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A DECADE IN BORNEO

Ada Pryer

Edited by Susan Morgan



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to Sarawak's aggressions, by 1888 there was almost nothing left of Brunei – except, of course, some oil, discovered in 1903.

In pursuit of the cause of recognition outside Sarawak, of being given their 'real' name, James Brooke might well be accused of relentless ambition, and the methods of Charles Brooke have been described by a recent historian as 'ruthless double-dealing and blackmail'.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, such evaluations do not characterize the image of the White Rajahs sustained by most of the historians recording the Brookes' rule in Sarawak. The White Rajahs, and the country they claimed they owned, attained what I would call a mythic significance in Victorian imperial discourse. Its lack of economic identity may have been the most striking point about this would-be nation. In opposition to British proceedings in the Malay Peninsula, the Brookes discouraged British commercial activities in Sarawak and actively blocked European investments which would take their profits at the expense of native interests. It wasn't at all clear that Sarawak even had many natural resources to 'develop'. The Brookes were not motivated by material greed. Rajah Charles railed at 'these times when eager speculators are always seeking for some new place to exploit ... when the white man comes to the fore and the dark coloured is thrust to the wall and when capital rules and justice ceases'.¹⁷ The 'meaning' of Sarawak had to be located on a different ideological ground from the all too common one of some kind of intertwining of European superiority with the right to systems of economic exploitation. Nor was it territory, any more than commercial profits, which drove the Brookes. In spite of their almost ceaseless efforts to control more land, they actively discouraged any kind of British settlement, and continually insisted that the state must exist to serve its own indigenous tribes.

In 1854, Harriette McDougall, wife of the first Bishop of Sarawak, published *Letters From Sarawak; Addressed to a Child*, a book she had sent in sections to her son at school in England. Sarawak, she says, 'has for the last seven years furnished a romance to the English public, which for a time made its Rajah a favourite hero'.¹⁸ How long that 'romance' would last may be suggested by another account over a century later, by a would-be historian of Sarawak in 1960.

In all history only one man succeeded in coming from the West and making himself king over an Eastern race, and founding a dynasty which lasted for a hundred years. ... He lived a life such as schoolboys dream of. ... He looked like a romantic hero, and behaved like one.¹⁹

The romance that Sarawak 'furnished' to fulfil the dreams of English schoolboys lay precisely in justifying the taking of territory as a matter of individual heroism, this 'archetypal fantasy of isolated white men ruling over savages in a tropical setting'.²⁰ What Sarawak and the ongoing debate about its identity offered to British imperial and racist interests was the possibility that an individual Englishman could go anywhere and become anything, could conquer pirates by sea and defeat jungle tribes by land, could find for himself his very own country and become its king. He could do this not only in an eighteenth-century novel like *Robinson Crusoe* but in real life. An Englishman could have 'a little kingdom carved out for himself'.²¹ In the words of Joseph Conrad's Marlow, narrator in the novel which was almost certainly inspired by the history of the White Rajahs, the romance come true of Sarawak represented the heroic fantasies of Lord Jim, who 'had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side'.²²

This particular legend was 'at its best in boys' adventure stories of the early twentieth century when the European imperial system was at its zenith'.²³ Brooke's Sarawak, that veiled 'eastern bride' of European dreams, was not only Lord Jim's Patusan, in a novel dazzling in its insights into and critique of the genre of imperial adventure story, but also Kim's India and Peter Pan's Never Never Land. The White Rajahs were a fantasy come to life, a dream come true. Never Never Land could be found on a chart, on the west coast of Borneo; and so, quite literally, could Conrad's Patusan, an actual village in a part of Brunei which the White Rajahs took over. The Brookes' story became the story of all 'our' possibilities, of the individualist promise at the heart of the imperial enterprise. Once the boy was cast as a man who lit out for the territory, all that remained was to present the specifics of what that dream consisted of and what its fulfilment was actually like. The narratives had to fill in the details, and send back the information from that fabulous reality. It is surely no coincidence that the first book by the writer who described Sarawak as 'furnish[ing] a romance' to the British public was cast in the form of letters to an English schoolboy.

A ROYAL CHARTER FOR NORTH BORNEO

By the mid-1870s the Foreign Office was seeing the two British presences in Borneo – in Labuan and in Sarawak – as real problems. Charles Brooke had many supportive friends for his ambitions in the Colonial Office, while those in the Foreign Office tended to view him as both aggressive

and untrustworthy and to view his plans to rule North Borneo as not in England's commercial interests. Labuan was simply recognized by all as a failure. It had not developed into an active port, had not even become self-sufficient, and had failed to make a profit on its own coal-mines at a time when coal was much in demand. By 1888 there were to be fewer than ten Europeans still living on the island.²⁴ In the 1870s, with support gone for developing Labuan, a general sense that Brooke really needed to be reined in, and, with the ever-increasing naval presences around Borneo of other European powers, several members of the government began to believe that the answer to these problematic presences was, incredibly, yet a third British presence in North Borneo.

The belief, contradicting so many official and public positions, was driven by some simple political facts. The Americans were already there. In 1865 Charles Moses, the United States Consul in Brunei, had received (with promises of paying for them later) concessions from the Sultan of Brunei for North Borneo for the next ten years. The Sultan was agreeable largely because it was suspected the Americans might do what the British had so far failed to do, despite all their public statements. A significant American presence in North Borneo might halt Brooke's territorial expansions. Moses immediately went to Hong Kong and sold the concessions – though retaining some rights – to two American merchants, Joseph Torrey and Thomas Harris and their two Chinese partners. The four established 'The American Trading Company of Borneo', gathered an eager group, and set off to establish a settlement in North Borneo. By the end of two years however, Harris and others had died and the settlement had failed. In 1875, just before the concessions were about to lapse, Torrey sold them to Baron von Overbeck in Hong Kong. Overbeck, who was born in Germany, had emigrated as a young man to America, worked as a whaler in Honolulu, and then as a successful businessman in Hong Kong. He had been awarded a barony for professional services by the Austrian government and was their Consul in Hong Kong at the time.

Overbeck and Torrey travelled to Brunei, where the Sultan's heir tentatively renewed the concessions for another ten years (the Sultan refused to 'renew' anything, since he had never been paid in the first place). Overbeck then travelled to London to raise capital for this venture and persuaded Alfred Dent to join. Overbeck returned to Brunei with Dent's money and paid the Sultan on 29 December 1877. The Sultan then officially signed the new concession agreement, ceding his northern territories to Overbeck and Dent.

