

X. *An Account of the Island of Sumatra, &c. By Mr. Charles Miller. Communicated by Edward King, Esq.*

TO EDWARD KING, ESQ.

DEAR SIR,

Bedford-row,
December 12, 1777.

Read Jan. 29, 1778. THE attention which has been paid by the learned world to the accounts lately published of the islands of the South-sea, has led me to think, that the inclosed account of the island of Sumatra, particularly of some of its interior parts, together with that of the neighbouring island of Enganho, might not be wholly unacceptable.

It is compiled from several letters of MR. CHARLES MILLER (son of the late botanic gardener) now in the service of the East India Company at Sumatra; and, as they were addressed to different friends, without the most distant idea of their contents being communicated beyond that circle, allowance must be made for inaccuracies of style and want of connection; for I was unwilling to attempt to supply any thing that seemed wanting, judging

judging that authentic information is more valuable than the best wrought tale.

If you think this paper contains any thing likely to afford either information or amusement to the Royal Society, you will do me the honour to present it.

I am, &c.

J O H N F R E R E.

Extracts from several letters from Mr. CHARLES MILLER (son of the late botanic gardener) now settled at Fort Malbro' near Bencoolen; giving some account of that place, of the interior parts of Sumatra, and of a neighbouring island never known to have been visited by any European.

FORT MALBRO' is situated about a mile and a half to the South of the Malay town [Bencoolen] where the company formerly had their factory; but removed from thence about the year 1710, on account of the unhealthiness of the place.

The fort, from which the settlement takes its name, still remains in the same state in which the French left it in

in 1761; when, after taking the place, they thought it not worth keeping, and accordingly blew up the bastions, and deserted the settlement.

The houses here are, almost all, built, cieled, roofed, and floored, with a kind of reed called bamboo, and thatched with the leaves of the sage-tree, and would all be called cottages in England, making a very mean appearance. They are placed in no kind of order; most of them are raised from the ground on wood or brick pillars six or eight feet high; within they are not much unlike a set of rooms in a college, as they consist of one large room called a hall, out of which two doors lead, the one to a bed-room, and the other to an office or study.

The climate is far from being so disagreeably hot as it is represented to be, or as one might expect from our vicinity to the line; the thermometer (of which I have kept a journal for a year past) is never lower in a morning at six than 69° , or higher than 76° . At noon it varies from 79° to 88° ; and at eight P. M. from 73° to 78° or 80° . I have once only seen it at 90° , and in the Batta country, immediately under the line, I have seen it frequently at six A. M. as low as 61° . We have always a sea-breeze, which sets in at about nine o'clock, and continues to Sun-set, and is generally pretty fresh: this tempers the heat so much, that I have never been incommoded

moded by it (even in the midst of the day) so much as I have frequently been on a summer's day in England. Rain is very frequent here; sometimes very heavy, and almost always attended with thunder and lightning. Earthquakes are not uncommon; we have had one in particular, since my arrival, which was very violent, and did much damage in the country. There are several volcanos on the island; one within sight of Malbro', which almost constantly emits smoke, and, at the time of the earthquake, emitted fire.

The English settled here (exclusive of the military) are between seventy and eighty, of which about fifty are at Malbro'. They live full as freely as in England, and yet we have lost but one gentleman during the last six months; a proof that this climate is not very unhealthy.

The people who inhabit the coast are Malays, who came hither from the peninsula of Malacca: but the interior parts are inhabited by a very different people, and who have hitherto had no connexion with the Europeans. Their language and character differ much from those of the Malays, the latter using the Arabic character; but all the interior nations which I have visited, though they differ from one another in language, use the same character.

The people between the districts of the English company, and those of the Dutch at Palimban on the other side the island, write on long narrow slips of the bark of a tree, with a piece of bamboo; they begin at the bottom, and write from the left-hand to the right, which I think is contrary to the custom of all other Eastern nations.

