

## Governor Sir William Robinson and The Muar Succession: A Consideration

THAM JUNEAN\*, MOHD SAMSUDIN, SUFFIAN MANSOR

*Pusat Kajian Sejarah, Politik dan Hal Ehwal Antarabangsa, Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

Corresponding author: p108825@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Received: 27 June 2023 Accepted: 21 September 2023

### Abstract

In 1877, the small territory of Muar in the Malay Peninsula was ceded to Maharaja (later Sultan) Abu Bakar of Johor after the death of Sultan Ali Iskandar Shah of Johor. This was done with the connivance and approval of the British Governor and Colonial Office, setting aside the claims of Sultan Ali's son, Tunku Alam. Although presented locally as a triumph for the politicking of the Maharajah, the Muar Succession was a short-lived check to the British forward movement in the Malay Peninsula. This article attempts to explain the reason for this anomaly, and the role of Governor Robinson during the event. The qualitative research was conducted using primary sources like Arkib Negara Malaysia documents, colonial newspapers and Colonial Office files. Contrary to conventional historiography which portrays the British forward movement as linear and inevitable, we show that the personal initiative of the Governor of the Straits Settlements played a crucial role in the development of British policy towards Muar, which would later influence the politics of British colonial administration in the Malay Peninsula in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the personal convictions of Governor Robinson against granting the Maharajah more influence marked the start of hardening colonial attitudes towards the Maharajah, leading to a resumption in British forward policy from the 1880s. The Muar affair would prove to be the exception that proves the rule, where the British experience in non-intervention in the Malay Peninsula provided instead justification for further direct expansion in the name of good administration.

Keywords: Sir William Robinson; Nineteenth-century; Muar; Johor; Sultan Abu Bakar

### Introduction and Background

The story of Stamford Raffles and his installation of Sultan Hussein (r.1819- 1835) as ruler of Johor to legitimise his acquisition of Singapore is a tale well known. It is also equally well known that Sultan Hussein was rendered disappointed by the terms of the Treaty, which denied him any authority and means. Disappointed, he retired to Malacca, where he passed away. The Sultan was succeeded by his son Sultan Ali Iskandar Shah (r.1835 – 1855/1877). Sultan Ali's reign was chronicled by increasing indebtedness and lack of administrative ability, which severely hampered his standing amongst the British and his ability to rule whatever possessions remained to him. To obtain more funds, the Sultan unsuccessfully tried to assert control over Johor, which was by then practically governed by the Temenggong. In 1855, Sultan Ali signed a treaty with the Straits government relinquishing his claims over most of Johor state. In return, the Sultan obtained a single lump sum payment of \$5,000 and an additional \$500 per month. Moreover, the Muar (Kesang) territory was detached from Johor proper and given to Sultan Ali.<sup>1</sup> However, the same treaty, while formally recognising Sultan Ali as Sultan of Johor, "also (strangely enough) recognised Temenggong Daing Ibrahim of Johor as sovereign ruler

of the state.”<sup>2</sup> It was this ambiguous text which would furnish the Temenggong’s son, later Maharajah Abu Bakar of Johor (1862 – 1895, as Maharajah 1862 – 1885) with a claim on Muar.

Even with the Treaty signed, Sultan Ali continued to accumulate debts, further reinforcing the low opinion held of him by the British. By his death, Sultan Ali was said to have mortgaged the revenues of Muar several times over to moneylenders and Chettiars in Singapore in a vain attempt to raise funds. Concessions for planting and agriculture were granted not only to the local inhabitants but also European merchants, the latter especially whose demands were to prove significant in the Muar Succession crisis to come. Sultan Ali died in the Settlement of Malacca on 20 June 1877, sparking off a succession crisis.<sup>3</sup> Normally, the successor to the Sultan would be his eldest son by a royal mother. However, Sultan Ali had not named a successor, as he had quarrelled with his eldest royal son, Tunku Alam. Before his death, the Sultan had instead wanted his younger son, Tuanku Mahmud, to succeed him. Thus, there were four (4) interested parties in the succession of Muar State, mainly:

1. The British Government
2. The Maharajah Abu Bakar of Johor
3. Tunku Alam, Sultan Ali’s eldest son
4. Tuanku Mahmud, Sultan Ali’s youngest son and preferred heir

Of the four parties, attention soon focused on the claims of the Maharajah and that of Tunku Alam. The Maharajah based his claims as the *de facto* ruler of Muar on the grounds that Muar belonged to the state of Johor, whose legally recognised sovereign the Maharajah was. Meanwhile, Tunku Alam’s claims were based on his status as his father’s only royal son and heir, and according to the Treaty of 1855, which assured the succession of Muar to Sultan Ali heirs. Regarding the remaining parties, although the Treaty of 1855 provided the British Government with a valid *casus belli* to assume control over Muar State, that decision was then seen as impractical.<sup>4</sup> This originated from an often cited despatch by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Carnarvon, on 1 June 1876, which specifically prohibited the Governors of the Straits Settlements from pursuing a policy of direct annexation in the Malay Peninsula.<sup>5</sup> Regarding Tuanku Mahmud, he was never taken regarded by the other parties as a serious contender for the position, as Tuanku Mahmud’s mother was not of royal descent.<sup>6</sup> Tuanku Mahmud’s young age – he was 11 in 1877 – also compounded his lack of any backers.

