



MONASH University

**An Incoherent Empire:
Environment, imperial networks, and administrative
disorder in British Malaya, 1786-1930s**

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Abstract

For much of its colonial history, British Malaya functioned as a key supplier of natural resources to the rest of the Empire. Tin mines thus pockmarked the earth and rubber plantations carpeted wide swathes of land, the results of which not only promised sound remuneration, but also changed the face of the region's environment. While this narrative of economic development might suggest a teleological approach to British intervention, this thesis offers another way of telling the story of British Malaya – one where its colonial administration was constantly beset by a sense of haphazardness and incoherence.

To do so, I examine written official documentation from c.1786 to the pre-Second World War period to interrogate how colonial attitudes towards Malaya's environment reveal prevailing instances of administrative disorder. Throughout the course of these numerous environmental interactions, British officials had to grapple with the pressing questions of what they *could* and *should* do with this colony, as well as how to go about it all. These issues were further complicated by the presence of dysfunctional imperial networks, which facilitated the transfer of misunderstandings and misinformation, as well as the creation of multiple, oft-contradictory colonial projects. Subsequently, I also suggest the metaphor of an imperial circuit-board, wherein British Malaya is imagined as a flickering, tenuously connected node.

Taken in sum, this thesis advances two interventions: first, it contends that a cultural environmental history approach to understanding British Malaya offers insights into the malfunction of imperial circuits, and second, it demonstrates how foregrounding colonial environmental attitudes can showcase the administrative incoherence of British rule in this region.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

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Date: 16 October 2019

Acknowledgements

While this work may never come close to an Academy Award winning film, I'm nevertheless suddenly acutely aware of how people on-stage must feel when they're confronted with having to do their acknowledgements: humbled, grateful, more than a little terrified of leaving someone out, and still a bit bewildered at getting to do them at all.

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Introduction

How might one describe the period of British colonial rule in Malaya? These were changing times, when the tall ships and canvas sails of the late-eighteenth century eventually gave way to the telegraph wires and railway tracks of the 1900s. Interconnected ones, too, as these methods of communication interweaved Malaya into network after network of trade, transport, and exchange. Paper-trails criss-crossed colonies and entangled them into lumbering administrative behemoths, while plants, goods, ideas, and people travelled from shore to shore – precious cargo of vastly different kinds. But of course, these connections also made for complicated times. From the waterlogged rice-fields of Perak to the grand, looming offices that lined the cobblestoned streets at Whitehall, colonial officials and administrators alike raised a chatter of voices to call out wholly opposing directions for, and observations about Malaya's environment. Botanists penned long reports discussing a region's fertility, while others still complained of spice plants dying by the thousands. Giddy with the prospect of economic progress, Governors declared hopes for a colony built on mining profits, even as agricultural men bickered noisily amongst themselves and District Officers fretted about the loss of peasant lands.

In this thesis, I examine a series of case studies from 1786 to the pre-Second World War period to tell the story of British Malaya as one where the dynamic, fragile, and imperfect nature of imperial networks forged incoherence rather than order. To do so, I read official colonial documentation to demonstrate how British understandings of, and interactions with Malaya's environment made this colony's integration into Empire a far more discordant process than previously thought. Focussing particularly on colonial attitudes towards the environments of Penang, as well as the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Pahang, and Negeri Sembilan, I argue that the presence of imperial networks and subsequent expenditure of energy in these regions did not necessarily lead to success, or even stability. Empire did not push towards order here; rather, in studying its shift towards entropy in these places, this thesis highlights a number of cases in which British officials largely failed at what they initially set out to accomplish. Networks provided opportunities for building connections and yet, their inability to be truly comprehensive meant that these could be unmade as well. Following these processes empirically throughout the course of British intervention in Malaya, I thereby contend that this was an administration of upturned earth and errant

decision-making, where the messy practices of colony-building were characterised by a slew of contradictions that centred upon the region's environment.

By addressing these issues, this thesis seeks to not only integrate British Malaya into pre-existing literatures of 'new' imperial history, but also suggest a different method of reading its cultural environmental history – this being a study of how environments were perceived and interacted with.¹ Given Malaya's central role in servicing the Empire with a myriad of natural resources throughout its colonial occupation, it is of little wonder that scholars seeking to further understand British rule have produced works that trend towards foregrounding various extractive activities. Correspondingly, areas such as plantation agriculture and mining have been examined in a somewhat isolated sense, as their complexities warrant in-depth studies on their material processes.² While these investigations have been useful in unpacking the socioeconomic effects of British activity in Malaya, the subsequent focus of most cultural environmental histories on issues such as colonial anxiety, genre writing, art, and tropicality still leave us with the following questions: How might we account for the dysfunctional nature of British occupation in this region? What part does Malaya's environment have to play in this? Consequently, how have administrative (mis)understandings of Malaya's environment contributed to colonial (mis)rule here?

To unpack these questions, my thesis engages with the scholarship of 'new' imperial history and its acknowledgement that "multiple colonial 'projects'" were set into motion through a series of networks.³ As has been demonstrated by various works in this area, the ability of Empire to encompass various conflicting ideas, interests, actions, and stakeholders necessitates that our understanding of its intricacy move beyond a metropole-periphery framework, thereby resulting in a network configuration instead, or Tony Ballantyne's

¹ J.R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2003): 6.

² See, for instance: Colin Barlow, *The Natural Rubber Industry: Its Development, Technology, and Economy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978); J.H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973); J.H. Drabble, *Malayan Rubber: The Interwar Years* (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1991); Lin-Ken Wong, *The Malayan tin industry to 1914: with special reference to the states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang* (Tucson, Arizona: Published for the Association for Asian Studies by University of Arizona Press, 1965); Yat Hoong Yip, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1969).

³ Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4, no. 1 (2006): 132.

metaphor of a web.⁴ Simply put, Empire can no longer be merely understood through the limited system of imperial centres relating to colonies and vice versa. While previous configurations of Empire privileged these vertical relationships, network scholarship urges us to also examine the horizontal connections. By expanding our analysis to include the numerous transnational and indeed, trans-colony linkages that helped tie the structure of Empire together, this allows for a variety of subjects, voices, and experiences to be seen as in constant conversation with each other. A clear example of how this might be applied to British Malaya can be seen in Lynn Hollen Lees' recent work, wherein she examines the social history of towns and plantations. With particular reference to how labour relations and modernity unfolded in these places, Lees demonstrates how a confluence of imperial markets, trends, and influences came to transform the region.⁵ The ability of imperial networks to be layered atop and enmeshed with each other thus results in a framework that has webs entangled within webs, where each nodal point is capable of relating to others in multiple ways.⁶

Despite Ballantyne's web metaphor accounting for the fragility of these networks and their propensity to breaking, their central role in enabling various exchanges within Empire still conveys a broad sense of functionality and coherence.⁷ The main contention of this thesis, then, uses British Malaya to demonstrate how this was not quite the case in practice. Embedding British Malaya into the very thick of these complex, multi-directional relationships, I read its colonial administration as not only as interconnected, but also inherently dysfunctional. To quote Alan Lester, the poly-faceted nature of networks takes into account "multiple meanings, projects, material practices, performances and experiences of colonial relations".⁸ In British Malaya, however, though the presence of networks certainly allowed for its colonial administration to contain multitudes, this did not give rise to a comfortable, or even straightforward situation. As I argue, this multiplicity regularly led to confusion and disunity instead, as networks were not merely fragile – they actively generated or at the very least, facilitated incoherence, too.

⁴ See: Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, eds. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2012); Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

⁵ Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁶ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 15.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks," 130-131.

Take for instance the situation explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis, which shines a light on the instability and in-fighting that prevailed throughout the initial years of the Department of Agriculture for the Federated Malay States. Pulled in multiple directions and unsure of what these states should be used for, colonial administrators resorted to looking at the work of other adjacent colonies, only to have their efforts thwarted by the unfortunate combination of incompetence and disinterest from senior officials. Importantly, however, from these murky depths of misgovernment also rose the proverbial crown jewel of British Malaya: its plantation rubber industry, which commanded a lion's share of the world market for much of the twentieth century. Bringing to the fore narratives such as these, this thesis writes against the teleology of Empire and argues instead for British Malaya to be seen as a site where its colonial administration did not succeed as much as it just managed to imperfectly assemble itself together from various dissonant pieces.

Such a prevailing sense of disunity was wrought into the very ruling structures of British Malaya itself. Fractured across different sets of colonies and protectorates, this region was never placed under a single homogenous administrative unit. Instead, what was imposed on Malaya was something akin to a patchwork of different styles that invoked varying levels of direct and indirect rule over the years. Following Francis Light's claiming of Penang Island for both the Crown and Honourable East India Company in 1786, British influence soon engulfed the surrounding areas – Province Wellesley on the Malay Peninsula in 1800, Singapore in 1819, and the pre-established settlement of Melaka, which was signed over from the Dutch in 1824 via the Anglo-Dutch Treaty. These territories were subsequently gathered together to form the Straits Settlements in 1826 and remained under Company rule for another forty years, until they were placed under the purview of the Colonial Office as Crown Colonies.

By the late-nineteenth century, British colonial rule had also started to take root in the Malay States. Beginning with Perak in 1874, it was not long before Selangor, Pahang, and Negeri Sembilan were similarly persuaded to accept British Residents who were tasked with 'advising' local Sultans. These four states were amalgamated into the Federated Malay States (FMS) and placed under a centralised government in 1895. As for the remaining Unfederated Malay States of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Johor, these were administered as individual British protectorates, taking on less politically powerful British Advisers instead of Residents. This varied system of colonial rule would continue uninterrupted until 1941, when

the Japanese invasion of Malaya during the Second World War brought a temporary end to almost one hundred and fifty years of British involvement in the region.



Figure 1: Map of British Malaya, circa 1909.⁹

While this quick, chronological overview of British rule in Malaya might suggest an overarching push towards imposing colonial order and purpose in the region, my thesis emphasises that such was certainly not the case on the ground. Though it is undeniable that the British had imperial designs for the region, I argue that these processes were not wholly coherent, nor were they even successful at most times. How should British rule look in these places? To what extent? Why? Officials struggled to articulate straightforward, unified answers to these seemingly simple questions, this being particularly evident in their attitudes towards Malaya's environment. Consequently, my choice to focus only on case studies in Penang and the FMS is driven by the fact that it was in these places that British rule was both most firmly entrenched and yet, also haphazard. Neither the presence of colonial governing structures, nor the subsequent integration of these regions into broader imperial networks

⁹ CartoGIS Services, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, "States of Malaya – 1909," N.d. Map. Source: "Maps Online: ANU College of Asia and the Pacific," accessed 14 August 2018, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/mapsonline/base-maps/states-malaya-1909>.

necessarily meant that their administrations were inherently stable.

To first address the choice of Penang rather than the Straits Settlements as a whole, the island's role as the starting point for British intervention in 1786 fashions it into what I believe is a succinct precursor to the situation that would continue to unfold in Malaya over the next hundred and fifty years or so. As will be demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 2, the island's imperfect connections to broader imperial networks of botanical and knowledge exchange mired its administration in problem after problem. Due to officials having to grapple with a slew of issues, the situation in Penang during these first few initial decades was one of much administrative confusion. Examined alongside the Federated Malay States, primary sources from these two regions tell a prevailing story of failure and discord.

Subsequently, the decision to exclude the Straits Settlements of Melaka and Singapore from this study was motivated by two main issues: that of Melaka's long history of Portuguese and Dutch colonial influence, and the development of a separate historiographical trajectory for studies of Singapore. Due to Melaka's relatively long association with other European powers until 1824, the prevailing influence of these previous colonial structures in central areas such as land tenures necessitates that it fall outside the purview of this thesis – which is to say, strictly that of British expansion in Malaya. Secondly, while Singapore was indeed established and ruled by British powers for most of its colonial occupation, the island-nation's separation from Malaya and its ensuing independence in 1965 has since resulted in the historiographies of both regions embarking on different trajectories.

Generally speaking, most works on colonial Singapore tend to apply a nationalist framework, where examining it as separate from the Malay Peninsula allows it to be understood on its own terms.¹⁰ In selecting the case studies for this thesis, I have followed the logic of these separate political organisations and its corresponding archives. Simultaneously, it is also

¹⁰ See, for instance: C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989); Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990); James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Nicholas Tarling, ed. *Studying Singapore's Past: C.M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012); Brendan Luyt, "Centres of circulation and unruly colonists: the colonial library in Singapore and its users, 1874-1900," *Journal of Documentation* 64, no.3 (2008): 386-396; Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "British Discourses and Malay Identity in Colonial Singapore," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 37, no.107 (2009): 1-21; Lai Kuan Lim and Peter Horton, "Sport in the British Colony of Singapore (1819-1900s): Formation, Diffusion and Development," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no.9 (2012): 1325-1343.

worth noting that scholarship on the colonial environmental histories of Singapore has been relatively more robust than that of the Malay States – though as will be seen in the following section, some scholars have started to help even out the playing field in favour of the latter.¹¹

Networks in the cultural environmental histories of British Malaya

Lying at the core of new imperial histories is the assertion that Empire was not the product of a single, homogenous effort. As Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper have demonstrated, “colonial regimes were neither monolithic nor omnipotent”.¹² Summarily, acknowledging and working with this multiplicity allows for our understandings of Empire to encompass a much broader cast of characters and experiences, as each imperial stakeholder came with their own interests, actions, and agendas. In viewing Empire as the sum of numerous fractured, often conflicting parts rather than a unified whole, what emerges is thus a scene of disorder – a “higgledy-piggledy process”, as John Darwin so succinctly describes it, where British imperial rule was characterised by “extraordinary versatility in method, outlook and object.”¹³

Framing Empire as a complex amalgamation of various colonial projects also necessitates that we reconceptualise *how* so many disparate aspects were connected to each other. Enter, then, the emphasis of recent scholarship on imperial networks as a method of organisation, with works from Tony Ballantyne, Antoinette Burton, and Alan Lester positing that it is far more useful to adopt a multi-faceted and indeed, multi-directional approach.¹⁴ As Lester

¹¹ See: Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Stephen Dobbs, “Memory, Heritage, and the Singapore River: ‘It Is Like a Dead Snake’,” in *Oral History in Southeast Asia* in *Oral History in Southeast Asia*, eds. Kah Seng Loh, Stephen Dobbs, and Ernest Koh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 177-193; Richard T. Corlett, “The Ecological Transformation of Singapore, 1819-1990,” *Journal of Biogeography* 19, no.4 (1992): 411-420; Richard T. Corlett, “Bukit Timah: the history and significance of a small rain-forest reserve,” *Environmental Conservation* 15, no.1 (1988): 37-44; Timothy P. Barnard, ed. *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014); Timothy P. Barnard, *Nature's Colony: Empire, Nation and Environment in the Singapore Botanic Gardens* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016); Miles Alexander Powell, “People in Peril, Environments at Risk: Coolies, Tigers, and Colonial Singapore's Ecology of Poverty,” *Environment and History* 22, no.3 (2016): 455-482.

¹² Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

¹³ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 375-376.

¹⁴ Tony Ballantyne, “On place, space and mobility in nineteenth-century New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 45, no.1 (2011): 50-70; Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books, 2012); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the reach of the global: 1870-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012); Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain* (London and New York:

notes, these connections “were always stretched in contingent and non-deterministic ways, across space, and they did not *necessarily* privilege either metropolitan or colonial spaces.”¹⁵ Shifting the focus from vertical, core-periphery relationships to horizontal, inter-colony ones instead allows for the structure of Empire to encompass multiple layers and points of connection that are seen in relation to each other, rather than simply to a single colonial centre.

Environmental historians of Empire have similarly begun to adopt a networked analysis, this being particularly pertinent in studies of scientific and botanical exchange.¹⁶ Seeds, plants, specimens, ideas, and perceptions – all were transferred throughout the course of different colonial projects, these movements changing their points of origin just as much as they managed to alter their intended destinations. More recently, however, James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O’Gorman have also proposed the concept of eco-cultural networks, which “offer a lens for examining interconnected, wide-ranging social and environmental process”. While most environmental histories have tended to examine the material and cultural spheres in isolation, utilising eco-cultural networks as an analytical framework now allows for these previously disparate aspects to be brought together as “dynamic and relational”.¹⁷ Highlighting the “deep dependencies between societies and their environments”, the authors argue that the workings of Empire not only rearranged the order of people and places, but also created “new ways of understanding and using environments”.¹⁸

Routledge, 2001); Alan Lester, “British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire,” *History Workshop Journal* 54, no.1 (2002): 24-48.

¹⁵ Lester, “Imperial Circuits and Networks,” 131. Emphasis is in the original.

¹⁶ See: Eric Pawson, “Plants, Mobilities and Landscapes: Environmental Histories of Botanical Exchange,” *Geography Compass* 2, no.5 (2008): 1464-1477; Edward Melillo, “Global entomologies: Insects, empires, and the ‘synthetic age’ in world history,” *Past and Present* 223, no.1 (2014): 233-270; Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860-1930* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Lucille H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. First published 1979); Jodi Frawley and Heather Goodall, “Transforming Saltbush: Science, Mobility, and Metaphor in the Remaking of Intercolonial Worlds,” *Conservation and Society* 11 (2013): 76-186; Brett M. Bennett and Joseph M. Hodge, eds. *Science and Empire: Knowledge and Networks of Science across the British Empire, 1800-1970* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁷ James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O’Gorman, “Rethinking the British Empire through Eco-Cultural Networks: Materialist-Cultural environmental history, Relational Connections and Agency,” *Environment and History* 20, no.4 (2014): 562-564, 566.

¹⁸ James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O’Gorman “Introduction: Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire, 1837-1945,” in *Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire: New Views on Environmental History*,

Building on these foundations, what this thesis intends to contribute is a history of British Malaya where networks do not necessarily succeed. Though certainly useful in understanding how Empire was structured out of numerous disparate and contradictory parts, network scholarship has yet to address situations whereby these connections break down, or lead to dysfunction rather than coherence. As I will demonstrate, the colonial administration of British Malaya was not merely cobbled together out of numerous contradictory and disparate parts; it also existed within and interacted with broader networks of exchange that tended to do more harm than good to its colonial administration. Disagreements, misinformation, and misunderstandings thus flowed from place to place and person to person, creating multiple interlinked layers of administration that were jarringly discordant with each other.

For all its systemic malfunctions, it is important to note that British colonial rule still managed to firmly entrench itself in Malaya and could, indeed, be even said to be successful. While this thesis intends to mainly grapple with *how* British colonial expansion functioned in Malaya, I am nevertheless conscious that these issues cannot be separated from the larger question of *what* Empire was for, here. Numerous scholars have subsequently tried to explain the acquisition, expansion, and consolidation of British colonial rule, these studies being based largely around what Ian Copland terms as the three Cs: commerce, Christianity, and civilisation.¹⁹ In turn, others such as Bernard Porter have argued for a more materialist approach, where the pursuit of material gains led to Empire being ruled by a relatively small number of British colonial administrators, rather than a broader ‘imperial culture’ at home.²⁰

In the case of Malaya and its abundance of natural resources, the extractivist nature of British rule has lent a definite materialist slant to imperial motivations in this region. What this thesis intends to do is reframe this impetus through the lens of Malaya’s environment – or to be more precise, the colonial mismanagement of it. While extractivist-centric narratives of

eds. James Beattie, Edward Melillo and Emily O’Gorman (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 3.

¹⁹ Ian Copland, “Christianity as arm of empire: The ambiguous case of India under the company, c. 1813-1858,” *Historical Journal* 49, no.4 (2006): 1028. Also see: Andrew Porter, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Abigail L. Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914* (New York: Longman, 1993).

²⁰ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16-18.

British involvement in Malaya might suggest a teleological or deterministic approach to colonial rule, I foreground the haphazard planning and execution of colonial ambitions to instead demonstrate that success was never assured. Indeed, it might even be said that the success of colonial economic expansion in Malaya was contingent on a host of factors that went far beyond the purview of its administrators. The increased demand for tin during the early-twentieth century, for instance, and the subsequent rise of rubber as a key asset in other industries – these were all fortuitous (and perhaps more significantly) external market forces which helped drive the ways in which British Malaya’s administrators enacted their different colonial projects.²¹ It was thus in the shadow of these developments that Copland’s three C’s of colonisation could extend and be entrenched even further. Imperial aspirations for Malaya to service the Empire with minerals and cash crops might have been one thing, but as I argue, the practicality, application, and management of these aims, especially in the realm of Malaya’s environment, were separate ones altogether.

On that note, it is worth emphasising that this should not be rendered into a sympathetic or apologetic approach, as these failures were *not* benign accidents. There was clear ambition as well as violence and environmental destruction here – that much is evident.²² Consequently, even though administrators might have adopted a utilitarian approach towards Malaya’s environment, I assert that the intentions that they had for it were misaligned with actual implementation. In making this argument, this thesis suggests that new insights about the roles and designs of Empire in this region can be gleaned from looking not only at the imperial networks that Malaya was enmeshed in, but the failures that its colonial administration encountered.

²¹ Much has been written on Malaya’s role in the rubber and tin markets. See, for instance: J.H. Drabble, “Investment in the Rubber Industry in Malaya c. 1900–1922,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no.2 (1972): 247-261; W.G. Huff, “Boom-or-Bust Commodities and Industrialization in Pre–World War II Malaya,” *The Journal of Economic History* 62, no.4 (2002): 1074-1115; John Hillman, “Malaya and the International Tin Cartel,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no.2 (1988): 237-261; Jean-francois Hennart, “Internalization in Practice: Early Foreign Direct Investments in Malaysian Tin Mining,” *Journal of International Business Studies* 17, no.2 (1986): 131-143.

²² See: P. Ramasamy, “Labour control and labour resistance in the plantations of colonial Malaya,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no.3-4 (1992): 87-105; Karl Hack, “Everyone lived in fear: Malaya and the British way of counter-insurgency,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23, no.4-5 (2012): 671-699; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Fiona Williamson, “Malaya’s Greatest Menace? Slow-Onset Disaster and the Muddy Politics of British Malaya, c.1900-50,” *International Review of Environmental History* 4, no.2 (2018): 45-68.

Placing colonial attitudes towards British Malaya's environment at the heart of this complex process, I take up the call put forth by Beattie, Melillo, and O'Gorman to view the material and cultural aspects of environmental history alongside each other – though with the caveat of including its political aspects as well. As per J.R. McNeill, environmental history can be classified into three major streams, these being: the material focus, which investigates the impact of nature on human endeavours; the cultural one, where studies are largely focused on how individuals perceived and represented their environments; and that of the political focus, which considers the role of the state and other institutions in regulating aspects of nature.²³ Though this thesis leans heavily towards the cultural stream of environmental history, it nevertheless draws inspiration from all three varieties by taking the following questions into account: What kinds of interactions existed between colonial administrators and Malaya's natural environment? How was this region perceived and why? And following that, how did colonial actions and policies reflect these perceptions? Applying a networked analysis to these issues, I argue that British Malaya's imperfect connections made for a volatile and disruptive colonial administration, where Empire did not function as much as it managed to flounder.

At the same time, this thesis also proposes to intervene in current environmental histories of both British Malaya and the broader Asian region. Briefly examining the former, the extractivist-centric nature of most pre-existing studies on Malaya's environment means that scholars have generally addressed issues of what was being produced here, how, and by whom, as well as their ensuing effects on different parts of colonial society.²⁴ Consequently, while these investigations have contributed key insights into Malaya's colonial past, they also function largely as socio-political, or economic histories instead, where the environment itself

²³ J.R. McNeill, "The state of the field of environmental history," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 35, no. 1 (2010): 346-347.

²⁴ See footnote 2. Also see: Amarjit Kaur, "Plantation systems, labour regimes and the state in Malaysia, 1900-2012," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 14, no.2 (2014): 190-213; Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, "The British and rubber in Malaya, c 1890-1940," in *The Past is Before Us: Proceedings of the Ninth National Labour History Conference*, eds. G. Patmore, J. Shields and N. Balnave (Broadway, N.S.W.: University of Sydney, 2005), 143-150; D.J.M. Tate, *The RGA History of the Plantation Industry in the Malay Peninsula* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996); James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya 1786-1921* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968); Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and their agricultural economy in colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Nancy-Lee Peluso and Peter Vandergeest, "Empires of forestry: Professional forestry and state power in Southeast Asia, Part 1," *Environment and History* 12, no.1 (2006): 31-64; Nancy-Lee Peluso and Peter Vandergeest, "Empires of forestry: Professional forestry and state power in Southeast Asia, Part 2," *Environment and History* 12, no.4 (2006): 359-393; Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation: Forests and Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005).

is relegated to a secondary position. This is, however, not to say that all studies fall into this category. As demonstrated by the works of Victor R. Savage, Lily Kong, and Susan Morgan, numerous in-roads have been made into the cultural environmental histories of Malaya.²⁵ Nevertheless, with the notable exceptions of Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells' contribution in natural history, Fiona Williamson's exploration of climate and natural disasters, and Corey Ross' work on tin-mining, a good majority of these are still largely concerned with examining environmental depictions in different genres of colonial writing, with a particular emphasis being placed on the contributions of prolific writer-administrators such as Hugh Clifford, or Frank Swettenham.²⁶

Casting our attention further abroad to also consider works on regions which might be comparable to British Malaya in terms of environment and European imperialism, the cultural environmental histories of these places have tended to privilege questions of tropicity and conservation – David Arnold, Felix Driver, and James Beattie's works on how colonists processed their fears, hopes, and anxieties in tropical places, for instance, or Richard Grove's contributions on the origins of environmentalism on tropical islands.²⁷

²⁵ Victor R. Savage, *Western Impressions of nature and landscape in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1984); Victor R. Savage and Lily Kong, "The Malay world in colonial fiction," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 7, no.1 (1986): 40-52; Susan Morgan, *Place Matters: Gendered geography in Victorian women's travel books about Southeast Asia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 135-175. Also see: Beatrix Shimizu, "The Exoticism of the Malay World: French and British Images," *The Bulletin of the Faculty of Studies on Contemporary Society, Aichi Shukutoku University* 1, no.1 (1996): 21-32; Siti Nuraishah Ahmad, "Malaysia as the Archetypal Garden in the British Creative Imagination," *Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no.1 (2014): 49-84; Siti Nuraishah Ahmad, Shantini Pillai, and Noraini Md. Yusof, "Rehabilitating Eden: Archetypal Images of Malaya in European Travel Writing," *Journeys* 12, no.1 (2011): 22-45.

²⁶ Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, "Peninsular Malaysia in the Context of Natural History and Colonial Science," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, no.1 (2009): 337-37; Corey Ross, "The tin frontier: Mining, empire, and environment in Southeast Asia, 1870s-1930s," *Environmental History* 19, no.3 (2014): 454-479; Fiona Williamson, "The 'Great Flood' of 1926: environmental change and post-disaster management in British Malaya," *Ecosystem Health and Sustainability* 2, no.11 (2016): 1-9; Fiona Williamson, "Weathering the empire: meteorological research in the early British Straits Settlements," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 48, no.3 (2015): 475-492. For works on specific colonial administrators, see: Philip Holden, *Hugh Clifford and the Discipline of English Literature in the Straits Settlements and Malaya, 1895-1907* (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2000); Victor R. Savage and Lily Kong, "Hugh Clifford and Frank Swettenham: Environmental Cognition and the Malayan Colonial Process," *Asian Profile* 22 (1994): 295-309; S. Robert Aiken, "Images of Nature in Swettenham's Early Writings: Prolegomenon to a Historical Perspective on Peninsular Malaysia's Ecological Problems," *Asian Studies* 11, no. 3 (1973): 135-152; P.C. Wicks, "Images of Malaya in the Stories of Sir Hugh Clifford," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52, no.1 (1979): 57-72; Hye Ryoung Kil, "Science, Commerce, and Imperial Expansion in British Travel Literature: Hugh Clifford's and Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction," *English Language and Literature* 57, no. 6 (2011): 1151-1171; Robert Hampson, "Hugh Clifford in Malaya," in *Writing, Travel, and Empire: In the Margins of Anthropology* eds. Peter Hulme and Russell McDougall (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 147-168.

²⁷ David Arnold, "Inventing Tropicality," in *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture, and European Expansion* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); David Arnold, "Illusory Riches: representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no.1 (2000): 6-18; Felix Driver, "Imagining

Correspondingly, the sheer size and centrality of British India in imperial history has led to it hoarding a lion's share of investigations, though a thriving scholarship also exists for the Dutch East Indies.²⁸

While the tropics of the Americas and West Indies might be more geographically distant, it is nevertheless worth noting that these regions have also been the subject of thematically similar investigations.²⁹ The entrenchment of American imperialism, the spread of their ensuing plantations (albeit with a far greater focus on slave labour), the clash of socio-political and corporate interests – all of these aspects bore structural similarities to that of the British Empire. Here too, then, did colonists frame the tropics as lush, verdant environments that came with their own complexities, thereby leading to the implementation of multiple colonial projects that sought to address these issues. When seen in comparison to these robust realms

the Tropics: Views and Visions of the Tropical World,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 25, no.1 (2004): 1–17; Felix Driver and Luciana Martins eds., *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); P.D. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); James Beattie, *Empire and Environmental Anxiety: Health, Science, Art and Conservation in South Asia and Australasia, 1800-1920* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Corey Ross, “Tropical Nature as Global Patrimoine: Imperialism and International Nature Protection in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Past and Present* 226, supplement 10 (2015): 214-239; John M. MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

²⁸ For works on India, see: G.A. Barton and B.M. Bennett, “Environmental Conservation and Deforestation in British India 1855–1947: A Reinterpretation,” *Itinerario* 32, (2008): 83-104; David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds. *Nature, culture, imperialism: Essays on the environmental history of South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856* (Delhi, Permanent Black: 2005); George C.D. Adamson, “The languor of the hot weather: Everyday perspectives on weather and climate in colonial Bombay, 1819-1828,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 38, no.2 (2012): 143-154. For works on the Netherlands East Indies, see: Peter Boomgaard, “The Making and Unmaking of Tropical Science: Dutch Research on Indonesia, 1600-2000,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- end Volkenkunde* 162, no.2 (2008): 191-217; Peter Boomgaard, David Henley, and Freek Colombijn, *Paper Landscapes: Explorations in the Environmental History of Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press 1997); Susie Protschky, *Images of the tropics environment and visual culture in colonial Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011); Susie Protschky, “Nature, landscape and identity in the Netherlands Indies: Literary constructions of being Dutch in the tropics,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- end Volkenkunde* 164, no.1 (2008): 13-37; Paul Jepson and Robert Whittaker, “Histories of Protected Areas: Internationalisation of Conservationist Values and their Adoption in the Netherlands Indies,” *Environment and History* 8, no.2 (2002): 129-172; Suzanne Moon, “Empirical Knowledge, Colonial Authority, and Native Development: The Controversy over Sugar/Rice Ecology in the Netherlands East Indies, 1905-1914,” *Environment and History* 10, no.1 (2004): 59-81.

²⁹ María Cristina Fumagalli, Peter Hulme, Owen Robinson & Lesley Wylie, eds., *Surveying the American Tropics: A Literary Geography from New York to Rio* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Jefferson Dillman, *Colonizing Paradise: Landscape and Empire in the British West Indies* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015); Stephen Frenkel, “Jungle Stories: North American Representations of Tropical Panama,” *Geographical Review* 86, no.3 (1996): 317-333; Greg Bankoff, “First Impressions: Diarists, Scientists, Imperialists and the Managements of the Environment in the American Pacific, 1899-1902,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 44, no.3 (2009): 261-280; Simon Naylor, “‘That Very Garden of South America’: European Surveyors in Paraguay,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no.1 (2000): 48-62; Heidi V. Scott, “Paradise in the New World: an Iberian vision of tropicity,” *Cultural Geographies* 17, no.1 (2010): 77-101;

of study, the relative absence of British Malaya in such discussions becomes all the more acute. Summarily, this rough sketch indicates two main themes in pre-existing historiographies: first, the tendency of British Malayan environmental histories to focus on either extractivist-centric, or specific cultural modes of study, and second, the region's rather glaring exclusion from broader trends in cultural environmental histories.

Reading colonial networks, environments, and perceptions as inextricable from each other, this thesis offers a number of interventions into the above-mentioned literatures. In the realm of British Malayan environmental historiography, examining how colonial administrators perceived and interacted with their environments within a networked analysis allows for a more complex, multi-layered approach. Eschewing the perceptions of individual officials to focus on a whole host of them instead, I use this method to demonstrate how there were competing visions of Empire at play in Malaya. In particular, I read the works of botanists and Residents alongside that of Governors and District Officers, arguing that British Malaya were not built logically from successor to successor, but was in fact a confluence of different contradictory approaches and opinions. These, in turn, were facilitated by the presence of imperial networks. As such, I not only integrate British Malaya into new imperial histories, but also assert that the region's various connections were capable of sowing dissonance and discord. Doing so, I advocate for a non-teleological method of understanding Empire in this region.

At the same time, I will be engaging with pre-existing trends in broader cultural environmental histories, so as to further integrate British Malaya into the developments that this sub-field has enjoyed. Moving away from a British India or Netherlands East Indies-centric approach, this thesis interrogates how issues such as tropicality, colonial anxiety, and notions of colonial 'improvement' looked in the messy context of Malaya. How did these models function here? What can network scholarship and this thesis' disruption of it contribute to present understandings? With the following chapters addressing issues such as these, I hope to both open up a new region for future studies of cultural environmental histories and suggest a more complicated and indeed, messy reading of Empire in Malaya – one where networks did not merely facilitate connections, but made them fragile and prone to failure as well.

Methodology and chapter overviews

To make these arguments, I will be drawing upon a rich storehouse of primary source material: the documentation and correspondence that helped form the foundations of British Malaya's colonial administration. From the very onset of British colonial rule in this region, its officials produced copious amounts of written texts. Reams upon reams of paper were thus filled with observations and instructions, while others still contained hastily scrawled minutes and comments which were then bound into volumes or files for circulation amongst other bureaucrats.

Upon the disintegration of Empire, these documents were dispersed to a variety of different places. A bulk of the documentation was deposited at the National Archives of the United Kingdom, these including files such those from the CO series which covers a myriad of administrative areas: minutes, letters, annual reports, memoranda, and other kinds of documents relating to the running of British Malaya. Though physical copies are held by the National Archives, most of the Command Papers associated with the FMS have also been digitised by the British Parliament. The Malaysian National Archives in Kuala Lumpur, in turn, hold an invaluable resource in the form of numerous State Secretariat Files. Recording the hand-written minutes of Residents and District Officers, these documents provide an in-depth look into how British colonial administration was run on the ground.

Documentation pertaining to Penang, in particular, exists primarily in the form of the Straits Settlements Factory Records. Spread across hundreds of microfilm reels, the efforts of librarians and researchers past have seen copies of these valuable documents deposited at various places outside of their current location at the British Library: places such the Matheson Library at Monash University, as well as in various state libraries in Australia.³⁰ As for documents on the FMS Department of Agriculture, these annual reports, notes, and letters are mostly held by the archives of the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, while a sizeable amount of correspondence between botanical experts has also been reproduced online by the JSTOR Global Plants database. Tracing the dissemination of these colonial records to places that might not have originally held them, what perhaps becomes apparent is their location at

³⁰ While the Matheson Library's copies were sourced and purchased by academics at Monash University as part of the institution's research profile during the 1960s, Australian state libraries have obtained their microfilms via the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP). For more on this, see: Mary-Ann Pattison, "The Australian joint copying project," *Government Publications Review* 13, no.3 (1986): 349-353.

various imperial nodes that today still hold afterimages of Empire – places such as London, Kuala Lumpur, and Melbourne. Though physically separated by archives and libraries, these sources are nevertheless bound by both their colonial pasts and post-colonial locations as well.

Despite my reliance on colonial government records, however, it is worth emphasising that this thesis will not be a study on colonial governmentality, nor will it be focusing on theorising the archive itself.³¹ Instead, by returning to and re-evaluating what might upon first glance seem like an archetypal top-down approach, I read these sources within a networked analysis to introduce a different narrative of British Malaya – one that foregrounds administrative disunity rather than continuity, and incoherence rather than focus and functionality. With reference to how these sources of colonial governmentality have often been used as a starting point for histories of British Malaya, I will be applying the method of reading along the archival grain to assist in my re-evaluation of these oft-familiar documents. As Ann Laura Stoler has advocated for in her work on archival research, one must first “explore the grain with care and read along it”, before reading against it.³² This in turn renders archives as “condensed sites of epistemological and political anxiety rather than as skewed and biased sources ... transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves.” Embarking from this understanding of colonial rule, governing structures were thus not merely a collection of clear-eyed policies, being instead an untidy combination of failures, delusions, and doubt.³³

While Stoler uses this practice of reading along the grain to explore how complex and uncertain epistemologies of race and social relations in the Netherlands East Indies could be, here I apply a similar methodology to instead highlight the disharmonies that plagued colonial environmental attitudes in British Malaya. Following the thread of these dissonant voices throughout the course of various networks, this thesis brings a close reading of

³¹ For a selection of works that have addressed these issues, see: Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1989); Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993); Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit narratives: The meanings of archives,” *Archival Science* 1, no.2 (2001): 131-141; Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial archives and the arts of governance,” *Archival Science* 2, no.1-2 (2002): 87-109; Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no.1 (2004): 9-25.

³² Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 50.

³³ *Ibid*, 20-21.

government archives into dialogue with the literatures of new imperial environmental history. After all, as Tony Ballantyne has also noted, colonial documents did not merely remain in the places they were produced. Be it via telegraph, steamship, horseback, or railway line, the presence of various networks helped to circulate these documents across Empire, the increasingly accelerated movements of which drew disparate parts of this behemoth ever closer and as I argue, in ever more messy and uncoordinated ways.³⁴

Given the reliance of this thesis on governmental records, we will be meeting a cast of familiar faces, as well as relatively less familiar ones. Though I will be touching on the British Malayan ‘greats’ such as Francis Light, Frank Swettenham, Hugh Clifford, and H.N. Ridley, the networked nature of this analysis also means that a less-studied cast of characters can be interweaved into the narrative. Hence, over course of the next few chapters, we will also be hearing from the likes of those such as Billington Loftie and J.B. Carruthers, D.G. Campbell and Abraham Hale – the surgeons, district officers, and men of science who have featured less prominently in histories of British Malaya, but were no less important to its colonial administration. Examining the roles that these individuals played, we will see, then, how their presence in various networks brought them to dysfunctional life.

In Chapter 1, I examine how colonial officials during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century engaged with various discourses of tropicality in Penang. Attempting to prove Penang’s worth amidst the East India Company’s ever-expanding constellation of settlements in this region, officials perpetuated numerous descriptions of Penang’s fertility and health to justify its continued relevance to Empire. Discussing the former, I first demonstrate how Penang’s tropical fertility was cast in utilitarian terms. Subsequently, medical officers reporting on the situation in Penang often applied a form of medical topography to select areas in the island, thereby perpetuating the belief that health was affected by personal choices, rather than the overall tropical climate. These descriptions allowed for multiple tropical visions to co-exist in Penang, though as will also be seen, not all of them could be easily fulfilled.

³⁴ Tony Ballantyne, “Contesting the Empire of Paper: Cultures of Print and Anti-Colonialism in the Modern British Empire,” in *Indigenous Networks: Mobility, Connections and Exchange*, eds. Jane Carey and Jane Lydon (New York and London: Routledge, 2014): 220-221.

The following chapter then turns towards considering how Penang was connected imperfectly into pre-existing imperial networks, especially that of the eco-cultural kind. Looking particularly at the break-down of the island's first Botanic Gardens during the turn of the nineteenth century and subsequent search for a profitable, sustainable cash-crop in the decades to come, I propose the metaphor of a circuit-board to help visualise the failings of these connections. Individuals transferring misinformation and misunderstandings functioned as unreliable conduits, while Penang itself was a flickering node, rendered unstable by such actions. Taken in sum, these two opening chapters cast Penang as a precursor of sorts to the situation that would be replicated in the Malay States: where there was no one directed scheme behind colonial intervention, and where networks contributed to incoherence.

Shifting towards the Malay Peninsula, Chapter 3 centres on the interplay between mining, planting and society in the Malay States c.1874-1895 to consider two interconnected issues: first, the environmental justifications behind extending British influence into this region, and second, the ways in which officials grappled with the contradictions that came with pursuing disparate aims. Having relied once again on beliefs about tropical fertility and its effects to fuel intervention, administrators then had to weigh the consequences of mining against that of agriculture: its financial outputs, ensuing societies, and how these societies would look and act. With each economic activity offering contradictory socioeconomic effects, this chapter showcases how colonial administrators utilised environmental determinism and the reproduction of British social hierarchies in Malaya to help reconcile choosing agriculture over mining.

Chapter 4, in turn, makes a case study out of the FMS Agricultural Department. Exploring the arguments, confusion, and lack of direction that plagued this department from 1899 to the 1920s, I demonstrate how the Department encapsulated both the messy and (badly) interconnected nature of British colonial rule. Clashes between administrators indicated the presence of wholly separate trajectories within the same government, while attempts to draw on inter-colony connections coalesced with internal discord to mire the Department in further problems. Given the close association of the Department with British Malaya's rubber industry, this chapter offers a different approach to the history of Malaya's most profitable crop – one where rubber did not grow out of planned, rational discourse so as much as it struggled out of dysfunction and an inability to match visions with directions.

Finally, the last chapter of this thesis examines how land policies in the Malay Agricultural Settlement and Malay Reservations during the early-nineteenth century were misguided attempts to accommodate the presence of different colonial projects. While the British colonial government had managed to succeed in transforming the socioeconomic landscape of the region to their own benefit, administrators nevertheless remained anxious about what this would mean for Malay peasants and their ‘traditional’ ways of life. Exploring colonial attitudes towards Malay culture and the environment, this chapter argues that the unresolved question of land-use – who it belongs to, how it should be used, and why – functions as a prism into the inherently irreconcilable nature of British rule.

Reading these chapters in unison with each other, what emerges is a story where imperial networks served to entangle British Malaya in connections that sowed dysfunction and discord. From the very founding of Penang in 1786, colonial administrators found themselves embedded in and utilising these multi-directional relationships. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated, these did not necessarily lead to a coherent structure, as the presence of multiple colonial projects meant that officials were pulled in different and oft-contradictory directions. The disorderly nature of colonial rule in Malaya was thus not merely created by imperial networks – they pushed it in even more disparate directions, too. That being said, however, it is important to remember that colonial rule was never truly threatened here. In the context of British Malaya at least, the materialist motivations of its colonial administration meant that it still managed to struggle on and persist despite these constant interruptions and incoherencies.

What this thesis contributes, then, is a narrative of Empire where for all of its intentions and aims, it did not inherently adhere to order or stability. Examining how British Malaya’s colonial administrators interacted with their environments, I argue that imperial networks had the power to both make and unmake, to create and also mire in difficulty. Disharmonious and with each layer out of step with each other, the colonial history of British Malaya is thus more than merely one of mines and plantations. By situating these arguments within the realm of colonial attitudes towards the environment, I not only intend to further complicate the new imperial environmental historiographies currently available to us, but also include Malaya as a worthwhile area of study.

With that in mind, the following chapter opens with the familiar story of Francis Light. The year is 1786, and with the coming of the East India Company to Penang, the first step towards British colonial rule in this region is about to begin.

Chapter 1:

Tropical visions of Penang and its conflicts, 1786-1820s

Shots were being fired on the island of Penang. Under the unrelenting glare of the tropical sun, artillerymen loaded dollar after dollar into their guns, aimed at the great green wall of undergrowth before them, and pulled their triggers to launch silver coins into the trees. Meanwhile, off to the side, Captain Francis Light might have stood close by watching this ridiculous endeavour with no small amount of satisfaction. As the strange and oft-repeated myth of Penang's colonial founding goes, this was, after all, his doing. Cutting down jungle and underwood was gruelling, mostly thankless work, but with any luck, the promise of finding coins in the midst of all this thick shrubbery would better entice the Malays to continue clearing the land.¹

While it is questionable whether Light had in fact employed such creative use of both guns and silver dollars, the setting, at least, of this enduring foundation myth remains somewhat true to history.² Once the East India Company's ships dropped anchor, their crews had clambered ashore only to encounter a land that seemed more jungle than anything.³ This was not yet the island that would one day be described as a place that "rivals any thing that has been said of the Elysian fields."⁴ Instead, what confronted them was a vast, green, tangle of growth, stretching up and over the hills in the distance and held back in parts only by mangrove trees growing along the shore. It was here, on this small, tropical island just off the western coast of the Malay Peninsula, that the British would soon come to raise the settlement of Penang.

¹ J.R. Logan, "Notices of Penang," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 4, no.1 (1850): 636.

² There is not official documentation of guns and silver dollars ever having been used, but the myth has since been repeated in numerous publications. See, for instance: A. Francis Steuart, *A Short Sketch of the Lives of Francis and William Light: The founders of Penang and Adelaide with extracts from their journals* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1901), 21; Goh Ban Lee, "The foundation of urban planning in George Town and Adelaide," *Kajian Malaysia* 6, no.1 (1988): 54; Lawrence Chua, *Gold by the Inch* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 70; Simon Richmond et.al, *Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei* (Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004), 153; Myra Shackley, *Atlas of Travel and Tourism Development* (Oxford and Massachusetts: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 86.

³ Kenneth McPherson, "Penang 1786-1832: A promise Unfulfilled," in *Gateways of Asia: Port Cities of Asia in the 13th-20th Centuries*, ed. Frank Broeze (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 109; John Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India: being a descriptive account of Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, and Malacca; their peoples, products, commerce, and government* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1865), 307.

⁴ James Johnson, *An account of a voyage to India, China &c. in His Majesty's ship Caroline, performed in the years 1803-4-5, interspersed with descriptive sketches and cursory remarks* (London: R. Philips, 1806), 95.

The Company had come into the possession of Penang (soon renamed Prince of Wales Island) via the machinations of Francis Light who, in 1786, persuaded the King of Kedah to lease it to the Company at the sum of 10,000 Spanish dollars per annum.⁵ Laid out across 108 square miles and within easy sight of the Malay Peninsula, Penang had once hosted a thriving settlement of no less than 3000 souls – or so one old Malay villager claimed to Captain Alexander Kyd of the Bengal Engineers, when the latter made his report on the region in the following year.⁶ As was explained to Kyd, the King of Kedah had sent an armament to expel Penang's people when they turned to piracy and started to disrupt local commerce. Consequently, only 158 Malay villagers remained when Light arrived in 1786, most of them engaging in a subsistence lifestyle that relied on fishing and collecting forest products.⁷

Traipsing across Penang to write his survey of the island in 1787, Kyd would come across evidence of previous cultivation, but in the thirty years that were said to have passed since the pirates fled their island home, the jungle had reclaimed most signs of anyone ever having lived there. Only one part of the island still bore witness to the society that had once worked its land, this being a space of some three square miles where Kyd noted the many fruit trees and furrows that remained.⁸ Mostly uninhabited, pleasantly warm, and in possession of what appeared to be fertile soil, Penang gave the appearance of the perfect place to establish a settlement.

In this chapter, I examine early writings on Penang to argue that administrators relied on numerous descriptions of the island as a tropical space to justify its acquisition and continued colonial occupation. First situating the claiming of Penang in 1786 within broader politico-economic concerns, I demonstrate how positive depictions of the island's material conditions initially persuaded the Company to envision it as a valuable, multi-purpose possession – be it

⁵ The exact figure paid annually to the Sultan of Kedah for British occupation of the island varied considerably over the years. In 1786, the Sultan initially requested an annual subsidy of \$30,000, which Light then represented as \$10,000 to the Company. This amount was subsequently lowered to \$6,000 by 1791 after a failed attempt by Kedah to force the British out from Penang, and then raised to \$10,000 again after both Penang and Province Wellesley were ceded to the British. See: L.A. Mills, *British Malaya 1824-67* (Selangor, Malaysia: MBRAS, reprint 1961. Originally published 1925), 48-50; R. Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38, no.1 (1965): 142-147.

⁶ K.G. Tregonning, "The Early Land Administration and Agricultural Development of Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39, no.2 (1966): 34; Alexander Kyd, "Copy of a Memoir from Captain Kyd regarding Prince of Wales Island and the other objects recommended to his Enquiry," 1 September 1787. *IOR G/34/1*.

⁷ Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780-1830* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 184

⁸ Kyd, "Copy of a Memoir". *IOR G/34/1*.

as a port, penal, or plantation colony. When the Company's Board of Directors in Bengal started to question whether such hopes could ever be fulfilled, officials on Penang sought to allay these misgivings by continuing to highlight the useful qualities of the island. Examining how early officials lauded Penang's tropical fertility, so as to address their own anxieties about Penang's continued relevance to the Company, I assert that the utilitarian language used here differed from the more aesthetically-inclined tropical discourses common to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. I also contend that descriptions of colonial health in Penang during the early-nineteenth century drew on medical topographies similar to those of India, in that certain areas and actions were considered more healthy for Europeans than others. By foregrounding how Europeans could maintain their health instead of vilifying the island's climate, officials on Penang were able to construe the island as suitable for colonial settlement.

To undertake this analysis, I read official reports, letters, and publications to posit that tropical discourses about Penang from 1786 to the early 1830s drew from tropes of tropical fertility and disease, which were in turn influenced by the island's ambivalent position within the Empire. Though desiring to extend their network and lay down new nodal points, British administrators also had to face up to and address the precariousness of Penang's position. Administrators thus turned to imposing multiple tropical visions on the island to justify continued colonial occupation there – though as will be seen, not all of these immediately found success. What this chapter does, then, is emphasise the uncertainty that plagued the founding of this new settlement and highlight how administrators used different environmental descriptions of Penang to their advantage. To unpack these contentions, the following section examines the tropics as both a physical and a conceptual space, before going on to consider the intellectual frameworks that underpin this chapter.

Fertility and health in the tropical realm

In terms of geography, the tropics can be described as the region that lies between the coordinates of 23° 27' North (the Tropic of Cancer) and 23° 27' South (the Tropic of Capricorn), with the equatorial line bisecting its middle. The tropics thus encompass a great many regions, these including, but not limited to parts of the Americas, Middle East, South Asia, Australia, and of course, Southeast Asia. Despite these terrains ranging from grasslands and deserts to seas and forests, the "humid lowlands" and tropical islands have come to be the main face of the tropics. Notably, Europe is the sole inhabited continent which does not

possess a tropical region.⁹

Given this situation, it is somewhat unsurprising that European colonial imaginaries came to view the tropics as the inverse of temperate regions. David Arnold, in particular, has argued that associating a region with the tropics was to define it as “environmentally and culturally distinct from Europe”, while also perceiving it in relation to other tropical places.¹⁰ In this case, the tropics did not merely indicate a place’s position on a map, or its warmth and humidity. Instead, the tropics came invested with its own set of ideas, these often being understood in juxtaposition to the ‘norm’ of temperate climates.¹¹ These differences would have been further entrenched with the increased reach of imperial powers such as Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands during the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries. While those travelling from the Mediterranean and more southerly regions of Europe might have been able to discern some commonalities between their own climate and that of the tropics, visitors from more northern climes only saw a foreign Other, visions of which were perpetuated by an increasing number of written descriptions.¹²

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that such understandings began only during the seventeenth century.¹³ Even from the time of Classical Antiquity, philosophers such as Strabo and Aristotle perceived the world as divided into zones. Aristotle, for instance, thought that people could not exist in places beyond the tropics, and that only temperate areas were capable of sustaining human life. Similarly, the Hippocratic corpus associated the body's four humors with certain environments, while Pliny's work drew links between race and climate.¹⁴ By the early-fifteenth century, Europeans encountering the New World were awed by the fertile scenes that greeted them near the equator and believed that they were capable of finding Eden itself.¹⁵ A century later, these ideas of tropicity had morphed into dreams of riches brought about by the spice trade, and by the 1700s, a “full-fledged myth of tropical

⁹ Paul Sutter, “The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary,” in *Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179-180.

¹⁰ David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 2.

¹¹ David Arnold, “India's place in the tropical world, 1770-1930,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26, no.1 (1998): 2.

¹² David Arnold, “The place of 'the tropics' in Western medical ideas since 1750,” *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 2, no.4 (1997): 304.

¹³ David Arnold, “‘Illusory Riches’: representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no.1 (2000): 6.

¹⁴ Sutter, “The Tropics,” 180-181.

¹⁵ Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 16.

exuberance” had taken hold of European imaginations.¹⁶

It is important to also note that Europeans did not merely understand the torrid tropics as standing in opposition to temperate climes. Setting foot in this warm, humid region, Europeans were confronted with a climate that also seemed to contradict itself. What gave rise to a luxurious fertility also promised the all too prevalent possibilities of death and disease, these dangers lurking in every miasmatic swamp and every acre of uncleared jungle. What appeared to be life-giving was thus also capable of sickness or death, this being clearly evidenced by the numerous European colonists who fell ill and ultimately perished in the tropics.¹⁷ Importantly, these anxieties were not merely limited to physical degeneration, as it was believed that morals, too, could be eroded if one spent too much time in such a degenerative climate.¹⁸

It is thus in the midst of these ongoing European beliefs about the tropics that colonial officials wrote missive after missive lauding the wonders of Penang’s natural features: its deep harbours and tall trees, fresh water and good soil. Examining the language that these administrators used to describe Penang, I demonstrate that its status as an isle in the tropics did not necessarily lead to its descriptions being confined to the dominant discourses of tropicity at that time. Though fertile, Penang was no Eden, nor was it imagined as a utopian paradise. Penang’s fate hung in the balance during these first few years of occupation, and with the Company constantly requiring assurance that this place was indeed worthy of its attention, local administrators were anxious to foreground its benefits in a practical manner.

In this case, British official who arrived on Penang in the late-eighteenth century acknowledged the island’s fecundity, healthy disposition, and many other material possibilities, but were also conscious of the intense labour that would be required to transform Penang into a site for imperial remuneration. Though these men were certainly inspired by cultural beliefs about tropical fertility, I demonstrate that their understandings of

¹⁶ Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1965), 60.

¹⁷ See: Karen Kupperman, “Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no.2 (1984): 213-240.

¹⁸ Arnold, “‘Illusory Riches’: representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950,” 7-8. Also see: David Livingstone, “Tropical climate and moral hygiene: the anatomy of a Victorian debate,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 32, no. 112 (1999): 93-110; James Beattie, *Empire and Environmental Anxiety: Health, Science, Art and Conservation in South Asia and Australasia, 1800-1920* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Penang were couched in more practical terms.

By making this argument, I draw on the work of Beth Fowkes Tobin who asserts that there were exceptions to the more typical Edenic discourses of tropicality during the late-eighteenth century. In contrast to the standard ‘polite’ Enlightenment science of the day, some individuals instead applied what Tobin calls an ‘artisanal’ framework.¹⁹ While polite science was characterised mostly by gentlemen conducting independent and amateur investigations, these artisanal descriptions of the tropics were more practice-based – more matter of fact and attentive to details of local labour or methods when it came to interacting with the land.²⁰ Applied to Penang, I assert that the utilitarian nature of the island’s descriptions were largely influenced by its tenuous place in the Empire. Having imposed a slew of ambitious visions on the island, the Company’s Directors quickly realised that Penang might not, in fact, deliver on most of them. Coupled with the island’s constant drain on Company finances, this often made the Board of Directors ambivalent about keeping Penang within its retinue of settlements. Hence, it did Penang’s officials little good to wax poetic about the island as a veritable Eden when their superiors were more concerned about its practical uses.

Fertility of the island aside, officials were also initially convinced that Penang’s tropical weather could prove to be nothing but remarkably healthy for European settlers. Subsequently, colonial missives and reports sent back to Bengal never failed to mention the salubrity of the island’s weather and its congenial effects to Europeans recovering from illnesses – especially those resulting from long voyages at sea. The presence of highlands such as Penang Hill, too, led officials to build convalescent houses there as they believed its temperate climate would assist in restoring weakened European constitutions.²¹ Nonetheless, it was undeniable that death and diseases still prevailed amongst European officers, so much so that scholar S. Robert Aiken has since quite bluntly described Penang as a “death trap.”²²

¹⁹ Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters 1760-1820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2-5, 9.

²⁰ Lawrence E. Klein, “Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,” *Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002): 890.

²¹ S. Robert Aiken, “Early Penang Hill Station,” *Geographical Review* 77, no.4 (1987): 426.

²² See: Tomotaka Kawamura, “Maritime Asian Trade and the Colonization of Penang c.1786-1830,” in *Hinterlands and Commodities: Place, Space, Time and the Political Economic Development of Asia over the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Tsukasa Mizhushima, George Bryan Souza, and Dennis O. Flynn (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 157; Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka*, 239; Aiken, “Early Penang Hill Station,” 430.

Examining early nineteenth-century medical records and reports on Penang, I suggest that the situation there was not a matter of either one or the other. Though administrators continued to couch the island's environment in mostly positive terms throughout most of its early colonial history, some medical practitioners also acknowledged the danger of certain areas and activities. Ultimately, the general consensus on Penang was that it was perfectly habitable so long as proper precautions were adhered to. Colonial health in Penang thereby had more to do with the specificities of certain locations and actions, rather than its overall climate.

To frame this, I draw from the work of Hans Pols, who asserts that late-eighteenth century Dutch and British understandings about tropical health in places such as nearby Batavia did not necessarily adhere to strict medical theories.²³ Instead, as Pols asserts, colonial medical practitioners in the tropics believed that the factors affecting European health were highly localised and could not be simply attributed to tropical environments at large.²⁴ Consequently, the ways in which Penang's officials identified certain areas of the island as more 'healthy' than others constituted a form of medical topography wrought small, this being a kind of report that laid out the material details of an area so as to evaluate its suitability for European health.²⁵ While medical topographies of India considered the properties of entire regions, the much smaller size of Penang confined observations to a particular plot of land, or even a specific ditch.²⁶

In the following section, I situate Penang within broader economic and political contexts to demonstrate how material descriptions of the island contributed to its eventual acquisition by the East India Company. While there have been works aplenty that examine the purpose of possessing Penang, I use this discussion to establish how material descriptions of Penang allowed the Company to envision a multitude of uses for it. Beyond providing much needed

²³ Hans Pols, "Health and Disease in the Tropical Zone: Nineteenth-century British and Dutch Accounts of European Mortality in the Tropics," *Science, Technology and Society* 23, no.2 (2018): 327-339.

²⁴ Ibid, 327.

²⁵ Wendy Jepson, "Of Soil, Situation, and Salubrity: Medial Topography and Medical Officers in Early Nineteenth-Century British India," *Historical Geography* 32, no.1 (2004): 137.

²⁶ For medical topographies of India, see for instance: James Annesley, *Sketches of the Most Prevalent Diseases of India; Comprising a Treatise on the Epidemic Cholera of the East; Statistical and Topographical Reports of the Diseases in the Different Divisions of the Army under the Madras Presidency; Embracing Also the Annual Rate of Mortality, &c. Second Edition* (London: Thomas and George Underwood, 1829); R. Baike, *Observations on the Neilgherries, including an Account of their Topography, Climate, Soil and Productions, and of the Effects of the Climate on the European Constitution* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1834); J. Evans, "Observations on the Medical Topography of Tirhoor," *Transactions of the Medical and Physical Society of Calcutta* 4, no. 1 (1828): 241-246.

historical context, this will also allow for colonial descriptions of Penang to be foregrounded in the story of its founding.

An island for the Company

On the 16th of July 1786, “a light breeze and flood tide” ran the *Eliza*, *Prince Henry*, and sharp-nosed snow *Speedwell* gently into Penang's harbour, where they “anchored in 13 fathoms within a musket-shot of the shore”.²⁷ It was not long after the arrival of these Company ships that Light wrote about how the island was awash with “Visitors of all kinds, some for curiosity, some for gain, and some for plunder.” These included a local Malay chieftain who desired to build a house on Penang, the community leader for the Chinese, the “Captain China”, and 100 Christians of India under the guidance of a French padre, who had brought a net with him – “which was very acceptable.”²⁸ Happily, curiosity and gain both seem to have won out over plunder, as on the 23rd of July, Light noted that a small bazaar had sprung up by the cantonments, this marketplace growing in size when several Malay *praus* (sailing boats) arrived from Kedah bearing articles for sale. With supplies regularly being shipped in from the mainland, this small, fledgling settlement was soon furnished with all kinds of necessities – from building materials to fruits, fowl, and rice.²⁹

While there is no record of what the original 158 or so Malay inhabitants on the island might have thought about all this hullabaloo, Light nonetheless wrote that some of them had visited him on the 19th of July and offered their service as assistance.³⁰ This was eventually accepted and they proceeded to help cut down some of the larger trees, though Light found that he could not “prevail upon them to attempt any more, having broke two of their *Bluongs* (axes.)” Yet, practicality still won out over politeness, and with tree-clearing proving to be “a slow and laborious work”, Light soon supplemented Chinese labour with an offer to the Malays: “a dollar for every four trees they should cut down.” This was soon accepted, and the Malays “went to work with great spirit.”³¹

²⁷ Francis Light, “Journal of Francis Light,” in Appendix to Consultation the 13th December 1786. *IOR G/34/2*.

²⁸ Francis Light to Andrew Ross. Letter, 25 September 1786. Quoted in Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory Volume the Second* (London: Ballintine and Law, 1808), 584, 585.

²⁹ Light, “Journal of Francis Light,” *IOR G/34/2*.

³⁰ Francis Light to Andrew Ross. Letter, 25 September 1786. Quoted in Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory Volume the Second*, 585.

³¹ Light, “Journal of Francis Light,” *IOR G/34/2*.

