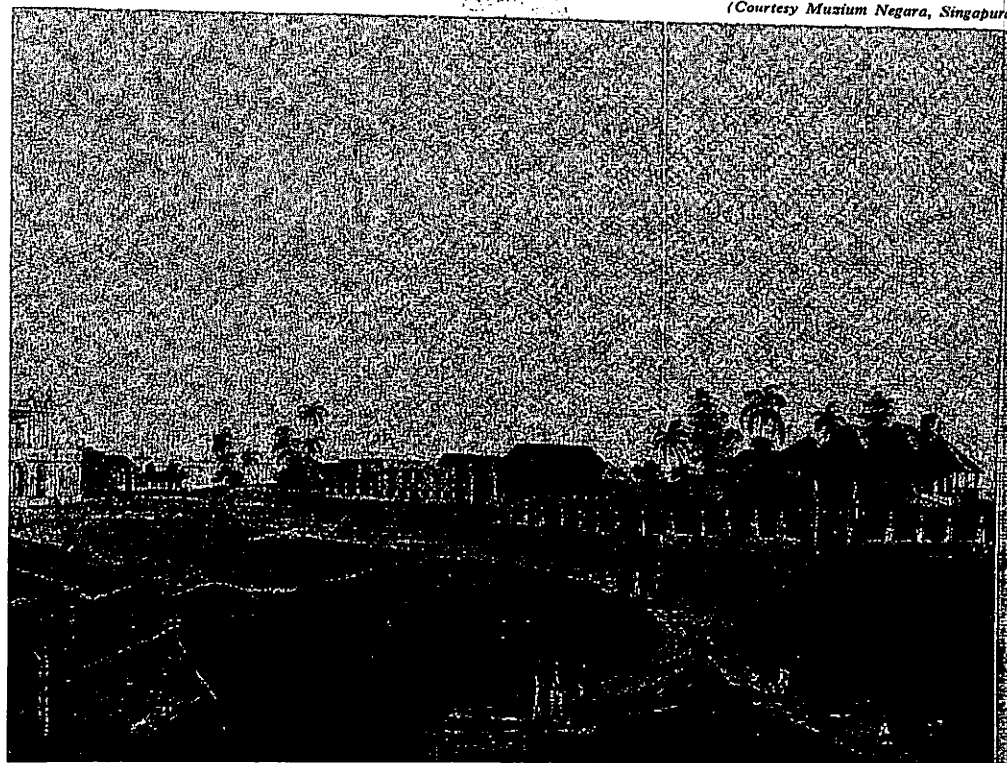


Two views of Fort Marlborough from aquatints dated 1799,
(above) The South Front, and (below) Government House and Council House

(Courtesy Muzium Negara, Singapura)



THE BRITISH IN WEST SUMATRA (1685-1825)

*A selection of documents, mainly from the East India
Company records preserved in the India Office Library,
Commonwealth Relations Office, London.*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

by

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x/11, 208

Topazes³⁸ were reinforced by a number of young soldiers sent out direct from England. Most of them appear to have succumbed either to disease or the rigours of a dissipated life. Sickness—probably in the form of malaria—so reduced their ranks at the time of the initial settlement that the military force defending Benkulen numbered no more than eleven British and nineteen Topazes, of whom not more than eleven were able to hold a musket. These men naturally showed some reluctance to face the two or three hundred Indonesian troops who had been sent by the Sultan of Bantam to reassert his claims to the Benkulen-Silebar region.³⁹ In this, and later precarious situations, the British authorities decided against arming the local people, 'for being such perfidious people as by daily experience wee find them to be wee should only furnish them with arms to do ourselves an injury'.⁴⁰ This proved to be a wise decision in the event, as the Indonesians actually made sorties against the British stronghold during the 1690s, and even captured Fort Marlborough in 1719, driving the British into the sea.⁴¹

