The liberal security experiment in Southeast Asia

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During the 53 years from the founding of Singapore in 1819 to the British exerting direct control over the native states in the Malay Peninsula in 1872, British involvement in Southeast Asia represented a liberal security experiment. This experiment was marked by the liberal principles of recognising native sovereignty, a belief and commitment to non-intervention in the native states, and the use of free trade as a norm to mitigate war and conflict.

The aggressive colonisation of the Malay Peninsula which occurred in the late nineteenth century has long been the main focus of study for students of British imperialism in Southeast Asia. Previous explanations of British expansion have viewed colonial expansion as inevitable. This colonial inevitability, is written into the narratives of previous colonial historians, such as Northcote Parkinson, Nicholas Tarling, C.D Cowan, K. G. Tregonning and C.M. Turnbull; and more recently Anthony Webster and Farish Noor.¹ These writers all cite the cost of empire and the burgeoning responsibilities of the East India Company in India, as explanations for why British territorial expansion in Peninsular Malaya was virtually non-existent until 1872. Even Alfred Rubin’s nuanced legal interpretations of colonialism, presented the advance of British imperialism, as a continuous development from the early nineteenth century onwards.² Rubin’s argument was that by the mid-1820s, British policy towards the native states in Southeast Asia, followed the system of paramountcy that resembled the imperial order of British India. In all the accounts, the idea that there was hostility to colonial adventurers and a belief in a system of states in Southeast Asia is not entertained.

Anti-colonial ideas are reduced to the structural argument, that the Straits Settlements was curtailed from expanding, by virtue of being beholden to the East India Company government, which was a little concerned with the affairs of independent country traders in the Eastern Seas. Lacking a direct voice with London, the colonies of Penang, Malacca and Singapore were
continually curtailed from expanding by the East India Company, the leaders of which did not want the costs associated with a war of occupation in the Malayan Peninsula. Previous historians, therefore, have interpreted colonial expansion as logical, natural and not meriting any questioning of its inevitability.

In this respect, scholarly opinion on colonial expansion in Asia, reflects the broader critique of the Manchester Schools approach to non-intervention, as outlined by Bernard Semmel, that they were against colonialism purely because it cost money. Therefore there was no moral objection to colonial intervention. Semmel’s seminal argument has been reiterated by a more recent generation of writers, such as Uday Singh Mehta and Jennifer Pitts, who also characterised the mid nineteenth century liberal rejection of colonial expansion, as being based on a belief in saving money, with very little legitimacy given to the anti-colonial beliefs that existed at the time.

Despite the belief in colonial inevitability, we should consider that for 53 years (and 86 years if we also look to the founding of Penang as the start date), the British Empire in Southeast Asia was basically stagnant — if stagnation is interpreted as a failure to grow through colonial territorial acquisition. After the establishment of Singapore in 1819, the only other events were the ceding of Malacca to the British in 1824 and the creation of another Island colony in Labuan in 1846. To this we could add the private endeavours of James Brooke in Sarawak, but these endeavours were not directly supported by the British government and were highly controversial in Britain and Singapore.

Despite the orthodox opinion of historians that colonial expansion was inevitable, as early as 1878, Peter Benson Maxwell and the former Conservative Prime Minister of the British Empire, Lord Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby, proposed a different narrative of colonial expansion. Maxwell and Derby, maintained that British intervention was not inevitable and that the long-held position in Southeast Asia was for non-intervention in the native states. This non-intervention was based on strategic and moral reasons and rather than there being an economic imperative conquest, free trade was the mechanism to avoid conflict and colonial acquisition.
The first intellectual champion of free trade and non-intervention in Southeast Asia was the East India Company official John Crawfurd, who wrote his *History of the Indian Archipelago* as a critique of previous colonial practices and as a plan for a new regional security order. British colonial policy in Southeast Asia was an early attempt to demonstrate the success of liberal ideas of security, whereby support for trade would prevent war and colonial conquest.

**Maxwell’s critique as a response to British Colonial aggrandisement**

Published in 1878, Peter Benson Maxwell’s 124-page pamphlet, *Our Malay Conquests* was the first attempt at writing a history of the British occupation of the Malay Peninsula between 1868-1876. His critique along with that of the former Prime Minister of Britain, Lord Derby, presented a view of the relations between the polities in the Malay Peninsula before the empire expanded to encompass these native states. Yet Maxwell had history when it came to critical thinking on military intervention. In 1855, he wrote an analysis of the Crimean War, which originated as an official inquiry into the maladministration of the war. In this book, he opened with a critical rejection of war as a policy means,

> certainly, whatever might be the claims of commerce and of the arts of peace upon us, they were forgotten in the dreams of military glory, and in the indignation at oppression which swelled the popular cry to arms; and the few voices that were raised to give warning of the sufferings which the victors must share with the vanquished, were unheard or disregarded.³

Despite Maxwell’s caution towards using war as means of international dispute resolution, his history of the Crimean War, was a defence of the actions of government in prosecuting the war against claims of negligence and administrative ineptitude. One year after publication, Maxwell was rewarded with a knighthood and dispatched to Penang, where he had the position of recorder between 1856–66. In 1866 he was sent to Singapore to continue as court recorder and then became Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements 1867, a position he held until 1871.
Maxwell’s term in Singapore coincided with a major shift in the status of the colony. Singapore gained its ‘independence’ from the British India Office in 1868, and became a crown colony with its own Governor, who reported directly to the colonial office rather than to the Governor General of India in Calcutta. Within five years of this transition, British control extended over the entire Malayan Peninsula. What had been independent Malay states, were now controlled through British Residents that reported to Singapore. Maxwell was disturbed by what he saw as a major shift in British policy towards the Malay Peninsula and Southeast Asia, which was destroying the independence of the native states.