Given Light's descriptions of early Penang as a hive of activity and commerce, we can glimpse a small sense of what initially made the island attractive to the East India Company. Penang's deep, natural harbour allowed for ships to dock with relative ease, while its great number of sturdy trees promised wood aplenty for naval repairs. Being in close proximity to Kedah, supplies that the island could not yet raise by itself were but also a *prau* away. With the first market in Penang having been set up scarcely less than a week after Light's arrival, it would have been evident that trade, too, could be conducted with relative ease. Even better was how the local Malays seemed amenable to British presence, this being a far cry from other settlements such as Aceh which Light had previously described as requiring a great force to subdue, as it was populated by "rigid and superstitious Mohamedans, sullen fickle & Treacherous".³²

In light of these numerous benefits, the acquisition of a settlement in this region would have initially been seen as a great boon to the Company. Writing on this matter, K.G. Tregonning asserts that most British activity in Southeast Asia during the mid to late-eighteenth century was driven by the tea trade. Having acquired an unquenchable taste for this beverage, British merchants were faced with the problem of how to best buy it. The Chinese market had no demand for British goods and while silver was deemed acceptable, draining Britain of bullion was thought to be detrimental to the country's economy. To remedy this conundrum, Britain instead had to turn to other commodities to partake in this valuable trade: tin and pepper, to be procured from the Malay world.³³

Fortunately for the British, these Malay products were held in high esteem by the Chinese. Malay tin had the benefit of being more malleable than other sorts and could subsequently be pounded into thin foil, which could then be used for "lining tea chests and for ritual burning." Meanwhile, the Chinese deemed Malay pepper – especially that from the state of Terengganu on the Malay Peninsula – to be both cheaper and superior to what could be procured from Malabar. British traders wishing to obtain these goods thus exported textiles and other products from British India to the Malay world, where they could be sold for valuable

³² Francis Light to Governor General and Council. Letter, 15 February 1786. Bengal General Proceedings, 2 March 1786. *IOR G/34/2*.

³³ K.G. Tregonning, *The British in Malaya: The First Forty Years, 1786-1826* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1965), 7.

supplies of tin and pepper.³⁴ Other materials, too, such as cloth, opium, specie, and precious metals were traded to and from the surrounding regions.³⁵

Importantly, the British were not the first to establish or even utilise these connections. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, the region was no stranger to international transshipment during this time, the Malay world having long been incorporated into broader networks of trade, commerce, and exchange.³⁶ Indeed, as Leonard and Barbara Andaya point out, the region's strategic economic importance gradually transformed it into an anchor for Europeans who wished to participate in the Chinese tea trade.³⁷ Placed in this context, Penang's close proximity to the riches of the Malay Peninsula and its central location as an entrepot made it a useful foothold for the Company. This would have been even all the more attractive in light of how most attempts to establish Company ports eastward of India had all ended in abject failures, as from the 1760s onwards, early schemes for places such as Balambagan, Aceh, Riau, and even Kedah, proved to be unsustainable.³⁸

At this juncture, it is apt to acknowledge that Light also had his own interests in region. Examining the lead up to Light's success at convincing the Company to possess Penang, R. Bonney notes that it is no coincidence that Light's previous suggestions for settlements were all located in areas that he had trading interests in. In this manner, the Company's anxieties about other foreign powers shutting them off from trading in the Straits of Melaka were Light's own anxieties, too, and having a Company settlement somewhere in this region ensured that Light could not only continue to trade under Company protection, but also

³⁴ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: Macmillan Education, 1982), 89-90.

³⁵ Nordin Hussin, "Networks of Malay Merchants and the Rise of Penang as a Regional Trading Centre," *Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no.3 (2005): 230.

³⁶ See, in particular, works by Anthony Reid: Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680. Volume One: The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988); Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680. Volume Two: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Anthony Reid, ed., *Southeast Asia in the early modern era: Trade, power, and belief* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1993). Also see: Craig A. Lockhard, "'The Sea Common to All': Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400-1750," *Journal of World History* 21, no.2 (2010): 219-247; Om Prakash, "The Trading World of India and Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Period," *Archipel* 56, no.1 (1998): 31-42; Kenneth Hall, "Multi-Dimensional Networking: Fifteenth-Century Indian Ocean Maritime Diaspora in Southeast Asian Perspective," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49, no.4 (2006): 454-481; Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, eds., *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 89-90.

³⁸ See: D.G.E. Hall, "From Mergui to Singapore, 1686-1819; A Neglected Chapter in the Naval History of the Indian Ocean," *History New Series* 40, no.140 (1955): 255-272.

obtain preferences or concessions as a reward.³⁹ Reading these contentions alongside Alexander Kyd's 1795 report on Penang, Bonney's assessment of Light might well seem partially accurate. As Kyd asserted, there was "little doubt" that Light "had a Share in the Chief Commercial House there". As such, Light may have "possessed the principles of Justice and impartiality", but at the same time, it was "impossible but that his Partners would make use of his influence ... and in fact ... Establish a Monopoly of all the valuable articles."⁴⁰

While the need for a trading base was at the forefront of British (and Light's) requirements in this region, the Company was also alive to the prospect of needing to stave off the spectre of increasing Franco-Dutch influence. Besides being involved in the East Indies at large, the Dutch were firmly established in important trading centres such as Melaka and Batavia.⁴¹ The French, in contrast, had continuing interests in Cochin China.⁴² Light himself seems to have acknowledged and indeed, even utilised these ongoing anxieties when suggesting Penang to the Company, a clear example of which can be found in a letter he sent to the then-Governor General of Bengal, John Macpherson.

Writing in January of 1786, Light raised the first bogey of the Dutch by noting that they had recently built a fort at Riau. Combined with their pre-existing settlement at Melaka, this resulted in the Dutch effectively possessing both sides of the Straits – "nothing is left", Light warned somewhat ominously, "but the small Kingdoms of Queda and Acheen." Turning next to French activity, Light went on to report that the French had recently obtained permission to establish a settlement in Cochin China and was convinced that they were involved in some kind of intrigue with the Siamese, this then being followed up with an assertion that the French had sent an ambassador to Ava (now part of Myanmar) where he was "well received".⁴³ Notably, it was in this very same letter that Light notified the Company of his possession of Penang. As Light claimed, he understood that Government wished to "obtain some useful and convenient Port for the protection of the Merchants who trade to China and

³⁹ Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," 153.

⁴⁰ Alexander Kyd to Sir John Shore, Governor General in Council. Letter, 2 August 1795. *IOR G/34/1*.

⁴¹ Leonard Y. Andaya, "Interactions with the Outside World and Adaption in Southeast Asian Society, 1500-1800," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia Volume One: From Early Times to c.1800*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992. Reprinted 1994), 359-364.

⁴² B.E. Kennedy, "Anglo-French Rivalry in Southeast Asia 1763-93: Some Repercussions," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4, no.2 (1973): 208-209, 212-214.

⁴³ Francis Light to John Macpherson. Letter, 25 January 1786. *IOR G/34/1*.

for the Service of His Majesty's Fleet in the time of War in either monsoon". To that end, Light had used the "influence and friendship" he had with the King of Kedah to procure a grant of Penang.⁴⁴

Having established how urgently the Company needed to find a port in this region, Light now had the perfect atmosphere in which he could introduce the saving grace of Penang and its numerous material benefits. Though presently uncultivated, Light described Penang as naturally producing numerous forest products, while also abounding with animals that could be hunted. Even better, it had "excellent water, a dry healthy soil" and a harbour teeming with fish. The Malay Peninsula also lay less than two miles away, this proximity being a fortuitous thing indeed when the region produced much rice and was well stocked with both cattle and poultry. As such, Light was nothing but optimistic about the uses of Penang:

By taking possession of this Island, you acquire a Port at which all vessels bound to China may procure refreshments and those articles of Trade, which best suits the China markets, the Malays and Buggesses [sic] will have a place of Safety to come and purchase Opium, Piece Goods, and Europe manufactures, you will likewise in a short time obtain a more exact knowledge of the state and utility of the Eastern Commerce, and be enabled to form such alliances as may prove beneficial to the Honorable Company both in Peace and War.⁴⁵

Wooed by such positive descriptions and anxious to secure a port, Governor-General Macpherson and by extension, the Council of Directors ultimately proved amenable to Light's plan. In a postscript to his letter to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors on the 26 of January 1786, Macpherson even lauded Light as a man of "excellent Character and good information" due to his extensive experience in the Straits – a clear sign that his reports could be believed.⁴⁶ More importantly, however, was Macpherson's admission that he had

⁴⁴ Ibid. While it is not within the purview of this chapter to discuss the complexities surrounding the terms of this grant, it might be apt to mention that Light had played what one scholar has since called a "double-game", as he misrepresented the terms of this grant to both the Sultan of Kedah and the Company. See: Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," 135-158.

⁴⁵ Francis Light to John Macpherson. Letter, 25 January 1786. *IOR G/34/1*.

⁴⁶ Indeed, Light had been trading in Kedah as early as 1771, and it was a report of this positive experience that led to the Company attempting to establish a site there. This largely failed due to the ineptness of one Mr. Monckton who was placed in charge of the Kedah expedition. See: Tregonning, *The British in Malaya*, 15-20.

also long been keeping an eye on French movements in the region. As such, he proposed that “possession to be taken of the Ports and Islands offered” by the King of Kedah – though at this point, he placed a greater importance on Junk Ceylon rather than Penang, Light’s last letter having alluded to the Company being able to acquire the former as well “without any great additional Force or charge”.⁴⁷ A second letter from Light to both the Governor-General and Council in February 1786 only served to reinforce these notions and steer the Company towards Penang instead of Junk Ceylon. Despite the latter being a “good healthy island” with wood and water, Light thought it would take six to seven years before it was sufficiently cleared and cultivated to supply a fleet. Penang, on the other hand, could simply purchase whatever was needed from the Malay Peninsula.⁴⁸

A free merchant by the name of Joseph Price similarly threw his support behind Penang, claiming in a letter read by the Council that he preferred Penang “to all others at this time in the power of this Government to obtain.” Junk Ceylon, for instance, was too far northward, while Aceh was not quite as healthy. Notably, Price's letter also cast Penang as fulfilling additional roles. As Price reminded the Company, it not only wanted a trading centre, but also a “Windward Port of refreshment and repair to the King ships in time of war”. Referring specifically to Penang’s healthiness and fertility, in turn, Price also suggested that Penang be used to transport Indian convicts. Given that the cost of transportation to Penang would be equal to that of imprisonment in India, Price asserted that the island would have a “wonderful effect on the pusillanimous pilfering spirit of the natives”, who could in turn be employed in cultivation.⁴⁹

All of these arguments were evidently quite convincing to the Council, as they resolved on the 2nd of March 1786 to accept the Sultan of Kedah’s offer of Penang. Detailing their

⁴⁷ Ibid.; Extract of Postscript to the Governor-General's Letter to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors, 26 January 1786. *IOR G/34/1*.

⁴⁸ Francis Light to the Governor General and Council. Letter, 15 February 1786. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 2 March 1786. *IOR G/34/2*.

⁴⁹ Joseph Price to Governor General. Letter, 23 February 1786. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 2 March 1786. *IOR G/34/2*. For more on Penang’s role as a penal colony, see: C.M. Turnbull, “Convicts in the Straits Settlements 1826-1867,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 43, no.1 (1970): 87-103; Anoma Pieries, “The “Other” Side of Labor Reform: Accounts of Incarceration and Resistance in the Straits Settlements Penal System, 1825-1873,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no.2 (2011): 453-479; Anand A. Yang, “Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of World History* 14, no.2 (2003): 179-208; Clare Anderson, “Convicts, Commodities, and Connections in British Asia and the Indian Ocean, 1786-1866,” *International Review of Social History* 64, Special Issue S27 (2019): 205-227.

reasons for this, the Council noted that Penang would: connect the Bengal trade with China and promote commerce, be valuable as a “port of refreshment and repair to the Kings, the Company and the Country ships”, function as a “station from which Her Majesty's squadron may ... proceed to the support of the Company's settlements”, and of course, break the Dutch chokehold at Riau and Melaka by offering an alternative “mart for the *proos* [sic] of the Eastern Seas and the sale of our opium”.⁵⁰

Given these different descriptions and assertions, we can see how Penang's perceived material benefits aligned with broader political and economic concerns. British participation in the tea trade was predicated on obtaining tradeable goods such as tin and pepper from the Malay isles. Meanwhile, the ever-present threat of having to compete with other European powers such as the French and Dutch lent an additional sense of urgency to the endeavour, this being all the more pertinent as the Company possessed no port in this region until the acquisition of Penang in 1786.

Attempting to convince the Company of Penang's utility as a trading centre in this context, Light relied heavily on positive descriptions of Penang's health, harbour, water, soil, trees, and proximity to Kedah. Deep harbours allowed for easy docking and ships seeking either repairs or replenishments had reliable access to both, as sturdy trees aided in the former, while Penang's fertile soil and nearness to Kedah ensured the latter. More importantly, local products could also be readily procured for sale. Individuals such as Joseph Price would have thus found it relatively easy to expand on these aspects to also envision Penang as fulfilling additional roles: a refitting and refuelling station, for instance, or even a penal colony. Consequently, early descriptions of Penang allowed for Company officials to impose a number of visions of this new settlement.

Pragmatic approaches to tropical fertility

Given that officials describing Penang did not celebrate the island's natural bounty as much as catalogue its usefulness, this section asserts that texts about Penang departed from the norms of tropical discourse. As Beth Fowkes Tobin has argued, tropical discourses during this period were inundated with “pastoral and Edenic tropes”, as well as aesthetic representations. At the same time, these colonial representations of the tropics as naturally

⁵⁰ Board Resolutions. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 2 March 1786. *IOR G/34/2*.

fertile and abundant effectively erased the local processes that went into cultivating the land.⁵¹ Take, for instance, the manner in which George Hamilton, a surgeon aboard the H.M.S. *Pandora*, wrote of Tahiti in the 1790s:

...what poetic fiction has painted of Eden, or Arcadia, is here realized,
where the earth without tillage produces both food and cloathing [sic],
the trees loaded with the richest of fruit.⁵²

For colonists such as Hamilton, a tropical island might have been akin to a paradise. Here, no human intervention was needed – the fecundity of nature itself was sufficient.

In contrast to the above, I demonstrate that writings on Penang foregrounded the island's pragmatic and practical uses, rather than its Edenic qualities. Though constantly acknowledged as fertile, the quality of Penang's soil did not necessarily mean that immeasurable bounties could simply spring forth from the natural beauties of nature. At the same time, depictions of Penang also took note of the work that had been, and had yet to be done. The relative lack of a local population meant that much of the island remained wooded and in dire need of hired hands to help clear it, while the pressure of convincing the Company to maintain Penang also required administrators to submit somewhat more realistic expectations for its development. Officials thereby looked upon Penang's environment with an eye to what could be used, as well as how they could do so.

Perceptions of the tropics as a paradisiacal locale spread through a combination of factors. As David Arnold has argued, the "myth of tropical exuberance" became more common during the late-eighteenth century due to the increased popularity of travel literature and tropical landscape paintings.⁵³ Meanwhile, Tobin's investigation of how the gentleman scientist Joseph Banks described Tahiti as an 'arcadia' similarly leads her to note that the "cultured imagination" of eighteenth-century gentlemen helped position the tropics as a bountiful place.⁵⁴ As such, Edenic ideas of the tropics were propagated via the texts and visual media produced by individuals belonging to an upper class. By using "literary, natural history, and

⁵¹ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 9, 11.

⁵² Basil Thomson, ed., *Voyage of the H.M.S. 'Pandora' despatched to arrest the mutineers of the 'Bounty' in the South Seas, 1790-91. Being the narratives of Captain Edward Edwards, R.N. The Commander and George Hamilton the Surgeon* (London: Francis Edwards, 1915), 108-109.

⁵³ Arnold, "India's place in the tropical world, 1770-1930," 3.

⁵⁴ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 34-35.

aestheticising practices” in their works, travellers and scientists could legitimise and transform them into something “learned and culturally sophisticated.”⁵⁵

This intersection of class with certain social and professional networks helped to further propagate these perspectives and confer a sheen of legitimacy onto them. Joseph Banks, for instance, was the leading science adviser to the British Government, this position rendering him not only deeply embedded in the myriad processes of imperial governance, but also a key instigator of imperial expansion.⁵⁶ At the same time, his involvement with establishments such as the Royal Society, Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, African Association, and London Missionary Society allowed for an overlap of roles that helped further his personal interests.⁵⁷ Similar to how Light strove to align Company interests with his own commercial ones, Banks was not above using these socio-political connections for his own benefit – as evidenced by the some 500 botanical specimens he obtained via missionaries in India during the late-eighteenth century.⁵⁸ Importantly, however, such legitimacy was not solely limited to members of the upper class, or those involved in particular social or political networks. According to Tobin, someone without the benefit of these backgrounds could achieve similar results by emulating the tropes within such circles, so as to elevate their own writings.⁵⁹

Placed in this context, it is important to acknowledge that most writings on Penang during this early period were not produced by individuals of particularly high social classes. Neither, then, did these individuals care to mimic aesthetic tropes to cast Penang as a newfound Eden, as their reports were largely written for the benefit of the Company’s Directors and not for circulation amongst the reading public. The aim was thus not to sell books, nor titillate readers with tales of a distant paradise – rather, these writers were primarily concerned with convincing the Company of Penang’s material benefits. In discussing the island’s environment with the Company, these men were also less interested in making new scientific findings and were, instead, more invested in Penang’s economic relevance. Put simply, these

⁵⁵ Ibid, 145.

⁵⁶ See: John Gascoigne, “Joseph Banks and the Expansion of Empire,” in *Science and Exploration in the Pacific: European voyages to the southern oceans in the eighteenth century*, ed. Margarette Lincoln (Suffolk: The Boydell Press in association with the National Maritime Museum, 1998), 39-54.

⁵⁷ See: John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16-33; W. Patrick Strauss, “Paradoxical cooperation: Sir Joseph Banks and the London Missionary Society,” *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 11, no.42 (1964): 246-252.

⁵⁸ Gascoigne, “Joseph Banks and the Expansion of Empire,” 45.

⁵⁹ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 145.

were administrators seeking to establish an island settlement, not writers or men of science.

Briefly establishing the backgrounds of the writers in question, one might turn first to Francis Light himself. Before he became the Superintendent of Penang, Light was a mere trader employed by the firm of Jourdain, Sullivan and De Souza in Madras.⁶⁰ His trading partner on both Junk Ceylon and eventually Penang, James Scott, was similarly a “trading master and owner” who had fallen on some hard times during the war.⁶¹ The commander of Penang’s garrison, Captain John Glass, too, was also a trader.⁶² Additionally, though he did not reside on the island, it might be apt to also include military engineer and eventual Surveyor General of India Alexander Kyd in this list, as he would come to furnish the Company with two lengthy reports on Penang.⁶³

While I will be conducting a close reading of texts from all these individuals, Light’s position as Superintendent necessitates that his works be foregrounded. As Penang’s most senior administrator, Light not only wrote back to the Company most frequently, but also functioned as the main conduit of information about the island. Subsequently, by reading the works of those intimately connected with Penang alongside reports from related individuals such as Kyd, the difference in their respective interests and motivations will help emphasise the nuances of their writings, especially with regards to the island’s material benefits. With that in mind, we begin with the following letter.

On the 15th of September 1786, Light forwarded a number of observations on Penang to both Governor General John Macpherson and the Council. Writing on the topic of cultivation, Light noted that the natives had claimed that Penang’s arable land was sufficient to produce enough grain and other planted products for up to 4000 families, this in turn leading Light to assert that the island would “daily encrease [sic] in value” and cause “much envy” to their neighbours.⁶⁴ In the same month, James Scott similarly addressed the same recipients to outline the reasons for why he preferred Penang to the recently formed settlement at Diego

⁶⁰ Bonney, “Francis Light and Penang,” 136.

⁶¹ K.J. Fielding, “The Settlement of Penang: by James Scott,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, no.1 (1955): 37-38.

⁶² John Bastin and M. Stubbs Brown, “Historical Sketch of Penang in 1794,” *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32, no.1 (1959): 21.

⁶³ Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 79.

⁶⁴ Francis Light to Governor General and Council. Letter, 15 September 1786. In Bengal Public Proceedings 13 September 1786. *IOR G/34/2*.

Garcia. Conceptualising Penang as a “marine port for the retreat or refitting of our war fleets”, Scott praised Penang's “fine climate, with plenty of all sorts of Provisions of Good quality wood and water & ca. in plenty and easily [sic] got so that there would be no detention on that account.” In sum, Scott thought that Penang's harbour, location, and the “island itself blessed with a healthy climate and fertile soil” meant that these aspects had “no Parallel in the Possession of Europeans in hither India.”⁶⁵

A further description of Penang from Light was also sent but a few weeks later, Light using part of it to now address the topic of potential animal husbandry on Penang. Here, he believed that it would only take a minimal amount of money to render Penang ready to supply fleets with meat. Goats, cows, and if the Company so wished it, even sheep could be raised on Penang. All that currently remained, claimed Light, was to encourage the inhabitants to engage in these activities, the implication thereby being that Penang's lands were ready for the using, if only there were only enough people to do so. The island was thus framed as “capable of high cultivation”, so much so that “from the produce a profit would arise to support the expence [sic] in part.”⁶⁶

These favourable reports of Penang notwithstanding, the Council adopted a far more careful approach. Writing back to Light in January 1787 to confirm his appointment as Superintendent, the Council also referred to the present state of their resources and the “great drain of Specie” that the late war had resulted in. Consequently, they could not spare the \$20,000 in silver that Light requested, but could still furnish him with copper coinage and goods for trade. The Company could thus help defray the cost of Penang, but until the Council was “fully satisfied ... that the Company will derive great advantages from such a measure”, they could only send 50 chests of opium and 100 pieces of cloth.

Interestingly, the Company also seems to have revised its priorities for Penang, now claiming that the “great object” in settling the island was to have it become a “Port of refreshment and repair”. As for Penang's role as a commercial port: “we must leave it to time and to your [Light's] good management to establish it as a port of commerce if the situation is

⁶⁵ James Scott to Governor General and Council. Letter, 25 September 1786. In *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Francis Light to Governor General and Council. Letter, 5 October 1786. In *Ibid.*

favorable”.⁶⁷ Rearranging their priorities in this way, the Company was drawing on long-standing perceptions of tropical islands as way stations, or places where men could rest and recover from sea voyages. Though writing in the context of environmental conservation, Richard Grove has noted the practical descriptions of tropical islands employed by travel-writers, especially during the 1500s to early 1600s. With their useful sources of wood, water, food, and any other number of necessities, these places were “sites of nurturing relief” and functioned as important nodal points that helped break up long shipping and sailing routes.⁶⁸

For Penang, however, this pivot in purpose also came with a note of warning. Contained within this missive were clear instructions for Light to inform the Council, “with as much accuracy as possible”, whether the settlement of Penang would be able to fulfil these purposes. Having Light’s opinions before them, the Council might then “be enabled to Judge whether it will be prudent to Continue or withdraw it altogether”. These ominous requests were nonetheless tempered by the fact that the Company had been somewhat swayed by Light’s description of the island’s capability for cultivation. To that end, at least, the Council decided to send 150 slaves from Bencoolen to Penang “for the purpose of clearing and cultivating the country”. In case that was not enough to render a boost to the fledgling settlement, the council also hoped to encourage some Chinese from Canton to settle there.⁶⁹

Perhaps also deciding that an external observer might help supplement Light’s observations thus far, the Company despatched one Captain Alexander Kyd to Penang in April 1787. Kyd was to give his attention to a myriad of issues and investigations, these including: a plan for the island’s fortifications, a report on Junk Ceylon, and most importantly for our purposes, observations on the “produce of the Island and the nature of its Soil”. At the same time, Kyd had to inform the Council as to whether Penang’s trees were suitable for utilising in repairs, or making into ship masts, while also estimating the amount of land fit for cultivation and how it might be extended via local labour. With this information, the Council hoped to form a view as to whether the produce of Penang was sufficient for its inhabitants, as well as for supplying ships.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Bengal Council to Francis Light. Letter, 22 January 1787. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 22 January 1787. IOR/G/34/2.

⁶⁸ Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39, 42-43.

⁶⁹ Bengal Council to Francis Light. Letter, 22 January 1787. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 22 January 1787. IOR/G/34/2.

⁷⁰ Bengal Council to Alexander Kyd. Letter, 10 April 1787. In Bengal Public Council 11 April 1787. *Ibid.*

While waiting for Kyd to return, the Council received a report from Captain John Glass, who had recently been put in charge of commanding the troops on Penang.⁷¹ Writing in May 1787, Glass noted that the sand of the island was “light and sandy, but fertile”, mixed with “a very productive Tin ore” that may prove remunerative to the Company. In terms of Penang's timber, it was “in general durable and fit for ship building”, Glass going on to assert that the cost for wood-clearing would not be great or particularly difficult, “as proved by the Natives.” Following up this claim, Glass briefly described the manner in which the Malays cut and burnt wood during the dry season, though he also acknowledged that their methods destroyed good wood along with the bramble. To avoid this and to “assist the poor farmer”, Glass suggested that the Company direct and pay for this endeavour instead. Meanwhile, Glass, like Light, was similarly enthusiastic about the island's prospects as a marine port, pointing in particular to the “fine climate, fertile soil and contiguity to a plentiful country” that would be beneficial to the “health and refreshment of the Seamen.” Consequently, Glass was nothing but optimistic about Penang, declaring somewhat triumphantly that “we are become possessed of a Harbour fitted by nature ... improvable in the Shelter, repairs and refreshments it can give a fleet”.⁷²

During the same Council seating in which they read Glass' letter, His Lordships had the pleasure to read a new missive from Light as well. Having furnished the Council with the goings-on of the island, Light went on to describe the area in which they were presently settled. The soil there was “covered with great variety of Forest and wild Fruit Trees”, and going further inland, the ground was similarly covered with trees and thorny plants. Given that the area tended to overflow during rainy weather, this led Light to believe that it would make for “good Paddy Grounds” when cleared. Some three miles from the fort, the soil around the Malay village there was also noted to be comprised of “exceedingly good sand and Clay in some places a fine white and yellow loam, fit for Brick, in other parts fine mould”. Former signs of habitation still remained in this area, including fruit trees and a “Plain covered with grass of considerable extent” which now housed the Company's 100 cattle and 140 goats. Adding on to this happy picture of productivity, Light noted that some of the Chinese settlers had even started making gardens, and since the island “abounds with Tin ore”, some people had even requested leave to go dig for tin – though Light had

⁷¹ Logan, “Notices of Penang,” 636.

⁷² John Glass to the Governor General. Letter, 29 April 1787. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 13 June 1787. *IOR G/34/2*.

ultimately not permitted it for fear of violating the terms of Penang's lease from the Sultan of Kedah.⁷³

Pausing here to take stock of how Penang has been described, we can start to see that officials on the island interweaved themes of tropical fertility into their descriptions, while also taking care to foreground its practical uses. Soil, frequently described as fertile, could thus not only someday support remunerative cultivation, but animal husbandry as well. Meanwhile, the possibility of procuring tin, rice, and bricks from Penang's soil was also raised. In the wake of the Company's doubt about maintaining Penang, these speculative descriptions gave way to more demonstrative ones instead. Further observations thereby involved more concrete images of productivity in the form of fruit trees, gardens, and grazing animals, so as to ground some of these speculations in reality. At the same time, officials were attuned to the type of labour that needed to be utilised, or was already in use by native societies. Understanding that Penang's riches required human intervention, officials described local processes so that they might comment on its efficiency and even offer suggestions for its improvement. As such, these themes highlight how Penang was cast as a space in which the trope of tropical fertility was modified to foreground practical, rather than Edenic qualities. This, in turn, was fuelled by anxieties surrounding the island's utility and permanence in the eyes of the Company.

Importantly, it was not only Penang's officials who adopted such a pragmatic approach. Turning now to the observations of Captain Alexander Kyd, we find that he employed similar descriptions, though they were slightly more sedate than those of Light's.⁷⁴ As the Surveyor General of India, Kyd would have been well-versed in surveying and went on to prepare similar reports for the Andamans, too, during the 1790s, before going on to administer the region in 1793.⁷⁵ Given Kyd's professional background, it might be seen from the following excerpts that he employed a more meticulous approach to detailing Penang's benefits, while also being careful to temper Company expectations by not presenting the island as capable of all things.

⁷³ Francis Light to Governor General. Letter, 7 May 1787. In *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Alexander Kyd was a relative of Colonel Robert Kyd, who founded the Calcutta Botanic Gardens. See: C.E. Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968. First published 1906), 240.

⁷⁵ Aparna Vaidik, *Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island History* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16, 21.

Kyd arrived in Penang on the 28th of May 1787 and spent almost two months there collecting information for his multi-paged report, which was then presented to the Council in early September. Obedient to the Council's specific requests, Kyd made note of the types of soil, trees, animals, and climate on Penang, these descriptions being largely similar in style to the ones previously examined. Writing first on soil, Kyd echoed previous assertions that most of Penang was suitable for planting grain and vegetables, there being “many spots so rich that any production which the Climate admits of may be reared”. Even sandy soil, “when dressed and manured” could afford “good vegetables both from the seed of Europe and India, as experience has already shown.” Penang’s trees were also described in great detail, Kyd using a good nine pages to discuss the properties of each type of tree, its growing conditions, and how it might used.

In his section on tin, Kyd reported that a sample of it was of “pretty good quality”, but there was a “question of great Doubt whether Government could reap any advantage from the working of the Mines”. From what Kyd had learnt, he did not think it possible if they were to employ their “own people” to do so. There was the option of involving Malay miners, but this was also a problem as the Malays were thought to be “so indolent a People that it is to be feared that much would not be got in this way”. Perhaps portending the myth of Light and his silver dollars that was to come, Kyd suggested that the Company might consider trying this experiment by offering a higher price to the Malays for their tin, so as to induce them to work harder. Nonetheless, Kyd still thought it prudent to warn that “great advantages must not however be expected from this Article”, as its expense almost equalled its value.

By describing the Malays in this disparaging manner, Kyd was making use of the myth of the lazy native – a trope that cast native populations as indolent. As Syed Hussein Alatas argues, colonial beliefs about the lazy native were established sometime during the mid-eighteenth century in this region, this being a by-product of increased Dutch influence in the Malay Archipelago.⁷⁶ While the myth will be explored in further detail in Chapter 3, it is worth noting here that Kyd’s description of the Malays as lazy was inconsistent, as in the very same report, Kyd also went on to praise their methods in clearing the island of trees. So impressed was Kyd with their work that he even asserted that regardless of whoever settled on Penang

⁷⁶ Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 22.

in future, the Malays would “probably always be necessary in cutting down Trees and clearing the Woods”. Kyd, like Glass, then embarked on a detailed description of their methods, going as far as to admit that they demonstrated a “good deal of ingenuity” and that the low price of their labour bore “no proportion to their real Value.” Correspondingly, Kyd did not merely acknowledge the transformative process of local labour – he even seemed to admire it and recognise its worth.

Concluding his observations, Kyd was convinced that Penang was preferable to places such as the Andamans, Nicobar Islands, and Junk Ceylon, “having more advantages and fewer disadvantages than any one of them.” “It is in a climate remarkable for its temperature and serenity being little subject to violent gales of Wind or hard and continued Rains”, declared Kyd. “It is upon a Coast abounding with Cattle, Fowls, Fish, and all kinds of Fruits in perfection.” On the island itself:

From the appearance of the Face of the Island and its Soil, it promises soon if cleared and cultivated with Spirit to be able to furnish every Article of refreshment within itself, sufficient for a large Fleet but above all it has on it an inexhaustible Stock of Timber fit for repairing Ships and for making masts ...⁷⁷

Having read Kyd’s report, the Council admitted to Light in December 1789 that “considerable advantage may be derived to the Island itself, and to the Public Interest in possessing it”. Yet, the Council still desired some clarification on topics such as cultivation, cattle, timber, and tin. Specifically, the Council wanted Light to confirm that these items were indeed procurable, and if they were, that he also had a plan to obtain them for the Company’s benefit. The Council thus reminded Light with no small amount of ominousness that though they had possessed Penang for three years now, “it has not been attended with any Public Benefit to their Trade or any other Public advantage but the Charge has been heavy”. Though it was acknowledged that this has long been the subject of correspondence between them, “the Result has not Satisfied the Board that the Expence [sic] is likely to cease, or the Public Benefit ... likely to be soon promoted.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Report by Captain Kyd. Report, 1 September, 1787. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 14 September 1787. *IOR G/34/2*.

⁷⁸ Bengal Council to Francis Light. Letter, 23 December 1789. In Bengal Consultations relative to Prince of Wales Island, 23 December 1789. *IOR G/34/3*.

Light took to this request for information with gusto, and as he was in Bengal during this period, the Council had the pleasure to start the new year of 1790 by reading almost fifty pages worth of observations. Though impossible to address all these descriptions, it is nonetheless still worth highlighting a number of key areas, particularly with reference to the island's fertility. Writing on Penang's ability to furnish produce, for instance, Light remained adamant that "from the general goodness of the Soil, every thing may be expected that Industry can produce". As he claimed, sixty families had settled by a river on the southeast side of the island and cleared 600 *orlongs* of land, which yielded 3600 *maunds* of rice in the past year.⁷⁹ Various kinds of fruits had also been planted, as well as both the plantain and sugar cane. Elsewhere, on the east side, 200 *orlongs* had been cleared, yielding 2000 *maunds*. Ground had also been laid out for pepper and *gutta gamba* (gamboge), while Chinese gardens supplied the bazaar with all kinds of vegetables – from beans and brinjals, to cucumbers and radishes. In all, 6000 *maunds* of rice (or an astonishing 18.2 million kilograms) had also been harvested that season, leading Light to assert that "the probability of the Island affording Sustenance for its Inhabitants is no longer doubtful, it becomes a Certainty."

Having given numerous examples, sketched out plans for preserving timber stock, and mostly abandoned the idea of tin-mining on Penang as the Company "cannot work the Tin Mines to any advantage", Light proceeded to name five "visible and undeniable" benefits of Penang. As a harbour, it secured ships from bad weather. As a port, it was favourable to commerce. As a refuge, it was a safe space for merchant ships. As an emporium, it was centrally located from every port of India. And finally, as an island, "well watered, of excellent Soil", it could sustain 50,000 people, "abounding in all necessary materials for their Service and Security."⁸⁰ In presenting his case with copious amounts of observations, descriptions, and claims, Light's letter seems to have satisfied the Company's need for information and assurance about the island's numerous capabilities. For the time being, at least, Penang's position in the Company's retinue of island settlements had been secured.

⁷⁹ 1 orlong = 1 1/3 acres and 1 maund = 82lb. as per the entry for Prince of Wales Island in Patrick Kelly, *The Universal Cambist and Commercial Instructor; Being a Full and Accurate Treatise on the Exchanges, Monies, Weights, and Measures, of all Trading Nations and Their Colonies; with an Account of Their Banks, Public Funds, and Paper Currencies Volume 1* (London: Lackington and Co., 1821), 114. Light himself gave the measurement for an orlong as "3256 square yd. nearly equal to an English acre" in the same letter.

⁸⁰ Francis Light to Council. Letter, n.d. In Bengal Consultations relative to Prince of Wales Island. *IOR G/34/4*.

In the wake of these descriptions of Penang, one might be pressed to wonder: Were such ambitious hopes ever fulfilled? For a time, at least, the island seemed to be on an upward trajectory. One only needed to look to its burgeoning population to see that it was indeed flourishing, as while the island only hosted 1283 people in 1788, this number had ballooned to 13,885 in 1810.⁸¹ Meanwhile, Penang also briefly proved its worth as a naval base, first with its help in capturing Melaka in 1795 and then again in 1797, when it functioned as a rendezvous for the eventually cancelled invasion of Manilla.⁸² The latter had been headed by the Colonel (later the 1st Duke of Wellington) Arthur Wellesley, who was impressed enough with Penang that he praised its “infinite advantage to the Company”. As such, he urged that Company should declare “in the most explicit terms” its intentions to keep it permanently.⁸³ It would take some years for this to pass, but in 1805, the Company finally did make its intentions most explicit indeed by raising the status of Penang to that of a Presidency – lower ranking than all the other Presidencies of India and still subject to the Governor-General in Council at Bengal, of course, but a Presidency nonetheless, and one that could now communicate with London directly.⁸⁴

Yet, such an overt declaration of Penang’s value and multiple uses was premature. Notably, Kyd himself submitted a far more reserved follow-up to his report in 1795, by which time he was Superintendent of the Andamans. Updating his opinions on Penang, Kyd noted that if the Company wished to retain the island only as a “Port of Commerce”, they might well rethink their decision to keep it. Summing up 37 pages of arguments, Kyd thus concluded that the Company could only derive direct advantages from “Land Revenues or Duties on Trade neither of which can ever amount to much” – though ultimately, it was still preferable to the Andamans.⁸⁵ Now being responsible for the Andamans, it would have been understandable for Kyd to temper the initial optimism he had for Penang. Nonetheless, the precariousness of the Andamans settlement was impossible to ignore by the mid-1790s, and in light of this, there was nothing Kyd could do but to admit its shortcomings relative to Penang. Such was the troubled situation on the Andamans that by 1796, the colony had failed and was

⁸¹ It is likely that the actual numbers would have been even higher than reported, as the census did not capture slaves or Company staff living on Penang. See: Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka*, 184-188.

⁸² D.G.E. Hall, “From Mergui to Singapore, 1686-1819; A neglected chapter in the naval history of the Indian Ocean,” *History New Series* 40, no.140 (1955): 270.

⁸³ Arthur Richard Wellesley, ed. *Supplementary Despatches and memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, K.G. India. 1793-1805. Volume the First* (London: John Murray, 1858), 26.

⁸⁴ Tregonning, *The British in Malaya*, 64. For more on how this relationship would affect Penang, see Chapter 2.

⁸⁵ Alexander Kyd to Governor General in Council. Letter, 2 August 1796. *IOR G/34/1*.

summarily abandoned.⁸⁶

Though it did not go the same, unhappy route as the Andamans, Penang did not quite live up to initial optimism either. The first real blow for the island came from victory at Trafalgar in 1805, which soon negated the need for Penang to function as a naval base. Hopes for the island's shipbuilding industry, too, never really came to pass, as it was hindered by issues surrounding dock-building, as well as a lack of quality timber and personnel.⁸⁷ Indeed, such was Penang's deficit in timber that shipbuilders had to bring in supplies from the forests of neighbouring Siak instead.⁸⁸ As will be seen in the following chapter, the cultivation of crops also faced similar challenges and did not become as remunerative as had been hoped. Despite the constant anxieties surrounding its viability and its constant fluctuations, it was the island's trade with the north-western side of the Malay Archipelago that ever really found any real importance.⁸⁹

As this section has demonstrated, officials anxious to justify continued Company support for Penang relied heavily on the pragmatic, rather than paradisiacal when it came to describing its environment. Tropical fertility was still foregrounded to a large extent, but officials were more concerned with representing its practical side – what it could be used for, along with how. In the context of Penang, fertility was primarily associated with utility. Reading Kyd's reports alongside the works of those with a closer connection with Penang, we can also see a subtle difference between the latter's unreserved enthusiasm and Kyd's more sedate assessment of the island. This is perhaps unsurprising, as for individual like Light, Scott, and Glass, there was infinitely more to lose should the island fall out of favour with the Company.

Simultaneously, I have demonstrated that some officials also broke with contemporary descriptions of tropical abundance to acknowledge the role of local labour, though this was sometimes coupled with the myth of the lazy native. While certainly employed as descriptors, the relatively few number of native Malays on Penang meant that such racial descriptions were not heavily used to justify colonial governance. As will be seen in Chapter 3, however,

⁸⁶ See: Satadru Sen, "On the Beach in the Andaman Islands: Post-mortem of a Failed Colony," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no.26/27 (2011): 177-186.

⁸⁷ Bastin and Brown, "History Sketch of Penang in 1794," 28-32b.

⁸⁸ Timothy P. Barnard, "The Timber Trade in Pre-modern Siak," *Indonesia* 65 (1998): 93.

⁸⁹ Kawamura, "Maritime Asian Trade," 148-152; Anthony Webster, "The development of British commercial and political networks in the straits settlements 1800 to 1868: The rise of a colonial and regional economic identity?," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no.4 (2011): 908.

these myths would become far more pertinent to colonial rule in later decades. Having considered the perception of colonial administrators on topical landscapes and local labour, the following section now focuses on the potential impact of these landscapes on colonial bodies.

Actions, areas, and tropical health

On the 13th of December 1786, Light wrote to inform the Bengal Council that Penang had managed to procure its very first Company surgeon, Mr. Hutton. Although they were not afflicted with “Fevers or any Dangerous disorders yet”, some men were still afflicted with “sore legs and old venereals” that their current “Black Doctor” could not treat.⁹⁰ To help with his work, Hutton relied on the sporadic presence of one, sometimes two assistant surgeons until a more regular medical service was set up in 1805.⁹¹ From then on, Penang was staffed by a Head Surgeon and two assistant ones, these men being drawn from the Bengal medical establishment and those of other Indian Presidencies as well.

In his investigation on how British and Dutch sources perceived Batavia in the late-eighteenth century, Hans Pols notes that health was related to the region’s specificities, rather than its overall climate. Humidity, air-flow, types of wind, the presence of fresh water, undrained swamps – all of these and more were considered alongside human behaviours such as physical activity, sun exposure, individual morals, and food/alcohol consumption.⁹² Socio-political contexts were also taken into account, as certain events could influence medical interpretations.⁹³ As such, this resulted in what Pols terms a “flexible interpretive repertoire” that could be moulded according to each unique circumstance. While general publications and treatises on tropical health produced in Europe might have presented sweeping understandings, Pols demonstrates that reports made on the ground in the tropics were more concerned with the local, thereby leading to a far greater degree of variation and adaptability.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Francis Light to John Macpherson. Letter, 5 October 1786. In Bengal Public Consultation, 13 December 1786. *IOR G/34/2*.

⁹¹ Mr. Hutton was joined by Mr. Howison in 1795, while in 1800, he was accompanied by Messrs. Cheafe and Waring. See: n/a, *The Bengal Kalendar and Register, for the year one thousand seven hundred and ninety-five* (Calcutta: T. Levingston - Mirror Press, 1795), 44; A.G. Harfield, “Fort Cornwallis, Pulo Pinang. (With notes on two 19th Century Military artists),” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 60, no.242 (1982): 81.

⁹² Pols, “Health and Disease in the Tropical Zone,” 327.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 336.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 327.

Applied here, I similarly assert that Penang's early medical staff were more concerned with issues such as the location of certain inhabited areas, the benefits of proper drainage, and the effects of outdoor work in the sun, rather than the island's overall climate and environment. Using a "flexible interpretive repertoire" of their own, officials in Penang created and drew from a medical topography that cast certain regions and activities as more healthy than others. Given that health was dependent on these specificities and not the island's overall climate, officials could continue to justify claims about Penang being suitably safe for habitation.

Importantly, Penang's medical officers were not unique in adopting this approach. In British India, this practice of medical topography resulted in connections between health and the environment being popularised during the 1820s, but as Mark Harrison argues, understandings of these relationships had their roots in the seventeenth century. Subsequently, clarifying the specificities of certain Indian regions allowed for Europeans to better adjust to living long-term in India, be it via acclimatisation, or changes in lifestyle.⁹⁵ One only needed to choose the right place and act appropriately to adapt to a region, scholars such as Wendy Jepson noting that these beliefs embodied attitudes of possibilism – "the belief that science and knowledge of the landscape could prevent ill effects of climate".⁹⁶

These perceptions about tropical health dovetailed with the belief that Europeans could, in fact, adjust to living permanently in places like India. As Harrison also contends, increasing British commercial and colonial involvement on the Indian subcontinent during the eighteenth century meant that Europeans had to reconsider their relationship with the region. It was no longer enough to view India as a site where exploitative mercantile interests could be fulfilled; now, "settlement and control" was also involved.⁹⁷ Medical discourses during this time thereby started to adopt a more optimistic tone, as Europeans believed that a combination of science and sense could help overcome the dangers of a tropical climate.⁹⁸ Ill health in the tropics was therefore not an inevitability; by focusing on preventive measures, Europeans could instead stave off tropical diseases with little more than adhering to expert

⁹⁵ Mark Harrison, "Differences of degree: representations of India in British medical topography, 1820-c. 1870," *Medical History* Supplement 20, no.1 (2000): 55.

⁹⁶ Jepson, "Of Soil, Situation, and Salubrity," 142.

⁹⁷ Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 80-81

medical advice and common sense. With time, however, especially after the Burma War of 1824-6, these medical topographies started to associate climate with racial attributes.⁹⁹ By the 1830s, the hardening of racial categories with relation to climate had shifted perceptions towards a more pessimistic route. If tropical climates were now thought to ingrain certain characteristics over the course of generations, its hereditary effects meant that Europeans who lacked such qualities could never truly thrive in the tropics.¹⁰⁰

Given that nearly all of Penang's medical practitioners were drawn from either the Bengal or Madras establishments, it is of little wonder that such perceptions about tropical health were reproduced on the island.¹⁰¹ Looking specifically at the period before the 1830s, I read observations on tropical health in Penang to illustrate how medical practitioners were more concerned about the island's particularities, rather than its overall climate. Medical reports and topographies of Penang thereby foregrounded the properties of specific regions and the importance of human actions when it came to maintaining one's health in the tropics. Consequently, micro-level concerns about certain areas, practices, and choices outweighed the perils of the tropical climate at large. This focus on how to *prevent* death and disease in the tropics allowed for officials to maintain the oft-repeated claim that Penang was healthy, as one's health was largely one's own responsibility and not the fault of the island. Nonetheless, this was not to say that climate did not feature at all in discussions about health. As will be seen, some individuals also saw a connection between climate and the health of certain races.

In February 1810, the Acting Head Surgeon on Penang, Billington Loftie, made reference to a number of reports having been sent to the Court of Directors "questioning the Salubrity of this Island".¹⁰² While the reports themselves do not seem to have been recorded, three lengthy replies from Loftie and his supporting staff were nonetheless preserved. The first of these was from Loftie himself, being written on the 14th of February 1810. Here, Loftie began by insisting that whatever fears assaulting the Council did not presently exist, and that "this rising and valuable Colony will justly bear, that scrutiny into its Reputation". Having collected information from "the oldest most intelligent European inhabitants" and the island's

⁹⁹ Harrison, "Differences of degree," 56-57.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 58.

¹⁰¹ See: D.G. Crawford, *Roll of the Indian Medical Service, 1615-1930. Volume 2* (London: W. Thacker & Co. and Calcutta & Simla: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1930), 626-627.

¹⁰² Billington Loftie to Thomas Raffles, Secretary to Government. Letter, 14 February 1810. *IOR G/34/9*.

natives, while also supplementing this with his own experiences, Loftie asserted that Penang's main town centre, George Town, was "the most eligible of any on the Island". The town was "wafted in all directions by a free Current of Air", "exposed to the Sea Breeze", and despite its relatively low-lying state, its soil was "remarkably dry and Salubrious."

In the spirit of fairness, however, Loftie noted some issues that might be injurious to colonial health. New colonies "in these latitudes" which required "such unremitting Energy" sometimes resulted in circumstances that "unavoidably aggravate and bring into action a variety of Disorders". Elaborating on this in the context of George Town, Loftie listed a number of areas that he considered unhealthy: the area around the "Bound Ditch", the north and south of Leith Street, the swamp and jungle to the south, and of course the ditch itself. These were dangerous due to what Loftie described as a lack of air circulation, especially in the vicinity of a large population.¹⁰³ Such views about air circulation were not uncommon, as evidenced by the works of physicians such as James Lind. In his *Essay on Diseases Incidental to Europeans in Hot Climates*, which was first published in 1768 and then reprinted numerous times into the early-nineteenth century, Lind claimed that thickly wooded areas were likely sources of sickness. Europeans "surrounded with thick woods" did not have access to "wholesome and refreshing breezes", while areas "perfectly freed from trees, underwood, marshes &c." had the benefit of healthy air.¹⁰⁴

Ironically, the European burial ground were also starting to become a danger, as the extended population of the island had "surrounded it with houses". The increasing practice to cultivating rice, too, around the vicinity of the town, had to be checked lest it "add strength to, or invite into action endemic disorders" due to the stagnation of water. Subsequently, the region southward of the town was also considered unhealthy due it being covered mostly with jungle and swamp, as well as being bounded by a mud bank – situations that also inevitably led to stagnant water.¹⁰⁵ Though coming short of naming it outright, here Loftie was perpetuating the concept of miasmas, or the belief that that atmospheres generated from dirty, marshy environments were dangerous to health.¹⁰⁶ Certain types of wind were also deemed

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ James Lind, *An essay on diseases incidental to Europeans, in hot climates: with the method of preventing their fatal consequences* 1st American, 6th London edition (Philadelphia: William Duane, 1811), 38-39.

¹⁰⁵ Billington Loftie to Thomas Raffles, Secretary to Government. Letter, 14 February 1810. *IOR G/34/9*.

¹⁰⁶ Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions*, 61-65; P.D. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12, 60.

detrimental, Loftie noting that since the Southwest monsoon blows for five months in a year, it was unsurprising that sicknesses would occur with “greater violence, more determined obstinacy and danger” at that time, these including: chronic and acute affections of the liver, bilious remittent, and intermittent fevers, fluges and dysentries.”

Going on to discuss preventive actions in light of these issues, Loftie asserted that “care and precaution” could prevent the casual occurrence of sickness. Importantly, many of the illnesses in the Eastern isles were “endemic, from which no one is exempt”. Both “temperate and debauched” were affected, and it was only “local knowledge and experience” that lives could be saved. To that end, Loftie expressed “alarm and astonishment” that so few residents on Penang paid any attention to reducing sun-exposure. “I have good reasons to suppose”, he grumbled,

this want of precaution, has aggravated perhaps produced disease, and when combined with a general mode of life, ill adapted to such a climate, added no inconsiderable number to the melancholy obituary of this Island.

Even worse was perhaps the fact that Penang's central position allowed it to play host to numerous sick seamen who “terminate a miserable existence” on the island, as well as the many soldiers who arrived at Penang only to die there. When this was announced to the public, griped Loftie, it was no wonder that there was such alarm. “Ignorance of the real cause is kept alive,” he declared, “and the climate with the reputation of the island are most unjustly tarnished.”

Having thus stated his case, Loftie was convinced that the Board would be able to judge the island on its own merits, especially since it “possessed a vast number of European Inhabitants living witnesses of its salubrity.” The uniformity of George Town's weather and the number of sick discharged from the General Hospital, too, only served to strengthen his case. Out of 302 Europeans admitted, 292 had been discharged for duty – a favourable number, especially when compared to Loftie’s previous experiences in Banda and Melaka. In sum, Penang was “still pre-eminent”, especially when one considered the presence of its health-giving highlands. As per Loftie, “Local causes removed, there would be few impediments to general

health”.¹⁰⁷

Loftie was not the first to note the health-giving properties of Penang’s highlands. Norman Macalister, for instance, a former captain and commander of Penang’s artillery, wrote in his 1803 memoir that the island’s hills were particularly salutary to European constitutions and that convalescents from his garrison found their health “perfectly restored in the course of a few weeks”. The island’s hills were thus “resorted to by invalids from all the different presidencies of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras.”¹⁰⁸ While India would also come to possess hill stations of their own, S. Robert Aiken has since suggested that the Penang establishment might have been one of the first of its kind, as the earliest Indian one dates from 1819.¹⁰⁹ This would have been the Nilgiri plateau of South India, which was established as a response to the perceived dangers of heat to the European constitution.¹¹⁰

Air in the lowlands had the perceived danger of being too hot, damp, and lacking in ventilation, which could in turn result in ever-pestilential miasmas. Highland air, by contrast, had the benefit of being cooler, less humid, and more ventilated, making it a far better stimulus for European bodies.¹¹¹ As Dane Kennedy contends, however, these hill stations did not merely function as sanitoriums; they were also used for both rest and play, as its similarities to home – be it natural, in the form of weather, or built, in the form of European architecture and gardens – allowed colonists to temporarily escape into a familiar place.¹¹² Correspondingly, as officials found it difficult to obtain home-leave from the Company, increased demands for such “places of refuge and resort in the East” led to a proliferation of such hill-stations in the colonies.¹¹³ Such was the belief in the healthiness of hill-stations over the hot, humid lowlands that by the late 1800s, entire colonial governments in British India would sometimes even pack up their affairs and relocate to higher, cooler climes for months at time, as these places were thought to be better for administrative work.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ Billington Loftie to Thomas Raffles, Secretary to Government. Letter, 14 February 1810. *IOR G/34/9*.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Macalister, *Historical Memoir Relative to Prince of Wales Island in the Straits of Malacca: and its Importance Political and Commercial: submitted to the Honourable The East India Company, and the Government and Legislature of Great Britain* (London: J.H. Hart, 1803), 8-9.

¹⁰⁹ Aiken, “Early Penang Hill Station,” 430.

¹¹⁰ Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), 20-21.

¹¹¹ Aiken, “Early Penang Hill Station,” 431.

¹¹² Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains*, 1-4.

¹¹³ Aiken, “Early Penang Hill Station,” 431.

¹¹⁴ Beattie, *Empire and Environmental Anxiety*, 45-47.

Returning to Loftie and his colleagues, we find that he was not alone in his defence of Penang. Writing to the Board in March 1810, Assistant Surgeon James Anderson similarly drew attention to the island's different soils and how they affected one's health. The southern side of the island, for instance, was marshy and covered with mangrove jungles, the soil of which was good for cultivation but unhealthy for the cultivators. While George Town's light, sandy, and porous ground was "likely to prove healthy", lower areas by the sea trapped water and loaded the atmosphere with moisture when it evaporated in the heat, this in turn causing a "relaxation of the system unfavourable to health." Heavy rainfalls caused by Penang's hills attracting clouds were equally bad, as those "bathed in a profuse sweat" could catch a chill and suffer from topical inflammation.

These examples notwithstanding, Anderson still concluded that he was "far from thinking the island extremely unhealthy". On the contrary, he believed that it was

a climate which requires considerable efforts of nature to assimilate
the European constitution to it ... one which the European cannot
indulge in intemperance with impunity.

Consequently, "with care temperance and regulating the Climate", Penang could be "equally healthy with most other countries under the same latitude." To back this claim, Anderson also provided statistics for both European and native troops on Penang. From August 1806 to August 1809, Anderson placed the average native deaths at 1 in 30, a mortality rate that "will not appear great" as the nearly 1000 sepoys stationed there "must be exposed to every vessitude [sic] of climate".

European troops fared markedly worse, with mortalities ranging from 1 in 13 to 1 in 15 from June 1806 to June 1808. As Anderson emphasised, however, these men had been "seasoned in the Climate of India" and that one portion had even "grown old in service".¹¹⁵ 'Seasoning', or acclimatisation, was believed to help with European health. The late-eighteenth century physician James Lind, for instance, argued that once Europeans were "habituated to the climate", they would be "less susceptible" to sickness caused by air or soil.¹¹⁶ Taking into account their seasoned state and the "irregular lives of European Soldiers in India", Anderson thereby believed that the proportions indicated "no great mortality." As for the Europeans

¹¹⁵ James Anderson to Thomas Raffles, Secretary to Government. Letter, 8 March 1810. *IOR G/34/9*.

¹¹⁶ Lind, *An essay on diseases incidental to Europeans*, 144.

that he saw in private practice, Anderson found “a considerable proportion ailing, but few seriously ill” – which seemed to be good enough for him, under the present circumstances.¹¹⁷

Of the three medical men who submitted their opinions, Assistant Surgeon John Crawford was by far the most reserved in his opinions on the island. For him, Penang’s uniformity of climate offered no season that could “invigorate the constitutions”. While this also meant that there was “no period of peculiar unhealthiness”, this was hardly as dangerous, or even fatal diseases could take place across the entire year. Yet, not all was doom and gloom. Providing short statistics, Crawford noted that the greatest number of sick in Bengal’s native battalion far exceeded that of Penang, and amongst the convicts, no more than 80 out of 1560 men had fallen ill in the last 15 months. George Town was also no more unhealthy than any other place, though ultimately, Penang was “less congenial to the European constitution” when compared to the varying climates of India.

Importantly, Crawford went further than Anderson by surmising that Penang was healthy only for certain races. To quote, it was:

well suited for the constitutions of its native inhabitants, but... not upon the whole congenial to the constitutions of Europeans who require ... a more scrupulous attention.¹¹⁸

This is notable when we take into account Crawford’s interest in ethnography. By the mid-nineteenth century, Crawford was regularly contributing articles on ethnography and had, by the 1860s, even become the President of the London Ethnographical Society.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, Crawford’s understandings about race differed from the more commonly accepted monogenetic interpretation, which posited that humans had one original source and were made different by their environments. Crawford was instead an advocate of polygenesis, or the notion that multiple creations were responsible for human development.¹²⁰ People living in each locale were thus fundamentally different from each other, this being a belief that was reflected in Crawford’s medical reasoning. Given that Penang’s natives ‘belonged’ to this climate, it stood to reason that even with human intervention, Europeans would sometimes

¹¹⁷ James Anderson to Thomas Raffles, Secretary to Government. Letter, 8 March 1810. *IOR G/34/9*.

¹¹⁸ John Crawford, to Thomas Raffles, Secretary to Government. Letter, 12 February 1810. *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ Gareth Knapman, “Race, polygenesis and equality: John Crawford and nineteenth century resistance to evolution,” *History of European Ideas* 42, no.7 (2016): 910, 916.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 911.

still have to struggle in the tropics. Thus, Europeans could certainly live on Penang, but whether they were able to thrive was a completely different matter.

By 1826, Penang's surgeons were still subscribing to the notion of a location's specificities being to blame for ill health. Presented with a newly arrived regiment of infantrymen who were suffering from "alarming and extensive sickness", a medical report prepared by Penang's medical team on the 14th of January located the cause as "some peculiarity in the atmosphere affecting young constitutions unassimilated to the climate".¹²¹ Evidently, the 65th Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry had come 'unseasoned' for the challenges of Penang's environment. To combat this, medical staff recommended that the men be removed to Penang's highlands and provided with a more nutritious diet of flour, sago, beer, and the occasional ration of wine.¹²²

Writing to the Government the following day, the Superintending Surgeon George Alexander further explained that the sickness and lack of response from treatment arose from "Local causes" surrounding the Sepoy hospital and the "lines of the Corps". To address this, Alexander suggested that the government drain and raise not only the land contiguous to the hospital, but that of its vicinity as well, since it was presently a swamp. The whole jungle in the neighbourhood of the hospital was to be rooted out and destroyed, too, while in the meantime, the sick should immediately removed to somewhere drier.¹²³ As helpful as his suggestions might have been, these were clearly not enough for the European commanding officer of the regiment. A mere few weeks later, Lieutenant Kerr presented a sick certificate and promptly removed himself back to Europe instead.¹²⁴

Taken in sum, these examples serve to demonstrate how medical professionals in early Penang created and drew on medical topographies of the island to address concerns about health. With certain places and actions being deemed more dangerous than others, the onus was thus placed on individuals to keep their health in check. Sickness could be prevented by simply moving away from an unhealthy place to a healthier one instead, or by modifying

¹²¹ William Casement to Secretary to the Governor. Letter, 27 July 1825. In Fort Cornwallis Council Proceedings, 29 July 1825. *Penang Consultations*, A18.

¹²² G. Alexander, B.C. Henderson, D. Ramsay, and J. Leslie, "Report of a Medical Committee," 14 January 1826. In Fort Cornwallis Council, 19 January 1826. *Penang Consultations*, A25.

¹²³ George Alexander to W.S. Cracroft, Secretary to Government. Letter, 15 January 1826. In Fort Cornwallis Council Proceedings, 19 January 1826. *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Fort Cornwallis Council Proceedings, 2 February 1826. *Penang Consultations*, A24.

unhealthy behaviours. In this case, Penang could continue to be presented as a healthy locale, or barring that, an island in which proper precautions might at least prevent ill health.

Simultaneously, there was also an acknowledgement that Europeans would generally have to content themselves with surviving, rather than thriving in the tropics. From Anderson's statistics to Crawford's statement about European constitutions, these served to reinforce the divide between temperate and tropical. Yet, such differences could still be overcome, rendering them as mere inconveniences that could be fixed via 'seasoning', temporary jaunts to the highlands, or even home leave. Displaced as they were from more temperate climes, Europeans in Penang remained generally convinced that the island was suitable for habitation, and that if advice was followed, no real danger would befall them.

As for whether or not this was indeed the case, one can only consider the health of Penang's own administrators. Within a year of the island becoming a Presidency in 1805, Penang's Council was already writing to the Court of Directors in London to complain about the "inefficiency of our Medical Establishment in general". The "severe indisposition" of the newly arrived Chief Surgeon, William Dick, was bad enough that he had to quit his ward and deprive Penang of his services, while the second assistant surgeon, H.W. Rumsey, had also recently died, leaving their medical team much depleted. Perhaps anticipating concern about the state of the island's health, the Council nonetheless made sure to emphasise that they could not keep up with duties due to the "resort of Invalids from your Service at the other Presidencies" – a sound reminder that despite everything, Penang was still salubrious enough to function as a health resort.¹²⁵

Beyond a more regular medical service, Penang's newly elevated status also entitled it to an increased number of administrative staff. Amongst the twenty-three, mostly young men who were shipped to Penang in 1805 with their families, forty-three year old Governor Philip Dundas was by far the oldest of the group. He, along with eight other men, would be dead within five years. By 1826, another six had passed as well, resulting in the deaths of more

¹²⁵ P. Dundas, N. Macalister, and W.E. Philips to the Public Department, The Honourable the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies. Letter, 17 January 1807. *Penang: Letters to London B2*.

than half of the new establishment.¹²⁶ Dundas' replacements across the years fared no better. Charles Andrew Bruce, for instance, arrived in 1810, sickened, and died after only nine months in office.¹²⁷ After a succession of temporary replacements, William Petrie came to Penang in 1812 and held on for four years throughout numerous illnesses before he, too, passed in 1816.¹²⁸ His replacement, John Alexander Bannerman, similarly died after two years in office.¹²⁹ The Governorship thus passed in 1819 to W.E. Philips, who had gathered ample experience over the years as Acting Governor each time the seat was vacated. Yet, even Philips could not contend with the dangers of Penang. Despite surviving Penang's four-month long cholera epidemic from 1819-1820 and having no issues with his own health, Philips tendered his resignation in 1823, citing concerns over the health of his family.¹³⁰

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which Penang's early administrators utilised different descriptions of the island's tropicity to their advantage. With the East India Company desiring to establish a new nodal point within their ever-growing network of settlements, administrators on Penang had to continually prove that this place was indeed worth their time and investment. Consequently, the precariousness of their position made this a period of great anxiety for Penang's officials, though as this chapter has demonstrated, many of them used tropical discourses of health and fertility to address these fears the best they could.

