

Through a Glass Darkly: A Fresh Look at the Stories of the Foundation of Singapore

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Abstract. The story of the founding of Singapore has typically been presented in a "simplistic" manner. This is perhaps understandable for school textbooks but less easy to fathom for specialist or semi-specialist works. Drawing upon sources that have been utilised in the past and those that have rarely been used, such as "The Sincere Letters", this study highlights the intricacies of the manoeuvrings of Stamford Raffles and the Malay rulers at specific junctures to re-evaluate the role of the major participants, particularly Raffles.

Keywords and phrases: Stamford Raffles, Singapore founding, Singapore history curriculum, early modern Malay politics, Tengku Long/Sultan Hussein

Introduction

The foundation of Singapore by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819 marked the beginning of British ascendancy over the lucrative sea-lanes linking Europe with China across the Straits of Melaka. In the popular historical discourse, Singapore's rise is viewed as a natural development of British traders' desire to gain a foothold in the Straits at a time when the British and other Europeans were engaged in a bitter struggle to capture regional trade between Europe and China. The historiography of Singapore's foundation faces the challenge of explaining how Raffles acquired the island to promote British commercial interests in the archipelago, apparently by creating a new sovereign ruler of the island to legitimise the transaction.

Munshi Abdullah, who knew both Raffles and his associate William Farquhar well and greatly admired Raffles, provides the first and best contemporary account of how Raffles founded Singapore. Abdullah most likely obtained the story from Farquhar himself. According to Abdullah, Farquhar met Temenggong Abdul Rahman, a vassal of Tengku Hussein, the eldest son of the former Sultan of Johor and the brother of the current Sultan of Johor, and asked Temenggong about acquiring Singapore for a British settlement (Munshi 1955, 127). Farquhar signed a preliminary treaty with Temenggong to acquire Singapore for the British. Once Raffles arrived in Singapore, he had Tengku Hussein brought to Singapore, enthroned him as the "Sultan of Johor" and promptly signed a treaty with him confirming the transaction (Munshi 1955, 138–139). Almost all subsequent accounts of the foundation of Singapore are based on Abdullah's

account because neither Raffles nor Farquhar left their own accounts. Raffles merely justified his course of action in memoirs written long after the event (Raffles 1978, 266–267). Thus, historians lack his version of events.

The most notable aspect of the foundation of Singapore is that Raffles legitimised the island's acquisition by signing a treaty with a "Sultan of Johor" he created by manipulating a succession issue, which otherwise had no chance of success, blatantly ignoring the existence of a Sultan of Johor who was acknowledged by most of Singapore's nobility and people. The modern historical narratives of Singapore's foundation explain this anomaly in different ways, either by ignoring the issue altogether, denouncing Raffles' action or arguing that Raffles understood the customs and practices of the Malay polity when he secured Singapore for the British in a seemingly legal manner. Not all scholars who study Stamford Raffles probe the issue of his role in the appointment of Tengku Hussein as the "Sultan of Johor" and manipulation of Malay politics. The works of N. Barley, D. C. de Kavanagh Boulger, J. A. Bethune Cook, and E. Hahn avoid the issue, although Hahn presents a detailed discussion of British involvement in the politics of the Malay Archipelago (Barley 1991; Boulger 1897; Cook 1907; Hahn 1946). Scholars such as M. Collis, H. J. Marks and C. Wutzburg present the events in some depth, either questioning the "righteousness" of Raffles or writing about his involvement in a neutral manner (Collis 1966; Marks 1959; Wutzburg 1954). In a survey of the subject matter performed by S. H. Wong, C. Clair was highlighted for portraying Raffles' knowledge of the succession dispute (Wong 1982). In C. H. H. Wake's article, Raffles is depicted as being aware of the dispute and even the succession protocols, although Wake highlighted Tengku Hussein's manoeuvres to proclaim himself "Sultan of Singapore" (Wake 1975). Mary Turnbull displays another opinion in her highly regarded history of Singapore in which Raffles' Malay partners are presented as responsible for ceding Singapore to the British, exonerating Raffles from any wrongdoing (Turnbull 2009).