As both Tunku Alam and the Maharajah were potential beneficiaries to Muar, based on the Treaty of 1855, it became mandatory that an arrangement must be done to resolve the murky status of Muar and its ruler. Most of the events that follow would encompass the interim administration of Colonel Archibald Anson (1877, 1879 – 1880) and the tenure of Governor Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson (1877 – 1879). During the period, the Straits Government not only declined to absorb Muar into the Settlement of Malacca, nor install Tunku Alam as Sultan, but instead allowed it to be administered by the Maharajah of Johor, effectively reuniting the states of Muar and Johor.

In that short period, many officials had to acquaint themselves with the tiny state. During the height of events, the *Straits Times* took pains to provide its readers details about the little state.

The Native State of Moar [sic] or Kessang...is situated between the river Kessang, the southern boundary of Malacca, and the river Moar, which is the northern boundary of the Principality of Johore. Its greatest length...is about 55 miles. Its greatest breadth...is about 23 miles. Its sea frontage is only about 3 miles...About the centre of the little State stand the mountain commonly known and shown on maps

as Gunong Ledang or Mount Ophir.<sup>7</sup>

In 1877, Muar was estimated to contain a population of around 450 Malays, led by a small government consisting of the Temenggong of Muar and nine Penghulus.<sup>8</sup>

The region of Muar had featured sporadically in British records prior to 1877. Shortly after the Pangkor Agreement, which ushered in the Residential System, Governor Sir Andrew Clarke (1873 – 1875) had instructed a party to survey the lands around the Muar River in order in preparation for a revised set of land laws.<sup>9</sup> The land laws were designed to maximise land registration for the colonial government, but in the short term had the effect of discouraging Malay planters from developing their land for agriculture. A local paper reported that the Malays, “hampered by vexatious laws and regulations, and burdened by heavy taxation, are abandoning their paddy fields and emigrate annually from Malacca to Muar, and from Province Wellesley to Kedah, where they find greater facilities for paddy planting.”<sup>10</sup> It was in this little part of the Malayan Peninsula that would see a temporary halt in the British forward movement in the peninsula, and the zenith of Maharajah Abu Bakar’s influence over the Malay Peninsula.

### **Anson’s Actions**

Sultan Ali’s death occurred during the interim administration led by Administrator Archibald Anson. Anson was assuming temporary charge of the government after the departure of Governor Sir William Jervois (1875 – 1877) earlier that May. The new governor, Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson, was not due till October 1877. However, the seriousness of the issue had already begun to circulate in the colonial press. In its issue covering the Sultan’s funeral, the *Straits Times* noted that there was no guard of honour at the Sultan’s burial, unlike that of his father. Another point highlighted was that no successor was immediately proclaimed.

More importantly, sides had already been taken in the issue of the Muar Succession. Tunku Alam was backed by the imams of Kampong Glam and by the merchants of Singapore. Notable supporters include William Henry Read and I.S. Bond, both unofficial members of the Straits Legislative Council, and spokesmen for the mercantile community in the Straits. They could also marshal the resources of friendly lobbyists in London, such as the Straits Association and friendly Members of Parliament. On the Maharajah’s side, he enjoyed the resources of Johor state, connections among the Europeans in the Colonial Office and the British nobility, his European advisers in Singapore, as well as the friendship of high officials in the colonial government.

The initial advantage was in the Maharajah’s favour. Not only did he possess the resources of Johor, more importantly he also enjoyed the close friendship of Administrator Anson, who possessed the authority to swing the scales in the Muar Succession.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Maharajah’s opponents not only lacked his political ability, wealth, and canniness, but also sufficient unity in purpose. The mercantile classes were not unanimous in their support of Tunku Alam. Some instead agitated for Muar to be annexed by Malacca, thus giving the British Government direct control. Such an attitude was shown by the *Straits Times*, who wrote on Sultan Ali’s death that

...he has been Sultan merely in name, and to proclaim a successor to a nominal title...as if he was a reigning Sultan with power in his hands, might lead to delusion and misunderstanding as to the real position and status of the late Sultan’s legitimate heir. This might cause future mischief and do no possible good...Divine right and legitimacy must here in Malaydom go the way it has gone with the Stewards of Scotland and the Bourbons of France, and de jure must give way to de facto.<sup>12</sup>