Administrators predicated Penang's fertility with utility, so as to reassure the Company of the island's continued importance. Rather than rely on paradisiacal descriptions of Penang, its administrators embraced a more pragmatic approach instead. As such, these practical depictions departed from the more Edenic conceptualisations of tropical islands that were common to that time. At the same time, administrators did not discount the role of local labour in making Penang productive. While Edenic tropes pointed to an island's natural fertility as the source of its abundance, administrators on Penang acknowledged that human effort was needed to render the settlement productive. In this manner, the Company could be

¹²⁶ Marcus Langdon, *Penang The Fourth Presidency of India 1805-1830. Volume One: Ships, Men and Mansions* (Penang: Areca Books, 2013), 237-238, 242.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 270.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 280.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 299.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 301, 307, 309.

informed not only of *what* made Penang useful, but *how* it could be made so as well.

Having temporarily convinced the Company of Penang's continued relevance, the island's upgrade into a Presidency of India in 1805 necessitated that administrators continue to present it as a suitably healthy for habitation. To that end, Penang's medical staff drew on medical topographies of the island to establish certain areas and behaviours as more healthy than others. Health on Penang was thus seen as a matter of making the right decisions, or removing oneself from the wrong areas. This is, however, not to say that Penang's tropical climate was absent from discussions. Medical staff who referred to the island's hot, humid environment sometimes acknowledged that Europeans were simply unsuited to thriving in the tropics, this being due to the difference between tropical and temperate constitutions. Nonetheless, this was no hindrance to Penang's utility. By relying on methods such as seasoning or escaping to hill stations, there was no reason to see Penang as particularly dangerous to health.

Taken in sum, this chapter has served to demonstrate how the island's unsecured position within Empire contributed to a slew of colonial visions being imposed on it, as officials during this period were actively seeking out believable reasons to settle Penang. Hence, there was not one single, clear purpose to colonisation here, as Penang's administrators strove to present the island as capable of multiple potentials. These were uncertain days for Penang, as administrators were frequently unsure as to whether the island would ultimately join the Company's broader network of settlements. To introduce the circuit-board metaphor that will be used in the following chapter, the Penang's officials were in this case employed in the messy business of laying out new circuitry – with Penang as a node and inter-colony correspondence as the method of connection. Containing tropical discourses of health and fertility, these reports and writings passed important information about Penang from node to node.

Having explored why and how early administrators established Penang as a new nodal point in the circuit-board of Empire, Chapter 2 will now go on to examine the ways in which it was tenuously linked.

Chapter 2:

The interconnectedness and insularity of Penang, 1796-1820s

Christopher Smith was no stranger to the vegetation of tropical islands. Following an apprenticeship at a botanical garden in Islington, a favourable recommendation from his superior had found him employment aboard the *Providence* in 1791 – this being none other than William Bligh’s second voyage for breadfruit.¹ After the first attempt in 1787 ended in a disastrous and much written about mutiny aboard the *Bounty*, it was not long before another expedition was arranged.² Once again under the purview and management of the influential Joseph Banks, Bligh was tasked with returning to Tahiti in search of even more breadfruit for the West Indies.³ Accompanying him would be a crew of some 134 men aboard the *Providence*, Smith joining their number as Second Gardener for the rather respectable salary of sixty pounds a year.⁴

By the time the voyage was over, Smith’s usefulness had suitably impressed both Banks and Bligh enough for them to recommend him to the Calcutta Botanic Garden as a Gardener. Bligh affirmed Smith’s “sobriety and quietness of disposition”, while Banks, providing a single scrawled sentence in December of 1793, merely named Smith as a “the person who brought home the bread fruit trees etc”.⁵ Brevity of their contents notwithstanding, these letters of recommendation were evidently convincing enough for the East India Company’s Directors, as Smith was promptly given the position in January 1794.⁶ Yet, Smith was not to stay long in India. In the wake of Admiral Rainier sailing from Madras in October 1795 to

¹ Ray Desmond, *The European Discovery of the Indian Flora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 62

² For more on Bligh and his voyages, see: John Barrow, *The eventful history of the mutiny and piratical seizure of H. M. S. Bounty, its causes and consequences* (London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1831); Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Rob Mundle, *Bligh: Master Mariner* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2010); Alan Frost, *Mutiny, Mayhem, Mythology: Bounty's enigmatic voyage* (New South Wales: Sydney University Press, 2018); Douglas L. Oliver, *Return to Tahiti: Bligh's second breadfruit voyage* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University at the Miegunyah Press, 1988); Jennifer Gall, “Bligh's Exploration of Australia's East Coast,” *Agora* 46, no.2 (2011): 37-43.

³ Dulcie Powell, “The Voyage of the Plant Nursery, H.M.S. Providence, 1791-1893,” *Economic Botany* 31, no.4 (1977): 387.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 390; Joseph Banks, Memoranda concerning the engagement of Christopher Smith as gardener. May 1791. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 53, Item 3.*

⁵ Joseph Banks to Court of Directors. Letter recommending Christopher Smith, 10 December 1793. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 53, Item 16.*

⁶ Desmond, *The European Discovery of the Indian Flora*, 62.

invade the Moluccas, Smith saw this as nothing less than a golden opportunity to procure valuable spice plants from that region, especially since it would now be in British rather than Dutch hands.⁷ The Company approved of this endeavour and by December 1795, Smith was aboard ship once again, this time bound for Penang. He had hoped to rendezvous with Rainier's squadron there, but having arrived six days too late and with no passage to the Moluccas for the next half year, what was supposed to be a brief stopover at Penang lengthened to months.

In retrospect, it was this moment of misfortune that would become a catalyst for Penang's role in the spice-trade. Recounting the entire series of events to Joseph Banks some years later, Smith wrote that he took this enforced stay as "an opportunity of getting acquainted with all the fine fruits and plants" of the region.⁸ Hence, when he returned to India in 1798 with more than 37,000 plants from the Moluccan Spice Islands in tow, it was Penang that yet remained at the forefront of his mind. "The Bengal Government apply'd to me to know what was best to be done with the Spice plants", continued Smith in this retelling, before noting that he had given his opinion as follows:

My zeal for the success of these plants, my knowledge from experience of the Soil & Climate of Prince Wales Island and that of the Moluccas, which are nearly similar, the great variety of Plants which I have seen at the Spice Islands, and the same kinds which are indigenous to Prince of Wales Island, prompts me to say, that the Spice plants will succeed at Prince Wales Island with care & become of National benefit.⁹

For Smith, the apparent similarities of these Eastern isles (and not to mention his own expertise) was justification enough for the Company to embark on what promised to be a lucrative project. After all, what could go wrong? British control on Penang was practically absolute and had been for more than ten years at this point, making it one of the few stable Company holdings in the region. The island's fortuitous position, too, allowed it to function as an intermediary between India and the Moluccas, Penang being a valuable link in the

⁷ Peter A. Ward, *British Naval Power in the East, 1794-1805: The Command of Admiral Peter Rainier* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2013), 157.

⁸ Christopher Smith to Joseph Banks. Letter, 23 June 1799. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 16, Item 6*.

⁹ Ibid.

Company's increasing chain of settlements in the region. Subsequently, on the 17th of October 1798, Smith found himself sailing for Penang once more – though this time, it was with 10,000 spice plants in tow for the island.

In this chapter, I extend discussions from Chapter 1 to argue that Penang was both insular and interconnected, albeit imperfectly on both accounts. As Pete Hay has asserted, islands represent a multitude of paradoxes: paradisiacal, but also sites for penal colonies; physically separate due to their hard-edged borders, but also linked into broader transnational flows of people, goods, and ideas by the sea.¹⁰ Placing Penang in this context, I examine these contradictory qualities through two lenses: the failure of its first Botanic Gardens, c.1796-1805, and the island's thwarted attempts at cash-cropping during the early to mid-nineteenth century. As a settlement of the East India Company, Penang was subservient to the administration of the Supreme Government, but as an island, its insularity and distance from the colonial centres of both India and London afforded it a certain degree of independence.

Though Penang's geographical separation allowed its administrators to act with a certain degree of autonomy, the island's integration into broader imperial networks of trade and botanical exchange meant that it was never *truly* independent. Consequently, this chapter examines Penang as a paradoxical space that was part of the broader Empire and yet, also apart from the Company's immediate sphere of administrative influence. Despite relying on the Company for monetary and administrative support, Penang's officials were not above exploiting the island's material isolation. As a means of better capturing the complexities and tensions of this relationship, I suggest the metaphor of Penang as a tenuously connected node within an imperial circuit-board. The transfer of misinformation between nodes, the presence of unreliable conduits, and the erratic nature of sending written communication across vast distances – all of these contributed to the haphazard quality of Penang's colonial administration and its dubious position within the broader circuit. To further contextualise how Penang's locale affected its inter-colony connections, the following section begins by briefly addressing intellectual discourses on islandness.

¹⁰ Pete Hay, "A Phenomenology of Islands," *Island Studies Journal* 1, no.1 (2006): 22-23.

Individual and interconnected islands

Islands are one of the prevalent forms of physical geography in the world, so much so that geographers have come to acknowledge more than 180,000 of them: these ranging from small, rocky outposts in the middle of the Pacific, to places such as Borneo, where its large, tropical environment is under the jurisdiction of multiple nation-states.¹¹ Beyond encompassing a variety of environments that range from the temperate to tropical, islands, like the tropics, also come with their own imaginaries.¹² While Yi-Fu Tuan has identified the island as one of the natural environments most associated with “humanity's dreams of an ideal world”, islands were also undeniably sites of great suffering – as evidenced by the existence of penal island colonies and the use of islands for exile or banishment.¹³ Be it as a metaphor for a paradise both lost and found, or as a site of isolation and individualism, the variety of meanings attached to islands has made them into what Pete Hay describes as “*the central metaphor within western discourse.*”¹⁴

Within this assortment of imaginaries, it is perhaps the island's seemingly contained nature that first comes to mind. Cut off from a mainland and surrounded by water on all sides, islands appear to be microcosms, or even little worlds of their own. Writing on island studies, Godfrey Baldacchino has pointed out that the physical boundaries of islands have led scholars to conceptualise them as ‘laboratories’ of sorts.¹⁵ Similarly, Klaus Dodds and Stephen Royle also note that numerous disciplines have turned towards using the island as a lens to study isolated dimensions of nature. The Galapagos Islands and their contributions to theories of Darwinism, for instance, come easily to mind, while island societies, too, have been subject to much ethnographic and anthropological research seeking to understanding a particular island “way of life”.¹⁶ Simultaneously, the boundedness of islands gives rise to the impression that they can be more easily transformed, as the specificity of an island's geographical space lends itself to the illusion of total control – the opportunity to create

¹¹ Stephen Torre, “Tropical Island Imaginary,” *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics* 12, no.2 (2013): 246.

¹² See: John Gillis, *Islands of the mind: the making of the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. First published 1974), 247; Atholl Anderson, “Islands of exile: Ideological motivation in maritime migration,” *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* 1, no.1 (2006): 33-47.

¹⁴ Hay, “A Phenomenology of Islands,” 26-27. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Godfrey Baldacchino, “The Coming of Age of Island Studies,” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 95, no.3 (2004): 272.

¹⁶ Klaus Dodds and Stephen A. Royle, “The historical geography of islands Introduction: rethinking islands,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 29, no.4 (2003): 488.

“islands in our own image”, so to speak. Entire islands have thus been made into prisons, tourist resorts, and military bases, among other things.¹⁷

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that islands were and are not as set apart as often thought. In light of the turn towards situating one's research within broader networks of globalisation, prior notions of the island as a ‘container’, or enclosed site have been increasingly reassessed with new understandings.¹⁸ To quote Baldacchino, “islands are not islands”. Despite the temptation to understand islands according to their finite, physical boundaries, islands are not perfectly enclosed systems unto themselves. Instead, they are always in conversation with external flows: ideas, economies, migrations, and any other number of moving currents.¹⁹ Tellingly, John Gillis has also demonstrated that the creation of presumably insular island cultures did not originate on islands themselves, but were instead the result of cultural contact between islands and mainlands.²⁰

In the context of maritime Southeast Asia, oceans and sea lanes connected island to island, and entire archipelagos to mainlands. Situated between both the Indian subcontinent and China, this region was (and indeed remains) an active participant in various networks of trade and exchange.²¹ Scholars such as Barbara and Leonard Andaya, Craig Lockard, and Angela Schottenhammer have thus examined the products of, and processes behind these connections in the Indian Ocean world to foreground what Baldacchino describes as a “nervous duality”, one that confronts both the “local and global realities ... interior and exterior references of meaning”.²²

¹⁷ Godfrey Baldacchino, “The Lure of the island: A spatial analysis of power relations,” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1, no.2 (2012): 57.

¹⁸ Klaus and Stephen, “The historical geography of islands,” 489.

¹⁹ Baldacchino, “The Coming of Age of Island Studies,” 272-273. Also see: Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), specifically Chapter 4 “Island Chains”.

²⁰ Gillis, *Islands of the mind*, 118-120.

²¹ Tansen Sen, “Maritime Southeast Asia Between South Asia and China to the Sixteenth Century,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2, no. 1 (2014): 32-33.

²² Godfrey Baldacchino, “Editorial: islands — objects of representation,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 87, no.4 (2005): 246. For works on maritime Southeast Asia, see: Barbara W. Andaya, “Recreating a Vision: *Daratan* and *Kepulauan* in Historical Context,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 153, no.4 (1997): 483-508; Leonard Y. Andaya, “The ‘informal Portuguese empire’ and the Topasses in the Solor archipelago and Timor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no.3 (2010): 391-420; Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015); Singgih Tri Sulistiyono and Yety Rochwulaningsih, “Contest for hegemony: The dynamics of inland and maritime cultures relations in the history of Java island, Indonesia,” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 2, no.2 (2013): 115-127; Craig A. Lockard, “‘The Sea Common to All’: Maritime Frontiers, Port

To unpack how such contradictions coexisted in the context of Penang, the first half of this chapter focusses on the failure of the island's first Botanic Gardens, c.1796-1805. Here, I contend that Penang's Gardens were both made and then undone by broader imperial networks. Doing so, I draw from the works of Lucille Brockway and Richard Grove, who both conceptualise botanic gardens as forming networks of their own. Examining the role of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in colonial expansion, Brockway deploys an analytical framework based on a "network of relations" that involved both institutions and individuals making independent choices within those contexts.²³ Grove, specifically attending to the colonial roots of environmentalism, similarly notes that such ideas were globalised by an "information network" of botanic gardens in the tropics.²⁴

Applied to Penang, however, I argue that these networks did not merely transfer plants, people, or ideas about the environment, but also facilitated the circulation of misconceptions and misinformation. From misrepresented situations to mistaken numbers, individual administrators propagated a slew of incorrect written observations that both mired the Gardens in difficulty and shrouded their true state from the Company for years. Building on the vocabulary of networks offered by scholars such as Grove and Brockway, I suggest the possibility of envisioning Penang as a flickering node within a circuit-board of other settlements – a small beacon tenuously connected and imperfectly linked, but ostensibly still alight all the same.

Following that, I use the second half of this chapter to examine how Penang's administrative autonomy was imperfectly manifested in its much beleaguered search for an appropriate and viable cash crop. Colonial planters on the island were particularly reliant on pepper during the early-nineteenth century, but when the Napoleonic Wars disrupted global trade, this relationship was quickly thrown into chaos. Tracing the ways in which Penang's government attempted to navigate ever-changing market conditions, I explore the complex lines of communication between Penang, Bengal, and London to demonstrate how these further

Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400-1750," *Journal of World History* 21, no.2 (2010): 219-247; Angela Schottenhammer, ed. *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World, Volume I: Commercial structures and exchanges* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *Early global interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean world, Volume II: Exchange of ideas, religions, and technologies* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

²³ Lucille H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. First published 1979), 9.

²⁴ Richard Grove, *Green imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 339-340.

entrenched the island in a state of ambivalence. The totality of British control over Penang's geographical borders might have resulted in its administrators acquiring a somewhat independent streak, but with the island's elevation to a Presidency of India in 1805, this new position only served to highlight the tensions between the perceived autonomy of its administrators and the reality of its subservient position in the Empire.

In this case, I argue that the Penang government's show of autonomy was closely interlinked with its deference to other colonial centres of administration. Returning to the metaphor of an imperial circuit, Penang might in this situation be visualised as caught in a feedback loop of sorts, as its interactions with other nodes – the Court of Directors in London and the Supreme Government in Bengal – flowed back into itself. As Penang's government awaited instructions from centres of administration that did not seem to truly grasp the urgency of the situation at hand, local officials were forced to act independently. To contextualise this relationship, I draw primarily from Miles Ogborn's work on the practice of writing in the East India Company, wherein he argues that the process and products of writing were central building blocks in the construction of trade and imperialism – yet for all their importance, they, too, were inherently insecure.²⁵

Taken in sum, these two sections investigate the flow of environmental information across imperial eco-cultural networks during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, so as to determine its role in building and breaking down different parts of the circuit.²⁶ During the era of Penang's Botanic Gardens c.1796-1805, officials propagated both plants and misconceptions between places such as the Moluccas, Bengal, London, and of course Penang itself. Following that, Penang's elevation to a Presidency in 1805 saw the island's new government communicate directly with the Court of Directors in London, though at times, correspondence was also sent to the Supreme Government of Bengal. At this point, the role of the individual was taken over by that of institutions – particularly the Penang Council, which was made up of colonial officials tasked with governing the island. This shift in scale was also accompanied by a shift in relationships. Whereas the Supreme Government of Bengal and its Council had played a far bigger role in determining Penang's path prior to 1805, the island's new status as a Presidency made it answerable to the Court of Directors in

²⁵ Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 22.

²⁶ For more on eco-cultural networks, see the Introduction of this thesis.

London instead. Individuals and establishments within the circuit might have desired to use these connections for personal ambition or material gain, but as will be demonstrated, the dysfunctional nature of networks made such aims difficult to achieve.

To investigate these issues, I begin by examining the role of individuals in the transference of misinformation during the course of Penang's Botanic Gardens, c.1796-1805. Following that, I will discuss Penang's attempts at cash-cropping from 1805 to the 1820s, with a particular focus being placed on the Penang Council's correspondence with the Court of Directors on the matter of pepper. Examining administrative writings in the form of letters, public consultations, and reports from 1796 to the 1820s, this chapter presents Penang as an independent, yet interdependent isle.

Spice for an island

Within a year of its colonial founding, Penang was already functioning as a node in inter-colony botanical transfers. In October 1787, Francis Light wrote to the Board of Directors to inform them of some fruit trees that he had shipped to Bengal. More than fifty sago trees had also been procured, though only four or five remained alive and had to regain their strength before they could be sent onwards.²⁷ The following month, Light boarded even more fruit trees on Bengal-bound ships, these including “the durian, mangosteen, ramboostan [sic], and Ramy”. Attached to this cargo, however, was also a complaint that he was “greatly as loss” for someone to “take care of the plants and keep them separate, so as they may be known in Calcutta.” To alleviate this, Light requested that two gardeners be sent as assistance, but as far as can be seen, none arrived in these early years.²⁸

The lucky recipient of Penang's botanical shipments was likely Robert Kyd, who had founded the Calcutta Botanic Garden in 1786.²⁹ Though a military officer, Kyd also maintained an interest in plants and had proposed that a Botanic Garden be established for two reasons: first, for famine relief in India and second, for economic development via the growing of useful plants. Joseph Banks, who was a notable lynchpin in the scientific

²⁷ Francis Light to Board of Directors. Letter, 7 October 1787. In Bengal General Proceedings 25 January 1788. *IOR G/34/3*.

²⁸ Francis Light to Board of Directors. Letter, 16 November 1787. In Bengal General Proceedings 25 January 1788. *IOR G/34/3*.

²⁹ Robert Kyd was a relative of Alexander Kyd, who surveyed Penang in 1787. See: C.E. Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968. First published 1906), 240.

advancement of Empire, avidly supported this plan and aided Kyd's endeavours by arguing that such a garden would also improve imperial commerce.³⁰ As such, motivations for Calcutta's Botanic Garden at this point could be said to be more patriotic than scientific.

Patriotic designs notwithstanding, botanic gardens of the imperial age were key components of eco-cultural networks that spread beyond the confines of Empire.³¹ Though overlaid atop of and interacting closely with the imperial circuit-board, it is important to note that these botanic networks also encompassed non-imperial knowledge, specimens, people, and places.³² For the British Empire, the centre of this vast, sprawling web was the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Initially founded in 1759 and functioning as a "royal pleasure ground" where George III could flaunt the exotics of the natural world that Empire had brought to his door, Kew eventually became a collection house of sorts by the 1780s.³³ Kew was thus not merely receiving plants, but also dispatching them to assist other British territories in their own agricultural pursuits.³⁴ As Banks himself put it in 1787, he envisioned Kew to soon become "a great botanical exchange house for the empire."³⁵

A combination of such sentiments were on clear display in Kyd's reply to Light in March 1787. Here, Kyd noted that the Company "shall suffer great disappointment" if Light's future attempts were "not more successful" in obtaining species such as the clove, nutmeg, bread fruit, and black pepper. "I'm sure," Kyd wrote, "you'll recollect that we are twenty years behind hand with ev'ry other European Nation possessing Settlements in the East". Thus, it was "high time" that the Company "atone for our past inattention of endeavour", and if Britain could not lead in this race, they had to "at least to keep pace with our neighbours".³⁶

³⁰ Adrian Thomas, "The establishment of Calcutta botanic garden: Plant transfer, science and the east India company, 1786-1806," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 16, no.2 (2006): 167-16.

³¹ Emma Reisz, "City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Gardens of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786-2000," in *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, eds. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, and Wei-Wei Yeo (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.

³² See, for instance: Kavita Philip, "Imperial Science Rescues a Tree: Global Botanic Networks, Local Knowledge and the Transcontinental Transplantation of Cinchona," *Environment and History* 1, no.2 (1995): 173-200; Richard Grove, "Indigenous Knowledge and the Significance of South-West India for Portuguese and Dutch Constructions of Tropical Nature," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no.1 (1996): 121-143; Franklin Ginn, "Colonial transformations: Nature, progress and science in the Christchurch Botanic Gardens," *New Zealand Geographer* 65, no.1 (2009): 24-47.

³³ Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 45.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 108.

³⁵ Joseph Banks. Banks to Dundas, 15 June 1787. Letter. *British Museum (Natural History) Botany Library: Dawson Turner copies of Sir Joseph Banks correspondence*, 5: 184-91. Quoted in *Ibid*, 108.

³⁶ Robert Kyd to Francis Light. Letter, 11 March 1788. In Bengal Public Proceedings, 14 March 1788. *IOR G/34/3*.

Having made his case, Kyd forwarded a list of plants that Light was to procure, or at the very least, obtain information about. An attached note from the Board of Directors indicated their support for Kyd's fervour, but also downplayed its importance by telling Light to attend to the list only when he could "afford the Leisure" to do so.³⁷

Given that Penang was first used as a space where valuable plants could be collected and raised for a time before being sent onwards to the Calcutta Botanic Garden, the island initially functioned as a transit point. With the founding of Penang's first Botanic Gardens in 1796, however, there were ardent hopes that the island would soon be elevated into a spice-producer. As this section will demonstrate, fundamental misunderstandings about spice-planting in Penang made this dream an elusive one. Desiring to prove that all their efforts were not in vain, officials on Penang often misrepresented the true state of the Botanic Gardens to their superiors in Bengal. For years, garden languished, and it was only via the arrival of botanical experts from Calcutta that the Company was alerted to its dire situation. Consequently, I argue that these networks of colonial knowledge not only transferred plants, people, and reports, but misinformation as well, leading to the eventual shuttering of Penang's first Botanic Gardens in 1805.

In making this argument, I begin by drawing on Lucille Brockway's usage of a "network of relations". In her work on how the Kew Gardens facilitated colonial expansion, Brockway emphasises that this system consisted of both institutions and individuals making independent choices within those contexts. Hence, her study is centred on the actions of a relatively small cadre of "homogenous scientific elite" who were in constant contact with each other.³⁸ As Brockway demonstrates, the men located within these networks made decisions and acted in ways that would have global resonations, this being done with the "wholehearted support of their government and the commercial establishment."³⁹ Richard Grove undertakes a similar analysis to assert that the network of botanic gardens that flowered across British colonies relied on a complex interchange of intellectual thought and was administered by a relatively small group of men – only about 15 for the entirety of Britain's tropical holdings, by 1790.⁴⁰ Applied to Penang, these frameworks are useful in determining the important roles that a

³⁷ Board of Directors to Francis Light. Letter, 14 March 1788. *Ibid.*

³⁸ Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁰ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 339.

handful of individuals played in raising and then, dismantling the island's first Botanic Gardens through the transfer of misinformation.

In recent times, scholars have turned towards describing Empire with metaphors that invoke networks, links, and connections.⁴¹ This includes Tony Ballantyne's web configuration for Empire, as well as Grove's description of plants and environmental ideas travelling between the "tropical axis" of Calcutta, St. Helena, and St. Vincent.⁴² Meanwhile, others such as James Beattie, Edward Melillo, Emily O'Gorman, and Jodi Frawley have stressed the importance of imperial eco-cultural networks in disseminating both plants and ecological ideas.⁴³ With reference to these descriptions, I use the case study of Penang's first Botanic Gardens to suggest a more nuanced method of visualising these inter-colony connections. Reminiscent of how individual islands were connected to each other via sea-routes, or how eco-cultural networks linked different individuals and scientific establishments, viewing Penang as a node within a larger imperial circuit-board allows it to be both insular and integrated. Though capable of emitting its own light, Penang as a node could not function without being integrated into the rest of the circuit. Nevertheless, it might have suited Penang's officials to occupy these dual positions, as they could utilise the island's connections, while also exploit its geographical isolation.

At the same time, the metaphor of a circuit-board also helps evoke a sense of movement within the network – people, ideas, and correspondence in the place of electrical currents, travelling between and affecting different nodes. Officials sending missives and reports formed tenuous connections between each node, while incorrect perceptions, be they pre-established, or the result of these documents, only served to further undermine the strength of such links. Correspondingly, the inherently unstable nature of such an imperfectly connected network meant that some connections were weaker than others, thereby leading to nodes that

⁴¹ Also see: Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4, no.1 (2006): 124-141.

⁴² Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 14-15; Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 339-340.

⁴³ See: James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O'Gorman, "Rethinking the British Empire through eco-cultural networks: Materialist-cultural environmental history, Relational connections and agency," *Environment and History* 20, no.4 (2014): 561-575; Jodi Frawley, "Joseph Maiden and the National and Transnational Circulation of Wattle *Acacia* spp.," *Historical Records of Australian Science* 21, no.1 (2010): 35-54; John McAleer, "'A young slip of botany': botanical networks, the South Atlantic, and Britain's maritime worlds, c.1790–1810," *Journal of Global History* 11, no.1 (2016): 24-43. The role of ecological networks will be returned to in Chapter 4.

flickered, dimmed, or even went out altogether. Such volatile connections were peculiar to the age of sail, when the distance between settlements necessitated that decisions be based on observations that were not only difficult to verify, but also sometimes months out of date. This would be even more pertinent from 1805 onwards, as Penang's government wrote to London rather than Bengal. To examine this process, the following section traces the progress of Penang's Botanic Garden through the roles of individuals who functioned as conduits between each node: William Hunter, the Roxburghs, and of course, Christopher Smith.

To grow a garden

Throughout Christopher Smith's collecting trip in the Moluccas from 1796 to 1798, he shipped countless boxes of plants across the Empire. Nutmeg and clove plants were boarded onto ships bound for Bengal, Madras, and the Kew Gardens, while boxes of breadfruit plants were sent towards places such as St. Helena.⁴⁴ Penang, too, was the happy recipient of some of these riches. In September of 1797, the *Hope* had sailed for Penang and Bengal with a cargo of 1,300 nutmeg, clove, sago, and Java coffee plants, this being but one of the numerous ships to ferry specimens between colonies.⁴⁵ By August of the following year, the Acting Superintendent of Penang was glad to report that "about six hundred nutmeg plants belonging to the Company are now in a very thriving way". Cloves, however, were in bad form, as "not above half a dozen alive of those sent here by the Company's botanist".⁴⁶

Two months later, the Bengal Council wrote to Forbes Ross Macdonald, now returned to duty as Penang's Superintendent, to acquaint him with "Mr. Smith the Nursery man" for the Calcutta Botanic Garden. Smith, who had recently returned to Bengal, was now coming to Penang with spice plants "for the purpose of forming a plantation of them" there, which meant that Macdonald was to allocate some land and as many convict labourers as possible for this purpose.⁴⁷ Battling gale and storm, Smith finally arrived in Penang on the 21st of

⁴⁴ Plants Collected by Christopher Smith, January - September 1797. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 16, Item 20.*

⁴⁵ Plants Collected by Christopher Smith, September 1797 - January 1798. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 16, Item 21.*

⁴⁶ Interestingly, Smith was not the only supplier of such plants to Penang, as the Superintendent also noted that the captain of the *Suprize* had offered him a "very large quantity of nutmeg and clove plants". Having no instructions to take these, he had declined to buy them and the plants were put up for public sale instead. Extract of Letter from the Acting Superintendent of Prince of Wales Island, dated 16th August 1798. Quoted in J.R. Logan, "Notices of Penang," *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 5, no.1 (1851): 118.

⁴⁷ David Campbell to Forbes Ross MacDonald. Letter, 25 October 1798. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 20, Item 17.*

November 1797, and though he was somewhat bedraggled from “a Fever and Ague, which almost carried me off”, a good number of the 10,000 plants in tow had managed to survive the perilous journey. Subsequently, Smith proceeded to clear a “fine piece of Ground for a Bot: Garden, containing 33 Acres”. As Smith triumphantly reported to Joseph Banks in June 1799, it was “highly probable that this will shortly become the Honble Company's principle Botanic Garden in India”, given its “trifling expense”, suitability for planting, and central location for shipping plants across the Empire in all seasons.⁴⁸

Smith was only to linger awhile at Penang before heading onwards to the Moluccas for more plants, and it was from Amboyna in December of 1800 that he sent Banks an update on the situation in Penang. The recently appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, George Leith, had apparently written to Smith with news of the plants which were presently thriving: “18,000 Clove plants and double that number of Nutmeg, all in the highest order”.⁴⁹ Smith thus confidently assured Banks that he would return to Penang as soon as possible, so that he might care for the plantations there.⁵⁰ In the meantime, Smith was evidently still sending plants to Penang, as Leith reported to the Bengal Council on the 29th of June 1800 that they had just received 15,000 clove plants and 5000 nutmeg ones from him. Yet, Leith still felt the need to add that they were in want of “some person duly qualified” to tend to these plants, and point out the kinds of soil that would suit them. “I therefore beg leave,” wrote Leith, “to recommend Mr. Smith's being ordered to come here as soon as possible to take on himself the charge of the Botanical Garden and Spice Plantations.” Consequently, if the Council could kindly bring Smith to Penang, Leith also wanted to know “what is to be the Amount of his Salary.”⁵¹

Months passed, and by the time Smith wrote to Banks in July of 1801 to explain his absence from Penang, a year had gone by. Ostensibly still in the Moluccas, Smith nonetheless argued that full British possession of the Spice Islands had afforded him the unmissable opportunity to collect even more plants there. Smith was thus planning to assist the new Resident of the Moluccas, Mr. Farquhar, in this task, after which he would return to Penang. Ending his

⁴⁸ Christopher Smith to Joseph Banks. Letter, 23 June 1799. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 16, Item 6.*

⁴⁹ Penang's early colonial history is characterised by numerous changes in administrative titles. From 1786-1800, the island was headed by a Superintendent. This title was then changed to Lieutenant-Governor from 1800-1805, and then to Governor from 1805-1824 when Penang became a Presidency of India.

⁵⁰ Christopher Smith to Joseph Banks. Letter, 2 December 1800. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 16, Item 8.*

⁵¹ Extract Letter from Sir George Leith; dated Prince of Wales Island, the 16th July 1800. Quoted in J.R. Logan, “Notices of Penang,” 165.

letter, Smith seemed to almost even adopt a defensive tone, as he testily pointed out that he had transferred a grand total of 88,113 plants to India and particularly Penang since September 1799. As such, 76,000 clove and nutmeg plants were currently in a “flourishing state” on Penang – implying that Smith’s expertise was not presently needed anyway.⁵²

Examining Smith’s excitement for the Moluccas in the context of the broader spice trade, one might be persuaded to forgive his tardiness. While cloves and nutmegs from the Moluccas had been traded to Egypt since the tenth century, it was only during the late-fourteenth century that these spices were being shipped more regularly to Europe.⁵³ By the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were attempting to monopolise the Southeast Asian spice trade, but complete control remained elusive due to the presence of Javanese and Malay traders utilising Muslim routes.⁵⁴ The Portuguese were subsequently driven out of the region by Dutch colonial powers in the early-seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company (or VOC, for the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) reaping near astronomical profits as they now controlled the price of spice.⁵⁵ In 1633, for instance, cloves bought in Maluku for \$331 Spanish dollars per ton could sell for \$1,102 at entrepôts. By the first decade of the 1800s, profits were still enormous: \$271/ton in Maluku and \$1,750 in the Netherlands.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, in Penang, one pikul (approximately 60kg) of nutmegs cost an average of \$225, making it one of the most expensive items on the island.⁵⁷

Given that nutmegs, cloves, and mace grew primarily in the Moluccas, control of this region all but assured a lion’s share of the spice trade.⁵⁸ Following years of Portuguese and then Dutch influence in the Spice Islands, it was only with the onset of the Napoleonic Wars that the British finally managed to carve a temporary foothold for themselves there. Fearing that the French would occupy Dutch settlements in Southeast Asia and disrupt trade with China,

⁵² Christopher Smith to Joseph Banks. Letter, 30th July 1801. *Sir Joseph Banks Papers, Series 16, Item 9*.

⁵³ Anthony Reid, “An ‘Age of Commerce’ in Southeast Asian History,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no.1 (1990): 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵⁵ Leonard Y. Andaya, “Interactions with the Outside World and Adaptation in Southeast Asian Society, 1500-1800,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia. Volume One: From Early Times to c.1800* ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992. Reprinted 1994), 359-360.

⁵⁶ David Bulbeck, Anthony Reid, Lay Cheng Tan, and Yiqi Wu, *Southeast Asian Exports Since the 14th Century: Cloves, Pepper, Coffee, and Sugar* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998), 29-30.

⁵⁷ Prize Current of Merchandize, for the year 1801-2. In Logan, “Notices of Penang,” 264. For conversion rates, see: Bulbeck et.al. *Southeast Asian Exports*, 182-183.

⁵⁸ Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 146-147.

the British responded by temporarily seizing these valuable colonies from 1795 to 1815.⁵⁹ The Moluccas were thus thrown open to the British, who promptly sent collectors such as Smith to gather as many spice plants as they possibly could.

At this juncture, it might be glimpsed how British seizure of the Moluccas connected these islands to a broader circuit of their imperial holdings. Temporary control of the Moluccas had not only lit these nodes in imperial pink, but linked them to other pre-existing points: Bengal, for instance, and of course Penang. Yet, there was an understanding that such a connection would not last, as the islands were held in trust and not for permanent occupation.⁶⁰ While the Dutch had sought to control the production and labour of the Spice Islands, British occupation saw collectors such as Smith ferrying plants by the thousand to more secure nodes elsewhere in the British Empire.⁶¹

As one of the main conduits for these inter-nodal connections, Smith's actions served to transmit both plants and reports between the nodes of Penang, Bengal, and the Moluccas. It was Smith who initially scouted the region of Penang during his enforced, yet fortuitous stopover in 1795. It was Smith, too, who collected spice plants from the Moluccas, sent them onwards, and suggested Penang as a suitable site to the Company's Directors before going there to establish it himself. Though Penang's permanence and potential might have briefly made it one of the brightest nodes on the circuit, Smith was nevertheless an unreliable conduit. It would take the presence of a new conduit, William Hunter, to expose the dangers of relying on a single, fragile connection.

A flickering node

Returning to Smith's report, it is startling to find just how far his figures were from the truth. While Smith had trumpeted the presence of 76,000 "flourishing plants" on Penang, Lieutenant Governor George Leith's report from the island some eight months later in March 1802 estimated only about 33,000 plants on Penang and a mere 25,864 within the Company's

⁵⁹ Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia 1770-1890* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998), 53.

⁶⁰ H.R.C. Wright, "The Moluccan Spice Monopoly, 1770-1824," *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no.4 (1958): 31.

⁶¹ Arun Saldanha, "Monopoly's Violence: Georges Bataille Explains the Early Dutch Spice Trade," in *Geographies of Race and Food: Fields, Bodies, Markets*, ed. Rachel Slocum and Arun Saldanha (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 325.

own plantations.⁶² Yet, even this drastically low number was eventually found to be incorrect. By October 1802, a new report would find a discrepancy of almost 8000 plants, thereby bringing the real number to 17,822 – a disappointing fraction of Smith’s original figure.⁶³

To begin tracing how the Gardens got to such a state in so short a time, we can turn to work of William Hunter, a Company surgeon who had initially travelled from India to Penang to regain his health.⁶⁴ An intellectual man, Hunter maintained a lively interest in botany, astronomy, languages, and a whole host of other subjects.⁶⁵ With his reputation likely preceding him, it was perhaps this background that led the superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, William Roxburgh, to promptly recommend that Hunter undertake two tasks while recuperating in Penang: first, to examine the state of the spice plantations there, and second, to superintend them.⁶⁶

Though arriving at Penang in what he described as an “infirm state”, Hunter furnished the Company with his first report on the 21st of April, 1802. Within were some troubling figures: While the Botanic Garden had expanded from 33 to about 130 acres, only 20 to 30 had been cleared and planted. Assuming 222 trees planted per cleared acre, Hunter thus estimated that barely 6000 plants had been permanently planted. To make matters worse, 9000 plants were still seedlings that had not even been removed from their shipping boxes.⁶⁷ Roxburgh, receiving this startling news some months later, subsequently wrote back to Hunter in late-July and instructed him to “make every exertion in his power” to have the seedlings planted out.⁶⁸

Fortunately, Hunter seems to have acted ahead of Roxburgh’s orders, as on the 29th of July, a new report noted that he had spent the last two months planting most of the nutmegs and

⁶² George Leith. Leith to R.C. Crommelin, 6 March 1802. Letter. Quoted in Logan, “Notices of Penang,” 355-356.

⁶³ William Hunter to W.E. Phillips. Letter, 23rd October 1802. In Extract Bengal Public Consultation 5 July 1804. Sale of the Company’s Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁶⁴ For more on Penang and health, see Chapter 1.

⁶⁵ William Hunter and H.N. Ridley, “Plants of Prince of Wales Island,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 53, no.1 (1909): 49.

⁶⁶ L.L. Forman, “The Illustrations to William Hunter’s ‘Plants of Prince of Wales Island,’” *Kew Bulletin* 44, no.1 (1989): 152.

⁶⁷ William Hunter to C.R. Crommelin. Letter, 21 April 1802. In Extract Bengal Public Consultations, 8 July 1802. Quoted in Logan, “Notices of Penang,” 356-358.

⁶⁸ William Roxburgh to Thomas Philpot. Letter, 26 July 1802. In Extract Bengal Public Consultations, 29th July 1802. Quoted in *Ibid*, 359.

cloves, with just over 13,000 plants left in nursery beds and none left in their boxes. Nonetheless, this was the extent of the good news. While 40,778 spice plants had been transported to Penang from 1800-1801, “a great proportion” of the larger trees – this amounting to 4759 of the total – had died on the voyage and “many perished afterwards”. Reinforcing the delicacy of these plants, Hunter also wrote that their biggest shipment of plants at 14,000 cloves and nutmegs, as well as 1000 plants from 63 different species, had also unfortunately mostly died during a “long and tempestuous voyage”. Ending this update, Hunter declined to even attempt estimating how much produce might be expected from the Company plantations and when they would start repaying their expenses. More information was yet needed, Hunter complaining that “the accounts ... are so imperfect and discordant, that no solid structure can be erected on such a foundation.”⁶⁹

Writing his last report in October 1802, Hunter’s careful perusal of these discordant accounts only served to highlight the sorry state of the Gardens.⁷⁰ Leith’s account of 25,864 plants in March had been found inaccurate, and while Hunter attributed some of the discrepancy to real loss during dry weather, human error was largely to blame as the figure had been “taken from enumerations made by 4 Natives”. Seeing no other way to remedy this, Hunter resorted to helping the gardener “count the plants without trusting to any other person”, this hands-on endeavour yielding a final result of 17,822 plants to which were fortunately added 20,000 new nutmegs due to the recent arrival of the *Commerce* and *Queen Charlotte* with their shipments.⁷¹

Beyond proving Smith’s unreliability, Hunter’s reports also served as current-tester of sorts. While the constant stream of plants flowing into Penang might have given it the appearance of emitting a bright, steady light, the situation on the ground left much to be desired. Ultimately, Hunter’s reports indicated that it was not merely the fault of Smith, the conduit: both the method of connection and node itself were flawed, as well. It was almost always a gamble to send plants via ship, as rough seas and lack of botanical expertise aboard could very well kill, or at the very least injure such fragile cargo. Moreover, those responsible for

⁶⁹ William Hunter to C.R. Crommelin. Letter, 1st July 1802. Quoted in Ibid, 360-362.

⁷⁰ While it is unclear when Hunter left Penang, a subsequent article from him notes that he spent “some months” there. William Hunter, “Remarks on the Species of Pepper, which are found on Prince of Wales’s Island,” *Asiatic Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal, for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia* 9 (1809): 383.

⁷¹ William Hunter to W.E. Phillips. Letter, 23rd October 1802. In Extract Bengal Public Consultation 5 July 1804. *Sale of the Company’s Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island*, 348/2618. IOR G/34/9.

Penang's garden had clearly not been very responsible at all, as evidenced by the numerous unplanted seedlings and massive loss of plants. Recalling Smith's assumption that Penang and the Moluccas were of similar ecologies, it should have been clear from these reoccurring failures that this was a fallacy. Consequently, these mistakes and misconceptions had exposed Penang as a flickering node, as the island did not have a flourishing garden as much as a floundering one. While this might have been clear to Hunter, the same could unfortunately not be said for his superiors.

Despite these setbacks, the Bengal Council maintained an optimistic outlook on Penang's Botanic Gardens. Mere days after Hunter finished his October report, the Council had even written to the Court of Directors in London on the 30th of October 1802 and described Penang's spice plantations as being "in a thriving state."⁷² When the Court of Directors read this missive almost a year later in September 1803, they largely concurred and referred in particular to a letter from Roxburgh written in February 1802. Here, Roxburgh had apparently considered Penang as "the most eligible of all our possessions" for growing cloves and nutmegs. Correspondingly, the Directors wished for "every reasonable encouragement" to be given to the spice plantations at Penang and Bencoolen, and for an annual report to be made on them for their perusal.⁷³ It was not until February 1804 that the Directors seem to have received Hunter's reports as well, but even then, these only reinforced their willingness to "afford every proper degree of encouragement" to bring Penang's Gardens "to a state of perfection." Roxburgh and Smith, in particular, were singled out for praise, the Directors taking the opportunity to also appoint the latter as Superintendent of Penang's garden.⁷⁴ This, at least, would have been gratifying for Smith, who had been quite chagrined to find that Hunter had taken his place as Superintendent while he was away.⁷⁵

To consider this optimism in the face of what, by all accounts, seemed like a disastrous beginning to their spice experiment, one only needs to look at the next paragraph of the Directors' letter. Having now also read another missive from Roxburgh, this time dated the 30th of March 1802, the Directors had "learned with some degree of surprize [sic]" that they "were at that period without a single clove plant in any of the Company's possessions, except

⁷² Extract of Public Letter from Bengal, 30th October 1802. *Ibid.*

⁷³ Extract of Public Letter to Bengal, 28 September 1803. *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Extract of Public Letter to Bengal, 29 February 1804. *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Desmond, *The European Discovery of the Indian Flora*, 63.

Prince of Wales Island, and but few of the Nutmeg Trees at Bencoolen.” A remedy to this was thus quickly found in the form of sending Roxburgh’s son to the Moluccas for more spice plants.⁷⁶ As such, for all its unplanted seedlings, dead plants, and wasted time, Penang was likely the best option that the Company had. It is of little wonder, then, that the Directors were eager to maintain this failing project. Penang’s Gardens might have been nowhere near what they could have been, but at this point, some spice plants were better than none at all. Indeed, a flickering light was the best that the Company had.

The beginning of the end

By mid-1804, things had truly started to unravel. Writing to the Bengal Council on the 6th of June 1804, Roxburgh complained that he had not received any report on Penang’s plantations in 20 months, which meant that he could not give a full account of them.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Roxburgh asserted that prior to receiving both Hunter’s and Leith’s less than encouraging reports in 1802, he “had every reason to think they were possessed of a greater number of young Trees and Plants of both sorts”. Plants had after all been shipped to the island since 1797, “and large supplies continually thrown in from that time”. Calculating the total number of plants that had been shipped to Penang from 1797 to 1802, Roxburgh estimated that the island had received more than 200,000 clove and nutmeg plants, along with almost 50,000 plants of other species.

Considering Hunter’s figure of almost 39,000 and nutmeg plants on Penang in 1802, this meant that more than 80% of all plants sent to Penang had perished – a number “so much greater than we had reason to expect.” Roxburgh thereby grimly asserted that he had no intimation of this situation when he wrote his February 1802 letter, this being the missive on which the Directors at London had based their instructions on in 1803. “For want of authentic Reports,” explained Roxburgh, “I was obliged to trust to private information”. Dire situation notwithstanding, Roxburgh insisted that though the figures had lowered his estimation of Penang, he still hoped that “with due care and attention”, the Penang plantations would be “a valuable property to the Company.” This of course necessitated more regular updates from

⁷⁶ Extract of Public Letter to Bengal, 29 February 1804. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁷⁷ The last report would likely have been Hunter’s, sent in October 1802 – approximately 20 months ago.

Smith, who was now directed to give a progress report every six months.⁷⁸

Enclosed in Roxburgh's letter was also a missive from his son, who went by the rather unimaginative William Roxburgh Jr. Writing also on the 6th of June to report on his journey to the Moluccas, Roxburgh Jr. made reference to his residence on Penang "about two years since". While there, he had observed how some of Penang's flowering nutmegs had turned out to be male plants, rendering them incapable of bearing fruit. As for the one fruit-bearing one that the island did have, its single nutmeg was some months away from ripening before it was "accidentally pluckt." As a result, they were "still ignorant of the quality of the Spice, that may be produced on the Island." Comparing this to the situation at Bencoolen, however, Roxburgh Jr. took great pains to paint this settlement as thriving. The most advanced nutmeg trees were already 15ft in height and bearing fruit ahead of time, while cloves were in a similarly vigorous state. Consequently, as "there is no place where they appear to have succeeded so well, as on that part of Sumatra", it was not merely Penang that was flickering due to its own incompetence – a new, brighter node in the form of Bencoolen had now also come alight.⁷⁹

These missives from both Roxburghs signalled the beginning of the end for Penang's first Botanic Gardens. While Smith's tireless involvement in botanical exchange had helped establish the island's Gardens, it was the movement of other individual officials such as Hunter and Roxburgh Jr. around the same region that led to its unravelling. Hunter had initially travelled to the island for recuperation, while Roxburgh Jr.'s journey to the Moluccas for more spice plants had offered him the opportunity to contrast Penang with what he had seen on his travels. Acting as additional conduits for information, these men complicated the picture that had been painted by Smith. Yet, it is worth noting that these new connections were not perfect either. Delayed by distance and time, information reached nodes such as Bengal and London months, or sometimes even years late. The disproportionate weightage given to information from other, more established conduits such as Roxburgh and Smith affected decisions, too, as these men would have been perceived to be the experts in their field – Roxburgh as the Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden and Smith as the

⁷⁸ William Roxburgh to Thomas Brown, Secretary to the Government in the Public Department. Letter, 6 June 1804. In *Extract Bengal Public Consultation*, 5 July 1804. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁷⁹ William Roxburgh Jr. to William Roxburgh. Letter, 6 June 1804. In *Ibid.*

initial catalyst for this entire project. In light of these imperfect connections, it is unsurprising that the Company's Directors had decided to support Penang's Garden for a little while longer. This, however, would soon come to an end.

On the 7th of March 1805, the Bengal Council read Smith's vastly uninspiring first half-yearly report, this being dated from January of that year. On the Company's 17 plantations, a mere 22 clove trees had started flowering, while only one was in full bearing. This meant that the total harvestable number came to a mere 23 out of some 8,283 trees – the latter figure representing yet another drastic reduction from Hunter's figure of 39,000 in 1802.

Undeterred, Smith continued to insist that Penang's Gardens would still be worthwhile, pointing in particular to his extensive experience with spice plants as proof. It was thus his "firm opinion" that Penang was perfectly positioned for spice-cultivation and could very well grow anything that grew in the Moluccas. A defensive addendum also noted that the spice plants on Bencoolen, Sumatra (which Smith did not fail to point out had actually been transferred by him) were two to three years older than those on Penang.⁸⁰

A small consolation for Smith and the Company might have come in the form of Joseph Banks. In 1805, Banks' article "On the Importance of the Prince of Wales's Island for the Culture of Spice, &c." was published in the *Annals of Botany*. "We are now become masters of every kind of spice plant either valuable or uncommon," he wrote in this rose-tinted article, and "the most sanguine expectations could scarcely have looked for such a successful issue from the experiment." Lauding Smith's accomplishments, Banks also noted that the Gardens' nutmeg and clove trees were "in the very highest state of health and perfection for the time they have been there." Indeed, Banks seems to have believed wholeheartedly in Smith's reports, blissfully concluding, that

In a very few years we shall not only be able to stock our own markets with all sorts of spice ... but also have the opportunity of supplying our neighbours at full as cheap a rate as they can purchase elsewhere.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Christopher Smith to W.E. Philips. Letter, January 1805. In Bengal Public Consultations, March 1805. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁸¹ Joseph Banks, "On the Importance of the Prince of Wales's Island for the Culture of Spice, &c.," *Annals of Botany* 1, no.1 (1805): 569-570.

Alas, Banks' glowing commendation and Smith's own reassurances had come too late, as the end of the Company's Botanic Gardens on Penang was officially set into motion on the 11th of April 1805. After ordering that Roxburgh Jr. revise the "extremely high" expenses of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, the Bengal Council made reference to his father having suggested that Penang's garden be abolished. As per Roxburgh, it was "extremely doubtful whether the advantages expected from the cultivation of the Spice Plants at that Island would ever be obtained". With money clearly on the Council's minds, it is unsurprising that Roxburgh Jr. was ordered to share his sentiments on two issues: first, on whether the Penang establishment should be retained and second, on how best to dispose of the plants there if it was to be abandoned.⁸²

Roxburgh Jr. dutifully furnished the Council with his thoughts a mere four days later. Taking into consideration the constant death of spice plants on Penang, the unsatisfactory state of its plantations, and the lack of a single tree having borne any fruit as of January 1805, Roxburgh Jr. concluded that it was "doubtful whether ... advantages will be obtained expected from the cultivation of the Nutmeg tree" on the island. The dispersal of plants across multiple small plantations distant from each other had also made the project difficult to manage, leading Roxburgh Jr. to believe that the plants would be better off in the hands of private planters. "I therefore presume it would be better," he wrote, "in order to save further expence [sic], to abandon the cultivation on account of Government." As for the spice plants remaining on Penang, these were now too big to be transported and should instead be disposed of via public sale.

Interestingly, Roxburgh Jr. also went on to echo his previous support for Bencoolen – going as far as to suggest the settlement as a viable replacement. Trees on that colony were already growing "with the greatest luxuriance" and producing fruit equal to the quality of those at the Moluccas, making it the "most eligible Situation for the cultivation of Spice plants."⁸³ With Penang's light dimming, Bencoolen's shone brighter for it – though unbeknownst to Roxburgh at that time, this would be yet another temporary affair. Attempting to delineate their respective spheres of influence in the region, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 would see

⁸² Extract Bengal Public Consultations, 11 April 1805. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁸³ William Roxburgh Jr. to John Lumsden. Letter, 15th April 1805. In Extract of Bengal Public Consultations, 18th April 1805. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

Bencoolen and all other territories southwards from the Straits of Melaka ceded to the Dutch, while the British occupied the former's colonies in the north.⁸⁴

Having read Roxburgh's reply on the 18th of April 1805, the Council promptly issued the following:

Ordered, that the cultivation of Botanical Plants of every description at Prince of Wales Island on account of Government shall be immediately abandoned, and that the Establishment maintained for this purpose shall cease.⁸⁵

A letter was also penned to Robert Farquhar, the Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, to inform him of this decision.⁸⁶ Hence, Farquhar was instructed to dispose the plantations by public sale, "immediately discharge the establishment attended to them", and direct that Smith return to Bengal.⁸⁷ No more was heard about the garden until late September, when the Council read a letter from Farquhar. Having written on the 24th of August, Farquhar noted that all 17 plantations had been sold, albeit for the meagre sum of \$9050 Spanish dollars.⁸⁸

To cast more light on the garden's last days, Farquhar had also attached its notice of sale, which instructed interested purchasers to meet Smith on horseback at the Gardens at 6am on the 17th and 18th of June. Given that the notice was translated into all the languages spoken on the island and affixed to the usual places for proclamations, Penang's government had evidently hoped for some healthy interest in the auction.⁸⁹ Ultimately, however, the Company's remaining 7,800 – yet again reduced from 8,283 in March – plants went to only two people: the trader James Scott, and Smith himself.⁹⁰ Later on, Smith would also notify the

⁸⁴ Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists*, 103.

⁸⁵ Extract of Bengal Public Consultations, 18th April 1805. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁸⁶ This is the same Mr. Farquhar referred to by Smith in his letter to Banks in 1801. Farquhar held senior administrative positions in the Moluccas from 1799 to 1804, first as Assistant Resident on Banda and then as Commercial Resident at Ambon. See: Anthony Webster, "British Expansion in South-East Asia and the Role of Robert Farquhar, Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, 1804–5," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23, no.1 (1995): 3–4.

⁸⁷ John Lumsden to R. Farquhar. Letter, 18 April 1805. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁸⁸ R.T. Farquhar to John Lumsden. Letter, 24th August 1805. In Extract Bengal Public Consultations, 26 September 1805. *Ibid*; Ridley notes that the Gardens in 1805 had cost \$11,909.41 and employed 80 coolies, which meant that the sale had been at a loss. See: Ridley, "The Abolition," 101.

⁸⁹ W.E. Phillips. Notice of Sale, 8th June 1805. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁹⁰ Anthony Macintyre. Account Sale of the Honble Company's Spice Plantations, sold at Public Auction by Order of the Lieutenant Governor. 20 June 1805. *Ibid*.

Penang government that a Bengal native had bought 34 nutmeg plants.⁹¹

In the same way no one ever realises a terrible mistake has been made until it is too late, it was up to the incoming Penang government – newly arrived due to the island’s elevation into a Presidency in 1805 – to question the sale of its Gardens. Reading Farquhar’s September 1805 report on Penang’s spice plantations in February of the following year, Penang’s new Council griped:

We cannot contemplate this head of the memoranda, without expressing our regret, that of the fostering care and great expence [sic] to which Government had gone, they should not have had some chance of reaping that advantage ... We have reason to complain that these plantations were so suddenly sold, on a notice of 12 days, and so recently before the arrival of the new Government.⁹²

Farquhar seems to have shared similar thoughts, as his report had indirectly pointed the finger not only at the Company for being too hasty in quitting the garden, but also at general inexperience. Courtesy of his time administering the Moluccas, Farquhar had acquired some spice-planting expertise of his own, this knowledge helping to highlight the great number of mistakes that had been made Penang. From the space between plants to the amount of shade they required, Farquhar’s lengthy attached appendix on spice planting clearly demonstrated how Penang had lost plants due to a slew of incorrect practices.⁹³

The role of human error in the garden’s failure was recognised by later writers, too, James Low noting in 1836 that “the shyness of the cultivators, and the carelessness with which the newly arrived plants were treated, and subsequently ... the prevailing ignorance as to the proper method of cultivating these exotics” had contributed to its demise.⁹⁴ Penang would not have another Botanical Gardens until 1822, though these, too, was sold in 1834 as the Governor was uninterested in them and his wife apparently “could not get enough vegetables

⁹¹ Christopher Smith to H.S. Pearson. Letter, 18 October 1805. In Extract Prince of Wales Island Public Consultation, 18 October 1805. *Ibid.*

⁹² Extract of Prince of Wales Island Public Consultations, 20 February 1806. Extract remarks on Mr. Farquhar's Memoranda respecting Prince of Wales Island. *Ibid.*

⁹³ Appendix to Mr. Farquhar's Report. Sale of the Company's Spice Plantations at Prince of Wales Island, 348/2618. *IOR G/34/9*.

⁹⁴ Low, *A Dissertation on the Soil*, 17

from them to diminish the cost of her cook's bills.”⁹⁵

In tracing the establishment and abandonment of the Company's first Botanic Gardens on Penang, a number of key themes might be discerned: first, the centrality of certain individuals to the life of the Botanic Gardens and secondly, the integration of the island into pre-existing, unstable inter-colony networks of exchange. From its inception, the Gardens relied on the work of a number of key individuals, or conduits within the metaphor of an imperial circuit board. The botanist Christopher Smith had been the first to suggest such a project on Penang, though with his attention fixed on the Moluccas, it was up to Company surgeon William Hunter to report on the true state of the Gardens there. Roxburgh Jr., travelling to the Moluccas, had similarly been called upon to furnish the Company with his opinions, thereby setting in motion the end of Penang's Gardens when he compared it unfavourably to the situation in Bencoolen – a seemingly brighter node which had emerged in competition to Penang.

Though the movement of these men between colonies such as India, Penang, Bencoolen, and the Moluccas allowed them to act as conduits, the connections they formed remained tenuous. Misinformation, distance, time, and differing hierarchies of expertise resulted in delayed signals and mistaken assumptions, while incompetence on the island itself also contributed to these problems. As part of a broader imperial circuit, Penang's node was a weak one, reliant on the fragile connections offered by unreliable conduits. While this section has demonstrated the unstable interconnectedness of Penang in relation to other settlements, the following one will now examine the effects of its relative remoteness in further detail.

Independent isles

Even from the very beginning of British settlement on Penang, the island's administrators were accustomed to acting independently. Recalling discussions in Chapter 1, Francis Light's procurement of Penang in 1786 was in itself a somewhat independent decision – less acting on Company orders and more informing the Company of their newly acquired settlement. Correspondingly, Penang's development in these early years was also characterised by such demonstrations of autonomous decision making. Similar to so many other islands, Penang was insular enough for colonial administrators to wield some semblance of power over the

⁹⁵ Ridley, “The Abolition,” 101.

entirety of their settlement, but also integrated into broader imperial circuits. While officials on Penang might have attempted to use this dual-position to their advantage, this section demonstrates that such a contradictory relationship only caused tensions between nodes.

Take, for instance, the initial issue of land ownership on the island: Light, having been granted full discretion to sort out land tenures on Penang, had simply handed out grants in perpetuity to all who desired them.⁹⁶ This worked until 1794, when a letter from the Bengal Council demanded not only land records, but for Light to limit land leases to no more than five years.⁹⁷ Coupled with prevailing rumours that the Company was on the brink of giving up on Penang and shifting its attentions to the Andamans instead, this directive had the potential to stymie the island's growth.⁹⁸ Faced with this threat, Light simply elected to ignore the directive, which allowed development to proceed unchecked for just a little while longer.⁹⁹ This act of ignoring Company orders was to be repeated in 1795, when Light's replacement, Forbes Ross Macdonald, similarly decided to ignore Company instructions to limit land grants to a mere 25 acres.¹⁰⁰

When Penang transitioned from a mere settlement to a Presidency of India in 1805, its brand of administrative independence underwent a transformation of its own. Previously running on the word of a Superintendent and his handful of assistants, Penang was now allotted a veritable menagerie of civil servants placed under the supervision of a Governor. Penang was thus no longer under the authority of a single man; rather, it was an entire Council that was tasked with governing the island and communicating directly with the Court of Directors in London. Nevertheless, these were changes in scale rather than action. Even as personnel, distance, and expenses increased, the streak of independence that characterised Light's administration was still wholly present in works of the Penang Council.

⁹⁶ W.E. Phillips and G.W.B., "Landed Tenures of Prince of Wales' Island." *Malaya Law Review* 17, no. 1 (1975): 5-6.

⁹⁷ K.G. Tregonning, "The Early Land Administration and Agricultural Development of Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39, no.2 (1966): 39.

⁹⁸ The Company had indicated the possibility of the settlement at Penang being withdrawn as early as 1792. Between 1794-1795, the Andamans in particular had been highlighted by Cornwallis as a potential replacement, and it is speculated that had the chosen site been healthier, the Company would have pulled out of Penang. Captain Kyd's extensive report comparing the Andamans and Penang, with a high preference being placed on the latter, seems to have swayed opinions, too. See: George Leith, *A short account of the settlement, produce, and commerce, of Prince of Wales Island, in the Straits of Malacca* (London: Printed for J. Booth, 1804), 6; Logan, "Notices of Penang," 11.

⁹⁹ Tregonning, "The Early Land Administration," 39.

¹⁰⁰ D.J.M. Tate, *The RGA History of the Plantation Industry in the Malay Peninsula* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 31.

