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THE GOVERNORSHIP OF SIR WILLIAM ROBINSON IN THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS: 1877-1879

Sir William Robinson was the Governor of the Straits Settlements from October 1877 to February 1879. Robinson's presence in Malaysian history is practically non-existent, because of the dismissive statements of later commentators and the short length of his tenure. Robinson's relish of the governor's ceremonial role also contributed to his unpopularity by making him seem distant to the Straits community. Politically, Robinson continued the policy of indirect rule in the Malay States. However, he had concerns about its stability and the authority of the Residents in administering, preferring instead a policy of annexation. However, his suggestions were politely set aside by a Colonial Office resistant to change and also by the differing Malay States policy of his successor, Sir Frederick Weld. Conducted using qualitative methods, this research also used a wide range of primary sources including Colonial Office and Admiralty records, government gazettes, newspapers, and private correspondence. This study presents a more in-depth assessment of Robinson's contribution to Malaysian history, and finds that, despite Robinson's uncontroversial and smooth governance of the colony, the failure of his annexation policy in the Malay States overshadowed his achievements, making his tenure seem undistinguished.

Keywords: *Sir William Robinson, Governor, Straits Settlements, Nineteenth-century, Malaya*

Introduction

Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson was and is among the least well known of the many governors who served the Straits Settlements and Malaya during the colonial era. Most academics would probably not known of his existence, as he served for the short duration of 15 months before returning to England on leave. A large part of this neglect stems from his short tenure, another from the pens of authors and scholars, who tends to belittle his tenure. Even amongst his contemporaries Robinson has little mention. For instance, Sir Frank Swettenham, writing in his book *British Malaya*, has this sole, dismissive, statement, that "when Sir William Jervois left Singapore, early in 1877, he

was succeeded by a civilian, Sir W, C. F. Robinson, who never visited the Malay States during the eighteen months he remained in Singapore".[1] This statement was later found to be false, but was repeated by later historians like V.G Kiernan,[2] and probably contributed to the lack of scholarly interest in Robinson's tenure. The most extensive coverage granted to Robinson was in Emily Sadka's work *The Protected Malay States*, which describes the actions Robinson took in regards to the Residents and the Residential System. However, even the normally extensive research Sadka applies also falls short for Robinson's tenure, explaining the course of actions rather and the reasons for it.[3] It is believed that after Sadka, there has not been any research on Malaya for Robinson. This lack of interest is baffling as Robinson boasted an extensive experience in colonial affairs even before his arrival in Malaya. Hence, to rectify that, the aim of this article is to provide a more in-depth assessment of Robinson's tenure and his contributions towards policy in Malaya.

William Francis Cleaver Robinson was the fourth son of Admiral Hercules Robinson and Frances Elizabeth Wildman-Wood.[4] Born in Rosmead, now in County Wesmeath, in the Republic of Ireland, Robinson belonged to the minor gentry, where his family had a history of respectable public service, ranging from Members of Parliament, clergy and the law. His father had served in the Battle of Trafalgar under the legendary Admiral Horatio Nelson, and the sense of overseas service was probably imparted early on to the Robinson brothers, two of which served in the Royal Navy and two, including William, who served in the Colonial Service.[5] William's entry into the Colonial Service came in 1858, when he was Private Secretary[6] to his elder brother Hercules, later 1st Baron Rosmead, in St. Kitts and later in Hong Kong. He later embarked on his own colonial career when he was appointed President of Monserrat in 1862. In the same year, Robinson married Olivia Edith Deane, who was the daughter of a Bishop of Meath.[7] Later appointments were as Administrator of Dominica in 1865, Governor of the Falkland Islands from 1866 to 1870, Governor of Prince Edward Island from 1870 to 1873, nominated Governor of the Leeward Islands in 1874, and Governor of Western Australia from 1874 to 1877. Robinson's accomplishments during those years were: initiating the development of West Falklands and improving the financial health of the colony, and successfully persuading the islanders of Prince Edward Island to agree to a union with Canada[8] Whilst serving in Western Australia, he received news of his appointment to the Straits Settlements.

By a curious coincidence, William was not the only family member to make his mark of Malayan affairs. Sir Hercules Robinson was consulted by the Colonial Office to look into the financial condition of the Straits to see the feasibility of its Transfer from the India Office to the Colonial Office.[9] Another contribution was the Cadetship system, whereby candidates selected by open examination were sent East to learn Chinese for the purpose as interpreters to the courts.[10] Originally created for Hong Kong, the system was extended

to Ceylon and the Straits and produced many talented and capable officials such as Frank Swettenham and Cecil Clementi Smith. Another brother, Frederick, was the Senior Naval Officer of the Royal Navy's Straits Division and "commanded the tool by which any intervention would have to take place".[11] This tool was HMS *Rinaldo*, which under Frederick's command was to bombard the stockades at Cape Rachado in an excuse to eliminate piracy. The action demonstrated to London the so-called dangers of disorder in the Malay States, thus paving the way for intervention.