Even among those who supported Tunku Alam, theirs was a mercenary support. In his book *“Play and Politics”*, Read recounts his role in acting on behalf of Sultan Ali by securing possession of his official seal in an attempt to control his business dealings, and in trying to reconstitute the Johor Empire with Sultan Ali as a figurehead. In his dealings with the Johor royal line, Read comes across as patronising at best and downright scheming at worse. It takes no great perception to realise that Read and his friends was intriguing for some sort of British control over the region, and that Sultan Ali, and later his son, seemed suitable figures for a puppet ruler.<sup>13</sup> Other support were motivated by personal interests. For instance, several European businessmen, including the American Consul, had been granted land concessions by Sultan Ali for the purpose of planting tobacco. It was possibly in fear that these agreements would be nullified by the Maharajah that these men were inclined to support Tunku Alam. In this they were supported by most of the colonial press. The *Straits Times* thundered that the only course to be made “with any regard to good faith, common honesty, or policy” was to install Tunku Alam as Ruler, or annex the state to Malacca.<sup>14</sup>

However, as early as 29 June 1877, Anson had decided on his own initiative to grant the administration of Muar to the Maharajah, thereby signalling openly where the preference of the British Government lay.<sup>15</sup> In replying to a formal letter by Tunku Alam on 4 July 1877 announcing his inheritance to his father’s titles, Anson instead replied the following day:

...His Highness the Maharajah of Johore will take charge of the territory of Moar until it has been decided what other arrangements for the government of that country shall be made, you cannot do better than to place yourself under his guidance.

It must not be expected that the person who succeeds to the property of the late Sultan Allie will be acknowledged under the title of Sultan, which title was that which in former days belonged to the Ruler of Johore, and was only continued, by courtesy, to Sultan Houssein Mahomed Shah, after he had sold the sovereignty of Johore to the Tumonggong, and which title has now, therefore, become extinct.<sup>16</sup>

In support of his policy, he quoted a letter by ex-Governor Jervois. Writing from Australia, Jervois wrote:

It seems to me that you have done the correct thing in placing the Maharajah of Johore in guardianship of the Kessang [Muar] territory...It would be a good thing if some arrangement could be made to absorb the said territory, either in the State of Johore or the Settlement of Malacca...<sup>17</sup>

In his memoirs, Anson maintained the reason he choose to allow Johore to assume control was no avoid the financial burden of a body of officers and to avoid the appearance of annexation.<sup>18</sup> Anson made his decision without asking for prior approval from his superiors in the Colonial Office. In fact, he only sent news of Sultan Ali’s death on 6 July 1877, the day after his brusque reply to Tunku Alam. By the time this despatch was received at the Colonial Office on 11 August 1877, matters had by then moved too far to be reversed.<sup>19</sup>

Anson was able to get away with his independent policy because he knew his superiors at the Office were currently opposed to annexation in the Malay Peninsula. Richard Meade of the Office spoke for the wishes of his superior Lord Carnarvon when he wrote, “our course is clear. We do not want to increase our responsibilities in the Malay Peninsula and H.M. Govt. have more than once decided against annexation.”<sup>20</sup> Another official agreed with Meade, writing that “the less we meddle with the

Maharajah's proceedings whilst holding the Govt. the better."<sup>21</sup> Even after Carnarvon's departure from the Office in 1878, his successor Sir Michael Hicks Beach maintained the policy of strict non-intervention.<sup>22</sup> The Colonial Office's inaction was also influenced by the incorrect information fed them by Anson. Anson presented Sultan Ali as having been "deposed" in favour of the Temenggong and Tunku Alam as being a man of "weak intellect". Given the Maharajah's familiarity with the Colonial Office, it was natural that their initial position was to agree to Anson's actions. However, Meade also stressed that "the Straits Govt. should only recognise as Sultan the person who is at once acceptable to the people and who is the rightful claimant according to Malay customs."<sup>23</sup> The Colonial Office thus attempted to play for time, instructing Anson to desist from further decisions and to let the major decisions be made by Robinson upon his arrival.

After his initial report to the Colonial Office, Anson visited the town of Segamat on 5 August 1877 to assess the situation. In a subsequent report to Carnarvon, Anson wrote that all the native chiefs "expressed the wish that their Country should be placed under the Government of the Maharajah of Johore."<sup>24</sup> This willingness was all the proof Anson needed, backing his earlier decision about letting the Maharajah assume temporary administration. The reply from the Colonial Office only came in September. In it, Carnarvon wrote "I assume you have taken no steps except what you mention".<sup>25</sup> His reply the next day noted that he had followed instructions and that the "Maharajah understands everything is subject to Your Lordship's instructions."<sup>26</sup>

The Maharajah for one felt secure about the situation, already writing Anson to open discussions about the grant of a pension to Tunku Alam.<sup>27</sup> In the same letter, the Maharajah had also offered that the costs of the administration of Muar to be borne by Johore "without more delay than is absolutely necessary." Anson had responded in compliance with the Maharajah's wishes, sending a pension to Tunku Alam, which was indignantly refused. To that missive, the Colonial Office expressed no objection to Anson's reports, but instructed him to observe the situation more closely and report. In his last despatch as Administrator, Anson maintained to the Colonial Office that Maharajah Abu Bakar remained the best candidate to the position of Ruler, and stressed the beneficial effect the Maharajah's rule would have in fostering good government in the little state. The Colonial Office was also informed that, given the uncertain succession for the rightful ruler of Muar, an election was scheduled to take place at Kuala Kesang on 8 November 1877 for the purpose of selecting the new ruler.