Given the Penang government's track record of autonomous administration in the midst of supposed subservience to the Company, this section examines the island's attempts to independently navigate the complexities of cash-cropping during the early-nineteenth century. As I will demonstrate, the actions of Penang's officials during this period evidence a tension between the island's perceived independence and the reality of its reliance on the Board of Directors in London, the Supreme Government of Bengal, and broader circuits of global trade. Consequently, I examine correspondence between Penang, London, and Bengal to argue that the totality of administrative control over Penang's natural boundaries did not necessarily translate to complete autonomy, as the island was still subject to exterior influences.

Further unpacking this in the context of the East India Company's vast, paper-based bureaucracy, I draw on Miles Ogborn's contention that the Company constructed a "new global geography" by utilising various forms of writing.¹⁰¹ In this manner, letters, accounts, and consultations were not only shaped by "cultural politics of collectivity, order, and authority", but also had a hand in affecting how the Company reacted and related to processes of global trade.¹⁰² To write was thereby not merely to report, or perform the act of decision making: it was to form social atmospheres and authority as well.¹⁰³ Yet, this was not simply a straightforward question of controlling the Company via regulating the process of writing. As Ogborn highlights throughout his exploration of two centuries worth of writing in the Company, there was no "final security" to be found in the process, as it was always complex and fraught with problems.¹⁰⁴

Applied to Penang, I similarly argue that the island's written interactions with Bengal and London were not only directed by its ambivalent position in the Empire; they served to further entrench Penang in that ambivalence, too. As previously mentioned, Penang's newfound status as a Presidency came with the assumption from local administrators that they could act with a certain degree of independence. Positioned in this in-between space of being a Presidency, yet still subject to the orders of both the Court of Directors and the Supreme Government, the Penang Council's correspondence with these two administrative centres was

¹⁰¹ Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, 22.

¹⁰² Ibid, 76.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 101.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 22.

characterised by a sense of ambivalence over its actual authority. Penang's deference to London was the product of its Presidency status, yet at the same time, the twin difficulties of distance and time between replies made the island inclined to act independently in the interim. As will be seen, this regularly resulted in Penang being reminded of its subordinate position by its superiors – a feedback loop of sorts, as output continuously interacted with input.

Importantly, this period also saw a shift in how decisions were made in Penang. While previously, individuals such as Christopher Smith were responsible for choices that mired the island in difficulty, the elevation of Penang to a Presidency resulted in collective decisions superseding individual ones. No longer did a Superintendent or Lieutenant Governor take charge of the entire island; rather, Penang was to be governed collectively by a number of individuals that made up the island's Council. The first Council of Penang in 1805 thus consisted of four Councillors: Governor Philip Dundas, John Hope Oliphant, Alexander Grey, and Colonel Norman Macalister, Commander-in-chief of the Company's military forces on the island.¹⁰⁵ Council decisions were to be recorded in Consultation books, Ogborn noting that these writings functioned as the “guarantee ... of the decision-making process.” Being the tangible product of a Council's discussions, these books justified why certain choices had been made.¹⁰⁶

Though make-up of the Council would vary over subsequent years, the emphasis on collective decision making remained. As Phillip Stern has argued, the strictly hierarchical nature of the Company placed great emphasis on the appearance of unity. Regardless of the debates and disagreements that might have happened between individual members of a council or committee, written items such as minutes and letters were more likely to record the conclusions, so as to convey the appearance of a unanimous agreement. In the case of Company holdings abroad, correspondence from these places could even be invalidated should one council member refuse to consent.¹⁰⁷

An equally important change during this period came in the form of lengthened distances between nodes, as Penang was now also connected directly to London. While previously,

¹⁰⁵ Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation, 20 September 1805. *IOR G/34/11*.

¹⁰⁶ Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, 80-81.

¹⁰⁷ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11

letters only had to cross the Indian Ocean to reach Bengal in about a month, correspondence to London necessitated that ships undertake a much longer, more precarious voyage.¹⁰⁸ What had been a matter of a few weeks now lengthened to months, as letters from the Penang Council made their slow, often halting way to London rather than Bengal.¹⁰⁹ A direct connection, in this case, did not necessarily make it faster one. Longer distances only resulted in longer delays, thereby placing more strain on already-tenuous connections. Consequently, in examining the correspondence between Penang, Bengal, and London from 1805 to the 1820s, this section highlights how Penang tried to adjust to its new position on the circuit-board.

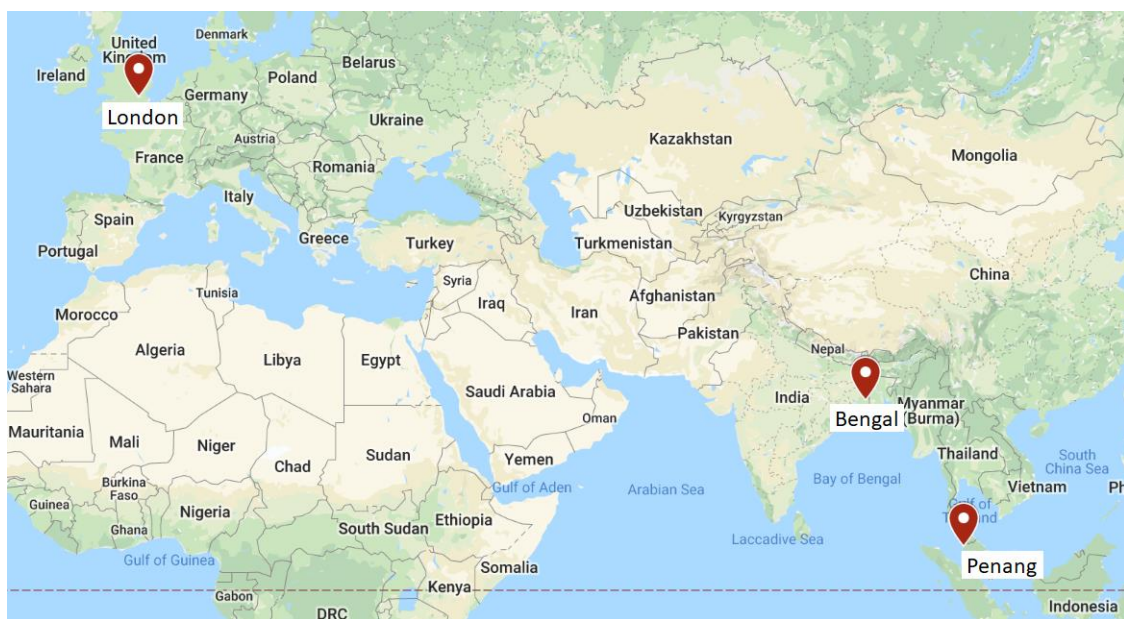


Figure 2: Map illustrating positions of Penang, Bengal, and London.¹¹⁰

Keeping the lights on

With a new staff encompassing personnel that ranged from accountants and auditors to schoolmasters and surgeons, there was the pressing question of how Penang was to maintain

¹⁰⁸ The journal of Captain Walter Caulfield Lennon, for instance, records him leaving Madras on 12 October, 1795 and arriving at Penang on 15 October. See: Walter Caulfield Lennon, "Journal of a Voyage through the Straits of Malacca on an Expedition to the Molucca Islands under the Command of Admiral Rainier etc.," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7, no.1 (1881): 51-53.

¹⁰⁹ Peter M. Solar and Luc Hens, "Ship speeds during the Industrial Revolution: East India Company ships, 1770-1828," *European Review of Economic History* 20, no.1 (2015): 69, 73.

¹¹⁰ Google Maps, N/A, Google, accessed 10 October 2019, <https://www.google.com/maps>.

this near astronomical increase in spending.¹¹¹ A despatch from the Court of Directors in London, read during the Penang Council's first seating on the 20th of September 1805, offered some suggestions, these including but not limited to: selling opium, monopolising marine stores, collecting duties, taxes, customs, and rents, and of course, trade. Writing specifically on the latter as a source of commercial advantage, the Directors expected that both European imports and Penang's own products in the form of pepper and spices may be sold in "as quick and advantageous a sale as possible".¹¹²

The Southeast Asian pepper trade was well-established by this time, with the market for it having shifted eastwards away from India during the early to mid-sixteenth century.¹¹³ Consequently, this was followed by increased European interest in the region, as Dutch, English, and Portuguese traders vied with Chinese merchants for a share of this lucrative crop throughout the next few decades.¹¹⁴ Pepper prices would fluctuate for most of the 1600s, but it was during the late-eighteenth century that the Southeast Asian market started to record truly astronomical profits. While the 1720s saw European prices dip to a low of \$282.27/ton, this figure slowly climbed over the next few decades to reach a staggering high of \$706.43/ton in the 1790s. Compared to Southeast Asian prices, there was a tremendous amount of profit to be made, David Bulbeck et.al. using data from 1620 to 1889 to calculate a bare minimum 154% return. Meanwhile, the maximum achieved was a whopping 914% during the decade of 1790-1799.¹¹⁵

It was thus in the midst of these spectacular market conditions that Penang entered the pepper business in 1790, when Light assisted the Kapitan China, Che Kay, with procuring vines from Aceh.¹¹⁶ The crop took to Penang with vigour, as Light was soon reporting back to Bengal in 1794 that the pepper plantations on the east coast were increasing so fast, his Malay workers could do nothing beyond record their number.¹¹⁷ From there, the island's industry grew in

¹¹¹ K.G. Tregonning, *The British in Malaya: The First Forty Years, 1786-1826* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965), 64; Despatch from Court of Directors to Penang, quoted in J.R. Logan, "Notices of Penang," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 6 (1850): 22-24.

¹¹² Logan, "Notices of Penang (1850)," 24-27.

¹¹³ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: Volume Two, Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 9.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 9-10; John Bastin, "The Changing Balance of the Southeast Asian Pepper Trade," in *Spices in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. M.N. Pearson (Hampshire and Vermont: Variorum, 1996), 293.

¹¹⁵ David Bulbeck et. al., *Southeast Asian Exports*, 83-84.

¹¹⁶ James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya, 1786-1921* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 95.

¹¹⁷ Tregonning, "The Early Land Administration," 42.

leaps and bounds. Writing a paper on the crop, William Hunter had even called it “the most important article of produce” on Penang and estimated that between 16,000 to 20,000 pikuls of pepper were cultivated in 1802.¹¹⁸ By November of 1805, the Penang Council reported to the Directors that 27,000 pikuls were being produced on the island, of which 75% might be suitable for the European market. Consequently, Penang's cultivators proposed that they would be quite happy to deliver their produce at \$11/pikul.¹¹⁹

Had the Napoleonic Wars not happened during this period, it is entirely likely that the story of Penang would have been a thoroughly different one. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, favourable market conditions such as the above would have led to the belief that Penang was perfectly poised to finally reap considerable economic success from its crops. On a broader scale, the decline of the Dutch East India Company during the late-eighteenth century also heralded the increase of British imperial strength in the Asian region.¹²⁰ Unfortunately for Penang, however, this did not translate to any kind of notable success for its cash crops during this period. The European continent remained gripped by fighting all throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century, so much so that the commercial landscape at large was thrown into chaos.¹²¹

Napoleon's Continental System was particularly devastating for Penang as it involved the passing of a number of decrees from 1806 to 1807 that restricted British trade from Europe.¹²² While the British economy largely managed to weather these changes, such a volatile atmosphere was not exactly conducive to global trade, and with Penang's pepper bound for the European market, prices on the island rapidly collapsed.¹²³ Mere months after suggesting that pepper be sold for \$11/pikul, Governor of Penang Philip Dundas was once again writing to the Directors in March 1806 to glumly inform them of the vast amounts of pepper still remaining on Penang. With little demand for it, good quality pepper was being sold for as low

¹¹⁸ William Hunter, “Remarks on the Species of Pepper, which are found on Prince of Wales Island,” *Asiatic researches, or, Transactions of the Society instituted in Bengal for inquiring into the history and antiquities, the arts, sciences and literature of Asia* 9, no.1 (1809): 385, 389.

¹¹⁹ Dundas et. al. to The Honble the Court of Directors. Letter, 12 November 1805. *IOR G/34/179*.

¹²⁰ Chris Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company: The Dutch East India Company and its Servants in the Period of its Decline (1740-1796)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 1-2.

¹²¹ See: Kevin H. O'Rourke, “The worldwide economic impact of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793–1815,” *Journal of Global History* 1, no.1 (2006): 123-149.

¹²² Silvia Marzagalli, “Napoleon's Continental Blockade: An effective substitute to naval weakness?” in *Naval Blockades and Seapower: Strategies and Counter-Strategies, 1805-2005*, eds. Bruce A. Elleman and S.C.M. Paine (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 26-28.

¹²³ Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*, 96.

as \$9, though if just two ship's worth of cargo might be procured for the island, Dundas intimated that the price could rise to \$12.¹²⁴

By 1807, things had not improved. Addressing the Penang Council on the 14th of February, the Collector of Customs and Land Revenue, W.E. Phillips, noted that farmers were currently unable to pay their instalments due to low pepper prices. Given this threat to Penang's revenues, Phillips suggested that the government accept sealed tenders for 10,000 pikuls of pepper, so that it may be sold to China instead.¹²⁵ This suggestion was promptly adopted and an advertisement drawn up, indicating that the Government would pay a reasonable price for whatever they received.¹²⁶ Going through the applications in March, however, the Council could not sanction any of the rates offered as they were far too high. Though all ten cultivators had offered over \$8/pikul, the Council ordered that the price not exceed \$7 – a drastic decrease indeed.¹²⁷

Despite Penang managing to ship some of their pepper to the Chinese market in 1807, this was but a temporary solution. Canton was already inundated with an oversupply of cheap pepper from Sumatra, while a lack of regular and adequate shipping only made a bad situation worse. Company ships, loaded with opium, could not afford extra space for pepper, while privately owned 'country' ships were rarely enticed to leave their local routes.¹²⁸ Foreign vessels were a plausible option, but being compelled to pay double duties at Penang, this was not a remunerative option either.¹²⁹ The Chinese market was thus inaccessible from the island, and Penang's pepper growers were left to continue languishing.

Back in London, things were hardly better. Preoccupied with the ongoing war and the economic situation on the home-front, the Company's Directors had little time or effort to spare for the distant colony of Penang. Only deigning to address the Council's missive from November 1805 in February 1807, the Directors regretted to note that they could not commit to establishing a regular export of pepper from the island, owing to low prices and an oversupply of pepper in their own London warehouses. On the European continent, prices

¹²⁴ Dundas et. al. to The Honble the Court of Directors. Letter, 20 March 1806. *IOR G/34/179*.

¹²⁵ W.E. Phillips to Thomas Raffles. Letter, 14 February 1807. In Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation 24 February 1807. *IOR G/34/17*.

¹²⁶ Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation 24 February 1807. *Ibid*.

¹²⁷ Fort Cornwallis Public Consultations, 17 March 1807. In *Ibid*.

¹²⁸ Tregonning, "The Early Land Administration," 43.

¹²⁹ Tate, *The RGA History of the Plantation Industry*, 45.

were reported to be even lower than in London, which meant that the Council's suggestion of \$11/pikul was far too high. Given that the supply of pepper was far exceeding its consumption, the Directors thus opined that Penang's planters "would do well to turn their attention to other pursuits". Coffee, in particular, "might probably be attended with advantage."¹³⁰

This advice to abandon pepper was clearly not heeded, as at the close of 1808, Penang's pepper planters were petitioning the government to purchase their present crop of 25,000 pikuls at \$7.50/pikul or, failing that, at least advance them \$6/pikul and help them ship it to China in Company tonnage.¹³¹ Discussing the issue a few days later, the Council was "fully aware the general prosperity of the Island and the very existence of its internal Revenue, are intimately connected with, if not dependent on, the advancement of Cultivation", and that if no action was taken, "many of the cultivated lands may revert to Jungle, and that a very large portion of the most valuable Class of the Inhabitants will emigrate." Despite such strong convictions, Council members nonetheless felt themselves unauthorised to commit such a large amount of money without the support of the Supreme Government at Bengal.¹³²

Such deference lasted all of two months. On the 4th of February 1809, the Council wrote to London to advise that due to "the extreme distress" of the pepper planters, they had advanced them a loan of \$20,000. Perhaps anticipating the need to soothe any upcoming scolding they would receive, the Council hastily added that they had also sought "the advice and assistance" of the Supreme Government, "not feeling ourselves authorised" to extend further aid. Tentatively elaborating on how such aid might look, the Council suggested that half of the island's pepper be purchased at \$7.50/pikul and sent to China, or a loan of \$5/pikul be made to the planters – this amounting to \$100,000 for the 25,000 pikuls on hand.¹³³

In May 1809, the Penang Council had the pleasure of finally receiving a reply from the Supreme Government who pointed out that that it would be unadvisable for the Council to either purchase anything on the public account, or even extend advances. Given that the

¹³⁰ Directors of the East India Company to Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 18 February 1807. *IOR G/34/186*.

¹³¹ D. Brown et. al. to The Honorable Council Norman Macalister Governor General. Letter, n.d. In Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation, 8 December 1808. *IOR G/34/20*.

¹³² Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation, 13 December 1808. *Ibid*.

¹³³ N. Macalister et. al. to The Honourable the Court of Directors. Letter, 4 February 1809. *IOR G/34/179*.

Directors themselves had also recently told them that the English market was overstocked, it was highly unlikely that a consignment of Penang pepper could be sent westwards, too. Nevertheless, contrary to the Court of Directors' prior advice, the Supreme Government clarified that they did not think planting pepper on Penang would be "ultimately injurious to the parties engaged in it, or that the government should ... discourage it." In fact, given the likelihood of Penang obtaining a market for its pepper at Canton, the Supreme Government proceeded to recommend that the pepper be consigned to China on Company ships. The Council was thus told to expect the arrival of an Indiaman of 1200 tons burthen in either May or June, "for the purpose of conveying the pepper to China".¹³⁴

In conveying this fortunate development in August 1809 to the Directors, the Penang Council seemed to indicate that they were still waiting for the arrival of the afore-promised ship from the Supreme Government. Pepper prices had dipped as low as \$6/pikul, which led Penang to once again bring up the possibility of sending its produce to Europe on the Company account. Disregarding the Supreme Government's assertion that England was at present overstocked with pepper, the Council proceeded to suggest a price of \$7-10/pikul, arguing that this was significantly less than the average price of Bencoolen pepper during the last three years.¹³⁵

Taking stock of how Penang's Council managed to navigate the complexities of the pepper trade thus far, two key areas might be highlighted. First, Penang's economic future was highly dependent on the continuation of the pepper industry, as pepper planters not only contributed revenue, but kept the island in constant cultivation. Despite the Court of Directors' suggestion that other crops might be planted instead – and indeed, coffee was trialled in 1808 until its price also collapsed in 1812 – it was not that easy to quickly pivot from an established cultivation to a new one.¹³⁶ Recalling the numerous difficulties that Penang's Botanic Garden had endured in trying to successfully plant spices, the suggestion that Penang simply choose another crop was of little use to planters experiencing financial distress at that moment.

¹³⁴ Minto et. al. to The Honble Court Norman Macalister Governor and Council Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 17 March 1809. In Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation, 25 May 1809. *IOR G/34/22*. Having read this letter, the Council proceeded to bizarrely record that they were soon to expect a tonnage of "about 2000 Tons in the month of July" – a severe case of rounding up, if any.

¹³⁵ N. Macalister et.al. to The Honorable the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England trading to the East Indies. Letter, 19 August 1809. *IOR G/34/180*.

¹³⁶ N. Macalister et. al. to The Honorable the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England trading to the East Indies. Letter, 29 January 1808. *IOR G/34/179*; Court of Directors to Our Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 21 October 1812. *IOR G/34/188*.

Simultaneously, such difficulties were the product of forces beyond the Council's control. Being integrated into the broader circuit of the British Empire, however, the island was subject to whatever issues were currently affecting the rest of board.

Secondly, it is with this prior context that we can further understand the Council's insistence on finding a viable market for its crop. Knowing that their application to the Court of Directors would take months to garner a reply, the Council had not only given out a \$20,000 loan to its planters, but also petitioned the Supreme Government for tonnage to China. Still lacking a reply from London in 1809, the Council had also once again tried its hand at persuading the Directors to import its pepper to England. Consequently, Penang's subservient act of seeking advice from the Directors and Supreme Government had indirectly resulted in the Presidency having to act on its own, while awaiting the relevant replies. As will be seen, this only had the unfortunate result of Penang being sternly reminded of its proper place in the Empire.

The defiant node

Just as Penang's Council was penning its hopeful letter to London in August of 1809, the Directors were at that very moment also composing a letter of their own. Writing on the 30th of August 1809, the Directors reiterated their previous assertions with some exasperation: London did not require any amount of Penang pepper and the island's planters should cultivate coffee or cotton instead. Noting that they had said all of this in 1807, the Directors acridly observed that the Council had gone against direct orders. Market conditions were bad enough for the Company to suspend their other pepper investments, so

should the cultivation of Pepper in your Settlement be unadvisedly
and unnecessarily extended ... the result as to your Island cannot but
be ruin to the Planters and loss to their Creditors.

Penang was thus soundly scolded on two fronts: first, for even daring to suggest the idea of a \$100,000 loan and second, for contacting the Supreme Government for assistance when the Directors had made it clear that the market was untenable. Citing the unreliability of the China trade, the Directors then proceeded to veto the Supreme Government's offer of sending Penang's pepper to China. Should any China-bound vessel arrive at Penang, noted the Directors, "they should be freighted with Cotton rather than with Pepper." Ending this letter, the Directors hoped that the Council had not advanced any money to the planters, nor would

they in future.¹³⁷

In the wake of this strong rebuke, Penang's Council seems to have grudgingly acquiesced to following orders for the time being. Writing to the Directors in March 1810, the Council reported that cotton was now being planted on the island, its soil and climate appearing “well adapted” for the crop. Perhaps seeking to highlight their dissatisfaction at having their pepper plans thwarted, however, the Council also pointed out that the island’s pepper production had fallen to no more than 20,000 pikuls and “a large portion of the Island formerly in high cultivation has again reverted to its original state of jungle”.¹³⁸ As for the Directors' previous instruction to cultivate coffee: “we now lament to find from the state of the Europe market is not likely to turn out a much more advantageous speculation than the former.” The spice plantations on the island, at least, were reported to be in a “very flourishing state”. If they seemed backward in comparison to Bencoolen’s plantations, it was the fault of native gardeners initially not knowing how to take care of them. This, the Council claimed, was at least all fixed now.¹³⁹

Given the Directors' instructions to plant cotton, one might imagine that Penang's rush to cultivate it would have been beneficial for the island. Unfortunately, in April 1811, the Directors backflipped on this directive. Not only was pepper and coffee still uncalled for; cotton, too, was now unrequired. Consequently, the Council was told to plant the “most necessary article” of hemp instead as it would “render the British empire independent in respect to an Article ... indispensably necessary for its interest and glory.”¹⁴⁰ Despite another missive in November 1811 warning the Council not to send any cotton to England on the Company account as it was “a ruinous and unproductive burthen”, the Directors once again reversed their position in October 1812.¹⁴¹ With American and Levantine cottons now

¹³⁷ Court of Directors to Our Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 30 August 1809. *IOR G/34/187*.

¹³⁸ British colonial administrators tended to associate jungle environments with a lack of development and incivility. For more on this, see Chapter 3.

¹³⁹ N. Macalister et.al. to The Honorable the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies. Letter, 15 March 1810. *IOR G/34/180*. It is worth noting that this is not the first time that ‘Native gardeners’ have been blamed. First accused of miscounting spice plants at the island’s Botanic Gardens, they now also shouldered the blame for not knowing how to take care of the plants in question.

¹⁴⁰ Court of Directors to Our Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 10 April 1811. *IOR G/34/187*.

¹⁴¹ Court of Directors to Our Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 27 November 1811. *IOR G/34/188*.

rivalling those grown in British holdings, the Council was ordered to improve the quality of Penang's cotton if they ever wanted their cultivation to succeed. To that end, they were to request the seeds of the best cottons from Bengal, Madras, and Bombay.¹⁴²

The Council leapt to support the cultivation of this new crop with gusto. By June 1814, they had decided to publish an advertisement enticing cultivators towards cotton, promising a slew of encouragements: land, loans, a fixed price of \$13/pikul for five years, and a waiver on export duties.¹⁴³ Well aware that such generosity would earn them yet another lashing from the Directors, the Council prudently attached a copy of their lengthy consultations on the matter in their September 1814 report back to London – signalling, hopefully, that they had in fact thought the matter through and that these documents would “explain in a very detailed manner ... the Ground and reasons” why they had also, by that time: bought new machinery, loaned out \$6000 to “respectable Individuals”, and advanced \$10 for each orlong of ground would be planted with cotton. Further justifying these actions, the Council claimed that prices in the China market led them to believe that “even at the worst seasons ... the Company can derive no loss from the Speculation”.¹⁴⁴

Adding to this temporary cheer and spree of injudicious spending was the end of the Napoleonic Wars, followed by the recovery of the pepper market. With prices climbing again, the Council happily reported to the Directors in May 1815 that pepper cultivation had once again “commenced with spirit”. Such was the Council’s optimism that they offered two suggestions: the first, now common refrain for the Company to import pepper to Europe, and secondly, for them to be allowed to enter into a contract with an enterprising cultivator by the name of Mr. Brown, whom the Council claimed was “certainly the principal and most extensive agriculturalist on the Island”.¹⁴⁵ David Brown’s proposal was an ambitious one, as

¹⁴² Court of Directors to Our Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 21 October 1812. *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ J. Cousens, “Government Advertisement: Cultivation of Cotton,” 25 June 1814. In Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation 25 June 1814. *IOR G/34/44*. This was evidently disseminated to at least one publication, as a copy of it also appears in n/a, *The Literary Panorama, and National Register: A Review of Books, Register of Events, Magazine of Varieties: Comprising Interesting Intelligence from the Various Districts of the United Kingdom; the British Connections etc. New Series - Volume the Second* (London: Miltonian Press, 1815), 105-106.

¹⁴⁴ 1 orlong = 1 1/3 acres as per the entry for Prince of Wales Island in Patrick Kelly, *The Universal Cambist and Commercial Instructor; Being a Full and Accurate Treatise on the Exchanges, Monies, Weights, and Measures, of all Trading Nations and Their Colonies; with an Account of Their Banks, Public Funds, and Paper Currencies Volume I* (London: Lackington and Co., 1821), 114. W. Petrie et.al. to The Honble the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies. Letter, 21 September 1814. *IOR G/34/181*.

¹⁴⁵ W. Petrie et.al. to The Honorable the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies. Letter, 6 May 1815. *Ibid.*

he suggested that he would supply the Company with 500-1500 tons of pepper at the fixed price of \$9-11 for ten years, or the entire period of the Company's charter. The price of the pepper, in turn, was to be determined by its type, when it was supplied, and for how long.¹⁴⁶

Unsurprisingly, a series of rebukes from London quickly followed. The first, dated May 1815, scolded the island's Council for having “so strong a tendency ... to increase the expenses of your Establishment ... at a time when every practicable reduction should be effected in order to lessen not to augment them.” This habit, it was then pointed out acerbically, appeared to have arisen “from a very erroneous idea of approximating your Presidency more closely with those of our other Indian Govts.” In objecting to this system of expense and ordering the Council to direct their attention to Penang’s economy, they were also warned not to incur any further expenses on buildings, allowance, staff, “or on any other pretence” without permission.¹⁴⁷

A more serious reprimand was to follow in February 1816, when the Directors noted that the objects they had in view when establishing the Presidency of Penang “appear either totally or partially to have failed, or to be so materially diminished” that it had become necessary to revise the entire project via severe budget cuts. Dredging up previous communiques, the Directors pointed particularly to their 1805 instructions for Penang to pay its own expenses via trade in pepper, spices, and other exports. Pepper had failed and so had coffee, while spices, for all their supposed flourishing, elicited the grumble of none having been sent thus far. With the total sale of these exports to London amounting to a paltry £143 since 1805, the conclusion from the Directors was clear: these ventures had also “either totally or partially failed”, which necessitated an immediate reduction in their expenses.¹⁴⁸

As for Brown’s proposal, the Directors addressed this in September 1816, as the Council’s letter of May 1815 had only been received in July the following year. Here, the Council’s attention was drawn yet again to previous and specific instructions *not* to incur any more costs through such investments. The island’s government was thus chided for even considering the prospect of accepting Brown's proposal, the Directors going as far as to call

¹⁴⁶ David Brown to A. Clubley, Secretary to Government. Letter, 20 April 1815. In Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation 21 April 1815. *IOR G/34/49*.

¹⁴⁷ Court of Directors to Prince of Wales Island General Department. Letter, 26 May 1815. *IOR G/34/190*.

¹⁴⁸ Court of Directors to Our Governor in Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 7 February 1816. *Ibid.*

this “a great error in judgement”. Further justifying their reaction, the Directors highlighted that Brown’s suggested price greatly exceeded the cost of pepper everywhere else, so much so that the loss on such an ‘investment’ would amount to £5,405 in the first year.¹⁴⁹

Thankfully, the Supreme Government had also shared similar views with Penang earlier in the year and Brown’s tender was ultimately declined in January.¹⁵⁰

In examining the messy lines of communication between Penang, Bengal, and London, we have seen how the island's contradictory position in the circuit characterised its interactions and decisions. Though allowed a greater degree of freedom due to its Presidency status, Penang's integration into and reliance on international trade meant that it was still subject to the whims and fancies of an economic environment much larger than itself. Subsequently, the Penang Council’s ability to address the Court of Directors was a two-edged sword of sorts, as the former’s deferment to the latter’s authority meant that the Council had to assert its own in the meantime. This, in turn, unfortunately only resulted in the Court of Directors reinforcing Penang's subservience in the strongest of terms, as they chastened the island's government for the “very erroneous idea” of acting in the vein of other Indian Presidencies. Penang as a defiant node can thus only be understood in the context of its feedback loop, as the Council's actions were merely responses to its situation and vice versa. As Penang's independence played out in the process of its Council writing to London, so too did the very same process further entrench its interconnectedness.

Given that Penang’s hopes for a revitalised pepper market had been shelved once more for the time being, it would have been fortunate if the island’s other great hope, cotton, had found any measure of success. Alas, cotton was also not to be for Penang. Having experimented with the seeds obtained from India, the Council noted that two out of three had “entirely failed.” Meanwhile, though the surviving one from Bengal was blooming, it needed “great labor and trouble, independent of which there is great Difficulty in Separating the Cotton from the Seed itself.” The Council had nevertheless received 50 bags of cotton from Robert Farquhar, the ex-Lieutenant Governor of Penang who was now Governor of Mauritius, and hoped that this new experiment might prove more successful.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Court of Directors to Our Governor and Council at Prince of Wales Island. Letter, 18 September 1816. *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation 6 January 1816. *IOR G/34/54.*

¹⁵¹ W. Petrie et.al. to The Honble the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies. Letter, 8 July 1816. *IOR G/34/181.*

Nonetheless, this, too, was a failure. When the botanist William Jack visited Penang in 1819, his observations only served to highlight the sorry state of the island's cotton. Writing to his friend Nathaniel Wallich, Jack described how the island's government had planted one pod of Pernambuco cotton from Brazil and saw it multiply, the results of which caused the Governor to be "full of the vast superiority of this cotton, of the great importance of his discovery, and the plantations of it which were to drive all other cotton out of the European markets". Subsequently, Jack deemed it necessary to see this magnificent crop for himself. "It was some time before I could discover it," he wrote, before "at last a couple of acres near the jail were pointed out ... where amid the luxuriance of weeds" he found "a few stunted bushes." Such was the extent of Penang's cotton.

As per Jack, however:

This field is now figuring in the dispatches of the Government, and the Honorable Court of directors are, perhaps now calculating the profits of this new created commerce. In anticipation of these exhaustless resources, he [the Governor] is laying new duties upon trade, new taxes upon industry, raising new crops for the service of the Island, and declares he will make the Island pay its own expenses. I beseech you now, do not think that I am giving you a chapter from the annals of Laputa, it is plain sober fact, and I am now in the place of wonders.¹⁵²

From Jack's representations, it would appear that Penang had once again found itself an unreliable conduit, thereby bringing the island back to its preliminary flirtations with planting for profit. The concerning nature of this continuing misrepresentation notwithstanding, no further efforts appear to have been recorded. Consequently, in 1825, the Penang government's memory of cotton was limited to one sad sentence of disappointment, recounting that cotton "was attempted on a large scale but totally failed and heavy losses resulted to those who engaged in it."¹⁵³

¹⁵² William Jack to Nathaniel Wallich. Letter, 15 March 1819. Quoted in A.T. Gage, I.H. Burkill, and William Jack, "William Jack's letters to Nathaniel Wallich, 1819-1821," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 73 (1916): 169. The reference to Laputa is from Jonathan Swift's 1726 work *Gulliver's Travels*, where Laputa is a fantastical flying island inhabited by some very absurd and impractical people.

¹⁵³ Fort Cornwallis Public Consultation, 4 January 1825. *IOR G/34/99*.

Conclusion

In examining this near comedy of errors that pursued both Penang's first Botanic Gardens and cash-cropping industry, I have used this chapter to argue that Penang's "islandness" offers a means of understanding it as an interconnected, yet also independent locale. To that end, this chapter suggested the possibility of conceptualising Penang as a flickering node within the broader circuit-board of the British Empire. Connected to other nodes such as Bengal and the Moluccas, Penang's first Botanic Gardens served as a space through which spices, ideas, and individuals could flow. At the same time, however, the presence of unreliable conduits in the form of individuals such as Christopher Smith allowed for the transfer of misinformation to happen, too, this ultimately resulting in the abolition of the Garden. Penang's connections to other imperial nodes were thus precarious, predicated on misunderstandings and misrepresentations. With the light of Penang's node revealed to be not as bright as initially thought, its flickering quality was made even more apparent when compared to other, competing nodes such as Bencoolen.

At the same time, this chapter also considered Penang's newfound independence in relation to its persisting interconnectedness. Looking in particular at the Council's search for a cash crop, I foregrounded the imperfect match between Penang's supposed increased autonomy and the reality of its integration into pre-existing politico-economic networks: that of the East India Company's administrative structure and, by virtue of its position within the Empire, the economic effects of the Napoleonic Wars. Penang in this case had become a defiant node that was subject to exterior influences beyond its control. As was demonstrated, this defiance was a product of and further entrenched by Penang's contradictory position as a Presidency – supposedly given more independence, yet still subservient to both the Court of Directors and the Supreme Government. Tracing the paper-trail of correspondence between these three administrations, I conceptualised Penang as a node caught in the midst of a feedback loop, as its actions in relation to changes on the circuit board only resulted in reactions that fed back into how it continued to (mal)function.

In sum, this chapter has foregrounded Penang's islandness to reinforce its complex position within the broader Empire. As a precursor to eventual British colonial expansion on the Malay Peninsula, the situation on Penang encapsulated the discordant, disordered, and sometimes downright incoherent method of rule on the island. Individuals in administrative positions perpetuated misunderstandings and misinformation, while entire Councils led

messy charges in different directions. What emerges is thus a scene of administrative haphazardness, as Penang's unsteady position within broader imperial networks/circuits facilitated the breakdown of both its first Botanic Garden and its trade in cash-crops. In the next chapter, we travel now to the Malay Peninsula to examine how British rule in the Malay States was predicated on the existence of multiple, oft-contradictory colonial projects.

Chapter 3:

Mining, planting, and society in the Malay States, 1874-1895

The Malay States were unsettled in the 1870s: Selangor caught up in wars between Rajahs, Sungei Ujong experiencing the same between chiefs, and Perak, on the brink of descending into civil unrest as well, due to prolonged squabbles over royal succession and violent fighting between Chinese factions. Seeing their current and future investments threatened by such unrest, traders who had financial interests in Selangor finally petitioned the colonial government of the Straits Settlements to intervene in 1872. As they pointed out, they had invested “large sums of money” in Selangor’s trade, “more particularly in tin mines”, and its “mineral and agricultural resources ... are enormous”. Given that the Straits Settlements government had “always ... exercised great influence over the Government of the Malayan States”, it only stood to reason that the former intercede.¹

Upon receiving this urgent plea, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Harry Ord, was mostly unsympathetic. As he noted to the Colonial Secretary, if these people knew the risks of investing in such a disturbed place and still chose to “hazard their lives and properties for the sake of large profits”, they should “not expect the British Government to be answerable ... if unsuccessful.”² Indeed, Ord was not wrong in making this assessment. Long-established trading relationships and a number of minor treaties notwithstanding, the British only wielded true influence in the Straits Settlements.³ Furthermore, on the part of the Colonial Office, the British government was wary of intervening with the situation in Malay States lest it cost them more money than the region was worth. Nevertheless, all of this produced a conundrum of sorts: if the financial interests of the Straits Settlements were not protected, British

¹ Petition of the Malacca Traders to the Chamber of Commerce, Singapore. Petition. July 27, 1872. In *Correspondence Relating to the Affairs of Certain Native States in the Malay Peninsula, in the Neighbourhood of the Straits Settlements. In Continuation of Command Paper 465 of 1872, C.-1111* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1874), 5-6.

² H. St. George Ord to the Earl of Kimberley. Letter, November 6 1872. *Ibid*, 1-4.

³ For examples of long-standing trade, see: Diane Lewis, “The Growth of the Country Trade to the Straits of Malacca, 1760-1777,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 43, no.2 (1970): 114-130; D.K. Bassett, “British ‘Country’ Trade and Local Trade Networks in the Thai and Malay States, c. 1680-1770,” *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no.4 (1989): 625-643; W.G. Miller, “English Country Traders and Their Relations with Malay Rulers in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 84, no.1 (2011): 23-45; L.A. Mills, *British Malaya 1824-67* (Selangor, Malaysia: MBRAS, reprint 1961. Originally published 1925), 203-218. For a list of treaties, see: Colonial Office, “Memorandum respecting the Relations of the British Government with the Independent States of the Malayan Peninsula,” *C.-1111*, 39-41.

taxpayers would be burdened with funding its upkeep. To save money, more money had to be spent on intervening in the Malay States.⁴

Ultimately, it was Ord's successor, Andrew Clarke, who would cut this Gordian knot. Upon arriving in the Straits Settlements as its new Governor in 1873, Clarke was instructed by the Colonial Secretary to ascertain the situation in the Malay States and report back with his opinions on what should be done with them. Though the Secretary reiterated the British government's distaste for interfering with the "internal affairs of the Malay States", he also acknowledged the "long and intimate connection" between the two – so much so that the former had a duty to "rescue ... these fertile and productive countries from the ruin which must befall them". In particular, Clarke was to "consider whether it would be advisable to appoint a British officer to reside in any of the States", this being done only with full consent from the native rulers and with the Straits Settlements colonial government shouldering the necessary expenses.⁵

In a manner that was reminiscent of his predecessors in Penang, Clarke did no such thing.⁶ On the 20th of January 1874, Clarke assembled a party of British officials, Chinese headmen, and Malay royalty aboard the Government steamer *Pluto*, which was anchored off the island of Pangkor.⁷ Their mission: to view and agree to an engagement that would not only bring much-needed peace to the troubled region of Perak, but also install a British Resident there.⁸ As per Term Six of the Pangkor Engagement, a British Resident, "whose advice must be asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom", was to be appointed in Perak.⁹ Justifying this independent course of action to the Colonial Secretary a month later, Clarke asserted that the British government "shall be neglecting a great and paramount duty" if they delayed "that intervention which the causes of civilization and good order now so loudly demand".¹⁰

⁴ John S. Galbraith, "The 'Turbulent Frontier' as a Factor in British Expansion," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960): 158.

⁵ The Earl of Kimberley to Governor Sir Andrew Clarke. Letter. September 20, 1873. C.-1111, 38-39.

⁶ Unsurprisingly, Clarke had a reputation of teaching young officers "to take responsibility, to act first and always to act, to write about it afterwards". See: R.H. Vetch, *Life of Lieut.-General The Hon. Sir Andrew Clarke* (London: John Murray, 1905), 141.

⁷ Engagement entered into by the Chiefs of Perak. January 20, 1874. C.-1111, 81-82.

⁸ Emily Sadka, *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1895* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 46.

⁹ Engagement entered into by the Chiefs of Perak. January 20, 1874. C.-1111, 81-82.

¹⁰ Governor Sir Andrew Clarke to the Earl of Kimberley. Letter February 24, 1874. *Ibid*, 114.

By June of 1874, a young official by the name of Frank Swettenham was traipsing across Perak, having been sent on a special mission to persuade the remaining Malay royals to accept this new British policy in their region. Swettenham's journal entries record a slow and at times, frustrating task, but small consolations could at least be found in some of the scenery:

Beautiful as this place always is I never saw it so lovely as it did this morning. Gunong Buboh ... clothed in thick clouds, which directly over the tops of the hills were the darkest purple while the edges had caught from the rising sun a deep soft saffron which was wonderfully lovely in striking contrast to the dark foliage of the jungle with which these hills are covered.¹¹

Clarke himself, too, was not wholly unmoved by the beauty of the lands he had managed to secure for the British Empire. In a missive to the Colonial Secretary, for instance, he described Perak's interior as being "of the most picturesque scenery, and of surprising fertility."¹²

Yet, while many administrators during this early period gazed upon Malaya with a romantic eye, another was always cast towards the potential remuneration that awaited them. In encountering the very same Gunong Buboh that had elicited such poetic descriptions from Swettenham, Clarke instead thought that the eastern range of its hills would "prove admirably" for coffee cultivation.¹³ Meanwhile, Swettenham himself also flit easily between appreciation for the land's aesthetics and economic potential. On Pangkor Island, Swettenham not only clambered up hills to appreciate "the beautiful view" that formed part of "the book of nature" there, but also wrote about how its location was well-suited for the cash-crops of pepper and coffee.¹⁴ Given these descriptions, we find that administrators in this period approached the Peninsula with two attitudes: a romanticised perception of its natural environment, and the desire to seeing its lands made productive.

In this chapter, I argue that there was a clear environmental dimension to how the British justified colonial intervention in the Malay States during the late-nineteenth century. While

¹¹ C.D. Cowan and Frank A. Swettenham, "Sir Frank Swettenham's Perak Journals, 1874-1876," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24, no.4 (1951): 85-86.

¹² Andrew Clarke to the Earl of Carnarvon. Letter. June 16, 1874. C.-1111, 239.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cowan and Swettenham, "Sir Frank Swettenham's Perak Journals," 33-34.

Chapters 1 and 2 examined this approach through the lens of tropicality and islandness on the Company settlement of Penang, this chapter examines how colonial administrators predicated intervention on what they understood to be the ‘right’ ways of interacting with the Peninsula’s environment. The Malay States were thus framed as fertile lands that had been left to waste away under native misrule, and administrators often asserted that it was only through colonial intervention that the land could ever achieve its full potential. Correspondingly, the language that these administrators used foregrounded supposed British colonial benevolence towards both the region’s people and the environment itself.

Having established themselves in the Malay States, British administrators proceeded to attach certain sociocultural associations to the activities of mining and agriculture. As such, I additionally assert that colonial approaches to these twin economic cornerstones were fraught with conflict, as they were rooted in irreconcilable views. Mines, with their unsightly pits and unruly Chinese coolies, were required for economic advancement, but these aspects did not fit with colonial ideals of a settled, beautiful environment. Agriculture, on the other hand, had the potential to offer what mining could not. Read alongside each other, these two central arguments demonstrate the haphazard manner in which British administrators attempted to enact multiple colonial projects in the Malay States. Beyond employing environmental descriptions to justify colonial occupation, British administrators also grappled with the pressing question of what to *do* with these new acquisitions.

By shifting temporarily away from examining this region’s complicated connections with the rest of the circuit-board, this chapter highlights the incoherencies that existed within the node itself. Doing so, I present a picture of administrative haphazardness, as British officials struggled to articulate a unified and coordinated direction for the Malay States. Officials might have had clear materialist intentions for these places, but as will be demonstrated, they were also aware of the social and aesthetic effects that their actions would have. Hence, this was not merely a matter of setting up a new nodal point and linking it into pre-existing circuits – officials within the node now had to contend with the difficult question of how it should function. To place the above in its historical context, the following section begins by briefly outlining British colonial activity in the region thus far.

Moving forward

After the founding of colonial Penang in 1786, British expansion into the rest of Malaya happened over a course of fits and starts. The first official British foray onto the Malay Peninsula began in 1795, when the British occupied Dutch Melaka as part of a broader campaign to prevent Dutch possessions from falling into French hands during the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁵ This was then followed by the acquisition of Province Wellesley in 1800 and the founding of colonial Singapore by Thomas Raffles in 1819, which extended British influence to the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula.¹⁶

This sparse patchwork of settlements was further added to when the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 necessitated that both parties trade settlements, so as to clearly delineate their respective spheres of influence in the region. In ceding their Sumatran settlements to the Dutch, the British received Melaka, as well as all Dutch possessions on the Indian subcontinent.¹⁷ Now occupying a string of settlements along the western coast of the Malay Peninsula, the British made the administrative decision to consolidate them into the Straits Settlements in 1826. Initially under the governance of the East India Company, the Settlements were given Crown Colony status in 1867 and transferred to the administration of the Colonial Office instead, with Harry Ord as its first Governor.¹⁸

In light of the numerous, albeit slightly dated works that have already been produced on the topic of British intervention in the Malay States, it might be apt to only briefly outline the developments which led to this decision. As previously mentioned, British involvement on the Peninsula was well-established even prior to 1874. Trade and treaties formed the basis of this relationship, and while the British only wielded direct control over the Straits Settlements, Eunice Thio has since argued that Malay rulers used to look upon the East India Company as the “arbiter of local politics”.¹⁹ This relationship notwithstanding, it was only via the Pangkor

¹⁵ D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (New York: St. Martins, 1955; London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961), 438. Citations refer to the Macmillan edition.

¹⁶ James Low, “An Account of the Origin and Progress of the British Colonies in the Straits of Malacca,” *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* 4, no.1 (1850): 12; Anthony Webster, *Gentleman Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East-Asia 1770-1890* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998), 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 102-103.

¹⁸ C.M. Turnbull, “Penang’s Changing Role in the Straits Settlements, 1826-1946,” in *Penang and Its Region: The Story of an Asian Entrepot*, eds. Yeoh Seng Guan, Loh Wei Leng, Khoo Salma Nasution and Neil Khor (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 41.

¹⁹ Eunice Thio, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula, 1880-1910. Volume 1: The Southern and Central States* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969), xvi-xvii.

Engagement of 1874 that the British managed to establish a firmer political foothold in the Malay States.

Consequently, numerous works have addressed the subject of intervention, these dealing primarily with its motivations.²⁰ In his survey of these works, Ernest Chew outlines a range of different interpretations for this change: from British humanitarianism and increased imperial sentiment, to economic pressures and fear of foreign intrusion.²¹ Hence, while some scholars such as David MacIntyre have suggested that there were fears of other European powers gaining a foothold in the Peninsula, others such as Khoo Kay Kim also posit that the entry of a new, more practical and presumably more cautious governor in the form of Andrew Clarke likely helped tip the scales in favour of intervention.²² Given that these works have largely focused on dissecting the economic and political motivations that fuelled the switch from non-interventionist to interventionist policies, this chapter intervenes by suggesting an environmental dimension to British involvement in the Malay States.

In examining how descriptions of Malaya's environment factored into interventionist policies, I first demonstrate how paternalistic beliefs of rendering assistance to both man and the environment were interwoven with hopes for economic expansion. Colonial intervention was thus predicated with the desire to rescue the Malay States from misrule, while also reap economic benefits from them. Simultaneously, British administrators seeking to further justify their actions also drew on Orientalist discourses that cast the native Malays as both wasteful and lazy. To unpack this, I primarily draw on the works of Richard Drayton and Syed Hussein Alatas, who have respectively explored the myths of the profligate and lazy natives.²³ Applied to the context of the Malay States during the late-nineteenth century, I foreground the myriad ways in which British administrators used environmental descriptions to propagate these

²⁰ See: C.N. Parkinson, *British intervention in Malaya, 1867-1877* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1960); Ernest Chew, "The reasons for British intervention in Malaya: Review and reconsideration," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 6, no.1 (1965): 81-93; C.D. Cowan, *Nineteenth Century Malaya: the origins of British Control* (London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1962); Khoo Kay Kim, "The Origin of British Administration in Malaya," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39, no.1 (1966): 52-91.

²¹ Chew, "The reasons for British intervention," 81-83, 91-93.

²² Khoo, "The Origin," 67-69; David MacIntyre, "Britain's Intervention in Malaya: The origin of Lord Kimberley's Instructions to Sir Andrew Clarke in 1873," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no.3 (1961): 63-69.

²³ Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2000), 229-234; Syed Hussein Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native: a study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism* (London: F. Cass, 1977).

myths. The Malay States were described as fertile, yet underutilised by native Malays, while the region's tropical climate and abundance was believed to reinforce their disinclination to hard work. Taken in sum, these descriptions fed the myths that built up a perception of natives as wasteful and lazy – clear signs to the British that the unused lands they saw would be better off in their hands.

This environmental dimension was also present in administrative decisions to encourage agricultural development, despite the overwhelming profits offered by mining. On the one hand, mines were required for economic growth, but their unsightly pits and unruly Chinese coolies did not fit with colonial ideals of a rural, settled population and aesthetically pleasing environment. On the other, agriculture – with its docile workers and neat villages – offered the promise of these ideals. In light of this situation, I argue that British administrators approached mining and agriculture through two lenses: that of a socially engineered colonial society, and the picturesque aesthetic. Racial stereotypes made Chinese miners an undesirable type of colonial settler, while the picturesque aesthetic suggested an idealisation of a social landscape that harkened back to pre-metropolitan Britain. Given this imposition of British frameworks of understanding on the Malay States, here I build on David Cannadine's thesis in *Ornamentalism*, wherein he argues that colonists “understood their empire *on their own terms*” – which is to say, that the British transported their own societal structures to their colonies.²⁴

To study the role of these ideas at the start of British intervention, this chapter centres its discussions from 1874 to 1895, when the Malay States were consolidated into a federation. While prior chapters have foregrounded how the flow of information across the imperial circuit-board affected this particular nodal point, here I am more concerned with the role of local perceptions – how colonists living and working within the node itself utilised environmental understandings of their surroundings. Examples will thus be drawn from administrative correspondence, journal entries, and annual reports by early British officials, so as to demonstrate the messiness of colonial environmental perceptions across various genres of writing.

²⁴ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 10.

The question of intervention

Even prior to the Pangkor Engagement of 1874, British officials were prone to highlighting both the material benefits of the Malay States and their imperial duty to protect these productive lands. Recalling how Governor Harry Ord had initially been mostly unreceptive to the idea of involving the British government in local affairs, a missive written to the Colonial Secretary in July of 1873 saw him having softened his stance somewhat. Ord's letter thus described how the richest part of the Malay Peninsula was "in the hands of the lawless and turbulent", and how he personally hoped that Her Majesty's Government might do something soon, as the subject was "so important not only to the interests and prosperity of the Colony, but to the well-being, progress, and even civilization of the native States."²⁵

Following the Colonial Secretary's instructions for Andrew Clarke to consider the possibility of placing a British Resident in one of the Malay States, this interventionist stance sparked a series of memoranda from the Executive Council of the Straits Settlements in February of 1874. Eager to indicate their support, council members such as the Colonial Engineer J.F.A. McNair urged for a "closer influence" in the Malay States, "not only to save them from further ruin, but to protect our own trade and interests." Additionally, "It must be remembered that these countries abound in gold and tin mines, have rich and fertile soils, and must necessarily, with peace and good government, yield large revenues." Placing a Resident – which, McNair noted, was also the desire of local Malay chiefs – instantly provided security to capitalists, who would then be inclined to mine or take up agriculture in the region.²⁶

Meanwhile, the Attorney-General, Thomas Braddell, had slightly stronger words regarding the present administration of the Malay States. "The fact which must strike everyone conversant with the affairs of the Peninsula," he wrote, "is the absolute inability of the native rulers to maintain order without assistance from an authority superior to themselves." For Braddell, the "innate superiority of the ordinary Englishman" would not only "dominate the inferior character of the Malay", but would bring order. Hence, "With order will come security, large immigration and production of tin, or other produce of the country, and with these large revenues ... ability to improve the country and its people."²⁷ Last, but not least,

²⁵ H. St. George Ord to the Earl of Kimberley. Letter. July 10, 1873. *C.-1111*, 30.

²⁶ J.F.A. McNair. Memorandum by the Colonial Engineer regarding Native States, with reference to Secretary of State's Despatch of September 20, 1873. *Ibid*, 212.

²⁷ Memorandum by the Attorney-General regarding Native States, with reference to Despatch from the Secretary of State, dated 20th September, 1873. *Ibid*, 220-221.

was the opinion of Secretary of the Straits Settlements government J.W.W. Birch, who would eventually become the first British Resident of Perak. Drawing from his twenty-seven years of experience amongst “Eastern people”, Birch claimed that they were “perfectly incapable of good government, or even maintaining order, without guidance or assistance from some stronger hand”. Consequently, installing a British officer in the region would supply every conceivable kind of benefit. Populations would rise, justice be administered, order be preserved, and ultimately, with such peace and progress, this could only mean that “cultivation will everywhere increase.”²⁸

Given these various descriptions of the Malay States, it can be seen that the upper echelons of the colonial government cast intervention as a noble, but also self-serving responsibility. As the usage of descriptors such as ‘rich’ and ‘fertile’ indicate, the British were not merely swooping in to save the Malay States because it was part of their colonial duty. Rather, in alluding to the economic potential of these lands, various administrators also linked such a rescue with lucrative remuneration. The British in this context thus utilised a descriptive language that combined the vocabulary of benevolence and rescue with that of economic expansion. Colonial descriptions of fertile lands left to waste invoked a sense of noble, imperial duty, while the promise of great riches served to reinforce the importance of mounting such an operation. As A.J. Stockwell and Colin Abraham have both documented, British administrators believed they were shouldering the white man’s burden in the Malay States, this sense of racial superiority subsequently helping to justify colonial control.²⁹ Intervention was thus tinged with visions of white saviourhood, as the British cast themselves as a benevolent power that had a duty to ‘educate’ the natives on proper land-use.

At the same time, British officials also drew on two myths to further justify their actions: that of the Profligate Native, and the Lazy Native. According to Richard Drayton, the myth of the Profligate Native is a longstanding belief in native populations ‘wasting’ natural resources. This perceived wastage helped legitimise colonial intervention, as colonists ostensibly knew how to better work the land and bring it to its full potential. Consequently, those who utilised land and labour in the most effective ways were justified in ruling over both. With time,

²⁸ J.W.W. Birch. Memorandum by the Colonial Secretary regarding Native States, with reference to Secretary of State's despatch of 20th September, 1873. N.D. C.-1111, 222.

²⁹ A.J. Stockwell, “The White Man's Burden and Brown Humanity: Colonialism and Ethnicity in British Malaya,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 10, no.1 (1982): 44-68; Colin Abraham, “Racial and ethnic manipulation in Colonial Malaya,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 6, no.1 (1983): 18-32.

beliefs of the Profligate Native came to include actions of conservation alongside exploitation, as native populations were seen as overusing resources and these environments now had to be ‘saved’.³⁰

These beliefs coexisted with the myth of the Lazy Native, which imagined native populations as disliking hard work. In demonstrating how late-nineteenth century colonists perceived Malays as lacking “initiative, or incentive for acquiring wealth”, Syed Hussein Alatas asserts that the British utilised environmental determinism to justify these understandings.³¹ Just as the natural richness of Malaya was thought to have made Malays disinclined to work hard for food, so too did its tropical climate imbibe local races with lethargy.³² In this case, hot, humid environments were not merely thought to affect constitutions and inclinations to work; they had the potential to intervene in human development, too.³³ By interrogating the extent to which these perceptions of tropicity affected British decisions to intervene in and eventually develop the Malay States, I suggest a clear environmental dimension to present discussions about the colonial self and native other.

To continue our investigation, we return to the words of Governor Andrew Clarke, a mere few months after the signing of the 1874 Pangkor Engagement. Writing to the Colonial Secretary in June, Clarke was happy to report that the results of British intervention in Perak were “eminently satisfactory”. Mines were back at work and Chinese gardens were flourishing, which meant that only time was needed to render the district of Larut “most prosperous and to develop its great resources.”³⁴ Replying to Clarke a few months later in September, the Colonial Secretary agreed wholeheartedly. Beyond hoping that the “wealth and material prosperity of the Malay Peninsula may largely increase”, he anticipated that the native population would slowly come to understand that their “true interests are best served” by the growth of commerce, which in turn would “surely follow” the peace and order that had been brought into their lands.³⁵

³⁰ Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 229-234.

³¹ Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native*, 45.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Paul Sutter, “The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 190-191.

³⁴ Governor Sir Andrew Clarke to the Earl of Carnarvon. Letter. June 16, 1874. *C.-1111*, 230.

³⁵ The Earl of Carnarvon to Governor Sir Andrew Clarke. Letter. September 4, 1874. *Ibid*, 242.

Phrased as such, the implication could not be more clear: British intervention was not just about clearing the way for economic prosperity, but was also for the native population's own good. Notably, it was not enough that such sentiments were left to circulate only amongst the officials themselves. Two months later, in November of 1874, a public proclamation from the Governor of the Straits Settlements conveying these exact words was translated and sent out towards the masses. If the "Great Queen's Government" was to intervene, all peoples across the land were to know of how it was for their "true interests".³⁶

The following year's Legislative Council brought more of the same. Clarke, once again recounting what had been done in Perak, now spoke of how it was Pahang which "calls again for our interference". In the past, Pahang had supplied the Straits Settlements with gold, tin, and other forms of produce, but as per Clarke's representation, "that large, most beautiful, rich, and most valuable country" was "now almost entirely depopulated." Lending weight to this decision to 'rescue' yet another state was also the apparent fact that the ruler of Pahang himself had asked for British mediation, wishing that people be sent "in order to open up his country, and to develop its great and easily accessibly wealth."³⁷ By presenting the situation as such, Clarke had set up yet another perfect scenario for intervention: a prosperous, valuable country once again needed only British guidance to develop it to its full potential.

Much of Clarke's speech to the Council continued in this vein. Reflecting on the state of Perak prior to intervention, Clarke described it as "simply one camp" where everything had come to a halt. Fields were uncultivated, fruit-trees destroyed, and everything was akin to "one huge cockpit" filled with fighting, murder, violence, and piracy. This was duly contrasted with post-intervention Perak, which was now the model for colonial progress and development. Roads were being reopened, ground cleared for planting, and houses built. As such, Clarke was of firm conviction that with "a little watchfulness and care", the British would not only provide security to native communities, but also to foreign investment and, in turn, "open up those countries, which teem with wealth and nature's produce, and only want a good Government in order to develop them."³⁸

³⁶ Proclamation of the Governor of the three Settlements, Singapore, Penang, and Malacca, to the Malay Rajahs, Elders, and People, to make known to them the good wishes of the Great Queen of England. November 2, 1874. *Ibid*, 246.

³⁷ Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Council Proceedings. September 15, 1874. *Ibid*, 248.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 250-251.

It is telling, however, that in the midst of all this enthusiasm about Perak's increased commercial viability, Clarke still took it upon himself to remind the Council of their higher duties. Though they had a mission to set up trade in “semi-civilized nations”, they were also beholden to the obligation that they “as Englishmen” owed their flag, country, and Queen. “I think,” insisted Clarke, “the success of the Malays ... under our influence and our protection, is quite sufficient to justify the course we have adopted”.³⁹ In closing, Clarke reasserted that the British had made the right choice to intervene, this time by drawing parallels between Ceylon and Malaya. Considering Ceylon’s growth in recent decades, there seemed no reason why they could not expect similar in the Malay States. The soil and climate on the Peninsula was thought to be “quite equal, if not superior” to Ceylon's, which led Clarke to conclude that the former “only wants the protection and assistance of a civilized Power to fill these empty wastelands with industrious and thriving settlements.”⁴⁰

Members of the Legislative Council who spoke after Clarke strongly supported and reinforced these ideas. Attorney-General Thomas Braddell, for instance, thought it “impossible for anyone to think of the States without feeling pain”, as precious little had been done to prosper its population. It was thus with great conviction that he spoke of there being a territory right at their doors, “enormously rich in minerals and agricultural resources to an extent rarely to be found in the tropics”, which had been left uncultivated to be a desert and “abode of anarchy and confusion” instead. In his eyes – and that of others who had long lived in the Colony, Braddell added – it was eminently clear that “the duty of this Government” had not been done. Upholding the British Government as the “protector of all inferior races within its influence”, they should have penetrated the Malay States long ago and “thus deliver us from the scandal of leaving the States ... in their existing condition.” As expected, however, all this was not merely about being noble protectors. Braddell subsequently went on to ask the rest of the Council to consider the wealth of the Peninsula: its gold and tin deposits, as well as its plains of “extraordinary fertility” that were “capable of any cultivation in the tropics”. When protection to life and property was afforded to these territories, he claimed, there would be an “enormous amount of wealth which may be brought from them”.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid*, 253.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 256.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 260-263.

Braddell was not alone in propagating these views. The Secretary for the Straits Settlements J.W.W. Birch, too, considered intervention to be a duty which the British nation “owed” to countries around them. This sense of benevolence was further emphasised through his description of the Selangor River as “the picture of desolation”, which was to him “a very painful one”. Where coconut plantations used to thrive luxuriantly, now there were only trees covered with tangled creepers. Paddy fields were overgrown and villages left empty, their houses falling apart. In Perak, however, British rule in that previously unhappy place had turned the state around, and one could now “see round the British Resident a busy and apparently happy throng of people”.⁴² Likewise, the Colonial Engineer, Major McNair spoke of how:

This rich country lies now a scene of waste and disorder, and it is alone by our ... judicious policy ... that we may look for the eventual development of its resources.⁴³

A year later, in November 1875, the Acting Colonial Secretary C.J. Irving would also use vastly similar examples in yet another Legislative Council. “I have seen what these countries *might be*,” Irving is recorded to have said, “and have seen, over a vast extent of the country, what they *are*.” “Miserable desolation” had resulted from mismanagement, and while in some historical time, these countries might have been populous and wealthy, they were now “a mere waste of dead jungle.” Though he spoke with the caveat that British Residents could not be a permanent solution for the Malay States, the point still stood: One could “steam up their rivers for miles and miles, and see beautiful lands, that ought to be covered with crops and abounding with people, covered with jungle”. Consequently, it was “the duty of the British government” to see this corrected.⁴⁴

At this point, we might pause to consider the key themes that have appeared across our examples thus far. In the lead up to and immediately after the Pangkor Engagement, British officials often justified interventionist policies by using language that drew from three main

⁴² *Ibid*, 259-260.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 264.