Robinson's Arrival

Robinson had the distinction of being the first civilian appointee as Governor since the formation of the Straits Settlements as a Crown Colony in 1867. The previous three incumbents, Sir Harry Ord, Sir Andrew Clarke and Sir William Jervois were all military men who accepted colonial appointments. Robinson's appointment was first publicly announced within the Colony on 2 July 1877.[12] The news of Robinson's appointment was met with guarded approval, with the *Singapore Daily Times* noting that

> [i]f an experience extending over a period of twenty-two years under the Colonial Office *regime* can make a good governor, then Mr. Robinson ought to be one. On the other hand, it is just possible, that having been such an old Colonial *employeè,* the Secretary of State has chosen him as a ready and disciplined tool to carry out instructions and do nothing more.[13]

It was the earnest wish of the Straits community to have a governor who would be willing to spend time in the colony to enact policies they favoured. While Ord had made himself universally detested, the tenures of both Clarke and Jervois had been generally well received; their only complaint being their short stay, which they felt was not enough, as any experience learnt was wasted due to their transfer away from the colony.

Robinson arrived at Singapore from Western Australia on 29 October 1877 to a hearty welcoming reception. In his speech to the assembled dignitaries, Robinson expressed the hope that

> The period of my administration may be marked by a revival of commercial activity and profitable trade, by the maintenance of peace and good government in the native States, by useful measures of progressive legislature, and by the existence of cordial relations between myself and the general community.[14]

The governor presided over his first Legislative Council meeting on 16th November.[15] His speech was well received, with the *Singapore Daily Times* commenting, "will commend itself at once, for its ability, modesty, good sense, and excellent tone, [which] promises well for the future relations between His Excellency and the Colony." Robinson declared

> [i]n a community such as this, I think it is especially desirable that the policy and instructions of the Government should be known and understood by the public. I propose to offer you the fullest information in my power on all questions…and as the views and wishes of the Members of your Honourable Council will at times receive at my hands the most respectful and impartial consideration, I trust that our intercourse may be marked by cordial personal relations, and that out present and future deliberations may result in progressive and beneficial legislation.[16]

The *Straits Times Overland Journal* noted that "[as] we have the advantage of a Civil Governor, it is to be hoped the affairs of the Colony will not be again sacrificed to the external diplomacy of the Malayan Peninsula."[17] The European community was anxious for Robinson to devote more time to the affairs of the Straits as they felt that both his predecessors Clarke and Jervois were more interested in the Malay States at the expense of the colony.

Robinson's Administration

In an interview he gave after his retirement, Robinson recounted his method of governing, which bears quoting at length.

> It is the question of work and responsibility, rather than the actual governing of a Crown Colony, that requires deft manipulation…[I]n order to govern without friction it is essential to win the respect as well as the confidence of the country; conflicting opinions should be harmonised, and public judgement ought to be tempered with expanding ideas of development and union. Political disturbances and great periods of depression fall to our lot not infrequently, and in such times one is in constant touch with the various and many-sided life of one's community. To know the correct and judicious thing to say at the right and propitious moment is a matter of serious mental debate to all who hold public positions.[18]

While it was said at a time of over 40 years' experience, and mostly applied to Robinson's time in Australia, the basic tenets of governance would have also applied during his time in the Straits.

Robinson's first official act as Governor was to pass an Ordinance allowing the Jewish community in Singapore to erect a synagogue of their own.[19] The fifteen months of his tenure was filled with ongoing administrative work related to improving the Colony. For instance, Robinson signed into law a lengthy reform of the legal system, with Ordinance IV of 1878 devoted in reconstituting the courts of law.[20] Other related acts were the establishment of a committee reviewing the performance of police forces in the Colony, the establishment of a Post Office Savings Bank and others.[21] Such work was typical of the colonial governors of the time, and Robinson was no different. A material contribution Robinson brought to the Colony was in petitioning and obtaining approval from London to allow the installation of a telegraphic line connecting Malacca with Penang and Singapore.[22] An anonymous writer commented that with this act "The name of Sir William Robinson will ever be gratefully remembered by the inhabitants if not of the Straits Settlements at least by those of the 'Sleepy Hollow' for having conferred such a great boon on them by placing Malacca in telegraphic communication with the rest of the world.[23] However, Robinson's contributions to the material development of the Colony went unrecognised as his time there was simply too short for any long-lasting changes.

This was reflected in the yearly Estimates, of which Robinson presided for the years 1878 and 1879. While 1878 was notably austere, the possible reason being the costs of the Perak War, the sums of expenditure for 1879 were noticeable larger, with an increase of more than $170,000 from those of the previous years. For 1878, a sum of $1,604,997 was approved with the greatest portions going to the Establishment.[24] In the event, the actual expenditure even fell short, with only $1,574,415 being actually recorded during the year, with the reductions being attributed to a lesser-than-expected military contribution rate and a decrease in spending on public works.[25] Most of these "savings" were in fact an extended policy of austerity towards public works caused by the debt outstanding for the costs of the Perak War incurred during Jervois' time. In contrast, the approved expenditure for 1879 was $1,777,000 of which the actual sum was an even greater $1,887,009.[26] While most of the expenditure of both years went to the colonial administration and servicing the military contribution, a larger sum was allocated for the construction of public works, of which the Malacca telegraphic cable was an example. This shows Robinson's commitment towards improving the physical well-being of the Straits Settlements. While the governor's financial policies went unremarked, the manner of its presentation was the opposite. Robinson was a polished public speaker on a variety of topics, as his inaugural address to the Straits Settlements Legislative Council above bears out. This could be a hard act to follow, as seen by the reception accorded a speech of Colonel Anson, who officiated as Administrator after Robinson's departure. The *Singapore Daily Times* wrote scathingly, calling Anson's speech, "a most ineffective fashion…