### **Governor Robinson's Policy**

On 29 October 1877, Governor Sir William Robinson arrived at Singapore from Melbourne and assumed the reins of government. His tenure would last from 29 October 1877 to 9 February 1879. The Muar Succession was among the first pieces of official business Robinson handled, with the governor sending a confidential telegram to the Colonial Office a mere two days after his arrival in Singapore.<sup>28</sup> Robinson was quick to report home, sending his initial despatch about the matter two days after his arrival in Singapore. Mentioning his study of previous correspondence on Muar "so far as the limited time at my disposal has enabled me to do so", Robinson adopted a wait-and-see attitude, forwarding a memorandum about Malay succession customs. The Maharajah too had not been idle, meeting the new governor the day after his arrival to stress his claims upon Muar. Robinson parried the Maharajah's questions, informing him only of the views of the British Government and asking him not to be present in Muar when the election of the new ruler was held. The governor noted however that from his observations, the Maharajah seemed likely to be elected ruler of Muar.<sup>29</sup> Robinson reported home again on 5 November, merely repeating his intention to report home whenever necessary.

On 14 November 1877, Robinson sent a despatch containing instructions he had given to A.M. Skinner, the Colonial Secretary for the Native States, instructing him to travel to Muar to be present on the day of the election, the 8<sup>th</sup> of November. Robinson's letter stated:

You should therefore proceed in the S.S. Pluto on Wednesday afternoon, so as to arrive at the place of election early on the morning fixed for the meeting.

...before the Election commences you should make full enquiry as to whether the Temenggong is satisfied that all who by Malay custom are entitled to a voice at the Meeting are actually present or have been duly summoned.

Beyond that however, it will not be desirable that you should interfere in way with the ceremony – the entire arrangements of which have been or should be made by the Temenggong and Penghulus themselves.

It will be your special duty to explain verbally...that the sole desire of the British Government in the matter is that in making the selection they should consider what would be most beneficial to their Country...

The nature of the arrangements which placed the Maharajah of Johore in temporary charge should be explained to them. There should be no grounds for misapprehension on this point on the part of the Chiefs and population, and you will make it clear... that it is far from the wish of Her Majesty's Government to impose any ruler over the Country against the wishes of the Inhabitants...

On 12 November, Skinner sent in his report of his trip to Muar, stating that the Chiefs had chosen to elect the Maharajah as their Ruler.

Normally, the results of the election and Skinner's report would have spelled the end of the event, as it would seem evident that the Maharajah had gotten what he wished for. In the hands of a predisposed governor, the election would have provided adequate legitimacy for the Maharajah's claims. Recent events in the Malay Peninsula had shown that governors could and did act independently without recourse to their superiors, thus imposing their will on events. For instance, the signing of the Pangkor Agreement took place mere weeks after the arrival of the then Governor Sir Andrew Clarke in the Straits. Anson's recent actions in declaring the Maharajah temporary ruler of Muar was made a mere 9 days after Sultan Ali's death. It was Governor Robinson's tenure which saw the matter prolonged.

The mercantile community were upset at the results of the election, as Skinner's account of proceedings were published in detailed in the colonial press. Attention was drawn to a remark by Skinner that two of the Maharajah's councillors were present at the election, in contravention to Robinson's warning. The newspapers lambasted the election as "a force...and a foregone conclusion".<sup>30</sup> On 7 December 1877, Read addressed the issue of Muar in a Legislative Council meeting, using the argument of English principles in support of the Tunku's cause. Read declared that he considered it "unjust to deprive an untried man of his heritage... simply because you desire to put that province into the hands of another."<sup>31</sup> Further anger was caused by the purported arrest of the Temenggong of Muar by the Maharajah's men, the news which reached Robinson on 5 January 1878. The following month, news arrived that Tuanku Mahmud, whom the Maharajah had taken by Anson's instructions to be his ward, was refusing to return to the Raffles Institution for his studies, seemingly revealing the lack of

unanimous support the Maharajah claims had in Muar.<sup>32</sup>

Although Robinson had hitherto maintained a cordial relationship with the Maharajah, seemingly accepting the latter's explanation of the Temenggong's arrest, cracks appeared in discussions about a financial settlement to the family of Sultan Ali. Robinson had by then learnt from Read of the pensions agreed upon for the Sultan and his heirs according to the Treaty of 1855. In a later despatch of 18 May 1878, Robinson forwarded 7 letters between him and the Maharajah from 9 May to 17 May 1878 regarding the issue.<sup>33</sup> Robinson obviously felt that the Maharajah ought to take on the responsibility for pensioning off the heirs of Sultan Ali as he had taken on the responsibility as ruler. In a letter of 7 May, the Maharajah had replied to Robinson's enquiries stating that he would be willing to pay a sum of \$500 per month and \$500 in addition, to terminate with the lives of the present family. Robinson was unimpressed, noting that Sultan Ali's descendants could "hardly be expected to acquiesce in some of the terms" offered. Robinson instead suggested that the Maharajah should offer \$1000 a month to the family "to place the matter on a footing more likely to be satisfied to the persons concerned than which Your Highness has proposed."<sup>34</sup>