In writing *Our Malay Conquests*, Maxwell used *Parliamentary Papers*, which Derby ordered after a House of Lords debate on the bombardment and occupation of Parek and subsequent interference in the Malay states by British forces. Maxwell’s pamphlet was a critical history in the form of a narration of these Parliamentary Papers. This practice was a common literary device by the 1870s. Parliamentary papers often provided a damning account of the actions of colonial officials – but the format of these official papers as a series of indexed letters lacked a coherent narrative, and were rarely read outside parliamentary circles. The most well-known of these Parliamentary Papers (turned political pamphlets) that related to colonial expansion, was Richard Cobden’s 1853 *The Burmese War: or how wars are got up in India*. A contemporary, likened Maxwell’s paper to Cobden’s: ‘Sir Benson Maxwell, late Chief Justice at Singapore, writing a pamphlet on the subject, which, it is said, is likely to be as luminous as Mr. Cobden's famous brochure on the Burmese war.’ We could also add to this other critical pamphlets on Southeast Asia such as W. N.’s, 1850 paper *Borneo, Remarks on a Recent “Naval Execution”* or Louis Alexis Chamerovzow, 1851 *Borneo Facts Versus Borneo Fallacies: An Inquiry into the Alleged Piracies of the Dyaks of Serebas and Sakarran*.

These critical pamphlets, were used by humanitarian liberals who wanted to demonstrate the political ineptitude, strategic fallacies and profligate spending, as well as moral bankruptcy of British colonialism in Asia. They were circulated in bookshops and newspaper vendors, but the reach of the pamphlets was much wider. Mainstream newspapers often reviewed the articles and in some cases published abridged versions of them as short articles, such as Maxwell’s
‘English Conquest in the Malayan Archipelago’, published in the *Daily News* and republished in papers across the empire.⁶

One of the key liberal minded organizations lobbying against colonial expansion in Southeast Asia was the Aborigines Protection Society. The society published regular articles on Southeast Asia in its journal *The Aborigines’ Friend*. Maxwell’s paper had its origins within that organization. Maxwell’s involvement began in 1877, when he acted as the main authority (and probably author) for the Protection Society’s ‘memorial’ (statement). He wrote a memorial to the Colonial Secretary supporting the case of the ‘Malay Chiefs’ in Perak who were accused of murdering the British official, James Birch, and Maxwell labeled British military actions in Perak ‘atrocities’.

Maxwell’s account of the British expansion is not the focus of this paper, but rather, his premise that the British expansion, broke a long-held policy of non-intervention:

> Until ten years ago, our settlements in the Straits of Malacca were under the government of India, and during its long reign there, that government managed to live in peace and friendly intercourse with the various Malay principalities of the neighbourhoods. It made treaties with them, chiefly to secure commercial advantages and the extradition of fugitive criminals. It respected their independence; and its policy generally was to leave them alone, and not to suffer its local officers to interfere in their internal affairs or disputes.⁷

Maxwell’s paper explains the quick expansion that occurred in the 1870s, but we can read backwards from his paper to determine what was the basis of policy before the expansion of the 1870s. He painted a picture of relatively harmonious relations between the native states, based on the British policy of non-intervention. The premise underpinning Maxwell’s argument was that the expansion of the 1870s was major break from the policies of recognizing the independence of the Malay states that had existed since the early nineteenth century.

**Liberal international relations**
Maxwell was not the only person arguing that the British government was undergoing a major change in policy. The chief Parliamentary critic of British actions towards the Malay states in the 1870s was Lord Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby. Although by this time Derby was a fading force in quasi retirement to the House of Lords, he had been a three time Conservative/Tory Prime Minister (between 1852 and 1869) and had served as leader of the Conservative Party for 22 years. It was Derby who had called for the release of papers that Mawell used to write *Our Malay Conquests*. In calling for the release of correspondence in 1874, Derby argued that the government was taking a course of action that would change the political order in the Malay Peninsula:

he felt it to be his duty to warn Her Majesty's Government against giving its sanction to the plans of the Straits Government, by which it would not only be entering into equivocal and entangling engagements, but would be embarking in a course which must inevitably lead to the invasion and conquest of the whole of the Malay Peninsula.  

Derby followed the debate for the next few years and after his prophecy had eventuated he again rose to give a speech in the House of Lords in 1876, that amounted to, I told you this would happen. ‘Reports’, he declared ‘continue to arrive of the plunder and burning of villages by the officials of the Straits Settlements, it appears necessary to call your Lordships' attention without delay to the state of things in the Malay Peninsula’. Such statements had an affinity with the Radical in parliament who continually cited the massacres and military repression caused by soldiers of the Empire, yet Derby was a conservative, whose castigation of British actions also criticised a speech delivered by Queen Victoria:

A paragraph in the Speech from the Throne refers to the military operations and loss of valuable lives in that country; and it is a matter of satisfaction to find an expression of regret for the loss of those lives, for which loss the Secretary of State for the Colonies is primarily responsible—as also for the bloodshed, injustice, and expenditure which have occurred, and which may follow later. The same paragraph of Her Majesty's Speech says that the military operations have reestablished the just authority of this country. I hope to show to your Lordships that some of those operations and losses of life have
happened in countries where there is not even a semblance of just authority on the part of England.\textsuperscript{10}

In 1874, he had argued that in demanding Residents be stationed within the Malay states to ‘advise’ the sultans in governance, Britain was effectively conquering the Malay states. He argued that if anybody should be stationed within the Malay states, it should be consuls who could act under the sultans’ authority not the Singaporean government.\textsuperscript{11} In 1876, he therefore maintained ‘I pointed out then that these arrangements must lead to the conquest of Perak, and that the Straits Press was asking for the conquest of the whole Malay Peninsula’ and that he ‘entreated Her Majesty's Government not to sanction these arrangements’.\textsuperscript{12}

Although Derby was being practical in his understanding of what would happen if a Resident was installed in a Malay State, in his arguments, he was also presenting a vision of international relations in Southeast Asia, where state sovereignty was a core normative principle.