With an eye to limiting expenses, the home authorities suggested that slaves from Madagascar might be enlisted for military service. 'They would', the Directors wrote, 'maintain the ballance in case of need against an enemy, they being as much strangers to ye Sumatrans as they are to us, and wee suppose five of them will not cost us so much to maintain as one English soldier: soe that if upon consideration you find [it] convenient you may encourage some of them to keep garde and watche in their courses at convenient places there and under such officers as you shall appoint them, with lances, darts and swords and other weapons of India, but teach them not ye use of firearms.'⁴² The instructions were repeated in a later despatch: 'Some of ye blacks that speak English if in want of soldiers you may arme and may make them keep garde to ease your English soldiers; but trust them not too much; neither ever arm or exercise of them above 10 of them to 30 English soldiers, and in an especiall manner we require you not to give any of

³⁸ According to the definition given by H. Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (London, 1903), 933, a *Topax* or *Topass* was a name 'used in the 17th and 18th centuries for dark-skinned or half-caste claimants of Portuguese descent, and Christian profession. Its application is generally, though not universally, to soldiers of this class.' Cf. C. R. Boxer, 'The Topasses of Timor', *MKVII*, LXIII, *Afd. Volk.* 24 (1947), 1.

³⁹ Doc. 9.

⁴⁰ Wright and Reid, *Malay Peninsula*, 37.

⁴¹ A. Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies* (ed. Sir W. Foster) (London, 1930), II, 183; Danvers, *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, I, 421; Marsden, *History*, 452n.

⁴² Wright and Reid, *Malay Peninsula*, 37.

your soldiers any arrack or brandy by weekly allowances, but by a stewart one dram at a time, three times as ye think best in each day for which they are to allow out of their pay (since wee have so great increased their wages) as they are for all other clothes and provisions which ye shall spare them.'⁴³ The slaves, however, proved themselves to be poor soldiers, so that the main military force continued to be drawn from the ranks of the Sepoys and British in India. Later in the eighteenth century the newly arrived Bugis people were armed, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century they constituted a most important, if somewhat independent part of the Benkulen military establishment.

IV

For the British soldiers and officials life at Benkulen during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was generally brutish and short. The Bombay proverb that two monsoons were the life of a man applied with even fewer exceptions in west Sumatra. 'All our Servants are Sick & dead', Benjamin Bloome and Joshua Charlton lamented in October 1685, '& at this Minute [there is] not a Cooke to gett victualls ready for those that Sett at the Comp^{as} table, and Such have been our straites y^t wee many times have fasted. Ye Sick lyes Neglected, some cry for remedies but none [are] to bee had: those that could eate have none to Cooke y^m victualls, soe y^t . . . ye one dies for hunger & y^e other for want of Remedies, soe y^t wee now have not liveing to bury y^e dead, & if one is sick y^e other will not watch, for hee Sayes that better one [than] two dies, Soe that people dies & noe notice [is] taken thereof.'⁴⁴

For those who were fortunate enough to survive the attacks of malaria and dysentery the actual living conditions were far from pleasant. Food was scarce and, therefore, expensive,⁴⁵ and as labour costs were high,⁴⁶ a long time elapsed before satisfactory accommodation was able to be provided for all members of the settlement. There were, moreover, few of the diversions in west Sumatra which made factory life in India at this period bearable. The west coast afforded few opportunities for travel, and even in the middle of the eighteenth century when this became to a certain extent obligatory by the Directors' injunctions that annual surveys of the country districts were to be made, journeys into

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Doc. 1. Cf. Wright and Reid, *Malay Peninsula*, 30.

⁴⁵ Doc. 1.

⁴⁶ Doc. 1.

the hinterland were never much enjoyed. William Marsden, who served in the secretariat at Fort Marlborough during the 1770s, could, in a sense of fun, pen the following verses when his brother was absent on such a survey:⁴⁷

*Through what rude deserts you have been,
Thick woods and torrents too, I ween;
How many monsters have you seen,⁴⁸
so frightful!*

*And then how strange, at night opprest
By toil, with songs you're lull'd to rest;
Of rural goddesses⁴⁹ the guest
delightful!*

But for the officials who had to perform these journeys for weeks on end through wild and difficult country there was little in them which afforded much pleasure. 'It is a very fatiguing and hazardous undertaking', the Fort Marlborough government wrote in November 1731 in reply to a request of the Directors that more Europeans should be employed in the work of surveying the plantations, ' . . . there being very few return but have severe sickness after it, & several have died.'⁵⁰ It was not until the very end of the British period in west Sumatra that Englishmen undertook journeys into the interior of the country for pleasure alone.⁵¹

In the narrow and confined circle of Benkulen society, quarrels were both inevitable and frequent. In 1690 there was a typical occurrence involving a junior military officer, who, 'after supper being heard a little louder than ordinary and somewhat lavish and prodigal in his tongue . . . he was commanded to be silent, but instead of obeying he came

⁴⁷ W. Marsden, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late William Marsden* . . . (London, 1838), 14.

