BRITISH STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE STRAITS OF MALACCA 1786-1819

by

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British Strategic Interests in the Straits of Malacca

1786 -1819

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ABSTRACT

It has almost become a common-place assumption that the 1819 founding of Singapore at the southern tip of the strategically located Straits of Malacca represented for the English East India Company a desire to strengthen trade with China; that it was part of an optimistic and confident swing to the east which had as its goal, the lucrative tea trade. However, to reach this conclusion is to disregard the volatile and sometimes unpredictable relationship the British had with the Dutch Netherlands between 1780 and 1824 which was strained to its limits by the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and which prompted the British to move into the Straits of Malacca. The eastward movement from British India through the Straits did take place, but it was slow and reluctant, and was carried out by the British under duress. In this process, the origin of the swing, India, was more important than its object, China. The British acquisitions of Penang in 1786, Malacca in 1795, and Singapore in 1819 were for Indian rather than for Chinese reasons. They pertained directly or indirectly to the security of India, prior to, during, and following the war with France between 1793 and 1815. Thus, modern Singapore did not 'begin' with the landing of the visionary Stamford Raffles on her soil on 29 January 1819, which is the common tale. Rather, its conception was to be found in British India and given shape by the acquisition of Penang as a potential naval base. The expansion of British India was characterised not by British naval mastery of the Eastern Seas in the Malay world, but by limitations in her sea power. The role the Royal Navy
played was dictated by events in Europe and India, and any expansion of British influence and power to be undertaken by the navy had to be necessarily subordinate to the defence of India.
Dedicated to my parents, Dr. & Mrs. Peter H. L. Wee
and
to my dear wife Karen
I would like to thank my Senior Supervisor, Professor Edward Ingram, for guiding me through this project; my parents for their love and support, and for not losing hope when I showed them the results of my G. C. E. 'O' Levels; and my dearest wife Karen, without whose patience and help in typing I would never have been able to complete this thesis on time.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ iii

DEDICATION ...................................................................................................... v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................ vi

ABBREVIATIONS ............................................................................................ ix

INTRODUCTION: A Passage from India .......................................................... 1

I. The British Acquisition of Penang in 1786 .................................................. 10

II. A Precarious Settlement 1787-1796 ............................................................ 40

III. The Pull from the West 1797-1807 ............................................................. 66

IV. Sir Stamford Raffles and the Acquisition of Singapore 1808-1819 .......... 91

CONCLUSION: The Limits to British Sea Power and the Expansion of India .... 119
Map 1: From Cape to Canton 129
Map 2: The Malay World 130
Map 3: Penang (Prince of Wales) Island 131
Map 4: Straits of Singapore 132

BIBLIOGRAPHY 133
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JMBRAS</td>
<td>Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSBRAS</td>
<td>Journal of the Straits Branch, Royal Asiatic Society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minto</td>
<td>Lord Minto in India 1807-1814, the Countess of Minto (ed.), London: 1880.</td>
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Shore  The Private Record of an Indian Governor-Generalship: The Correspondence of Sir John Shore, Governor-General, with Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control 1793-1798, Holden Furber (ed.), Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1933.


Wellesley  The Despatches, Minutes and Correspondence of the Marquess Wellesley during his Administration in India, Robert M. Martin (ed.), 5 Vols., New Delhi: 1984 (1836).

Follow me from Calcutta, within the Nicobar and Andaman Islands, to Prince of Wales Island, then accompany me down the Straits of Malacca, past the town of Malacca, and round the south-western point of the Peninsula. You will then enter what are called the Straits of Singapore, and in Marsden's map of Sumatra you will observe an island to the south of these straits called Singapura; this is the spot, the site of the ancient maritime capital of the Malays, and within the walls of these fortifications, raised not less than six centuries ago, on which I have planted the British flag, where, I trust, it will long triumphantly wave.

