

RAFFLES
AND THE
GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY
1781–1826

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Introduction



Everyone has heard of Raffles Hotel in Singapore. There are also in Singapore schools, colleges, businesses, medical centres, auctioneers, investment management companies, shopping malls, clubs, streets, squares, landmarks and serviced apartments all bearing the name ‘Raffles’ or ‘Stamford’. Until recently Singapore Airlines called their Business Class ‘Raffles Class’. ‘Raffles’ is a brand that belongs to no one and everyone in Singapore. The name delivers an instant message: exclusive, probably expensive, uniquely Singaporean, ‘heritage’ – though the branding becomes stretched at the lower end of the commercial spectrum.

This is all because in 1819 Sir Stamford Raffles raised the British flag on a small jungle-covered island and founded a settlement which became the city state of Singapore. He was also Lieutenant-Governor of Java and of Bengkulu in West Sumatra. That is not all that he did in the East Indies – the Eastern Archipelago – and only a part of what he was. The reality of him has been submerged by his image and his name.

He has been re-imagined by history-writers both as a hero and as a villain of the British Empire. The fiction writer E.W. Hornung, at the turn of the nineteenth century, borrowed the name Raffles for

his gentleman thief. Raffles appears as himself, a fictional presence, in three of Patrick O'Brian's seafaring sequence of novels. There is even a musical, *Raffles of Singapore*, last performed in 2010 in Henley-on-Thames – fortuitously, where Raffles and his second wife spent their honeymoon in 1817.

Raffles' story, in a work of fiction, would strain credulity. His good fortune and his ill fortune were both of an extreme kind. Many times, learning about him, I felt I recognised him. At any period, such people erupt. Born with no advantages, he took his chances and strove to realise his visions. He became the entrepreneur of his own ideals and a utopian imperialist. He wanted fame, and he wanted to do good.

From the age of fourteen he was an employee of the East India Company – a two-hundred-year-old, hydra-headed commercial entity, administering the British Empire in fractious partnership with Parliament. The Company's arcane practices and cronyism had something in common with dysfunctional global corporations today, and was called by Adam Smith 'an absurdity' five years before Raffles was even born. The Company contained and constrained Raffles and finally spat him out, while reaping the benefits of his greatest achievement: Singapore. He was not an organisation man. For him, the status quo was never an option.

His way, which is the way of all impatient innovators, was to do something first and seek approval from the proper authority afterwards. Usually what came was a directive *not* to take the measure in question, by which time it was too late. In the days of sail it could take up to ten months each way for despatches between the Eastern Isles and Company headquarters in London. The history of political activism, then as now, is the history of communications.

Raffles' career was played out in the East, but the backdrop was European. The Portuguese, then the Dutch, the British and the French were involved in the lucrative spice trade in the Eastern Isles for two centuries, before the wars between Britain and France

(each in shifting coalitions with other European states) injected a strategic and military dimension into the commercial rivalry. Apart from a shaky one-year peace in 1803, Britain was at war with France on land and at sea from the time Raffles was twelve until he was in his mid-thirties.

In the year that Raffles met his first wife Olivia, Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor and was massing troops in Boulogne to invade England. By the time Raffles and Olivia set sail for the East the following year, 1805, Spain too was at war with Britain. They reached Penang, Raffles' first posting, about a month before Nelson's victory and death at Trafalgar, though that news would not reach Penang for several further months. The vicissitudes of war in Europe, and hostile French incursions in the East, determined British policy in India and the Archipelago. Almost nothing that Raffles wanted to do was judged on its intrinsic merits, but in the light of the European conflict, in dismal combination with the Company's entrenched caution and conservatism.

Napoleon's defeat at Trafalgar put a stop to his invasion of England, but his ambition to gain control over continental Europe was not abated. After France conquered the Low Countries, Dutch possessions in the Archipelago were taken over by the French, so that when Raffles and the Governor-General of India, Lord Minto, invaded Java, they were ousting the French not the Dutch, though the Dutch were still there. After the defeat of Napoleon by Britain and her allies there was a reshuffling of territories, and the Dutch were given back most of their possessions in the Archipelago. Restitution to the Dutch in the event of British victory had been foreseen. Raffles' radical reforms in Java needed far more time to see through than he had, or was ever likely to have. This did not deter him.

Raffles was high-strung, clever, articulate, impetuous, charming, small in stature and physically fragile. He had unusual resources of energy, curiosity and resilience. He had a loving heart. He was loyal, supporting and promoting his friends to an extent that was

injudicious even in a time of accepted patronage and nepotism. He inspired profound devotion in some colleagues, and made enemies of others, especially military men. He loved his mother and sisters and looked after them financially. He loved his wives, both of whom were remarkable women. Coming to fatherhood relatively late, he adored his children. Writing about their deaths has been painful, as was writing about the fire on the *Fame* – which he and his second wife Sophia survived, but which saw one of his precious collections of natural history drawings, animal specimens, manuscripts, Javanese artefacts and his professional and personal papers all lost at the bottom of the Indian Ocean.

This is not a rags to riches story. It is more interesting than that. Raffles was never much good at making money, either for himself or for the East India Company. He died at forty-five under a dreadful burden of debt, in semi-disgrace with the Company, while paradoxically lionised by the scientific community in London.