In the Maharajah's reply, he showed that he was annoyed at the claims raised by unofficial members Bond and Read at the Legislative Council in December 1878, claiming that it presented his claim on Muar as weaker than it actually was. Concerned, the Maharajah attempted to remind Robinson of his prior loyalty to the British Government, and the past and potential influence he wielded with local chiefs in that part of the Peninsula. To buttress his statement, the Maharajah quoted from a past despatch of Sir William Jervois dated 19 August 1876, whereby the Maharajah was officially seen as having greater autonomy over the rule of Johor compared to the Sultans of the Malay States under the Residential System. The Maharajah wrote:

Your Excellency will note that ... Sir William Jervois ... speaks of having such a high opinion of myself – of my being a personal friend of his own – of my having shewn unnecessary loyalty to the British Government – of my having rendered certain most valuable services to the local authorities...

It would seem that this veiled threat saw the beginning of Robinson's dislike of the Maharajah. In his reply, Robinson wrote:

Your Highness will not fail to remember that the doubts which existed at the death of Sultan Ali as to the validity of his Will in favour of Rajah Mahmood and as to the legitimacy of Tunku Allum [sic]...and although the declaration of the Panglima had been made in Your Highness' favor, there seems no valid reason why – in the event of such declaration having been accepted...the British Government should join you in referring to regards Tunku Allum as the Ruler of Muar...if Tunku Allum is, on practical grounds, debarred from succeeding his father as the Ruler of Muar, he should on that very account be treated with every possible consideration short of interfering with the people of Muar in the choice of their present ruler.<sup>35</sup>

Read recounts what the result was: "A short time afterwards I got a note from him [Robinson], in which he informed me that he had been able to obtain...a monthly payment of \$750 to my friend [Tunku Alam], but he feared that he would not be able to do better. Would I accept? I accepted with thanks and gratitude."<sup>36</sup> As such, the total pension granted to Tunku Alam was \$1,250, with \$500 being the original pension granted to his father according to the Treaty of 1855, and \$750 negotiated by Robinson from the Maharajah.

Despite his growing dissatisfaction with the Maharajah, Robinson lacked the political courage and will to overturn the Maharajah's position. Earlier on 16 April 1878, Hicks Beach had written clear instructions calling Robinson not to meddle further in Muar's affairs.<sup>37</sup> Hicks Beach had also spoken in the British Parliament to reiterate the Government's refusal to interfere with the Muar Succession, explaining "The Treaty of 1855, though made with the cognizance of Her Majesty's Government, was made between two Native Princes, and it does not appear to be in any way incumbent on us to maintain or enforce it."<sup>38</sup> To hammer home his decision, he further added

In recognising the Maharajah as Ruler of Muar, you will do so in as quiet and unostentatious a manner as possible so as to show that the Government has no further concern than of a chief authority to approve the choice as made by the people after the deliberation.<sup>39</sup>

There was nothing more Robinson could do to change the situation. After negotiating the pension for Sultan Ali's family, Robinson's attention was kept busy with other matters, particularly the conduct of the Resident of Selangor in May 1878, the murder of the Superintendent of the Dindings in September 1878, and his diplomatic mission to Siam in December 1878.

The causes of Robinson's increasing dissatisfaction with the Maharajah possibly arose from the Maharajah's direct though aggressive attempts to remind Robinson of the influence he wielded in British official circles. Unlike his eventual successor Sir Frederick Weld, whose "paternalistic and occasionally condescending air"<sup>40</sup> would have given offence to the Maharajah, Robinson was a discrete man who never made his feelings known in public. A later writer described it thus "while he has been courteous and genial to all, men whom he has had reason to prefer at a distance never could take a liberty with him. At the same time, to them that knew him best, there was no relaxation of a quiet dignity."<sup>41</sup> It is entirely possible that Robinson's attitude of neutrality, so markedly different from his predecessors, would have unsettled the Maharajah.<sup>42</sup> Even his colonial reputation, where he was later lauded for his "patience", "conciliation" and "prudence", was entirely at variance with the blunt, independent-minded governors the Maharajah was accustomed to deal with.<sup>43</sup>

From Robinson's perspective, as the Maharajah had obtained his position as ruler thanks to British help, he could do no less than in honouring their requests. Although scholars like C.H.H. Wake, Eunice Thio and Carl Trocki stated that the British attitude towards the Maharajah started to decline in the late 1870s, only Thio has posited that it was under Robinson's time that this new attitude started to develop.<sup>44</sup> Thio mentions that the evident prosperity of the Protected State of Perak, which was under British Residential control, meant that "the results achieved in Johore through advice alone no longer appeared so remarkable."<sup>45</sup> Robinson had seen the administrative success of the Resident of Perak during a tour of the Malay States in 1878, praising the British officials for the "satisfactory and promising condition" they had managed to achieve there.<sup>46</sup>