⁴⁴ Legislative Council, Singapore. Council Proceedings. November 5, 1875. In *Further Correspondence Relating to the Affairs of Certain Native States in the Malay Peninsula, in the Neighbourhood of the Straits Settlements, C.-1505* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1876), 82. Emphasis in original.

ideas: that the Malay Peninsula was a land of untapped riches, its Malay rulers were incapable of proper administration, and finally, the British, being vastly superior in all imagined ways, were burdened with the duty of taking the task upon themselves instead. Taken in sum, this combination of depictions evidence how the environment of the Malay States was an important catalyst in colonial decisions to intervene. Its assumed productivity promised great remuneration, while in pointing to the failings of native populations to exploit it, the British could build an even stronger case for the need to administer the States themselves.

Indeed, officials in many instances used language that framed intervention as a ‘rescue’ of sorts, where the British were helping to return the land back to its intended state. Negative depictions of the wasted present were thus combined with hopeful ones looking to a productive future that only the British could provide. Newly appointed Assistant Resident of Selangor Frank Swettenham, for instance, described in 1874 how the state’s “minerals, gutta, rattans or fertile soil” were second to no other place in the Peninsula and “only want a liberal Government”, amongst other securities, for that region’s prospects to be brightened.⁴⁵ In this case, the land itself was not at fault since it was known to be fertile and productive, previously teeming with life. Rather, native mismanagement was to blame, and British intervention promised an easy solution to this situation.

To further reinforce their centrality to this equation, colonial administrators also often compared and contrasted different situations on the Peninsula. Pre-intervention scenes were depicted as full of chaos and wastage, while post-intervention, drastic changes in development and increasing prosperity were described instead. As such, administrators stressed potential and transformation in their descriptions, so as to give the impression that the Malay States only needed the hand of Empire to bring it to its intended potential.

The myths of the profligate and lazy native

In addition to the above, colonial descriptions of the environment during this period also invoked a number of stereotypes about native populations. It was not enough to cast local ruling methods as inferior to the civilising processes of British colonisation; native societies, too, were depicted as ‘wasting’ nature’s bountiful gifts, so much so that the British had to

⁴⁵ Frank Swettenham, Report of the Assistant Resident with the Sultan of Salangore. December 18, 1874. *Ibid*, 270.

rescue the Malay States from their supposed indolence. Three interconnected perceptions were thus employed here, these being: nature being fertile enough to dissuade hard work, tropical climates causing native languor, and the despotism of native chiefs discouraging agricultural enterprise. While the first two instances drew from myths of the profligate and lazy natives living in a tropical environment, the third allowed the British to reinforce their roles as white saviours. In this manner, previous depictions of imperial charity could be further established, as the British were yet again intervening to ‘rescue’ these lands from disuse.

As demonstrated by Alatas’ germinal work on the myth of the lazy native, ideas about Malay indolence were deeply rooted in the colonial project. Hence, Alatas argues that ideologies of colonial capitalism resulted in Southeast Asian societies being framed as lesser – both in physicality and countenance – so that Europeans could justify their own suitability to administer the East.⁴⁶ When colonial capitalism became the benchmark through which labour and usefulness could be judged, native populations were assumed to fall short of such standards. In other words, direct connections to colonial capitalism allowed for communities to be seen as hardworking or active, while activities falling outside of typical colonial ventures such as mining and planting were judged as indolence.⁴⁷ Correspondingly, these ideas dovetailed into British beliefs about their own superiority and imperial charity as they, being the better, more industrious race, were ‘teaching’ Malays to overcome their lack of incentive and initiative.

These perceptions of native laziness and natural bounty also intersected with a long history of Western ideas surrounding the role of man in nature – one of these being the prevailing notion that human progress was dependent on mastering one’s environment. Interest in how human societies managed to develop across history found increased traction during the Enlightenment, and continued to influence intellectual thought even into the following century. This ‘conjectural history’ was “an attempt to conjecture” the manner in which humans developed prior to the beginning of historical documentation, and was of particular interest to Scottish intellectuals who favoured a stadial outline. Subsequently, four stages of existence were imagined, with each eventually shifting into the next: hunting and gathering,

⁴⁶ Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native*, 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 213-214.

pastoral, agricultural, and lastly, commercial.⁴⁸ Progress through each stage was thought to depend on how humans managed and used the natural resources available to them.⁴⁹

While this framework encompassed a number of different methods of thinking, Nathaniel Wolloch asserts that it was common to assume an inverse relationship between environment and progress. According to eighteenth-century economists such as James Steuart and David Hume, working difficult ground encouraged cultural improvement, since in fertile areas, cultivators did not have the same level of motivation and were not required to develop their methods any further.⁵⁰ Extending this idea into the mid-nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill also argued that the ability, technology, and knowledge to properly utilise land were just as important as its fertility. By contending that Europeans had all of these qualities and could thereby teach colonised societies to better use their own lands, Mill's Eurocentric approach evidenced beliefs about a benevolent type of colonialism.⁵¹ For Mill, imperial governance in places such as India helped to civilise societies there, this being quite different from the environments of settler colonies which assisted colonial communities in realising the “civilizational potential” already within them.⁵²

Linking this to our purposes here, such beliefs meant that British colonists who looked upon the fertile lands of the Malay Peninsula saw additional rationale for casting natives as lazy, or indolent. By engaging with and employing these long legacies of economic thought, the British could justify their own innate superiority as a more developed population. Take for instance a journal entry from the first Resident of Perak J.W.W. Birch, who in 1874 thought that a site at Pasir Panjang might be an excellent place to plant various crops as a small farm, “and to teach the natives”. This, he claimed, would be “one of the things a Resident may be more useful in” as he could “improve the style of cultivation of so many things, and start so many new things not known before, and not yet tried.”⁵³ Intervention was thereby not only a matter of fully economising a fertile environment in the ‘right’ way, but also a service rendered to natives who needed to be taught and rescued from their own base nature.

⁴⁸ Nathaniel Wolloch, *Nature in the History of Economic Thought: How Natural Resources Became and Economic Concept* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 42.

⁴⁹ Nathaniel Wolloch, “The Civilizing Process, Nature, and Stadial Theory,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no.2 (2011): 253.

⁵⁰ Wolloch, *Nature in the History of Economic Thought*, 45-48.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 113-114.

⁵² Duncan Bell, “John Stuart Mill on Colonies,” *Political Theory* 38, no.1 (2010): 46.

⁵³ J.W.W. Birch and P.L. Burns, *The Journals of J.W.W. Birch: First British Resident to Perak, 1874-1875* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 109.

This sense of benevolence was often accompanied by negative descriptions of how Malays failed to capitalise on their overwhelmingly fertile environments. Prior to his exit from the Straits Settlements to take up his new post of Governor of Western Australia instead, Governor Harry Ord managed to reiterate his support for intervention to the Colonial Secretary. “The introduction of the seeds of civilized government into the Malaya peninsula,” he wrote in September 1873, “seems destined to change the face of that country.” Obvious reference to planting a government aside, Ord also maintained that this place was “endowed with a fertile soil” and unlimited minerals, but was currently nothing more than an immense primeval forest, the undisturbed abode of various creatures. Most tellingly, however, was his assessment of Malay civilisation:

Little villages of Malays are thinly scattered along its shores, and on the banks of its rivers, but the bounty of nature has been thrown away on them.⁵⁴

Describing the region as such, Ord highlighted the apparent lack of care shown by local populations. Malay villagers lived in the midst of all this natural fertility and potential, and yet, nothing had been done to reap its offerings.

These ideas were repeated by the likes of Captain Murray, the Assistant Resident at Sungei Ujong in 1876. Reporting on a trip to one of the valleys in his region, Murray claimed to the Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements that he now understood why the natives were “so lazy and disinclined to work.” Nature, according to Murray, was so bountiful that labour was unnecessary. Fruit trees of all kinds grew in the greatest profusion, and in measuring the mangosteen trees in particular, Murray found them to be simply enormous.⁵⁵ Similarly, the first Resident of Negeri Sembilan, Martin Lister, wrote in his guide to mining laws and customs that Malays were “lazy and live contentedly on comparatively little”, as their rivers abounded with fish and their forests contained both big and small game. Produce grew with such luxuriance that money, it would seem, was “not an absolute necessity”.⁵⁶

Though written some ten years after the Malay States were federated in 1895, we might also look to Frank Swettenham’s *British Malaya* and include it in our discussions, as it was

⁵⁴ Sir H. St. George Ord to the Earl of Kimberley. Letter. September 5, 1873. C.-1111, 90.

⁵⁵ Captain Murray to the Colonial Secretary. Letter. February 2, 1876. C.-1505, 92.

⁵⁶ Martin Lister, *Mining Laws and Customs in the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1889), 3.

intended to be a history of British intervention. In his description of the Malays, Swettenham thought their leading characteristic to be “a disinclination to work” since “Nature has done so much for him that he is never really cold and never starves.” Using the example of fishing in particular, Swettenham then asserted that “less than one month’s fitful exertion in twelve, a fish basket in the river or in a swamp, an hour with a casting net in the evening, would supply a man with food.”⁵⁷ Such was the fertility of the Peninsula, that so much could be got for so little.

It is worth noting that it was not merely officials who held these views. The *Straits Times* newspaper, for instance, repeated these sentiments about lazy natives and fertile lands in a piece extolling the visit of the new Governor, William Jervois, to the east coast of the Peninsula in 1875:

That all these States are rich in resources of every description there can be no doubt from the fact that the population, which may be pronounced the laziest in the world, all “nature’s gentlemen,” are able to live with the smallest amount of work ... It only requires safety to life and property to be once assured ... a general era of prosperity and enterprise take the place of one of sleepy stagnation and idleness.⁵⁸

Jervois obviously agreed with the columnist, as the extract above and more was forwarded to the Colonial Secretary for his perusal.⁵⁹ While prior examples saw officials transmitting their opinions either within their own circles or to their superiors, the *Straits Times* article went one step further by helping to perpetuate these myths to the reading public, thereby further entrenching such perceptions.

Given that the Malay Peninsula seemed overwhelmingly fertile to the British, it is of little surprise that officials thought that richness could be coaxed from it with relatively little work – a considerable reversal from the discourses of tropicality presented in Chapter 1, where early officials on Penang were more attuned to how tropical fertility required the assistance of

⁵⁷ Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company, 1907), 136-137.

⁵⁸ Extract from the “Straits Times”. July 31, 1875. In *Further Correspondence Relating to the Affairs of Certain Native States in the Malay Peninsula, in the Neighbourhood of the Straits Settlements, C.–1320* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1876), 10.

⁵⁹ Governor Sir W.F. Jervois to the Earl of Carnarvon. Letter. August 7, 1875. *Ibid*, 9.

human labour. Writing to his wife in 1884, Governor Frederick Weld asserted that the richness of the vegetation he saw was “indescribable”. Veritable “plantations of tapioca and pineapple” were growing wild as well, implying that such was their abundance, human hands were not needed to cultivate them.⁶⁰ A speech that Weld delivered to at the Royal Colonial Institute in the same year also saw him repeating these views, the Malays being described as “excellent boatmen”, but lazy in all other occupations as “nature and very little trouble supplies all their wants.” Correspondingly, these fertile lands were so abundant in produce that Weld even proceeded to wonder aloud if “a large proportion ... of our own energetic countrymen would not be lazy too, if they had such a climate and all their wants supplied.”⁶¹

These perceptions were not merely limited to colonial officials, as prominent Europeans also took to spreading these perceptions. William Napier, for instance, was the Chairman of the Straits Settlements Association (SSA), a body dedicated to protecting British commerce in the Straits and its surrounding region. As Anthony Webster argues, the SSA represented a long-awaited recognition of the Straits as an important commercial entity, especially in the metropole.⁶² Hence, given the SSA’s close association with the Colonial Office, Napier’s 1876 work *The Malays: And a Few Words Regarding Perak and Salangore* might bear some brief examination. Within this “brief sketch”, Napier described how the despotism of native rule only added to the “natural indolence” of the Malays, as they anticipated the fruits of their labour being taken from them. Casting native systems of governance in this unflattering light, Napier split the blame between local rulers and their people, asserting that such an atmosphere led to “neither aptitude for agriculture, nor skill to work the mineral riches of the soil.” Consequently, he deemed Malay rulers to be “*magna inter opes inops* – wealthless in the midst of wealth”.⁶³

In his 1878 book *Perak and the Malays*, the Colonial Engineer Major McNair repeated similar perceptions when he blamed Malay chiefs for preventing the population from “attempting to

⁶⁰ Lady Alice Lovat, *The Life of Sir Frederick Weld, G.C.M.G. A Pioneer of Empire* (London: John Murray, 1914), 278.

⁶¹ Frederick A. Weld, “The Straits Settlements and British Malaya (10 June 1884),” in *Honourable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in South-East Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute, 1874-1928*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 72.

⁶² Anthony Webster, “The Development of British Commercial and Political Networks in the Straits Settlements 1800 to 1868: The Rise of a Colonial and Regional Economic Identity?” *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no.4 (2011): 899-900.

⁶³ William Napier, *The Malays: And a Few Words Regarding Perak and Salangore* (London: Alfred Boot, 1876), 3, 11.

improve their own condition.” Fearing that their produce would be confiscated, Malays only grew what was sufficient for their wants, and it was only with the onset of British rule in the region that they started to live more comfortably. “Doubtless,” McNair concluded, “this oppression has much to do with the careless indolent habits of too many of the people.”⁶⁴ Though a “land metaphorically flowing with milk and honey”, the state of Perak was “badly ruled, thinly inhabited, poorly cultivated, and asking the direction of Western capitalists”.⁶⁵

Taking stock of our examples thus far, we find that native laziness was closely associated with three main aspects: the belief that Malays needed ‘education’, tropical abundance, and the familiar spectre of local misrule. As David Arnold has argued, the tropics during much of the 1800s was framed as an Eden whose primeval quality not only applied to nature itself, but its inhabitants, too. In being insulated from the changes of the outside world, natives were thereby thought to remain childlike.⁶⁶ John Stuart Mill’s view of colonialism as a form of benevolent education thus seems particularly apt in the context of the Malay States, since if the Malays needed guidance, Empire could adopt a paternalistic role in teaching them. Indeed, the instigator of British intervention in the Peninsula himself, Andrew Clarke, wrote as much to the Colonial Secretary in 1874, claiming that “The Malays ... require to be treated more like children, and to be taught”.⁶⁷

Simultaneously, these perceptions of perpetual childhood co-existed with the belief that an overabundance of tropical nature led to a great laziness amongst its peoples.⁶⁸ The concept of natural bounty in the tropics had undeniable economic and political implications, as employing these tropes alongside that of the lazy native allowed colonial administrators to effectively erase local forms of labour.⁶⁹ If Nature was thought to have granted these abundances, natives could be seen as mere slothful freeloaders, never mind the complex, pre-existing relationships that they had with their natural environments via cultural meanings, narratives, histories, and conditions of production.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the fecundity of the tropics

⁶⁴ Major Fred. McNair, *Perak and the Malays: "Sarong" and "Kris"* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1878), 445.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁶ David Arnold, “‘Illusory Riches’: representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no.1 (2000): 11.

⁶⁷ Andrew Clarke to the Earl of Kimberley. Letter. February 24, 1874. *C.-1111*, 110.

⁶⁸ Arnold, “‘Illusory Riches,’” 12.

⁶⁹ Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760-1820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 32-33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

provided no motivation to further civilise, as one could merely reap nature's own harvest.⁷¹ The myth of the lazy native was thereby rooted in environmental determinism, wherein laziness was a by-product of a constitution shaped by climate.

Correspondingly, climates could be said to come with its own moral classifications. David Livingstone, for instance, points to the presence of a "moral cartographic" where the earth is split into "virtue and vice, master and servant, enlightened and benighted."⁷² In this case, the heat and humidity of the torrid zone was believed to have contributed to the negative characteristics of those who lived there, causing lethargy, degeneracy, and overall inferiority.⁷³ Reminiscent of our discussions in Chapter 1, these negative perceptions of the tropics were also intertwined with discourses of acclimatisation, as Europeans regularly questioned whether they could "settle, survive, and rule" in these places.⁷⁴ Operating within these frameworks, Europeans across the ages tended to fear what the tropics might do to their own physiologies, though by the mid-nineteenth century, increased beliefs in 'colonial duty' meant that climatic determinism took an even firmer hold.⁷⁵ Mike Hulme has therefore argued that the potential danger of a climate was affected by imperial understandings of whether one was physically, mentally, and morally superior to those living in such an environment.⁷⁶ By asserting that climates made Europeans and colonised populations fundamentally different, there was increased justification in asserting dominance over the latter.

As with all things, however, caveats did exist – particularly when colonists adjusted beliefs in the face of potential remuneration. In the Malay States, we see these discourses played out in the writings of colonists such as Acting Resident of Perak Captain Speedy, who wrote to his superior, Governor Clarke, that the climate of the Larut district was one of "great advantage to the European settler" as "the languor and lassitude experienced in most tropical countries is here almost unknown." Temperatures rarely exceeded 30 degrees Celsius, and though the sun was fiercely tropical at noon, frequent breezes meant that the heat was decidedly non-fatal.

⁷¹ Sutter, "The Tropics," 188.

⁷² David Livingstone, "Tropical hermeneutics and the climatic imagination," *Geographische Zeitschrift* 90, no.2 (2002): 69.

⁷³ George Adamson, "'The languor of the hot weather': Everyday perspectives on weather and climate in colonial Bombay, 1819-1828," *Journal of Historical Geography* 38, no.2 (2012): 144-145.

⁷⁴ Mike Hulme, "The conquering of climate: Discourses of fear and their dissolution," *Geographical Journal* 174, no.1 (2008): 9.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Also see: Karen Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no.2 (1984): 213-240.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

This was incredibly fortunate indeed, given that the region's hills were “admirably adapted” for the growth of all types of things, and the plains, available for plantations of sugar, tobacco, and tapioca. With “British enterprise and energy brought to bear for the proper cultivation of the land,” enthused Speedy, Larut would soon see great success.⁷⁷

Clarke evidently agreed with these views. Commenting on a paper on British Malaya read at the Royal Geographic Society, he went one step further by asserting that there would be “no practical benefit” if the British did not recognise that “the great neglected Malay Peninsula was a province unequalled in the Tropics for its beneficial influence upon the European constitution.” After all, he pointed out, the speaker of the paper was still perfectly fine and healthy despite having carried out surveying work while exposed to all the “vicissitudes” of a tropical climate for eight or nine years.⁷⁸ If there was economic benefit to be reaped, clearly some concessions could be made.

Having demonstrated the centrality of climatic determinism and economisation to colonial environmental attitudes in the Malay States, the following section will now go on to explore how British perceptions of an ideal colonial society and its associated aesthetics affected decisions to choose agriculture over mining.

An ugly endeavour

When the British began administering the Malay Peninsula, it was with the knowledge that it held vast mineral reserves. Deposits of gold, coal, iron, and other types of ore were scattered across the region, but tin was by far the most common and remunerative. Mining interests were thereby largely concentrated on this metal, and while enterprising companies would attempt to extract others, nothing would ever come close to the premier status that tin enjoyed. Early mentions of Malayan tin can be found as far back as the ninth century, when Arab sources made note of a port on the Peninsula that was famed for tin and bamboo.⁷⁹ Chinese writers, too, wrote of tin being exported to the Middle Kingdom via Kelantan and Pahang during the 1200s, while Dutch and Portuguese colonisers in the sixteenth to eighteenth-

⁷⁷ T.C.S. Speedy. Report on Larut by Acting Resident for period dating from Treaty of Pangkor to 31st December 1874. C.-1505, 70-72.

⁷⁸ D.D. Daly, “Surveys and Explorations in the Native States of the Malayan Peninsula, 1875-82,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society and Monthly Record of Geography* 4, no.7 (1882): 410.

⁷⁹ Yat Hoong Yip, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1969), 55-56.

centuries attempted to monopolise the local tin trade.⁸⁰ By the establishment of the Straits Settlements at the start of the nineteenth century, the rise of European and Chinese mercantile activity in the area meant that such interests also eventually spilled over into the adjacent hinterlands, these mines being mostly worked by Chinese immigrants.⁸¹ Nonetheless, it was only during the latter half of the 1800s that Malayan tin truly came into its own as an important economic resource. By then, tin had become a central commodity, and with no good substitute for it in place, the drying up of European mines forced prospectors and investors alike to look towards Southeast Asia.⁸²

In the Malay States, tin-mining rapidly became the bedrock upon which the British colonial government was raised. The onset of industrialisation meant that various parties were clamouring for more tin, which was predominantly used in tinplating. Particularly, its centrality in making tin cans increased demands as these items had become more common in both wartime and daily life.⁸³ Linked into broader imperial circuits of trade and consumption in this manner, tin prices in the region spiked. While one pikul (approximately 60kg) had cost \$20 during the 1850s, this rose to more than \$30 per pikul in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁸⁴ In response, export duties on tin constituted the highest source of revenue, earning the British Malayan government a staggering \$25 million between 1875-1896. In contrast, the second most lucrative area of railways was at a mere \$6.7 million, while land revenue, another half of that at \$3.5 million – meagre sums, when seen in comparison to tin.⁸⁵

In continuing to consider how colonial environmental attitudes affected the administration of the Malay States, this section examines the different motivations behind decisions to agitate for greater agricultural development despite the financial benefits of mining. Given the Malay

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja, *The Economy of Colonial Malaya: Administrators versus Capitalists* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 15-19.

⁸² Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 140.

⁸³ Ibid, 139.

⁸⁴ Yip, *The Development*, 62. Indian rupees were used as official currency during Company rule in the Straits Settlements, this being exchanged for dollars from 1867 onwards. Silver dollars from other areas were also considered legal tender at this point, while local currencies such as gold and silver coins were also in circulation on the Peninsula. British trade dollars were introduced in 1895, only to be replaced with the Straits Settlements dollar in 1903 when the Settlements moved to the gold exchange. Official tender in the Malay States largely corresponded to these changes. See: Chiang Hai Ding, "The Origins of the Malaysian Currency System (1867-1906)," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39, no.1 (1966): 1-18. For pikul conversion, see: David Bulbeck, Anthony Reid, Lay Cheng Tan, and Yiqi Wu, *Southeast Asian Exports Since the 14th Century: Cloves, Pepper, Coffee, and Sugar* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998), 182-183.

⁸⁵ Raja, *The Economy*, 22.

States' importance to the rest of the circuit-board as tin-producing node, mining held the promise of wildly successful profits. These, however, were short-termed, and the processes of mining yielded undesirable physical and social results. In stark contrast to this, agriculture offered sustainable remuneration, the 'right' kind of colonial population, and appealed to the nostalgia of the picturesque aesthetic. Analysing how these inconsistencies manifested in both written texts and policies, I argue that such contradictory positions stemmed from a mix of incompatible social, economic, and intellectual motivations that ultimately still managed to work together due to their shared interests in reinforcing colonial rule.

To frame this section, I draw primarily from the work of David Cannadine who contends that British officials seeking to establish their Empire abroad strove to connect disparate regions by replicating the social structures that were familiar to them. Correspondingly, colonial administrators did not merely assume that certain societies were similar to their own domestic structures. In some cases, these foreign societies were even deemed superior to the metropolis of an increasingly urbanised home.⁸⁶ The export and implementation of these social hierarchies from colonial centre to periphery were thus essential to the "spectacle of empire", as the British organised their colonies according to familiar categories of rank, status, and of course, race.⁸⁷ Stratifying their Empire as such, the British could continue to imagine that they still occupied a more traditional social hierarchy – one that was contingent on agriculture, land-ownership, and feudal relationships. As such, the centrality of these structures to British colonialism meant that the Empire was "about land and agriculture and the countryside".⁸⁸

Building upon Cannadine's work, I showcase how agriculture was the vehicle through which British administrators tried to create what they believed to be an 'ideal' colonial society and environment in the Malay States. As will be seen, the British drew on racial stereotypes when comparing the effects of mining with that of agriculture. While Chinese miners were thought to be troublesome and difficult to control, indentured Indian agricultural labourers were cast as more docile and amenable to British rule. Simultaneously, agriculture also promised a return to the feudalism of British landed estates, though in the context of the Malay States, it was the Malays themselves who occupied the role of the yeoman peasantry. Through the process of engineering and controlling these relationships, British colonial rule could

⁸⁶ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, xix.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 122-123.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 130-131.

ultimately be entrenched at the apex of this social hierarchy.

To encapsulate how British officials described the benefits of tin-mining, we can first look to the words of W.E. Maxwell, whose long and distinguished career in both the Malay States and Straits Settlements spanned from 1865 to 1895.⁸⁹ Addressing the Royal Colonial Institute in 1891, Maxwell's paper asserted that "Our hopes, of course, rest almost entirely on the tin-industry."⁹⁰ Cultivation could be hoped for, but even then, it would not come close to the results of a "successful mining rush." For Maxwell, then, mining was the perfect vehicle for colonial development. With the Malay States "supported by splendid mineral resources", the British would be able to entice both coolies and capital to the region, thereby helping to drive up excise revenue as lands and houses subsequently increased in price.⁹¹

Nonetheless, this came with its own issues as an overreliance on tin subjected the rest of the colonial economy to the effects of price-fluctuations. Low tin prices in the late 1870s, for instance, led then-Resident of Selangor Bloomfield Douglas to complain that every other industry was being affected, as tin was the main and only staple of the country.⁹² Similarly, Governor Frederick Weld wrote to the Colonial Secretary in 1880 to note how Sungei Ujong's revenues were derived mainly from tin royalties and excise duties. With the influx of planters into the region, however, there was now reasonable hope that its future would "rest on a firmer basis than the fluctuating value of tin."⁹³

Yet, that was not all, as in the same breath, administrators often indicated great desires for a settled population. Mining formed part of what Corey Ross calls the "commodity frontier", where boundaries of extraction were moved ever further to exploit and exhaust available resources. Given that speculators adopted a utilitarian approach to land, these "windfalls" of

⁸⁹ Mohamad Rashidi Pakri, "An Imperial or a Personal Legacy?: The Rivalry of W. E. Maxwell and F. A. Swettenham in British Malaya," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 84, no.2 (2011); 33-37.

⁹⁰ W.E. Maxwell, "The Malay Peninsula: Its Resources and Prospects," in *Honourable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in South-East Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute, 1874-1928*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 151.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Bloomfield Douglas, "Report on the Revenue and Expenditure of the State of Selangor for the Year 1879." 12 May, 1880. In *Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States, C.-3095* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1881), 12.

⁹³ Governor Sir F.A. Weld to the Right Hon. The Earl of Kimberley. Letter. 18th June 1880. *Ibid.*, 4.

resources tended to draw transitory populations.⁹⁴ Once a place was utterly deprived of all that could be extracted from it, these communities would pack up and move on, thereby pushing the frontier further out again. Consequently, Ross argues that the temporary nature of these populations, lack of political consequence, and accompanying assumption of practically infinite resources led to transient and destructive modes of extracting mineral wealth in Southeast Asia.⁹⁵

In comparison to the above, agriculture promised the far more desirable possibility of settled populations and continuous revenue, making it better long-term alternative. As per the investigations of various economic historians, the administrative tendency to agitate for increased agriculture was generally fuelled by desires to see the Malay States settled with permanent populations that could also contribute lasting revenue.⁹⁶ To achieve this aim, the British colonial government implemented a variety of policies to encourage the spread of agriculture, these including: rent remissions for new settlers, distribution of plants and seeds to enterprising cultivators, and judicious loans – all of which were offered to both subsistence and commercial planters.⁹⁷

These beliefs in the benefits of agriculture were held by numerous administrators. Referring to Bloomfield Douglas again, his 1880 missive to the Secretary of the Straits Settlements expressed hopes for a time when, at the expiry of their agreements, immigrant miners would turn to other industries and settle down permanently. It was, he claimed, not “a healthy state of things” when the country’s main population was made up of “large employers and labour and their rude uncivilized labourers”, rendering the country still “a vast jungle yielding nothing in ... agricultural produce” or any rice.⁹⁸ Matters seemed to have improved by 1882, when the Superintendent of Public Works and Surveys, D.D. Daly, spoke to the Royal Geographical Society. Addressing his audience, Daly described how Selangor's revenues prior

⁹⁴ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 180-202. Quoted in Corey Ross, “The tin frontier: Mining, empire, and environment in Southeast Asia, 1870s-1930s,” *Environmental History* 19, no.3 (2014): 457.

⁹⁵ Ross, “The tin frontier,” 457.

⁹⁶ See: James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya, 1786-1921* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 223-224; Lim Teck Ghee, *Origins of a Colonial Economy: Land and Agriculture in Perak 1874-1897* (Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1976), 88-89, 101-102; Chai Hon-Chan, *The Development of British Malaya 1896- 1909* (London, Kuala Lumpur, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 22-23.

⁹⁷ Sadka, *The Protected Malay States*, 357-360.

⁹⁸ From H.B.M. Resident, Selangor, to the Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements. Letter. 24th May, 1880. C.–3095, 36.

to British intervention had depended entirely on tin exports – “always a precarious and fluctuating source.” Nonetheless, British rule had caused agriculture to drastically increase and “a revenue formerly unknown” was now being coaxed from the land.⁹⁹ In response to this, a previous member of the Straits Settlements Council by the name of Mr. Adamson not only expressed hopes that young Englishmen would go to the Malay States to engage in coffee cultivation there, but was also confident that “the Chinese would flock into these territories, and assist in promoting such cultivation, until the country would become rich and prosperous”.¹⁰⁰

These sentiments were echoed by the Acting British Resident of Selangor J.P. Rodger, who noted in his annual report for 1885 that they had a “most urgent need” for the presence of a large agricultural population. While tin revenues were steadily increasing and would continue to increase for years to come, he thought “it would be unwise not to fully recognise the fact that at some future period, more or less remote, these alluvial tin mines will gradually become exhausted ...”¹⁰¹ The same was also conveyed in an 1889 letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Governor of the Straits Settlements. “To the spread of agriculture,” he wrote, “I attach the greatest importance”. This was not merely due to its ability to supplement tin-mining, but also because the “progress of agriculture taken in connexion with the constant stream of immigration” would spread the population more evenly across the Peninsula, rather than have it clustered around mining areas.¹⁰² J.F. Dickson, who was in charge of administrative duties during the Governor's absence, agreed wholeheartedly and concurred in his reply that: “It is on the extension of cultivation with a settled population that the future progress and permanent prosperity of these States must mainly depend.”¹⁰³

Going into the 1890s, this desire to see a settled, agricultural population remained a common refrain. Resident of Selangor, W.H. Treacher, opined in 1893 that in a country made prosperous from tin, few would “dispute the desirability ... of giving every possible encouragement to agriculture, the soundest basis of permanent prosperity and of a contented

⁹⁹ Daly, “Surveys and Explorations,” 402.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 411.

¹⁰¹ J.P. Rodger. Annual Report on the State of Selangor for the Year 1885. In *Further Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States, C.-4958* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), 109-110.

¹⁰² Lord Knutsford to Sir C.C. Smith. Letter. July 23 1889. In *Further Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States, C.-5884* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1889), 114.

¹⁰³ The Officer Administering the Government to Lord Knutsford. Letter. July 10, 1890. In *Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States, C.-6222* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1890), 10.

population in all countries”.¹⁰⁴ Frank Swettenham, too, who was the Resident of Perak during this period, thought it wise to encourage agriculture, the improvement of labour supplies, and “the employment of every reasonable means to induce European and native planters to convert ... forest land into plantations.” As he concluded, it was only through these methods that they would be able to secure revenue independent from mining, which “cannot alone ensure real and permanent prosperity.”¹⁰⁵

Later, in 1895, Swettenham would also assert that the opening up of agricultural capabilities would give them

the best thing we can hope for: a settled agricultural population and a body of Europeans who will ... convert our jungles into extensive estates of permanent cultivation, a form of enterprise such as no Asiatic has hitherto had the ability, experience, or determination to attempt.¹⁰⁶

In this manner, Swettenham was not merely echoing the preferences of administrators before him, but also harkening back to the now-familiar myth that natives simply did not have the constitution to undertake meaningful enterprise. For the British, agriculture was associated with sustainable remuneration and a settled, rural society – key qualities of a thriving colony and the very antithesis of what mining resulted in.

Importantly, Swettenham’s approach aligned with colonial desires to see the Malay States not only settled, but settled by the ‘right’ kind of population. Contextualising this outlook, tin mining on the Peninsula prior to the first quarter of the twentieth century was monopolised by the Chinese, with up to 78% of tin extracted by Chinese producers in 1910.¹⁰⁷ In contrast, European efforts were relatively muted until the 1880s – a “feeble commencement”, as Perak Resident Hugh Low put it in 1883.¹⁰⁸ European investors were uninformed about the potential of the Peninsula, while those that did know, decided to proceed with extreme

¹⁰⁴ W.H. Treacher. The Administration Report of the State of Selangor for the Year 1893. Report. April 11, 1894. In *Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1893*, C.–7546 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894), 44.

¹⁰⁵ Frank Swettenham, *About Perak* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 1893), 74-75.

¹⁰⁶ Frank Swettenham. Annual Report by the British Resident of Perak for the Year 1894. In *Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1894*, C.–7877 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1895), 22.

¹⁰⁷ Arthur W. King, “Changes in the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya,” *Geography* 25, no.3 (1940): 130.

¹⁰⁸ Hugh Low, Annual Report on the State of Perak for the Year 1883, 5. Quoted in Yip, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry*, 95.

caution.¹⁰⁹ Even then, these unlucky few tended to struggle before closing their mines in a mere few years, as they found it difficult to compete with the Chinese who had a labour cost advantage.¹¹⁰ Like their spice-planting predecessors in Penang, many also severely underestimated the challenges that the Malay States posed to their pre-established methods.¹¹¹

When British officials wrote about mining during this period, it is thus quite likely that the overwhelming Chinese element (and European failures) would have been at the forefront of their minds. Such circumstances were also tempered by pre-existing attitudes towards the Chinese, which were ambivalent to say the least. In his work on race in British Malaya, Charles Hirschman describes Europeans as having a “sense of resentment and hostile admiration” towards the Chinese. On one hand, they were thought to be the best workers – hardworking, skilful, and adaptable.¹¹² On the other, they were also troublesome and difficult, on the account of being involved with secret societies.¹¹³ Correspondingly, they were both bane and boon, a necessity for economic development, but not the ideal permanent settler either.

These contradictory racial beliefs were held by a number of colonial administrators. The Colonial Engineer J.F.A. McNair, for instance, thought the “busy hands of the Chinese people” would make Malayan lands “one of the most productive under the sun” and that Chinese skilled labour in “mining, agriculture, and artifice” was a “valuable acquisition to the country.”¹¹⁴ Swettenham, too, implored his readers to “understand at once what is due to Chinese labour and enterprise in the evolution of the Federated Malay States”.¹¹⁵ Yet, others such as Chairman of the SSA William Napier noted with some disquiet that the 20,000 Chinese in Larut – one of the Peninsula’s key mining districts – were mostly adult males. Although “industrious settlers, and generally disposed to peaceful courses”, they harboured secret societies and had shown themselves capable of violence.¹¹⁶ Hugh Low might have put

¹⁰⁹ P.P. Courtenay, *A Geography of Trade and Development in Malaya* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1972), 90

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Yip, *The Development*, 99-100.

¹¹² Charles Hirschman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology,” *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 346.

¹¹³ Philip Loh, *The Malay States 1877-1895: Political Change and Social Policy* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), 144.

¹¹⁴ McNair, *Perak and the Malays*, 3, 130.

¹¹⁵ Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company, 1907), 232-233.

¹¹⁶ Napier, *The Malays*, 18.

it most clearly, writing in his 1882 report for the state of Perak that Chinese miners “were of all men the most rude, conceited, and ignorant, with no confidence in Europeans, easily oppressed ... misled by their own countrymen who employed them, and ... greatly influenced by the secret societies of Penang”.¹¹⁷

While mining was a predominantly Chinese affair, agriculture was increasingly characterised by Indian indentured labour as the British considered them to be the best type of plantation worker. Where the Chinese were thought to be unruly and disruptive, Indians – especially those from the Madrasi caste – were idealised as docile and easily managed.¹¹⁸ Other ‘positive’ traits included being amenable to low wages, costing less in maintenance, being used to British rule, and easily acclimatising to tropical weather as South India was climatically similar to the Malay Peninsula.¹¹⁹

Echoes of white saviourhood and paternalism were demonstrated in these perceptions as well, as Indian immigration was framed as not just a service to the Peninsula, but to India herself. Governor Frederick Weld, writing to the Colonial Secretary in 1881, noted that immigration was in the interests of both regions as this would benefit British capital and commerce, while also relieve overcrowding in India.¹²⁰ Later in the year, he continued saying the same to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council when he described how introducing Indian immigration would bring a “fresh impetus” to the prosperity of the Malay States. Commerce would be promoted, while the immigrants themselves would also benefit. As “a race eminently suited to the country, and fitted to develop its resources”, Indians were thereby thought to be suitable coolies and “small landowners, which they would speedily become.”¹²¹

In response to Perak’s great need for labour, Hugh Low further entrenched these beliefs by passing the Indian Immigration Enactment in 1882, which permitted immigration under

¹¹⁷ Hugh Low, Report on the Revenue and Expenditure of the State of Perak for the year 1882. July 22, 1883. In *Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States, Including Papers Relating to the Abolition of Slavery in Perak*. C.–4192 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1884), 26.

¹¹⁸ Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 56-57.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Governor Sir F.A. Weld to the Right Hon. The Earl of Kimberley. Letter. 31st May, 1881. C.–3095, 44.

¹²¹ Proceedings of the Legislative Council, Straits Settlements. 11 October, 1881. Appendix, 187. Quoted in Loh, *The Malay States*, 145-146.

certain conditions.¹²² Safeguards for wellbeing aside, family and spousal units were not to be split up, while a certain ration of men to women in each group was also enforced.¹²³ Consequently, incoming Indian family units who helped promote settled agriculture would have been far more preferable to the transient, single male Chinese coolies who staffed the tin-mines. Two years later, an updated legislation was passed to include the Straits Settlements and other Malay States, so that by 1886, Governor Weld was glad to report that with Indian immigration, Perak not only had settled Tamil agricultural families, but the European planters themselves were “saved from imminent ruin” and had good prospects ahead.¹²⁴ Despite these provisions and the approval of the Indian Government, it is nevertheless important to note that most Indian immigration to this region was transitory, with an estimated 4.25 million Indians entering Malaya and 3 million leaving it from 1786 to 1957.¹²⁵

In sum, the British saw mining’s profitability as inextricable from the undesirable aspects of its Chinese labourers, while in contrast, agriculture promised both a sustainable revenue and seemingly malleable Indian population. These colonial preferences for agriculture thus demonstrate how British administrators were motivated by a combination of both economic and societal concerns. While scholars such as Colin Abraham have demonstrated that the British were indeed manipulating ethnic relations to their benefit, in this case it would be erroneous to assert that they were overtly planning these ethnic associations and categorisations.¹²⁶ Though the British had a direct hand in both encouraging and causing Indian migration via the mismanagement of famines during the late-nineteenth century, Chinese miners had already been operating on the Peninsula from as early as the 1400s – far before British colonial interference in the region.¹²⁷

¹²² Perak Council Minutes 17th December 1881 and 23rd May 1882 in R.J. Wilkinson and P.L. Burns, *Papers on Malay Subjects* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), 240, 249.

¹²³ Loh, *The Malay States*, 147.

¹²⁴ Governor F.A. Weld to the Right Hon. Edward Stanhope. Letter, September 14, 1886. C-4958, 117.

¹²⁵ Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, 157.

¹²⁶ See: Abraham, “Racial and ethnic manipulation in Colonial Malaya,” 18-32.

¹²⁷ David Arnold, “Social Crisis and Epidemic Disease in the Famines of Nineteenth-century India,” *Social History of Medicine* 6, no.3 (1993): 394, 397-400; W.L. Blythe, “Historical Sketch of Chinese Labour in Malaya,” *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no.1 (1947): 64. For more on the role of British colonial rule in famines, see: Kate Currie, “British colonial policy and famines: Some effects and implications of free trade’ in the Bombay, Bengal and Madras presidencies, 1860–1900,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14, no.2 (1991): 23-56.

That aside, flows of labour migrants into the Peninsula were also dictated by larger historical and socioeconomic forces beyond the control of British Malayan administrators during this period.¹²⁸ Famine, drought, or a troubled political environment might push migrants out of their home countries towards British Malaya, while at the same time, favourable economic conditions in the Malay States pulled migrants towards these places as well.¹²⁹ In attempting to engineer a colonial society, officials were thus treading down and building on an established path, rather than actively creating their own.

The picturesque

Colonial concerns about mining were not merely limited to the issue of incoming migrants, as the living situation of the local Malays, too, had to be considered. While this complex relationship between colonial economic development and rural Malay societies will be further explored in Chapter 5, this section examines how British officials tended to associate Malay villages with settled agriculture and its perceived aesthetic benefits. To begin, we might first look at Frank Swettenham's 1893 publication *About Perak*, which is a compilation of articles that he originally penned for the *Straits Times* newspaper. Within, Swettenham described Kuala Kangsar with the following terms:

... there are no mines and though there is a small, neat village ..., it is the absence of the Chinese element that, with the extreme Vitality of the place, makes Kuala Kangsar so attractive. It is the very paradise of Malays; a wide, shallow, clear river with high banks covered for miles with picturesque villages, hidden under a wealth of palms and fruit trees.¹³⁰

Beyond the typical association of mining with the undesirability of its Chinese community, Swettenham's immediate invocation of Kuala Kangsar as a "paradise" of Malays implied that they were both incompatible with each other. This was further demonstrated in the 1893

¹²⁸ See: Ibid and Chapter 2 in Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*.

¹²⁹ See: C.A. Vlieland, "The Population of the Malay Peninsula: A Study in Human Migration," *Geographical Review* 24, no.1 (1934): 61-78; Gregg Huff and Giovanni Caggiano, "Globalization, Immigration, and Lewisian Elastic Labor in Pre-World War II Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Economic History* 67, no.1 (2007): 33-68; Atsushi Ota, "Towards Cities, Seas, and Jungles: Migration in the Malay Archipelago, c.1750-1850," in *Globalising migration history: the Eurasian experience (16th-21st centuries)*, eds. Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 180-214.

¹³⁰ Swettenham, *About Perak*, 38.

report of Arthur Keyser, who was Magistrate and Collector for Jelebu. Here, Keyser wrote about how mining was slowly ousting local rice planters, and that this was being received with mixed feelings. Planters were “distressed at the sight of their cherished field being converted into unsightly pits”, and yet, “fully alive to the advantages to be derived from the receipt of compensation.” Attempting to preserve Malay cultivation, Keyser had gone on to set aside valleys as reserves, but still “feared that should temptation be offered, there will be little doubt that the miner will prevail.”¹³¹

Reading these two texts, we find that both men subscribed to the idea that mining degraded the appealing aesthetic of Malay agriculture. While the excerpt from Swettenham highlighted the preferred scene of Malay villages over the ugliness that came with Chinese miners, Keyser went one step further by enacting actual policy. As Paul Kratoska argues, the British envisioned Malays as part of the “yeoman peasantry: independent, self-sufficient small landowners.”¹³² Correspondingly, Keyser’s actions constituted one of the early legislations which helped give Malay farmers a secure tenure for their land, this subsequently evolving over the years to become the Malay Reservations policy in 1913.¹³³ Expanding on this point, Phillip Loh notes that these policies were intended to secure land revenue and, more importantly for our purposes, prevent Chinese immigration from overwhelming the Malay countryside. Preserving Malay communities as idyllic villages, British Residents could assert their position as “intercessor and protector”, thereby further reaffirming the paternalistic aspect of British intervention on the Peninsula.¹³⁴

Given Swettenham’s usage of the term ‘picturesque’ and Keyser’s description of agricultural land being transformed, this provides an opportunity to segue into discussions of how preferences for agriculture were subtly, yet tightly interweaved with pre-existing beliefs about environmental aesthetics. As such, here I argue that there was also an environmental dimension to how British administrators approached the physical consequences of mining. Mines, with their giant pockmarks in the earth, were thought to be unsightly, while settled agriculture invoked picturesque scenes of an idyllic countryside instead.

¹³¹ Arthur Keyser, “Annual Report on the State of Jelebu for the Year 1892” in *Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1892*, C.-7228 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1893), 71.

¹³² Paul Kratoska, ““Ends that we Cannot Foresee”: Malay Reservations in British Malaya,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no.1 (1983): 149.

¹³³ For more on this, see Chapter 5.

¹³⁴ Phillip Loh, *The Malay States*, 123.

Popularised during the eighteenth century, the picturesque ('picture-like') bridged nature and art by rendering each with aspects of the other. Picturesque art mirrored nature and corrected its perceived faults, while picturesque nature implied that the scene had picture-like qualities.¹³⁵ The native English landscape, particularly its humble, rural scenes, provided the template, and while the picturesque has undergone a number of evolutions over time, some key qualities include: landscape distances with a hazy background and detailed foreground; features that harmoniously balance the composition so as to draw attention to the middle distance; a winding river; rugged mountains in the background; and a soft, gold tint to the light.¹³⁶ The picturesque was thereby in itself a process of recognition, where a particular scene was framed against a set of pre-established artistic conventions.¹³⁷

This transformative act made the picturesque an important component of colonial discourse, as Europeans used the picturesque as a lens to render foreign landscapes into recognisable ones instead. As Jeffrey Auerbach argues, organising and perfecting landscapes in imperial art reflected changes to the type of interests within Empire – from explorations to discover an untouched Eden in the late 1700s, to presenting foreign regions as safe and familiar during the mid-nineteenth century, so as to encourage settlement.¹³⁸ British administrator W.E. Maxwell, for instance, thought that “Miners do not make the best colonists”, but that some would perhaps prefer to see in Malaya a “peaceful landscape of rural hamlets, instead of the hastily-built towns of a floating mining population.”¹³⁹ Others still, combined distaste for mining with an appreciation for the picturesque aesthetic. This is particularly noticeable in Swettenham’s *Malay Sketches* (1895), a collection of observations that occupy a curious place between fiction and truth. To quote Swettenham’s description of the book, these were intended as an attempt to “awaken an interest” in the people who lived in “one of the most beautiful and least known countries in the East.”¹⁴⁰ Given the author’s intended purpose, their inclusion might be warranted despite occupying a genre more fiction than not.

¹³⁵ Nicola Trott, “The Picturesque, the Beautiful and the Sublime,” in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 80.

¹³⁶ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (California: University of California Press, 1986), 57; Jeffrey Auerbach, “The picturesque and the homogenisation of Empire,” *The British Art Journal* 5, no.1 (2004): 48.

¹³⁷ Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 45.

¹³⁸ Auerbach, “The picturesque,” 49.

¹³⁹ Maxwell, “The Malay Peninsula,” 145.

¹⁴⁰ Frank Swettenham, *Malay Sketches* (London and New York: John Lane, 1895), vii.

In the last chapter of *Malay Sketches*, Swettenham describes the scene from a mountain-summit and imagines himself looking out towards the rest of the country. Written as a love-letter of sorts to Malaya, the author describes the region's numerous beauties in a style that draws heavily from the picturesque aesthetic. Far out in the distance, for instance, hazy mountains rise on the horizon, and a "golden veil" hangs over the entire scene. On the western side of the Peninsula, the Dinding coast lies "flat and fertile, a feast for the eyes" with its vivid green patches of cultivated cane and rice, but on a whole, it is still jungle that stretches from hill to sea. All of this lovely scenery is nevertheless broken up when the reader's gaze rests on Taiping, in the state of Perak:

You might cover the place with a tablecloth for all its many
inhabitants, its long wide streets, open spaces, and public buildings.
And those pools of water all around the town, what are those?

They are abandoned tin-mines, alluvial workings from which the ore
has been removed, and water mercifully covers, in part, this desolation
of gaping holes and upturned sand.¹⁴¹

In this excerpt, we find the aftereffects of mining being described with particularly evocative imagery. The peaceful flow of nature is interrupted by the town of Taiping, its urbanity sitting at odds with the peaceful, rural scenes that Swettenham had just described. Indeed, such is Swettenham's apparent dislike of this urban centre that he prescribes a tablecloth to cove it, so as to hide its existence, and one might even detect a note of dismay in the way he enquires about the pools – what are *those*? Given Swettenham's choice to write of abandoned mines rather than working ones, these depictions evidence his misgivings about the effects of the commodity frontier. Having rendered their mines unproductive, the miners have moved on and left only ugly desolation in their wake.

Swettenham also employed similar language when urging a shift towards more agrarian policies. In his Annual Report for Perak in 1894, Swettenham noted his preference for agriculturalists over miners, who were described with some derision:

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 283-284.

We give to the miner what is often fine land covered with magnificent forest, and, when he has destroyed the timber, he turns the soil upside down and after a few years abandons it, leaving huge stretches of country a sightless waste of water-holes.

While Swettenham recognised that miners undoubtedly brought in useful revenue for the Malay States, he also thought that planters were far more worthy of praise as they converted jungles into fields, settled on the soil, and kept the land in productive cultivation. Permanent remuneration could thus be gained from the sale of produce, so much so that it required “no great effort of imagination” to see a time when agricultural exports exceeded that of minerals. “To make it easy to mine successfully and difficult to plant with profit may be good shop-keeping,” concluded Swettenham, “but seems indifferent administration.”¹⁴²

In 1895, Swettenham's successor in Perak, E.W. Birch made his stance most explicit by including a section entitled *Agriculture as opposed to Mining* in his annual report for the state.¹⁴³ Describing himself as “imbued” with Swettenham's ideas on agriculture from the previous year, Birch asserted that it was impossible to disregard them when living in a country perfect for agricultural development, but “which has hitherto been practically handed over to miners, who turn upside down lands that could be beneficially occupied by permanent settlers”. This “process of devastation” only resulted in overproduction of tin and punished the mining community, Birch believing that it was “surely time” for the Government to limit its revenues from minerals and discourage mining and smelting.¹⁴⁴

Given these attitudes, here we can refer to David Arnold's work on the contradictory relationship between romanticism and economisation, or ‘improvement’, in a capitalistic and imperial sense.¹⁴⁵ Writing in the Indian context, Arnold argues that while there was romantic appreciation for nature's wonders, Europeans also desired to “improve” the country. The latter presented two types of improvement: a capitalistic, profit-generating one, and an aesthetic one that concentrated on transforming wild jungle into orderly cultivation.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Frank Swettenham, “Annual Report by the British Resident of Perak for the Year 1894,” C.-7877, 22.

¹⁴³ E.W. Birch was the son of J.W.W. Birch, the first Perak Resident who had been assassinated in 1875.

¹⁴⁴ E.W. Birch, “Annual Report by the British Resident of Perak for the Year 1895,” in *Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1895*, C.-8257 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1896), 23.

¹⁴⁵ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science 1800-1856* (Delhi, Permanent Black: 2005), 104-109.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 104-5.

Though mining offered immense profits, its adverse effects on Malaya's environment meant that it only fit half of the intended 'improvements'. Agriculture, on the other hand, slotted in perfectly, as its picturesque nature also mirrored desires to see the presence of British aesthetics: rural landscapes bearing signs of agricultural development.

Consequently, officials frequently invoked the picturesqueness of settled agriculture. In a journal detailing his journey from Perak to Slim in 1888, Swettenham arrived at the confluence of two rivers only to describe it as "the picture of rest and beauty", the "two or three picturesque huts" on the riverbanks leading him to imagine that this "might almost be a village in Switzerland."¹⁴⁷ Others such as the Superintendent of Public Works and Surveys in Selangor, D.D. Daly, also explored the region and returned with reports of passing through "most picturesque country" which consisted of large fields and numerous Malay huts and gardens.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Colonial Engineer Major McCallum's record of a trip across the Peninsula indicated how Pahang's scenery changed for the better once they were out of "dreary, monotonous jungle", the company finding themselves amongst paddy fields, gardens, and fruit plantations. Encountering "Ideal bits of Malay kampong scenery", McCallum took to describing the scene with some indulgence as the village houses "stood out well in the early morning sun which was lighting up the blue hills ... in the background."¹⁴⁹

Appreciation for such scenery sometimes also held more practical motivations, as evidenced by the words of Martin Lister, the Resident of Negeri Sembilan. In his 1889 Annual Report for the state, Lister wrote of being incredibly satisfied to see gardens and houses springing up around the region of Kuala Pilah. For Lister, this type of settling for garden cultivation constituted "a better compliment to the Government of a state than the opening of mines and large plantations", since it demonstrated that the local populations had intents to settle permanently. Subsequently, Lister argued, this would give them confidence in the State's future.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Frank Swettenham, "From Perak to Slim, and Down the Slim and Bernam Rivers," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5, no.1 (1880): 58.

¹⁴⁸ Daly, "Surveys and Explorations," 399.

¹⁴⁹ H.E. McCallum, *A trip across the Malay Peninsula with H.E. Governor* (Singapore: Singapore Free Press, 1894), 11.

¹⁵⁰ Martin Lister, "Annual Report on the State of Negri Sembilan for the year 1889," C.-6222, 75.

These positive sentiments towards the relative simplicity of rural agrarian settlement formed part of a much longer historical trajectory, one that stretches as far back as Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt.¹⁵¹ As a comforting myth that invoked some golden age where things seemed simpler or purer, the countryside stood in opposition to the increased social tensions and change associated with, and arising from urbanisation. Fears of the future and an imperfect present thus rendered the countryside past into an ideal.¹⁵² In this case, nostalgia for rustic life was nothing new by the time of British Malaya, though we can point to the industrialisation of Britain as an important catalyst that helped fan these sentiments amongst colonial administrators. By the mid-nineteenth century, factory production and mining had overtaken the agricultural sector, and while urban populations boomed, countryside ones languished. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Britain was almost entirely industrialised and urbanised.¹⁵³

Simultaneously, this shift from the agricultural rural to industrial urban was accompanied with changes to social structure. As Michael Bunce summarises, the paternalistic, interdependent ties of agriculture were replaced with the anonymity and insecurity of factory-work instead.¹⁵⁴ The mid and late-nineteenth centuries thus saw landowners respond by building model villages, or cottages which both perpetuated the picturesque aesthetic and evidenced a paternalistic social concern on the landowners' part.¹⁵⁵ This paternalism stood in opposition to the “hard selfishness” of the market, reviving previous forms of social thinking that focused on “mutual responsibility and deferential hierarchy” instead.¹⁵⁶

Considering the situation in the metropole, we can begin to understand how such beliefs might have been transplanted to British Malaya. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation invoked a sense of nostalgia for a simpler, rural past, and when colonial officials arrived on the Peninsula, that was exactly what they saw. Added to this was also the tendency amongst officials to see Malay society as feudal and a mirror to their own, pre-Industrial Revolution

¹⁵¹ Michael Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

¹⁵² John Rennie Short, *Imagined country: Environment, culture and society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 31.

¹⁵³ Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal*, 10.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 60.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

era.¹⁵⁷ Swettenham, for instance, wrote that Malays were “conservative to a degree”, proud and fond of their land and people. They venerated their customs and traditions, feared their Rajas, and had “a proper respect for constituted authority”.¹⁵⁸ This in turn fed into the way the British saw themselves, as in the Malay States, they could now occupy the paternalistic and benevolent role of protector over a traditional society that needed to be preserved in their agricultural ways.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated the environmental dimensions that were present in two key areas of the British colonisation of Malaya: first, in decisions to officially intervene on the Peninsula, and second, in preferences for agriculture despite mining’s profitability. By deploying accounts of the Malay States as a neglected, yet useful space, the British cast themselves as rescuers who could return a previously-fertile land to its intended productive state. At the same time, these perceptions of benevolent colonialism dovetailed with myths of the lazy and profligate native, thereby allowing the British to imagine themselves as a more superior, industrious race tasked with teaching the native Malays. Malays were thus thought to be lazy and indolent: both by nature and because of nature herself, as the latter’s fertility negated the need for hard work. The association of tropical climes with laziness, too, influenced British perceptions of Malays as climatic determinism posited that those in temperate climates were inherently superior and vice versa. Consequently, while there were certainly other political motivations behind their intervention, the British further justified their involvement on the Peninsula by employing depictions of a fertile, tropical environment needing imperial intervention to save it from decline.

In subsequent years, developments in tin-mining helped earn enormous revenue for the colonial government. Despite these riches, however, administrators frequently agitated for agricultural development. To help explain this inconsistency in policy, this chapter has argued that British officials approached agriculture not just as a long-term investment, but as a vehicle to socially engineer a preferred colonial settlement and reinforce the picturesque aesthetic. Seemingly docile agricultural settlers were preferable to the rabble of Chinese miners, while from an aesthetic point of view, settled agriculture stirred nostalgic sentiments

¹⁵⁷ John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 52.

¹⁵⁸ Swettenham, *Malay Sketches*, 3.

for a simpler, rural time prior to the industrial era – here represented by the ugly devastation of mining.

Viewing the industrialised metropole and rural, untouched periphery as dichotomies of a terrible modernity and paradisiacal agricultural past, British officials championed the continuation of the picturesque aesthetic via land policies that supported agricultural development. As a result, they could once again cast themselves in a paternalistic role that protected this ‘better’ past from the ravages of industrialisation and urbanisation, and further reinforce their own colonial position. Correspondingly, colonial preferences for agriculture over the profitability of mining were driven by a mix of economic motivations, nostalgia, and desires to ‘improve’ the country – a slew of contradictory desires which nevertheless drove British presence in Malaya.

Consequently, this chapter has highlighted the contradictions that came with enacting multiple colonial projects in the Malay States. With the economic activities of mining and agriculture bringing their own distinct effects on the region’s economy, society, and physical landscape, colonial administrators had to weigh each against the other. What emerges from this confluence of approaches is thus a picture of colonial rule that was both predicated on environmental attitudes and administrative disorganisation, as there was no coordinated effort towards a single, overarching aim. Colonial rule was thus not merely about extracting financial benefits; the social organisation it governed required consideration, too.

In the following chapter, we will go on to look at how the Department of Agriculture for the Federated Malay States encapsulated the messiness of having multiple colonial projects in operation.

Chapter 4:

Mismatched mindsets and directions in the FMS Agricultural Department, 1899-1920s

The canopy of the Brazilian jungle was full of a riotous sort of beauty: wild ferns and rare orchids burst into life in their aerial gardens, while on the branches, birds with rainbow feathers shared perching-space with little titi monkeys that gambolled about, quite uncaring for the men who laboured on the ground so many metres below them. There was precious little time to stop and gaze upwards, but every now and then, Henry Wickham still paused to catch his breath and found himself indulging in a lingering glimpse of that entire “world of life” above. Never for long, though. There were tens of thousands of rubber seeds to collect, and for Wickham, there was no time to lose.¹

To have Wickham narrate the story of how the British Empire came to cultivate rubber across its tropical colonies, one would think it was a tale of unfathomable luck, great daring, and scandalous piracy. Having previously sent rubber seed samples to Sir Joseph Hooker at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, Wickham was soon employed to collect more at the rate of £10 per 1000 seeds, with work to begin in the new rubber season of 1876.² Just as Wickham pondered on the question of “how on earth to bring it off”, fellow European planters in the region brought word of a fully-equipped ocean liner arriving at Santarem. This was the *S.S. Amazonas*, under the charge of Captain Murray. Wickham had the pleasure of being invited to dine aboard it, though after it left to continue its journey for the Upper Amazon, he promptly thought no more about its presence. “Then,” recorded Wickham, “occurred one of those chances, such as a man has to take at top-tide or lose for ever.”³

Word soon arrived that two of the *Amazonas*’ crewmen had stripped her cargo, leaving her unprofitably empty for her return voyage. Wickham, seeing opportunity amidst disaster, was

¹ H.A. Wickham, *On the plantation, cultivation, and curing of Pará Indian rubber (Hevea brasiliensis) with an account of its introduction from the west to the eastern tropics* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Limited, 1908), 49-51.

² John Loadman, *Tears of the Tree: The Story of Rubber - A Modern Marvel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87.

³ Wickham, *On the plantation*, 47-48

instantly “determined to plunge for it.”⁴ There was little time to deliberate. Seed season was notoriously time-sensitive, as rubber seeds explode from their pods during propagation and must quickly be gathered up before animals can devour them.⁵ Thus pressured by the lack of time and promise of profit, Wickham went about “boldly chartering the ship on behalf of the Government of India”, promising to rendezvous with Captain Murray at where the Tapokos and Amazon rivers meet.⁶

What followed was a frantic dash to collect seeds. Wickham noted that he employed as many indigenous Brazilians as he could and joined them in carting away seeds, while indigenous women wove baskets and made crates for storage. These hung swaying from the rafters of village lodges, filled with seeds that had been lightly dried and packed with banana leaves between each layer. Wickham, who was wary of them not surviving their long sea-journey, had insisted on good ventilation. While the rubber seeds were eventually boarded with little issue, Wickham claimed that when he went to gain approval from the Brazilian port-authorities to leave, he had ordered the *Amazonas* to “keep up steam” – implying that they might have to flee, should the authorities try to detain them and their precious cargo.⁷ Recounting the incident in his eighties, Wickham further dramatised this account to include secretly loading the seeds in the presence of a gunboat, which would have apparently blown them to smithereens had its crew known of their actions.⁸

This fantastical story of smuggling 70,000 seeds out from under the shadow of both guns and the law has since been called into question for its numerous discrepancies, but regardless of how Wickham managed to pull it off, the seeds did somehow arrive at Kew on the 14th of June, 1876.⁹ In November of the same year, the explorer Robert Cross, who had been collecting seeds in South America as a failsafe, also returned with his cargo – albeit with far less drama.¹⁰ This was a fortuitous contingency plan as a mere 4%, or 2,700 of the 70,000

⁴ Ibid, 48.