⁴⁸ Marsden's note (*ibid.*, 14): 'Such as wild elephants and tigers, with occasionally a *tapir* and rhinoceros.'

⁴⁹ Marsden's note (*ibid.*, 14): 'The place of nightly repose on the surveys, is the public hall of the village, a part of which is divided off by a curtain for the purpose. On the outside of this the unmarried daughters of the principal inhabitants (termed *gadés* [*gadís*, Sum. a maiden = *anak dara* Mal.] or virgins, in the language of the country, but by Europeans goddesses) take their places, and soothe, or disturb, the rest of the wearied stranger with unceasing melodies till day-break.' See also Marsden, *History*, 140, 266-8.

⁵⁰ *SFR*, 8 (Doc. 39). Cf. also Fort Marlborough to Court, 30 October 1732 (*SFR*, 8) stating that only one European was able to be spared for survey work during the past season, and since he returned he has been very ill.

⁵¹ Marsden, *History*, 304ff; S. Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* . . . (London, 1830), 313ff.

up to ye head of ye table and daming ye chiefe and all present and declaring he wore a sword with abundance of insolent, disrespectful, saucy language so much used by him to be tedious by repetition upon which he was forbid ye Honble Company's table'.⁵² To judge from Captain Thomas Otho Travers' observations on Benkulen, there was little change in the social situation during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Fort Marlborough, he wrote in April 1819, 'without exception, is the most unpleasantly circumstanced place with respect to society I ever knew. In limited circles such as here, petty feuds generally exist but here we have greater annoyances. The younger part of society [is] in one continued state of warfare with Government.'⁵³

The presence of European women doubtless would have had a salutary effect in easing such tensions, but there were none at first, and at no time during the eighteenth century did they constitute more than a sprinkling of the total population. The feminine part of Benkulen society did not impress Governor Collet when he arrived on the west coast in 1712: 'And for the Ladies I'll tell you in what Condition we are. There are but 5 White things in Petticoats upon the Coast, one I am sending away with her husband, tho' she petitions to stay behind in the Quality of Nurse alias Bawd. Another is sent away by her husband with my consent because she is so free of Tongue, Tale and Hands that the poor man can't live in quiet with her. A third is non-compos and actually confin'd to a Dark room and straw. A 4th is really a good Wife and a modest Woman but the malicious say, that her person never provok'd any one yet to ask her the question. The 5th is a young Widow suppos'd to have a little money, of the rt. St. Helena breed, as well shap'd as a Madagascar Cow,—and so much for Women.'⁵⁴ Apparently the situation did not improve much during the course of the century, for in 1801 an American visitor to the west coast observed in his *Journal*: 'Bencoolen boasts but one European Lady, Mrs. Waters—and if the breath of slander has not done her more than common injustice, she adds little to the morals or respectability of the place.'⁵⁵

The lack of European women meant that the British in west Sumatra followed the early example of their compatriots on the Indian-subcontinent and formed connexions with the local people. Contrary to the