There were a couple of problems. First, only in the most theoretical sense could it be said that the territories were the Sultan's to cede. Brunei

was a small and fairly poor state, its glory days 200 years in the past, and its rule of the huge northern lands of Borneo mostly a faded memory. Brunei's resources for ruling its peoples had been virtually used up in efforts to stave off foreign invasions, particularly in the nineteenth century by the ever-encroaching Brookes. Moreover, the east side of the northern territories was claimed by another Sultan, with a more present-day right to that claim. The Sultan of Sulu, the archipelago just east of Borneo, claimed the whole northeastern section of Borneo. His ownership was fairly widely acknowledged, but his rule there was weak, also due to his energies and resources being used up in efforts to beat back foreign aggression. The piracy of this region 'was mainly a symptom of the breakdown of law and order as the sultanates of Brunei and Sulu were reduced to impotence'.²⁵ The Sultan of Sulu was engaged in a long and costly defensive war to beat back the Spanish from taking his territories now that they had the islands just east of his archipelago, the Philippines. Northeast Borneo was crucial to him, not least because, being the western part of his territories, it could be somewhere to escape to if he lost the rest of his lands to Spain.

Overbeck handled the dual claims of the two sultans quite simply. He went directly from Brunei to Jolo, the main island in the Sulu Archipelago. Having signed the concession with one Sultan, he proceeded to sign the concession with the other, and paid him too. But there was one difference in the terms. While stopping in Labuan, Overbeck had met the British Colonial Secretary there, William Hood Treacher. Treacher was delighted that the proposal for commercial development of North Borneo was being revived, and with British capital by a well-known British business firm. He was not aware that Dent and Overbeck saw this as only an investment, and planned to sell the concessions as soon as the sultans had signed. Treacher went with Overbeck to Sulu, lending the influence of the British government to Overbeck's request. This was important, because the Sultan of Sulu was persuaded to sign the concessions once he saw them as carrying the weight of the British government. He would not be giving up his one escape route from the Spanish to some private trading company but, he hoped, would be putting the protective might of England at his back. His idea, which proved to be correct, was that the Spanish would not overrun the east coast of North Borneo with the British flag flying there.

Treacher did not lend the support of his government position to this private enterprise for nothing; he wanted something for England as well. Treacher lent his 'influence', and in return Overbeck included a clause in the concessions treaty that the ceded territories could not be transferred to another party without the permission of the British government. In other

words, Dent and Overbeck could no longer sell their cessions to just anyone who was willing to pay. In spite of British control, Rajah Brooke, predictably, was outraged, having long considered all of North Borneo effectively, if not yet officially, as his. Finding himself in the odd position of suddenly being the moral opponent of territorial takeovers, Brooke wrote to Treacher threatening to do his utmost 'to thwart the encroachments of this wild and unjustifiable adventure'.²⁶

The British government, of course, only wanted a British company in Borneo. Again, they could deny that this was British acquisition of territory. It was simply private enterprise, albeit with a few government guidelines to protect Britain from those other encroaching European nations. The next step was inevitable. Dent realized he and Overbeck could not simply turn over the cessions for a quick profit; they would have to develop the place. Dent bought out Overbeck and proceeded to use his and Treacher's extensive connections, particularly Dent's friendship with Sir Julian Pauncefote, Permanent Under-Secretary, to apply for a Royal Charter. During the three years of political manoeuvring that it finally took to be granted a Charter, Dent had secured financial as well as political support for this enterprise, and instead of his single ownership there was what was officially called a 'Provisional Association' composed of investors. In November 1881 the Charter was granted, and the Association changed its name. The British North Borneo Company, also called the BNBC, or also the North Borneo Chartered Company (NBCC), began.

Events in North Borneo had not kept pace with the long and unpredictable process of applying for and receiving a Royal Charter. The plan for a Charter had been something of a long shot by Dent as he faced the financial implications of the clause which Treacher had Overbeck include in his treaty with the Sultan of Sulu. But whether or not it would have the special backing of a government charter there could still be a commercial company, but one that couldn't be sold without government approval. When Overbeck returned to Brunei with Dent's capital and then travelled on to Sulu, he had been prepared for success. His plan was to divide the northern territories into three commercial sections, each with a resident and trading centre: the west, the middle and the east. After successfully concluding his business with the Sultan of Sulu he stopped first to establish the company's station on the east coast of the northern territories, in Sandakan Bay. There he left behind someone who had travelled with him through the signing of the concession treaties, a young man who had worked in the Philippines and had been a bookkeeper for the Shanghai firm of Thorne and Company. He was to be the

representative of the BNBC for its eastern section. Overbeck gave him the official title of 'Resident of the East Coast' and, for good measure, Treacher named him British Consular Agent. The young man, William Pryer, landed in Sandakan Bay on 11 February 1878.

THE ENTHUSIAST

When Overbeck left William Pryer in Sandakan Bay that February day, accompanied by two Eurasian assistants, ten Chinese labourers and one West Indian servant, the first thing Pryer did was to fly the flag; two flags, actually: the flag of Dent Brothers, and the Union Jack. Pryer would remain 'Resident of the East Coast' for three years, until Treacher returned with an official appointment of Governor of the eastern section. Pryer's service as British Consular Agent was a little shorter. In spite of Treacher's claim that Pryer's use of the British flag 'should cause no misconception', Treacher was reprimanded for overstepping his authority when he returned to Labuan, and Pryer's government title was rescinded.²⁷

William Pryer occupies a permanent place in British imperial mythology about the British takeover of the lands of Southeast Asia. What Pryer offered the British public, the government and private investors was an appealing alternative of colonial enterprise to the aggressive adventurer image cultivated by the Rajah Brookes. Pryer's life would come to stand for colonialism as peaceful rule, for non-aggression, and, best of all, for a commitment to economic development as the ultimate justification for acquiring foreign territories. Whether or not this representation of his life is true, it certainly functioned as 'true' in the public rhetoric which drove the British nation's acceptance of its policies of imperialism.