In 1873, he also spoke against Dutch colonial aggression towards the state of Aceh and presented a view of international relations in Southeast Asia that emphasised individual rights to trade and open relations between states. He maintained that the British had abrogated the treaty of 1824, and went on to express a view that it was the basis of diplomatic relations in Southeast Asia and that it was a regime similar in scope to the Concert of Europe: ‘The Treaty of 1824, which had subsisted for almost 50 years, had become part of the public law of the countries adjoining the Malacca Straits, as much so as the Treaty of Vienna was the public law of Europe’\textsuperscript{13}. Under this treaty, British traders ‘carried on trade with Bender Achin [Aceh], and other parts of Sumatra, and the population of Sumatra had friendly relations with the British Straits Settlements, and trusted to the Treaty of 1824’.\textsuperscript{14}

In criticising colonial expansion, Maxwell and Derby are not just criticising colonial practices, but also making an argument that colonial expansion into the Malay states is a breach of a previous established international order. This order was one based on a recognition of state sovereignty and free trade. Such views expressed a liberal international relations order in Southeast Asia.
Admittedly it may seem somewhat anachronistic to argue that a liberal theory of international relations existed the nineteenth century, when International Relations did not exist as a discipline at that time. As Tze Shung has written in chapter three of this book, William Husskinson captured the essence of liberal ideas of international relations in 1823, when he argued that free trade would ‘establish more liberal principles, and [to] show that commerce was not the end but the means of diffusing comfort and enjoyment among the nations embarked in its pursuit.’ Maxwell’s and Derby’s critiques, were a continuation of these Husskinson principles, and in their arguments we can see what would become three key liberal international relation principles: the rejection of power politics; a belief in mutual benefits and cooperation; and, support for international organizations and nongovernmental actors. These principles were present in thinking about Southeast Asia until the mid-1870s. In the context of Southeast Asia, they were about the curtailment of British and Dutch power to support the existence of native states.

The key organisational regime underpinning British policy in Southeast Asia, was not empire, but the sovereignty of the native states. Cooperation was framed around support for the principle of free trade and the importance of individual country traders (private traders under a national flag) in maintaining a system of good relations based on profit. As Anthony Howe has argued (as well as other chapters in this book), free trade ‘offered the potential to reorder relations between states’. ‘Trade – the douceur of commerce – would replace warfare between nations, for rather than representing a zero-sum contest between mercantilist states, the opening of a world market offered the possibility of universal peace’. In arguing against colonial expansion, Maxwell and Derby both articulated a system of relations based on free trade that rejected military opportunism of empire, and, instead, embraced the mutual benefits of trade and security that occurred from recognising the independence of native states.

Crawfurd’s History of Indian Archipelago and limited engagement

Published in 1820, John Crawfurd’s *History of the Indian Archipelago* was a work designed to influence public policy. He first considered writing a volume on Java as a compendium to
William Marsden’s *History of Sumatra*, only to find that Stamford Raffles beat him to the task.\(^{17}\) Undaunted, Crawfurd expanded his study into a larger archipelagic wide project, that critiqued previous mercantilist colonialism and proposed free trade colonialism instead. His critique of what had been, as well as his advocacy for free trade, represented the beginnings of a liberal international relations experiment in Southeast Asia, in which he advocated for the recognition of the independence of native states and functional separation between merchants and the state.

His argument began with an outline of the strategic problem faced by old ‘joint-stock companies’ of the seventeenth century, such as the Dutch *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) and the English East India Company in trading with Asia.\(^{18}\) These companies, he argued possessed ‘No military navy … to protect their distant adventures from the hostility of European and native enemies’, and their adventures were not supported by the British or Dutch state.\(^ {19}\) As a consequence of their strategic risks, the companies were granted a monopoly ‘with a portion of sovereign authority’, so that the companies could look after themselves and exercise military violence to defend their interests – making the merchant company a quasi-state.\(^{20}\) In building his liberal critique, Crawfurd drew from the earlier critiques of colonialism, made by Guillaume Thomas François Raynal and Adam Smith, that Diana Carroll has established as founders of a liberal world view in Southeast Asia. Raynal and Smith both argued that, in their private quest for riches, the East India Companies acted like rapacious freebooting barbarians, destroying the wealth of Asia.\(^{21}\)

His argument began with a demonstration of the problems caused, by making commercial enterprises (such as the various East India Companies) into sovereign states. By making commercial enterprises quasi sovereign states, he saw there was a corrupting contradiction to their basic foundation. He argued that the British East India Company, with exclusive rights to British trade in Asia, was governed, more by a ‘spirit of gambling than by views of fair trade’.\(^{22}\) Importantly, he saw the lack of ‘fair trade’, as the source of conflict between European and local peoples. Initially, he argued, ‘the Dutch and the English appeared in the simple character
of traders, committing occasional acts of piracy, but, upon the whole, maintaining a tolerably fair reputation with the natives’. The companies gained a monopoly, he believed ‘they lost’ their ‘reputation’ as traders and ‘entered upon the system of coercion’. Transforming from individual traders into companies of ‘armed traders’, Crawfurd surmised, ‘they did not fail to use the power which they had in their hands to possess themselves ... of the produce or property of the native states with which they traded’.

The corruption within these companies was represented by the way they used treaties with native states, to enforce their commercial advantage, but in such a way that those treaties also limited the capacity of the indigenous states, to act as sovereign entities. He argued that ‘the treaties which’ European companies entered into with these governments had for their object to exclude all rivalry or competition, to obtain the staple products of industry at their own prices, and to possess the exclusive monopoly of the native market for their own imagined advantage.

The treaties he declared were not negotiated on equal terms, as they were ‘violently or surreptitiously obtained’; the result of this was that native states attempted to ‘evade the flagrant injustices, as well as absurdity, which an adherence [to these treaties] implied’. The European traders however could exercise ‘sovereign authority’ to defend what they saw as the ‘perfidious violation of their rights’, punishing perceived native transgressions ‘to the utmost of their power’.