The diverse opinions of Raffles' role in the king-making episode also reverberate in school textbooks used in Singapore, which usually present Raffles' action as acceptable under the circumstances.¹ The information presented by Singapore Museum for public education is reflective of advances in the field. Raffles was supposed to have "recognised Sultan Hussein as the heir to Johor, [so that he could later] sign over a part of Singapore to the British". Despite his limited options, Hussein's acts were spontaneous and Machiavellian (Frost and Balasingamchow 2009, 45; 48).

The orthodox views on the foundation of Singapore are no longer accepted. Even the media trying to project a neutral version of the island's history cannot avoid undermining the orthodox discourse, asserting that Raffles' actions leading up to the foundation of Singapore amounted to a "coup". Furthermore, Raffles' lack of

understanding of Malay history and culture is said to have led him to "create Singapore out of thin air" (*History of Singapore*, Discovery Channel 2006). Several radical critics argue that Tengku Hussein, who was appointed by Raffles as the "Sultan of Johor" in conjunction with the foundation of Singapore, was trying to create the equivalent of a satellite *karajaan* in Singapore, a view premised upon Tengku Hussein's ingenuity in feeling his way through a difficult diplomatic problem by acting without the approval of his overlord in Johor. This perspective, which is closer to Turnbull's opinion, is untenable in view of contemporary sources that characterise Tengku Hussein as weak (Turnbull 1988, 51).

Ascertaining exactly how Raffles went about "creating Singapore out of thin air" presents a serious difficulty due to the paucity of primary sources. Almost all modern scholarly works on the subject are based on Munshi Abdullah's account, which has been exaggerated over time through retelling. Expecting any important primary source material to emerge is unrealistic because all relevant archival material has already been analysed. Raffles' extant private papers contain many letters with Malay rulers but not a single letter regarding the foundation of Singapore, suggesting he conducted the affair entirely through William Farquhar.² Indeed, the only direct contemporary information regarding the affair by the players involved appears in a series of letters exchanged between Farquhar and Raja Muda of Johor, Tengku Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman included in Farquhar's papers. Information contained in these letters is not revelatory, but it illuminates several key points (Badriyah 1999).³ Raffles and Farquhar apparently first attempted to coax and cajole Johor to help locate a suitable place for British operations, and they frightened Johor by insisting that the Dutch would attack Riau to obtain its support. When those strategies failed, they set about creating a new Sultan of Johor in Singapore to legitimise its acquisition. Therefore, Raffles' surreptitious actions to acquire Singapore are no longer a matter of speculation.

The Farquhar letters have not received attention of scholars in Singapore, partly because only the Malay versions of letters have been published and partly due to a reluctance to accuse Raffles, whose public image as a benevolent colonial administrator is still strong, of misconduct when he was behaving as a typical imperialist, ready to exploit circumstances to suit his purpose. Nonetheless, setting the historical narrative right by considering the new information instead of merely speculating about what happened is necessary.

The Context

Raffles' role in the events leading up to the foundation of Singapore must be seen in the broader context of the rapidly evolving competition between the Dutch and the British for control of the archipelago. The Dutch had established themselves in the archipelago at the beginning of the 17th century and had most of it under their influence, if not effective control, by 1780. The Dutch were particularly concerned about any other European power gaining a foothold in the Straits, a concern that nearly became a phobia in the context of rapid political upheavals in Europe in the last two decades of the 18th century (Lewis 1995). In the late 18th century, England's power was ascendant outside Europe. The British East India Company, which Raffles represented in principle, was England's unofficial imperial agency in the Indian Ocean, and it was anxious to gain access to a place in the Straits to facilitate its rapidly increasing trade with China (Zhen 2008, 26).⁴ The British East India Company was able to fish in the troubled waters of the Indian Ocean during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars in Europe after 1780. Raffles did not play a part in the British East India Company's acquisition of control over Melaka in 1795, but he played a key role in gaining control of Java in 1812. Raffles' expectations of making Java the centre of English forward movement in the archipelago came to an abrupt end in 1815 when England had to return both Java and Melaka to the Netherlands. He was forced to search for another base, a task far more difficult because the former possessions of the United East India Company (VOC) had come under the jurisdiction of the Netherlands' government, and both England and the Netherlands were at peace in Europe.