This country is very hilly, and the access to it exceedingly difficult, there being no possibility of a horse going over the hills. I was obliged to walk the whole way, and in many places bare-foot, on account of the steepness of the precipices. The inhabitants are a free people, and live in small villages called Doofsans, independant of each other, and governed each by its own chief [Doopattee]. All of them have laws, some written ones, by which they punish offenders, and terminate disputes. They have almost all of them, particularly the women, large swellings in the throat, some nearly as big as a man's head, but in general as big as an ostrich's egg, like the goitres of the Alps. It is by them said to be owing to their drinking a cold white water; I fancy it must be some mineral water they mean. Near their country is a volcano: it is very mountainous, and abounds with sulphur; and I dare say with metals too, though no mines are worked here. If this distemper be produced here by this cause, perhaps in the Alpine countries it may take

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its origin from a similar one, and not, as has been imagined, from snow-water: certain it is, there is no snow here to occasion it. In almost all the central parts from Moco-moco northwards, they find gold and some iron; but this distemper is unknown there. I have met here with a rivulet of a strong sulphurated water, which was so hot a quarter of a mile below its source, that I could not walk across it.

The country called the *Caffia* country lies in latitude 1° N. inland of our settlement of *Tappanooly*: it is well inhabited by a people called *Battas*, who differ from all the other inhabitants of Sumatra in language, manners, and customs. They have no religious worship, but have some confused idea of three superior beings; two of which are of a benign nature; and the third an evil genius, whom they stile *Murgiso*, and to whom they use some kind of incantation to prevent his doing them hurt. They seem to think their ancestors are a kind of superior beings, attendant always upon them. They have no king, but live in villages [*Compongs*] absolutely independant of each other, and perpetually at war with one another: their villages they fortify very strongly with double fences of camphire plank pointed, and placed with their points projecting outwards, and between these fences they put pieces of bamboo, hardened by fire, and

likewise pointed, which are concealed by the grass, but will run quite through a man's foot. Without these fences they plant a prickly species of bamboo, which soon forms an impenetrable hedge. They never stir out of these Compongs unarmed; their arms are match-lock guns, which, as well as the powder, are made in the country, and spears with long iron heads. They do not fight in an open manner, but way-lay and shoot or take prisoner single people in the woods or paddy-fields. These prisoners, if they happen to be the people who have given the offence, they put to death and eat, and their skulls they hang up as trophies in the houses where the unmarried men and boys eat and sleep. They allow of polygamy: a man may purchase as many wives as he pleases; but their number seldom exceeds eight. They have no marriage ceremony; but, when the purchase is agreed on by the father, the man kills a buffalo or a horse, invites as many people as he can; and he and the woman sit and eat together before the whole company, and are afterwards considered as man and wife. If afterwards the man chuses to part with his wife, he sends her back to her relations with all her trinkets, but they keep the purchase-money; if the wife dislikes her husband, her relations must repay double the purchase-money.

A man detected in adultery is punished with death, and the body eaten by the offended party and his friends:

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the woman becomes the slave of her husband, and is rendered infamous by cutting off her hair. Public theft is also punished with death, and the body eaten. All their wives live in the same house with the husband, and the houses have no partition; but each wife has her separate fire-place.

Girls and unmarried women wear six or eight large rings of thick brass wire about their neck, and great numbers of tin rings in their ears; but all these ornaments are laid aside when they marry.

They often preserve the dead bodies of their Radjas (by which name they call every freeman that has property, of which there are sometimes one, sometimes more, in one Compong, and the rest are vassals) for three months and upwards before they bury them: this they continue to do by putting the body into a coffin well caulked with dammar (a kind of rezin): they place the coffin in the upper part of the house, and having made a hole at the bottom, fit thereto a piece of bamboo, which reaches quite through the house, and three or four feet into the ground: this serves to convey all putrid moisture from the corpse without occasioning any smell. They seem to have great ceremonies at these funerals; but they would not allow me to see them. I saw several figures dressed up like men, and heard a kind of singing

and dancing all night before the body was interred: they also fired a great many guns. At these funerals they kill a great many buffaloes; every Radja, for a considerable distance, brings a buffalo and kills it at the grave of the deceased, sometimes even a year after his interment; we assisted at the ceremony of killing the 106th buffalo at a radja's grave.