⁵ Nicholas Money, *Triumph of the Fungi: A Rotten History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87.

⁶ Wickham, *On the Plantation*, 49.

⁷ Ibid, 54.

⁸ Dean Warren, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber: A study in environmental history* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 21.

⁹ Loadman, *Tears of the Tree*, 92. For discrepancies, see: P.R. Wycherley, “Introduction of Hevea to the Orient,” *The Planter* (March, 1968): 1-11; Loadman, *Tears of the Tree*, 88-95; Warren, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber*, 15-22.

¹⁰ J.H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973), 3-4.

Wickham seeds germinated. 50 of these lucky seedlings were sent to Singapore, where only five survived.¹¹ Ceylon, which had received a mix of Wickham's and Cross' seedlings, sent a further 22 to Singapore in 1877, of which ten were transported to the Malay Peninsula.¹² It was thus from these few trees, so painstakingly carried across oceans and coaxed to grow in foreign soil, that Malaya's rubber plantations were first raised.

In this chapter, I argue that the discordant origins of the Department of Agriculture for the Federated Malay States (FMS) encapsulates the incoherent and contradictory nature of British colonial rule in this region. From its inception, the Department was rife with difficulties, as different layers of administration operated under varying assumptions about what should be done about systematising agriculture in the FMS and how it should happen. To that end, officials even glanced at the works of other colonies both near and far in hopes of replicating their successes, though these attempts largely came to nought due to internal issues of budgeting, personnel hire, and ignored expertise. Despite these failures, the FMS was nevertheless incorporated into broader imperial networks of colonial science. Situated within the context of these inter-colony circuit-boards of knowledge exchange, this chapter focuses on the history of how British agricultural administration initially failed in the FMS.

As I argue, these departmental clashes reveal the inability of British colonial administrators to articulate a unified direction for Malaya. Rubber offered exciting new economic prospects, but when it came to systemising its research and administration, officials were ill-equipped to integrate this commodity into current visions for what Malaya should be as a colony. The FMS government offered practical assistance in the form of favourable land policies, generous loans, and procurable plantation labour, but when it came to supporting the expansion of rubber and indeed, even agriculture from a more scientific stance, its approaches were far less straightforward.¹³ As such, this chapter offers a new method of reading the story of Malaya's rubber – one where its most profitable crop grew not in the midst of careful planning and single-minded intent, but out of confusion and contradictions within its administration.

¹¹ Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya*, 3.

¹² Loadman, *Tears of the Tree*, 95-96.

¹³ Colin Barlow, "Indonesian and Malayan Agricultural Development, 1870-1940," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 21, no.1 (1985): 98-100; J.H. Drabble, "The plantation rubber industry in Malaya up to 1922," *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 40, no.1 (1967): 54.

The origins of rubber

Natural rubber, or caoutchouc, is the refined product of a sticky, white substance known as latex. Obtained from rubber trees, latex is ‘tapped’ and collected via making small incisions in the tree bark from which latex can then flow. While numerous tropical trees and plants are capable of producing rubber, experiments conducted during the mid to late-nineteenth century determined that *Hevea brasiliensis* was most suitable for domestication.¹⁴ In the Malay World, native rubber planters and collectors also drew on other types of rubber trees such as the *gutta percha* and *getah rambong*, but for most of the large, colonial plantations that were supported by private or governmental concessions, *Hevea* was the species of choice.¹⁵

Despite its flexible and waterproof qualities promising great things, early European rubber planters struggled. Rubber was indeed useful, but it became sticky in hot weather and lost its pliability in lower temperatures, making it brittle and susceptible to cracking. Its odour, too, did little to endear it to both makers and users.¹⁶ Nonetheless, these restrictions were soon removed through the work of Nathaniel Hayward and Charles Goodyear in 1839, whose respective experiments with heat and sulphur resulted in a far more practical, and more pleasant-smelling compound that could function in all temperatures.¹⁷ Goodyear named this process of adding heat and sulphur ‘vulcanisation’ – a tribute to Vulcan, the Roman god of fire.¹⁸

Vulcanised rubber transformed the industry, as goods of all kinds could now be made: from seals for preservative jars to parts for the telegraph system, and from foldable mackintoshes to rubber bands. Numerous industries started to rely heavily on the seemingly infinite capabilities of rubber, making it a ubiquitous product for the remainder of the nineteenth century and beyond.¹⁹ Consequently, there was a great demand for a consistent rubber supply.

¹⁴ William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 234.

¹⁵ Badriyah Haji Salleh, “Malay Rubber Smallholding and British policy: A case study of the Batang Padang district in Perak (1876-1952),” PhD diss., (Columbia University, 1985), 88-91. Also see: John Tully, “A Victorian Ecological Disaster: Imperialism, the Telegraph, and Gutta-Percha,” *Journal of World History* 20, no.4 (2009): 559-579; Michael R. Dove, “Transition from Native Forest Rubbers to *Hevea brasiliensis* (Euphorbiaceae) among Tribal Smallholders in Borneo,” *Economic Botany* 48, no.4 (1994): 382-396.

¹⁶ Beinart and Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, 234; John Tully, *The Devil’s Milk: A Social History of Rubber* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 38-40.

¹⁷ Beinart and Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, 235

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tully, *The Devil’s Milk*, 41-42.

This was initially largely provided by indigenous people who tapped wild rubber in the Amazon rainforest, but the process was unsustainable and uneconomic, not to mention incredibly exploitative.²⁰ Companies such as the Peruvian Rubber Company, for instance, which was Peruvian-owned, but incorporated in London and staffed by overseers from Peru and Barbados, were notorious for their mistreatment of indigenous people during the Amazonian rubber boom.²¹ For the British, however, the boom could not have come at a more convenient time. The resounding success of quinine cultivation had left them in want of another new crop for their tropical Empire and rubber, being suited to the tropics and wildly lucrative at this time, seemed the perfect candidate.²²

In the FMS, nine rubber seedlings were first planted in 1877 by then-Resident of Perak and ardent naturalist, Hugh Low, within his own gardens at the Kuala Kangsar Residency. Meanwhile, the tenth seedling was sent to Taiping where it presumably died, as Low could not find it the next year.²³ Thankfully, the Residency trees managed to thrive under Low's care, Low reporting in 1879 that they were now 12-14 feet high and "take to the country immensely."²⁴ Low thus continued to report on their progress over the next few years with no small amount of optimism, as he saw the potential for them "to become important cultivations".²⁵ By 1882, Low happily noted that seeds and plants from the *Hevea* had even been distributed to Java, Singapore, Ceylon, and India, with supplies to be "forwarded on application to an person or institution which will take care of these valuable plants."²⁶

Subsequently, the year 1883 proved to be something of a milestone for rubber in Malaya: rubber specimens from the now six-year old trees were collected and sent to England for analysis, while on the Peninsula, the planter Heslop Hill started planting a few rubber trees on

²⁰ Richard E. Schultes, "The odyssey of the cultivated rubber tree," *Endeavour* 1, no.3-4 (1977): 133.

²¹ Robert M. Burroughs, *Travel Writing and Atrocities Eyewitness Accounts of Colonialism in the Congo, Angola, and the Putumayo* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 124-125. Also see Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror – Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no.3 (1984): 467-497.

²² Schultes, "The odyssey," 133.

²³ Loadman, *Tears of the Tree*, 99.

²⁴ Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* (London: Darling and Son, 1898), 241.

²⁵ Hugh Low, "Report on the Revenue and Expenditure of the State of Perak, for the Year 1879," February 4, 1880. In *Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States, C.-3095* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1881), 9; Hugh Low, "Report on the Revenue and Expenditure of the State of Perak, for the Year 1881." March 31, 1882. In *Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States, C.-3428* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1882), 19.

²⁶ Hugh Low, "Report on the Revenue and Expenditure of the State of Perak, for the Year 1882." July 22, 1883. In *Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States, Including Papers Relating to the Abolition of Slavery in Perak, C.-4192* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1884), 28.

his coffee estates. These cultivars, however, unfortunately bore few positive results. England found the rubber samples unsatisfactory, while Hill's planting was largely unsystematic and merely for observation, or to provide seeds if the crop ever became successful.²⁷

Further tapping endeavours remained modest, so much so that in 1889, Frank Swettenham, Low's successor in Perak, was sufficiently disappointed enough to declare that *Hevea* had no future in Malaya. Several of the original Kuala Kangsar trees were promptly destroyed and Swettenham even "discouraged further interest" in the crop.²⁸ Progress for rubber might have languished even more if not for the timely arrival of one H.N. Ridley in 1888 as the new Director of the Botanic Gardens at Singapore. Having been urged by Hooker to study rubber, Ridley took to his task with great gusto.²⁹ Unlike Swettenham, Ridley saw enormous potential for rubber and spent the next few years trying to persuade others of its value as a plantation crop. So enthusiastic was Ridley that this earned him the moniker 'Mad Ridley', or 'Rubber Ridley', as he apparently went around trying to stuff seeds into planters' pockets, begging them and any others to give rubber a try.³⁰

Eventually, Ridley's persistence paid off. During the mid-to-late 1890s, coffee prices plunged, while rubber rose sharply in response to the demand for new products such as rubber tyres for both bicycles and motorcars.³¹ It was during this time as well, that Ridley's experiments developed the excision method for tapping rubber, a controlled kind of wounding which sliced the bark in a herringbone pattern. This technique not only allowed re-tapping, but also increased rubber yields.³² The first rubber plantation was thus established in 1895 by Tan Chay Yan of Malacca when he planted 43 acres of the crop at Bukit Lintang, this being followed by the Kindersleys of Selangor with about 5 acres in the same year.³³

²⁷James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya, 1786-1921* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 213; P.R. Wycherley, "The Singapore Botanic Gardens and Rubber in Malaya," *Gardens' Bulletin, Singapore* 17, pt.2 (1959) 177-179.

²⁸ Wycherley, "The Singapore Botanic Gardens," 178.

²⁹ H.N. Ridley, "Facility for Radio Malaya: The Development of the Rubber Industry," 2. *HNR* 6/1/2. For more on Ridley and his time at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, see: Timothy Barnard, *Nature's Colony: Empire, Nation and Environment in the Singapore Botanic Gardens* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

³⁰ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923), 449.

³¹ D.J.M. Tate, *The R.G.A. History of the Plantation Industry in the Malay Peninsula* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206.

³² Money, *Triumph of the Fungi*, 85-86. To illustrate how much rubber a tree might produce if it was merely hacked at with a hatchet and its latex collected in a bucket, Money claims that this produces "enough rubber to make a pack of condoms for a chihuahua" – which, for those unfamiliar with dog breeds, is not much rubber at all.

³³ Tate, *The R.G.A. History*, 206; Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya*, 19.

With that, rubber was set to transform British Malaya.

In light of Malaya's fledgling rubber industry during this time, I first investigate how a slew of tensions, trials, and losses manifested within the Department of Agriculture when British Malayan colonists were unable to agree on a collective, focused vision for FMS agriculture. While the Department promised a move towards more efficient and effective planting practices, I examine documents from this period to argue that it instead provoked antagonistic interdepartmental relationships and exposed misalignments in priorities. Ultimately, the first two decades of the Department were characterised by failures to sustain a productive, or even cohesive approach to systemisation. Analysing writings from officials serving in the Department, Singapore Botanic Gardens, and upper administration, I demonstrate how the different motivations and beliefs of each individual encapsulated the tensions that resulted from lacking a unified colonial agricultural policy for British Malaya.

By focusing on the Department's role as a scientific organisation, this chapter also engages with the work of Michael Worboys and Paolo Palladino. In their review of the relationship between science and imperialism, the authors assert that histories of science have gone beyond trumpeting the "contributions" made to Eurocentric spheres of knowledge. Looking instead at the role of scientific institutions and practices in relation to varying socioeconomic structures, histories of science have come to include how different circumstances transform and codify scientific knowledge.³⁴ Most forms of science associated with European colonies largely served politico-economic purposes and its knowledge was produced within an imperial context, but as the authors argue, these seemingly unifying qualities did not necessarily make colonial science a thoroughly focused endeavour.³⁵

Equally important here is Roy MacLeod's distinctions between colonial science and imperial science, the definitions of which changed according to whether they were viewed from the colonies, or imperial centre. For the FMS, for instance, colonial science, or science practiced within that colony, was part of imperial science – the broader network which linked Britain with its Empire and embodied intellectual/institutional divides according to the politics of

³⁴ M. Worboys and P. Palladino, "Science and Imperialism," *Isis* 84, no.1 (1993): 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

that time.³⁶ According to MacLeod, the ever-changing nature of imperial science meant that ideas were not disseminated in a pre-determined, linear manner. Instead, there were “multiple autochthonous developments which have reverberating effects”, or networks upon networks, where each interacted with the other.³⁷

Given the FMS Department of Agriculture’s reliance on these imperial connections, I also contend that the Department struggled to fit comfortably into these scientific networks due to different identities and loyalties clashing within the realm of economic agriculture, which itself was also in a state of uncertainty. Colonial botanists envisioned scientific policies and sweeping changes for the betterment of British Malayan agriculture, while officials in charge of regulating bureaucratic systems brought their own, more fiscally conservative priorities to the table as well. Yet, underpinning it all was the prevailing acknowledgement that they needed to capitalise on the colony’s vast agricultural potentials. This, in turn, led to a mindset that did not match the various intended directions.

To examine how these issues played out in the Department of Agriculture, the following sections will consult a range of official reports, letters, and private writings from those involved in the Department’s founding and initial years of operation, c.1899-1920s. Before we investigate these, however, we must first consider the historical context in which they unfolded.

The Department of Agriculture

During this time, political structures of governance on the Malay Peninsula were being overhauled as the Residency system was replaced with a Federation of Malay States. Prior to this, the Malay States had been largely run by individual Residents and their small support network of officers, but now, the new Federation attempted to gather disparate regions under the common umbrella of a centralised administration. Historians have since explored the reasons behind this shift in governing practices, but broadly speaking, the move towards federation was largely motivated by two issues: the threat of Siamese expansion during the late-nineteenth century, and British desires for greater political and economic unity in the

³⁶ R. MacLeod, “On Visiting the ‘Moving Metropolis’: Reflections on the Architecture of Imperial Science,” *Historical Records of Australian Science* 5, no.3 (1980), 2.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

region.³⁸

During the 1890s, the northern borderlands of the Malay Peninsula had become an increasingly contested area. While the Siamese were anxious about British powers exploiting local unrest to justify colonial expansion, the British, in turn, fretted over the possibility of a third party intervening in the region, should either of them not establish their intentions and boundaries.³⁹ A series of border negotiations thus followed, these ultimately culminating in 1909 with the transfer of Kedah, Terengganu, Perlis, and Kelantan into British hands.⁴⁰ Subsequently, there were internal benefits to be reaped from federation, too. Consolidating the Malay States in this way not only preserved the individuality of each state, but also connected them to ensure what British administrator J.P. Rodger described as “departmental efficiency and economy”, as well as “that general continuity of policy and solidarity of interest”.⁴¹ Birthed from concerns about regional politics and internal management, the treaty of federation was thus signed in 1895 with Frank Swettenham as the first Resident General, and an entire stable of secretaries, departmental heads, and commissioners beneath him. With time, Swettenham was soon promoted to the dual position of Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the FMS – a role which placed both regions under one purview.⁴²

This was a volatile period of change for British Malaya, as the success of both tin-mining and rubber forced a transition in the dynamics of colonial governance. Writing in the context of British Malaya, Nicholas White considers the acquisition and subsequent expansion of colonial rule during this time to be a form of ‘reluctant imperialism’. As such, British

³⁸ See, for instance: Jagit Singh Sidhu, *Administration in the Federated Malay States, 1896-1920* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980); Chai Hon-Chan, *The Development of British Malaya, 1896-1909* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967); Tamara Loos, “Competitive Colonialisms: Siam and the Malay Muslim South,” in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, eds. Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 75-91; Amrita Malhi, “Like a Child with Two Parents: Race, Religion and Royalty on the Siam-Malaya Frontier, 1895-1902,” *The Muslim World* 105, no.4 (2015): 472-495; Philip King, “A Tin Mine in Need of a History: 19th-Century British Views of the Patani Interior,” in *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand: Essays on the History and Historiography of Patani*, ed. Patrick Jory (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 161-182; Eunice Thio, “Britain's Search for Security in North Malaya, 1886-1897,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no.2 (1969): 279-303.

³⁹ Loos, “Competitive Colonialisms,” 82-83.

⁴⁰ Thio, “Britain's Search,” 303.

⁴¹ J.P. Rodger, “The Administration Report of the State of Selangor for the Year 1894,” in *Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1894, C.-7877* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1895), 47.

⁴² The role of Governor-High Commissioner was always held by one person, ostensibly to prevent “conflicts of policy” between the two political units of the Straits Settlements and FMS. See: Ernest Chew, “Sir Frank Swettenham and the Federation of the Malay States,” *Modern Asian Studies* 2, no.1 (1968): 59.

motivations here were not concerned with commercial, or financial needs; rather, they desired to protect pre-existing strategic interests from other imperial powers, chief of these being control of the sea-lanes between India and China. White therefore describes Malaya as without any “grand, imperial economic role”, though this changed during the dawn of the twentieth century when the British gradually realised they possessed something akin to a large commercial “treasure chest”.⁴³ There was the blistering success of tin, first, from the 1880s to early 1900s, after which rubber took over as British Malaya’s ‘premier commodity’.⁴⁴ Correspondingly, although Malaya was catapulted from a mere “afterthought of empire” to a commodity powerhouse, British administration was slow to adapt to the colony’s newfound importance.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, change was similarly afoot within the broader Empire. In London, the Colonial Office was embarking on a new direction under the leadership of the newly appointed Joseph Chamberlain. Assuming office in 1895, Chamberlain was preoccupied with transforming the economics of colonisation. It was no longer enough to have colonies pay their own way and ensure that British taxpayers were unburdened by their expenses. Now, as Chamberlain so optimistically envisioned, colonies were to be profitable instead, and properly exploited for the sake of Britain's own economic security.⁴⁶ Thus, it was on a Saturday night in 1895, at the annual dinner of the Birmingham Jewellers' and Silversmiths' Association, that Chamberlain laid out his convictions quite neatly. After accusing governments of not doing enough with their colonies, Chamberlain declared:

It is not enough to occupy certain great spaces of the world's surface unless you can make the best of them, unless you are willing to develop them. We are landlords of a great estate; it is the duty of the landlord to develop his estate.

⁴³ Nicholas J. White, “Gentlemanly capitalism and empire in the twentieth century: the forgotten case of Malaya, 1914-1965,” in *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Imperialism: The New Debate on Empire*, ed. Raymond Dumett (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 176.

⁴⁴ Lin-Ken Wong, *The Malayan tin industry to 1914: with special reference to the states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang* (Tucson, Arizona: Published for the Association for Asian Studies by University of Arizona Press, 1965), 246-247; J.H. Drabble, *Malayan Rubber: The Interwar Years* (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1991), 11.

⁴⁵ White, “Gentlemanly capitalism,” 176.

⁴⁶ Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A History of British Imperialism, 1850 to the present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013. First published 1975), 160.

Cheers greeted this proposition, Chamberlain going on to assert that doing so would boost British trade and industry, and they would “sooner or later earn a large reward either directly or indirectly”.⁴⁷

Richard Drayton has since argued that Chamberlain’s use of the estates metaphor was no happy coincidence, as an agrarian vision still guided European policies of expansion during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The association of estates with political power was particularly persistent in Britain, where landed gentry wielded considerable influence. This continued zeal for agriculture even in spite of increased industrialisation thus stemmed not only from notions about the relationship of land-ownership to civic participation and benevolent rule, but also from the understanding that colonial science could improve the productivity and profits of the land. Citizenship was defined according to owning land and agriculture, while the botanical sciences led to new, remunerable discoveries such as rubber, or revivals of previously flagging crops such as coffee and sugar.⁴⁸

Similarly, William Storey notes that Chamberlain’s invocation of “undeveloped estates” to describe colonies stemmed from paternalistic ideals that merged notions of private property with political power. As owners of these ‘estates’, the British were duty-bound to see them made profitable. This was a new method of describing colonial economies as now, they did not merely develop from a position of potential. Instead, they were also expected to become more prosperous, so as to benefit the British economy.⁴⁹ Consequently, colonial science institutions flourished across the Empire, as the mantle of research and economic botany was passed (sometimes unwillingly) from botanic gardens to agricultural departments.⁵⁰ It is thus within this framework of change that British Malaya’s Department of Agriculture first took root.

In light of the above context, I argue that the Department of Agriculture was the product of FMS administrators not having a unified vision for the colony’s overall direction. With no

⁴⁷ “Mr. Chamberlain On Trade,” *The Times* (London, England), April 1, 1895. The Times Digital Archive.

⁴⁸ Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the ‘Improvement’ of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 256-257.

⁴⁹ William K. Storey, “Plants, power and development: Founding the Imperial Department of Agriculture for the West Indies, 1880–1914,” in *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and the Social Order*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 117-118.

⁵⁰ M. Worboys, “British Colonial Science Policy, 1918-1939,” in *Colonial Sciences: Researchers and Institution*, ed. Patrick Petitjean (Paris: ORSTOM, 1996), 100; M. Worboys and P. Palladino, “Science and Imperialism,” *Isis* 84, no.1 (1993): 97.

clear idea of where the colony's interests should primarily lie, administrators could not effectively articulate what the Department should do, or if it should even exist at all during these early years. By using the prism of the Department of Agriculture to illuminate this theme of colonial haphazardness within the FMS, I draw from John Darwin's work in *Unfinished Empire* where he asserts that the British Empire was, in a sense, always in the making.⁵¹ Elaborating on this, Darwin argues that the multiplicity of viewpoints, activities, and interests that went into the making and running of Empire meant there was never one single, coordinated version of it.⁵² The possibility of there being a unifying imperial policy that could be applicable across the board was therefore "always a pipe-dream", as Empire was built from the work of different hands, each of which could never quite agree on how the final product should look.⁵³ Subsequently, this falls within the purview of 'new' imperial history, which rejects the idea of there being only one, sole European colonial project. There was thus no unifying "discourse or set of representations and practices of colonialism", as these were not merely different – sometimes, they were even in opposition to each other, too.⁵⁴

This period of change was also characterised by a shift in how colonists perceived the tropics. Advances in tropical medicine and agriculture from the late-nineteenth century onwards introduced some practical solutions to taming the tropics and making them productive, but as David Arnold contends, general European perceptions remained largely negative.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the success of tropical medicine suggested two new possibilities: that of tropicity finally being conquered and now, also harnessed for other, more beneficial purposes such as crop-planting. Paul Sutter thereby asserts that the tropical triumphalism of the early 1900s which extolled the tropics as having been tamed for European living and enterprise was, in fact, also infused with the hope that this would lead to increased tropical agricultural production. In this manner, the tropics were envisioned as an eventual "cornucopia of global food production."⁵⁶

⁵¹ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2012), xii.

⁵² Ibid, 12.

⁵³ Ibid, 191.

⁵⁴ Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4, no.1 (2006): 132.

⁵⁵ David Arnold, "'Illusory Riches': representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no.1 (2000): 7, 15.

⁵⁶ Paul Sutter, "The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 193.

Although this dream went unfulfilled in most British colonies, the relative success of British Malaya's rubber plantations bucked the trend. Nevertheless, Michael Worboys has asserted that we would be mistaken to assume that this was due to careful planning. Similar to that of Ghana's, British Malaya's plantation economy was "in part accidental", as it was built on the back of trying and failing to raise different crops until these experiments yielded the best method and commodity.⁵⁷ In this chapter, I extend Worboys' contention to assert that the growth of the rubber industry and indeed, the very structures that supported it in British Malaya did not germinate from a place of rational or even planned colonial discourse. There was no carefully laid-out grand scheme for systemisation here. Instead, by almost impulsively reacting to a variety of broader forces and opposing opinions that British Malaya was not yet prepared to confront, these initial administrative structures were dynamic ones, rife with antagonism and misguidedness.

The idea of having a Department of Agriculture was first broached around 1899, when the United Planters Association (UPA) wrote to the Resident-General of the FMS to request that such a department be created. For the Association, "the advantage of perpetuating the prosperity of these States by aiding agriculture in all forms" was terribly obvious, and this was best achieved via creating a Department that could collect and publish information to all cultivators.⁵⁸ Swettenham, the Resident-General at that time, acknowledged this request with "fullest sympathy", but nonetheless stated that while a Department was certainly beneficial, the FMS did not currently have the funds to establish one as they were already committed to railway extensions and irrigation projects. Also, "The Federated Malay States are essentially mining countries ... and this fact must not be lost sight of in the appropriation of available revenues to any purpose which may benefit one class of the community rather than another."⁵⁹

Swettenham's initial refusal for a Department here is particularly interesting when we recall his keen interest in agriculture in Chapter 3. For someone who had extolled its virtues throughout the initial part of his career, Swettenham's latter years as Resident General and Governor-High Commissioner were characterised by a relative cooling in enthusiasm as he turned his attention towards road and rail projects instead. These projects were undoubtedly

⁵⁷ Michael Worboys, "British Colonial Science Policy," 101.

⁵⁸ Tom Gibson, Secretary of the U.P.A. to the Resident General. Letter, 20th April, 1899. *CO 273/251*.

⁵⁹ Oliver Marks, Secretary to Resident-General, to Secretary of the U.P.A. Letter, 29th April 1899. *CO 273/251*.

connected with the opening up of land for plantations and estates, but by and large, official attention was quite firmly focused on mining instead.⁶⁰

We might further sympathise with Swettenham's initial approach when examining how tin-prices soared during this time. In 1902, for instance, tin duties alone made up an impressive 40% of the FMS' \$20 million annual revenue – a total which easily covered its expenditure of \$15.9 million.⁶¹ The year before, Swettenham had even written to Joseph Chamberlain to voice his disagreement with the opinions of those who said the FMS must soon look to agriculture, due to the danger of tin deposits being worked out. Lest he be construed as favouring mining to the detriment of agriculture, however, Swettenham was also quick to remind Chamberlain that “the direct interest of planters have never been neglected by the Residents of the Malay States”, as large sums had previously been spent to assist with various crop experiments and an irrigation project for rice-planting was already in the works. On top of that, an officer had even been appointed to superintend an experimental plantation and advise on rubber cultivation, Swettenham asserting that planters “have the warm sympathy of the Government which will continue to afford them all reasonable assistance.”⁶²

In the end, however, it was not warm sympathy that pushed Swettenham to finally acquiesce to forming a Department. By 1903, numerous planters' associations had begun to agitate Swettenham for a government department that would be able to implement a clear, definite policy for FMS agriculture. With time, the ruckus of these requests finally forced him to form a committee that would look into starting such an establishment.⁶³ Reporting on the situation to Chamberlain in July of that year, Swettenham wrote that the question of creating a department to “foster agricultural interests, encourage the cultivation of new products, to conduct experiments and be a general source of information for Planters” was now under consideration. Previous planting enterprises might have “not hitherto proved very successful”, but rubber prospects were currently so good that barring “some unforeseen disaster”, the future was “full of promise” for cultivators. To that end, 16,000 acres had already been planted with rubber – though this was still a far cry from the 2.26 million acres

⁶⁰ H.S. Barlow, *Swettenham* (Kuala Lumpur: Southdene Sdn. Bhd., 1995), 499

⁶¹ F.A. Swettenham to Mr. Chamberlain. Letter, 11 July 1903. In *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1902, Cd.-1819* (London: Darling and Son, 1903), 3. W.H. Treacher, “Resident-General's Annual Report for the Year 1902,” *Ibid*, 6.

⁶² F.A. Swettenham to Mr. Chamberlain. Letter. July 1, 1901. In *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1900, Cd.-815* (London: Darling and Son, 1901), 4.

⁶³ Tate, *The R.G.A. History*, 277.

of 1922.⁶⁴

It is worth noting at this point that Swettenham's assessment of previous plantings were not inaccurate, as despite the planters' and government's best efforts, there was relatively little to show from years of experiments and plantations. As seen in Chapter 2, the continued failures of spice planting rendered crops such as cloves, nutmeg, and pepper of only minor importance, while at the turn of the twentieth century, hopes for a profitable coffee industry were dashed by disease and unfavourable prices.⁶⁵ By 1902, coffee estates had even been planted over with rubber instead, a move which one official accurately predicted "will eventually dispossess the coffee".⁶⁶ Similarly, the sugar plantations of Perak and Province Wellesley, which had been fairly successful in previous decades, were gradually being replaced with more profitable crops such coconuts and rubber.⁶⁷

Placed in this context, the Department was initially presented as a multi-purpose boost to the FMS' flagging agricultural industries and a direct continuation of the Government's previous support in developing this particular sector. Given its increasing spread and seemingly optimistic potential for future profit, rubber planters seemed poised to benefit the most from such efforts. Yet, the potential of rubber did little to persuade the FMS Government that it was worth investing in its research and development via the formation of an Agricultural Department. Far from being embraced by all colonial officials, the Department instead warranted different degrees of attention from different people, with the disparity being the greatest between its staff and upper administrators within the FMS. With the FMS government clutching tightly at its purse-strings and still subscribing to the mentality of mining being the region's main focus, each level of administration could not agree on how the Department should look, or more importantly, how much it should cost.

To begin with correspondence between H.N. Ridley, the Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and William Thiselton-Dyer, the Director of the Kew Botanic Gardens, we find that the Department was mired in disagreement even from the very start. In November 1903, Ridley wrote to complain about not having been officially informed of a series of proposals

⁶⁴ Frank Swettenham to Mr. Chamberlain. Letter, July 11, 1903. *Cd.-1819*, 4; Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya*, 216.

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*, 127; Colin Barlow, "Indonesian and Malayan Agricultural Development, 1870-1940," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 21, no.1 (1985): 97.

⁶⁶ W.H. Treacher, "Resident General's Annual Report for the Year 1902," *Cd.-1819*, 9.

⁶⁷ Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*, 172-173. Also see Chapter 2.

for an FMS board of agriculture. The scheme, noted Ridley, seemed to involve affiliating the pre-existing Singapore Botanic Gardens with similar establishments in the FMS, so that they should “not be working on the same work in different establishments”. Ridley thought this was a sound recommendation, and though the Resident-General for the FMS at the time, W.H. Treacher, and a handful of other FMS Government board-members were supportive of it, Ridley noted that the entire scheme was ultimately “refused by Swettenham.”⁶⁸

In March 1904, Ridley wrote again to complain of still being kept in the dark about any plans for an agricultural board, or department. Beyond mentioning that it had been started due to how “the planters grumbled that the Government did not do enough for them”, Ridley also made mention of “old Venning”, or A.R. Venning the Federal Secretary to Treacher. Ridley thought Venning “runs the Government pretty much as he likes, or is let to” – implying that Venning was the power behind Treacher, who he unkindly depicted as a mere figurehead.⁶⁹ Further describing Venning to Thiselton-Dyer, Ridley called him “a dear old woman, ideas [sic] late William the IV with apparently a mania for Dutchmen” as he was “very interested in Malay settlements” and wanted to the FMS Malays to “settle down and become agriculturalists, as the Dutch have done with the Javanese”.⁷⁰

Ridley’s unspoken hunch about Old Venning was uncannily accurate, as at that very point, Venning was spearheading the committee charged with discussing the formation of an agricultural board. This was a five-man affair, its members including: Venning as its head; a sugar planter, Mr. Turner, who sat on the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements; the Superintendent of Indian Immigrants, Mr. Hill; and two Chairmen from the United Planters Association, Messrs. Bailey and Carey.⁷¹

⁶⁸ H.N. Ridley to William Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 10 November 1903. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/96-97. Ridley had a bit of an acid tongue, mostly reserved for various administrators. Swettenham in particular was a favourite target. In April 1903 for instance, Ridley wrote to Thiselton-Dyer complaining that ‘Frankie’ had called an article of Ridley’s “rubbish” due to some uncorrected printing mistakes. “Truly”, sniped Ridley, “the author of ‘Unaddressed Letters’ should know what rubbish is, as he has given us so excellent an example of it.” H.N. Ridley to William Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 3 April 1903. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/85-86.

⁶⁹ In retrospect, Ridley might have been accurate about Treacher’s position, as historians such as Sidhu have since described him as “shy and retiring”, lacking strength of character, and predisposed to the “pleasant or popular course”. Sidhu, *Administration in the Federated Malay States*, 52.

⁷⁰ H.N. Ridley to William Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 8 March 1904. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/102-104. For more on Malay agricultural settlements, see Chapter 5.

⁷¹ Acting High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Extract of despatch, 15 October 1903. *MR* 327.

The committee met on the 1st of September 1903 and its results, containing a number of modest proposals, were subsequently forwarded to Treacher and Swettenham himself. One of the committee's first recommendations was that the President of this new Board of Agriculture should be styled the 'Director of Agriculture', since a term like 'Superintendent' seemed "more suited to the manager of a garden than the Head of an important Department." Subsequently, the Director ("a well paid Government official") was to be "guided and advised by a Board composed of some of the most experienced agriculturalists in the country" and together, they would be responsible for a whole laundry list of areas "capable of almost indefinite expansion". Based off the Committee's discussions, Swettenham appears to have also wanted a single Director for both the Straits Settlements and FMS, but this notion was soundly rejected and deemed unfeasible for the time being.⁷² In sum, the overarching aim was fairly simple: to systematise FMS agriculture by bringing it under a unified administration.⁷³

Having established the purview of this department, the Committee recommended that the Director be someone who could combine scientific knowledge with practical experience. To that end, an adequate salary of £1000 per annum was to be offered, so that they could better secure the services of someone "properly qualified". Assisting him would be two Superintendents of Experimental Plantations in Perak and Selangor (£300-420), a clerk (\$720), an orderly, and, rather quaintly, a Punkah or fan-puller (\$216 total, for both). Additional allowances for a horse, travel, furniture/repairs, newspapers, and books were also included, while in the second year, provisions were to be made for a European Assistant (£300-420), Agricultural Analytical Chemist (£300), and laboratory. Appended to this brief budget was a note from Mr. Turner, the sugar planter, who personally attested to the value of chemists as he himself had derived "great advantage from their services" and employed two of them on his plantations at the cost of £400 per annum with free houses, servants, and so on.

Sums laid out, the committee reiterated "the very great advantage which will accrue to these States" from having a Department of Agriculture. If, the Committee pointed out, their

⁷² No reason was given for this rejection, though it may have been for fear of offending H.N. Ridley, then Superintendent of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Ridley, as we will find, had an immensely prickly nature.

⁷³ Report of the Committee nominated to consider certain proposals relative to the appointment of a Board of Agriculture for the Federated Malay States. 1st September, 1903. *MR* 327

recommended expenditure seemed high, it was “of no account whatever as compared with the enormous advantages which are sure to result.” Given that the well-being of the FMS was presently centred on tin mining, they felt that

they cannot too strongly urge upon the Government the immense importance of taking steps which will add greatly increased prosperity both to the capitalist and the native cultivator, and will lead to gradual and very important increase of trade, and of the revenues of the Federated Malay States.⁷⁴

Notes dated from May of that year were also attached to the Committee’s deliberations, these having been written by L.C. Brown, the Federal Inspector of Coconut Trees.⁷⁵ Evidently, Brown had come to similar conclusions, as he lauded the great benefits that a Department could bring via stimulating and protecting the development of agriculture. As Brown pointed out, prospective investors currently had to apply to Land Offices for agricultural information, something that “hardly comes properly within their province”. A Department with centralised, accessible records could thereby not only draw much capital into the FMS, but ensure that large tracts of land previously granted for cultivation did not lie unused and wasted. Last, but not least, Brown saw “no harm in having two strings to one bow”, as in the case of any tin depression, those employed in that sector would have agriculture to fall back on “instead of being sent ... broadcast over a barren country”.⁷⁶ Thus, the Department was imagined as both purveyor and protector, with agriculture as a safety-net.

These various benefits notwithstanding, Treacher disagreed with a number of the Committee’s suggestions. Sending his comments to Swettenham on the 24th of September 1903, Treacher first noted that Perak already had a Superintendent who was in charge of its Government Gardens, so even though he was to come under the supervision of the Department’s Director, he should nevertheless remain a State Officer and continue on his current salary of £240-300 rather than the £300-420 suggested by the Committee. One can

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ The post of Coconut Inspector was established following the Coconut Trees Preservation Enactment 1898, which aimed to prevent the spread of pests such as coconut beetles. See: Peter Triantafillou, “Governing agricultural progress: A genealogy of the politics of pest control in Malaysia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no.1 (2001): 193-221.

⁷⁶ L.C. Brown, Notes by Federal Inspector of Coconut Trees re: Agriculture. 2nd May, 1903. *MR* 327.

only assume that the same applied to the Superintendent of the Federal Experimental Plantations in Selangor, though with the present Superintendent about to vacate his post, Treacher noted that he would forward more details of the position in due course.

Superintendents aside, a chemist for the Department seemed unnecessary since an arrangement with the pre-existing Colonial Analytical Chemist “would obviate a separate appointment” for the FMS. In particular, Treacher wrote that he did “not attach much importance” to Mr. Turner’s note about chemists on his own sugar plantations, as “nearly all well-equipped Sugar Factories are provided with special Chemists”. The laboratory could be done away with, too, given that Department could share the one at the Institute for Medical Research. As for the Director’s salary, this was deemed far too high and cut from £1000 to £800, with the position limited to three years and made non-pensionable, at that. Adding insult to injury, Treacher additionally hoped that only one Director of Agriculture would be able to look after both the FMS and the Straits Settlements – this being yet another direct contradiction to the Committee’s suggestions.⁷⁷

Taking stock of discussions surrounding the Department at this juncture, we find that officials in upper administration and those on the ground collectively agreed that FMS agriculture needed to be directed more systematically. For the Committee, the best way to enact this was to create a Department of Agriculture, where its ably-skilled Director was assisted by a board and other support staff – including punkah-pullers. Given the long-term benefits of a Department to both capitalists and native agriculturalists alike, these advantages alone would have seemed to justify the costs of its upkeep. While Treacher and Swettenham broadly agreed with these sentiments, they nevertheless thought that agricultural administration simply did not warrant such spending, no matter how modest the sum. Consequently, salaries, staff, and facilities were cut, evidencing that even though these two officials shared similar desires with the Committee, their methods and priorities were markedly different.

To find a template

At this point, it is worth noting that Treacher’s suggestions were made with some pre-existing knowledge of how other British colonies were running their own Departments. Treacher had

⁷⁷ W.H. Treacher, Resident General, to High Commissioner, Frank Swettenham. Letter, 24 September 1903. *Ibid.*

even went as far as to explicitly name them, when he mentioned how he spoke with Swettenham about both the Imperial Department of Agriculture for the West Indies and the Board of Agriculture and the Agricultural Departments in the Colony of Jamaica.⁷⁸ Read alongside Ridley's on-going correspondence with Thiselton-Dyer, Treacher's invocation of these establishments provides a useful segue to consider how the FMS Department of Agriculture was embedded into broader networks of imperial science. As I will demonstrate, the ebb and flow of international trade meshed with imperial science to not only bring rubber to Malayan shores, but also see it spark disagreements about its administration. These were thus fragile connections, fleeting and prone to causing more trouble than good as they were established with little notion of what the Department should be like.

As noted in the Introduction of this thesis, there has been a general turn towards adopting a 'network' style of organisation when conceptualising the British Empire. In the context of science, more specifically, David Chambers and Richard Gillespie have made a case for colonial science to be understood as a "polycentric communications network" – this being a decentralised response to the more Eurocentric metaphor of a wheel, which places Europe at the centre and has spokes of knowledge radiating outwards into the 'peripheries'.⁷⁹ Colonial scientists thus had their own identities and loyalties, while their work was performed within a pre-existing framework of "institutions, agendas, career opportunities, working language, financial support and patronage systems."⁸⁰ Similarly, James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O'Gorman have proposed utilising 'eco-cultural networks' as an analytical framework. By foregrounding the interconnected nature of society and the environment, the adaptive, relational nature of this approach encompasses the movements of people, capital, communication, biota, and knowledge, thereby forming channels of transfer and exchange between separate societies and environments.⁸¹

In the FMS, we see a constantly shifting tangle of relationships between a series of centres and peripheries that are, themselves, also in flux. This in turn makes it reminiscent of Tony

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ David Wade Chambers and Richard Gillespie, "Locality in the History of Science: Colonial Science, Technoscience, and Indigenous Knowledge," *Osiris* 15 (2000): 223.

⁸⁰ Sverker Sörlin, "National and International Aspects of Cross-Boundary Science: Scientific Travel in the 18th Century," in *Denationalizing Science: The Contexts of International Scientific Practice*, eds. Elizabeth Crawford, Terry Shinn, and Sverker Sörlin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993), 45. Quoted in Ibid.

⁸¹ J. Beattie, E. Melillo, E. O'Gorman, "Rethinking the British Empire through eco-cultural networks: Materialist-cultural environmental history, Relational connections and agency," *Environment and History* 20, no.4 (2014): 563-564.

Ballantyne and Alan Lester's descriptions of networks (or webs) being dynamic, integrative units of organisation. The fragility of these systems allows for them to be reworked and remade if certain parts are ever destroyed, while these connections are also "provisional and contingent ... ephemeral and even fleeting."⁸² Applied to the context of the FMS Department of Agriculture, I argue that the colony's lack of a unified direction contributed to the dysfunction of these connections. Attempts to reach out and connect with various other colonies and establishments were largely made in vain, as the FMS' own administrators could not utilise these connections in a meaningful manner. Links thus faltered and failed, making the Department a tenuously connected node within the broader imperial circuit-board.

Given these relationships, Treacher's invocation of the Imperial Department is particularly important when we examine its guiding role within such inter-colony networks. To situate its founding in 1899 within the appropriate context, we first consider how during the mid to late-nineteenth century, there was a movement amongst certain intellectual and activist circles to create an imperial federation. This ambitious scheme did not come to pass, but its echoes were still recorded in smaller, more successful attempts at federating colonies: Canada in 1867, for instance, followed by the FMS in 1895 and Australia in 1901.⁸³ In response, the realm of science also recorded a swing towards 'federative' language, as scientists and politicians alike attempted to bridge political separation by emphasising the role of imperial science as a unifier between colonies.⁸⁴ The Imperial Department, which intended to impose a coordinated direction for the West Indian colonies, was one such attempt.

In light of these seemingly rational, neutral qualities of scientific methods, there was the assumption that imperial unity could be achieved via scientific unity. The 'purity' of science rose above the messiness of political implications and influences, which in turn meant that the needs of the people could instead be foregrounded. Thus, science was cast as the perfect vehicle for 'development', or the supposed socioeconomic improvement of a disadvantaged country.⁸⁵ As William Storey argues, development was a "new discourse of intervention" which demanded that colonists discard previous laissez-faire approaches to instead employ

⁸² Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 15; Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4, no.1 (2006), 135.

⁸³ Storey, "Plants, power and development," 120.

⁸⁴ MacLeod, "On Visiting the Moving Metropolis," 11.

⁸⁵ Storey, "Plants, power and development," 120.

science to enact their Empire's social responsibilities.⁸⁶ According to Storey, the institutionalisation of these scientific and technological development policies occurred in the West Indies – specifically via the formation of the Imperial Department. Drawing from aspects of Social Darwinism and colonial paternalism, the Imperial Department helped to rationalise the spread of scientific agriculture across Empire, and by the early-twentieth century, it became the prototype on which other colonial research institutions and development policies were based.⁸⁷

While it is not clear what it was, exactly, that Swettenham and Treacher discussed in relation to the Imperial Department, this background allows for some speculation on its possible influences upon the nascent FMS Department. Gazing upon the relative success of the Imperial Department as an example of federated science – wherein all West Indian colonies could be sheltered under a standardised umbrella of scientific knowledge and practice –, the administrators of British Malaya might have desired similar outcomes for their own region. A Department of Agriculture that encompassed both the FMS and Straits Settlements offered a chance to gather the region's agricultural capabilities and potentials under a single administration.

Nonetheless, things were not that simple. In the nineteenth century, colonial botanic gardens were the institutions responsible for researching economic botany.⁸⁸ As Timothy Barnard notes, these gardens served as nodes that linked colonial research with broader networks of imperial science, thereby amalgamating local requirements with imperial needs.⁸⁹ Recalling the failings of the first Penang botanic garden in Chapter 2, however, British Malaya's track record with maintaining these important institutions was almost laughable. To quote Ridley, the British Malayan government might have actually held the record for the most botanical and agricultural establishments created and then abolished within a century: nine founded and seven disbanded.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Ibid, 109.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Lucille H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. First published 1979), 74-75.

⁸⁹ Timothy Barnard, *Nature's Colony: Empire, Nation and Environment in the Singapore Botanic Gardens* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 117. Also see Chapter Two.

⁹⁰ H.N. Ridley, *Life of a Naturalist, volume 1*, 165. *HNR* 3/3/1.

By the early-twentieth century, only the Singapore and Penang gardens remained, though it was largely the former which ended up servicing both the Straits Settlements and FMS' agricultural and botanical needs.⁹¹ Characteristically, Ridley had much to say about this arrangement, as he complained about having practically done all the agricultural work from 1888 to 1906 – from advising planters to introducing new plants and inspecting estates. This was indeed corroborated by numerous letters to the Editor of the *Straits Times* newspaper in 1910 and 1911, all of which lauded Ridley's contributions to both the Straits Settlements and FMS. Nevertheless, no amount of appreciation was enough to soothe Ridley's complaints of how he was employed “only by the Colony [of the Straits Settlements] and had nothing to do with the Native States which did not even pay the Colony for my services.”⁹²

Given this intimate, mostly-lopsided relationship between the Singapore Botanic Gardens and the state of agriculture on the FMS, we glimpse how plans to establish an FMS Department were bound up in pre-existing local and imperial networks of knowledge exchange. On the one hand, the West Indian Imperial Department provided a template for how future institutes of colonial science should look and function, while on the other, by utilising the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the FMS was already integrated into pre-existing intra-regional networks of science. Simultaneously, the somewhat unsatisfactory British Malayan experience with local agricultural establishments also suggested a prevailing misunderstanding about the value of such places. As such, the FMS Department had to contend with a number of tensions: reconciling departmental costs with its ability to function, the transfer of power from botanic gardens to preferably federated institutions, and last but not least, a colonial administration that did not value its contributions.

These difficulties with cost and direction were only further highlighted when in October 1903, details for the post of Director of Agriculture for the FMS were made official. Reading its description, we find that the position was hardly an attractive one. Though there was a furniture allowance, quarters were not provided. Additionally, the Director's “whole time” was “to be at the disposal of the Government”, and no private practice of any sort allowed.

⁹¹ Barnard, *Nature's Colony*, 116.

⁹² H.N. Ridley, *Malay Peninsula Gardens and Agriculture*, 245. *HNR* 4/11. Ridley helpfully included copies of these articles in Notebook 7, 275. *HNR* 2/7 and Notebook 8, 125. *HNR* 2/8. These include letters from a pseudonym ‘Delta’, “What Planters Owe to Mr. H.N. Ridley,” *The Straits Times*, 27 August 1910; the planter E.V. Carey, “What Planters Owe to Mr. H.N. Ridley,” *The Straits Times*, 3 September 1910; and an anonymous piece “Mr. Ridley's Retirement,” *The Straits Times*, 19 September 1911.

Free passage was provided for the Director and his family from England to Malaya, but this was only limited to second class by mail steamer, or first class by other modes. And, as per Treacher's amendments, the post was non-pensionable, on a three-year term, and attracted a salary that could not rise above £800.

Matters of pay (or lack thereof) and perks aside, the extent of the Director's official duties were also listed. These included, but were not limited to: advising the Government on agricultural questions and development; supervising Government Plantations and Experimental Gardens; advising Agricultural Settlements; providing practical information to Planters; collecting useful information; and conducting experiments related to cash-crops such as gutta percha, rubber, cotton, and ramie. It was thus stipulated that the Director should have sufficient knowledge to carry out all of the above, though knowledge of any native languages was deemed unnecessary.⁹³ This omission is particularly glaring, considering that the Director had to advise agricultural settlements, which were largely made up of non-European agriculturalists.⁹⁴ In short, descriptions of the Directorship position evidenced two main issues: first, that the FMS government wanted an ambitious, all-encompassing role while not paying too much for it, and second, that practically speaking, the Director was not there for the benefit of local, non-European planters or agriculturalists.

These details as well as prior plans for the Department were subsequently forwarded via the Colonial Office to Thiselton-Dyer in late 1903, so that he might comment on their suitability and suggest a candidate. Judging from Thiselton-Dyer's response, however, he was not exactly impressed. First addressing how the Director "must combine botanical and other scientific knowledge with practical experience", Thiselton-Dyer proclaimed that plenty of men fitting the former requirement could be found in the country, but those with practical experience were already serving in the tropics. As such, "it would be useless to expect any of these" to give up their permanent roles for a temporary position of only three years.

⁹³ A.R. Venning, Federal Secretary. "Particulars of the Office of Director of Agriculture and Chairman of Agricultural Board," 6 October 1903. *MR* 327.

⁹⁴ The Perak Administration Report for 1902, for instance, refers to "foreign agricultural settlements" as a means to increase rice cultivation, and also makes mention of Chinese and Tamil agriculturalists being settled on the Perak coast. See: J.P. Rodger, "Perak Administration Report for the Year 1902," *Cd.-1819*, 39. Also see Chapter 5 for a more in-depth discussion on the Malay Agricultural Settlement.

Additionally, given that the FMS Government already wanted the Colonial Analytical Chemist to include the FMS in his purview, Thiselton-Dyer saw no problem in having Ridley do the same from his current position. Thiselton-Dyer thereby recommended Ridley for the Directorship, as Ridley fit most of the characteristics mentioned and a specialist could be obtained to cover those he did not. In closing, Thiselton-Dyer made his opinion about the FMS' requirements quite clearly known: "I am afraid that the planting community in the Malay States expects to be supplied with men of heaven-born genius. I know of no machinery for producing the commodity ... At present we are all more or less amateurs at the business."⁹⁵

Reading the series of correspondence that followed, the FMS Government evidently did not take any of Thiselton-Dyer's recommendations on-board. To begin, suggestions of making the Directorship permanent and hiring Ridley for it were met with an emphatic rejection, as Thiselton-Dyer's suggestions were, unsurprisingly, "considered inexpedient".⁹⁶ More strangely, however, it was proposed that the "Government of Netherlands India should be requested to fill up appointment of Director of Agriculture" instead.⁹⁷ Recalling Ridley's prior description of Venning having a "mania for Dutchmen", we can quite accurately guess who made the suggestion for employing a Dutch Director.

A missive from the Colonial Office to Thiselton-Dyer in the new year nonetheless shows that this particular suggestion was short-lived. Instead, as they informed Thiselton-Dyer, they had instructed the High Commissioner of the FMS to instead consult with the Governor of Ceylon about the possibility of appointing the current mycologist and Assistant Director of the Peradeniya Gardens, J.B. Carruthers, to the post.⁹⁸ Yet, the FMS Government dragged its feet over appointing Carruthers as Director. According to Ridley's recollections, Venning "would not have him", and "did not want a scientific man but a Dutchman".⁹⁹ Eventually, this led to the acting High Commissioner at the time, W.T. Taylor, to advise and persuade the Resident General, the now-promoted Treacher, to get one Dr. Willis from Ceylon to write a report on

⁹⁵ Sir W.T. Thiselton-Dyer to C.P. Lucas. Letter, November 26, 1903. *MR* 327.

⁹⁶ C.P. Lucas to Sir W.T. Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 4 December 1903. *Ibid*; R.E. Stubbs to Sir W.T. Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 11 January 1904. *Ibid*.

⁹⁷ The Officer Administering the Government of the Straits Settlements to Mr. Lyttelton. Telegram, 17 December 1903. Enclosed in C.P. Lucas to Sir W.T. Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 21 December 1903. *Ibid*.

⁹⁸ R.E. Stubbs to Sir W.T. Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 11 January 1904. *Ibid*.

⁹⁹ H.N. Ridley, "Malay Peninsula gardens and agriculture," 130. *HNR* 4/11.

FMS agriculture and suggest improvements.¹⁰⁰

With the inclusion of Willis into this scheme, the FMS Government now found itself embedded even deeper into the networks of scientific knowledge that co-existed alongside, and indeed interacted with other imperial circuits. Swettenham and Treacher had discussed establishments in the West Indies, while Thiselton-Dyer's expertise had been sought all the way from Kew. In his own way, Venning's looking towards the Netherlands East Indies similarly intended to connect British Malaya with established and successful methods of agricultural systemisation from a nearby, foreign colony. Now, Willis' arrival also served to extend that network across the Indian Ocean to now include the Peradeniya Botanic Garden in Ceylon.

As I have demonstrated in this section, the FMS was linked into broader eco-cultural circuits via fleeting and fragile connections. These were embodied in the constantly shifting interactions between the FMS Government, Ridley, Thiselton-Dyer, the Colonial Office, and now, Willis as well, on top of the occasional glance towards the British West Indies, or even the Dutch East Indies. Consequently, this multiplicity of reference points also highlights the largely unplanned and indeed, disorderly approach of the FMS Government towards establishing its Department of Agriculture. Opinions were sought as quickly as they were discarded, resulting in a confusion of perspectives that were ultimately rejected by various parties.

With each point of contact bringing its own unique set of problems and perceptions to the table, personal and professional animosities were set on a collision course with scientific expertise, while frugality wrestled with political change and economic opportunity. Rubber had initially promised a better, more profitable path for the region's agriculture, but with no grand plan for how to shape it, administrators were left scrambling for an appropriate approach. In the following section, I go on to investigate how once a plan was finally enacted, the FMS Government cared little for it.

¹⁰⁰ H.N. Ridley, "Notebook, volume 4," 207-209. *HNR* 3/2/4.

Visions from Willis

Upon arriving in the FMS, Willis' first letter back to Thiselton-Dyer in April 1904 reported that Ridley "very much resents" his being there, as it was initially proposed that Ridley should be the one taking on this work. Yet, any suggestion that Ridley take over had inspired "immediate opposition". "In fact," wrote Willis, "I think if the Colonial Office were to insist on it [Ridley's appointment], that the Govt. here would drop the whole scheme, whereas at present they evidently mean business." This is an illuminating note, as it clearly suggests that in spite of previous efforts, the powers that be were quite willing to simply discard the entire affair due to sheer pettiness. Put in perspective, the future of FMS agriculture was to some extent dependent on its administration's dislike of one man – who, ironically, was also the best candidate to lead the Department.

Thankfully, Willis' own assessment of the situation offered a far more level-headed view. For him, the FMS Government seemed to want "A practical scientific department, which won't be too proud to deal with labour, drainage, workers, etc. and go for essentials and not minor details", and Ridley, as an "old fashioned taxonomist, not the experimental practical one of the physiological" was unsuitable. Nonetheless, this pickiness raised a new issue. Even though the FMS was "a fine piece of country, and botanically and agriculturally interesting", Willis thought it did not "have much chance of attracting many scientific workers" due to being so far from Europe and in between the established institutions of Peradeniya in Ceylon and Buitenzorg in Java. A postscript in the same letter even indicated how this might play out in future, as Willis noted he had been offered the Directorship himself, but refused to take it as he preferred Peradeniya.¹⁰¹

Two months later, Willis wrote Thiselton-Dyer again to say that he was now in the midst of writing up the report for the FMS, in which he was "recommending a department somewhat on our [Peradinaya's] lines". Beyond suggesting the necessary officers and clerks, he would also point out areas for development so that the FMS Government "can't say they never realised what might come." Given that the FMS had "endless money", "they ought to make a splendid institution, rivalling ours from a practical point of view".¹⁰² This, as we now know, was an expectation that did not come to pass.

¹⁰¹ J.C. Willis to Sir William Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 17 April 1904. *Directors' Correspondence 164/59-60*.

¹⁰² J.C. Willis to Sir William Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 21 June, 1904. *Directors' Correspondence 164/48-49*.

Willis' trip to the FMS and his observations there were spread across two reports. The first and shorter one was published on the 12th of July 1904 after Willis had spent some weeks travelling through the country, visiting estates, meeting with officials and planters, and acquainting himself with the general state of agriculture there. Willis even paid a short visit to Java, aspiring to see "the reasons of the great prosperity and industry of the natives of that island and find ... any prospect of producing similar effects" in the FMS.

Summarising Willis' observations, he found that the FMS' planting industry had been generally unfortunate thus far, but now, with coconuts, sugar, and rubber (the latter "in which scientific aid is especially necessary"), success seemed to be finally at hand. To that end, Willis strongly supported establishing a Department of Agriculture, as agriculture was currently "being nibbled at by various officers, and institutions, official and unofficial". Tellingly, the weak point was thus "the almost entire lack of a definite agricultural policy upon the part of the Government or of the local officers", this being a particularly salient thing when agriculture changed slowly and its improvement must come from a "settled policy ... carried on through a long period of time."¹⁰³

Echoing the Committee and Thiselton-Dyer's views, Willis recommended that the Director should have a salary that made it "worth his while to stay for a long period, if not for his whole career, in the country", thereby giving continuity to agricultural policies. This, however, did not necessitate a change from the current pay of £800. Rather, as seen in Table 1, Willis suggested an increase across other expenditures such as the library allowance, which was raised from \$100 to \$500. Justifying this, Willis asserted that a Department of Agriculture required a "considerable library", while also pointing to Peradeniya's own expense of Rs1000 (~\$560) in this area.¹⁰⁴

Having highlighted the importance of the Department, Willis nominated a grand total of \$13,596 for the Department of Agriculture in the 1905 budget estimates – a thoroughly pitiful amount when we consider that the FMS' expenditure for 1904 amounted to \$19.3 million and

¹⁰³ John C. Willis, "Department of Agriculture, F.M.S." 12 July 1904. *MR* 327.

¹⁰⁴ Based on conversion rate of 1 rupee = 1s. 4d. and £1 = \$8.50. Arnold Wright, ed. *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, 1907), 864; Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright, ed. *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, Ltd., 1908), 939.

its revenue, \$20.24 million.¹⁰⁵ Comparing the cost of the Department against other projects, \$6,658 was paid out in 1905 for the “destruction of noxious and dangerous animals”, while building expenses for High Commissioner’s new house at Kuala Kangsar was estimated at \$70,000.¹⁰⁶

<u>Personal Emoluments</u>	<u>Committee</u>	<u>Willis</u>
Director of Agriculture	\$11,439 (~£1000)	\$8000 (~£800, starting)*
Clerk	\$ 720	\$720
Laboratory Attendant	-	\$360
Orderly and Punkah-puller	\$ 216	\$216
<u>Other Charges</u>		
Horse Allowance	\$300	\$300
Travelling & Personal Allowance	\$1000	\$1000
Library (Newspapers/books)	\$100	\$500
Laboratory	-	\$500
Stationary	-	\$100
Furniture, etc.	\$50	\$50
Contingencies	\$100	\$100
<u>Special Expenditure</u>		
Furniture	\$250	\$250
Books and Journals	-	\$1000
Microscopes, etc.	-	\$500
Total	\$14,175	\$13,596
*Willis’ conversion rate differed from that of the Committee. This has been retained, since these are the sums submitted and are in of themselves, another indicator of how messy the planning process was.		

Table 1: Comparison of Committee’s budget with that of Willis’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ John C. Willis, “Department of Agriculture, F.M.S.” 12 July 1904. *MR 327*; W.T. Taylor, “Resident General's Annual Report for the Year 1904,” in *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1904, Cd.–2777* (London: Darling and Son, 1905), 6.

¹⁰⁶ William Taylor, “Resident-General's Annual Report for the Year 1905,” in *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1905, Cd.–3186* (London: Darling and Son, 1906), 12, 18.

¹⁰⁷ John C. Willis, “Department of Agriculture, F.M.S.” 12 July 1904. *MR 327*; Report of the Committee nominated to consider certain proposals relative to the appointment of a Board of Agriculture for the Federated Malay States. 1st September, 1903. *Ibid.*

In November of 1904, Willis submitted an even longer report, one that ran for some 455 paragraphs across more than a hundred pages. This sweeping view of agriculture on the Malay Peninsula addressed two broad areas: its current state, as well as potential directions for its future. Overall, Willis believed that the FMS had the ability to be a “great centre of tropical agriculture”, and that it should learn from the successes and failures of other colonies such as the West Indies, Java, Ceylon, India, etc.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, every form of agriculture was to be encouraged by the Government, though estate agriculture was more important than the peasant kind due to its ability to “open up and populate the country ... more rapidly”.¹⁰⁹ This agricultural vision could be achieved via a number of schemes, including and not limited to: practical improvements such as road frontage and drainage; technical ones like crop cultivation, preparation, and research; and even social ones, such as loans, education, and immigration. At the heart of all these recommendations, however, was Willis’ plea for the FMS government to adopt a definite agricultural policy, as the above could only be achieved with a “full and complete concentration and continuity of effort towards the same end.”¹¹⁰

It was sometime during the writing of this report that the Assistant Director of the Peradeniya Gardens, J.B. Carruthers, seems to have accepted the Directorship, as on the 26th of September 1903, the *Singapore Free Press* ran an article on Carruthers' appointment to Malaya as its Director of Agriculture and Government Botanist.¹¹¹ Given that Carruthers had already been appointed Director at this point (and most likely according to the stipulations of the official post description), Willis’ additional suggestions for how the post should look only served to further reinforce the chasm between what Willis considered ideal, and what the Government thought acceptable.