Born in London on 7 March 1843, William Burgess Pryer began travelling with Overbeck when he was aged 34 and was to land in Sandakan less than a month before his thirty-fifth birthday. His reputation is largely based on the fact that once he settled in northeast Borneo he stayed there for the rest of his life (with two or three trips back to England) and promoted British commercial interests. As Joseph Hatton, invoking all the familiar colonial stereotypes in one of the two obituaries published in the *British North Borneo Herald* put it, Pryer was

a typical British pioneer, and the British pioneer is not the fire-eater some of our foreign neighbours seem to imagine, nor is he the kind of hero the romantic novelist loves to paint him. On the contrary, he

is gentle, modest, quiet, unassuming. Yet, brave as he is unassuming, and enthusiastic as he is modest.

(16 March 1899, p. 92)

The earlier obituary was a little less heavy-handed, more simple. Certainly, it argued for the greatness of 'one of the earliest pioneers of foreign enterprise in British North Borneo'. It informed us that Pryer was a man 'of splendid physique and remarkable for his personal fearlessness' (1 February, p. 44). Perhaps rather more accurately, on the subject of Pryer's enthusiasm we are informed that

his chief fault was a little too much enthusiasm, but he had an undoubted faith in the future of the Territory and did his best to aid it, though his comments on policy and procedure were not at all times pleasing to the authorities.

Pryer was an enthusiast who grew up during the major age of British imperialism and developed an interest in that familiar Victorian pair: science and adventure. Something of an amateur naturalist, he had 'explored' and collected butterflies in the Philippines before signing on with Dent and Overbeck and moving to Borneo. Convinced of the great potential of the huge northern territories, Pryer spent the first few years settling the company as an authority over the areas that he could reach and influence. That authority had to do both with conditions in Sabah and the state of affairs of this particular private enterprise.

From the first, the company was hugely undercapitalized and understaffed. This is perhaps the most significant and continuing fact about the British North Borneo Company, and meant that, from the very beginning and continuing for decades, there could be no question of this company actually engaging directly in commerce, in the production, trade or sale of goods. Thus, from the very beginning, the company became of necessity an administrative enterprise, a 'company' only in the sense that it claimed the right through the sultans' concessions to collect tariffs and taxes on goods, by 1901 even licensing all – even the tiniest – boats. These ongoing financial constraints inevitably limited the possibility of profit, and there weren't even enough staff to collect the tariff and tax money. Of necessity, Pryer and the company employed many local people as their 'agents' in the field. The 'company' was, of course, a government rather than a business.

To the peoples who lived there, North Borneo was divided, named and understood in terms of rivers. By the 1870s, when Pryer arrived, the virtually non-existent authority of Brunei, and the off-on authority of Sulu, as the two kingdoms struggled against their own foreign aggressors,

had allowed the regions of North Borneo to become havens for warring groups. The local peoples had abandoned many of the settlements at the mouths of the rivers as too vulnerable to visiting ships looking for supplies any way they could get them, and retreated many miles upriver into the interior. Pryer's control of river traffic at the mouths of rivers did result in peoples again building villages where the rivers met the seas, but the interior peoples were probably worse off than they had been before the advent of the company. Villages were at the mercy of those locals who claimed to be – and often actually were – the company's agents, but agents without accountability who could forcibly collect whatever charges they wanted.

William Pryer's enthusiasm for company policies carried him through the first few years, during which those policies were inevitably shaped by the crushing disparities between the scarcity of the money available and the vast lands to be policed. Here is an account of him, published anonymously in *The British North Borneo Herald* in 1883:

Pryer, a busy and enthusiastic soul, would periodically enliven our midday conferences with his latest 'discovery' in Borneo's assets ... he was a very charming and likeable man. An ex-amateur champion boxer, utterly fearless with man or beast; a magician with snakes, the collection of which he made a hobby, he once seriously upset the nerves of a party of officers of *H. M. S. Magpie* he had taken for a walk in the jungle after lunch. he was leading us, talking, when he suddenly dived into some undergrowth shouting 'grab his tail!' – and while we started, he suddenly reappeared plunging about grasping a 20 foot python by the neck.²⁸

Later in the same article Pryer is said to claim to be sending yet another snake to the London Zoo, alive.

For Pryer, 1883 was a wonderful year for several reasons. Mr von Donop, in his public diary of travelling in Sabah in 1882 and 1883, seems to have caught the general excitement of a possible commercial frontier, claiming that 'North Borneo is just now like a beehive'.²⁹ He points out that town lots in Sandakan are selling at high prices, that people are starting tobacco and sugar plantations, that the first newspaper, the *British North Borneo Herald* is about to start publishing, and that two resthouses have even been opened.

Von Donop ends his diary with an exciting 'P.S. – Ladies are beginning to come to Sandakan, and more I am informed are expected'. One of these was Ada, whom William married on 10 December 1883. He was 40 and she was 28. Ada Blanche Locke had been born on 25 October 1855, in St

Woolos (Newport), Monmouth, in what was then the west of England but is now officially Wales. Her father, Edward Locke, originally from Gloucestershire, was an engineer in a local nail factory, most probably the DOS factory in Newport. Her mother, Mary, who had been born in Middlesex, was much younger (by about seventeen years) than her father, a pattern Ada followed in marrying William. The family was clearly middle-class, though hardly distinguished, and they lived quietly in Maindee, a part of Newport. Edward and Mary were never to leave Maindee, and were buried there.

After the early exhilarating years of being on his own, life changed for William Pryer during the 1880s, positively in terms of his marriage and negatively in terms of his professional life. He began to disagree with the strictly administrative character of company rule, which he saw as not interested enough in the economic potential which North Borneo represented for him and which had drawn Overbeck and Dent there in the first place. By the end of the 1880s he was convinced that the road to prosperity in North Borneo lay not in tariffs and taxes but in private agricultural development. Pryer actually resigned from his beloved company in 1890 and returned to England to interest people in his vision of North Borneo. He gathered investors who shared his enthusiastic views and became part of a newly formed company, the British North Borneo Development Corporation, and returned to North Borneo in 1891 committed to developing plantation crops.