Raffles was ideally suited for the purpose of scouting for a congenial location in the region, for he had acquired a degree of command of the Malay language and established friendly relations with local rulers. He had been interested in securing a British settlement to promote the commercial interests of the British East India Company, which was eager to secure the Straits of Melaka. Raffles focused on Singapore as the most suitable place for a British settlement after considering several other places against the background of rapidly changing balance of European power in the archipelago. By 1818, Raffles' field of operation was rather limited both temporally and diplomatically because he could not provoke a conflict with the Dutch by entering into any arrangements with local rulers who were in the sphere of Dutch influence or power (Tarling 1962, 51–80; Wutzburg 1954, 450–474).⁵

Raffles' and Farquhar's activities in securing a base suitable for British mercantile activities coincided with important political developments in the state of Johor in the aftermath of Dutch attack on Riau in 1784. The Dutch attacked to evict the Bugis, who had waged war on the Dutch in Melaka, and the attack ended with the

Dutch gaining direct control over Riau. The Malay ruler of Johor-Riau had grievance about the kingdom's fortunes but was powerless to respond without the active support of another European power. Against this background, Farquhar, representing the British East India Company on behalf of Raffles, made overtures to the rulers of Johor to secure a base for operations in the archipelago.

Initial Gambit

Raffles and Farquhar used the uncertainty about whether the realm of Johor-Riau was completely independent from the Dutch control after the VOC was ousted from Melaka in 1795 (Winstedt 1992, 80). Under the circumstances, Raffles and Farquhar expected the rulers of Johor-Riau to be amenable to enter into a friendship with the British. The Raja Muda of Johor was agreeable to such a development, based on the tenor of his correspondence with Farquhar. In August 1818, Farquhar wrote to the Raja Muda asking him to name a suitable place for a base because Carimon Island was not suitable and he would prefer a place nearer to the shipping lanes (Badriyah 1999, 41–42). The Raja Muda was cautious in his reply two weeks later because Johor had a treaty with the Dutch that did not allow Johor to grant any other foreign nation access to territory under Johor's control (Badriyah 1999, 43–44). Farquhar was not easily discouraged by such scruples and coaxed the Raja Muda with soothing words, pressing his request again at the end of January 1818. Farquhar wrote, "our intention of coming to meet you, our friend, with sincerity, warmth and a clean heart, was to extend our friendship to you, our friend, on behalf of the English Company" (Badriyah 1999, 45). In the next sentence, Farquhar said, "We beg our friend not to delay us because we cannot stay for long due to the Company's affairs" and he needed a prompt response from Johor (Badriyah 1999, 45).

However, when Farquhar's soothing words and pleas for a quick response did not produce the desired result, Raffles increased pressure on the ruler of Johor. On 5 July 1818, while Farquhar was still in Johor, Raffles wrote a letter to Sultan Abdul Rahman of Johor explaining that he had received news from Batavia that the Dutch would "send a great force to remove my friend (i.e., Sultan of Johor) to Pontianak, and in my opinion, my friend should not receive the Dutch envoy (who is coming to Johor ostensibly for a peaceful purpose), if my friend is inclined to place himself under the protection of the flag of the English Company so we can be friends and support each other" (Netscher 1870, 250).⁶ Sultan Abdul Rahman, concerned about his situation, promptly signed a treaty with the British on 19 August 1818 (George and Sumner 1924, 115).

