

SIR FRANK SWETTENHAM AND EDUCATION IN BRITISH MALAYA, 1874-1904

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Shortly following his retirement in 1904, after more than three decades in the Malayan civil service, Frank Swettenham wrote the book *British Malaya*, a highly personal account of the British colonisation of the Federated Malay States between 1874 and 1904.¹ Only 2½ pages of the book—out of some 345 pages—were devoted to the topic of formal education. It is not surprising, then, that at least one recent scholar has suggested that Swettenham did not place a high priority upon the social dimensions of British colonial policy such as formal education during his illustrious Malayan career.² At first glance, the scant attention which Swettenham gave to education in his book furnishes little evidence to challenge this scholarly assessment. For the most part, Swettenham confined himself to a brief, approbatory overview of the limited state of formal educational provision in the Federated Malay States at the end of the nineteenth century, concentrating on the Malay vernacular school system. However, a closer reading of the totality of Swettenham's remarks suggests the need for a more complex assessment of his educational position. For Swettenham went on to summarize what he perceived to be that rationale underlying British educational policies.

A system of elementary Malay education in the vernacular was preferred, Swettenham suggested, because the Malay language was the *lingua franca* of maritime Southeast Asia.³ He did not mention that whatever the popular status of Malay, the language of government and administration in British Malaya was English; but the omission is significant in that it suggests the parameters of educational vision in a colonial environment. We are also told that the principal value of school attendance for the Malay was "to teach him habits of order, punctuality, and obedience."⁴ Even more significant, though, were Swettenham's assertions that "the Government has not aimed at educating the children of any class or nationality to unfit

them for the lives they will probably have to lead," and also that "rightly or wrongly, the Malay administrators have tried to avoid a system likely to create an imitation, however remote, of the occasionally startling, sometimes grotesque, and often pathetic product of the British Indian schools,"⁵ where the medium of post-elementary formal education was English.

These tart and relatively brief comments indicate *not* that Swettenham was unconcerned with formal educational development in British Malaya, but rather that he had a distinctive, toughly-conceived approach towards educational issues. To a later twentieth-century Western eye, this approach may well appear profoundly conservative, even fossilizing, and destined to retard the progress of its recipients towards modernity. In the eyes of its late nineteenth-century proponents such as Swettenham, however, the approach was at once well-intentioned and politically astute, economical and cautious, and grounded in what Swettenham himself liked to call "that special sympathy and consideration for the Malays."⁶

This article will trace the development of Swettenham's thought and action in the sphere of formal education in the Federated Malay States. A reappraisal of Swettenham's Malayan career should cast valuable light upon the early years of British Malaya, and upon the strengths and failings of its educational system.

The Residents and Their System

Frank Athelstane Swettenham was one of twelve Englishmen who were successively appointed as Residents to the Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang between 1874 and 1896, and who fashioned the remarkably effective political amalgam of *de jure* Malay sultanates and *de facto* British administration which became known as the Residential System. In fact, the "System" evolved through a kind of trial-and-error experi-

ence, for the early Residents had no clear rules to guide them. "Nothing with any pretensions to a system had ever been formulated," Swettenham was wryly to note later.⁷ Indeed, leading Malays delighted in telling Swettenham that he and his colleagues had been thrown out as bait by the British Government. "If the Malay chiefs swallowed the bait, they would find themselves on the British hook; of course, no one would worry about the bait."⁸ That so many of the Malay rulers did swallow the bait was testimony to the personal qualities and diplomatic skills of the early Residents, several of whom were outstanding exemplars of the "gentleman ideal" of nineteenth-century British government and public administration.⁹ Their families graced the upper levels of English society, and they had been educated in the classical tradition at public schools (or enjoyed private tuition). The "gentleman ideal" to which they subscribed involved a distinctive style of life which married social position with public service, privilege with duty, loyalty with honour, and outer propriety with inner virtue. Ruling with "an effortless grace, a casual assurance, the light touch in command,"¹⁰ they saw themselves as a body of disinterested governors, acting exclusively in the best interests of the Malay States, interests they defined in terms of public order, social harmony, and change by gradual adjustment rather than by dynamic intervention. "The Residential System," affirmed a youthful Swettenham in 1875, "will secure safety to life and property, will put a stop to piracy, and will by its influence over the Rajahs give even justice and a collection of legitimate and unoppressive taxes."¹¹ But this affirmation was to tell only part of the story.