The corporation was at least as undercapitalized as the company, and consequently suffered the same problems. The remainder of Pryer's years in Borneo continued to be a struggle to find investors, interspersed with great enthusiasm for his agricultural projects. He ran several plantations around Sandakan, full of optimism for his mangoes, his sugar, his hemp, his coconuts, his sago, and, most of all, his coffee. He ran tours of his estates for anyone he could persuade to come over from Singapore or Hong Kong or anywhere else, even interesting Dr Jose Rizal, the Philippine patriot and writer, in establishing a colony in North Borneo.³⁰ As his wife so succinctly put it in her diary, 'Willie's head [is] full of schemes', and his prayer is, 'may we get the coin'.³¹

In spite of Willie's schemes and prayers, the corporation failed. We hear that by January 1898 'all the money had been spent so that there are no funds left to go on with' (*Diary*, p. 95). Yet Pryer remained convinced of the possibility of progress, of what he had seen as 'great things for the country' (*Diary*, p. 33). But he had been working for those great things in North Borneo for twenty years, and was now in his fifties. He had health problems for several years. On 1 October 1898, after several months of

severe illness, he and his wife set out for England on sick leave. Neither was to return. Ada's darling Willie died somewhere in the area of Port Said on 7 or 8 January 1899, two months short of his fifty-sixth birthday. The marriage had lasted a little over fifteen years. William was buried in Suez, and Ada retired to England. She was just 43. She settled in London, and died there seventeen years later on 12 February 1916, aged 60. She was buried near her parents in Maindee.

ADA'S LITTLE BOOK

In 1893, in the midst of William's struggles to generate the capital needed to make a commercial success of his plantations and fulfil his dreams about the glorious future of North Borneo, Ada published *A Decade in Borneo*. This little book was written at the service of those struggles and dreams. It has a unique role as the one book aimed at locating North Borneo for a general British audience. The book was to be literally a memoir of the early years of Ada's husband's pioneering activities and some aspects of their life together. A central purpose of the book was to ensure that the audience back home understood just what a hero William Pryer was and how far he had been personally and single-handedly responsible for the British successfully taking over British North Borneo, as well as recording what a wonderful place this region 'really' was. This was a crucial point, not simply because Ada adored her 'darling Willie' but because the willingness of investors to pledge capital to Willie's new development corporation depended a great deal on their perception of his achievements and the largeness of his reputation. That perception depended on distinguishing Willie's commercial commitment from Rajah Brooke's more fiery brand of imperialism, which scorned a profit motive. Would-be investors were betting on the man as well as the place. Moreover, not only private investors but also the British government had to be impressed. North Borneo's continuing political problem was how to successfully fend off the ongoing claims and aggressions of Rajah Charles Brooke, who was counting on the company's and corporation's financial failures in his relentless arguments to the Colonial Office that North Borneo should be turned over to Sarawak.

A Decade in Borneo thus functions on at least three levels: as a private and loving tribute, as a clarion call to private investors, and as an argument about the colonial status appropriate for British North Borneo. In the latter two senses, the book operates as a piece of economic and political propaganda which uses its feminine narrator as a useful way to join the debate about the British presence in Borneo as a matter of commercial

development or romantic adventure. The implied logic is simple. To support commercial investment and development by British companies and individuals in British North Borneo can only mean to oppose the claims of Brooke, since the White Rajah was vividly on record as being opposed to the very concept of commercial development in Borneo.

The book begins with a little 'history' of the island which in its own way echoes a general British imperial attitude after the Napoleonic wars and throughout the nineteenth century. This 'history' teaches readers that the true enemies in Borneo, and the sources of greatest danger and destruction to almost anyone, have been other Europeans, particularly the French, the Dutch and the Spanish. Thus Pryer's entire opening chapter represents a Borneo which in the very 'Old Days' was prosperous and harmonious when left alone but which, with the advent of the bad Europeans, declined into poverty and piracy as local peoples were driven from their homes. Far from being anti-interventionist, this argument is not that Borneo and its peoples should be left alone again, but precisely that the British had to intervene and are the very nation that should be there. The peoples and lands of Borneo had already been decimated by England's enemies in Europe. Literally driven from their villages and dispersed, the people were forced to become homeless wanderers in their seas and their woods.

The general frame of the wickedness of previous European presences in contrast to the obligation and obliging nature of British occupation allows Ada to represent William's and her own presence in North Borneo as a gesture of friendship. It allows her to represent local resistance to William's takeover of large chunks of land and imposition of duties and taxes on local goods in the name of the BNBC in some very special ways. Not only is William not a pirate (which he might well be called by an anti-imperialist reader) but, just as important in this narrative, neither are the local resistant Malays 'really' pirates (which they were routinely called in British newspaper accounts). Piracy, in Ada Pryer's rhetorical lexicon, is a product of European corruption and thus vanishes when the right European, which is to say an Englishman such as her husband, appears. Local resistance to William Pryer's *de facto* rule and policies becomes represented as simply an early mistake, a learned and even appropriate response when facing the Spanish or the Dutch, but needing to be unlearned when dealing with William. In this account all the local Malays do unlearn their objections to being colonized as all become settlers, or resettlers, together.

North Borneo, in Pryer's memoir, is a kinder, gentler world, better than its own past, better than the neighbouring British colonial world of Sarawak, better even than England itself. William is initially presented as

comparable to James Brooke of Sarawak, as just as heroic, a white man 'alone' in the jungle, conquering pirates, facing enormous odds, in order to carve out a harmonious state in a tropical paradise. Ada's readers must understand that William is just as great as the famous White Rajahs. In fact he is greater, because he is also presented as crucially different from Brooke, whose methods are to be understood as simply out of date. Those differences are marked in the narrative through gender, and serve to map the imperial geography of North Borneo as a potential money-making southern sister of British Malaya rather than a northern brother of Sarawak.

In the boys' adventure tales of the White Rajahs there was no place for women, any more than there was a place for Jewel in the Patusan of Conrad's *Lord Jim*. But in Pryer's memoir William is distinguished as a different kind of hero from James Brooke or Conrad's Tuan Jim. William makes friends rather than conquering enemies, and in the process reverses the cruel diaspora which was the legacy of a bad colonial past. Heroism in *A Decade in Borneo*, though about great physical courage, is not that all-too-familiar masculinity of adventure tales demonstrated by dashing through the jungle with weapons and waging battles. While there are a few references to fighting, the one incident which Ada actually recounts involving shooting is presented as a farce. William didn't use a gun but his police shot 412 cartridges, missed the fleeing Malays, hit the government boats five times by mistake, and ended up being fined (ch. 8).