Sir Stamford Raffles to the Duchess of Somerset, 22 February 1819
INTRODUCTION: A PASSAGE FROM INDIA

Following the Seven Years War and especially during the Napoleonic Wars the government at Fort William, Calcutta was engaged in a challenge eastwards of British India—in the Indian Ocean and the Malay world. One cannot scrutinize this period without acknowledging the work of Vincent Harlow, who argued in 1952 and 1964 that the 'swing to the east' between 1763 and 1793 was stimulated by commercial interests in the South Pacific and Far Eastern Seas and markets. His hypothesis has been developed by such historians as Glyndwr Williams, J. H. Parry, K. C. Tregonning, and Howard T. Fry.

Merchants and traders sailing from India to China inevitably had to negotiate the Malay world, comprising the Malay Peninsula and the Malay Archipelago with its hundreds of islands and islets. Lying as the strategic channel into the Malay world is the funnel shaped Straits of Malacca, a crucial waterway to and from India. 'From Bengal to China, the natural route lies between Cape Negrais and the Andamans and so through the Straits of Malacca.'

1 Writers and historians of this region have followed no strict rule in the usage of terminology. For the present purpose, the term 'Malay world' will be used in reference to both the Malay Peninsula (present day Malaysia) and the Malay Archipelago (present day Indonesia). 'East Indies' will refer to the Malay Archipelago, comprising Sumatra, Java, the Celebes and Moluccas, and Borneo. 'Eastern Seas' refers to the waters stretching from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea.


Malacca .... From the Coromandel Coast, the route to China might also lead through the Straits of Malacca, by way of the Ten-Degree channel.\textsuperscript{4} The Straits are approximately 500 miles long and 300 miles wide at the broadest part separating the Malay Peninsula from the island of Sumatra. Off the northern shore of the peninsula lies Penang, and 350 miles away at the southern tip lies Singapore. One hundred and ten miles north of Singapore lies Malacca, the seat of the once powerful medieval and Islamic Malacca empire.

Known for centuries to the Indians, Javanese, and Chinese, Malacca's occupants came face to face with the Portuguese when, in 1509, Diego Lopes de Sequeira arrived on her shores, beginning a long and eventful intercourse between Europe and the Malay world. Taken by Portugal in 1511, Malacca was next conquered by the Dutch and Johore Malays in 1641. By the time Lord Minto, the Governor-General of Bengal, set sail in 1811 from Penang towards Malacca, the Straits had become well-known to the sailors and navigators of the world. Minto's words written on 31 May 1811 are worth quoting here as a general and picturesque introduction to the Straits of Malacca and the Malay world:

\begin{quote}
The weather was a succession of calms or light winds and squalls, with heavy rain and thunder. This is the case pretty generally through the year in the Straits of Malacca .... The passage through these straits is pretty and interesting by the variety of islands, and by the high coast of the Malay peninsula, which is always in view, and often at a very
\end{quote}

discernible distance. Both the islands and the main land are much in the same character as Penang—mountainous, and covered with timber, of which there must be inexhaustible treasures in these regions. We sometimes had the Malay coast and the mountains of Sumatra in sight at the same time, to our right and left.\(^5\)

Three historians have discussed aspects of British activity in the Malay world between the 1780s and the 1820s.\(^6\) K. C. Tregonning's *The British in Malaya 1786-1826* considers local Malay conditions and developments that attracted the British to the region. Thus, Tregonning elaborates on the lucrative spice trade andchronicles the early history of Penang as a colony (1786-1805) and as the Fourth Presidency (1805-1826) of British India. However, his underlying thrust, like Harlow's, is that of Far Eastern commerce:

The movement of the British eastwards from India to the Malay Peninsula, the impulse that led to the foundation of Penang in 1786, to Singapore in 1819 ... represented above all the British desire to strengthen trade with China. Implied if not stated, the influence of this Chinese trade on the British in Malaya is present throughout the book.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Minto, p. 260.


\(^7\) Tregonning, *British in Malaya*, p. vii.
The China trade is not to be discounted, for it was certainly a potent force. However, it has tended to distract historians from the fact that the swing to the east originated in India.