expressed in very slipshod English- the language being so obscure…a sad want of perceptive about the speech…[which] reminds one by contrast of the polished paragraphs in which Sir William Robinson would have announce the flourishing conditions of the Colony".[27]

Unfortunately for Robinson, his oratory skills did not guarantee him a permanent spot in popularity. From the almost entire absence of his name and actions in later years, Robinson was one of the least popular governors of the colony.[28] A large part of this unpopularity stemmed from Robinson's relish in the gubernatorial prestige conferred upon him. This was noticed by no less a person than his brother Hercules, who remarked to Jervois in a private letter that "my brother seems to be going in a little too strong for ceremonials but on the whole the people seem to like him and have voted another £1,000 for allowances."[29] While that was said early on in Robinson's reign, the good impression did not last. F.K. Crowley noted that Robinson "was not as warm and genial in official relationships".[30] This reserve may be due to his personality or his intolerance of the tropical climate, which made him ill, but it did not make for good public relations. Signs that the community were unhappy was recounted in a letter by Lieutenant H.E. McCallum to Jervois,[31] relating "the inhospitality of the present Government House…[which] a lapse of 18 months had made heavy gaps in the former Government House visiting list."[32] The reason of this inhospitality was elaborated further by McCallum, who wrote that

> Both Sir William Robinson and Lady Robinson are frightfully stiff, very little given to entertainment of hospitality of any sort although he gets an extra £1,000 per annum towards the same. He is very much afraid to take any responsibility and the slightest thing goes to the Secretary of State. William the Taciturn is his local sobriquet…He has a row with the Navy which has been given against him (he would not send his card to any naval officer in command expect an Admiral on whom of course he called personally). Now he is engaged in a row with the Commandant on the subject of guards of honour …

The "row with the Navy" was another example of Robinson's obsession with ceremonials which also lowered his personal popularity. Besides the Straits community, Robinson also entertained various passing military officers, particularly from ships of the Royal Navy (RN). Unfortunately, Robinson's love of ceremony led him to fall out with the Senior Naval Officer of the area. The presence of the RN was important as almost the sole mobile offensive force the British had, barring the troops of the Singapore garrison. Robinson fell afoul of Captain George Bosanquet, the Senior Naval Officer in the Straits, regarding the proper protocol for the interchange of visits between RN officers and the governor. The incident would have been a minor one had

not Robinson insisted on raising the issue at the Colonial Office to gain his point. Bosanquet's letters to the governor betrays a frustration with Robinson bordered on bluntness, which probably execrated the incident. Bosanquet was backed by his superior officer Admiral Hillyer and the Admiralty, which later found in Bosanquet's favour. Forcing the issue, Robinson wrote that "if you and your brother officers think differently, I shall be quite willing to refer the remit home for consideration, which would be far better than any excuses should exist on the subject."[33] In reply, Bosanquet fumed "That it should have cropped up in the year 1878, as one of the most carrion episodes of official life out of England."[34] To douse the flames Robinson replied conciliatorily that

> I am afraid we must agree to differ as to the meaning of the new regulations…I have always regarded the intercourse between governors and Naval Officers, other than the Senior Naval Officer in command, as…more of a social than an official character. I hope I need hardly say that if they tell me from home that your view is correct I shall be perfectly ready to adopt it…[35]

Later, taking Robinson's words of agreeing to differ literally, Bosanquet allowed the Commander of HMS *Thistle*, one of the visiting ships, permission to call officially on the Governor. As per Robinson's views, the visit was not acknowledged, prompting a further flurry of angry letters, with both parties arguing on points. The verdict came in September when Bosanquet's view was upheld by the Admiralty and agreed to by the Colonial Office.[36] The incident temporary strained the relations between the Royal Navy and the Governor. Later that year, Robinson was incensed that, upon his return to Singapore after a visit to Batavia, he was not accorded a Royal Navy gun salute, in contrast with Maharajah Abu Bakar of Johor, who was accorded one upon his return from a visit to England. These incidents appear to validate Sir Hercules Robinson's and McCallum's assertions that the governor was indeed "going a bit too strong for ceremonials", the net result of which was his decreasing popularity in the Straits.