Whatever the lofty self-image of the officials-on-the-spot, in the viewpoint of a now aggressively imperialistic government in London, political stability and ordered administration of a Western-type were merely necessary preconditions for the rapid economic development of Malaya's rich natural resources, a goal to be achieved by a profitable combination of British capital and non-Malay labour. None of the Residents themselves ever gave official indication that they disputed the desirability of this long-term goal. Instead, they worked hard, long, lonely years to achieve it. The dilemmas of a colonial government "bound to respect tradition, yet intent on revolutionizing the economy and administration,"¹² were to remain unresolved throughout the entire period of British Malaya, and have been viewed by later historians as dichotomous.¹³ No other

Resident manifested the inherent dichotomy of British colonial policy in Malaya more acutely and with greater self-assuredness than Frank Swettenham.

Swettenham's Early Malayan Career (1871-1882)

The rugged son of a wealthy English family, Frank Swettenham was 20 years old when he arrived in Singapore in January, 1871, to begin his professional career as a cadet in the Straits Civil Service. He passed the strict Malay Interpreters' examination some fifteen months after his arrival in the Colony. Between 1872 and 1874, Swettenham paid several official visits to the western Malay States, and in August, 1874, as part of the British "Forward Movement" on to the Peninsula, he was posted to "assist" the ruler of Selangor, Sultan Abdul Samad. Within two months, the Sultan wrote to Straits Governor, Sir Andrew Clarke, saying of Swettenham that:

He is very clever; he is also very clever in the customs of Malay government and he is very clever at gaining the hearts of Rajas with soft words, delicate and sweet, so that all men rejoice in him as in the perfume of an open flower.¹⁴

Whilst Assistant Resident in Selangor, Swettenham travelled extensively around the state by boat, by elephant, and on foot, examining the resources of the land, its villages and people, its rivers, mines, and plantations. Most of the time he was exclusively in the company of Malays, and so acquired a comprehensive knowledge of the territory and its inhabitants. In 1876, he returned to Singapore to take up the position of Assistant Colonial Secretary for Native States, and during the next five years, he dealt with all the official correspondence to and from the Protected Malay States. Not surprisingly, the Straits' administration had come to regard Swettenham as *the* expert on Malay affairs. The new Straits Governor, Sir Frederick Weld, frequently sang his praises to London, and recent historians have re-echoed Weld's favourable evaluation.¹⁵

Three elements in particular guided Swettenham's thought and action as a colonial official. First, like Governor Weld, he was a consistent admirer of the pioneer of Britain's Malayan empire, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, whom Swettenham saw as utterly devoted "to the prestige, the power, and the trade of England in the Far East."¹⁶ Swettenham shared this devotion and perceived himself as helping to fulfill Raffles' dream. Second, Swettenham firmly believed that the welfare of

Malaya's inhabitants would be improved by material progress and administrative order, and that with British intervention had come "an entirely new order of things"¹⁷ in the Malay States. Third, and seemingly with less consistency, Swettenham evinced an affection for the traditional Malay way of life which bordered at times on the romantic and the antiquarian. As he later wrote in a literary sketch appropriately entitled "The Love Philtre":

Of Eastern places the Malay Peninsula had special attractions for me . . . It is difficult to say exactly wherein lies the spell, but there are beauties of scenery, the undoubted charm of the people (as distinguished from other Easterns), and the sense of mystery, of exclusiveness, of unspoiled nature and undescribed life, that arouses a new interest in the wearied children of the West.¹⁸

His praise of the "old" Malay world had an aesthetic basis, too:

It is difficult to imagine any state of human existence more typical of perfect peace, of idyllic simplicity, of warmth and colour, and the plenty bestowed by a super-abundantly-fruitful Nature, than that presented by a Malay riverine hamlet, when the observer has time and inclination to note the details of the picture. It is painted by nature, true to life, in perfect proportion, full of atmosphere, of light and shade, of striking realities and subtle suggestions; and it satisfies the artistic sense in a way that seems peculiar to many phases of Eastern scenery.¹⁹

All three elements of Swettenham's thought—British interest, material progress, and pro-Malay sentiment—were reflected in his administrative actions after his first substantive appointment as British Resident in Selangor in 1882. During this Residency, Swettenham moved promptly and energetically to convert Selangor into a model colonial state by overhauling the administrative structure, replanning the shabby Chinese town of Kuala Lumpur into a modern urban centre, opening a railway from Kuala Lumpur to Klang, and doubling the state revenues within a few years. If these changes accurately mirrored his preoccupations with economic growth and administrative efficiency, it was in the sphere of formal educational provision that Swettenham's rather different attitudes towards the Malay community were most manifest.