Harry Marks's *The First Contest For Singapore 1819-1824* deals briefly with Anglo-Dutch rivalry between the Peace of Paris in May 1814 and Stamford Raffles's January 1819 landing at Singapore, before discussing at length the 'paper war' between the British and Netherlands governments to delineate their respective spheres of influence in the Malay world. Marks's book unequivocally centres around Singapore and the controversy after 1819 of its usefulness. He explains:

The story of the acquisition of Singapore by the British deserves better treatment. From our perspective it appears as a transitional episode combining some of the traits of the colonial adventuring of earlier generations with harbingers of the imperialist rivalries of the future. The inadequacy of existing accounts would of themselves justify restudy of the acquisition of Singapore ....

Marks's analysis of modern Singapore's origins, compelling as it is, neglects the trend in British policy that began with the events leading up to the founding of Penang. In other words, it would be more beneficial to treat Raffles and Singapore as the fulfilment of British efforts to find a port suited to serve as a naval base for the British in India, as a check to Dutch power in the East Indies and as an entrepot for the China trade.

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8 Marks, *Contest for Singapore*, Introduction.
That modern Singapore 'began' with Raffles's landing was an assumption all too quickly made in the journalistic and antiquarian accounts prone to appear from time to time in Singapore. However, the misconception also blemishes the work of more discerning scholars, most notably C. M. Turnbull.

Nicholas Tarling's range in *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry in the Malay World 1780-1824* is broader than Marks's. Tarling's emphasis is Anglo-Dutch negotiations set against the background of the Revolutionary Wars. Although it deals with the East Indies as the bone of contention, his work is more Eurocentric than Malayocentric. It is about diplomacy in high places, in Westminster and The Hague, and Tarling takes pains to unravel the intricate web of Dutch politics—the delicate relationship between the royalist Stadtholder and the republican Patriots, and the overall Dutch vulnerability to French control. His treatment of Penang's founding is scant and is explained in conjunction with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1784 and the Franco-Dutch alliance of 1785. The book does, however, drive home the essential if elementary point, that the British, in searching for a viable base in the Malay world, had to be wary of antagonising the Dutch empire and jeopardising their already fragile relationship with the Dutch Netherlands in Europe.

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Commerce as both motive and magnet in the expansion of the British empire has been stressed at the expense of two other important factors that characterised British action in the Eastern Seas between the 1780s and the 1810s. There was, firstly, the naval struggle with Revolutionary France and her allies in the Indian Ocean, a subject amply dealt with by Northcote Parkinson almost four decades ago, but by none other since.\textsuperscript{11} Secondly, and not independently of the first, was the British search for a potential naval base in the Malay world to which the navy could retreat to repair and refit. This endeavour began in earnest when the English East India Company founded Penang in 1786 and culminated with the acquisition of Singapore in 1819.

Therefore, in the context of Britain's Asian involvement in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the security and defence of India was of great importance. The broad eastward sweep undertaken by British India in this period brought them to the Straits of Malacca. As far as India was concerned, the Straits of Malacca were superior to the Straits of Sunda further to the south between Sumatra and Java, because they were nearer the Bay of Bengal, better sheltered and provided the quickest route to China. They offered a most useful, and gradually a most necessary, passage from India. Penang, Malacca, and Singapore were acquired by the British or, more accurately, the East India Company, before, during and after the war with France for reasons pertaining directly or indirectly to the defence of British India.

Alfred Thayer Mahan, writing in the 1890s, has provided a conceptual framework which one might consider when studying the history and the role of the Royal Navy. Mahan's hypothesis has been revised in recent times by Gerald Graham and Paul Kennedy. Mahan's argument can be summarised: his world was one that was dominated by the ocean, the sea and the waterway which constituted a 'wide common' and where land was treated as a periphery, an adjunct to the water. Therefore, any state that could command the sea by a superior navy, numerous strategically-located naval bases and a suitable political, social and economic structure would also be able to exploit it. Her overseas trade would be enhanced in peace and protected in war, her ties with colonies maintained, and her troops transported freely to desired destinations. Conversely, a country which in wartime lost command of the sea would suffer both militarily and commercially, possibly to the extent of losing the ability to continue the struggle.