In Chapters 2 to 4, which focus primarily on the narrative of William restoring peace to 'his' areas of North Borneo, the anecdotes Pryer narrates again and again construct a portrait of a hero with words, a guy who can talk, and who travels around in a small boat having successful chats. The emphasis is not on William's prowess but on his cleverness and charm. The repeated results are, in Pryer's language, that although there were 'moments of peril' (ch. 4) almost daily, they could be surmounted without violence. Instead of violence, 'by a little tact and judgment, and a firm stand, matters were arranged amicably' (ch. 3).

If William is portrayed as an amicable arranger, a man with a talent for persuasive talking rather than aggressive fighting, more feminine than masculine, the Malays are also presented as being full of a feminized sensitivity and charm. Since their resistance to William's takeover – strong at first and recurring in very occasional outbursts for several years – can be laid at the door of those other Europeans, it follows that the Malays themselves are pleased with the advent of William's and the BNBC's rule. The representation of masculinity as part of the old past with those 'other' Europeans and the representation of the Malays as participants in a new

feminized present means that they are now all happy. The narrative is full of 'descriptions' of local peoples as gentle, charming, courteous, devoted, patient, and having the 'polished manners ... of civilization' (ch. 2), with tidy houses, pretty gardens, and villages offering a 'scene of contentment and plenty' (ch. 7).

A Decade in Borneo offers an economic geography in which North Borneo belongs with British Malaya rather than with Brooke's Sarawak. More specifically, in the rhetorical act of electing to sketch a landscape picture of imperialism which chooses business rather than adventure, Pryer radically modifies the masculinized iconography familiar to her imperial readers in those two choices. The narrator's claim is that North Borneo, and Southeast Asia more generally as represented by its great metropolitan centre of Singapore, is a superb place to do business because it is a superb place to live. Choosing business turns out to mean choosing not merely a profession but a way of life, and also choosing not gruelling work but delightful leisure. The narrator presents herself as having found the best of what we now call a 'lifestyle', full of nice things to do, with nice views and nice gardens, nice people to meet, nothing so 'enjoyable [as] a moonlight pic-nic on a large and comfortable steam launch' (ch. 12) and, as she emphasizes, 'snakes are quite scarce' (ch. 13). No mention of Willie's capture of 'a 20 foot python' here.

Pryer's narrative is a picture of the good life, one which images the product of doing business in North Borneo – graceful living in domestic companionship – rather than the process – those portraits of the heroic struggles of a lone individual, always male, always carrying a big knife, to carve something or other out of the wilderness. Her chapter on the steps involved in creating a coffee plantation, apparently about the process of creating a business, functions as an implicit argument for the lack of difficulty involved in that process. The text reads like a recipe for success, ten easy steps to making a coffee plantation. Pryer repeatedly praises the landscape of North Borneo, explicitly claiming that 'nowhere in England is there such lovely scenery' (ch. 5). In a more lengthy comparison, this time between England and Singapore, the narrator finds the better metropolitan location to be Singapore, 'a perfect paradise', with 'superb' roads as good as anything in England, without England's 'squalid and grimy poverty', with people of more buoyant spirits who are 'un-English' in ways that include their friendliness and 'hospitality' (ch. 11).

The comparisons with England function in *A Decade in Borneo* to emphasize that the narrative is a call for immigration and settlement, an argument that North Borneo is a wonderful place to live and call home. Specifically, it is a place where British women (those pretty views, that

lack of snakes) would want to be. Colonization, in Pryer's narrative, is represented as about neither the hardships and enormous riches of tin mining and rubber planting nor the thrills of fighting pirates, about neither economics nor heroism. Certainly North Borneo offers profits, but imaged in a particular way. In the vision offered by this narrative, colonization is about graceful living, for women as much as for men, about fine, large, airy bungalows and creative cooks and beautiful scenery. It is about lovely moonlight parties and good roads. It is about the indigenous Malays as friends and neighbours, enjoying along with the Pryers the bounty and productivity brought by British rule, wishing along with the Pryers for more British families to settle and be part of the development of North Borneo, an event which can only increase the bounty and productivity of this beautiful world.

In this successful colonial present the place is peopled by willing though sparse settlers, both Malay and European, everybody busy making farms and businesses and villages and towns together. Both groups enjoy the same continuum of the good life, though one more simply and the other more elaborately. All they need is more people to join them in enjoying it too. The narrative's argument for immigration rejects portraits of North Borneo as a masculinized backdrop for a man's adventure tale – too much wilderness and danger required – and as a masculinized source of entrepreneurial business opportunities – too much individualism, and an unappetizing image of isolated mines and plantations.

Yet Pryer's feminized North Borneo, while emphatically communal, is not a private or interior domestic sphere. There are no children or family scenes here. Instead, *A Decade in Borneo* offers the feminized public sphere of the familiar bourgeois community: a heterosexual couple, concerned to have a nice house on good farmland, with solid business opportunities and a fulfilling social world. The book, ignoring such details as dense tropical rain forests with pathways navigated almost entirely by boat, invokes the rural pleasures of England's most beloved image of itself as a settled and productive agricultural land. These are precisely the values and images which Pryer invokes in her economic hymn to North Borneo. Her vision is that the greatness of England can live again, in the dream of a commercial future in this remote island world. She closes her narrative with the faith that 'the day cannot be far off ... when North Borneo's enormous capabilities must ... attract notice to this the finest tropical agricultural country that Great Britain possesses'.