A letter dated 25 May 1819 preserved in the Riau state archives until as late as the 1860s written by Sultan Abdul Rahman of Riau to the Dutch in Melaka in the aftermath of the foundation of Singapore provides information on what transpired

in 1818 (Netscher 1870, 249–251; Winstedt 1992, 89–91). According to the letter, the sultan entered into negotiations with the British and signed a treaty under the impression that the Dutch had been ousted from power and were not known to be returning to resume their hegemony over the Straits. Consequently, Johor-Riau was free to enter into negotiations with the British. The sultan emphasised that he signed a treaty with the British after being persuaded by "the arguments and candour of Major Farquhar", and later realised that "we had been tricked into signing a treaty in haste and had been deceived as to a Dutch attack on our country" (Winstedt 1992, 90). The Dutch later nullified Sultan Abdul Rahman's actions in this instance, but the versatility of British overtures to an array of people with the potential to influence the course of events should not be dismissed (Badriyah 1999, 15). As Kwa's study has demonstrated, Tengku Hussein was not a passive player in the course of events (Kwa 2006, 30–31). He initiated communications with the Dutch and the British, including to parties who were possibly in rivalry with each other, specifically Raffles and J. Alexander Bannerman (Badriyah 1999, 50–51).

In September 1818, when Melaka was returned to the Dutch, rumours of an impending Dutch attack on Johor were circulated in Johor. The Dutch promptly sent an envoy to Riau to calm the ruler of Johor and prevent any further British contact with Johor (Buyong 1980, 182–186; Mattheson 1999, 223–224).⁷ The Dutch clearly saw the need to strengthen their hold over Johor, located so close to Java and other Indonesian islands where Dutch control had been readily accepted. In November 1818, the Dutch governor of Melaka had the ruler of Johor bound to Dutch control through yet another treaty to pre-empt any alliance between Johor and the British or any other European power. On behalf of Johor, Sultan Abdul Rahman, Raja Muda Jafar and other noblemen signed the treaty. Whether Tengku Hussein, the Sultan's eldest son, participated in the negotiations and signed the treaty is uncertain, although he did so according to *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, a major Malay chronicle of Johor composed in the mid-nineteenth century based on earlier records. Temenggong Abdul Rahman, who was Tengku Hussein's deputy, certainly did sign the treaty as a leading member of the ruling elite (Buyong 1980, 186).

Meanwhile, Farquhar remained in Melaka where he had already established himself and knew that the Dutch were suspicious of British intentions. The restoration of friendship between Johor and the Dutch did not stop Farquhar's dealings with Johor, most likely under Raffles' direction. On the first of February 1819, a day after he wrote two more letters to the ruler of Johor-Riau, Farquhar mentioned that he heard that the Dutch in Melaka had already annexed Riau, Pahang and Johor to Melaka's territories. Farquhar asked the ruler of Johor to clarify the situation because the Dutch had dispatched a warship to the area, apparently to enforce their authority and to dissuade any interference by the

British, whose surreptitious activities with Johor had certainly become known to the Dutch in Melaka (Badriyah 1999, 46–47).

The Bugis feared the Dutch after 1784, and their relationship had been precariously tense (Badriyah 1999, 61–66).⁸ Raja Muda Jafar of Riau, with whom Farquhar corresponded, was obviously concerned about dealing with Farquhar, reluctant to invoke the wrath of the Dutch and recalling the destruction of Riau after Raja Haji's effort to oust the Dutch from the Straits in 1784. Therefore, in his reply to Farquhar dated 7 February 1819, Raja Muda of Riau was counselling caution on the issue of providing a base for the British in the Johor-Riau territory, which could affect his own fortune as well as that of the state of Riau (Badriyah 1999, 48–49). A gap exists in correspondence between the rulers of Johor-Riau and Farquhar at this juncture, either real or due to missing papers. Farquhar and Raffles must have realised that the tide had turned against them for securing a suitable base in the area under the jurisdiction of Johor-Riau with the co-operation of its rulers and sought another means to achieve their end.