This would be seen by Robinson's later recommendation for a resumption of the policy of annexation in the Malay Peninsula. In a confidential report written in 1879, Robinson had commented that "in the five years during which we have had Residents in the Native States, more has been done than they have accomplished in Johore, for instance, in 30 or 40 years."<sup>47</sup> It is entirely possible that Robinson was privately displeased with the Muar Succession arrangements, which basically tied the British Government's hands in supporting the Maharajah's claims. This is revealed in a later despatch to Hicks Beach where he accused Anson of "failing to consult his [Executive] Council on the subject of the Muar Succession".<sup>48</sup> In his negative comparison of Johor, Robinson was possibly worried that the Maharajah would upstage the governor in the affairs of the peninsula. The prolonged delays in the issue was the governor's way of asserting British dominance in the affairs of the peninsula. The chance to send a clear signal came upon the Maharajah's request in August 1878 to be recognised as



Sultan. Robinson made his feelings clear in a confidential telegram to the Colonial Office, where he commented:

Most undesirable to recognise Maharajah as Sultan, it would be an incendiary to the whole Peninsula and following closely on the question of the Muar Succession would greatly complicate our position.<sup>49</sup>

Robinson's refusal to accede to the Maharajah's request thus shows the widening gulf between the British administration, who desired to exert absolute control over the Malay Peninsula and the Maharajah. As both parties wanted to be seen as the supreme authority in the region, it was inevitable that a clash would happen. It was only Robinson's discrete nature that delayed an open rupture, but that rupture had already occurred.

## Conclusion

When the new governor, Sir Frederick Weld, arrived in May 1880, the Muar Succession was long considered by most as a fiasco. Weld had been given Robinson's confidential despatch of 1879 to read, and this possibly contributed towards the new governor's dislike of the Maharajah. Weld's tenure would see no repeat of the Muar issue, but the extension of the Residential System to the rest of the Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, directly countering the Maharajah. Weld was determined to make the Peninsula British, and he would devote his entire tenure to that goal.

Meanwhile, Tunku Alam continued in his efforts to be recognised as Sultan, an act which exhausted his financial means and, as Read recounted, "ultimately affected his health".<sup>50</sup> The \$1,250 monthly paid to the Tunku remained inadequate as the Tunku lost a legal case brought by one Alagappa Chetty on his father's debts.<sup>51</sup> Alagappa Chetty was not the only one; a Bugis named Silawatang also attempted to claim compensation by writing to the Resident of Selangor.<sup>52</sup> Doing his best to "prop [the family] up", Read subsequently persuaded Governor Weld to offer some additional recourse to Tunku Alam, which came in the form of a house built at the Straits Government's expense in Kampong Glam in 1890.<sup>53</sup> Sadly, Tunku Alam had little time to enjoy his new abode, passing away suddenly on 23 August 1891 from dropsy.<sup>54</sup>

For the Maharajah, the grant of Muar to Johor would prove to be the zenith of his influence. The Maharajah's influence thus stretched throughout the southern half of the peninsula, covering Pahang and Negeri Sembilan. Moreover, he had managed to suppress a small uprising in Muar led by Tunku Alam's supporters. However, he had paid dearly for the privilege. Thio commented that the Muar affair had apparently used up most of the Maharajah's credit. 1880 would see a new Secretary of State and a new governor, both of whom were in favour of increasing British influence in the region. While the Maharajah would get the coveted title of Sultan in 1885, it was at the cost of renouncing all his influence in the states above. The Sultan would spend the remainder of his reign successfully preventing a British takeover of Johor. For Muar, it has remained part of the modern state of Johor till this day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, Volume 1, India, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1892, pp.432-433.

<sup>2</sup> C.A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates. The Temenggongs and the Deveopment of Johor and Singapore 1784 – 1885*, Singapore, NUS Press, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Straits Times, 14 July 1877, Sultan's Ali's funeral took place on 8 July 1877 at Umbai, Malacca Territory, the site of the present Tranquerah Mosque. Among those present were the Maharajah Abu Bakar, John Douglas, the Colonial Secretary, C.J. Irving, the Lieutenant Governor of Malacca, and the Temenggong of Muar. The assembled people, some 3,000 individuals, included members from all races.

<sup>4</sup> The Treaty of 1855 assured the succession of Muar to the heirs of Sultan Ali. However, Clause 4 also stated that if the province should be ceded, the British Government should have priority, followed by the Temenggong of Johor.

<sup>5</sup> E. Sadka, *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1895*. Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Press, 1968, p.96.

<sup>6</sup> Tuanku Mahmud's mother was the daughter of a Malacca penghulu, one Encik Momin.

<sup>7</sup> The Straits Times, 18 August 1877.