His second wife, Sophia, rescued his reputation as a colonial administrator. Her monumental *Memoir* of him laid the foundations of a somewhat fantastical critical heritage. Between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth, most accounts of Raffles were heroic and uncritical. It is possible to take a long step back from all that. It is equally possible to take a long step back from the weight of the post-colonial guilt (on the one hand) and the post-colonial revisionism (on the other) of the last half of the twentieth century. It would be as easy to paint a black picture of Raffles as a golden one, and neither would show him as he was, or just what it was like to be that particular person in that region at that time. This book seeks to demythologise him without diminishing him. He was not a genius but, like all ambitious visionaries, he had a streak of genius.

Those who ran the expanding Empire did not really know what it was for. The East India Company was interested in making profits for its shareholders. Its senior civil servants out East were interested

in getting home as soon as possible with enough money to support them for the rest of their lives. The Company was generally against acquiring territory other than for strategically essential commercial settlements because administering territory cost money.

Raffles' vision, on the other hand, was of bringing together the countries of the Archipelago in a romantic reconstitution of ancient indigenous kingdoms, under benign British rule. In this respect he was closer to the Victorian idea of Empire, the *Pax Britannica*, but with a difference. When in Java, he sought to promote the value and beauty of the indigenous culture and its pre-Islamic Hindu heritage. That was the driving force behind his collection of antiquities and anthropological artefacts. Similarly, his plans for education in Singapore prescribed the teaching of students through their own languages and literature.

Some of his ideas changed. Sumatran civilisation was not so evolved as Javanese. In Sumatra, he said he would (had he had the time) be a benevolent despot. His idea of civilisation was based on human development – that is, that all societies grow from a state of infancy to maturity. (He did not take into account that any society at any time is advanced in some respects while 'barbaric' to outsiders in others.) He was beginning, too, to advocate colonisation – the permanent settling of Europeans under a British flag, as in the lost American colonies – again, to be a feature of the later Empire. He was inconsistent, like everyone except religious fanatics. But on certain essentials he never wavered – an absolute intolerance of slavery, the banning of gaming (cock-fighting) and opium-farming, and his insistence on free trade.

Writing about him has been an act of concentration, in both senses. There are a great many strange characters churning around in this book, and a great many more clamouring outside it, shut out for reasons of space and focus. Similarly, many episodes, sideshows, back stories and circumstantial details have been consigned – not to oblivion, but to the shadows – and a website rafflesbook.co.uk. Raffles' energies were never confined to his reformist administrations.

A whole book could be written on Raffles the natural historian, another on Raffles the ethnologist and collector.

During the war with Napoleon, and in armed conflicts in the East, defeats and victories were reported vividly in the British and Indian public prints. Successful naval and military commanders became national heroes. Company civil servants did not get the same press, yet the civil branch was senior to the military branch. The military, however, did not always see it that way, which caused problems for Raffles. He did not have the social clout or the experience to deal wisely with an uppity colonel.

Raffles was English. But whether from great families or, like himself, from unprivileged backgrounds, virtually all his superiors, colleagues, subordinates, friends and enemies were Scottish. Those that were not were Irish, mostly from the north of Ireland. The Act of Union of 1707 provided unprecedented career opportunities for the Scots, not only in England but in India and the Eastern Archipelago. Scotland, with one-tenth of the population of England, was massively over-represented in the East India Company and on the ground out East – Scots army officers, naval captains, doctors, administrators, engineers. Sometimes it will seem, in these pages, that among the British, Thomas Stamford Raffles is the only Englishman around, and even he may have had distant Scottish origins: there are small places called East and West Raffles near Mouswald in Dumfriesshire.

Note on the Text

The period 1783–1815 is often referred to as the Second British Empire. I have called it the ‘early Empire’, as being less laborious.

Raffles and his contemporaries used capital letters for common nouns in a completely random manner. To follow this slavishly in quoting from letters and despatches, makes for a distracting kind of ‘period’ distancing. I have behaved in an equally random manner,

leaving capitalisations only when they seem to add an intentional or particularly graphic emphasis. Capital initial letters were always used for titles and official positions, all the way from ‘President of the Board of Control’ to ‘Master Attendant and Storekeeper’. Against all modern practice and my every inclination, I have felt compelled to follow this. In the hierarchical structure of the Company, these were more than just job descriptions: they defined a man.

In quoting from letters I have substituted ‘and’ for the crossed squiggle – a reduced ampersand – which everyone uses, then and now. An ampersand in print looks heavy and intrusive.

So far as place names are concerned, I have used the forms and spellings used by Raffles, putting in brackets at the first mention the modern form, as for example, ‘Bencoolen (Bengkulu)’. Raffles and his contemporaries transcribed Malay and Arabic proper names more or less phonetically, and they did not all hear the same phonemes. I have followed Raffles’ usage, rather than duplicate every proper name according to the conventions and accompanying diacritics of modern scholars. Raffles’ time, in this book, is real time.

It is notoriously hard to establish today’s values for the varied and variable currencies of India and the Eastern Isles between 1800 and 1825. The most stable unit in the Archipelago was the Spanish dollar, generally worth then about five English shillings – twenty shillings to the pound (£), or just under five US dollars (\$) or, probably, twenty pounds or thirty-three dollars today.

The value of £1 in Raffles’ lifetime equates to between £80 and £95 in today’s money.