Creating a New *Kerajaan*

Raffles and Farquhar had begun withdrawing from the area in earnest when it became clear that the arrangements they had made with the ruler of Johor-Riau had limited use and they could not expect any help from Johor, which was firmly under Dutch control. In late January 1819, a flotilla of six ships departed Penang and, together with the earlier vessels sent on the same mission, landed at Carimon, where the captain of one ship suggested a more suitable point northeast (i.e., St. Johns Island). The entire flotilla subsequently landed in Singapore. According to Wutzburg, at this point, Raffles was "determined to exploit the political situation" by exploiting the issue of succession to the throne of Johor by the "ingenious" creation of a sultanate of Singapore (Wutzburg 1954, 450–501). The island of Singapore had no Dutch presence, and Farquhar met with Temenggong Abdul Rahman, who was the head of a small local population of Malays and Chinese on the island. The circumstances under which Temenggong Abdul Rahman left Riau and settled in Singapore were ambiguous, and referring to the event, Tuhfat al-Nafis simply writes that Temenggong acted "as was his habit" (Matheson 1999, 227). This statement implies that Temenggong was in the habit of retreating to Singapore occasionally, possibly when he was out of favour in the court or when his faction of the court had lost its hold on power of the realm. The relationship between Temenggong Abdul Rahman and his overlord, the Sultan of Riau is even more difficult to ascertain. According to a letter written by Temenggong in Malay in 1814, he sought the sultan's permission to leave Riau and seek his fortune elsewhere, presumably within the territory under Riau's jurisdiction, which brought him to Singapore (Meursinge 1842; Winstedt 1992, 92). Malay noblemen, usually in disagreement with their overlords, typically

sought refuge far away from the centre of political power either to lead quiet lives or mount rebellions aimed at acquiring power. Temenggong Abdul Rahman was unsure of his best course of action against the background of the succession dispute in Riau, in which he was only a minor player. He decided to leave, at least until the succession dispute was resolved. Temenggong Abdul Rahman most likely belonged to the faction that lost in the contest for the throne of Riau, which strengthens such a conclusion (Winstedt 1992, 92).⁹

Landing in Singapore was no accident for Farquhar and Raffles, and both men intended to take advantage of Tengku Hussein's claim to the throne of Johor by cultivating the friendship of Temenggong Abdul Rahman, who was managing the island of Singapore on behalf of his patron, who himself was under the jurisdiction of the Sultan of Johor. According to Munshi Abdullah, Temenggong Abdul Rahman agreed to sign a provisional treaty allowing the British to have a settlement in Singapore, provided it was approved by his overlord, Tengku Hussein. Temenggong Abdul Rahman informed Farquhar that he himself was a vassal of Tengku Hussein, who was quickly brought to Singapore. Tengku Hussein assumed the title "sultan" and signed a treaty with Farquhar (Munshi 1955, 137–140). Earlier, on 19 August 1818, Farquhar had signed a treaty with Sultan Abdul Rahman to attempt to obtain the right to found a settlement in the region. Sultan Abdul Rahman "declared he was not the sultan" and Farquhar should approach Raja Muda Jafar because "all power (had been delegated to him)" (Winstedt 1992, 92–93). The British were themselves far from being united in their conduct. For example, the world view and working style of Bannerman, the Governor at Penang, and even Raffles' aide, Farquhar, were at times diametrically opposed to or incongruent with Raffles' approach (Wutzburg 1954, 480 and 490).¹⁰

Did Raffles act without knowing Malay succession customs or deliberately manipulate Johor's succession issue, which had avoided a serious problem for seven years, in a bid of "imperious dealings" (Kwa 2006, 23–24), side-lining the interests of two Malay noblemen? One might argue that Raffles' support for Tengku Hussein was premised on primogeniture, a principle applied in such situations in European history. However, such a position amounts to arrogance typical of the colonial era and cannot be reconciled with Farquhar's statement, as reported by Munshi Abdullah, that Raffles knew about Johor's succession issue and wanted to resolve it. Raffles may have deliberately ignored the facts of the situation and Malay political norms. Johor managed to settle the issue of succession in 1812 without serious political fallout. Did Raffles know about Malay political customs in Johor at that time?

