

Sulu and Sabah. By Nicholas Tarling. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1978. 385pp. U.K. price: £18.25.

IN *Sulu and Sabah*, Professor Tarling presents a meticulously documented diplomatic history of the British connection with northern Borneo from the East India Company's ill-fated venture at Balambangan in the 1760s and 1770s to the ultimate incorporation of Sabah, formerly the Crown Colony of North Borneo, into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. The book is in fact an exposition in depth of the bases of the Malaysian title to the area and the limits of its borders. In view of the Philippines government's competing claim to Sabah, which Tarling also examines briefly in his conclusions, the story is of considerable contemporary interest.

The policy objectives explored here are fundamental themes in the history of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British endeavour in Southeast Asia: the twin needs to safeguard her sea lanes to China and Australia, which traversed the region, and to extend her freedom of navigation and commerce within it. Britain sought the maximum of opportunity with the minimum of expense and complication, pressed always on one hand by British merchants and officials on the scene toward ever greater formal commitment and protection of their activities, restrained on the other by London's reluctance to face the financial burden and European resentment accompanying the further acquisition of colonies.

So much is familiar. What is unique to the North Borneo case is the unusually large number of interested parties and the consequent complexity of the factors to be weighed in policy formation. The area was claimed by both the Brunei and Sulu sultanates, though the latter controlled it when the British first arrived there. It was located in a border zone between the established colonial spheres of Spain and the Netherlands. By the mid-nineteenth century it was also neighbour to the Crown Colony of Labuan, the independent Raj of James Brooke in Sarawak, and open as well to trade and possible settlement by Germany, the United States and even briefly France and Italy. For as long as possible Britain depended on diplomatic manoeuvre among this crowd of competitors to preserve her interests without actual occupation. Even when, in the imperial scramble of the latter nineteenth century, this mechanism proved inadequate, she selected the unusual expedient of chartering a private trading firm, the North Borneo Company, to keep the area safely but still unofficially British rather than resorting to protectorate or annexation. She was then obliged to cope with the numerous anomalies resultant from the Company's *de facto* sovereign status, until it finally surrendered its rights to the Crown in 1946.

As a history of British policy, *Sulu and Sabah* rests primarily on British documentary sources, and its focus is ultimately on London where the power to determine action resided. The motives and activities of the foreign governments, both European and Southeast Asian, are therefore presented as they were communicated to and understood by British officials. With regard to the interested European powers, who were rarely backward in transmitting their views to London, this approach succeeds. Professor Tarling unfolds his story of shifting alliances, treaties and protocols, legal interpretations and refutations, with little praise or blame for the actors and an unfaltering mastery of his material. At the local level, however, the concerns of the Brunei and Sulu Sultans and even Raja Brooke and the Labuan government occasionally emerge as mono-dimensional or

lacking in context.

Part of the difficulty seems to be Tarling's desire to avoid needless repetition of observations already presented in his earlier work, *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei*, but as events in Brunei, Sarawak, Sabah and Sulu were intricately intertwined, and tended frequently to be considered as a whole by both local and London authorities, the problems of dividing the material are formidable. The present book is advertised as a companion volume to the former. It appears rather, despite a slightly different thrust, to be an extension of it, and regarding the period prior to the formation of the North Borneo Company, the reader is inclined to wish that the two books could have been published as a single multi-volume work, so interdependent and complementary are they.

Similarly, in spite of its prominence in the title, Sulu's role in the book is circumscribed. Within the frame of British policy toward North Borneo, the Sulu Sultan functioned principally as the legal peg on which every cession of the area from 1761 had hung. Britain was therefore constrained to support his independence or at least the fiction of his independence vis-a-vis the Spanish for as long as possible. This was to the Sultan's advantage, but a successful British drive to engross the internal trade of North Borneo, long Sulu's most valuable economic hinterland, was not. According to at least one scholar, Sulu's hold on the commerce of the region was not broken by the North Borneo Company until as late as the 1890s.¹ Tenure of North Borneo was of overriding concern to both Britain and Sulu, but because of their differing perspectives, the legal status of the matter, which so exercised the British, did not automatically reflect the real boundaries of the Sultan's freedom of action. What the reader misses in the narrative of British-Spanish-Sulu dealings, is an occasional alternative standard by which to judge it, when and how much the British view of Sulu, coloured as it was by diplomatic necessity, diverged from actual local circumstance.

Strictly speaking, however, such questions lie outside the defined purpose of this book. In all that touches British concerns, what emerges is a skillful, often fascinating portrait of the multiple moves — from conflict to sometimes ungainly compromise, as each new challenge to her interest arose — by which Britain's imperial expansion in North Borneo gradually took form.

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Pacific Islanders under German Rule: A Study in the Meaning of Colonial Resistance. By Peter J. Hempenstall. Australian National University Press,, Canberra, 1978. 264pp., illustrations, maps, end papers. Aust. price: \$19.50.

GERMANY lost her Pacific colonies in 1914. Yet until very recently only scant information on German rule has been available. At best it has been fragmentary, and it is still far from complete. It may be that this is due to the fact that it is the winners who write history. If so it should also be said that such neglect has been

¹ James F. Warren, *Trade, Raid, Slave: The Socio-Economic Patterns of the Sulu Zone*, Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1975.