Education in Selangor (1882-1889)

During the early years of British rule in the

western Malay states, the task of developing formal educational systems was impeded by fundamental Malay indifference, by lack of adequate financial support, and by the absence of qualified educational personnel. From 1874 to 1890, school construction and attendance were left to the responsibility of individual Residents and district officers. Selangor in 1882 had only one government Malay school. Yet individual British administrators did give the question of public instruction a considerable amount of attention and careful thought.

Shortly after his arrival in the state, Swettenham addressed a letter to Straits Governor Weld on the subject of formal education, recommending that "the best means of initiating an educational scheme" was to concentrate on the provision of a free elementary education for the Malay community in the vernacular medium and through a network of rural village schools.²⁰ Other issues such as the educational needs of Chinese immigrant children and the desirability or otherwise of English-medium instruction could, he suggested, be left to a later date.

There were several reasons for Swettenham's choice of educational priority. First, he believed that the British had a moral obligation as the Malays' "Protectors," as well as the Malays' "partners in government," to cater for their educational wants first. As early as July 1875, he had unflinchingly affirmed that "the Malays look upon the British Government as their father—as one who can confer upon them by just government all those things which they lack under Malay rule whilst holding complete power to enforce obedience and punish wrong."²¹ This paternalistic quality in Swettenham's approach to the Malays was deep and enduring.

Moreover, as a result of his extensive experiences as explorer, interpreter and administrator, Swettenham believed that he knew "the real Malay"²² and his strengths and weaknesses, and probably knew them better than anyone else. Here Swettenham shared the fashionable Victorian intellectual tenet that it was possible and desirable to make binding generalizations about ethnic groups as products of their distinctive heredity and environment. Swettenham had none of the later twentieth-century inhibitions about stereotyping "national characters." On the contrary, he believed that it was on the basis of generalizations about the distinctive character of ethnic groups that sound colonial policies could be formulated. Ideally, such knowledge was dependent upon intimate

personal contact, observation, and interest.

To begin to understand the Malay [he wrote] you must live in his country, speak his language, respect his faith, be interested in his interests, humour his prejudices, sympathise with him in trouble, and share his pleasures and possibly his risks. Only thus can you hope to understand the inner man, and this knowledge can therefore only come to those who have the opportunity and use it . . . So far the means of studying Malays in their own country have fallen to few Europeans, and a very small proportion have shown an inclination to get to the hearts of the people.²³

Much of Swettenham's reflective writing is filled with blunt, dogmatic assertions about particular Malay qualities, and there is room here only for a short list of them. According to Swettenham, the "real Malay":

1. "above all things . . . is conservative . . . proud of his country and his people, venerates his ancient customs and traditions, fears his Rajahs, and has a proper respect for constituted authority.
2. "looks askance on all innovations, and will resist their sudden introduction . . .
3. "is lazy to a degree . . . without method or order of any kind, knows no regularity . . .
4. "is courteous and expects courtesy in return . . .
5. "is extremely particular about questions of rank and birth.²⁴
6. "is loyal, for loyalty is part of his creed. He is hospitable, generous, extravagant, a gambler, a coxcomb."²⁵

Swettenham also conceded that "if you let him take his own time he can produce most beautiful and artistic things . . . if he were given the conditions which appeal to him, he would rise again to the height of his past achievements."²⁶ Formal education would be one of those conditions of Malay "regeneration" (one of Swettenham's favourite phrases), but it had to be the sort of education that would accommodate the "admirable" Malay characteristics of conservatism, class-consciousness, courtesy, loyalty and a rural lifestyle, whilst eradicating the "undesirable" Malay characteristics of laziness and unreliability.

There were two other factors that appear to have influenced Swettenham's approach to formal education for the Malays. One of them was pragmatism. On the basis of past experience in the Straits Settlements, Swettenham and other British officials thought that elementary vernacular education was the form most likely to appeal to rural Muslim-Malay parents who were extremely wary of British-sponsored schools on religious,

cultural and economic grounds.²⁷ Consequently, any workable modern educational system would have to make allowance for these fears. On the other hand, Swettenham was increasingly conscious of the political and social dangers that might be posed to British colonial rule by the creation of an English-educated elite, a problem on which he was to elaborate more fully when he moved to the Residency of Perak.