The Battas have abundance of black cattle, buffaloes, and horses, all which they eat. They also have great quantities of small black dogs, with erect pointed ears, which they fatten and eat. Rats and all sorts of wild animals, whether killed by them or found dead, they eat indifferently. Man's flesh may rather be said to be eaten *in terrorem*, than to be their common food; yet they prefer it to all others, and speak with peculiar raptures of the soles of the feet and palms of the hands. They expressed much surprize on being informed that white people did not kill, much less eat, their prisoners.

These people, though cannibals, received me with great hospitality and civility; and though it was thought very dangerous for any European to venture among them, as they are a warlike people, and extremely jealous of strangers; yet I took only six Malays as a guard, but was escorted from place to place by thirty, forty, and sometimes

sometimes one hundred of the natives, armed with match-lock guns and matches burning.

It is from this country that most of the cassia sent to Europe is procured; and I went there in hopes of finding the cinnamon, but without success. The cassia tree grows to fifty or sixty feet, with a stem of about two feet diameter, with a beautiful regular spreading head; its flowers or fruit I could not then see, and the country people have a notion that it produces neither.

Camphire and Benjamin trees are in this country in great abundance; the former grows to the size of our largest oaks, and is the common timber in use: I have seen trees near one hundred feet high. Its leaves are acuminate and very different from the camphire tree seen in the botanic gardens, which is the tree from which the Japanese procure their camphire by a chemical process; whereas in these trees the camphire is found native in a concrete form. Native camphire sells here at upwards of 200*£.* per Cwt. to carry to China; what the Chinese do to it, I cannot say; but, though they purchase it at 250*£.* or 300*£.* they sell it again for Europe at about a quarter of the money. I have never been able to see the flower of the camphire tree; some abortive fruit I have frequently found under the trees, they are in a cup, like an

acorn, but the *lacinie calycis* are four or five times longer than the seed.

I have taken other journeys into different parts of the interior country, never before visited by any Europeans. These journeys were performed on foot, through such roads, swamps, &c. as were to appearance almost impasseable. I have been hitherto so fortunate as to meet with no obstruction from the natives; but, on the contrary, have been hospitably received every where. Almost all the country has been covered with thick woods of trees mostly new and undescribed, and is not one-hundredth part inhabited.

It is amazing how poor the *Fauna* of this country is, particularly in the *mammalia* and *aves*. We have abundance of the *simia gibbon* of BUFFON: they are quite black, about three feet high, and their arms reach to the ground when they stand erect; they walk on their hind legs only, but I believe very rarely come down to the ground. I have seen hundreds of them together on the tops of high trees. We have several other species of the *simia* also; but one seldom sees them but at a great distance. The *oerang oatan*, or wild-man (for that is the meaning of the words) I have heard much talk of, but never seen; nor can I find any of the natives here that have seen it. The tiger is to be heard of in almost every

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part of this island: I have never seen one yet, though I have frequently heard them when I have slept in the woods, and often seen the marks of their feet. They annually destroy near one hundred people in the country where the pepper is planted; yet the people are so infatuated that they seldom kill them, having a notion that they are animated by the souls of their ancestors.

Of tiger-cats we have two or three sorts; elephants, rhinoceros, elks, one or two other kind of deer, buffaloes, two or three sorts of mustelæ, porcupines, and the small hog-deer, almost compleat the catalogue of our *mammalia*.

Birds I have seen very few indeed, and very few species of insects. Ants, of twenty or thirty kinds, abound here so much as to make it almost impossible to preserve birds or insects. I have frequently attempted it, but in vain.

I have met with one instance, and one only, of a stratum of fossil shells. I had some notion that it was an observation (of CONDAMINE's I think) that no such thing was to be found between the tropics.