Mecklenburg, New York, 1999

NOTES

1. This saying was quoted in reference to rubber in Malaya by an early-twentieth-century Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens. See Susan Morgan, *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women's Travel Books about Southeast Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 148.
2. Quoted by K. G. Tregonning, *Under Chartered Company Rule (North Borneo 1881-1946)* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1958), p. 25.
3. See *ibid.*, pp. 25-7.
4. I am indebted to Ian Black, *A Gambling Style of Government: The Establishment of the Chartered Company's Rule in Sabah, 1878-1915* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), and L. R. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), for the following discussion, as well as to *Under Chartered Company Rule*.
5. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo*, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
7. Nicholas Tarling, *The Burthen, the Risk, and the Glory: A Biography of Sir James Brooke* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 125-31.
8. See esp. Nicholas Tarling's detailed analysis of the history of relations between the Brookes and the British government on the subject of the status of Sarawak in *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).
9. Colin N. Crisswell, *Rajah Charles Brooke: Monarch of All He Surveyed* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 57.
10. Quoted by Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei*, p. 56. Naval ships did help Brooke - sometimes simply by their presence and sometimes in actual battles - much more extensively than their orders allowed.
11. Quoted from Lord Derby by Emily Hahn, *James Brooke of Sarawak: A Biography of Sir James Brooke* (London: Arthur Barker, 1953), pp. 231-2.
12. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo*, p. 202.
13. This information is provided by Ulla Wagner in her excellent account of Brooke rule, *Colonialism and Iban Warfare* (Stockholm: OBE-Tryck, 1972), p. 36.
14. Robert Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke Rule, 1841-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 120. I am indebted to Pringle's discussion of this incident (pp. 97-134).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
16. Tarling, *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei*, p. 181.
17. Quoted by R. H. W. Reece, *The Name of Brooke: The End of White Rajah Rule in Sarawak* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 7.
18. Harriette McDougall, *Letters from Sarawak; Addressed to a Child* (Norwich: Thomas Priest, 1854), p. v. Further references are to this edition.
19. Robert Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak* (1960; reprinted Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 14-15.
20. Reece, *The Name of Brooke*, p. xxv.
21. Review of *Memoirs of Francis Thomas McDougall, D.C.L., F.R.C.S., Sometime Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak, and of Harriette His Wife*, *Athenaeum*, no. 3244 (28 December 1889), p. 886.
22. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1899; reprinted New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 307.
23. Reece, *The Name of Brooke*, p. xxv.
24. Tregonning, *Under Chartered Company Rule*, p. 41.
25. Black, *A Gambling Style of Government*, p. 23.
26. Quoted in Tregonning, *Under Chartered Company Rule*, p. 16.
27. Quoted by Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo*, p. 148.
28. Quoted by K. G. Tregonning, 'William Pryer, the Founder of Sandakan', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 27 (1954), pp. 45-6.
29. L. S. von Donop, 'Diary of Mr. L. S. von Donop's Travels in Sabah in 1882', *Sabah Society Journal*, vol. 3 (March 1968), pp. 245-6.
30. Austin Coates, 'The Philippines National Hero: Rizal in Sandakan', *Sarawak Museum Journal*, vol. 10 (July-December, 1962), pp. 537-53.
31. Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *Mrs. Pryer in Sabah: Diaries and Papers from the Late Nineteenth Century* (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1989), pp. 43, 58. Hereafter referred to as *Diary*.

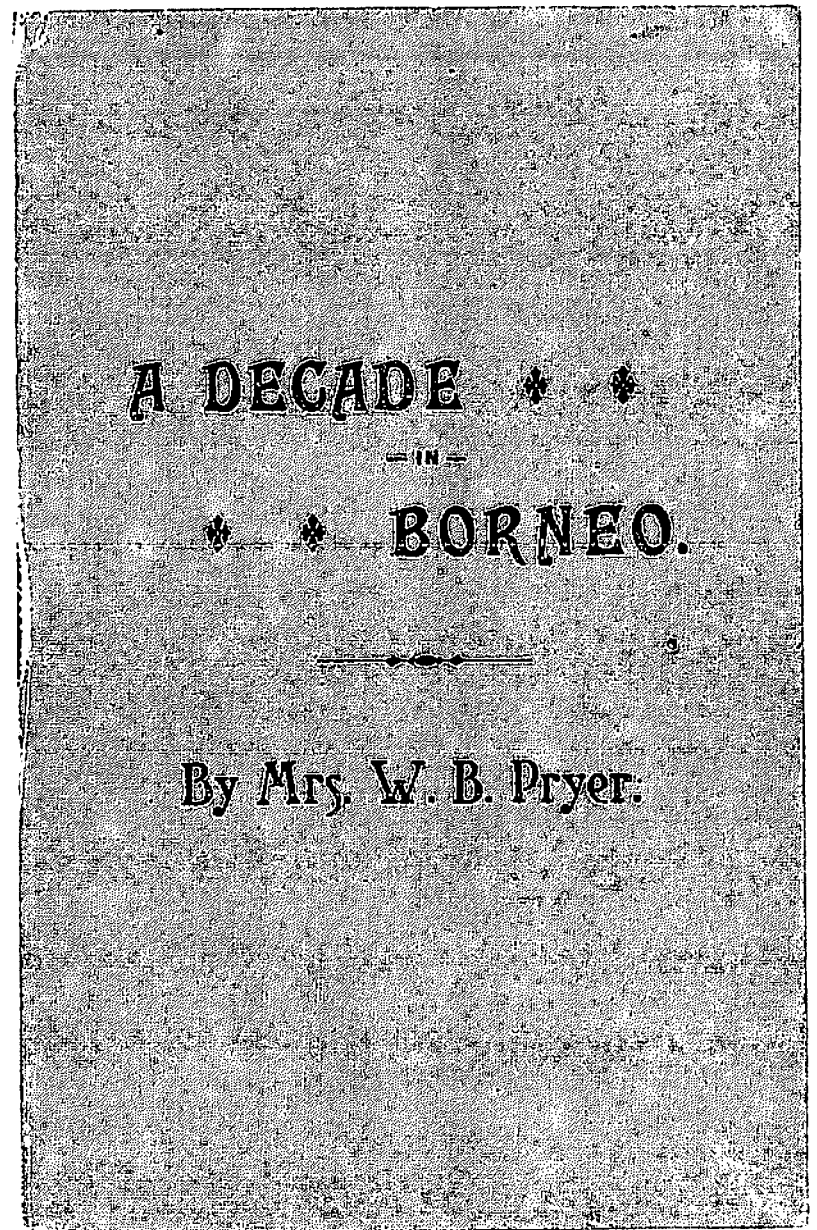


Plate 1 Cover of original edition of *A Decade in Borneo*, Kelly & Walsh Ltd, Hongkong, Shanghai, Yokohama and Singapore, 1893.

The leading spirit of the hunt was decidedly a Bisayah or Indian from the Philippines (better known to English readers as Manila-men, though perhaps they have never been near Manila in their lives) named Esnine – a particularly muscular specimen of humanity, who entered keenly into the sport. The dogs were four queer little brown animals rather long in the body, rather short in the leg, with sharp jackally noses, prick ears, and a half sly, half humorous, twinkle in the back of their eyes. They were the property of Sheriff Byassin, who armed with a spear, came with us. We went to look for a buffalo which Esnine had put up that morning, which he thought he had marked down, but it was very soon evident that, with the dogs and the motley following of Sooloos, Malays, &c., not forgetting Esnine, we must make the best of whatever turned up.