<sup>8</sup> Singapore Daily Times, 14 August 1877.

<sup>9</sup> Straits Observer, 10 September 1875. The survey was greeted with hostility by the locals, who thought the party allies of Pahang, whom they then in conflict with.

<sup>10</sup> ANM 1957/0001021, Letter from A.P. Talbot to B. Douglas, 18 November 1879; Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle, 16 October 1889; Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle, 21 December 1889.

<sup>11</sup> Under Anson, treaties were signed in 1876 and 1877 with the Negeri Sembilan confederacy, binding them to refer their disputes with the Maharajah, effectively increasing the latter's influence there.

<sup>12</sup> Straits Times Overland Journal, 21 July 1877.

<sup>13</sup> W.H. Read, *Play and Politics, Recollections of Malaya by an Old Resident*, London, Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1901, p.16.

<sup>14</sup> The Straits Times, 18 August 1877.

<sup>15</sup> CO 273/91/9743, Enclosure letter from Anson to Maharajah, 29 June 1877.

<sup>16</sup> W.H. Read, *Play and Politics*, p.19.

<sup>17</sup> A.E.H. Anson, *About Others and Myself 1745 - 1920*, London, John Murray, p.354.

<sup>18</sup> A.E.H. Anson, *About Others and Myself*, p.357.

<sup>19</sup> CO 273/91/9743, Despatch by Anson to Carnarvon, 6 July 1877.

<sup>20</sup> CO 273/91/9743, Minute by Meade, 22 August 1877.

<sup>21</sup> CO 273/91/13284, Minute by De Robeck to Meade, 14 November 1877.

<sup>22</sup> Hicks Beach gave even less attention than Carnarvon to matters in Muar. His time as Secretary of State was mostly occupied with matters in South Africa.

<sup>23</sup> CO 273/91/9743, Minute by Meade, 22 August 1877.

<sup>24</sup> CO 273/91/11989, Anson to Carnarvon, 25 August 1877.

<sup>25</sup> CO 537/45, Telegram from Colonial Office to Anson, 13 September 1877.

<sup>26</sup> CO 537/45, Telegraph from Anson to Colonial Office, 14 September 1877.

<sup>27</sup> CO 273/91/13284, Enclosure Anson to Carnarvon, 29 September 1877.

<sup>28</sup> CO 273/91/14937, Confidential Despatch from Robinson to Carnarvon, 31 October 1877.

<sup>29</sup> CO 273/91/14937, Robinson to Carnarvon, 31 October 1877.

<sup>30</sup> Singapore Daily Times, 29 November 1877.

<sup>31</sup> Singapore Daily Times, 20 December 1877.

<sup>32</sup> The Straits Times, 9 February 1878.

<sup>33</sup> CO 273/93/7630, Robinson to Hicks Beach, 18 May 1878.

<sup>34</sup> CO 273/93/7630, Enclosure Letter from Robinson to Maharajah, 10 May 1878; W.H. Read, p.20.

<sup>35</sup> CO 273/93/7630, Enclosure Letter from Robinson to Maharajah, 14 May 1878.

<sup>36</sup> W.H. Read, p.20.

<sup>37</sup> CO 273/93/4243, Hicks-Beach to Robinson, 16 April 1878.

<sup>38</sup> Singapore Daily Times, 15 April 1878.

<sup>39</sup> CO 273/93/4243, Reply from Hicks Beach to Robinson, 20 April 1878.

## Governor Sir William Robinson and The Muar Succession: A Consideration

- <sup>40</sup> J. Williams, Frederick Weld: A Political Biography, Ph.D Thesis, University of Auckland, 1977, p.518.
- <sup>41</sup> The Centennial Magazine, 30 June 1889, p.879.
- <sup>42</sup> The Maharajah maintained personal friendships with all colonial governors appointed since 1867. These were Governors Sir Harry St George Ord, Sir Andrew Clarke, and Sir William Jervois. Robinson was the first not honoured.
- <sup>43</sup> The Centennial Magazine, 30 June 1889, p.877.
- <sup>44</sup> See C.H.H. Wake, Nineteenth Century Johore, Ruler and Realm in Transition, Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, 1966, p.327; E. Thio, British Policy in the Malay Peninsula, 1880 – 1909, Ph.D. Thesis. University of London, 1956, p.125; C.A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, p.192.
- <sup>45</sup> E. Thio, *British Policy Towards Johore: From Advice to Control*, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1967, 40, p.5.
- <sup>46</sup> CO 273/93/5009, Enclosure Governor's Speech in the Legislative Council, 15 March 1878.
- <sup>47</sup> CO 273/101/4657, Letter from Robinson to Herbert, 19 March 1879.
- <sup>48</sup> CO 275/96/15797, Robinson to Hicks Beach, 24 October 1878.
- <sup>49</sup> CO 537/45, Telegram from Robinson to Hicks Beach, 9 August 1878.
- <sup>50</sup> W.H. Read, p.21.
- <sup>51</sup> Straits Times Weekly Issue, 26 August 1891.
- <sup>52</sup> ANM1957/0003047, Minute by Swettenham to Smith, 4 March 1884.
- <sup>53</sup> Straits Times Weekly Issue, 20 August 1890.
- <sup>54</sup> Straits Times Weekly Issue, 26 August 1891.