Robinson and the Malay States

As with most governors, the affairs of the neighbouring Malay States occupied most of Robinson's time in the colony. After retirement, he regarded as his most important work as Governor of the Straits Settlements was in defining the relationship between the Residents and the Malay States, which he considered "required the greatest possible handling".[37] Robinson outlined his views in a 21-page confidential memorandum to the Colonial Office after his return to England.[38] While affirming Lord Carnarvon's instructions of 1 June 1876[39] that the Residents were to serve as advisers to the Malay States and nothing more,

Robinson had realised the illogical and contradictory situation whereby the Residents were in all but name emerging as the actual administrators of the states they were supposed to be advising.

The main event that spurred Robinson's request for clarification was the arbitrary action of the Resident of Selangor, Bloomfield Douglas, who had suspended a Malay member of Council on the charge of attempting to bribe a magistrate. As this violated in essence the wording of Lord Carnarvon's policy despatch, Robinson issued a stern warning to the Residents, writing that "the Residents have been placed in the Native States as advisers, not as rulers, and... if they take it upon themselves to disregard this principle, they will most assuredly be held responsible if trouble springs out of their neglect of it".[40] Although the occasion of independent action by the Residents in regards to state administration and revenue collection were well underway, Douglas was singled out for censure as his actions savoured dangerously of personal gain rather than in the interests of his nominal superiors in Selangor, the Sultan. Sadka notes a similar advocation towards independent action was voiced by Hugh Low, the Resident of Perak, who protested strongly that unless he could control the Rajah Muda of Perak, his position would be untenable, and that he was quite prepared to take the responsibility for the course he was pursuing.[41] Unlike Douglas, Low was of a different calibre altogether, being deemed valuable for maintaining the delicate political situation in Perak. In Low's case, Robinson replied in a conciliatory tone, "[t]he advice which the Resident gives is authoritative advice and may not be lightly rejected…All the same the fiction (if such you prefer to call it) that the Residents are merely advisers must be kept up, and here is just where the adroitness and ability of the Officer are so important…"[42] Low was simply too valuable and capable to be aggrieved, as Robinson realised, saying "[i]f more officers of Mr. Low's calibre could be procured for the money we can afford to pay…the position would be less dangerous than it is…".[43]

The contradiction between the actual roles of the Residents was one that Robinson found extremely uncomfortable to sustain, despite his previous assertions for the Residents to act as advisers.

> That Government should hold the Residents responsible for the administration of the country, for its peace, its collection and proper expenditure of its income, the [] of criminals, and the administration of justice, and at the same time impress upon them non-interference in matters of detail, and matters of Malay custom, is a position almost impossible for any man to hold…Of course Government is constantly impressing on the Residents the necessity of doing everything in the name of the Chief Native Authority and on no account to exceed their proper functions as Residents. That is the theory of the system, and we have over and over again told the Residents that they will be held

> responsible if trouble springs out of their neglect of it. But practically it is not, and cannot be strictly observed, and I must candidly admit that it would not be for the benefit of the States themselves that it should be strictly observed.[44]
>
> In such an avowal of Residential action, Robinson was implicitly asking for a redefinition of the "advisory" role that the Residents had announced till now. Robinson stressed the virtues of the British presence in the Malay States, announcing that progress there has not been brought about by advice alone, nor by avoiding questions where differences of opinion might be expected with the Malays, nor by refraining from indifference in matters of detail. It has been done by pointing out the right path by saying it must be followed, and by the strength of will and influence obliging it to be followed, even though the questions were one involving a Malay custom – a very wide term – and especially be personally dealing with every matter of detail in the administration.[45]

The solution as Robinson saw it, was giving "early consideration… to the question whether Government looks forward to the ultimate annexation of the Protected States…". Robinson then goes into his reasons for supporting annexation, His arguments were:

i The inability to develop the Malay States as they were because of the lack of European Capital
ii The unstable political situation in the Malay States, and the reliance on an extremely few number of officials *in situ*

For form's sake, Robinson also included a number of arguments against annexation, although his heart was obviously not in it, these reasons were:

i Uncertainty whether the revenues of the colony could support Establishment costs in the Malay States.
ii The inexpediency of involving ourselves in increased and somewhat inefficient responsibilities.
iii The improbability of putting a sudden stop to the practice of Debt Slavery and the equal improbability of allowing it to continue under British rule.
iv The probability of foreign intervention if, as I understand, we formerly interpreted to present the extension of French territory in Cochin China.

However, the arguments against annexation Robinson listed were actually implicit reasons to support annexation. Robinson argued that the political position of the Malay States was still delicate and unstable, and "an effective remedy for this would be to annex the States and convert them into British territory and therefore, the constant danger of renewed political disturbance may be fairly be used as an argument in favour of annexation."[46] A further indication of Robinson's annexationist stance was that his arguments against annexation was made on an unrealistic premise of "withdrawing from all further interference in their affairs as soon as their condition and capacity for self-government shall have so far benefitted by our example and advice as to furnish a reasonable belief that we should be justified in leaving them to their own resources."[47] As Robinson well knew, such an option was completely unrealistic and would not be even considered by the Colonial Office, as withdrawal would mean a loss in British prestige in the region.