Ignorance, Arrogance or Subterfuge?

Raffles' time in Melaka in the early 1800s was a period of learning about society and people in the archipelago, and he met other European students of Malay language and culture such as J. Leyden, who was preparing a translation of the major Malay historical narrative, *Sejarah Melayu*, which did not appear in print until 1821 (Leyden 2001, 35–47). By the time Raffles became the governor of Java in 1812, he should have had some basic understanding of the Malay language and the Malay people. Raffles knew about the Johor succession issue and had cordial relations with several Malay rulers for a decade, but he most likely lacked a sound knowledge of Malay politics. Perhaps realising that the treaties made with Temenggong and Tengku Hussein did not have a legitimising effect, Raffles and Farquhar re-designated Tengku Hussein as the "Sultan of Singapore". This move may have been an effort to avoid a diplomatic breach with the Dutch by tacitly acknowledging that the British had no desire to intervene in the affairs of Johor, which was under Dutch control. However, downgrading Tengku Hussein's position implicitly suggests that Raffles tried to rectify the previous mistake of proclaiming Hussein "Sultan of Johor".

Raffles' understanding of Tengku Hussein's claim to the throne of Johor was patently superficial, according to Wutzburg, who quotes from a letter Raffles wrote that "the legitimate heir to the title is a wanderer and was absent when the old Sultan died. According to custom the King could not be buried till his successor was invested with the title, but the King was [ultimately] buried and the second son at Lingen assumed charge in the name of the Sultan of Johor but his authority apparently did not extend beyond Lingen..." (Wutzburg 1954, 479). Wake claims that perhaps Raffles was unclear about the nature of succession in Johor-Riau, which suggests Raffles most likely did not decide to appoint Tengku Hussein as "Sultan of Johor" after careful consideration, and when the British were scouting for a base, Raffles may have been uncertain about how the succession would occur (Wake 1975, 53–54).

Malay succession was problematic because incumbent rulers rarely nominated their heirs publicly prior to their deaths. To complicate matters further, more than one son could always lay claim to the throne, and primogeniture was not the *desideratum* for Malay succession (Gullick 1988, 54). The personal character of the heir-apparent and the support of *orang kaya* (powerful noblemen) were more important factors than birth order in deciding a successor when more than one candidate was present. According to one story, Sultan Madmud of Johor nominated his younger son, Abdul Rahman, as his successor before his death, but this story is unconvincing because Sultan Madmud had also nominated Tengku Hussein as his successor to the throne (Winstedt 1992, 86–87). Appointing a successor was urgent so that the funeral of the late king could be officiated.

Tengku Hussein's absence when his father died left no choice but the appointment of his younger brother as the successor to the throne. Tengku Hussein did not challenge the decision; he is said to have resigned to his fate (Turnbull 1988, 8). If the later assessments of Tengku Hussein's personality are reliable, he was incapable of governing a kingdom (Turnbull 1988, 50). Turnbull's opinion relates to Tengku Hussein's career at a later stage and not to his personality around 1819.