In the meanwhile, Swettenham pursued the task of erecting a Malay vernacular school system in Selangor with his now customary vigour and determination. Within a year of his taking over the Residency, the number of Malay schools in Selangor had increased from one to six, and the number of pupils on the Register from a handful to 200, with an average daily attendance of 167.²⁸ The curriculum of these village schools did not develop beyond a four-year elementary education focussing on the "Three Rs," practical work in vegetable plots, and the inculcation of habits of cleanliness, tidiness and punctuality. The typical school consisted of one or two classrooms in makeshift premises and minimal instructional aids. The government provided some textbooks and primers, principally translations of basic English works on geography, natural science, hygiene and arithmetic. Not surprisingly, the nature of these early government schools has been harshly assessed by later scholars.²⁹ In fairness, though, it must be recognized that Swettenham and his Residential colleagues had continually to contend with problems of teacher shortage, higher governmental disinterest, parental distrust, and erratic attendance. These problems tended to defy gentlemanly administrative solutions, and Swettenham was prominent amongst those Malayan officials who, during the 1880s, urged the appointment of a full-time, professional Inspector of Schools for the Protected Malay States. However, even when Mr. H.B. Collinge assumed this post in 1890 and addressed himself to problems of school attendance and management, responsibility for broad educational policy remained substantially with the Residents in their various states.

Education in Perak (1889-1896)

Swettenham succeeded Hugh Low as Resident of Perak in June 1889, and thus became the most senior of the British Residents in Malaya as well as the most influential and vocal of colonial policy-makers. In Perak, he found only eleven Malay vernacular schools, the same number as in

Selangor, even though Perak had four times Selangor's Malay population. Again, Swettenham moved quickly to correct the anomaly. Within three years, annual educational expenditure in Perak rose from \$1,256 to \$10,034 (figures in Straits currency: \$8 equals one English pound). The number of Malay schools in the same period increased from 11 in 1889 to 51 in 1891, and the number of pupils on the Register from 500 to 2,780.³⁰ By 1891, most of the government Malay schools on the Peninsula, and most of the pupils attending them, were in Perak. As early as 1890, Swettenham sought to ease the problem of erratic school attendance by allowing Islamic teachers to hold special classes in the government schools during the afternoon, a move which served to increase the popularity of the schools amongst *kampong* dwellers and obviated the need for compulsory attendance laws. Under Swettenham's guidance, Perak pioneered modern Malay female education with the opening of two girls' schools in 1890, and another two in 1891.

However, the year 1891 proved to be a watershed in Swettenham's approach to formal educational provision, for after that year, his enthusiasm for educational innovation visibly waned. Essentially, the paternalist and romantic in Swettenham was convinced that the state of educational provision as had been achieved in Perak by 1891 was sufficient at that stage of Malay development, and for the foreseeable future. As he wrote later:

Malays do enough work to satisfy their needs, and nature is so bountiful that that is very little. They do not strive for riches, but they are probably as happy and contented as other people who regard life differently, and it is questionable whether we should deserve their thanks if we could teach them the tireless energy, the self-denying frugality of the Chinese. And for what?³¹

He also reflected that "time will not change the Malay character," nor should formal education attempt to do so too quickly.³²

There was a more specific reason for regarding 1891 as a crucial year in Swettenham's educational record. For it was in 1891 that Swettenham felt prompted to rebut strongly and publicly those few amongst his British colleagues who were pushing for wider opportunities for Malays to enjoy English-medium instruction. On 5th May, 1891, Swettenham wrote in his Perak Annual Report:

The one danger to be guarded against is an attempt to teach English indiscriminately. It would not be taught well except in a very few schools, and I do

not think it is at all advisable to give the children of an agricultural population an indifferent knowledge of a language that to all but the very few would only unfit them for the duties of life and make them discontented with anything like manual labour.³³

Because of Swettenham's senior position and forceful personality, this cautious view prevailed. On the one hand, Swettenham believed that instruction in English or "higher education" of any kind could produce a group of politically active indigenous malcontents who might wish to rid Malaya of the British. As he reiterated in 1894, "whilst we teach children to read and write and count in their own language . . . we are safe."³⁴ On the other hand, Swettenham also believed that to teach English unrestrictedly in a Malayan environment would be to invite frustration and failure for both teacher and pupil. He did not dispute the efforts by the Reverend F.W. Haines in Selangor to provide English-medium instruction for those sons of the traditional Malay aristocracy who wished to participate in the lower levels of the colonial bureaucracy. For the vast bulk of the Malays, however, the only further education that Swettenham was prepared to make freely available was technical or teacher training.