Robinson's conclusions about the delicate political situation of the Malay States were formed by his tour to the States in early 1878, as well as later events, in particular the murder of Superintendent Lloyd of Dindings by disgruntled Chinese. Robinson singled out Perak as being particularly challenging to handle, despite the brilliance of Low.

> Perak is in many respects different from the other two States. It is a State infinitely more difficult to administer and where the people will require very careful and judicious handling for some time to come. [Low] is an experienced magistrate and as no complaints are made against his decisions, [unlike] at Kuala Kangsar, where the Rajah Muda resides, and where native judges often sit alone. They administer Malay justice, that is what we would call injustice, and the Resident rules under his instructions, having obstinate men to deal with, finds it very difficult to intervene.
>
> In Selangor and Sungei Ujong the chiefs are only anxious to have everything done for them by the Residents, and to accept the Governor's advice, but the Rajah Muda of Perak is a man of a different stamp, he is an able man but self-willed to a degree, and often it is with the greatest trouble that Mr. Low can keep him straight, and reproach him, already disliked by a large majority in Perak, from doing something foolish which could acerbate the dislike into violence.[48]

Robinson had actually met Rajah Muda Yusuf during his tour.[49] From his own observations, and most likely from private discussions with Low, Robinson evidently found little to like about Rajah Yusuf. While the governor's initial public response to his tour of inspection was somewhat positive, "in a

satisfactory and promising condition",[50] Robinson was not fully convinced of the tranquillity of a state which had only two years back raised debates in London.

The murder of Mr. Lloyd, the Superintendent of the Dindings, was another event which convinced Robinson of the delicate political balance in Perak. As with Rajah Yusuf, Robinson had also met and was introduced to the leading Chinese towkays of Perak, especially the heads of the Go Kwan and Si Kwan Secret Societies. Robinson had or was warned about the chaos produced by the conflicts of rival factions of secret societies in the pre-Pangkor Agreement days. The governor did not take kindly to their disputes, one of which occurred in Singapore two days before Christmas 1877. Robinson instructed the Colonial Secretary to "summon a meeting of the Headmen of the two societies and read to them a message from myself…showing them that severe repressive measures would be resorted to if the dispute was not settled."[51] In his note to the Colonial Secretary, Robinson stressed firmness, writing that "It appears to me important that the Headmen should be made aware that these are the instructions of the new Governor and I shall be obliged if you will leave no room for doubt or misapprehension on the subject."[52] To make sure his intentions were clear, the Government Gazette of 26 July 1878 carried an announcement that the Governor had the right to suspend or restore the Ordinance pertaining to Chinese Immigration, at all or any of the Straits Settlements.[53] The murder of Lloyd later that year appeared to have confirmed Robinson's concerns. He was extremely displeased that the Pangkor police had not made any steps to apprehend the murderers and considered them cowards, stressing that the force should be disbanded after an official enquiry was held in Penang.[54]

The governor's support for direct British control was also evident in the observations he made about the other independent Malay States, particularly Johor. He wrote that "[i]n the five years during which we have had Residents in the Native States, more has been done than they have accomplished in Johor, for instance, in 30 to 40 years."[55] Maharajah Abu Bakar had made a positive impression on Robinson, who had met him many times during the Maharajah's trips to Singapore, and during party invitations to the palace in Johor. For instance, The *Straits Times* reported on 29 December 1877 on a dinner given the previous day by the Maharajah, where Robinson and his wife were present.

> His Excellency the Governor and Lady Robinson, His Highness Prince Lichtenstein, and a party of 40 ladies and gentlemen at dinner at the Estana [sic], Johore, last evening. A shooting party, consisting of those guests who proceeded to Johore yesterday morning…[56]

The wily Maharajah was known to jealously safeguard Johor's independence from Western control by taking up Western modes of governance.

This show of independence was mildly irritating to Robinson, who wished the British to exert an influential mediating position, something which the Maharajah politely but firmly declined to do. Such an occasion was during the process of recognising the Maharajah as Ruler of the tiny district of Muar.[57] The Colonial Office had instructed Robinson to allow the recognition, citing the reason that "[i]n recognising the Maharajah as Ruler of Muar, you will do so in as quiet and unostentatious a manner as possible so as to show that the Government has no further concern than of a chief authority to approve the choice made by the people…"[58] However, the Maharajah disagreed with the governor's suggestion of acting as an arbiter in the matter of paying the allowances to the surviving claimants of Muar.[59]

All these collective experiences were the core of Robinson's appeal for annexation. However, mindful of the debacle that met his predecessor Jervois' own annexationist attempt, Robinson did not advocate for immediate action. Instead, he trod warily, writing that

> My own opinion is that annexation must sooner or later take place. It may not be necessary, indeed it would be undesirable, for government to show its hand at present, but if we cannot [retreat?] from the position and responsibilities which we have already assumed…then the only alternative is to acquiesce that annexation is inevitable and to shape our policy accordingly. In the course of a few years the States would be…so assimilated to the Colony in all matters of administration… that they would become practically one. The declaration of British territory…would then be a mere form.[60]