The island of Enganho, though situated only about ninety miles to the Southward of Malbro', was so little known, on account of the terrible rocks and breakers which entirely surround it, that it was even doubtful

whether it was inhabited: to this island I have made a voyage. With great difficulty and danger we beat up the whole South-west side of it, without finding any place where we could attempt to land; and we lost two anchors, and had very near suffered shipwreck before we found a secure place into which we might run the vessel. At last, however, we discovered a spacious harbour at the South-east end of the island, and I immediately went into it in the boat, and ordered the vessel to follow me as soon as possible, for it was then a dead calm. We rowed directly into this bay; and as soon as we had got round the points of an island which lay off the harbour, we discovered all the beach covered with naked savages, who were all armed with lances and clubs; and twelve canoes full of them, who, till we had passed them, had lain concealed, immediately rushed out upon me, making a horrid noise: this, you may suppose, alarmed us greatly; and as I had only one European and four black soldiers, besides the four lascars that rowed the boat, I thought it best to return, if possible, under the guns of the vessel, before I ventured to speak with them. In case we were attacked, I ordered the seapoys to reserve their fire till they could be sure their balls would take effect; and then to take advantage of the confusion our firing would throw the savages into, and attack them, if possible, with their

bayonets. The canoes, however, after having pursued for a mile, or a mile and a half, luckily stopped a little to consult together, which gave us an opportunity to escape them, as they did not care to pursue us out to sea. The same afternoon the vessel came to an anchor in the bay, and we were presently visited by fifty or sixty canoes full of people. They paddled round the vessel, and called to us in a language which nobody on board understood, though I had people with me who understood the languages spoken on all the other islands. They seemed to look at every thing about the vessel very attentively; but more from the motive of pilfering than from curiosity, for they watched an opportunity and unshipped the rudder of the boat, and paddled away with it. I fired a musquet over their heads, the noise of which frightened them so, that all of them immediately leaped into the sea, but soon recovered themselves and paddled off.

They are a tall, well-made people; the men in general about five feet eight or ten inches high; the women shorter and more clumsily built. They are of a red colour, and have straight, black hair, which the men cut short, but the women let grow long, and roll up in a circle on the top of their heads very neatly. The men go entirely naked, and the women wear nothing more than a very narrow slip of plantain leaf. The men

always go armed with six or eight lances, made of the wood of the cabbage-tree, which is extremely hard; they are about six feet long, and topped with the large bones of fish sharpened and barbed, or with a piece of bamboo hardened in the fire, very sharp-pointed, and its concave part armed with the jaw bones and teeth of fish, so that it would be almost impossible to extract them from a wound. They have no iron or other metal that I could see, yet they build very neat canoes; they are formed of two thin boards sewed together, and the seam filled with a resinous substance. They are about ten feet long, and about a foot broad, and have an outrigger on each side, to prevent their over-setting. They split trees into boards with stone wedges.

Their houses are circular, supported on ten or twelve iron-wood sticks about six feet long: they are neatly floored with plank, and the roof rises immediately from the floor in a conical form, so as to resemble a straw beehive; their diameter is not above eight feet.

These people have no rice, fowls, or cattle, of any kind: they seem to live upon cocoa-nuts, sweet potatoes, and sugar-canies. They catch fish, and dry them in the smoke; these fish they either strike with their lances, or catch in a drawing net, of which they make very neat ones.

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They do not chew betel, a custom which prevails universally among the Eastern nations.

I went on shore the day after the vessel anchored in the bay, hoping to be able to see something of the country, and to meet with some of the chiefs. I saw a few houses near the beach, and went towards them; but the natives flocked down to the beach, to the number of sixty or seventy men, well armed with their lances, &c. and put themselves in our way; yet, when we approached them, they retreated slowly, making some few threatening gestures. I then ordered my companions to halt and to be well on their guard, and went alone towards them: they permitted me to come amongst them, and I gave them some knives, pieces of cloth, and looking-glasses, with all which they seemed well pleased, and allowed me to take from them their lances, &c. and give them to my servant, whom I called to take them. Finding them to behave civilly, I made signs that I wanted to go to their houses and eat with them; they immediately sent people who brought me cocoa-nuts, but did not seem to approve of my going to their houses: however, I determined to venture thither, and seeing a path leading towards them, I went forward attended by about twenty of them, who, as soon as we had got behind some trees, which prevented my people seeing us, began to lay violent hands

