

## The Making of 'British' Malaya, 1874-1919

Although commonly accepted as a convenient means of demarcating the beginning of Malaysia's colonial period, the Pangkor Treaty does not signify a radical change in British imperial policy. Governor Andrew Clarke may have concluded the treaty on his own initiative, but it did not cause great consternation in the Colonial Office, where the possible appointment of a British agent in the western Malay states had been under discussion for some time. Nor does the Pangkor Treaty stand as a clear break between two different phases of economic development. Despite the expectations of the commercial community in the Straits Settlements, European enterprise was only slowly established in the peninsula. Chinese predominance in the Malay economy continued in both tin mining and most forms of plantation agriculture, and not until the 1890s did the initiative pass to Europeans.

The significance of the Pangkor Treaty lies in the fact that it represented a turning point in the formal relationship between Britain and the Malay states. Arguments for and against expansion of British control had been tossed back and forth since Singapore's founding, but once the Pangkor Treaty had been concluded it essentially became a question of how and when British rule would be extended across the entire peninsula. Over a period of about fifty years British authority, whether represented by governor, agent, resident or adviser, was to be formalized in several separate administrative units which became known by the deceptively unified term 'British Malaya'.

### The Extension of British Control

Governor Clarke was quick to seize the long-awaited opportunity provided by the signing of the Pangkor Treaty in January 1874. In Larut, where fighting had been most extensive and the tin trade most disrupted, the former commander of Menteri Ngah Ibrahim's forces, a colourful adventurer called Captain Speedy, was installed as Assistant Resident. Three commissioners, including Frank Swettenham, a young civil servant qualified in Malay, and William Pickering, who was fluent in Chinese, were dispatched to Larut to supervise the dismantling of

the Chinese stockades, organize the return of women captured in the fighting, and resolve the disputes over mines and watercourses which had fuelled the conflicts. In early November, pending his official posting as Adviser, Singapore's colonial secretary, J. W. W. Birch, took up residence on the Lower Perak River.

Meanwhile, Clarke was ready to exploit the unusually amenable mood in London in order to extend British influence in Selangor. A case of 'piracy' on the Langat River in August 1874 gave him the justification he needed to suggest to Sultan Abdul Samad that Swettenham live at the royal capital, Langat, as Assistant Resident. Although no formal treaty was concluded, Tengku Kudin's financial associate, J. G. Davidson, who was already assisting in the administration of Kelang, was officially appointed as Resident of Selangor. A final posting was made in Sungai Ujung, where Clarke gave the newly appointed Dato Kelana, the territorial chief, 'the protection of the British Government' as well as arms and ammunition. In return, the Dato Kelana promised to keep the Linggi River open to trade and to charge reasonable duties. This association with the British gave the Dato Kelana a decided advantage over his rival, the Dato Bandar, who had come to be regarded as the Kelana's equal. Fighting between the two factions had been protracted, but now, in an ensuing quarrel between them, the Dato Kelana unilaterally hoisted the British flag and asked for troops to reinforce his position and an officer to live with him. In granting both requests, British control was effectively extended in Sungai Ujung, despite the lack of any formal treaty. However, the use of arms to strengthen an unpopular Dato Kelana not only upset the political balance between this office and the Dato Bandar; it left behind a sense of insult and resentment which was not easily appeased.

By the beginning of 1875, the first steps had thus been taken in the development of what came to be called the residential system. It is striking how ill-prepared the British were for the role they had assumed. Only some time after the meeting at Pangkor, for example, did Swettenham learn of the existence of Raja Yusuf who would have succeeded to the Perak throne in 1857 and 1865 had it not been for his unpopularity with the Malay chiefs. If the men on the spot were often surprised by some new disclosure, it was immeasurably more difficult for decision-makers in London to conceive of what Malaya was like. To them, the way in which Malay culture was intertwined with its politics was a continual puzzle. As one exasperated official in London sighed in 1878, 'Malay modes of election, Malay customs as to inheritance and relationship and purity of blood etc. are incomprehensible to us.'<sup>1</sup>

In 1875 there was no long-term plan as to how the British should proceed, and the difficulties which developed were almost inevitable