Robinson recommended that successive governors be appraised of this policy so they "would know how to act". Furthermore, Robinson ventured to suggest that assurances might be given "that there is no intention to recede from the position and responsibilities which had been assumed, and that persons desirous of investing their money in the States need be under no apprehension that the Countries will again be exposed to the anarchy and rapine which would assuredly result from the withdrawal of British control."[61]

Unfortunately, the prevailing opinion, both in the Colonial Office as well in the Residencies, were against Robinson's pln. His suggestion for "ultimate annexation" met with mixed feelings at the Colonial Office. While junior officers were in agreement with Robinson's views, senior officials were not as supportive, with one commenting that the notion of letting governors privy into the annexationist policy "would be a very dangerous knowledge or even idea to give a governor unless we are prepared to annex."[62] Sir Michael Hicks Beach was of the latter party, commenting that "for the present, let well alone".[63] The legacy of Sir William Jervois' disastrous policy was still fresh in everyone's minds, and to chart the same course would be to exchange to

illusory calm of the Pangkor Agreement period of Clarke to the expensive, controversial, and time-consuming policy Jervois had bungled.[64]

The most important factor for the failure of Robinson's annexationist policy was the attitude towards the Malay States taken by his successor as Governor Sir Frederick Weld. As Sadka comments, whatever a strong Governor could do during nearly eight years of office to preserve the independence of the states, Weld did.[65] Weld's enjoyment and relish of the independent authority he was given in the Malay States made him reject annexation. On the pretext that "the more rigid and complicated and expensive system of a political and legal organisation suited for a British Colony, does not admit of ".[66] Weld's later actions and views on the Malay States all stressed their distinct separation from the Straits Settlements, perpetuating the fiction that both were separate instead of different parts of a whole. He even went as far to state that "the Native States have their own laws, have their own Civil Service and make their own appointments and have their own defence force, subject only to the Governor".[67] No clearer admission of Weld's relish of power could be vouchsafed. It was Weld's authority, backed up by the tacit agreement of the Residents, that cemented the Residential System in stone in the Malay States.

End Of Tenure And Legacy

Robinson left the Colony on 9 February 1879 for England, ostensibly on leave. The traveller Isabella Bird's visit to Malaya coincided with the remaining weeks of Robinson's administration and she was able to meet Robinson a few days before his departure. She noted that even at the last days, matters of officialdom still continued, as

> [m]ost people have "axes to grind". There are people pushing rival claims, some wanting promotion, others leave, some frank and above-board in their ways, others descending to mean acts to gain favour, or undermining the good reputation of their neighbours; everybody wanting something, and usually as it seems, at the expense of somebody else![68]

Bird was later invited to be seated next to the departing governor, who had introduced her to Low and W.E. Maxwell. Her only personal remark on the governor was that he was "kind and courteous, and…interested himself in [Bird's] impressions of the native states."[69] Her conversations with officials reveal the uncertainty surrounding the governor's intentions. Among the many topics, "intensified by the recent visit of Sir W. Robinson" was one speculating whether he would return to the colony.

Robinson spent about a year in England before he took up another colonial posting, but this time back in Western Australia. Minutes at the

Colonial Office strongly suggests that Robinson would not have been removed from the post of Governor of the Straits Settlements after a mere 15 months in office, hence it is quite likely that Robinson himself requested for a new appointment.[70] The main reason for this was probably his health; Robinson could not stand the tropical climate of the Straits Settlements. Although there is no mention of ill health during his tenure there, the lack of entertainments at Government House, which McCallum deplored, was probably a sign of his unease in the climate. In later years he was to reject the governorship of Hong Kong, which carried the same salary as the Straits because of its climate. Robinson himself admitted the fact, when in his ceremonial address in 1880 upon returning to Western Australia, he noted "the climate of Singapore did not suit me".[71]

During his time in England, Robinson wrote his appraisal of the political situation in the Malay States described in the last section, and also performed other sundry tasks of service, like overseeing the final approval of the duplicate telegraph like connecting Malacca to Penang and Singapore. The following year, Robinson embarked on his next posting and reappointment as Governor of Western Australia. For the remainder of his colonial career, Robinson remained in Australia, serving between the colonies of Western Australia, South Australia and in an acting position in Victoria.

Despite his gifts as a colonial administrator, F.K. Crowley notes that Robinson "was not as genial or as warm in his official relationships". He was esteemed in Australia because of the long period in which he served there; his popularity in the Straits suffered because he did not serve long enough for the community to know him better. Accounts and memoirs by prominent Straits residents and administrators hardly, if at all, mention Robinson and his reputation.[72] Moreover, the public atmosphere in Government House lent an aura of authority which was probably not as conducive to personal relationships as the more detached realm of Western Australia.