Crawfurd recognised the natural independence of the South East Asian states. He believed that the Company’s treaties establishing trading relations, which did not stipulate free trade (which he refers to as ‘fair trade’) and hence effectively removed the independence of native states. As pseudo-states, the companies enforced their rights with military power. He maintained the results of using military power to enforce trade was that ‘the independence of most of the
natives of the Archipelago was subdued, and their commerce and industry subjected to the will of the monopolists’.  

The companies built strategic ports as isolated territorial strongholds inside native states. These company strongholds challenged native independence when they became ‘an independent authority within ... [a] kingdom’. As independent authorities, they existed in a matrix of other territorial-political entities. Although they were fortified, the security of these strongholds was not just dependent on defences. More importantly, their security was maintained by the company’s relationship with surrounding native polities.

Crawfurd saw that the damage these conflicts inflicted on the native states, to their people and the general trade in Southeast Asia. The native states were forced to take sides between European powers, and as a consequence, many suffered internal civil wars and were further weakened by their interaction with Europeans. With ‘the country depopulated and exhausted by wars’, the ‘incentives to industry and production’ were ‘removed’.

Crawfurd maintained that truly independent indigenous states in South-East Asia were in everybody’s interest, creating ‘incentive to industry and production’. Faced with territorial control of a socially and economically depleted land, however, ‘the monopolist’ responded by ‘converting the population of each particular country into predial slaves ... to cultivate the most favoured products of their soil, and deliver these exclusively to the monopolist, at such prices as the latter might be pleased to grant’.

The Free Traders:
Crawfurd’s book was timely, as one review noted, coinciding with a campaign against the East India Company monopoly and support for free trade. Around the time the *History of the Indian Archipelago* was published, free trade was promoted by leading conservative liberal politicians in Britain, such as Frederick Robinson, Thomas Wallace, and William Huskisson in the House of Commons, and in the House of Lords, Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, third Marquess of Lansdowne, who was a leading figure in the Whig (liberal) party. Wallace chaired the select committee on trade with the East Indies for the House of Commons, whilst Petty-Fitzmaurice chaired the select committee on trade with the East Indies for the House of Lords.

Both reports were tabled in 1821, and argued for the further freeing up of trade in Asia. Their focus was first, to expand the market for British goods in China and Southeast Asia and secondly, expand British shipping to the region. Both Wallace and Petty-Fitzmaurice concluded that, the East India Company’s monopoly, was the problem.

The reports also speculated, in a limited way, on the security benefits that free trade would have for the region. Wallace’s final report confined his statements on security, to building friendly relations through increased trade connections and familiarity, however, Petty-Fitzmaurice went further, proposing that a ‘free port’ under ‘British protection’ would be of ‘the greatest benefit to commerce and civilization’ and that ‘the importance of such a station, and the quick perception of its advantages formed by the native traders in that part of the globe, may be estimated by the rapid rise of the port of Sincapore [sic]’. Crawford was one of the key witnesses called to give evidence to the committee behind Petty-Fitzmaurice’s report to the House of Lords. In his evidence, Crawford emphasised the social benefits of trade, although his evidence drew on the free trade ideology of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, more than any substantive evidence to prove his case. When asked, ‘Has the increase of that taste [in British manufactures], in your opinion contributed to excite the industry of the inhabitants?’ he responded, ‘It would be difficult in so short a time to give any distinct proof, if it had done so; but the increase of commerce must inevitably produce its natural effects, in civilizing the inhabitants, and furthering the progress of industry.’ He went on to state ‘Increased trade, as well as material improvements in the general government of the
great population of that island [Java] within the last few years, have certainly contributed to ameliorate the condition of the inhabitants'.

Questions then moved to the effects of colonialism on the indigenous polities in Southeast Asia. Crawfurd’s response was to reprise his book. He emphasized the consequences of interference to the indigenous polities, but also noted the consequences colonialism had on the long term relations between Asian peoples and European merchants:

All the conquests and establishments formed hitherto in the Indian islands, have been formed for the purpose of subjecting the commerce and industry of the natives to the supposed interests of monopolist, and, in my opinion have not been attended with any of the legitimate advantages of European government. They have always been hostile to the feelings of the natives of the country.

These long term effects, he argued, shaped how more powerful Asian political systems dealt with Europeans. He argued that the Chinese have watched European colonialism with great concern: ‘they have the intelligence to observe, that we are conquerors, and very near them, and very dangerous; moreover, all the European nations behaved extremely ill early in their commercial intercourse with them’. Because of this history of poor relations between Asia and Europe, he argued that free trade was a solution to intractable colonial problems and it would create the basis for harmonious relations between Europeans and Asian states.

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, Crawfurd was regularly asked to give evidence before committees or advise government on Indian and Asian affairs. In 1830, he maintained that China’s dislike of foreign ships and sailors entering their ports should be respected, and that this would not greatly impede access to Chinese markets. The reason, he believed, was the inherent separation that should exist between merchant and the state — the British, he argued, should respect Chinese policy, because the Chinese junks would continue to conduct trade with British settlements regardless of Chinese government policy.

In 1832, he wrote a submission, arguing for non-intervention in the native states and a reduction of Britain’s imperial obligations to the regions. He critically cited his own experience
in Java, arguing that before he became Resident of Yogyakarta, the ‘sultan of Java, had a fertile territory, and about a million and a half of subjects’. Yet he painted his time as Resident of Yogyakarta as a failure in exercising colonial rule and thereby destroying the country:

we exercised, during our possession of Java, the same kind of interference which we exercise in the administrations of Hydrabad, Oude and Mysore, or the Guicowar…. After a quarrel with him [the Sultan of Java], which followed almost immediately on the conquest of the island, and which arose out of a desire to throw off the yoke of the European supremacy, which terminated in hostilities, tranquillity was afterwards tolerably maintained during our remaining occupation of the island. …. The same medley, indeed, with the other native princes of Java, had, on previous occasions, produced exactly similar effects.43