At the time of the succession in 1812, both brothers were equally matched in terms of resources and manpower to challenge each other. Tengku Hussein was married to the daughters of the Bendahara of Pahang, Wan Ali, and Temenggong Abdul Rahman, which was a formidable combination that could carry great weight in a succession dispute. Tengku Hussein had several hundreds of followers at his command and more manpower he could bring to bear through his marital relationships (Begbie 1967, 272; 313–318).¹¹ A prince with the advantage of seniority, strong supporters and a large following could have mounted a challenge to his rival for the throne, but Tengku Hussein's response was hesitant and muted. Therefore, his rivals were unsurprisingly able to foil his efforts early. According to Winstedt, Tengku Hussein was warmly received by his younger brother, the sultan, upon his return from Pahang, and the sultan offered to abdicate in favour of his elder brother. However, Raja Muda of Riau, who was behind Abdul Rahman's rise to sultan, apparently prevented the sultan's abdication. At this juncture, Tengku Hussein departed with the queen of the former sultan, who had his regalia, and mustered a force together with his marital relations in Pahang to recover the throne. The Raja Muda of Riau now played his ace: he hinted to the British in Melaka that Bendahara, who was behind Tengku Hussein's campaign, was engaged in piracy. This ploy had its desired effect, and the British warned Bendahara not to interfere in the affairs of Riau Lingga, which, as Netscher observed, would have provoked both the Dutch and the British into action in warfare (Winstedt 1992, 88; Netscher 1870, 250; Badriyah 1999, 221–224).¹² Much more than clever thinking on Raja Muda's part is on display in this episode; he was concerned about retaining his power under a young ruler who was not as clever and clear thinking (Buyong 1980, 178). Consequently, Tengku Hussein's cause was lost even before it began. He retired and found a safe haven in Penyengat, where he remained in obscurity until early 1819.

Tengku Hussein was most likely induced to acquiesce to Raffles' proposal of assuming the newly created position of "Sultan of Johor" because his life in Penyengat was far from an honourable one, befitting of a royal prince. Tengku Hussein's autonomy in Penyengat and the extent to which Raja Muda of Johor had him monitored are unclear, but, interestingly, Tengku Hussein had to "pretend to go fishing in the Riau Straits" before he was brought to Singapore by

Raffles' agents, Raja Embong and Wan Abdullah (Winstedt 1992, 88; 93). Therefore, his decision to support Raffles' scheme is unsurprising, even if Hussein knew it went against the norms and practices of the Malay polity. Tengku Hussein's later explanations of his role in the events leading up to his appointment as the Sultan of Singapore clearly suggest a weak character, gullible to persuasion by his close associates, who stood to lose a great deal if their candidate lost out in the competition for power and wealth. Tengku Hussein became a willing partner to his supporter, Temenggong Abdul Rahman, who appears to have taken the lead in with Raffles' scheme, although Munshi Abdullah portrays him to be a model of diplomatic conduct by deferring decisions to his superior, Tengku Hussein (Munshi 1955, 128).

Temenggong Abdul Rahman most likely moved to Singapore in the aftermath of Tengku Hussein's failed bid to become the Sultan of Johor in 1812 and settled on the island with a group of Orang Lauts and Chinese between 1812 and 1816.¹³

If Raffles' role in the intrigue surrounding the events of Singapore's foundation as a British commercial base appears far more central than has been depicted in standard historical narratives, his close associates among the Malay noblemen also appear far more involved in the intrigue, rather than being puppets in the hands of imperial agents. After Singapore had become a *fait accompli*, both Tengku Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman found themselves in a rather difficult position. They were still bound by the code of conduct of subordinates towards their overlord, whose authority they had usurped against all Malay conventions of diplomacy. Conversely, they were beholden to their English patrons for everything now that they were barred entry into Johor's court. Both noblemen were consequently forced to become further involved in deception, as evinced by a classic piece of double-dealing. While writing to their overlord that they had been forced to accede to Raffles' course of action, they also wrote to the Governor of Bengal expressing their desire to be on the side of the British (Badriyah 1999, 50–51).

Conclusion

The debate about whether a noble or Machiavellian motive was behind Raffles' actions in the founding of Singapore is not new, but Raffles' understanding, or lack thereof, of Malay politics and history is crucial to any discussion of the issue. Raffles' prior knowledge of Malay politics was limited, and Raffles' desperation to secure a base in late 1818 is also obvious. The new information in Farquhar's letters to the ruler of Johor, sparse as it is, clearly suggests that Raffles initially sought Johor's support to secure a base and even resorted to subterfuge to coax Johor to do so before the Dutch resumed their control over Johor and its dependencies. When this gambit failed, Raffles did not hesitate to fish in the

trouble waters of Johor politics by courting the faction that lost power in Johor in 1812, supporting the party that lost its bid to power, which had no realistic chance of success under normal circumstances, to lend legitimacy to the acquisition of Singapore without the consent of its acknowledged overlord. New information has revealed that the main Malay protagonists in Singapore's foundation—Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman—were active participants in the events, often communicating with and placating the English and Dutch at the same time and hoping to benefit from their support for the British, although knowing that they had burnt bridges behind them in the political world of Johor. Raffles arguably decided upon a course of action that paid scant attention to Malay political norms and practices and was aimed at gaining a base for British commercial interests by manipulating circumstances and individuals whose participation was essential.