on my cloaths, and endeavour to pull them off; but having a small hanger, I drew it, and, making a stroke at the most officious of them, retreated as fast as possible to the beach. Soon after we heard the sound of a conch-shell; upon which all the people retired, with all possible expedition, to a party of about two hundred, who were assembled at about a mile distance. It was now near Sun-set, and we were near a mile from our boat; and, as I was apprehensive we might be way-laid in our return if we staid longer, I ordered my people to return with all possible speed; but first went to the houses the natives had abandoned, and found them stripped of every thing; so that I suppose this party had been amusing us while others had been employed in removing their wives, children, &c. into the woods. I intended to have attempted another day to have penetrated into the country, and had prepared my people for it; but the inconsiderate resentment of an officer, who was sent with me, rendered my scheme abortive. He had been in the boat to some of the natives who had waded out on a reef of rocks and called to us; they had brought some cocoanuts, for which he gave them pieces of cloth: one of them seeing his hanger lying beside him in the boat, snatched it and ran away; upon which he fired upon them, and pursued them to some of their houses, which,

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finding empty, he burnt. This set the whole country in alarm; conch-shells were sounded all over the bay, and in the morning we saw great multitudes of people assembled in different places, making use of threatening gestures; so that finding it would be unsafe to venture among them again, as, for want of understanding their language, we could not come to any explanation with them, I ordered the anchor to be weighed, and sailed out of the bay, bringing away two of the natives with me.

In our return home my desire of seeing some yet unexplored parts of the island of Sumatra, occasioned me to order the vessel to put me on shore at a place called Flat Point, on the Southern extremity of the island, from whence I walked to Fort Malbro'. In this journey I underwent great hardships, being sometimes obliged to walk on the sandy beach, exposed to the Sun, from six in the morning till six at night, without any refreshment; sometimes precipices to ascend or descend, so steep that we could only draw ourselves up, or let ourselves down, by a rattan; at other times rapid rivers to cross, and then to walk the remaining part of the day in wet cloaths. The consequence of these hardships has been a violent fever; but, much as I then regretted having quitted the ship, I had, when I came to Fort Malbro', more reason to rejoice; for I then found, that the vessel, in her voyage home,

home, was lost, and every soul on board perished. This has, however, been a severe stroke upon me; for as I was obliged to leave all my baggage on board, it being impracticable to carry it over land, I lost all my cloaths, books, specimens, manuscripts, notes, arms, &c. from Enganho; in short, almost every thing which I had either brought with me, or collected during my residence in this island.

I forgot to mention, that when I was at Tappanooly I saw what I find in PURCHAS's Pilgrim called *the wonderful plant of Sombrero*: his account, however, is somewhat exaggerated, when he says it bears leaves and grows to be a great tree. The name by which it is known to the Malays is *Lalan-lout*, that is, sea-grass. It is found in sandy bays, in shallow water, where it appears like a slender strait stick, but, when you attempt to touch it, immediately withdraws itself into the sand. I could never observe any *tentacula*: a broken piece, near a foot long, which, after many unsuccessful attempts, I drew out, was perfectly strait and uniform, and resembled a worm drawn over a knitting-needle; when dry it is a coral.

The sea cocoa-nut, which has long been erroneously considered as a marine production, and been so extremely scarce and valuable, is now discovered to be the fruit of a palm

a palm with *flabelliform* leaves, which grows abundantly on the small islands to the Eastward of Madagascar, called in our charts *Mahi*, &c. and by the French *Les Isles de Sechelles*. To these islands the French have sent a large colony, and planted them with clove and nutmeg-trees, as they have likewise the islands of Bourbon and Mauritius.