When it came to states exercising ‘independent sovereignty’ and in ‘the immediate neighbourhood of British dominions’ he suggested, ‘the less we interfere in their internal affairs the better’.44 He recognised the rights of independent sovereigns to create laws and that these laws need to be adhered to, no matter what Europeans thought of them, noting in his Journal of an Embassy to Siam that,

if the subjects of a free and civilized government resort to a barbarous and despotic country, there is no remedy but submission to its laws, however absurd or arbitrary and that

it could scarcely be hoped... that an arbitrary government should concede to strangers a degree of liberty and security which it denied to its own subjects.45

The chief mechanism by which political interference occurred, was through the system of residencies, in which a British Resident was appointed to a native state to control not only the foreign policy of that state and often the revenue raising mechanism of that state. Crawfurd continually depicted residencies as a central problem that interfered with the sovereignty of native states. He noted in 1832 that,
Political residents are at present maintained by us, both at Ava and Nepaul [sic], in virtue of treaties with these courts. I confess I am unable to discover any utility in these agencies. ... The presence of a British diplomatic agent ... seems to me more likely to be the source of irritation than of conciliation. ... The presence of a resident agent is notoriously viewed by the Indian princes as a mark of vassalage or thraldom.46

He argued that consular representation by leading British merchants, would be both cheaper and lead to less political interference and therefore more harmonious relations.

Crawfurd demonstrated the consequences of not respecting the sovereignty of native states, by using the example of what happened to the princely states in India, that were protected by the British Empire:

By our military protection, and our interference in the civil administration, the powers of the native governments are necessarily enfeebled; the prince is reduced to a pageant — often into a mischievous one; all responsibility to his subjects for good government is removed; and the natural check of apprehended insurrection against the vices of a feeble or tyrannical sovereign, the only on which exists in most Asiatic governments, is wholly withdrawn. All interest in the good government of his country being taken away, the prince, according to his personal character, degenerates either into a besotted voluptuary, a miser, or a discontented intriguer, surrounded by parasites or usurers.... The country necessarily becomes a scene of anarchy and confusion. Resistance to authority becomes habitual, and petty insurrections break out, which, just or unjust, are immediately suppressed by the irresistible arm of British power.47

In arguing for non-interference in the states of Southeast Asia, Crawfurd was at the extreme edge of the free trader argument. In his various submissions, he always concluded that British political interference in the affairs of native states would result in decreasing trade and revenue. He argued for a reduced influence and pointed to island colonies like Singapore being the solution in Southeast Asia.48 In these submissions, Crawfurd was proposing a liberal system of
international relations in Southeast Asia, based on the recognition of sovereignty, a system of consular access, rather than residencies, and with a focus on trade rather than political interference.

Siam and Kedah

In London, the free traders were arguing for non-intervention, but in the front-line colony of Penang, the government was faced with the rising power of Siam, and were not so eager to embrace the security risks of free trade. Siam’s power and desire to expand into the Malay Peninsula was a challenge to the policy of non-intervention. In 1822, Crawfurd was sent as a trade envoy to Siam. He proposed a continuation of non-intervention and recognition of Siam’s claims in Kedah, with the aim of strengthening trade ties. However, the East India Company servant in Penang, John Anderson, proposed a strong interventionist line that would see direct conflict with Siam.

Penang’s relationship to Kedah had always been tense. Originally a possession of Kedah, Penang was provisionally ceded to the East India Company, under condition that the East India Company provide protection for the Sultan of Kedah against Siam. The East India Company government in Calcutta refused to accept those terms, but also refused to give the settlement back to Kedah after taking possession of the Island.

Prior to the British gaining control of Penang in 1786, Kedah was a tributary state of Siam. The tributary relationship, however, placed only a small burden on Kedah, consisting of sending a yearly tribute of bunga ‘mas (a small gold model tree), and therefore the state was practically independent. With the dispute over who inherited the sultanate after the death of Sultan Abdullah in 1799, the Siamese intervened, siding with Sultan Ahmad over his brothers. Consequently Ahmad was beholden to Siam. The pressure on Kedah by Siam increased further when Siam ordered Kedah to invade Perak as punishment for Perak refusing to pay the bunga ‘mas (although Perak had never previously recognised the suzerainty of Siam of Perak). Kedah
made overtures to Ava (Burma) Siam’s traditional enemy, the consequence of this was Siam’s invasion of Kedah. The Sultan fled to British protection in Penang.  

These events coincided with Crawfurd’s embassy to Siam to open up trade. Aware of the potential for the Kedah dispute to derail the trade negotiations, Crawfurd had avoided raising the issue until raised by the Siamese. Realising that British support for the Sultan of Kedah had ‘wounded the Siamese pride exceedingly, and given rise to much irritation’ Crawfurd relayed the Siamese perspective to the British Government in Calcutta:

the Rajah of Quedah, a tributary of Siam, had abandoned his own country, and fled to a foreign one for protection. They said, that instead of seeking an asylum at Prince of Wales’s Island [Penang], he should have come to the capital, and represented his grievances to the King, and they added, that if he would still come, ample justice would be done to him.

In his account of the negotiations, Crawfurd maintained that he ‘hinted at various proposals for our mediation in restoring the Rajah of Quedah to his principality’ but to little avail, with the Siamese maintaining this matter was of no concern to the British. Crawfurd ’s advice to the Governor of Penang was to recognise the historical and continuing claims the Siamese had to Kedah, writing in his journal:

From the earliest knowledge of Europeans, [Queda] has been a tributary or vassal state of Siam; and, besides contributing in war to the assistance of the paramount state, in men, arms, and provisions, by immemorial usage, the King of Queda sends to Siam, in common with other Malayan princes, a triennial token of submission.