Robinson died in 1897 "from an affectation of his throat" in his home in London. While the Australian newspapers carried fulsome and lengthy reports paying tribute to his services and his contribution to Australian cultural life, in contrast he was almost forgotten in the Straits. The *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* provided a short column in its 18 May issue, summarising his career, without any tributes to his Straits experience. It merely noted that "it is a strange thing that Reuter has not notified the Straits Settlements on the death of one of its former Governors, which news is given in an Indian telegram dated 3rd May."[73]

To the end, Robinson's achievements in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States were trifling because most of his suggestions were not acted upon. Robinson was not one of those governors who acted first and reported second; and this reason contributed to his unpopularity in the Straits community. Robinson's time as governor actually saw a material improvement

of the finances of the Colony, a credit to his stewardship. Moreover, Robinson's time presented an odd interlude of relative calm in the political arena, a fact which has been mostly ignored by his contemporaries, who would most likely prefer a hawkish governor like Clarke and Jervois. Ultimately, Robinson was a regular and conscientious governor who was less suited to the ever-changing dynamics of a complex area like Malaya. His gifts were those of a regular administrator, thriving in situations where regularity, order and direction reigned. The Straits Settlements just was not his best moment.

Endnotes

1. Swettenham, F.S. *British Malaya*, London, John Lane & Co, 1907, p.245.
2. Kiernan, V. G. Britain, Siam, and Malaya: 1875-1885, *The Journal of Modern History*, 28(1), 1956, p.6.
3. To Emily Sadka, Robinson's sole political act as Governor was to issue a warning calling for the clarification of the role of the Residents as advisers. The significance of this was the implicit recognition that the Residents were behaving more like administrators, thus showing the illogic of the term "advisers". See Sadka, E. *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1895*. Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1968, pp.102-104.
4. *The Age,* 4 May 1897.
5. The remaining brother, Sir Henry Robinson, occupied a succession of senior government posts in Ireland.
6. The post Private Secretary (Appointments) was made based on the patronage of any incoming colonial governor. Appointment by patronage was only abolished in 1930.
7. *The Australasian*, Saturday 8 May 1897.
8. For a description of Robinson's role in Canada see Bolger, F.W.P. "Prince Edward Island and Confederation." *Abegweit Review,* 1964, 8(1), pp.1-10 and Harvey, D. C. "Confederation in Prince Edward Island." *Canadian Historical Revie*w, 1933, 14(2), pp.143-160.
9. Rajendra, N. The Straits Settlements 1867 – 1874, M.A. Thesis, Australian National University, 1976, pp.17-32.
10. Lethbridge, H. J. "Hong Kong Cadets, 1862-1941." *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1970, 10, pp.36-56.
11. MacIntyre, W. D. Britain's Intervention in Malaya: The Origin of Lord Kimberley's Instructions to Sir Andrew Clarke in 1873, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1961, p.56.
12. *Singapore Daily Times*, 2 July 1877.
13. *Singapore Daily Times*, 10 July 1877.
14. *Singapore Daily Times*, 29 October 1877.

15. *Singapore Daily Times*, 17 November 1877.
16. Ibid.
17. *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 15 November 1877.
18. *The Album: A Journal of Photographs of Men and Women, and Events of the Day*, Volume II, London, Ingram Brothers, 1895, p.219.
19. CO 273/93/6173, Ordinance 1 of 1878; *The Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements*, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898, pp.406-408.
20. *The Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements*, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898, pp.432-442.
21. See CO 273/100/16595 for the Report on Police Commission and CO 273/93/4296 for the Post Office Savings Bank Ordinance.
22. CO 273/97/12684, Connection of Malacca by Submarine Cable with Singapore and Penang; CO273/97/13323, Connecting of Malacca by Submarine Cable with Singapore and Penang; CO 273/97/16331, Proposed Duplication of Cable between Singapore and Penang.
23. *Singapore Daily Times*, 30 December 1879.
24. Straits Settlements Government Gazette 1877, p.587.
25. Straits Settlements Government Gazette 1880, p.1191.
26. Straits Settlements Government Gazette 1878, p.1205; Straits Settlements Government Gazette 1880, p.1191
27. *Singapore Daily Times*, 25 July 1879.
28. The only governor more universally detested was Sir Harry Ord.
29. Papers of Sir William F. D. Jervois, Series 2, Letter from Hercules Robinson to William Jervois, 15 January 1878.
30. Crowley, F. K. *'Robinson, Sir William Cleaver Francis (1834–1897)'*, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, n.d. URL: https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/robinson-sir-william-cleaver-francis-4494/text7329 [Retrieved 11 February 2022].
31. Henry Edward McCallum was at Singapore to oversee the building of fortifications proposed by Jervois. McCallum had served as Jervois' Private Secretary during Jervois' governorship in the Straits, when amongst his many tasks was the survey of the defences of Singapore.
32. Papers of Sir William F. D. Jervois, Series 2, Letter from Henry E. McCallum to Jervois, 12 November 1878.
33. ADM 125/81, Letter from Robinson to Bosanquet, 27 June 1878.
34. ADM 125/81, Letter from Bosanquet to Robinson, 28 June 1878.
35. ADM 125/81, Letter from Robinson to Bosanquet, 29 June 1878.
36. ADM 125/81, Admiralty to Hillyer, 19 September 1878.
37. *The Album: A Journal of Photographs of Men and Women, and Events of the Day,* p.219.
38. CO 273/101/7139, Robinson to The Undersecretary of State, Colonial

Office, 29 April 1879.