## References

- Aitchison, C.U. 1892. *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, Vol. 1. India: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing.
- Anson, A.E.H. *About Others and Myself 1745 - 1920*, London: John Murray.
- CO 273/91/9743. 1877. Death of Sultan Ali Iskandar Shah of the Territory of Kessang, or Muar, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 71, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 273/91/11987. 1877. Visit of Governor to Muar with Chiefs of Native States, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 71, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 273/91/13284. 1877. Affairs of Muar, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 71, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 273/91/14937. 1877. Confidential. Affairs at Muar on Death of Sultan Ali, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 71, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 273/93/4243. 1878. The Muar Succession: Need for Presence of Maharajah of Johore, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 73, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 273/93/5009. 1878. Tour of Governor to Province Wellesley and Native States, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 73, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 273/93/7630. 1878. Provision to be made for the Family of the Late Sultan Ali, MF 389 C.O. 273 gul. 73, Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Bangi.
- CO 275/96/15797. 1878. Confidential. The Muar Succession, The National Archives, London.
- CO 273/101/4657. 1879. Sir W.F. Robinson: Papers Regarding Malay States, Muar Succession, Debt Slavery, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- CO 273/101/7139. 1879. Relations with Protected Malay States, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- CO 537/45. 1877. Telegraph from Anson to Colonial Office, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- CO 537/45. 1878. Telegram from Robinson to Hicks Beach, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

- Newspaper SG. 1875. "Untitled". *Straits Observer*, 10 September. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitsoobserver18750910-1.2.4>
- Newspaper SG. 1877. "Moar State." *Singapore Daily Times*, 14 August. Accessed 1 September 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/singdailytimes18770814-1.2.8.4>
- Newspaper SG. 1877. "Moar". *Singapore Daily Times*, 29 November. Accessed 1 September 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/issue/singdailytimes18771129-1>
- Newspaper SG. 1877. "The Council Meeting, 7<sup>th</sup> Dec. II." *Singapore Daily Times*, 20 December. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/singdailytimes18771220-1.2.6.3>
- Newspaper SG. 1877. "The Late Sultan Allie". *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 21 July. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/stoverland18770721-1.2.8>
- Newspaper SG. 1877. "The Late Sultan Allie". *The Straits Times*, 14 July. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/issue/straitstimes18770714-1>
- Newspaper SG. 1877. "Moar State". *The Straits Times*, 18 August. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes18770818-1.2.5>
- Newspaper SG. 1878. "Moar Question". *Singapore Daily Times*, 15 April. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/singdailytimes18780415-1.2.16.3.7>
- Newspaper SG. 1878. "Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March". *The Straits Times*, 9 February. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes18780209-1.2.141>
- Newspaper SG. 1889. "The Development of Agriculture in the Straits". *Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle*, 16 October. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitsindependent18891016-1.2.4>
- Newspaper SG. 1889. "The Foremost Duty of our Government". *Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle*, 21 December. Accessed 31 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitsindependent18891221-1.2.3>
- Newspaper SG. 1890. "Tunku Allum's New House". *Straits Times Weekly Issue*. 20 August. Accessed 14 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/stweekly18900820-1.2.18>
- Newspaper SG. 1891. "The Death of Tunku Allum". *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 26 August. Accessed 14 August 2023. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/stweekly18910826-1.2.66?qt=tungku,%20allum&q=Tungku%20Allum>
- Read, W.H., 1901. *Play and Politics, Recollections of Malaya by an Old Resident*. London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co.
- Sadka, E. 1968. *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1895*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.
- Sel. Sec. 363/79. 1879. Relative to People Leaving the State of Selangor, ANM 1957/0001021, The National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.
- Sel. Sec. 437/84. 1884. Asks for a Portion of the Revenue of Muar and Kesang, ANM 1957/0003047, The National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.
- The Centennial Magazine. 1889. "Sir William C.F. Robinson, G.C.M.G." 30 June. Accessed 2 September 2023. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3083699887/view?sectionId=nla.obj-3089629491&partId=nla.obj-3083883355>
- Thio, E. 1956. "British Policy in the Malay Peninsula, 1880 – 1909". Ph.D. Thesis. University of London.
- Thio, E. 1967. "British Policy Towards Johore: From Advice to Control", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 40(1): 1 - 41.

Governor Sir William Robinson and The Muar Succession: A Consideration

Trocki, C.A. 2013. *Prince of Pirates. The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore 1784 – 1885*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Wake, C.H.H. 1966. "Nineteenth Century Johore, Ruler and Realm in Transition", Ph.D. Thesis. Australian National University.

Williams, J. 1977. "Frederick Weld: A Political Biography", Ph.D Thesis. University of Auckland.