In his account of negotiations, Crawfurd decided it was futile to try and find a solution to the problem, but used it as leverage to extract a concession from the Siamese that the British would cease paying the annual stipend of 10,000 Spanish Dollars to the King of Kedah, which was original agreed to by Captain Francis Light as part of the agreement to cede Penang to the East India Company in 1786. Crawfurd was somewhat surprised that he received no pushback from the Siamese, who had a rightful claim over Penang:
I had anticipated the probability that the mooting of this point would bring on the question of our right of sovereignty in Prince of Wales Island, and a demand upon the part of the Siamese for the payment of the annual stipend, but neither question was agitated. The Siamese negotiators, by their silence at least, seemed to acquiesce in our right of appropriating the stipend.\textsuperscript{57}

His conclusion was that the Siamese realised they did not have the practical power to enforce their claims against the British, therefore acquiesced to the reality of British rule over Penang.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Crawfurd did not interpret Siamese fear of British power as a positive for British foreign policy, believing that it led to a reluctance on the part of the Siamese to engage in trade. He noted in his journal, the general fear that the Siamese and other nations in Southeast Asia had towards the British, noting an observation communicated to one of his interpreters that “the English were a dangerous people to have any connection with, for that they were not only the ablest, but the most ambitious of the European nations who frequented the East”.\textsuperscript{58} Crawfurd had provided similar comments in his evidence to parliamentary committees and in all cases repeated his point, that this fear of European encroachment from historical crimes towards Eastern nations created a general fear and hesitation to engage with Europeans. This hesitation he often termed ‘jealousy’ in his writings, but a contextual interpretation would suggest, he meant a fear of European encroachment at the expense of the existing native elite.

He concluded that the best policy for the future was to placate the Siamese and ease their concerns over time. He urged accommodation with the Siamese: ‘Should the Siamese nation become our neighbours I may safely venture to assert that ... Such a state of things will improve and tend to lay open, the commercial resources which their fertile and extensive territory is undoubtedly capable of affording.’\textsuperscript{59} Crawfurd’s policy placed trade as the central concern and political neutrality in relation to Siamese interests in the Malay peninsula as the objective. Nevertheless, Crawfurd’s approach of free trade and political neutrality was opposed by some figures in the government of Penang.
John Anderson, the Malay Translator in the Government of Penang presented a different view to that of Crawfurd and that of the free traders publishing a book on policy towards the Malay states and Siam in 1824. Historian Anthony Reid argued, that ‘Anderson made a case for a stronger and more consistent British policy in defence of Malay sovereignty against encroachments from other powers’. Anderson was certainly advocating Malay sovereignty, but at the expense of Siamese claims, whilst also advocating British encroachments on Malay sovereignty, like those that existed in protected princely states in India. Anderson’s paper can be largely read as a rejection of Crawfurd’s approach. For Anderson, power politics was at the heart of policy in Southeast Asia, and the British should not shy away from demonstrating their power, arguing:

The sooner we interfere in the affairs of Quedah, the greater will be the probability of success’ We should now avail ourselves, therefore, of the opportunity of taking advantage of their alarms; for pacific negotiations have been tried, but tried in vain.

Rather than strengthening the system of states in Southeast Asia, as Crawfurd believed would happen, Anderson believed that the laissez-faire system, as advocated by the free traders, advocated weakness. In phrases that appear to foreshadow mid-twentieth century critics of appeasement towards Nazi Germany from the 1930s, Anderson argued that free trade emboldened bullying behaviour of native powers towards weaker states, and it was Britain’s role to uphold the weak:

Conciliate the good will of its neighbours, how ready so ever it has always shown itself to repay concession by concession, and to encourage the most friendly commercial relations, how averse, at all times, to proceed to extremities, when reluctantly forced to repel aggression, still moderation has its limits, and a compromise of its just and inherent rights or tardiness in repelling encroachment, would generally entail more serious evils than we suffer from being engaged in occasional hostilities.

Anderson saw the Siamese as a major threat to the political order in Malay peninsula. He urged intervention to protect the states from Siamese aggression but also to make the Malay state understand that they were subservient to British interests.
An ascendancy certainly established chiefly by the sword, renders it the more necessary to destroy the first seeds of opposition and encroachment, at this late period of our sway, on the part of any native power, least the example of our forbearance, in one case, should give encouragement to other powers, and thus involve us in far greater calamities than we seek to escape from, by pacific means, undoing all that has been done, by the sacrifice of wealth and human lives, for the attainment of objects, which if preserved, confer a blessing upon the mother country, and will continue to raise, as our struggles and our moderation as victors have raised the British name through all countries. Let not, then, any delusive hope of success from an experimental and illusory system of avoiding war by undue forbearance, when we are forced by circumstances to resist, induce us to purser plans of which our whole experience and history affords abundant evidence of the futility.63

Anderson’s approach was a bold one, in which he wanted to transfer the system of Indian protected states to the Malay Peninsula. His book was dedicated to the Governor of Penang, Robert Fullerton, and Fullerton certainly adopted a strident resistance to Siam in relation to claims of suzerainty over the Malay state of Parak, but Anderson’s grand ideas fell on deaf ears of an East India Company trying to avoid any more entanglements.64 Nevertheless, Anderson’s approach would see a renaissance under James Brooke 20 years later. By the 1840s, Anderson had retired, but after being asked to write a supporting memorandum for James Brooke’s projection of British power in Borneo, Anderson again advocated using British power to strengthen and intervene in the Malay states:

The Malays, with proper management may, in my opinion, be rendered a very superior race in many respects to some of the natives of Hindostan. They have a manly independence about them, which contrasts favourably with the servility and cunning of the Chooliah and Bengalees, or the morose, haughty, and intractable Siamese. Let us, then, unite in raising the Malay to his proper place in the scale of humanity and civilisation.65
James Brooke’s challenge to non-intervention

With the exception of Anderson’s proposals, Crawfurd’s advice for a system of relations in Southeast Asia based on state sovereignty went largely unchallenged, possibly from lack of interest by the East India Company government in Calcutta, but also because Crawfurd maintained an active involvement in Southeast Asian policy. After his first career in the East India Company, Crawfurd’s second career was that of professional lobbyist and journalist. The British Merchants in Calcutta hired him in 1827 to lobby against the Stamp Act of 1827. For the next three decades, Crawfurd continued in the pay of either Calcutta or Straits Settlements merchants — employed to lobby against the monopolistic activities of the East India Company. In his lobbying capacity he published pamphlets publicly as well as anonymously. In Britain, he regularly published anonymous opinion articles on Asia in the leading London liberal paper, The Examiner, and various other review journals. He also actively worked behind the scenes talking with government officials about policy and was purportedly a trusted authority on all sides of government. As a member of many London clubs, associations, and the Masonic Temple, he probably had access to political and other leading figures through non-official channels. The merchant associations of India and Singapore paid him to shift the political and public opinions of the British elite.