The forest was very open and easy going, and we had not been a quarter of an hour in it when suddenly one of the little dogs gave tongue, and with a short sharp little “week, week, week,” away the whole pack went, and away after them went we. However, in less than five minutes some of the notes became more long drawn, while others were quicker and more yapping in their tone, and it was clear the quarry was being bayed. On rushing up we found a little pig had taken refuge amongst the roots of a tree with the dogs surrounding it, one of them occasionally rushing in and having a snap at it. Poor little piggie was quickly secured alive, its legs tied up, and it was left under a tree till we returned again. On once more, and up a steep hill, on the top of which it was just possible the buffalo might be, but before we got there “week, week, week, week,” again from the dogs. In the forest there is no seeing more than thirty yards in any direction owing to the tree trunks, saplings, dwarf palms, wild ginger, &c., so we could not tell what we were after; but following the dogs again to the bottom of the valley and then down stream, torn by thorns, dashing wildly through the bushes, stumbling in our haste over the big rough stones of the brook, sometimes in the water, sometimes out, and sometimes again making short cuts through the forest, the little dogs “weeking” away in front and bringing the game up every now and then for a few moments. Esnine was far ahead; at last there was a shot, and on getting up we found that a large pig had been bagged. The little dogs had been unable to hold the pig at bay, but as it broke away, Esnine wounded it with his spear, whereupon it wheeled round and charged. He dodged it and again sent his spear well in, but before it could charge again one of the fortmen came

up and sent a Snider ball through its body; even then it was some time before it succumbed. The above will serve for a description of all the runs we had, of which there were five in all, a kill resulting every time. Esnine got first spear three times.

The next afternoon, after sundry preparations in connection with the nest-collecting had been made and other matters settled, we went away to explore a path said to lead towards the gold district, the more particularly that on it there was said to be good large game country. The track was a very fair one, and good going; and after an hour and a half's walk, during which we had seen the old tracks of elephants in two places, besides those of buffalo, deer, and heaps of pig, we came to what was said to be the best place; but after an hour's wandering about, not seeing any more traces, half of us gave it up and returned. The others did not come back till nightfall, having come to a place where there were fresh rhinoceros tracks, but they saw nothing of the animal.

I may take this opportunity of mentioning, as it has lately been said in the pages of *The Field* that there was still some uncertainty as to what species the Bornean rhinoceros belongs to, that of something like a dozen skulls examined all were *R. sumatranus*. Our elephant also is probably the Sumatran variety of *E. indicus*, but this is not quite certain.

We had a reception afterwards; amongst other people, Dato Buginda Etam brought his four wives aboard. Dato Buginda Etam is the good Dato as distinguished from Dato Buginda Putih the bad Dato; they both come from Tuncu, a celebrated pirate village. The old pirate chief, Dato Kurunding, is dead; this is the man who used to show people a crees-barong (a weapon somewhere between a large bowie-knife and a Roman sword), with which he boasted he had himself killed one hundred and twenty people. Buginda Putih, his son, exhibited a desire to emulate his father's exploits; but was soon controlled by the growing strength of the government, and had to fly, deserted by most of his followers, to Spanish territory. His cousin, Dato Buginda Etam it is who was on board with us to-day with his wives, as well as Sheriff Byassin's, &c. As usual, they were gorgeously arrayed in all the brilliant hues of the rainbow, purple and orange-coloured jackets, sarongs of dark green, or else red and yellow plaids, worked with silk. Their masses of jet black hair, well anointed with fresh cocoanut oil, was combed up high on the crowns of their heads, and tied in knots, which as they do not know the use of hairpins, continually descends, and has to be re-dressed. They usually cut a small square fringe round their foreheads. They had nothing whatever to say for

attempts at reprisals were made.¹⁴ The story runs that it was in consequence of a feud between the chief of the village, Pangeran Amai, and the crocodiles, that they were so bloodthirsty, he having in his youth sworn that he hoped he might be devoured by a crocodile if a statement he made was not true, well knowing that he was swearing falsely. The curious point of the tale is that, after the villagers had all moved down to Biler, Pangeran Amai went to the Mumiang to collect nipas for roofing his new houses, and whilst there, was dragged out of his boat at night by a huge crocodile, and was never more seen again, although there were six or seven other men in the same boat.

The deserted fields and gardens here, being now covered with grass, afford food for large numbers of deer, bison (*Bos banting*), rhinoceros, and elephants. We saw the footprints on the muddy banks where one of the latter animals had landed after a swim across the river. On a former occasion on this spot my husband, having failed to come up with a herd of about forty elephants, was returning through the forest, when his men discovered some orang-utans sitting in a tree. He himself objects to shoot these animals, but the men began firing at them before he could stop them. The female, with a little one clinging to her, made off into the forest; but, being wounded, stopped in a high tree. Hearing a rustling behind him, he turned round and saw the male animal coming to his wife's assistance, although it clearly understood the danger, and was in fact shot by the men – a sad sacrifice to conjugal affection.

Early the next morning we arrived at Lamag, having passed through nearly sixty miles of tropical forest without seeing a single house, although if the country were China it would support hundreds of thousands of people, possessing as it does all the necessary elements for the support of a large population.

Having reached this place (Lamag), we sent the "Sabine" back, as we intended making a long stay, and, furthermore, proposed continuing our journey into the far interior when W. had finished his work at this place. There is a large native village here, and we saw a good deal of the people. On the day we arrived the natives had killed a rhinoceros, which their dogs had brought to bay when out pig-hunting. The men went in with their spears and killed it. The Lamagites, not being Mohamedans, do not scruple to eat anything that offers – snakes, monkeys, &c. – so they regarded the rhinoceros as affording an opportunity for a big feast. They offered W. a cut of steak, which he accepted, and ordered to be cooked for dinner, to my disgust. He protested that it was very good eating, and was something like pork and venison; but I declined to try it – indeed, I did not like to use the knives, forks, or plates for some days afterwards. Our cook,

Lam Chong, a Chinaman, bought the animal's small horn for five bundles of tobacco, as his countrymen prize all manner of strange and curious things as medicine, and no doubt he made a good profit over the transaction when he returned to Elopura. I possess one valued at \$25.