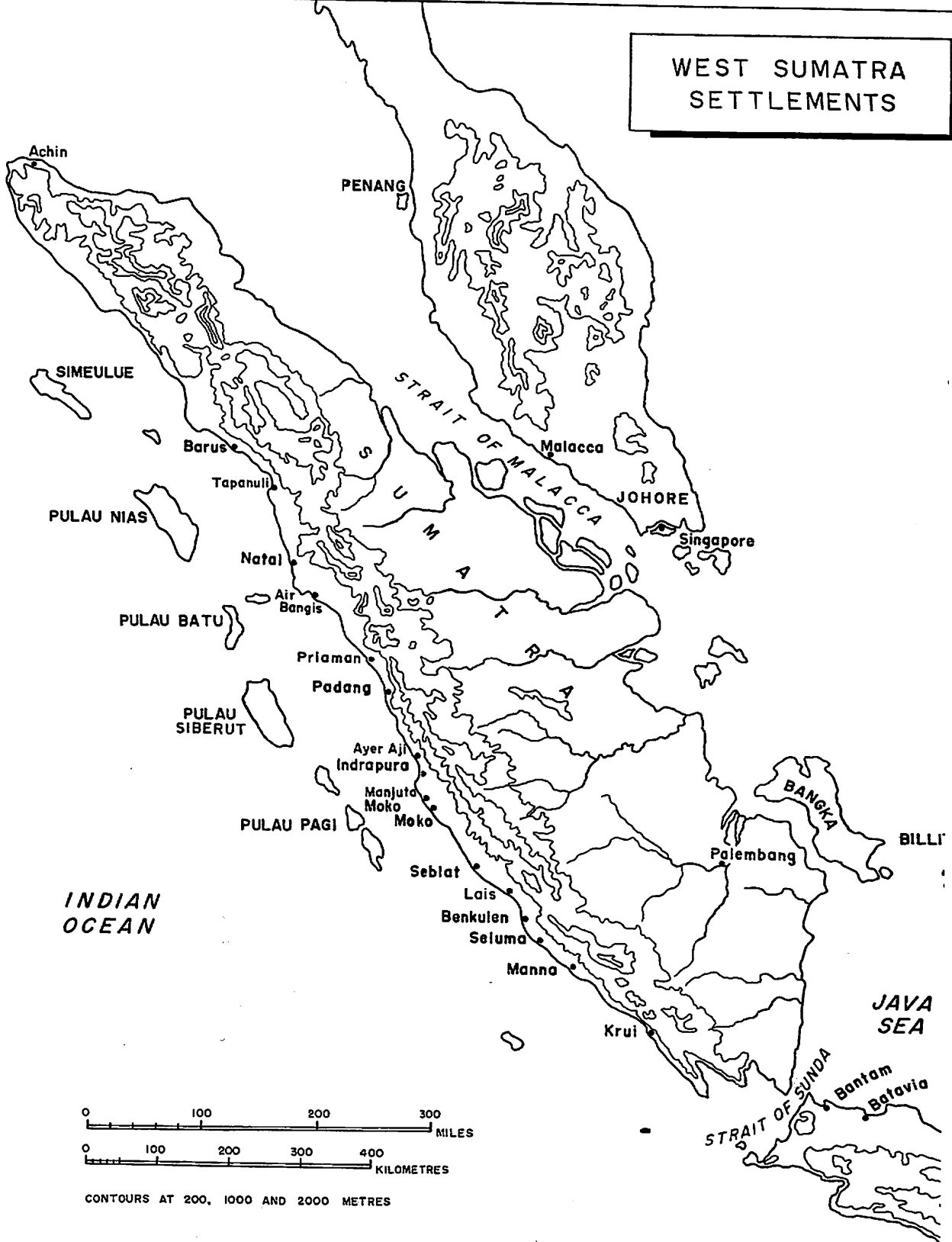
⁵² Wright and Reid, *Malay Peninsula*, 34.

⁵³ *Journal of Thomas Otho Travers 1813-1820* (ed. J. Bastin) (Memoirs of the Raffles Museum, No. 4, Singapore, 1957), 122.

⁵⁴ *The Private Letter Books of Joseph Collet* (ed. H. H. Dodwell) (London, 1933), 33.

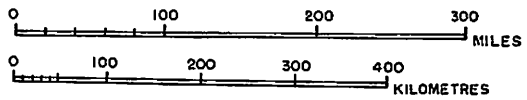
⁵⁵ *Journal of Dudley Leavitt Pickman 1799/1804* (in MSS. Peabody Museum, Salem, U.S.A. Cat. No. 656/1799B).

WEST SUMATRA
SETTLEMENTS



INDIAN OCEAN

JAVA SEA



CONTOURS AT 200, 1000 AND 2000 METRES

BENKULEN RESIDENCY