Notes

1. The topic is taught in history and social studies syllabi at the lower and upper secondary levels. The two sets of textbooks used are *History of Singapore: From Settlement to Nation* and *Interacting with Our World: Our Beginnings*, written by the Curriculum Production and Development Division. In the 1980s, the history textbook used was *Social and Economic History of Singapore. Singapore in World History*, by S. Dhoraisingam and H. T. Sutton in 1967, also discusses the topic.
2. Raffles' papers are now located in the British Library. For a detailed listing with information about papers that are in print, see: <file:///Users/mradinfernando/Documents/The%20British%20Library%20%20India%20Office%20Select%20Materials%20-%20Contents%20list.webarchive>. A selection of letters from this collection has been published; see Ahmat Adam (2009) *Letters of Sincerity*, which includes correspondence from Singapore, Riau and Lingga.
3. The original documents are now located in the British Library.
4. Trade in China from the 1760s to 1830s tripled and the English share of the trade increased from 50 to 75 per cent.
5. Raffles' initial efforts to find a suitable place in the archipelago are discussed at length in Tarling's and Wutzburg's studies.
6. This letter to the Raja Muda of Johor, dated 6 Ramadan 1233 (5 July 1818), was found in the Riau Lingga Archives when Netscher consulted in the 1870s.
7. Buyong Adil's account is almost entirely based on *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, a Malay chronicle written in the mid-nineteenth century but based on 18th century Malay papers and oral tradition, which contains a literary embellished version of the events.
8. The Dutch had launched a major attack on the Bugis at Riau in 1784, greatly diminishing the latter's strength in the area. The British "invited" Raja Deris to Singapore after the latter complained of his "unhappiness" with the Dutch. Apparently, the raja was also communicating with the Raja Muda and Engku Putri, revealing that the Bugis were in (continued) tensions with the Dutch.
9. The actions of the Temenggong revealed him to be as Machiavellian as the other native players. The Temenggong wrote to the Raja Muda in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the treaty with the British expressing shock at the British arrival and emphasised that Hussein's ascension to sultanhood was "forced and influenced". See further in Letter 7 in the collection of Farquhar letters by Badriyah Haji Salleh.
10. The Foreign Secretary (Viscount Robert S. Castlereagh, 1812–1822) had advised officials, particularly those overseas, to refrain from hostility with the Dutch. While with Francis R. Hastings (Governor General of India) in India, Raffles received somewhat "contradictory" instructions not to provoke the Dutch as well as reassurances that Hastings would be behind him. Hastings' gestures could suggest that the Governor General was unsure how events would unfold and embraced an ambiguous front to safeguard his own career. See further discussion in Collis' or Wutzburg's studies.
11. Estimating the strength of the two rivals to the throne of Johor in terms of manpower and resources in their control is difficult because the sources do not provide complete information. Nevertheless, according to information in some contemporary sources, the main supporters of Tengku Hussein

- could muster several thousands of people to their cause. They also had large amount of wealth to retain their followers' support.
12. The adverse tactic of the Raja Muda against the Bendahara came, expectedly, after having attempted to solicit his support. See further in Letters 100 and 101 in the collection of Farquhar letters by Badriyah Haji Salleh. Letter 47 stated that the Bendahara's change of mind in going to Lingga to support Tengku Hussein's claim to the throne was the result of "displeasure" about Abdul Rahman's ascension.
 13. Winstedt used a number of sources to establish the time of Temenggong's move to Singapore, but he does not clearly specify his sources.

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