39. CO 809/7, Carnarvon to Jervois, 1 June 1876.
40. CO 809/18, Circular to Residents, 17 May 1878, enclosed in Robinson to Hicks-Beach, 13 June 1878.
41. Sadka, E. *The Protected Malay States*, pp.102-104.
42. Robinson to Low, 9 June 1878, Governor's Letter Book I in Raffles Library Archives, Singapore, quoted in Sadka, E. p.103.
43. CO 273/101/7139, Robinson to The Undersecretary of State, Colonial Office, 29 April 1879.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. CO 273/93/5009, Tour of Governor to Province Wellesley and Native States.
50. CO 273/93/5009, Extract from His Excellency the Governor's Speech in the Legislative Council, enclosed in Robinson to Hicks Beach, 26 May 1878.
51. CO/273/93/4898, Robinson to Hicks-Beach, 16 March 1878.
52. CO/273/93/4898, Letter from Robinson to Douglas, 24 December 1877, enclosed in Robinson to Hicks Beach, 13 May 1878.
53. Straits Settlements Government Gazette 1878, p.1087.
54. Ghazali Abdullah Zakaria, Pembunuhan Kaptain Lloyd, Penguasa Dinding 1878, *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies,* 1980, 9, p.5.
55. CO 273/101/7139, Robinson to The Undersecretary of State, Colonial Office, 29 April 1879.
56. *The Straits Times*, 29 December 1877.
57. By a Treaty signed in 1855 between Governor Cavanagh and Sultan Ali of Johor, Sultan Ali relinquished all his claims over Johor save over the principality of Muar. Upon Sultan Ali's death in 1877, his claims were taken up by his son Tunku Allum, whom the British resolutely refused to acknowledge, with the argument that the Treaty of 1855 only applied to Sultan Ali personally, and was therefore void upon his death.
58. CO 273/93/4243, Confidential draft reply, Hicks Beach to Robinson.
59. See CO 273/93/7630, Letter from Robinson to Maharajah Abu Bakar, 10 May 1878 and 14 May 1878, enclosed in Robinson to Hicks Beach, 18 May 1878.
60. CO 273/101/7139, Robinson to The Undersecretary of State, Colonial Office, 29 April 1879.
61. Ibid.

62. CO 273/101/7139, Minute from Meade, 29 May 1879.
63. CO 273/101/7139, Minute from Hicks Beach, 13 June 1879.
64. Jervois' policy of annexation was formed after a tour of the Malay States in July 1875, Jervois came to the conclusion that matters were best handled by annexing the Malay States instead of indirect rule advocated by his predecessor Sir Andrew Clarke. Although his proposal was rejected by Lord Carnarvon, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Jervois persisted in his plans by pressuring the Perak chiefs to sign documents inviting the British to govern Perak. This was made on the grounds of increased revenue collection, increased administrative efficiency and the abolishment of debt slavery. The Residents would be termed Queen's Commissioners, who had the responsibility of administrating the Malay States in the name of the respective Sultans, but receive instructions only from the Governor. While this heavy-handed measure was unpopular amongst the Malay chiefs, the trigger was the insensitive actions of the over-zealous Birch, who was murdered. Birch's death highlighted the failure and unpopularity of Jervois' annexation policy. To rectify this, once the news of Birch's death reached Singapore, Jervois lost no time in summoning a large body of Imperial troops from India and Hong Kong in addition to those already at Singapore to quell the "disturbances". The costly expense of quelling the Perak War and the unrest that Jervois' assumption of independent policy created discredited him and his scheme of annexation in the eyes of the Colonial Office, who thereafter maintained a polite refusal to any similar suggestions, including Robinson's.
65. Sadka, E. p.116.
66. Sadka, E. p.117.
67. CO 273/142/16188, Weld to Stanhope, 4 January 1887.
68. Bird, I. *The Golden Chersonese*, Singapore, Monsoon Press, 2015, p.234.
69. Ibid, p.235.
70. CO 273/100/16575, Minute by Ebden, 27 October 1879. Ebden writes "The action to be recommended on this Report is to await the return of Sir William Robinson to the Colony." This supports the notion that Robinson's return to England was merely for leave purposes.
71. *The West Australian,*13 April 1880.
72. For published works, there is Sir Frank Swettenham's incorrect statement about Robinson not having visited the Malay States. W.H. Read, a long serving Straits resident who served at times as an Unofficial Member of the Legislative Council merely notes he pleaded with Robinson to provide a pension to the family of the late Sultan Ali. See Read, W.H., *Play and Politics, Recollections of*

Malaya by an Old Resident, London, Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1901, pp.19-21. Other individuals who wrote about their Malayan experiences such as W.E. Maxwell, Major J.F.A. McNair, and Emily Innes never mentioned Robinson's name at all, while other prominent figures of the time like Sir Hugh Low and Sir Cecil Clementi Smith did not leave any written works on this period.

73. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Adviser*, 18 May 1897.

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