Throughout the 1890s, Swettenham's policies were realized in practice when most of the Malay boys who passed through the vernacular school system returned to their familiar peasant pursuits. For example, a survey of "past pupils of Malay schools" conducted in Perak in 1896 found that 2,070 of them had become "*padi* planters or gardeners," while only 118 had become clerks and orderlies, and 59 had become schoolteachers.³⁵ As long as Swettenham remained in Malaya, as first Resident-General of the Federated Malay States from 1896 to 1901, and as Governor of the Straits Settlements from 1901 to 1904, any moves to foster English-medium instruction among the Malays were stringently restricted, and the education of Chinese and Indian immigrants continued to be regarded as the private preserve of the leaders of those communities, or of Christian missions. Swettenham recognised and praised the Chinese contribution to Malaya's economic development, but like most of his British administrative colleagues, he perceived the Chinese as fundamentally alien, transient, and potentially disloyal "birds of passage."³⁶

The Heritage of Swettenham

By the first decade of the twentieth century, a

rudimentary system of government Malay vernacular schools was firmly ensconced in the Federated Malay States. Swettenham's administrative skills, experience, knowledge, and sheer strength of personality had enabled him to play an especially crucial role in formulating the nature of this school programme, within the very flexible structure of the Residential "System." That he was a founder of modern Malay education is beyond dispute, even if the kind of foundations he laid remains a matter of controversy.

For a reappraisal of Frank Swettenham's thought and action on educational issues during his Malayan career must conclude on a note of paradox. "When the features of the country change," he wrote in retirement, "the features of the people, their language, manner, religion, and even their colour, will probably undergo as great a change."³⁷ No British official did more to promote changes in the features of the Malayan countryside. Swettenham's Malayan career was devoted to the forthright promotion of British colonial rule, to administrative order and efficiency, to rapid economic growth and mechanical innovation, and to the encouragement of industrious immigrant labour for material ends. Swettenham never really doubted the purpose and worth of British rule in Malaya. He was not an introspective or self-recriminating man like his colleague, Hugh Clifford.³⁸ Instead, Swettenham liked to assert that British rule had given to the Malay community "an independence, a happiness, and a prosperity which they never knew before."³⁹ Yet few of the other British officials possessed a more intimate or comprehensive knowledge of the "old" Malay world than Swettenham, or tried so hard to preserve its "best" features through a formal educational system.

However paradoxical and dichotomous his Malayan career appears in retrospect, Swettenham never wavered in his conviction that the Malays were "the people of the country," or that their distinctive cultural integrity should be preserved. A future generation of Malay nationalist leaders were to reaffirm this part of Swettenham's heritage, even if they regarded his image of the "real Malay" as a restrictive stereotype.

Footnotes

¹Sir Frank Swettenham. *British Malaya*, rev. ed., London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1929.

²William R. Roff. Introduction to *Stories and Sketches by Sir Frank Swettenham*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. xv.

³Swettenham, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁹Rupert H. Wilkinson. "The Gentlemen Ideal and the Maintenance of a Political Elite," in P.W. Musgrave, ed., *Sociology, History and Education*, London: Methuen, 1970, pp. 126-142.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Memorandum by Frank A. Swettenham, dated July 1875, and included as Appendix 1 in Peter L. Burns and C.D. Cowan, eds., *Sir Frank Swettenham's Malayan Journals, 1874-1876*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 333.

¹²Emily Sadka. *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1895*, Kuala Lumpur: University Press, 1968, p. 204.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 208-210. Also, William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, p. 12.

¹⁴Quoted in Roff, Introduction to *Stories and Sketches*, p. xiii.

¹⁵See Rex Stevenson. *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policy Towards the Malays, 1875-1906*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 29; also, Eunice Thio, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula, 1880-1910*, Vol. 1, Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1969, p. xvi.

¹⁶Swettenham, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁷Roff, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁰Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²¹Memorandum by Swettenham, p. 335.

²²Roff, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Quotation taken from *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

²⁵Swettenham, *op. cit.*, 140.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁷For a fuller discussion of Malay responses, see Peter Wicks, "Education, Colonialism, and a Plural Society: The Development of Formal Education in West Malaysia, 1786-1909," unpublished M.Ed. thesis, University of Hawaii, 1978.

²⁸Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²⁹Sadka, *op. cit.*, p. 293; Roff, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

³⁰Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³¹Swettenham, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

³²*Ibid.*

³³Quoted in Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism: British Educational Policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 15.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁵Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 73; Loh, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁶Swettenham, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-233. Also, Victor Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, London: Cassell, 1965, p. 97.

³⁷Roff, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

³⁸Cf. William R. Roff, ed. *Stories by Sir Hugh Clifford*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966. Also, Peter Wicks, Introduction to *Hugh Clifford's Journal of His Mission to Pahang in 1887*, Southeast Asia Working Paper Number 10, University of Hawaii, 1978.

³⁹Swettenham, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

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