The first major challenge to Crawfurd’s system of order was created by James Brooke who had become the independent sovereign of Sarawak and was seeking to extend British power over northern Borneo. Crawfurd opposed Brooke’s proposals for Borneo. In October 1846, Crawfurd published an anonymous commentary in The Examiner titled ‘On the projected colonisation of Borneo,’ in which he rejected the idea of colonising Borneo. Probably with a view to trying to maintain connections with Brooke and his supporters, Crawfurd was careful not to criticise Brooke directly, and avoided mentioning him throughout the article.

He opened this lengthy article with a blunt call for a ‘little knowledge and common intelligence’ to ‘substitute for the dense cloud of vapour and rhetoric’. He went on to explain the folly of
colonising Borneo, arguing that it was an unproductive jungle, with poor soil and a geography that had prevented any ‘native civilisation’. The only form of colonisation that was possible, he maintained, was one whereby Europeans would become a ‘dominant caste’ that ‘exist by the toil of an inferior race, — that is, by holding that race in virtual slavery’. Such a statement did not advocate colonisation – Crawfurd intended it as a rebuff to those who advocated colonialism on humanitarian grounds. He also perhaps intended it as a shock to the senses alongside the shocking images he evoked of dead Englishmen and money buried on the ‘monster’ island:

The colonization, or the conquest, or the settlement of Borneo, or of any portion of Borneo, will in our humble opinion, be a very good scheme for burying Englishmen and their money in a tropical swamp; also, for swamping no inconsiderable portion of English reputation of common sense and forecast; but good for nothing else. In reference to these questions, therefore, let us hear no more of the monster island; — no, not even under its exotic sounding name of Kalamantan

By the late 1840s, despite Crawfurd’s efforts, advocates of colonialism in Borneo appeared to be winning the debate. Crawfurd’s apprehension is apparent in his letters to the radical parliamentarian Richard Cobden. Crawfurd wrote of Borneo colonisation that ‘Nothing but death and wast [sic] was to be got of it’ He added ‘I tried he to arrest it, to stop the blowing of the trumpets’ but the ‘aldermen of London and the accompanying fishmongers would have none of it and allowed the trumpet to blow on’.

Crawfurd’s opposition fell on relatively deaf ears until 1849, when the public mood changed. On 31 July 1849, in collaboration with British Naval forces, Brooke launched an offensive campaign to destroy the capacity of the Saribas and Sekrang Dayaks to commit acts of piracy. The campaign was centred on the battle of Beting Marau which resulted in the deaths of over 1000
of natives, in canoes armed with spears and in comparison British forces suffered no losses and were equipped with a steam powered paddle steamer armed with guns and cannons and powerful paddles that chopped the bodies of the natives in their canoes. Opponents labelled the battle a massacre of the Saribas and Sekrang Dayaks and used news of the event to challenge Brooke’s civilising claims and the legitimacy of colonialism in Borneo. For his and his sailors part in the massacre, Captain Farquhar of the Royal Navy claimed £20,700 (equivalent to approximately £2 million in 2013)\(^7\) in prize money for killing pirates.

Such a large sum of money awarded to Farquhar caught the attention of Radicals in the House of Commons such as Richard Cobden and Joseph Hume who were always on the lookout for profligate spending on colonial and military escapades. The Radicals used the large sums being allocated as a means of criticising Brooke and his campaign in Sarawak. The Radicals in parliament already held serious reservations regarding Brooke’s anti-piracy methods from the mid-1840s. The debate about head-money allowed the Radicals to achieve what Crawfurd had failed to achieve in the mid-1840s: bring the argument to public attention.

Crawfurd’s resistance to Brooke’s expansion divided the Singapore community. The editor of the *Straits Times*, R. C. Woods was in contact with Crawfurd and Hume supplying them with information from the colony, but the other newspaper, the *Singapore Free Press* supported Brooke, and the merchants were roughly split 50/50. On 8 March 1850, anti-Brooke merchants wrote an open letter of opposition to James Brooke published in *the Straits Times*. They were responding to pro Brooke merchants who had published a letter in *the Singapore Free Press* on 5 March 1850, supporting Brooke stating ‘Merchants here have declared in the most emphatic manner their approval of the measures taken’. The anti-Brooke merchants accused the pro-Brooke faction of ‘grossness with which it is sought to pervert truth, and to gull the public at a distance into the belief that the very fulsome address expresses the sentiments of the commercial community on the wanton slaughter of the Sarebas and Sakarran tribes of Borneo, as also the general policy and conduct of Rajah Brooke’.\(^7\)
In 1852, a new government formed in Britain that relied on the Radicals support for legislation to pass through the House of Commons. Hume’s and Cobden’s lobbying finally resulted in a Commission of Inquiry. The consequence of the Commission was to end Brooke’s ability to call on naval support and effectively end British expansion in Sarawak. The Commission thus delivered a qualified victory to the Radicals trying to prevent the expansion of the British Empire. Although the Commission exonerated Brooke, it did not give him any grounds to be included within the British Empire or even to call on naval support to defend his territory.