To “attract a really good man” who would not be “continually looking out for opportunities to better his position elsewhere”, Willis’ report had asserted that the Director's salary should begin at £800 and continue to rise, with the post made permanent and pensionable.¹¹² Also recalling that the Director was not required to learn any local language for his appointment, Willis instead emphasised the opposite by advising that the Director should learn the Malay

¹⁰⁸ John C. Willis, *A Report Upon Agriculture in the Federated Malay States* (Kuala Lumpur: F.M.S. Government Printing Office, 1905), 9. MR 330.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹¹¹ “Mr. Carruthers' Appointment to Malaya,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 26 September 1904. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/singfreepressb19040926-1.2.9>.

¹¹² Willis, *A Report*, 86. MR 330.

States' local peculiarities, conditions, and the Malay language.¹¹³ Nonetheless, it is notable that these contradictions were not merely limited between Willis and the FMS government. Willis contradicted himself to some extent, too, asserting that "it is important for good work to have plenty of space", before going on to say that the question of headquarters "should not be decided in a hurry" and "any well-lighted building" would suit for a few years.¹¹⁴

Ridley, being the only other real authority on scientific and economic agriculture in the region at this time, had many opinions about Willis and his reports. Writing to Thiselton-Dyer shortly after Willis arrived, Ridley found Willis to be not particularly brilliant and with "very little interest in plants, excepting Para rubber" – of which Ridley claimed to have learnt little from him. What Ridley did learn, however, was that Willis was greatly interested in rubber cultivation on the Peninsula because he had apparently introduced the cultivation of it there. "At which," Ridley noted wryly, "we audibly smiled." As Ridley also recollected, Willis made no mention of his reports throughout his stay, "nor did he make any of the enquiries that we would naturally have expected." Instead, "he asked about nothing at all, and most of the time was dumb."¹¹⁵

This unflattering picture of Willis thus painted to his superior, Ridley's personal writings present a far more colourful recollection. Describing Willis as someone "fully possessed with the belief that the cheap bluff that carried him along so well in Ceylon would do the same" in the FMS, Ridley thought he had a way of "saying very little but trying to give the idea that he knew so much more than anyone who was talking". Correspondingly, Ridley thought that Willis "spoke little and talked nonsense when he did" – incidents of which Ridley gleefully recorded. One notable incident is that of a dinner attended by Ridley, Willis, and a planter named Carey, who was most likely the very same Carey who had been on the initial Committee to plan for a Department.

Here, Willis apparently told them he had seen a fungal disease on some estates in Selangor, but could not name which. Willis then sat "dreaming", before telling the party that he did not wish to scare the planters, but he had seen some experiments that had almost succeeded in making synthetic rubber – quite ignoring the fact, wrote Ridley, that such experiments had

¹¹³ Ibid, 97.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 98.

¹¹⁵ H.N. Ridley to Sir William Thiselton-Dyer. Letter, 19 May 1904. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/105.

been attempted some 50 years earlier by Michael Faraday. Willis' infamous claim about having introduced rubber to Malaya is recorded to have happened during this meal as well, to which Ridley and Carey "both went into roars of laughter and called for more drinks", as rubber had been introduced and cultivated on the Peninsula "when Willis was in small boy knickerbockers".¹¹⁶

While amusing in their retellings, Ridley's personal writings also serve to provide some previously unseen background to Willis' appointment to write a "wordy, long full report which appeared long after he had been forgotten", full of things that Ridley claimed everyone already knew. Prior to Willis' arrival, Ridley noted that he had went to see Swettenham's successor, Governor John Anderson, to ask for Willis' appointment as Ridley had worked on FMS agriculture for many years and could formulate a suitable scheme for it. Anderson heard Ridley

in a bored kind of manner and then said in political-official language that he did not care a damn about me, but that Frank Swettenham had arranged the whole scheme and approved the direction before he left ... and he could not do anything.

For Ridley, Willis' visit, his reports, "and all this solemnity" was thus "pure humbug" at the expense of the FMS government.¹¹⁷

While on the one hand we can consider Anderson's rejection of Ridley to be founded on the fact that Ridley was simply a difficult person to work with, on the other, this interaction still demonstrates a certain level of disinterest in agricultural matters from upper administration. It was already bad enough that the FMS government was content to axe the entire plan for a Department if they were forced to work with Ridley, but now, we also find that the new head of the FMS himself claimed to have no input whatsoever on the scheme. Even worse was the

¹¹⁶ H.N. Ridley, "Notebook, volume 4," 170-173. *HNR* 3/2/4. Given that Willis was born in 1868 and rubber introduced to the Peninsula in 1877, Ridley was not too far off the mark here as Willis would have been about nine years old. See: W.B. Turrill, "John Christopher Willis 1898-1958," *Biographical Memoirs of the Royal Society* 4 (1958): 353-359.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 173-175. Still, Ridley sympathised a little with Willis' "awkward position" of having to teach agriculture to far more knowledgeable people in the FMS while knowing "very little if any of Botany and less of agriculture". Willis also had a bad accident in Ceylon when an elephant knocked him off his bicycle, leaving him to be found the next morning half-insensible and with a broken bone in his head. Shortly after, he developed malaria, too, though this "would not of course account for his complete ignorance of agriculture and little knowledge of Botany generally."

insinuation that the expert hired to evaluate the state of agriculture in Malaya was hardly an expert at all, especially in the area of rubber – where it counted most. Read alongside the government's apparent unwillingness to heed advice from Thiselton-Dyer, Ridley, and indeed even Willis, what we have in this case is an ironic twist on Willis' desire for FMS agriculture to have a unified direction. It was not a solid, steady purpose to systematise agriculture that linked old and new administrators in continuity with each other, but a confusion of parsimony, personal vendettas, and even a dash of misplaced expertise.

A revolving door of Directors

With Carruthers starting as the FMS' first Director of Agriculture from the 1st of February 1905, it finally seemed like the worst was over and the Department could start its work.¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, correspondence from this time indicated otherwise. Founding the Department had been hard enough, but as it turns out, running it efficiently and effectively was much harder, so much so that its first 20 or so years were characterised by immense employee dissatisfaction. This, as we see, resulted in the kind of revolving door of staff that Willis had explicitly warned against, as dissatisfied civil servants fled British Malaya for greener pastures.

To gain a sense of how this started, we can begin by examining Carruthers' first annual report for the year 1905. Temporary offices and a laboratory had been offered by the Institute of Medical Research, but as Carruthers grumbled, their distance from Kuala Lumpur made it inevitable that they lost time every day. Simultaneously, the Department's awkward location also meant that planters were hindered from personally visiting these distant premises to obtain useful information. To illustrate the popularity of the Department, Carruthers went on to note that he had received up to 170 letters of enquiry for advice on agricultural and botanical issues in the past half year alone – indicating that with an average of at least one letter arriving each day, planters both within the FMS and outside it (as 35 letters had come from elsewhere) were desperate for some form of official direction. Each letter had to be furnished with a report, while those relating to plant diseases were personally investigated by Carruthers in both the field and laboratory. In light of having to do so on top of attending to various other official duties such as land applications, Carruthers further complained that

¹¹⁸ William Taylor, "Resident-General's Annual Report for the Year 1905," in *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1905, Cd.-3186* (London: Darling and Son, 1906), 8.

these investigations (the “most important part of the work of the department”) were in danger of being neglected. Given that Carruthers’ report had also opened with a description of how badly understaffed the Department was, this situation was hardly an unexpected development.¹¹⁹

The following year saw only more of the same complaints from Carruthers, as the Department still suffered from “lack of suitable quarters” and its work was “carried on under difficulties”. Necessary accommodation was nowhere to be found, while the offices of the Department were placed miles apart. As such, much scientific work “having an important practical bearing on the various agricultural industries of the Peninsula had to be either investigated cursorily or postponed.” “This,” commented Carruthers snidely, “was unavoidable”, as being the sole scientific worker, he had to investigate plant disease, chemistry, meteorology, and any number of the other routine duties that fell under the Director’s purview. A Government Chemist and Entomologist had been appointed during the second half of 1906, but being attached to the Institute for Medical Research, they did not have much time for Departmental work.¹²⁰

Carruthers was not alone in his complaints. Prior to the publication of this report, Willis had raised similar concerns with the new Director of the Kew Gardens, David Prain, as well. In anticipation of Prain receiving news about the FMS’ Department, Willis had written to him in July 1906 to make his own dissatisfactions known. As Willis was “the practical author” of the Department, he wished Prain to know that he disagreed with the FMS Government’s decision to have Carruthers share an entomologist and chemist with the Medical Institute. For Willis, this was a “great mistake”, as these men would “never do good agric. [sic] work if they belong to another dept.” and were “not in proper touch with agric. [sic] matters”. After all, claimed Willis, it was “not in human nature to do your best work for someone else.”¹²¹

These unfortunate circumstances did little to encourage any kind of loyalty on Carruthers’ part. In October 1906, Carruthers wrote to Prain to indicate that in recent conversations with Willis, the issue of one Daniel Morris’ imminent retirement from his post as Imperial

¹¹⁹ J.B. Carruthers, *Report of Department of Agriculture for the Year 1905*, 1. MR 330.

¹²⁰ J.B. Carruthers, *Report of the Director of Agriculture for the Year 1906* (Kuala Lumpur: FMS Government Printing Office, 1907), 1. *Ibid.*

¹²¹ J.C. Willis to Sir David Prain. Letter, 12 July 1906. *Directors’ Correspondence 164/95-96*.

Commissioner at the West Indian Agricultural Department had come up. Given that a successor was to be appointed, Carruthers wondered if Prain could let him know whether he thought Carruthers “should take any steps” to have his name considered as a candidate. While “not anxious to leave Malaya especially when ... starting what ... will be a strong and useful Dept”, Carruthers admitted that “apart from salary”, the West Indies offered other benefits such as a better climate and being closer to home. Also, unless he received better pay in the FMS, Carruthers did not expect “anything but a meagre pension.”¹²² In this case, the FMS Government’s frugality in salaries was starting to have real consequences.

By 1908, little had changed for the better. In May, Carruthers reminded Prain that he was still interested in Morris’ post and although he thought Malaya had “a great future agriculturally”, he was aware that a fresh man might be able to get the Government to “staff and equip the department better”. They had provided excellent laboratories, but there was no one to work them except for Carruthers himself. To make matters worse, Carruthers’ application to visit Trinidad had also been declined by Governor John Anderson, leading him to muse with some frustration that he was unable to persuade the Government of his needs “neither departmentally or personally”.¹²³

The following month, Carruthers was disappointed to report that Anderson had gone on to reject his application to attend a rubber exhibition in London as well, despite the committee in charge of home conferences and local planters requesting that he be sent as commissioner to manage the Malayan exhibit. This, speculated Carruthers, was probably due to the authorities assuming that he had made the suggestions himself – an unusually petty response if so, as Carruthers had been hoping to learn new techniques and update himself on rubber research at the exhibition. The Chairman of the Planters’ Association of Malaya had even sent a private letter to Anderson, expressing fears that the Malayan rubber exhibit might not come together without Carruthers, but knowing Anderson, Carruthers thought him unlikely to care. Somewhat defeated, Carruthers noted that he had not expected to be allowed to go home anyway, on account of his constant requests for the chemist and entomologist to be connected to the Department.

¹²² J.B. Carruthers to Sir David Prain. Letter, 4 October 1906. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/253-258.

¹²³ J.B. Carruthers to Sir David Prain. Letter, 7 May 1908. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/259-260.

More worrying, however, was the fact that “incalculable harm” was currently being done by white ants to rubber, but nothing could be done at the moment as the entomologist was too busy studying ticks to pay it any attention. Meanwhile, though Carruthers had work for the chemist as well, he could not perform it with the current means and was described as becoming increasingly irritated by Carruthers' constant reminders.¹²⁴ The month of November saw only more rejections, as Anderson also went on to decline Carruthers' request for home leave. Having met with Anderson, Carruthers opined to Prain that he did “not seem ... to be fully aware of the use of a well equipped agricultural department”, which did not make him regret leaving the FMS when it undervalued him so much. Indeed, Carruthers had already been making plans for his escape at this point, as he had been collecting references from different authorities in anticipation of applying for Morris' now-vacated job in the West Indies.¹²⁵

By January 1909, the process was complete and Carruthers wrote to Prain to inform him of his new role in Trinidad. Though sad to leave, Carruthers asserted that three and a half years of fighting the FMS Government to establish the Department was quite enough. Two requests for his salary to be increased to equal footing with other departments such as Forests and Education were not granted, leading Carruthers to think that “the authorities do not wish to have a strong representative dept.” One might even detect a hint of incredulity as Carruthers compared the FMS with Trinidad. At just 1/16th of the size of FMS (which recently had a surplus of £4 million, noted Carruthers), Trinidad could nevertheless afford to pay him £200 more at the lower ranking post of Assistant Director. To add insult to injury, Carruthers also thought that the Government did not care enough to persuade him to stay.¹²⁶ One of Carruthers' final letters from the FMS thus reiterated how much of a pity it was, that despite progress in obtaining new resources and staff, local authorities did not appreciate what a scientific department could do.¹²⁷

To some extent, Anderson himself seemed to recognise that neither the Government, nor the Department could cope with what was required of it. Rather than fix the existing problems, however, his solution was to foist the burden onto the planters themselves instead. Opening

¹²⁴ J.B. Carruthers to Sir David Prain. Letter, 11 June, 1908. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/261-262.

¹²⁵ J.B. Carruthers to Sir David Prain. Letter, 16 November 1908. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/263-264.

¹²⁶ J.B. Carruthers to Sir David Prain. Letter, 21 January 1909. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/265-266.

¹²⁷ J.B. Carruthers to Sir David Prain. Letter, 17 February 1909. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/267-269.

the Agri-Horticultural Show in 1909, he thought the future of the rubber industry to be in “grave peril” if all observation work for planting were to be left to the FMS scientific observers. As such, he recommended that every large district be provided with an “independent scientific observer who can co-operate with those employed by Government” – this grand scheme being funded from the handsome dividends of the Planters' Association of Malaya (PAM).¹²⁸ As the umbrella organisation that encompassed most Malayan planting organisations, the PAM was effectively one the loudest and largest representatives of single planter-proprietors.¹²⁹

In a meeting held a few days later, the PAM Chairman argued that since planters were already paying millions of dollars in rubber duties and were also spending “a very large amount of money” in preventative measures against pests, it was the Government's duty to “found a proper agricultural department with properly equipped staff.”¹³⁰ Simply put, the Government was kindly requested to do their own job, rather than have the planters do it for them. Further meetings thereby saw the PAM vote that the Government be asked to give Department officers the power to deal with unreported outbreaks of plant disease, and that a PAM deputation be sent to visit Anderson, so as to request an immediate increase in Department staff.¹³¹

One W.J. Gallagher stepped into the Directorship position after Carruthers' exit, but his term was even shorter than Carruthers', as Gallagher left after just one year due to disagreements over salary. Describing his exit to Prain in June 1910, Ridley noted that Gallagher had met with Anderson to ask for an increase of his £800 salary to £900, this eventually rising to £1200. Anderson initially agreed, but after Gallagher left, no more was heard of this agreement. Having come to the East “to make money or do original research”, Gallagher promptly quit the FMS after being denied both.¹³² By 1918, only 19 out of 27 vacancies in the Department had been filled, there being “little immediate prospect of securing trained

¹²⁸ “Agri-Horticultural Show 1909: His Excellency the Governor Sir John Anderson, G.C.M.G. Optimistic on Rubber in the FMS. Important speech at Penang,” *Agricultural Bulletin of the Straits and Federated Malay States New Series*, 8 (1910): 453-454.

¹²⁹ Tate, *The RGA History*, 261.

¹³⁰ “Planters Association of Malaya: Minutes of a Meeting of the Planters' Association of Malaya, August 15 1909,” in *Agricultural Bulletin of the Straits and Federated Malay States New Series*, 8 (1910): 477.

¹³¹ “Minutes of Meeting of the Planters Association of Malaya, October 31 1909,” *Agricultural Bulletin of the Straits and Federated Malay States New Series*, 8 (1910): 577-578.

¹³² H.N. Ridley to Sir David Prain. Letter, 24 June 1910. *Directors' Correspondence* 168/179-180.

men” for them.¹³³

This frustrating back and forth continued over the next few years, as even though staffing and facilities were increased, planters still thought that the Department should be doing more work, or at least doing it better. Some PAM members, for instance, complained in 1915 that since £28 million had been invested in the FMS rubber industry, “it was just about time” the Department, being in “every way well equipped, should make an effort of making itself useful to the industry.”¹³⁴ Meanwhile, others indicated that the Department’s lectures were too focused on being “highly scientific” and should instead “emphasize more points of common practice.”¹³⁵ The Rubber Growers Association (RGA), which was based in London and represented merchant agency houses that had multinational interests, similarly thought the situation was bad enough to warrant filing a formal complaint about the Department.¹³⁶

Lawrence Lewton-Brain, who succeeded Gallagher as Director, managed to last until 1921, but even this long-desired permanence was dogged by incompetence. Ridley noted that Lewton-Brain only worked from the hours of 9am to 1pm, while Arnold Sharples, a mycologist with the Department at that time, similarly complained that the Director “suffers from constitutional laziness – he is about the limit ... it is impossible to move him except by threat.”¹³⁷ Lewton-Brain was the last Director the Department would ever see, as in 1922, the post was abolished and replaced with a Secretary for Agriculture who oversaw both the Straits Settlements and FMS. Lewton-Brain was retained as a Technical advisor, but unfortunately died “suddenly from malignant malaria” soon after.¹³⁸

Conclusion

While scholars such as Richard Drayton have asserted that it was through rubber that the “co-operation of botanists and colonial officials produced prosperity, and professional benefits for each other”, this chapter has demonstrated that the case of the FMS Department of

¹³³ L. Lewton-Brain, “Report of the Director of Agriculture for the Year 1918,” 2. *CO 576/18*.

¹³⁴ “Minutes of Meeting of Planters' Association of Malaya, 30th June 1915,” *The Agricultural Bulletin of the Federated Malay States* 3, no.9 (June 1915): 355.

¹³⁵ “Minutes of Meeting of the Planters' Association of Malaya, November 29th 1915,” *The Agricultural Bulletin of the Federated Malay States* 4, no.2 (November 1915): 90.

¹³⁶ Tate, *The RGA History*, quoted in Footnote 16, 398.

¹³⁷ H.N. Ridley, Malay Peninsula, 71. *HNR 4/11*; Arnold Sharples to Sir Arthur William Hill. Letter, 22 January 1920. *Directors' Correspondence 149/238a-240*.

¹³⁸ A.S. Haynes. “Report of the Secretary for Agriculture, Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, for the Year 1922,” 8 April 1923. *CO 576/25*.

Agriculture suggests otherwise.¹³⁹ In the FMS, at least, the rubber industry was unaccompanied by such sanguine relationships between scientists and administrators. Yet, rubber still boomed. From the golden period of 1909-1912, rubber companies were paying dividends of up to 375%, while in a period of five years, the number of rubber estates increased from 417 in 1908 to 1,151 in 1913.¹⁴⁰ Difficulties with systemisation notwithstanding, private planters and agency houses clearly still managed to function without a Department to oversee things – though as seen, many were unhappy about having to do so.

As Colin Barlow has speculated, Malayan planters who were expecting “much of government” neglected to conduct private research at the same level as their counterparts in the Dutch East Indies, who had the enviable benefit of functional agricultural departments.¹⁴¹ This, however, is not to say that Malayan planters did not at least try to organise their own private research. Though lying beyond the purview of this chapter, it is apt to briefly note that the PAM and RGA, obviously frustrated with the Department, attempted to systematise their own research attempts. Unfortunately, these were similarly hampered by inefficiency and internal squabbles. In 1909, for instance, the PAM declined to assist the RGA in publicising its scheme to conduct commercial experiments outside of the Department’s current attempts.¹⁴² Further attempts to have the Department and the RGA collaborate also initially came to a standstill, as both thought it unfeasible. When pressed to explain why, no concrete reason was given.¹⁴³

The RGA eventually set up its own London-based Board of Rubber Research in 1917, while the PAM, unhappy with a scheme so distant from Malaya, retaliated by suggesting the Department grow to encompass the entirety of Malaya instead. Department Director Lewton-Brain, in turn, supported the prospect of a larger Department, but preferred it to be FMS-centric. A mediator was eventually brought in via the form of Dr. E.J. Butler, Government Mycologist for India, so that this new administrative mess could be sorted out. Taking the middle ground, Butler’s *Memorandum on Rubber Research in Malaya* recommended establishing a local Rubber Research Board, while the Department, now with a Secretary at

¹³⁹ Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 249.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*, 246-249.

¹⁴¹ Barlow, “Indonesian and Malayan Agricultural Development,” 100.

¹⁴² Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya*, 90-91.

¹⁴³ Tate, *The RGA History*, 392.

its head instead of a Director, was to oversee over both the FMS and Straits Settlements¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, this is not to say that the FMS Government completely ignored rubber. As D.J.M. Tate posits, the FMS was in the midst of rapid economic expansion during this time and its government faced the dilemma of how to best utilise its funds, so that this happy scene of productivity could continue. Ultimately, the FMS Government chose to prioritise infrastructure improvement instead, particularly that of railways.¹⁴⁵ This was a strategic choice in many regards, as even though these transport networks and facilities were initially meant to transport tin to the coastal ports and not created solely for agriculture's sake, they could also serve as a means for agricultural expansion. The opening of estates was thus largely dictated by these pre-existing railway lines, leading to a larger focus on the western coast of the Peninsula.¹⁴⁶ Such fortunate overlaps in infrastructure were accompanied by more directed forms of Government intervention, as planters were assisted with procuring plantation labour, planting land, and monetary loans.¹⁴⁷

The existence of such practical assistance notwithstanding, I have argued that looking at colonial attempts to systematise planting via a FMS Department of Agriculture reveals the extent of how unstable and almost ad-hoc the whole situation truly was. In particular, I asserted that within this atmosphere of rapid change and enormous economic opportunity, the FMS Government's response was not to systemise and administer its rubber industry in a clear, decisive manner. Rather, efforts attempting to establish and run the Department were plagued by a lack of direction, or even care. Instead of combining forces to make the most of the rubber boom, the Government and Department spent most of these years locked in an unhappy cycle of disinterest and dissatisfaction. Fuelled by the success of rubber, each wanted something completely different from the other, this messy situation made no easier by how their individual desires also occasionally changed on a whim. The ongoing influence of various personalities and individuals, too, contributed to the incoherence of this situation.

The Government's attitude towards systemising agriculture might not have affected the rubber industry in any extreme way, but as has been demonstrated, this situation evidences a

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 392-393.

¹⁴⁵ Tate, *The RGA History*, 387.

¹⁴⁶ Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*, 236.

¹⁴⁷ Drabble, "The plantation rubber industry in Malaya up to 1922," 54.

sense of disorder towards how rubber should be integrated into the colony, and how British administration should respond to it. Practical assistance was one thing, while institutional and scientific support was clearly another. Indeed, from its very inception, the Department's founding had been contingent on planters agitating for such an institution and not a product of Government initiative. Subsequently, the process of setting the Department up was hardly better, as different sources of expertise contended with the Government's own direction and sources of influence. Later still, the actual running of the Department was marred with great unhappiness from its staff due to underfunding and interdepartmental disagreements, resulting in an institution that struggled to retain enough personnel to run it.

Underpinning and to some extent, enabling much of this, were also the ever-present networks of imperial science that existed within the broader circuit-board of the British Empire.

Colonists in British Malaya used these linkages for inspiration, correspondence, and expertise, as officials constantly sent letters seeking or sharing valuable information. In this manner, the FMS was connected to places as close by as Singapore and as distant as Ceylon or the West Indies, these horizontal bonds criss-crossing with those that linked the colony back to London. Entrenched within and involved with these connections, British Malaya was consequently exposed to a chorus of different opinions. Yet, when faced with these, the responses of colonial administrators ranged from detachment and stubbornness to outright disdain. The integration of the FMS into these networks of imperial science thus managed to both foreground and facilitate the incoherence of British Malaya's colonial administration.

In the final chapter, we will turn to examining how the presence of multiple colonial projects once again led to a sense of disorder, this time within the context of the Malay Agricultural Settlement and Reservations.

Chapter 5:

Controlling land, culture, and identity in the Malay Agricultural Settlement and Reservations, 1899-1920s

The tale of Raja Muhammad Saleh goes a little something like this: for five years, the young Malay prince Saleh (or Sally, to his English friends) was brought up in England in the English way. There, his Malayness was gradually buried, being replaced instead with all things foreign and subsequently fulfilling, for a while, that “beautiful theory” – the belief that a presumably higher standard of civilisation could only be a form of blessing and happiness to those privileged enough to encounter it.¹ With time, Saleh came to speak the English language, learn English history, and think English thoughts, so much so that his “denationalisation” was eventually complete.²

Upon leaving Malaya, Saleh had felt himself “to be a thing of torn and bleeding roots, plucked wantonly from the soil in which they have won a hold.”³ Yet, replanted as he was in a foreign land, Saleh’s Malayness was never truly gone. After five years abroad, he still found himself drawn to the leafy, green expanse of Richmond Park as he was “forest-bred” and sought the “freedom of the jungle”, which was considered his birthright. Richmond Park paled in comparison to the “magnificent, untouched forests of Malaya,” but under the great oaks and elms, Saleh was consoled to find “a sense of companionship and peace” that could distract him from the busyness of London life.⁴ England might have given him the outward sheen of an Englishman, but Malaya and her lands were still in Saleh’s blood and bones, never allowing him to fully cleave from his Malay self.

Embittered by the growing realisation that he could never bridge such an insurmountable racial divide, Saleh sailed home to Malaya during his fifth year.⁵ Nevertheless, the questions that had driven him from England continued to haunt him even there. Who had he been? A Malay prince, transplanted. Who was he now? An Englishman, but never enough of one. And

¹ Hugh Clifford, *Sally: A Study and Other Tales of the Outskirts* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1904), 40.

² Ibid, 39.

³ Ibid, 19.

⁴ Ibid, 47.

⁵ Hugh Clifford, *Saleh: A Sequel* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1908), 22-29.

more puzzlingly, who should he be? Perhaps being replanted in Malayan soil might tell him. Steaming upriver through his home country, it would have been a relief for Saleh to see that the landscape of his home, that “unchanging, seemingly inviolate” place, remained as it always had been. Nonetheless, this was nothing but an illusion. Coming up fast ahead was the town of Kuala Pekara, the sight of which only rendered Saleh astonished:

[T]here ... there was nothing to show that Kuala Pekara was a town of Malaya! The bungalows and the great Government buildings were designed by Europeans ... the shops were Chinese or Indian; everywhere the Malay, the native of the country, had been quietly eliminated, forced out of existence by superior energy, superior ability to compete successfully in the struggle for wealth and power.⁶

Saleh had returned to Malaya seeking an identity, someplace that he could re-root himself and regrow in familiar soil. And yet, now that he was back, the unthinkable had happened in the face of progress: change. Malaya, her lands, and her people were all no longer the same.

With its themes of Malay identity, ties to land, and unchecked socioeconomic change, this fictional, mostly tragic, story of Saleh came from none other than the pen of Hugh Clifford, the Resident of Pahang and eventual Governor of the Straits Settlements. Clifford was one of British Malaya’s most prolific administrators and writers of fiction, though his friend, the author Joseph Conrad, thought that it was only fair that that one “cannot expect to be, at the same time, a ruler of men and an irreproachable player on the flute”.⁷ While the quality of his writing might be debatable, Clifford’s stories nevertheless remain an important source for examining contemporary colonial thought.⁸

Here, however, I use Saleh as an entry point to argue that British colonial beliefs about Malays positioned them as being inextricable from their land. To be removed from the land

⁶ Clifford, *Saleh: A Sequel*, 168.

⁷ Quoted in Linda Dryden, “Conrad And Hugh Clifford: An “Irreproachable Player On The Flute” And “A Ruler Of Men”,” *The Conradian* 23, no.1 (1998): 51.

⁸ See, for instance: P.C. Wicks, “Images of Malaya in the Stories of Sir Hugh Clifford,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52, no.1 (1979): 57-72; Hye Ryoung Kil, “Science, Commerce, and Imperial Expansion in British Travel Literature: Hugh Clifford's and Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction,” *English Language and Literature* 57, no.6 (2011): 1151-1171; Robert Hampson, “Hugh Clifford in Malaya,” in *Writing, Travel, and Empire: In the Margins of Anthropology*, eds. Peter Hulme and Russell McDougall (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 147-168.

and its associated traditions was to ‘lose’ one’s identity, just as being back on a seemingly inviolate version of it was to ‘find’ your true self again. In this manner, Saleh embodied colonial anxieties about the effects of increased socioeconomic development on both Malaya’s land and her people. If digging mines, raising plantations, and establishing urban centres changed Malaya’s physical landscapes, what did that mean for the Malays who supposedly had a special connection with their land? Could change be prevented if Malays were insulated from such developments? As will be explored, administrators used colonial frameworks of knowledge to grapple with these questions, thereby resulting in policies of land-use that rested upon presumed understandings about the unique relationship between Malays and land.

Writing on Clifford’s literary works, Philip Holden has asserted that these texts clearly connected colonial governance with textual authority, as Clifford’s writings had intended to depict and engage with Malay culture, so as to ‘regenerate it’.⁹ In Clifford’s view, the colonial government was to help Malays better themselves by awakening them to this regeneration and guiding them towards ‘improvement’.¹⁰ Correspondingly, we find that Saleh was ‘improved’ once he settled in the fictional, rural town of Bandar Bharu. There, he

breathed more freely when he found himself once more among the sleepy, sun-steeped villages, the spreading rice-fields, yielding full crops in return for a minimum of expended energy, the broad grazing-grounds over which buffaloes and peasants wandered with much the same indolent content ... This ... was his native land, his proper, his natural environment.

Saleh himself might have been a fictional character, but as this chapter shows, the fears and aspirations that he represented were very real to the British in Malaya. The presence of multiple colonial projects – be they in the form of economic development, or social preservation – meant that British administrators were faced with contradictory directions. Racial beliefs also meant that Malays had to be helped so that they might better themselves on their own accord, while examples such as Saleh reinforced the presumed connection between

⁹ Philip Holden, *Modern Subjects/Colonial Texts: Hugh Clifford and the Discipline of English Literature in the Straits Settlements and Malaya 1895-1907* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 2000), 4, 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

Malays and their land.

With reference to the themes of colonial dysfunction, misconception, and improvisation which have been explored in the preceding chapters, here I investigate the unhappy results of combining all these aspects. Despite having established the FMS as a fairly secure node on the circuit-board of Empire for years at this point, British administrators had yet to properly figure out how it should function. Consequently, I examine writings on the Malay Agricultural Settlement (MAS) and Reservations to argue that these early twentieth-century policies stemmed from misinformed attempts to address long-standing British administrative haphazardness over how Malaya should be developed as a colony. Similar to Chapter 3, here I will be exploring the incoherencies that existed within the nodal point itself.

The MAS was established in 1899, which was then followed by the passing of the Malay Reservations Enactment in 1913. Aimed particularly at Malays, these policies served two broad purposes: first, to protect traditional Malay peasantry from the feared ill-effects of encroaching socioeconomic development, and second, to preserve what the British imagined to be their ‘traditional’, rural way of life. As I assert, the motivations behind these decisions were rooted in interconnected anxieties about the changes that colonial economic development had wrought upon Malay culture, land, and local demographics. These anxieties, in turn, were underpinned by British constructs of Malayness and its presumed connection to villages, or rural environments. Issues relating to land-use – be they who should occupy and transform it, or how – thus become prisms through which we can read broader colonial concerns relating to socio-political change brought on by economic development.

Malay yeomen in their *kampungs*

From the late-nineteenth century onwards, crops such as sugar, coffee, and eventually rubber came to increasingly dominate economic interests within the plantation sector. This was by and large a welcome development for the British colonial government which stood to gain increased revenue, especially in the wake of the early twentieth-century rubber boom. As this thesis has shown, administrators had long heralded the coming of a time when the Malay Peninsula’s agricultural advantages would come to fruition, but it was only with the overwhelming success of rubber that this much-awaited age finally arrived. By 1908, the same year that *Saleh: A Sequel* was published, the Director of Agriculture for the Federated Malay States (FMS) reported that rubber acreage had surpassed all other plantation crops

combined, these including coconuts, coffee, and tapioca.¹¹ Rubber had consequently become “the most important form of cultivation in these states”, with investments in that industry described as soon surpassing “any previous boom known of” in that generation.¹²

Yet, all was not well. Despite the flourishing rubber industry, colonial administrators found themselves hard-pressed to reconcile the economic success of plantation agriculture with its perceived detrimental social effects, especially on Malay peasantry. The problem was thus two-fold: on the one hand, the British were dependent on large-scale plantation agriculture for continuing economic development and desired these plantations to maintain a monopoly of the market, lest peasants affect export prices.¹³ On the other, colonial administrators were also somewhat wary of such increasing, unchecked expansion, as the economic lures of the plantation economy seemed to herald a death knell for the ‘traditional’ life of local Malay peasants, on whom they depended for social stability in the colony. If Malayness was considered inextricable from rural settlement, it only stood to reason that the British were obliged as colonial administrators to keep them in their villages and far away from the effects of economic development.

To further investigate how administrators interweaved their understandings of Malayness and land into their governing practices, this chapter engages with Bernard Cohn’s work on colonial knowledge as a form of power and control. Coining the term “investigative modalities” – or, methods of collecting, defining, and disseminating information –, Cohn argues that these were key in ensuring that governing bodies remained in power. Colonial authorities used these modalities to frame foreign environments, peoples, and objects through the lens of their own understanding, which then allowed them to better transmit this knowledge into different aspects of colonial governance. By controlling reports, histories, laws, and other forms of knowing, Cohn asserts that colonists were able to lay claim onto both physical and epistemological spaces, thereby cementing their rule.¹⁴

¹¹ Report of the Resident General of the Federated Malay States for 1908, *Cd.*–4722 (London: Darling and Son, 1909), 9;

¹² Annual Report Selangor Chamber of Commerce, 1910, 6. Quoted in J.H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973), 63.

¹³ Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 94; Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, “The development of the underdevelopment of the Malaysian peasantry,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 9, no.4 (1979): 440.

¹⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3-5.

Deploying Cohn's insights in this chapter, I argue that paternalistic assumptions about Malay peasantry were central to maintaining colonial control over land-use and economic participation. Stereotypes of Malays as less capable than other races justified British "protection" from the negative effects of economic development, while the belief that Malays were best kept confined to village life, be it due to their traditions or suitability as the only permanent food-producers in British Malaya, served to reinforce policies that excluded them from plantation agriculture.¹⁵ In translating these understandings into tangible policies such as the MAS and Malay Reservation land enactments, the British intended to balance the effects of economic development with sociocultural preservation.¹⁶

By interrogating the role of colonial knowledge in policies of land-use, this chapter seeks to further complicate historical understandings of the complex relationship between colonial administrators, economic development, and the roles of Malay peasantry. To do so, I also draw on and extend the work of historical anthropologist Donald Nonini on Malay peasant resistance, wherein he demonstrates the dialectical relationship between colonial administrators and the peasants they sought to control. As Nonini asserts, although it is certainly inarguable that the conflicts between these two parties were primarily fuelled by capitalist interests, it would be remiss to assume that these were the only motivations.¹⁷ Looking specifically at the role of colonial administrators, Nonini uses the example of Malay Reservations to contend that the motivations of the colonial state went beyond simple capitalist desires to exploit the rural peasant class. By creating these Reservations, administrators were also appealing to their own sense of nostalgia for an "ideal feudal past".¹⁸ This sentiment in turn transformed Malay peasants into what Paul Kratoska describes as the "sturdy yeomanry", a class which the British hoped would shoulder the virtues and morals of the colony.¹⁹

¹⁵ Paul H. Kratoska, *The Chettiar and the Yeoman: British Cultural Categories and Rural Indebtedness in Malaya. Occasional Paper No.32* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), 7-8; J.H. Drabble, "Some thoughts on the economic development of Malaya under British administration," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no.2 (1974): 207.

¹⁶ Though not the point of this chapter, it is worth reinforcing that Malays also had their own historical agency when it came to forming their own categories of knowledge. See: Sandra Khor Manickam, "Common ground: Race and the colonial universe in British Malaya," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no.3 (2009): 593-612; Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006); Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Donald M. Nonini, *British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900-1957* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, 1992), 161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kratoska, *The Chettiar and the Yeoman*, 5.

Notably, these ideas were also replicated and imposed by British officials in settler colonies such as Western Australia and New Zealand – though slightly earlier than in the case of the Malay States.²⁰ As previously noted in Chapter 3, David Cannadine has argued that British colonists often superimposed a common social vision of ‘merrie old England’ onto their respective colonies. Society was thus imagined and crafted to be “paternalistic, hierarchical, and rural”, socially stratified in the manner of British landed estates.²¹ Hugh Clifford himself had fittingly even come from such a background and was supposedly so impressed with his family’s seat of Ugbrooke Park in Devon that he sought to imitate similar social structures in the colonies he administered, these being places such as Ceylon (1907-1912, 1925-1927), Nigeria (1919-1925) and of course, the FMS (1883-1903, 1927-1929).²² Buoyed by these romantic ideas, it would have seemed to colonists such as Clifford that the versions of these feudalistic structures abroad, still unchanged by rapid industrial development, were even superior to the waning ones back at home.²³ Consequently, administrative ideas about land, peasants, and the need to protect both in British Malaya were influenced by the situation in other colonies, and that of the metropole as well.

These dreams of a feudal society notwithstanding, such motivations were supplemented by the fact that colonial officials did not always maintain complete control over their policies. Recalling the situation in Chapter 4 where the systemisation of plantation agriculture was stymied by inter-departmental animosity, Nonini similarly argues for the presence of what he calls “systemic limits”. Writing in the context of capitalist accumulation by Malay peasants in the face of colonial intervention, Nonini asserts that administrators sometimes had “interests and commitments ... tangential to the requirements of colonial capitalism”. The power wielded by the colonial state was limited, too, as well as being “reactive rather than initiatory”.²⁴ As such, these systemic limits functioned as roadblocks of sorts, hindering colonial intents and strategies.

²⁰ See: Chapter 3 “The ‘yeoman farmer’ and the quest for Arcady,” in J.M. Powell, *Mirrors of the New World: Images and Image-Makers in the Settlement Process* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978), 49-83; Matthew Tonts, “State Policy and the Yeoman Ideal: Agricultural development in Western Australia, 1890-1914,” *Landscape Research* 27, no.1 (2002): 103-115.

²¹ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 66.

²² Ibid; A.J. Stockwell, “Sir Hugh Clifford's Early Career (1866-1903) as told from his private papers,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 49, no.1 (1976): 90; A.J. Stockwell, “Sir Hugh Clifford in Malaya, 1927-9 “Pinang pulang ka-tampok”,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52, no.2 (1980): 57.

²³ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 67.

²⁴ Nonini, *British Colonial Rule*, 162.

While Nonini is more interested in analysing the many antagonisms of these complex interactions within a Marxist framework, this chapter focuses instead on the ways in which colonial administrators processed the tensions behind these “systemic limits”. In particular, it addresses how administrators worked through the apparently incompatible desires of economic development and socio-cultural preservation, the intersection of which lay at the site of Malaya’s environment. To do so, I examine the ways in which British administrators perceived Malay identity as intimately tied to land and rural villages, so as to justify implementing policies associated with the Malay Agricultural Settlement and Malay Reservations.

To do so, the following section first addresses the constructions of “Malay” and situates them in their various socio-political and economic contexts. Following that, I examine the Malay Agricultural Settlement in Kuala Lumpur to investigate how colonial officials not only drew from inaccurate assumptions about Malayness and land, but also operated in a haphazard state, as they tried to establish a traditional Malay *kampung* (village) in the midst of an urban, cosmopolitan centre. This then segues into a discussion on Malay Reservations, which similarly drew on simplistic understandings about Malayness. Misconceptions in both cases led to administrators having to legislate cultivation policies, so as to ensure peasants acted in peasant-like ways. The planting of rubber in Reservations and *padi* (rice) in the Agricultural Settlement are of particular focus here, these serving to demonstrate the combined effects of incorrect investigative modalities and bureaucratic incoherence. Covering the period between 1899 to the 1920s, this chapter draws most of its archival material from the Selangor State Secretariat Files.

A Malay, by any other name

To begin examining how the British constructed colonial notions of Malayness and its associated traits, it is useful to first acknowledge that the terms ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’ are themselves historically complex descriptors. Tracing the history of the term ‘Malay’, Anthony Reid asserts that it was initially used as a geographical descriptor before various groups appropriated it as a sociocultural label.²⁵ Expanding on this, Leonard Andaya explains that kingdoms on both sides of the Straits of Melaka tried to assert their position as the centre of

²⁵ Anthony Reid, “Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no.3 (2001): 297.

Malayness through the creation of rival texts. Though Melaka lay claim to cultural dominance via the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy/Descent of Kings) during the fifteenth century and attempted to place the Peninsula at the centre of Malay world, other kingdoms such as Johor, Minangkabau, and Siak contested this claim with texts of their own.²⁶

Subsequently, Malayness during the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries was associated with two ideas: a royal genealogy claiming descent from the kingdoms of Srivijaya and Melaka, or Pagarruyung; and a diaspora that continued on the traditions of Melaka. The latter was able to be assumed by anyone regardless of ethnic background, but as per Reid, it nonetheless gradually developed into the creation of ‘Malay’ as a “distinct ethnîe”. Meanwhile, Dutch records during the 1600s to 1700s used the term ‘Malay’ in ways that indicated a level of fluidity that was congruent with the diasporic elements of Malayness, as ethnic labels were taken up and discarded in accordance with trade patterns.²⁷

This in turn leads us to British conceptions of ‘Malay’, the resonance and implications of which stretched far into the colonial process. Writing his *History of Sumatra* in 1784, William Marsden asserted that Malays originated from the Peninsula, thereby helping to crystallise colonial notions about Malayness as being inextricable from what would eventually become the territories of British Malaya. Hence, it is due to Marsden’s text that we have the ‘Malay Peninsula’ and its translation as *Tanah Melayu*, or ‘the land of the Malays’.²⁸ Perhaps even more important than Marsden’s contribution, however, was that of Thomas Raffles, who is most well-known in this region for founding the colony of Singapore in 1819. Reid thus argues that Raffles was central to creating the notion of a Malay nation, as the latter wrote in 1818 that he “cannot but consider the Malayu nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, and preserving their character and customs.”²⁹

Given the popularity of social classification in Western Europe during the nineteenth century and the use of ‘race’ as an organisational category for mapping humankind/societies, Anthony Milner reads Raffles’ statement not as a mere descriptor, but as a proposal for “a formulation,

²⁶ Leonard Andaya, “The Search for the ‘Origins’ of Melayu,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no.3 (2001): 327-328.

²⁷ Reid, “Understanding Melayu,” 301-302.

²⁸ Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, “A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of ‘Malayness’ in Malaysia Reconsidered,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no.3 (2001): 363.

²⁹ Thomas Raffles, “On the Malayu Nation, with a Translation of its Maritime Institutions,” *Asiatic Researches* 12 (1818): 103. Quoted in Reid, “Understanding Melayu,” 303.

a category” that contributed to these new ways of knowing.³⁰ Importantly, Raffles would also go on to name the previously mentioned *Sulalat al-Salatin* as *Sejarah Melayu* (the Malay Annals) in 1821, thereby transforming what had earlier been a description of royal genealogy and court practices into the history of the Malay people.³¹ The first step towards epistemological control was thus somewhat complete: the British had created a category of people, accorded them a history, and situated them as the original owners of the Peninsula.

Later, individuals such as the famed British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace would also attempt to foreground this distinction. For Wallace, the Malay race was “undoubtedly the most important ... as it is the one which is the most civilized, which has come most into contact with Europeans, and which alone has any place in history.” Correspondingly, the “Malays proper” lived on the Malay Peninsula and along the coasts of Borneo and Sumatra.³² This theorising was significant, as by the mid-nineteenth century, naturalists were beginning to immerse themselves in the study of ethnography. Scientific committees and journals were established to nurture this new field of assigning humanity into specific racial groupings based on historical or geographical factors, thereby lending a sheen of scientific legitimacy to such interpretations.³³ In this way, racial distinctions and characteristics could be seen as natural rather than invented, and inevitable rather than constantly in flux.

Colonial ideas about Malays continued to develop over time, these being modified in accordance with social, economic, and political changes. While early British officials in Malaya had been in the business of creating these racial categories, those in the early-twentieth century were more concerned about reinforcing and preserving them – both for the presumed sake of the Malays, and for the colonial administration itself. In 1906, scholar-administrator R.J. Wilkinson published the first pamphlet in what would eventually become a series entitled *Papers on Malay Subjects*. British cadets had initially used these works as study materials when seeking to study for (and hopefully pass) their Malay examinations, but this was no mere textbook. Instead, Wilkinson’s intense focus on preserving information about the Malays and their culture formed part of a broader shift in how British officials were

³⁰ Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 119.

³¹ Reid, “Understanding Melayu,” 303.

³² Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The land of the orang-utan and the bird of paradise. A narrative of travel, with studies of man and nature* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1877), 582.

³³ Jeremy Vetter, “Wallace’s Other Line: Human Biogeography and Field Practice in the Eastern Colonial Tropics,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 39, no.1 (2006): 93-94.

now approaching Malay welfare.³⁴

Despite some early officials believing that they were truly acting out of concern for the Malay race, the first generation of officials in British Malaya were ultimately still more interested in the “problems of establishing and sustaining British authority”.³⁵ In contrast to this was the second generation of officials, which was generally comprised of younger men. With British rule having been established in the Malay States for almost thirty years at this point, these individuals had the opportunity to contemplate the consequences of a more prolonged colonial intervention. It was thus out of these reflections that a small cadre eventually emerged, championing what one contemporary official deemed the “pro-Malay campaign”.³⁶

By the early-twentieth century, British rule had already taken a firm hold across the FMS. In establishing such strong sociocultural roots, Hendrik Maier notes that this system was fuelled not by “enlightened considerations of free trade” or even “intolerant mediations and arrogant aloofness”.³⁷ Instead, it relied on the deep-seated belief that only British intervention could revive Malay culture, which had become static. Malay communities were seen as becoming unbalanced and disorientated in the face of rapid socioeconomic change, the British reading these effects as a form of social decay that demanded their help. Hence, it was not enough to render material assistance; Malay identity, too, needed to be nurtured.³⁸ This identity, in turn, hinged on intimate ties to land and rural environments. In light of the rapid socioeconomic change that threatened to oust Malays from their ‘natural’ state, British policy was thus deemed too narrow, too dependent on the indiscriminate opening of mines and plantations, and most importantly, too inadequate if they wanted to protect and preserve Malay institutions and culture. “Mere exploitation”, as Wilkinson argued in 1906, was not enough.³⁹

Meanwhile, we can also see how Bernard Cohn's investigative modalities might have been at play here – particularly that of the historiographic variety. Writing in the context of British India, Cohn saw the historiographic modality as “the most complex, pervasive, and powerful,

³⁴ R.J. Wilkinson and P.L. Burns, *Papers on Malay subjects: Selected and introduced by P.L. Burns* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Hendrik M.J. Maier, *In the Center of Authority: The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988), 54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Wilkinson and Burns, *Papers on Malay subjects*, 3.

underlying a number of the other more specific modalities”. Cohn then went on to identify three ways in which the British colonial state harnessed the “ontological power” of history in order to assert control. First, British administrators collected local knowledge to codify into understandings of land tenure, resulting in the formation of settlement reports. Secondly, British historical writers produced narratives of local history and civilisation that helped justify British intervention. And finally, the British also reconstructed their own actions through a British lens, so as to cast different parties in what they thought were the appropriate roles.⁴⁰

It is worth noting that in Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s work on the role of British colonial knowledge in forming Malaysian history, he has similarly argued for using Cohn’s historiographic modality as an organising framework when unpacking the discourses surrounding Malay identity, as has Paula Pannu. In particular, Baharuddin uses this to critique the reliance of Malaysian historiography on colonial forms of knowledge without problematising their terms and origins.⁴¹ Pannu, in contrast, examines how colonial knowledge was propagated via history books, census reports, and the education system, thereby helping to internalise these perceptions within Malay society.⁴²

Extending these contentions and shifting their focuses, however, I suggest that the historiographic modality is central to understanding how British officials arrived at their understandings of Malayness and the land, both of which underpinned colonial policies such as the Malay Agricultural Settlement and Reservations. As Adrian Vickers has argued, the British invented the notion of Malay tradition so as to make it a “legitimising function in the classic divide-and-rule scheme of British expansion”. Consequently, administrators had specific understandings and definitions of what ‘Malay’ meant, this being based on traditions that the British claimed to have knowledge of.⁴³

In defiance (and perhaps ignorance) of how ‘Malay’ was a fluid category with no clear-cut definitions, British amateur ethnologists settled on a few useful descriptors that cast Malays as

⁴⁰ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 5-6.

⁴¹ Baharuddin, “A History of an Identity,” 357-359.

⁴² Paula Pannu, “The Production and Transmission of Knowledge in Colonial Malaya,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37, no. 3 (2009): 427-451.

⁴³ Adrian Vickers, “‘Malay Identity’: Modernity, Invented Tradition, and Forms of Knowledge,” *RIMA* 31, no.1 (1997): 176

“brown-skinned peasant farmers who lived in wooden houses on stilts in rural areas and dressed in sarongs”. Malayness was also widely thought to orbit around “loyalty to a local sultan”, thereby reinforcing pre-colonial ‘feudalistic’ relationships.⁴⁴ While British intervention complicated the peasant–sultan relationship to some extent by imposing a colonial administration system alongside these traditional structures, officials still harboured hopes of making the Malays a part of the yeoman peasantry. Given the dependence of the trope on land as an organising principle, British visions of a stable, rural Malay populace went hand in hand with keeping them connected with their land. Casting Malays in this light and themselves as protectors for this traditional, agrarian culture, the British could thereby continue to justify their involvement in the Malay States.

In light of these discussions, however, it is important to reinforce that these modalities did not always manage to serve British interests. As I contend, many were in fact based on reductionist assumptions about lands and peoples, resulting in policies that did not work the way the British intended them to. To interrogate this further, the next section will examine the Malay Agricultural Settlement in Kuala Lumpur.

The Malay Agricultural Settlement

Its name notwithstanding, the original impetus for establishing the Malay Agricultural Settlement was not, in fact, solely for the promotion of Malay agriculture. Rather, one of the first mentions of the Settlement arises under the heading “Technical education” in the Selangor Administration Report for 1899. There, we find that it had been the “especial desire” of the colonial government to provide Malays the ability to learn the arts which they hold in high esteem and “thus, if possible, to assist in reviving and perpetuating industries which are not now, unfortunately, so generally preserved in as was the case in former years.”

To that end, 200 acres of land in the immediate neighbourhood of Kuala Lumpur, the urban centre of Selangor, was reserved for the “exclusive use of the Malay community” and termed the “Malay Agricultural Settlement”. The reserved land was to be divided into smaller lots, which would then be settled by “respectable Malays” who were willing to obey the rules that had been drawn up by the previous Resident of Selangor, Douglas Campbell, who was the

⁴⁴ Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 290.

orchestrator of this entire affair.⁴⁵ By 1900, 30 families had already settled on the reserve and there were plans to soon establish different kinds of “industrial education” under the tutelage of Malay teachers, this ranging from husbandry and silversmithing, to weaving, embroidery, mat-making, and other similar industries.⁴⁶

In the following year, the Acting Resident of Selangor Henry Belfield was happy to note that the aforementioned “respectable Malays” were already occupying 200 half-acre allotments in the Settlement, all of which had been or were being planted with “valuable fruit trees”.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Campbell’s own report on the Settlement, written in January 1901, similarly identified four main points which were kept in view when creating the Settlement, two of which are important for our purposes: first, the “desirability of collecting in one area an exclusively Malay population” and second, the promotion of “some agricultural teaching”. The creation of the Settlement itself had already met the first point, while Campbell thought the second could “only be attempted after the first has been fully attained and will probably be the most difficult to bring to a successful issue”.⁴⁸

These statements fed directly into British beliefs in the enduring myth of the lazy native.⁴⁹ As Campbell explained it, Malays were unable to work with non-Malay craftsmen due to both cultural differences and the fact that Malays did not live in areas where such craftsmen were located. This was evidently some cause for dissatisfaction, Campbell complaining that had these difficulties been faced “by a people anxious to learn or pushed by poverty,” they “would soon have been overcome and have disappeared”. In the case of the Malays, however, this was not the case. Echoing the sentiments of his predecessors in Chapter 3, Campbell asserted that British administrators had to

deal with a somewhat indolent people who can earn an easy living ...
and who are only just beginning to appreciate the benefits of an

⁴⁵ Though both Campbell and the *Raja Muda* (Crown Prince) of Selangor were thanked for their personal efforts in initiating and raising the settlement, it is quite probable that Campbell had taken the lead. Tellingly, the *Raja Muda* was described in the very same administrative report as having “always cordially co-operated with the British Resident, according his support to all measures proposed for the improvement and development of the State.” See: H. Conway Belfield, “Selangor Administration Report for the Year 1899,” in *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1899, Cd.-382* (London: Darling and Son, 1900), 38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁴⁷ H. Conway Belfield, “Selangor Administration Report for the Year 1900,” in *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1900, Cd.-815* (London: Darling and Son, 1901), 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ For more on this view, see previous discussions in Chapter 3.

education which will enable them to attain to a more comfortable and luxurious, if somewhat more restrained existence.⁵⁰

Given that one of Campbell's issues with the Malay population was its distance from craftsmen, there was clearly a practical purpose to having an exclusively Malay population in one area. This was, after all, a matter of logistics and effective organisation. Nonetheless, I also contend that when read in tandem with additional reports, administrative desires to have an exclusively ethnic Malay population dovetailed with colonial beliefs about how Malays were best suited to rural, village lifestyles. The problems faced by Malays were thought to be not particularly difficult, but due to what the British saw as inherent laziness in the face of cultural decline, it was up to the paternalist colonial state to ensure they could be taught their own traditions and settled in their 'natural' environments.

These paternalistic concerns were particularly pertinent in the wake of the four, formerly Siamese states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu in the north coming under British control in 1909, and the southern state of Johor formally agreeing to accepting a British Adviser in 1914.⁵¹ Together, these were known as the Unfederated Malay States. With these new regions now under British influence, this gave the British some opportunity to compare and contrast the demographics of the Unfederated States with that of the Federation. With the exception of Johor which had long-standing ties to the British, the number of Malays in the Unfederated States nearly doubled those in the FMS – so much so that Malays made up more than 60% of the population in each Unfederated State.⁵² The implication was thus clear: British interference had resulted in an undeniable shift in demographics, as foreign migrants and indentured labourers helped fuel rapid economic development in the Federation.

Colonial administrators seemed well aware of this change. Analysing the writings of colonists such as Swettenham, Clifford, and W.E. Maxwell, Maier argues that these earlier scholar-administrators created an idealised construct of Malayness that inspired and legitimised the colonial government to implement policies of insulation. The "beautiful traditions" of the Malays had to be preserved, which meant that Malays themselves required

⁵⁰ Report by Mr. D.G. Campbell on the Malay Agricultural Settlement at Kuala Lumpur. *SSSF 734/1901*.

⁵¹ Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule, with a new introduction by Dr. John Bastin* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1964), 220.

⁵² *Ibid*, 195, 198.

protection from the disruption and destabilisation of rapid socioeconomic development.⁵³ Take, for instance, the words of former Resident of Perak G.E. Cator, who bemoaned as late as 1941 that, “in less than a man's lifetime the whole economic structure of Malaya ... has altered beyond recognition.” This was a change “more rapid and more violent” than the British industrial revolution, and its impacts had fallen “on a race little adapted by tradition, environment and outlook to face sudden change.” When the British first arrived in the 1870s, Malaya had been in the “Anglo-Saxon stage of civilisation”. Yet, in the span of a few decades, it had been “whirled through the centuries into the complexities of the twentieth century”, with rubber being the main reason for such a bewildering “magic-carpet flight”.⁵⁴

Similar changes were also sweeping through other parts of the Empire. A new Colonial Secretary, Alfred Milner, had taken up the position in 1919, and in the wake of the First World War, Milner's plans for post-war reconstruction focused particular attention on the role of colonies that held great economic potential, but were still deemed unprepared for self-government like the white dominions. Subsequently, these places were to service the needs of the broader Empire without being subjected to direct exploitation. Milner was thus guided by two main principles for the dominions and protectorates of Empire: to maintain the “best of indigenous culture”, while also incorporating new scientific research to improve economic development.⁵⁵

While Chamberlain had championed similar notions through his doctrine of improvement in the late-nineteenth century, conceptualising colonies as “great estates” had resulted in the overwhelming belief that benefits to the broader Empire would automatically result in improvements to native populations.⁵⁶ When such hopes failed to pass, critics from both within Britain and abroad increasingly started to demand that imperial policy-makers take greater accountability and responsibility towards those under their rule.⁵⁷ These agitations were soon supplemented by Frederick Lugard's 1922 work *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, in which the author asserted that the presence of European powers in places

⁵³ Maier, *In the Center of Authority*, 56.

⁵⁴ G.E. Cator, “Some of our Malayan problems,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 28, no.1 (1941): 23.

⁵⁵ Yeo Kim Wah, *The Politics of Decentralization: Colonial Controversy in Malaya, 1920-1929* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982), 36-38.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Robinson, *The Dilemmas of Trusteeship: Aspects of British Colonial Policy Between the Wars* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 24.

⁵⁷ Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 118.

such as Africa were “for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes, and of the native races in their progress to a higher plane.” Consequently, this was a reciprocal relationship, the “aim and desire of civilised administration” being to bring this “dual mandate” to fruition. Addressing the dilemma of how to develop the tropics for Europe while also protecting native welfare, Lugard suggested the method of “indirect rule”, or to “develop resources through the agency of the natives under European guidance, and not by direct European ownership”.⁵⁸

This rhetoric of having a dual mandate sat uncomfortably with British Malayan administrators. Greater socio-economic development could only be achieved with British powers at the helm, this style of administration being larger and more efficient than the native kind so proposed by Lugard’s version of indirect rule. Yet, as mentioned earlier, due to the rapid influx of non-Malay peoples into Malaya and their heavy involvement in economic development, British administrators were also alive to the prospect of Malays having been excluded from such progress. Furthermore, as one official from the Colonial Office minuted in 1928, giving Malays a greater role in administration was “an ideal difficult to attain because it conflicts with efficiency in administration.”⁵⁹

Indirect rule in British Malaya was thus not a direct path to self-rule and native agency, but instead what Yeo Kim Wah describes as “the strongest safeguard” to avoid Malays being overwhelmed by immigrant communities, and an attempt to further solidify native support for continued British rule.⁶⁰ Hence, the threats of intense socioeconomic and political change came from both within the confines of British Malaya and across the broader Empire. Even as the Malay States were rapidly transforming into something more modern and more unrecognisable, so too were imperial attitudes themselves undergoing similar changes. Coalescing, these trends came to inform administrative anxieties about the future of British Malaya, especially for the Malays.

It was in the midst of this fraught situation that Campbell wrote his somewhat defeated report about the Settlement’s lacklustre state. In 1903, Campbell noted that the settlement had “proved that its existence is most beneficial to a class of native whom Government was very

⁵⁸ F.D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1922), 506, 617-618.

⁵⁹ Minute by Beckett, 13.8.1928. CO 717/61. Quoted in Yeo, *The Politics of Decentralization*, 39.

⁶⁰ Yeo, *The Politics of Decentralization*, 38-40.

desirous of assisting”, but its main aims of providing technical education and reviving endangered forms of craftwork had “not yet met with the success which they merited”, since the young people they had targeted were not responding. Echoing Campbell, Belfield attributed this failure to the attitudes of the Malays, explaining that,

It is a matter of history that it is a superhuman task to persuade a Malay to take up with interest any work which his personal inclination does not lead him ... The obstacle to present progress being simply the temperament of the people we desire to benefit, advance must be made at their rate, not with the rapidity with which we ourselves are anxious to infuse it.

Ergo, Belfield urged “much patience and infinite tact” in this area.⁶¹

On a more positive note, however, the Settlement had at least achieved “one excellent object, inasmuch as it has enabled many families of respectable Malays of the Peninsula to live their natural village life almost within the precinct of a large town.” This had done much to “popularise the neighbourhood in the eyes of the best class of natives” and induced people to come to Kuala Lumpur, when they might have preferred to live in a less populated area before. In this regard, the Settlement was “unquestionably a success”, though Belfield also wondered whether this alone warranted the amount of money that had been spent.⁶²

These colonial ideas of establishing a purely Malay community that would engage in ‘traditional’ pursuits were notably out of step with the increasing modernity and cosmopolitanism of colonial towns and cities in the early-twentieth century. Contrary to J.S. Furnivall's initial thesis of ‘plural societies’ in port cities only interacting via the marketplace, Su Lin Lewis has argued that places such as Penang in the Straits Settlements played host to various modes of cross-cultural exchange and interaction. Intercultural contact resulted in new, or even hybrid identities, this being most obvious in the emerging middle class.⁶³ Consequently, Lewis considers cosmopolitanism to be a “process of negotiation between

⁶¹ H. Conway Belfield, “Selangor Administration Report for the Year 1902,” in *Reports on the Federated Malay States for 1902, Cd.-1819* (London: Darling and Son, 1903), 68-69.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 8-9.

diverse communities participating in a dynamic and shared public sphere”.⁶⁴ Lynn Hollen Lees, too, has similarly pointed out that as the British encouraged immigration, raised urban centres, and participated in international markets, they “created a cosmopolitan, hybridized society” which rendered Malaya into a “globalized, colonized space”.⁶⁵

Yet, in establishing a strictly Malay agricultural settlement in the immediate vicinity of what was one of the Peninsula’s largest towns at that time, British administrators seemed to be rejecting the advancement of these processes of cosmopolitanism and modernity for Malays.⁶⁶ Take for instance Belfield’s description of the Settlement. On the one hand, he had framed the influx of rural Malays into Kuala Lumpur as a positive outcome, while on the other, he also championed the ability of the Settlement to let Malays “live their natural village life”.⁶⁷ There was a desire to increase the Malay population of Kuala Lumpur, but at the same time, officials also thought that these people should be kept separate from its urban characteristics. In this manner, Malaya was integrated into broader, ongoing anti-urban and pro-rural sentiments that were happening in other parts of the world.⁶⁸ The contradictory desires of wanting economic development, but also cultural preservation resulted in a strange compromise that saw multiple visions of Malaya occupying the same space: that of the increasingly cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur, with its miners, traders, migrants, and administrators; and that of the Malay Agricultural Settlement within its confines, being a static copy of Malay traditional life set apart only for the use of Malays.