There was with us Mr. A., a naturalist, whose cook was provided with a camp oven; so he and our cook used to have great baking matches, preparing and subsequently baking bread on a sandbank. One night the river rose nearly twenty feet, submerging the said sandbank. We usually lay at anchor in mid-stream, but on this and some other occasions, after heavy rains in the mountains of the interior, we had to haul our boat close in to the bank, to prevent ourselves being carried away by the big floating logs which swirled past us in numbers.

At this place the natives very wisely turn the tables on the crocodiles, preferring to eat them rather than be eaten by them. No less than sixty-seven had been caught in the preceding twelve months, some of very large size, and nearly 20 ft. long. I first found out that the natives had acquired a taste for crocodile flesh in the following way: At daybreak one morning the orderly came and called my husband, saying there was a big wild pig on the river bank close by. He got up immediately, and shot it from the boat. Having consequently a large supply of fresh meat, and knowing that the natives at this place would be glad of some, I, seeing a long dug-out canoe making its way up the river, hailed the occupants, intending to give them a portion of poor piggy. As they came alongside, the man in the bow put his head in at one of the cabin windows, and asked if we would like some "ekan besar" (big fish). An instant later, to my intense surprise, I found the "big fish" he offered was nothing else than crocodile. They had just captured it, and had hewn it into great steaks. This culinary delicacy we politely declined. The brute must have been about 12 ft. long; its skull is now in the Sandakan Museum. The mode of capturing these creatures is by firmly driving two stout but pliable poles into the river bank, and tying them together. To the lower one is attached a long single rattan, at the end of which half a dozen lines are made fast to a short stout stick to which is bound a dead monkey, or other such bait. A crocodile, however large, once swallowing this, and getting the stick crossways in his stomach, cannot drag away the apparently weak sticks, and is found and secured by the men when they go round to examine the lines.

As the accommodation for our boatmen was very limited, some of them made an upper storey on the roof of the boat. They bound poles to the sides of the boat with rattan, and then covered in the framework with *kadjangs* made of the ever useful nipa palm. In this country one never seems to be at a loss for this sort of thing. Rattans are always to be found

about, while the native dogs always take care to keep out of danger, but they always kill and eat the pigs they once settle down in chase of, and capture.

What I have more fear of than snakes and regard with more aversion, are centipedes, these are of the largest most loathsome type. They are not infrequently to be met with in the houses, especially if repairs to roof or walls be in progress. Their bite is very painful and causes great swellings. They are wonderfully active and seem to have an innate knowledge that man is their natural enemy, and disappear down a crack in the floor or other crevice with astonishing celerity when once perceived. Scorpions are also nasty things and their sting is even more painful, but they luckily are not so common.

There are a good many animals of one kind and another in the forest, monkeys, squirrels and so forth, beside the larger game; if one keeps chickens it is soon realized that there are many more animals than are usually supposed, for if one has not got two or three dogs about, musangs, civit cats, big monitor lizards up to eight feet long, snakes, rats and all manner of vermin are constantly making inroads on the poultry yard. There is no harm in any of these animals as far as one is concerned, and in fact the musangs can even be partly tamed.

But there are larger animals in the forest. We have had deer bound across our garden, and on one occasion a rhinoceros frequented a gully at the back of our house for two or three nights running, the dryness of the season having lured him down to our water supply, as they are fond of bathing. We wondered the first night what the loud grunting noise was, and stood on the verandah to hear him crashing amongst the herbage down below, whenever he came across a log in his path, against which he knocked his shins in the darkness, he swore after rhinoceros fashion and grumbled. One night he actually came up the water coolies' path, and made his way along the hill top towards the town, but when he turned the corner and saw lights ahead he became alarmed, and returned to his accustomed haunts: his peregrinations were clearly traceable next morning. They went after him two or three times but failed to come up with him, though they found a pool all muddy which he had lately been bathing in.

Just before we left Borneo W. stumbled across three in the forest, and had to get up a tree to escape from one, having no gun with him, but directly afterwards, his boy rushing up with the necessary fire arm, he pursued one and killed it. They are nasty ugly brutes but have not so far displayed any of those vices with which they are accredited.

The animal most peculiar to Borneo is the orang-utan: a family of three

came down to the edge of the forest close to our house once. W. and I were returning from the estate to our house, when we saw a little group of Sulus below a tree, into whose top they were all gazing intently. It appeared that when they sent up the youngest of their party to get some fruit (the tree being in bearing) he almost went into the arms of the horrible animal. That boy came down much more quickly than he went up, but the poor creature only tried to hide itself in the leafy crest of the tree. We should not have touched it as they are harmless brutes, but it is very unpleasant to have them for such near neighbours, so I went for W.'s gun, and he shot it. It was a dreadfully hideous beast, enough to give one the nightmare, with a ferocious expression of countenance of which the stuffed specimens in museums give no adequate idea. This was the male, a few days later he shot the mother and child, they were not half so ugly. A curious feature about these animals is that they seem to contract lasting unions, and always go about in families of three, father, mother and child.

The Chinese have a strange infatuation for all sorts of extraordinary things, which they use as medicines, rhinoceros horns and the gall of the orangutan being amongst them, to obtain either one or other they will pay high prices.

The most ferocious creature we have is the crocodile, and he certainly is to be feared. Rarely a month passes but news reaches us that some one or other has been killed by one: they are most audacious and come right up to the town. Not long before we left, a China-man picking up drift wood on the shore was seized by one of these brutes, which proceeded to drag him away; his loud cries however caused his friends to rush to his rescue, and he was recovered, but in a very mauled condition; this happened just below the house we were living in at the time, which was situated in the centre of the town and we heard his cries plainly.

One of our men at Pulo Bai went out fishing with his son at night time in a long "gobang" (canoe). The boy went to sleep, but was suddenly awakened by the boat tipping over; he cried to his father but got no answer, and the father has never been heard of or seen since; no doubt a crocodile upset the boat and carried the man off. This old man had shortly before brought me some charms, which he said would preserve the bearer from harm, as W. was going on an expedition which involved danger; it was owing to the absence of these charms that his friends attributed the occurrence.

From crocodiles to dragons is but a short step. Our Chinese sometimes indulge in very fine dragon feasts, the dragon being 150 feet long. This creature has a huge and grotesque head, the body is composed of many yards of coloured silk fastened round the ribs, each rib being supported by