In 1858, Brooke toured Britain trying to raise capital and promote the idea of selling Sarawak to the British Government. Crawfurd and Cobden lobbied the conservative government of Lord Derby, who 14 years later would campaign against colonial expansion into the Malay Peninsula. The Derby government listened to the arguments made by Crawfurd and Cobden and rejected the Brooke proposal. In his *Examiner* column, Crawfurd congratulated the government:

> We feel it our duty to offer Lord Derby and his colleagues our hearty thanks for the courage and intelligence they have shown on this occasion, qualities which, had they been displayed by their predecessors, would have saved the nation from an imposition, which from first to last has cost much money, much foolscap, and expense for printing, to say nothing of the slaughter of some 5,000 savages or barbarians.78

**Conclusion**

Between 1815 and 1870, the British Empire in Southeast Asia was a highly innovative liberal experiment. As a centre for trade, the Straits Settlements that included Singapore, Penang and Malacca were actively formed as a test case for the new liberal free trade ideas. These free trade ideas were not merely about reducing the cost of trade but also preventing future conflict between states through trade and liberal institution building. The Straits Settlement became an experiment in developing a liberal international society between states which would recognise
each other's jurisdictions. Trade was essential for this system to work, but so was British recognition of the sovereign rights of the native states.

Under the intellectual and political leadership of William Huskisson, John Crawfurd, Joseph Hume and Richard Cobden as well as other liberal and radical figures within Southeast Asia and London, they insured that British Power was used to avoid conflict and prevent the development of further colonial relationships.

James Brooke’s empire building activities in Sarawak presented a serious challenge to this liberal order. Brooke’s many allies in Britain and Singapore hoped that his example would create a surge in British imperium in Southeast Asia. His activities in Sarawak, nevertheless, stagnated and failed to undermine the liberal regime. Liberals demonstrated intellectually and politically why colonial control of Sarawak was both bad for British interests but also the interests of Indigenous peoples within Southeast Asia.

Far from being a failure or prolonged interregnum, as previous historians have characterised the period from 1815 to 1870, this period should be viewed as the first attempt to create a liberal regional international order. Future research into the origins of liberal international relations should look to Southeast Asia during the nineteenth century as an early working example of liberal internationalism. It was Southeast Asia that inspired British liberal radical parliamentarians to develop ideas about how liberalism could create a system of institutionalised peace between states.


7 P.B. Maxwell, *Our Malay Conquests* (P.S. King, 1878), 7.

8 HL Deb 19 May 1874 vol 219 cc467-77


10 ibid

11 HL Deb 19 May 1874 vol 219 cc467-77

12 HL Deb 28 February 1876 vol 227 cc1000-18.


14 ibid


17 John Crawfurd, to unknown person, 1816, Batavia, Acc 3651, letter 93, Scottish National Library


22 Crawfurd *HIA*, vol. 3, p. 217.

23 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 219.

24 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 220.


26 Ibid., vol. 3, p.220.

27 Ibid., vol. 3, p.220.

28 Ibid., vol. 3, p.220.

29 Ibid., vol. 3, p.221.


31 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 221.

32 Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 229-32

33Ibid., vol. 3, p.221

34 Johnson defines this as ‘consisting of farms’ Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers : to which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar*, (London.: W. Strahan, 1755), p. 1552.

35 Crawfurd, *HIA*, vol. 3, p. 221.

36 As Tze Shiung Ng has demonstrated in “ideological foundations of Singapore” in this volume.

Anderson a stellar career in administrative positions within the colony of Penang. He began as being appointed to the position of 'writer' in 1813 in Penang. By 1821 he had been, when he held the position of deputy-warehouse keeper and Malay translator to the government, to the rank of 'factor,' and to the discharge of the functions of deputy-accountant, deputy-auditor, accountant to the recorder's court, and commissioner to the Court of Requests; the duties of which offices were continued to him on his preferment, in 1823, to be ‘junior merchant.’ By various steps he had become, in 1826, accountant and auditor, accountant-general to the recorder's court, superintendent of lawsuits, and Malay translator, and in 1827 attained the dignity of 'senior merchant,' with the offices of secretary to government and Malay translator.

52 ibid..
54 ibid. vol. 1, p. 244.
56 Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China, vol. 1, p. 45
58 ibid, vol. 1, p. 216-7
61 John Anderson Political and Commercial Considerations Relative to the Malayan Peninsula, and the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca (William Cox, Prince of Wales Island: 1824) p. v.
63 Ibid. p. vii.
64 Cowan, Nineteenth-Century Malay p. 10-11
65 John Anderson, Memorandum respecting a British Settlement on Borneo, Borneo 1844-1846, Colonial Office, UK National Archives, CO 144/1, p. 306
Anonymous, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, (April 15, 1847). In a letter to Cobden, Crawfurd notes that Brooke’s supporters were asking him for support John Crawfurd, ‘Crawfurd to Richard Cobden, December 31’, West Sussex Record Office, Cobden Mss 3/12 (1850).

For reference to Crawfurd being a Mason see letter to John Crawfurd, ‘Crawrud to Norton Shaw June 8’, *Royal Geographical Society*, Royal Geographical Society, RGS/CB4/Crawfurd (1860), also his obituaries state he was in most of the intellectual clubs Anonymous, ‘Death of Mr. John Crawfurd’, (13 May, 1868); Anonymous, ‘Mr John Crawfurd’, (16 May, 1868).

Crawfurd*, ‘On the Projected Colonization of Borneo’, (October 24, 1846). The article was syndicated/reprinted in other papers as well including the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* on October 31, 1846 and even the *Sydney Chronicle* on 3 April 1847.

Ibid.

The original version had a compositing error was written ‘sounding and exotic’ possibly suggesting that Crawfurd’s hand written copy had additional comments that were edited out in the published copy.

Ibid.

See John Ingleson, *Expanding the empire: James Brooke and the Sarawak lobby, 1839-1868*, (Nedlands, W.A.: Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Western Australia, 1979). for a discussion on how Brooke British supporters manipulated public opinion.

Crawfurd, ‘Crawfurd to Richard Cobden February 10’.

http://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/ real price of that commodity is £1,874,000.00, labour value of that commodity is £14,820,000.00, income value of that commodity is £22,790,000.00


<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes18500308-1.2.6.1> Accessed 5 May 2017

[John Crawfurd], “Rajah Brooke and His Claims,” *The Examiner*, October 16 1858.