A mere five years after the Settlement was established, its Committee recognised that technical education there had been a complete failure, and any attempt to carry it on was abandoned. Yet, not all was lost, as the Settlement would “always continue to be useful as a healthy locality for Malays whether engaged in agriculture or other employment.”⁶⁹ In spite of the Settlement’s failure to achieve its original goal, colonial administrators still believed in its ability to provide a middle ground between the opposing desires of wanting Malays to both

⁶⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁵ Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects*, 11.

⁶⁶ John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia, c.1800-1900: The transition to modern economic growth* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 84.

⁶⁷ Belfield, “Selangor Administration Report for the Year 1902,” 69. *Cd.-1819*.

⁶⁸ See: Steve Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Lorenzo Veracini, “Suburbia, Settler Colonialism and the World Turned Inside Out,” *Housing, Theory and Society* 29, no. 4 (2012): 339-357; Bernhard Dietz, “Countryside-versus-City in European Thought: German and British Anti-Urbanism between the Wars,” *European Legacy* 13, no.7 (2008): 801-814.

⁶⁹ Annual Report for 1904: Malay Agricultural Settlement. *SSSF 1201/1905*.

experience socioeconomic development and retain their Malayness.

To make further sense of these attitudes, we can turn to Hendrik Maier's investigation of R.O. Winstedt, an early an early-twentieth century scholar-administrator who specialised in Malay studies. Although Winstedt is described as having "loved the Malays", he also wanted to keep Malays in the position they had been in when British colonists first arrived: "in an inferior position, preferably in the countryside." Maier goes on to observe that since the British had now asserted colonial control over the Malays, the best way to incorporate them into all the presumed benefits of colonial rule was to foreground their Malayness, especially with reference to supposedly ancient traditions.⁷⁰ This broad category encompassed a variety of areas, ranging from "loyalty for their rulers" and "traditions of courtesy", to "ancient customary law" and, most importantly for our purposes here, the centrality of agriculture as the "soul of Malay life".⁷¹ Nonetheless, as Maier argues, these actions were at odds with each other. British administrators saw intervention as a pathway to betterment, but at the same time, Malay identity had to remain intact.⁷²

Extending this argument, Lynn Hollen Lees has contended that such contradictions resulted in both British rulers and Malay sultans creating a Malay 'traditionalism', which allowed for the sultans to retain their privileged position and for the British to legitimise their rule. The continuation of "royal ceremonies and festivals" not merely ensured "old habits and hierarchies" could live on, but also presented the convenient fiction that British intervention had not changed things.⁷³ When the British established a foothold on the Malay Peninsula in 1874, colonial rule relied heavily on maintaining the support and cooperation of Malay rulers, as they could help justify and legitimise British presence.⁷⁴ Though the FMS was "built up apart from and over the heads" of the Malay governing class, this indirect form of ruling did not break the traditional relationships between Malay elites and the lower classes.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Maier, *In the Center of Authority*, 51

⁷¹ Ibid, 54; R.J. Wilkinson, *Life and Customs. Part 1: The Incidents of Malay Life* (Kuala Lumpur: F.M.S. Government Press, 1908), 20, 48.

⁷² Maier, *In the Center of Authority*, 51.

⁷³ Lees, *Planting Empire*, 118.

⁷⁴ Simon C. Smith, "The Rise, decline and survival of the Malay rulers during the colonial period, 1874-1957," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, no.1 (1994): 84-85.

⁷⁵ Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule*, 140.

A loss of governing power thereby did not necessarily correspond to a loss of influence; instead, British intervention even resulted in Malay rulers enlarging their roles, as they were drawn into new areas of influence.⁷⁶ By co-opting the Malay ruling class, the British were reinforcing pre-existing ‘feudal’ structures that would allow for better social control over the Malay peasantry.⁷⁷ Hence, just as the British depended on Malay peasants to stabilise the Malay States, so too did they also depend on the Malay ruling class to assist with keeping the peasantry in line. Peace and order in the FMS were thus predicated on a hierarchical structure that had Malay elites functioning as middle-men between British colonial administrators and Malay peasants.

In the case of the Agricultural Settlement, the British took it upon themselves to create a physical space where such traditional ideals could be preserved. The Settlement thereby drew on two frames of colonial knowledge that fed into each other: first, the belief that Malays were suited to ‘traditional industries’ such as craft-making and agriculture; and second, the prevailing assumption that Malays, being lazy and indolent, were facing the risk of sociocultural decay and required British intervention to reassert their relationship with their ‘natural’ environments, so as to prevent this from happening.

This line of thinking was somewhat analogous to how metropolitan humanitarians in the late-nineteenth century foregrounded the “perceived need to protect indigenous peoples from the malign effects of imperialism and settler colonialism”. As Rob Skinner and Alan Lester note, such ideas interacted with other theories of segregation and indirect rule during the early 1900s, these in turn promising to form a bulwark against imperialism's negative effects.⁷⁸ Similarly, James Heartfield asserts in his work on The Aborigines' Protection Society that a majority of colonial conquest was in fact underscored by the “humanitarian idea of protecting aboriginal peoples” – though in the end, these altruistic motives did little to improve their living conditions.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ J.M. Gullick, *Rulers and Residents: Influence and Power in the Malay States 1870-1920* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.

⁷⁷ Colin Abraham, “Racial and ethnic manipulation in Colonial Malaya,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 6, no.1 (1983): 19.

⁷⁸ R. Skinner and A. Lester, “Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012): 735.

⁷⁹ James Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1836-1909* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 303.

Meanwhile, in British Malaya, colonial interest was focused on the Malays rather than the indigenous *Orang Asli* (original peoples) population. For administrators, there was a practical reason to this indifference, as they thought it important to understand the vastly more populous Malays with whom they also had more regular dealings with.⁸⁰ Malay cooperation was thus seen as a means to legitimise colonial rule, while the “exotic”, “primitive” *Orang Asli* remained mere intellectual curios until the post-war communist insurgency of 1948-1960, when they played a larger role in matters of national security.⁸¹

In 1917, for instance, the Sultan of Selangor suggested that an area close to a Malay Reservation in Kuala Langat might be made into a reserve for ‘*Sakais*’.⁸² While this received some support from the local District Officer (D.O.) who went as far as to also suggest having one large Reservation for Selangor, or even the FMS “on the lines of an Indian Reservation in America”, this scheme was quickly shut down by other officials.⁸³ In Perak, the efforts of Pat Noone from the FMS Museums Department were markedly more successful when he managed to establish the Perak Aborigines Enactment during the 1930s, but even this was prematurely cut short by the Second World War.⁸⁴ British administrative efforts at protection and preservation were thus largely concentrated on the Malay population instead, rather than the *Orang Asli*.

In October 1903, yet another report on the Agricultural Settlement was produced, this time coming from the observations of one Mr. A. Hale, who was the vice-chairman of the board managing it. Elaborating on what others before him had already mentioned, Hale highlighted the Settlement's success in relocating underprivileged urban Malays into the Settlement, which “proved to be very healthy indeed, owing in a great measure ... to the fact that it is so arranged as to follow the traditions of Malay *Kampong* (village) life, but on an improved

⁸⁰ Rusalina Idrus, “The discourse of protection and the Orang Asli in Malaysia,” *Kajian Malaysia* 29, Supplement 1 (2011): 58, 61.

⁸¹ Ibid, 61.

⁸² The term *Sakai* was used in the pre-colonial era to denote non-Muslim indigenous peoples on the peninsula. It is now considered derogatory in Malaysia for its connections to servitude and has been replaced with *Orang Asli*, an umbrella term that includes various indigenous groups such as the Semang, Senoi, Jakun, etc. See: Shuichi Nagata, “Subgroup 'names' of the Sakai (Thailand) and the Semang (Malaysia): a literature survey,” *Anthropological Science* 114, no.1 (2006): 45-57.

⁸³ “Proposed reserve for Sakais in Kuala Langat next to Kampong Malayu (Klang) Malay Reservation,” *SSSF* 4298/1917.

⁸⁴ Idrus, “The discourse of protection and the Orang Asli in Malaysia,” 58-61.

system”.⁸⁵ This was a class of people whom Hale assumed did not even earn more than \$10 a month, “and who lived in very poor and dilapidated houses in one quarter of the town”. Consequently, the land previously occupied by “a crowded community living in tumble down huts” had now been sold and “vastly improved in appearance ... nice villas having been built”.⁸⁶ Needless to say, these new villas were not for Malay occupation.

The image that Hale invokes here is particularly pertinent when we consider the comparison he makes between urban and village-style living for the Malays. Malays living in the town of Kuala Lumpur were described as part of the urban poor, living cramped, unhealthy lives in ramshackle huts. In contrast, the Settlement was a better, healthier alternative, based as it was on the traditional Malay village. Though not explicitly stated, Hale’s comparison implied that Malays were simply not suited to urban living or able to keep up with its demands, thereby resulting in dismal living environments. Far better for Malay health was “the traditions of Malay *kampung* [sic] life”, in which Malays surely would have been more comfortable. Correspondingly, this was not just a relocation. In British minds, they were returning Malays to their natural *kampung* environment where they could thrive. Being an “improved system”, the implication here was that British innovation had made a good thing even better – never mind the fact that their visions of *kampung* life had failed to capture the true complexity of the situation.

Planting people

Despite Hale’s exuberance over this “improved” *kampung* system, the fact of the matter still remained: British understandings of Malay traditional life did not align with how Malays themselves lived. As I assert here, British responses to the assumed relationship between Malays and their land were predicated on incomplete investigative modalities, resulting in a slew of problems that manifested across both the Malay Agricultural Settlement and eventual establishment of Malay Reservations. Misunderstandings about Malay relationships to land, settlement, and planting forced administrators to grapple with a community of settlers who did not always act in ways that they had anticipated. To demonstrate this, I first discuss the establishment of Malay Reservations to examine how British administrators implemented

⁸⁵ The spelling of the word *kampung* has since been replaced with *kampung*. While I retain the original, British-transliterated spelling whenever they appear in quotations, I will be using the current Malay spelling of *kampung* in all other instances.

⁸⁶ A. Hale, “The Malay Agricultural Settlement and Technical Schools,” 1-2. 22 October 1903. SSSF 272/1904.

policies of insulation and exclusion to not only protect Malays from the presumed ill-effects of socioeconomic development, but also prevent them from participating in it.⁸⁷

During the early-twentieth century, increased rubber planting led British officials to worry about Malays losing access to village or ‘ancestral’ land, as they would be inclined to profit from selling these plots to growing rubber estates.⁸⁸ In 1910, the D.O. for Ulu Langat in Selangor, R.C. Clayton, reported that the “permanent Malay population” in his district had been “caught up by rubber fever”, with almost 200 applications for small rubber holdings having been submitted in April alone. This was “scarcely to be wondered at”, as individuals and companies alike were buying up native rubber holdings at “fabulous prices”. A Javanese land-owner, for instance, had sold a small rubber holding to another native for \$50, who then resold it to a European for a staggering \$750. Correspondingly, it was “much regretted that something can’t be done to stop these sales” which resulted in the loss of a “permanent agricultural population”.⁸⁹ The following month, Clayton reported that demands for agricultural land had even “reached a pitch where it almost becomes absurd”, the matter being complicated by the fact that the moment a certain area was gazetted for Malays or small native holdings, someone would buy out the whole lot and then apply for the balance.⁹⁰

In light of this apparent crisis, Clayton submitted a memorandum arguing for the protection of what he deemed to be *kampung* (or “kampong”) lands. Given that Malays were the only people “whose children's children can be considered likely to form a permanent agricultural population and labour force” in the FMS, it stood to reason that all efforts must be focused on protecting *kampungs* from absorption. After all, a Malay meant his *kampung* to be the “permanent abiding place of himself and his children's children”, where they would settle and “abide for ever and a day”. Should he sell this land, the money he gained often melted “like water from a sieve” and rendered him a “homeless wanderer” – “at best day labourer and at the worst, a vagabond”. To combat the fact that Malays would always sell their lands if

⁸⁷ For more in-depth studies on Malay Reservations, see: Paul Kratoska, ““Ends that we Cannot Foresee”: Malay Reservations in British Malaya,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no.1 (1983): 149-168; Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977); P.K. Voon, “Rural Land Ownership and Development in the Malay Reservations of Peninsular Malaysia,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 4 (1977): 496-512; P.K. Voon, “Malay Reservations and Malay Land Ownership in Semenyih and Ulu Semenyih Mukims Selangor,” *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no. 4 (1976): 509-523.

⁸⁸ Kratoska, ““Ends that we Cannot Foresee”,” 153.

⁸⁹ R.C. Clayton, “Ulu Langat District Report for April 1910.” 3 May 1910. In *Monthly Reports, Ulu Langat district 1910. SSSF 688/1910*.

⁹⁰ R.C. Clayton, “Monthly report for May 1910,” 6 June 1910. *Ibid*.

offered enough money for it, Clayton offered a number of immediate solutions and one suggestion for the future: the establishment of Malay reserves.⁹¹

Further discussions from Clayton's colleagues and superiors followed, many of these employing a rhetoric that was vastly similar to Clayton's. The High Commissioner saw a "serious menace to the future well being of the Malay inhabitants of the country", while a report from the Committee appointed to research the current state of affairs concluded that unless some action was taken, there would be "disastrous consequences" to Malay permanent settlement.⁹² The Committee thereby asserted that the main aim of Malay Reservations was to ensure that Malays would have Malay neighbours, and to "protect [them] from the temptation of sacrificing [their] landed rights" for the "temporary superfluity of ready money". Simultaneously, the act of giving Malay heirs their hereditary rights would also induce them to permanent settlement in the FMS.⁹³

Administrative decisions to enact these land policies were not merely reactionary. Read alongside previous chapters, such attempts at colonial control were also symptomatic of a long-standing culture of contradiction towards what British Malaya should be as a colony. Echoing Saleh's horrified realisation that he was gazing upon a land he no longer recognised, British administrators similarly feared the extinction of Malay peasant culture due to economic expansion and the influx of foreign influence. In spite of Malaya's changing social demographics and increasing economic development, British colonial thought continued to maintain that peasant Malays were best kept confined their neat little *kampungs* where they could grow rice and live simple, untouched lives. By keeping them in *kampungs*, peasants could also be kept away from the plantation rubber industry – be it in the form of becoming a wage-worker, or smallholder. Notably, this was a reversal of early colonial attempts to recruit a local Malay labour force. The British had previously tried to persuade Malays to take up plantation work, but seeing no positive response, chose to blame it on the myth of the lazy

⁹¹ R.C. Clayton, "The absorption by large Land Owners and Estates of native (Malay) holdings." Memorandum, 28 July 1910. In Desirability of preventing the alienation by Malays of their Kampong land, *SSSF 3170/1910*.

⁹² E.H. Wolff to Secretary to the Resident, Selangor. "Desirability of preventing the alienation of Malays of their Kampong Lands." Letter, 18 July 1910. *Ibid.*

⁹³ "Report by the Committee appointed to enquire into and report on the question of the alienation of hereditary rights in land by Malays and the desirability or otherwise of preventative or remedial action being taken," 3-4. *Ibid.*

native instead.⁹⁴

In retrospect, there was a deep sense of irony to this situation. Visions of an everlasting pastoral landscape notwithstanding, it was undeniable that the socioeconomic changes that the British so feared were largely the product of colonial intervention. The growth of the colonial economy attracted Chinese and Indian labourers to work the tin-mines and plantations, while the development of the rubber industry inevitably led to the establishment of rubber processing factories, which only served to hasten the process of industrialisation.⁹⁵ At the same time, the gradual reduction in Indian coolies after the cessation of the indentured labour system in 1914 resulted in Malays leaving their *kampungs* and established rice fields to work for large estates instead, while the rise of Malay smallholders threatened to break the plantation monopoly on rubber.⁹⁶ Indeed, there was no 'lazy native' at play here. Rather, early Malay disinclination to plantation work was primarily due to its unattractiveness, monotony, low wages, and any number of other oppressive qualities which lead peasants to shun it.⁹⁷ Now confronted with the Malay labour they previously so desired, officials thought it their duty to keep Malays away from the very same socioeconomic developments that the British themselves had caused.

By 1911, the Selangor state government had initiated an ancestral lands scheme, whereby landowners from the "Malayan race" could voluntarily submit their titles for inclusion. This entitled them to pay reduced land rent, but also restricted land-transfer to those of similar race unless special provisions were given.⁹⁸ Two years later, these features were incorporated into the FMS-wide Malay Reservations Enactment of 1913. Summing up its objects and intentions, the Acting Legal Advisor for the FMS, Hasting Rhodes, described how Malay subjects were being "deluded by visions of present but transitory wealth" and "blinded by the radiance of the inducement offered, entranced by the visions of Lethean pleasures conjured up". By succumbing to these illusions, this "race of yeoman-peasantry aforesaid happy and

⁹⁴ P. Ramasamy, "Labour control and labour resistance in the plantations of colonial Malaya," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no.3-4 (1992): 92.

⁹⁵ See: Chapters 5 and 6 in Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *A Question of Class: Capital, The State, and Uneven Development in Malaya* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986); D.H. Grist, *An Outline of Malayan Agriculture* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Agriculture, Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, 1936), 86, 90.

⁹⁶ P.P. Courtenay, "The Plantation in Malaysian Economic Development," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no.2 (1981): 331-332.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Kratoska, "'Ends that we Cannot Foresee'," 153-154.

prosperous” were “surrendering and sacrificing the happiness of a lifetime”.

Rhodes then made mention of how similar laws were already enforced in the Dutch East Indies, New Zealand, and the Punjab region, before going on to claim that the Enactment served to protect Malays from “prodigally and improvidently divesting himself of his birth-right and inheritance.”⁹⁹ In this manner, administrators not only legislated into existence land policies that would come to shape Malay land-ownership for decades to come, but also further incorporated British Malaya into broader, pre-existing doctrines of colonial protection and anti-urbanism – traces of which we have already glimpsed in the Agricultural Settlement.¹⁰⁰

Yet, it was not enough that Malays be insulated from the ravages of unchecked economic development, or protected from their own financial follies. Recalling Selangor’s 1911 ancestral lands precursor to the 1913 Enactment, we find the District Officer (D.O.) of Ulu Selangor noting that the question of rubber cultivation was causing “some difficulty” as practically all Malay applicants wanted to plant rubber as well as fruit trees. The D.O., J.W. Goldthorp, thereby suggested the possibility of Malays taking up land under a limited alienation clause so that they might plant rubber, as dishonest applicants were going to take the land up anyway and officials would only be hurting honest Malays who had to pay higher land-rents when they planted rubber in non-reservation lands.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, the Resident was unmoved by this appeal and by the following month, he had even sent out a circular to the state’s D.Os. reminding them that all land titles for ancestral lands “must contain a provision that no rubber may be planted thereon.”¹⁰²

In a classic case of muddled bureaucracy, however, this state-wide ruling was not standardised. The officer for the district of Ulu Langat, for instance, asked and received permission to generally use discretion when dealing with the issue of planting rubber, while in Klang, its officer was told only to apply the clause to new applicants and not retrospectively.¹⁰³ For Ulu Selangor, however, the no-rubber clause was a death knell for the

⁹⁹ Hastings Rhodes, “Objects and Reasons,” 1 April 1912. In Enactment to preserve to Malays the use of their ‘Kampong’ lands, 17 April 1912. *SSSF 3013/1912*.

¹⁰⁰ See: Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow, “Introduction: The Long, Strange History of Protection,” in *Protection and Empire: A Global History*, eds. Lauren Benton, Adam Clulow, and Bain Attwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-9.

¹⁰¹ D.O., Ulu Selangor to the Secretary to Resident. Letter, 26 March 1912. *SSSF 3170/1910*.

¹⁰² Secretary to Resident, Selangor to the D.O., Ulu Selangor. Letter, 29 March 1912. *Ibid*; Secretary to Resident, Selangor to the C.L.R. and all D.O.s. Letter draft, April 1912. *Ibid*.

¹⁰³ D.O., Ulu Langat to The Secretary to Resident. Letter, 17 April 1912. *Ibid*.

ancestral lands scheme, its D.O. writing in August of 1912 to say that it had failed in his district and that he did “not anticipate its becoming a success in the near future on such conditions”, as Malays would rather pay higher land-rent outside reservation lands to plant rubber.¹⁰⁴

With the 1913 Enactment, the no-rubber clause was deleted, but this did not stop similar issues from occurring. Writing to clarify an enquiry from the D.O. of Kuala Langat in 1915, the Selangor Resident noted that it was “not desirable that rubber should be planted, and intending planters of rubber should be settled in land elsewhere than in a reservation”.¹⁰⁵ More than ten years later, the Government Mycologist had similar misgivings. First disparaging Malay planting as haphazard, unprofitable, and untended due to inherent laziness, he went on to note that many Malays in the Kluang reservation desired to plant rubber for profit. The D.O., however, was said to be against this, as “probably within 5-6 years time the place would no longer be a Malay Reservation, but would be in the hands of Chetties [sic] and Money-lenders” – the Chettiars being an Indian money-lending caste.¹⁰⁶ This in turn elicited a response from the D.O. who clarified that rubber was only allowed on the hilly parts of the reservation, but that “a large area must be kept free of rubber if the Reservation is to remain as such.” Accordingly, it was “highly important to encourage other forms of cultivation i.e. fruit trees, coffee, bananas, vegetables, pineapples etc.”¹⁰⁷

In a manner that this thesis has shown to be typical in British Malaya, things did not go as planned. As Donald Nonini has pointed out, Malay peasants actively engaged with the colonial economy, this in part being possible due to their own resistance to administrative attempts at restriction.¹⁰⁸ In the years after the Enactment, numerous reports described Malays circumventing its restrictions in increasingly varied ways. A memorandum from the FMS Commissioner of Lands, for instance, noted that Malays were disposing their lands to non-Malays via three methods, these being via: successive three year leases (“abused in every way”, detection “very difficult”), a power of attorney with power to substitute (“no clear

¹⁰⁴ D.O. Ulu Selangor to the Secretary to Resident. Letter, 23 August 1912. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ “Malay Reservations. Enquires if Rubber is allowed as a crop.” 9 April 15. *SSSF 1870/1915*.

¹⁰⁶ Government Mycologist to Secretary for Agriculture, S.S. and F.M.S. Letter, 4 May 1928. *SSSF 1499/28*. For more on the Chettiars, see: See: Rajeswary Brown, “Chettiar Capital and Southeast Asian Credit Networks in the Interwar Period,” in *Local Suppliers of Credit in the Third World, 1750-1960*, ed. Gareth Austin and Kaoru Sugihara (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 254-287.

¹⁰⁷ D.O. Ulu Selangor to Secretary to Resident. Letter, 27 July 1928. *SSSF 1499/28*.

¹⁰⁸ Nonini, *British Colonial Rule*, 163.

means of combating”), and a charge to the full value on the land with power of attorney to the chargee (“most efficacious”).¹⁰⁹ A power of attorney effectively granted someone ownership and power to dispose of land, while placing a charge to the full value on the land gave lenders full rights to it, reducing the possibility of its original owners returning to claim it.

Consequently, these methods resulted in Reservation lands being the “practical possession of a non-Malay”, the Commissioner of Lands asserting that it would be necessary to insert certain provisions to prevent it. Beyond securing “actual and beneficial ownership of the land” for Malays, these safeguards would: preserve Malay communal life that could otherwise be diluted by things like disease and mixed marriages, promote saving money as Malays would lose the ability to gain easy credit via mortgages from non-Malays, and encourage Malay industry since, “when a Malay can no longer ... dispose of his interest to non-Malays he will gradually learn to cultivate his own land and reap the fruits thereof.”¹¹⁰ No further action was taken at that time as the present Enactment was deemed sufficient, but with the onset of the world depression in the 1930s and rising rates of rural indebtedness, the more restrictive 1933 Malay Reservation Enactment was legislated to close existing loopholes.¹¹¹

Analysing this situation, we see two distinct layers to British methods of protection: first, Malays had to be protected from losing *kampung* lands that they were presumed to be attached to; and secondly, they had to be prevented from increased involvement in the rubber economy, lest they transform these lands into something unrecognisable and sell them for profit. Rubber was not completely prohibited, but its ability to render Reservation land into a source of ready credit led colonial administrators to react negatively towards its planting. As P.K. Voon has noted, these reservations were never intended to be economically important, or even prosperous. Instead, they ensured Malay could be entrenched in subsistence farming practices that were “sufficient to meet the simple daily needs of settlers”.¹¹²

Subsequently, these anxieties about socioeconomic change were intricately linked with British colonial hopes for a settled yeoman peasantry who would permanently reside on their lands “for ever and a day”. The FMS with its expanding rubber estates was to increasingly develop,

¹⁰⁹ Commissioner of Lands, FMS. Memorandum re: evasion of the Malay Reservations Enactment No.15 of 1913, 11 August 1924. SSSF 2748/1923. Comments in parentheses are from: D.O. Ulu Langat to Secretary to Resident. Letter, 4 September 1923 and D.O. Kuala Langat to Secretary to Resident. Letter, 18 June 1923. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Commissioner of Lands, FMS. Memorandum re: evasion of the Malay Reservations Enactment No.15 of 1913, 11 August 1924. *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Kratoska, ““Ends that we Cannot Foresee”,” 159-167.

¹¹² Voon, “Rural Land Ownership,” 500.

but in the midst of what one official has since described as a “magic-carpet ride”, Malays needed to stay the same: living in *kampungs*, cultivating simple produce, and remaining undisturbed by other races. Similar hopes and perceptions dictated the foundations of the Malay Agricultural Settlement, and just as officials administering Reservations had to contend with Malays circumventing attempts to keep them tethered to *kampung* lands, so too did the Settlement’s Committee face similar challenges.

Take for instance Rule 5 of the Settlement Rules, which stated that “it shall be an implied condition of occupation that the holder shall fence and cultivate his holding”. While applicants were allowed to occupy land in the Settlement free of charge, there was nonetheless a clause that allowed the Committee to impose charges on buildings, or “collect a tithe of the produce of each holding”.¹¹³ In a similar vein, the High Commissioner of the Straits Settlements also suggested in 1901 that all Settlement occupiers who did not plant permanent products on their lots be fined \$1, this subsequently becoming a by-law.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, Vice Chairman of the board managing the Settlement, A. Hale, also noted in his 1903 report that land titles were only being given to Malays who had “fenced and made a good start to cultivate his land”, as well as “built a substantial house”. Until they had done so, their claim on the land was only via the verbal and written promise of the Executive Officer of the Settlement’s Committee.¹¹⁵

Though the Settlement’s gardens were being well-managed, Hale nonetheless complained that many were neglected due to Malays being “by no means industrious or careful of appearances”. As for the ones that were “most creditable”, it was likely that these happy results were largely dependent on the fact that annual prizes were given out for best kept holdings.¹¹⁶ In the following years, the Committee evidently had enough of a problem with the cultivation clause to introduce notices that would “stimulate further the proper cultivation of the land”, as those who received one would have three months to comply with the cultivation instructions.¹¹⁷ 84 such notices were thus issued in 1908 and 54 the next, calling on “occupiers to clear cultivate, or fence their holdings”. Subsequently, \$53.50 in fines were

¹¹³ Report by Mr. D.G. Campbell on the Malay Agricultural Settlement at Kuala Lumpur. *SSSF* 734/1901.

¹¹⁴ John Hands, “Malay Agricultural Settlement Kuala Lumpur: A Short History, compiled from Minute Books,” *The Malayan Historical Journal* 2, no.2 (1955): 147.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

¹¹⁶ Hale, “The Malay Agricultural Settlement and Technical Schools,” 3-4. *SSSF* 272/1904.

¹¹⁷ Annual Report: Malay Agricultural Settlement for 1907. 24 February 1908. *SSSF* 1246/1908.

collected in 1909, principally from “non-compliance with cultivation conditions”.¹¹⁸

In a striking parallel to the situation that would be experienced in Malay Reservations some years later, it also came to the Committee’s attention in 1907 that several Malays in the Settlement had in fact borrowed money from the Chettiar lenders by offering up their land permits as mortgage. As such, it was decided to notify the Chettiar lenders that the permits were of no value as security, and that those who obtained money against them would have their permits cancelled. Addressing this matter, however, the Committee’s secretary helpfully pointed out that the current Civil Penal code exempted the “materials of houses and other buildings belonging to and occupied by agriculturists” from attachment, or the process of transferring a debtor’s property to a creditor. Furthermore, it was asserted that Settlement Malays should “claim the protection of this clause” – this decision being quite discordant with the fact that Malays did not seem to want protection for their land as much as they wanted it to be a ready source of credit.¹¹⁹ By attempting to participate in these transactions, Malays were integrating themselves into current capitalistic trends and readily defying British hopes that they would continue to live simple, traditional lives as part of the yeoman peasantry.

Given the thematic similarity of these stipulations, it can be seen that British administrators considered permanent cultivation to be integral to both the Malay Reservations and Agricultural Settlement. As such, these visions of neatly fenced holdings planted with permanent products were bound up tightly in colonial beliefs about what a traditional Malay *kampung* should be. In establishing these policies, it is likely that British administrators thought they were inducing Malays to return to their traditional roots. Nonetheless, what the British saw as cultural education and a favour to the Malays was seen more as an irritant and inconvenience by Malays themselves, as evidenced by the numerous failed attempts to have them adhere to the rules.

Consequently, this clash of understandings highlights the fundamental differences between Malay and British conceptions of land ownership. Writing on Malay systems of land tenure, David Wong argues that land was “involved as a medium rather than an object”. During a period when land was in plentiful supply, anyone could take up, clear, and occupy forest land.

¹¹⁸ Ibid; Annual Report: Malay Agricultural Settlement for 1908. 9 March 1909. SSSF 1061/1909.

¹¹⁹ Minute of meeting of the Malay Agricultural Settlement Committee held on 22 December 1907. SSSF 411/1908.

Continual land-use and occupation was thus “an essential facet of life in a sedentary peasant community”, resulting in customs likely being based on the consequences of abandoned land rather than ownership. Given that Malay customary law foregrounded land-use and its produce, British assumptions of Malay cultivators acquiring a “proprietary right” to land by clearing and then continually occupying it were less than accurate. Indeed, though broad forms of private land ownership might well have already been evolving across the Peninsula during the colonial period, Wong claims that Malay cultivators had no real conceptualisation of total land ownership. As such, it was an “unreality” for the colonial state to base their assumptions on land rights when historically, it was really about land *use*.¹²⁰

Read in the above contexts, British administrators seem to have acknowledged only one half of the relationship outlined above, and even that interpretation was itself a misreading. While the cultivation clause echoed how Malay understandings of land orbited around its usage, British insistence on making it a condition for ownership both overstated the centrality of land to Malay life and thought it important for the wrong reasons. As Paul Kratoska notes, it was a prevailing belief amongst British administrators that peasant holdings were “the foundation for a way of life”, and that by giving peasants the means to possess land via secure tenure, they would be persuaded to give their allegiance to the colonial state. Administrators thus attached an overinflated sense of sentiment to Malay smallholdings, this misunderstanding ultimately resulting in a fundamental dissonance between British officials and Malay peasants when the latter often disposed of their land with little care or attachment.¹²¹

Adding on to this, J.M. Gullick asserts that peasants in the pre-colonial era were more inclined to be mobile rather than settled, this being caused by the desire to evade the “impositions and demands” of local rulers. It was not the work of corvée labour itself that led to such hatred for it, but the fact that such conscriptions were made during peak agricultural seasons and disrupted work on the peasants’ own lands. At the same time, Malay peasants also actively participated in a semi-subsistence economy, wherein products that were not produced for consumption could be bought or sold for money.¹²² Meanwhile, in addressing

¹²⁰ David S.Y. Wong, *Tenure and Land Dealings in the Malay States* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1975), 11-13.

¹²¹ Paul Kratoska, “The Peripatetic Peasant and Land Tenure in British Malaya,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, no.1 (1985): 41.

¹²² J.M. Gullick, *Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 100.

the tropes of “permanence, stability and attachment to place” so often associated with *kampung* environments, Joel Kahn has gone on to argue that these were better placed in the concept of *kerajaan* (royal rule/dominion) rather than the *kampung*, as the relationship between ruler and those ruled could embody some level of perpetuity. Even then, however, the *kerajaan* metaphor might have been more symbolic than literal, especially in the case of the Malay Peninsula where peasants could easily move outside the sphere of their ruler’s influence.¹²³ To echo Krastoska’s assertions, this paints a picture of Malay peasants who were more peripatetic than settled, and more inclined to sell for profit than keep for sentiment.

Planting *padi*

Mobility of peasant populations notwithstanding, it is worth noting that exceptions to the norm did exist. *Padi*, or rice-planting, provides a useful segue into briefly discussing these situations, thereby adding nuance to the above while also providing some useful background to the Malay Agricultural Settlement’s disastrous flirtation with *padi*-planting. During the nineteenth century, two broad methods of cultivating *padi* existed on the Malay Peninsula: that of dry *padi*, which is a form of *ladang* (shifting) cultivation; and wet *padi*, which is more permanent.¹²⁴

While there is some contest as to whether wet-*padi* cultivation was introduced in either the tenth or fifteenth century, James C. Jackson nonetheless asserts that the arrival of this relatively new method did little to diminish the centrality of dry-*padi*. Indeed, by the 1880s, British officials observed that *ladang* cultivation remained popular, though wet *padi* was also grown in more populated areas.¹²⁵ As *ladang* cultivation required cultivators to move to a new plot of land after each year’s harvest, Malay planters eager to make a quick escape from the demands of conscription much preferred the impermanence of *ladang* cultivation. Simultaneously, *ladang* cultivation was less labour-intensive, as well as less susceptible to hazards such as pests, floods, and droughts.¹²⁶

¹²³ Kahn, *Other Malays*, 35-36.

¹²⁴ Gullick, *Malay Society*, 125.

¹²⁵ James C. Jackson, “Rice Cultivation in West Malaysia: Relationships Between Culture History, Customary Practices and Recent Developments,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 45, no. 2 (1972): 77-78

¹²⁶ Gullick, *Malay Society*, 125-126.

Yet, there remained an intricate relationship between *padi*-planting and Malay *kampung* settlements. R.D. Hill, for instance, notes that the establishment of a *kampung* was contingent on mutual needs for protection and the demands of both “terrain and technique”. According to Hill, individual rice fields were subject to being damaged by rats or birds, while a *kampung* allowed for the protective qualities of simultaneous cultivation. The “miserably damp” quality of a rice field, too, prevented individual cultivators from living directly on their land, thereby driving them to live in a community instead.¹²⁷

Similarly, Gullick offers the example of nineteenth-century Selangor, where its original *padi*-growing Malay population was scattered by civil war and replaced with immigrant settlers who gradually transformed *padi*-growing from a livelihood to a lifestyle. Rice was grown if it was deemed remunerative, but at the same time, this was not merely a commercial relationship. Even when prices became less profitable, “continued occupation ... induced a willingness to grow *padi*”, while growing *padi* reinforced a cultivator’s attachment to land.¹²⁸ With time, cultivators might have felt obligated to continue occupying and working the same land as their ancestors. As Gullick reminds us, however, decisions to choose one cultivation method over another were predicated on a variety of factors, these including and not limited to terrain, length of settlement, and historical background.¹²⁹ Consequently, *padi*-planting was by no means a simple, direct link to a permanent Malay *kampung*, despite what British administrators might have seen.

Given this context, we can return to Hale’s report to examine additional issues that administrators were facing with regards to getting Malays to plant *padi* in the Settlement. Of the 67 holdings remaining in 1903, Hale noted that 26 of them were “larger portions of swamp land, designed for *padi*-planting”.¹³⁰ The allocation of swamp land, associated with wet *padi*, is significant when we consider that British officials saw this form of cultivation as a means to encourage stability and permanence. This was in stark contrast to *ladang* cultivation, which was largely discouraged by colonial officials. *Ladang* cultivation was thought to result in soil erosion and silting in rivers, while complaints from officials also evidenced a marked annoyance at Malays “wandering from place to place” as they abandoned

¹²⁷ R.D. Hill, *Rice in Malaya: A Study in Historical Geography* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 44.

¹²⁸ Gullick, *Malay Society*, 128-129.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 127.

¹³⁰ Hale, “The Malay Agricultural Settlement and Technical Schools,” 3. SSSF 272/1904.

plot after plot of land.¹³¹ This, in turn, would have reduced the amount of usable land available to plantation owners. Consequently, since *ladang* cultivators prioritised profit over permanent settlement, it was imperative that Malays be induced to plant wet *padi* instead.¹³² Summing this up, perhaps the Resident of Perak's view on the very welcome influx of foreign Malays into his state captured it best: "These people cannot be expected to stay unless they can get *padi* land," he wrote, "for no Malay Settlement is permanent without *padi*."¹³³

In this case, we might begin to see why officials administering the Settlement were eager to introduce *padi*.¹³⁴ Despite several attempts to get these reserved plots planted, however, Hale noted that they were being hampered by a great many difficulties. Contextualising this, Hale was keen to point out that the colonial governments of both Perak and Selangor were undergoing similar issues, since they had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in irrigation works, but had no cultivators for their land. Hence, it was "not surprising that the 105 acres of swamp land ... are left without appreciators". Even less surprising was the reason behind it, Hale asserting that "the people find much more congenial and profitable work than *padi* planting".¹³⁵

Added to these woes were a number of other failed agricultural projects, these being more related to incompetence than cultural misunderstandings. To encourage rice planting in 1901, the committee had given out four-acre plots of *sawah* (wet rice) fields and constructed four water wheels to irrigate them. The first of these was inspected in March of the following year and seen to be so satisfactory that the other three were ordered for a total of £165. Evidently, these had only been seen by the British administrators and not the Malays who would use them, as come October, the Settlement's Malay headman opined that *padi* planting would never work as long as water wheels were used. Given their unsuitability, one water wheel order was promptly cancelled.

¹³¹ Gullick, *Malay Society*, 127; J.M. Gullick, "The entrepreneur in late 19th century Malay peasant society," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 58, no.1 (1985): 63.

¹³² Gullick, "The entrepreneur," 63.

¹³³ E.W. Birch, "Perak Administrative Report for the Year 1909," 10. *CO 576/4*.

¹³⁴ Though outside the purview of this chapter, it is of note that colonial concerns about rice-planting deepened and shifted in focus after the First World War, when most of Southeast Asia was gripped by a rice-shortage. For more on this, see: Paul Kratoska, "Rice Cultivation and the Division of Labor in British Malaya," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no.2 (1982): 295-298; Paul Kratoska, "The British Empire and the Southeast Asian Rice Crisis of 1919-1921," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no.1 (1990): 115-146.

¹³⁵ Hale, "The Malay Agricultural Settlement and Technical Schools," 3. *SSSF 272/1904*.

The fact that such a glaring administrative oversight could occur was qualified by the fact that in the very same meeting, the Secretary bemoaned that “only one European member” took any interest at all in the Settlement’s affairs. Subsequently, the Settlement’s accounts were also found to be in enough disarray that in the following month, he further asserted that “things were in a mess and as there were no records he could not disentangle the difficulties.” *Padi*-planting, too, was finally declared an “absolute failure”, this having been “undertaken against the advice of the Malay members”.¹³⁶

Elaborating on this, Hale revealed in 1902 that the remaining water wheels had been erected and some money advanced to prospective farmers, but alas, “the wheels fell to pieces and the advances were not returned”. In a possible attempt to salvage this situation, English seeds had then been distributed amongst the Malays in hope that they would be induced to plant new crops, but even this had failed, as there was “very little interest” in them and the Malay planter “prefers the vegetables and flower he is used to.”¹³⁷ Ultimately, this unhappy foray into planting *padi* resulted in a loss of \$1000 and as far as the records show, nothing similar was undertaken again in the Settlement.¹³⁸

In concluding this series of unfortunate events, we might consider the irony of the Settlement’s low-lying agricultural lands eventually being destroyed by unchecked colonial development. By 1919, some 35% of the Agricultural Settlement’s 2,350 inhabitants were living on lands susceptible to flooding.¹³⁹ Rising river beds were causing small floods, and some five years later, entire areas were reported to be going out of cultivation due to their frequency.¹⁴⁰ These deluges were so consistent by 1926 that 50 acres of “well cultivated garden land” was now regularly underwater, and “where 200 people lived five years ago, not fifty now remained.” Given the rates of silting, a Committee report estimated it would take only another two years before the whole area was transformed into an “uninhabitable swamp.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Hands, “Malay Agricultural Settlement,” 150.

¹³⁷ Hale, “The Malay Agricultural Settlement and Technical Schools,” 7. *SSSF* 272/1904.

¹³⁸ Hands, “Malay Agricultural Settlement,” 150.

¹³⁹ Annual Report 1919, Malay Agricultural Settlement. 9 March, 1920. *SSSF* 1489/1920.

¹⁴⁰ Annual Report 1924, Malay Agricultural Settlement. 21 January, 1925. *SSSF* 403/1925; Annual Report 1926, Malay Agricultural Settlement Kuala Lumpur. 10 February, 1927. *SSSF* 912/1927.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, *SSSF* 912/1927.

Unsurprisingly, the entirety of Kuala Lumpur was hit by a “Great Flood” in 1926. In her exploration of this phenomenon, Fiona Williamson has argued that such an environmental catastrophe cannot be blamed on extreme weather alone. Rather, some fault also lay with colonial economic activities such as plantation agricultural and industrial mining, which transformed the physical landscape and removed natural flood defences. Large swathes of forest which would have slowed water flows had been cut to make way for colonial development, while mines polluted rivers and choked the passage of water.¹⁴² Consequently, even though the British had spent so much time and effort on protecting ‘traditional’ Malay livelihoods from the spectre of colonial economic development, it was not cosmopolitanism, rural indebtedness, or even landlessness that resulted in the most damage. In the end, it was floodwater caused by their own actions which became one of the Malay Agricultural Settlement’s greatest threats.

Conclusion

In tracing British colonial attempts to protect and preserve what they, in most cases, inaccurately understood to be traditional Malay ways of life, this chapter has highlighted some of the complex intersections between colonial constructs and anxieties. Arriving on the Malay Peninsula, British administrators not only raised a new system of rule alongside pre-existing Malay governing structures, but also imposed visions of a yeoman peasantry class on Malays living under them. Even as the growing influx of foreign migrants and indentured workers changed the socioeconomic landscape of the FMS, these administrators anticipated Malay peasants continuing to provide the permanent, agricultural foundations on which this entire affair would rest.

With reference to Bernard Cohn's investigative modalities, I have argued that colonial presumptions about land, people, and planting were attempts to simplify what was in fact an incredibly complex identity. Myths of the lazy native coalesced with stereotypes of a traditional, settled Malay *kampung*, resulting in legislative decisions that sought to address both. If Malays were lazy, they would need laws and incentives to continue cultivating the lands so essential to permanent *kampung* settlements. This, however, constituted a misreading, as Malays were in fact acting according to economic self-interest rather than

¹⁴² Fiona Williamson, “The “Great Flood” of 1926: environmental change and post-disaster management in British Malaya,” *Ecosystem Health and Sustainability* 2, no. 11 (2016): 5-6, 8.

inherent laziness, and peasants were more peripatetic than settled.

Subsequently, though prior chapters have examined how inter-colony connections within the broader imperial circuit board facilitated administrative discord, here I have focused particularly on the prevailing incoherence that existed within the node itself. A microcosm of this can be glimpsed particularly in the establishment of the Malay Agricultural Settlement, which suffered greatly from the largely unresolved question of what it was supposed to be. First lauded as a place to educate Malays on aspects of technical education and traditional craftwork, this plan was soon abandoned with the Malays were unreceptive to such a scheme. Constructed then as a place where Malays could be reconnected to their traditional living environments while in the midst of an urban centre such as Kuala Lumpur, this became a liminal space where Malays were in the midst of development, but also set apart from it.¹⁴³

While the British officials described in Chapter 3 were torn between the economic advantages of mining and its undesirable social and aesthetic effects, this chapter has foregrounded the tensions that British officials perceived between a burgeoning rubber industry and its influence on Malay peasants. By the early-twentieth century, socioeconomic development brought on by the rubber industry had spread cosmopolitanism, industrialisation, and capitalist markets across the Malay States. Yet, I have demonstrated that such ideas and their effects were anathema to British officials when viewed in relation to the Malays – never mind the fact that Malays themselves desired to be part of such change, and indeed had even started to partake in it. Integrating themselves into the ebbs and flows of capitalist markets, Malays were set on the path to joining a growing urbanised, middle class.

By creating the Malay Agricultural Settlement and Malay Reservations, British officials were attempting to redress this situation without compromising on development. Considering the question of whether changes to the land would result in changes to its people, the British decided that the best answer would be to isolate the Malays from these effects. Insulated in this way, Malays could be preserved and protected, or perhaps even guided to relearn what they had already lost. As seen throughout this chapter, however, such actions were

¹⁴³ Though not in the purview of this chapter to discuss the composition of the Settlement's inhabitants, it is worth noting that the first Malays to arrive in the Settlement had been Malay peons and messengers employed by the Government. It is therefore likely that the cultivation clauses were not met by some settlers as they were employed in other occupations and placed no stock in its purported importance. See: Hale, "The Malay Agricultural Settlement and Technical Schools," 1.

characterised by numerous misconceptions and mistakes. Misguided by their investigative modalities, British administrators found themselves constantly thwarted by Malay agency and repeated attempts to participate in the colonial economy. To most extents, this was not a people who needed, nor even wanted protection.

Consequently, it is with no small amount of amusement that we note how in 1926, the Committee administering the Malay Agricultural Settlement seems to have finally acknowledged some aspect of this:

It is recognised that a residential suburb of Kuala Lumpur is being evolved from a *Kampong*. Much of the *Kampong* charm and beauty will be lost, but it is hoped that in time a model suburb will be created in which Malay life may flourish free from the inquisitiveness of other oriental races.¹⁴⁴

The Malay Agricultural Settlement would remain, but as a suburb in the style of the Malay Reservations. Impossible as it was to prevent Malays from participating in economic progress, the British would just have to content themselves with protecting them in whatever way they still could, if only for a little while longer.

¹⁴⁴ Annual Report 1926, Malay Agricultural Settlement Kuala Lumpur. 10 February, 1927. SSSF 912/1927.

Conclusion

Even during the twilight years of British Malaya, colonial officials had still not quite worked out a straightforward approach to administering this colony. By the late 1930s, tin was on the verge of running out, and in the opinion of the Senior Warden of Mines, the FMS' reserves had no more than fourteen years before they were completely depleted – an alarming prospect indeed, when Malaya was producing more than a quarter of the world's tin at that time.¹ Yet, as the High Commissioner of the FMS, Sir Shenton Thomas, pointed out in a 1937 despatch to the Colonial Secretary, it was still possible to stave off the inevitable for just a little while longer. As Thomas described it, there were still “large areas of land locked up in forest and Malay reserves, in rice cultivation, and of course in rubber” and it stood to reason that some tin-ore was still left to mine beneath these places. “There are thus conflicting interests”, he wrote, “and the task of the Malayan Governments is to reconcile them.”²

Pursuing this course of action, Thomas promptly requested and then received a series of documents that detailed how other colonies within the British Empire's vast circuit-board of colonies had dealt with similar problems. All this additional information, however, came to nought, as despite being equipped with examples from places such as Kenya and Sierra Leone, Thomas' subordinates still could not agree on a course of action. Hashing out their options in the form of scrawled minutes on the file itself, officials ultimately settled on the fact that there should be “no material difficulty in dealing with each case, as it arose”. Additionally, if the British were ever called upon “to do the right thing”, the profits from mining would simply mean they had the money to do so.³

In a manner reminiscent of the endeavours that have been detailed in this thesis, there was to be no central, unifying policy here, as administrators were evidently expected to make up their own directives as they went along. While the planned destruction of official documents in the lead up to the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1941 means that we might never know how such a proposal was ever implemented, if at all, these brief interactions demonstrate how

¹ Appendix 1, “World and Malayan Production of Tin-in-Concentrates, 1851-1964,” in Yat Hoong Yip, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1969), 392-393; T.W.S. Thomas to W.G.A. Ormsby-Gore. Letter, 2 December 1937. CO 717/133/15.

² Ibid, CO 717/133/15.

³ Ibid.

even right up to the very end, British rule was still characterised by administrative disorder.⁴

As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, a great proportion of British Malaya's administration was beset by a sense of haphazardness and incoherence. Despite taking charge of a colony whose success was predicated on the extraction of natural resources such as tin and rubber, the writings and actions of British officials evidenced a longstanding struggle to articulate a unified direction for this colony. Questions of what the British *could* and *should* do with such a valuable place conflicted with concerns about the effects of colonial rule. Meanwhile, other officials also struggled with the pressing issue of how, exactly, these projects should be enacted. Simultaneously, I have argued that the existence of imperial networks did not mean that British Malaya's connections with other colonies were necessarily helpful, or even functional. Although British Malaya was integrated into a sprawling imperial network, the slapdash attitudes of local colonial administrators did little to render its position useful. In this case, British Malaya may have been part of an imperial circuit-board, but it was a tenuously connected node.

In foregrounding the disorderly nature of this administrative process, my thesis has sought to contribute to historical understandings of how officials in British Malaya understood their local environment and navigated imperial networks for its improvement. Given the centrality of Malaya as a source of tin and rubber to the rest of the British Empire, most works on this region have generally focussed on issues surrounding resource extraction – be it in the form of mining, forestry, or plantation agriculture. Correspondingly, contributions from scholars such as Colin Barlow, James C. Jackson, and Amarjit Kaur centre on either the material processes, or socioeconomic resonations of these activities.⁵ The importance of these works notwithstanding, the overall narrative that they present is a largely teleological one, where British Malaya's administration seemingly arrived at their purposes for this colony in a

⁴ Other documents were also lost due to looting and administrative mismanagement during this time. See: Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 6-8.

⁵ See, for instance: Colin Barlow, *The Natural Rubber Industry: Its Development, Technology, and Economy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978); Yip Yat-Hoong, *The Development of the Tin-mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969); Amarjit Kaur, "Plantation systems, labour regimes and the state in Malaysia, 1900-2012," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 14, no.2 (2014): 190-213; James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya 1786-1921* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968); Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and their agricultural economy in colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press), 1977; Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation: Forests and Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005).

straightforward and logical manner.

What my thesis has aspired to do, then, is write against this notion. Malaya's wealth of natural resources meant that many of its colonial projects were rooted in the dual concerns of mining and planting, but in shifting the focus away from these activities and their associated effects, this thesis highlights instead the administrative disorder that underwrote such actions. To do so, I foreground the importance of the environment itself, rather than the economic processes that were enacted upon it. By looking in particular at how officials approached the many possibilities that Malaya's environment seemed to offer, this study of colonial environmental attitudes allows for a more complex story of British rule to be told – one where administrators did not easily arrive at successful mines and plantations, but instead took a far more winding route, full of false starts and untimely ends.

As I have shown, colonial rule was never an assured, or even straightforward outcome for Malaya. From the very formation of new settlements in Penang and the Malay States, officials approached these regions with a veritable menagerie of oft-contradictory directions in mind. Many administrators were influenced by discourses of tropicality, while others were more preoccupied with visions of financial gain, or an idealised version of a more pristine, rural past. Examining the various tensions that came with either trying to choose between projects, or make disparate ones compatible with each other, I contend that the colony of British Malaya was raised within an atmosphere of administrative confusion and dissonance.

These projects were in turn facilitated and indeed, generated by the presence of imperial networks. Numerous horizontal, inter-colony connections did not merely serve to link British Malaya into different webs of transfer and exchange; they allowed for misinformation and misunderstandings to travel between different points of contact, too. In the realm of imperial network scholarship, works from Tony Ballantyne, Antoinette Burton, and Alan Lester have examined how inter-colony connections factored into the making of Empire, while James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O'Gorman's organising system of eco-cultural networks demonstrate that these linkages were similarly present in an environmental context.⁶ As I

⁶ See: Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the reach of the global: 1870-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012); Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4, no. 1 (2006): 124-141; James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O'Gorman "Introduction: Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire, 1837-1945," in *Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire*:

suggest, however, the overall functionality of imperial networks might have been somewhat overstated, at least as they pertain to the workings of empire in British Malaya.

Though Ballantyne's web configuration accounts for the fragility of networks and their propensity to breakage, this thesis demonstrates that they could be much more dysfunctional than this model implies.⁷ To better illustrate this, I introduce the visual metaphor of an imperial circuit-board, where places like Penang and the Malay States functioned as individual nodes and their administrators, as conduits. With the precarious movements of correspondence, materials, and ideas taking the place of electrical currents, the circuit-board metaphor demonstrates how Malaya's connections to other colonies were capable of malfunction and even complete breakdown at times, the effects of which only served to sow further administrative discord. British Malaya in this context was thus not a well-connected node that emitted a strong, steady pink light of imperial significance. Rather, it was one more prone to misfired signals and constant flickering, as its integration into the circuit relied on ineffective connections and officials who acted as unreliable conduits. In sum, the tenuousness of British Malaya's relationship with the rest of the circuit-board demonstrates the possibility of networks being less serviceable and practical than previously suggested.

To bring these central arguments together, I have also foregrounded the role of colonial environmental attitudes, so as to better encompass the variety of projects that British officials enacted in Malaya – the fruitful, the failed, and everything in between. Consequently, this method suggests a more precise way of recovering the numerous ideas about Malaya's environment and its uses that were circulating during this time, as well as their role in forming colonial policies. Using this lens to uncover how British officials came to not only hold such disparate views, but also act upon them, this thesis offers a new reading of British Malaya's environmental history: one where its cultural aspects are supplemented with contributions from the material and political realms. With the exception of works from scholars such as Fiona Williamson and Corey Ross, the cultural environmental histories of British Malaya are still largely driven by scholarship that investigates various genres of colonial writing – fiction and recollections, for instance, or travelogues.⁸ Further abroad, most

New Views on Environmental History eds. James Beattie, Edward Melillo and Emily O'Gorman (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 3-20.

⁷ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 15.

⁸ See: Corey Ross, "The tin frontier: Mining, empire, and environment in Southeast Asia, 1870s-1930s," *Environmental History* 19, no.3 (2014): 454-479; Fiona Williamson, "Malaysia's Greatest Menace? Slow-onset

cultural environmental histories have also tended to privilege colonies such as British India and the Netherlands East Indies, these investigations in turn often foregrounding discourses of tropicity and their ensuing colonial hopes or anxieties.⁹

To better engage with these historiographies of environment and empire, my thesis takes into account recent developments in the scholarship of imperial networks. At the same time, my focus on British Malaya has advanced two arguments: first, that the methods used in this cultural environmental history of British Malaya might function as a useful template for investigating the haphazard quality of imperial circuits, and second, that an in-depth examination of colonial environmental attitudes can offer new insights into the administrative dissonance that characterised British rule in this place. The complex question of *how* British Malayan officials perceived their environments is thus inextricable from the equally complicated issue of *what* they intended to do with Malaya. Given that administrators were not beholden to a single, unified method of interacting with Malaya's surroundings, the prevalence of these different environmental perceptions in the midst of multi-directional and indeed, multi-layered imperial networks meant that British Malaya was never governed by a uniform colonial vision.

Beginning with Penang in Chapter 1, I examined how late-eighteenth century administrators of the East India Company went about the complicated business of establishing a new colonial settlement – a new node within the Company's ever-expanding imperial circuit board of holdings. From its very inception, however, British Penang occupied a tenuous position within Empire. With the Company's Board of Directors constantly ambivalent as to

Disaster and the Muddy Politics of British Malaya, C.1900-50," *International Review of Environmental History* 4, no.2 (2018): 45-69; Victor R. Savage and Lily Kong, "The Malay world in colonial fiction," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 7, no. 1 (1986): 40-52; Susan Morgan, *Place Matters: Gendered geography in Victorian women's travel books about Southeast Asia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 135-175; Victor R. Savage and Lily Kong, "Hugh Clifford and Frank Swettenham: Environmental Cognition and the Malayan Colonial Process," *Asian Profile* 22 (1994): 295-309; S. Robert Aiken, "Images of Nature in Swettenham's Early Writings: Prolegomenon to a Historical Perspective on Peninsular Malaysia's Ecological Problems" *Asian Studies* 11, no. 3 (1973): 135-152.

⁹ See: David Arnold, "'Illusory Riches': representations of the tropical world, 1840-1950," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21, no.1 (2000): 6-18; Felix Driver and Luciana Martins eds., *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds. *Nature, culture, imperialism: essays on the environmental history of South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1856* (Delhi, Permanent Black: 2005); Peter Boomgaard, David Henley, and Freek Colombijn, *Paper Landscapes: Explorations in the Environmental History of Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press 1997); Susie Protschky, *Images of the tropics environment and visual culture in colonial Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011).

whether Penang was worth their time and effort, local administrators turned to using tropical discourses of health and fertility to foreground the island's numerous benefits. In this context, these material descriptions of Penang demonstrate the lack of surety that plagued its colonial founding, as well as how British rule was predicated on multiple tropical visions of the island.

Continuing this story into the early-nineteenth century, Chapter 2 elaborated on the circuit board metaphor by visualising Penang as a flickering, ill-connected node. Integrated into the Company's broader circuit of settlements, yet also peripheral to the administrative nodes of Bengal and London, this contradictory position meant that Penang's colonial government struggled to maintain both its first Botanic Garden and cash-cropping industry. As I argue, the transfer of misinformation and presence of unreliable conduits contributed to the eventual failure of the Gardens, while the irregularities of correspondence between nodes threw the Penang Council's attempts to find a viable cash-crop into disarray. Taken in sum, the example of Penang during this period succinctly encapsulates how nodes within an imperial circuit were first established with various colonial projects in mind, and then rendered dysfunctional by their tenuous connections.

With the onset of British intervention in the Malay States during the late-nineteenth century, these themes of administrative disorder were transferred onto the mainland. Chapter 3, then, focused on the internal administrative discord within the newly established node of the Malay States. Drawing once again from tropical discourses, British officials seeking to justify colonial intervention interweaved the dual myths of the profligate and lazy native into descriptions of the Malay States' fertile, yet neglected environment. Following that, officials also had to confront the contradictions of colonial economic expansion. While mining offered lucrative financial returns, many administrators voiced their support for agricultural expansion instead, as the latter allowed them to pursue dreams of having both an 'ideal' colonial society and physical setting – these in turn being influenced by feudal visions of a more rural, perfect past. British Malayan officials thus imposed a slew of environmental perceptions onto this region, though as this chapter asserts, the conflicting nature of their ensuing colonial projects meant that the Malay States were not governed by a single, unifying vision.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the founding of a number of important colonial establishments had helped to entrench British rule. In Chapter 4, I examined the messy origins of the Department of Agriculture for the FMS to trace how the Department suffered from the unhappy combination of misaligned priorities and dysfunctional imperial networks. As seen with Penang's first Botanic Garden, the Department was similarly ill-connected into inter-colony circuits of knowledge exchange. Though botanical experts certainly looked across these connections for ideas as to how their Department should be run, the prevalence of infighting, incompetency, and misaligned priorities meant that these examples were simply not utilised in any meaningful way. Indeed, as examples such as H.N. Ridley and the Department's revolving door of Directors suggest, these connections even served to highlight the internal disorder amongst colonial administrators.

During the same period, British desires for a stable, feudal society in Malaya were further elaborated on via the creation of the Malay Agricultural Settlement (MAS) and Reservations. Exploring the messy foundations of these two establishments, Chapter 5 considered how British officials grappling with the contradictions of colonial rule turned to preserving and protecting the 'traditional' lives of Malay peasantry. Having raised British Malaya's colonial economy on the cornerstones of mining and plantation agriculture, officials continued to harbour long-standing anxieties about their ill-effects on rural Malay societies. Closing with this now-familiar story of administrative haphazardness and disorder, I use this chapter to argue that British attempts to redress the contradictions of economic expansion and sociocultural change were held back by the incoherence that was inherent in their rule.

From the very start of British intervention in this region, officials attempted to promote multiple, often disparate colonial projects at once. Examining these through the framework of colonial environmental perceptions, I have argued that this was a colony of varied visions and disorderly administrative conduct. In Chapter 1, officials were influenced by anxieties about health and Penang's continued relevance to the broader Empire, while in Chapters 3 and 5, colonial preferences and policies were the messy product of attempts to reconcile the necessity of economic development with its unintended social effects. At the same time, this was also an interconnected colony. As demonstrated in Chapters 2 and 4 in particular, the discordant qualities of British Malaya's administration were further exacerbated by the colony's tenuous integration and participation in broader imperial circuits. Just as the transfer of misinformation via unreliable conduits mired gardens and entire industries in difficulty, so

too did administrative confusion negate the potential utility of these horizontal, inter-colony connections.

In sum, the five case studies of this thesis have collectively demonstrated how examining colonial environmental attitudes can reveal the experimental policies, malfunctioning imperial networks, and administrative incoherence of British Malaya. This was not just a colony of mines and plantations, where British rule was smoothly advanced with clear intent. Rather, British Malaya was also a place of confusion – where officials acted in haphazard ways and imperial circuits served to further entrench administrative disorder, so much so that colonial rule was never a sure, nor straightforward endeavour there.

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