Paul Kennedy, expanding Mahan's thesis, asserts that, during the Napoleonic War, Britain's formidable navy defended and thus boosted her trade which sustained the Industrial Revolution, and which in turn guaranteed naval supremacy. However, we have been warned not to be distracted by this 'mercantilist myth'. Great Britain during the Napoleonic

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13 Paul Kennedy, British Naval Mastery, pp. 172-3.

War was not simultaneously a great naval power and a great colonial power in the Indian Ocean and its eastern appendage, the Malay seas. On the contrary, the expansion of British India into the Straits of Malacca was carried out despite the limitations of British sea power.

Chapter One will assess the inadequacies of Harlow's thesis. It will then describe the British acquisition of Penang in 1786, which was the result of the search for a naval base after the British were denied the use of Dutch Trincomalee. The colony of Penang in its first ten years of existence, however, quickly became neglected by both Indian and London officials, as Chapter Two will demonstrate. In addition, the advent of the French Revolutionary Wars only aggravated Great Britain's position by forcing her to capture Malacca in 1795. Chapter Three will examine the years 1797 to 1807, during which the British were willing to use the navy to exert their influence in the Malay world, but were unable to, because the defence of India from Napoleon was more important. Finally, Chapter Four will seek to show that the invasion of Java in 1811 was necessary to maintain the security of India, and that this subsequently led to Raffles's founding of Singapore in 1819.

Three related themes will be developed with regards to Britain's strategic interest in the Straits of Malacca. First, the impact of European events on the Straits. This will be illustrated by the demand made on the Royal Navy to atone for the failure of British politicians to maintain European alliances. Second, the implications of events in India on the Straits. This will be seen in the need for a naval base in the Bay of Bengal, and the paramountcy of the defence of India. Third, the effect of the growing antagonism between the
Dutch and the British on the emerging British empire in the Malay world. This will be shown by the actions of prominent British 'men on the spot'--in India--to secure British interests.
CHAPTER 1: THE BRITISH ACQUISITION OF PENANG IN 1786

Penang was acquired in 1786 because the British in India needed a naval base on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal, and hoped that such a base would subsequently justify and supplement its existence as an entrepot for the spice and China trades. That the British required a naval base here was made clear during the Seven Years War. Yet they did nothing in the way of actively finding one until the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780-4 twenty years later. Thus, only when it faced insurmountable opposition in the Dutch, French, Spaniards and the revolted American colonies, did the government at Fort William, Calcutta do something. It took Penang. The acquisition of Penang, in other words, represented the attempt by the British to redeem themselves after their failure to act upon the lessons of the Seven Years War.

The English East India Company was established in 1600 to trade with the Malay world, or more accurately, the Spice Islands. Aloes, garlic, cassia, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, and pepper had drawn the Portuguese and the Dutch to the East Indies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. Now it was England's turn. On 5 June 1602, the commander of the East India Company's first voyage, James Lancaster, stepped before King Alauddin Shah of Achin in northern Sumatra, to request peaceful commerce and intercourse between the English and the Achinese.1 Lancaster's success at Achin, however, was no portent of better things to come. The English, while

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trying in the next two decades to establish a network of factories and settlements throughout the archipelago, had to contend with the determined Dutch East India Company. Their commercial rivalry, centred in the Moluccas, soon led to open war, with the Dutch driving the English out of the Banda islands by 1620. Following the notorious Dutch massacre of Englishmen at Amboyna in 1623, the Company was forced to abandon many more factories, holding on only to those at Achin, Jambi, Japara, and Macassar. Thereafter, weakened by civil strife in England, the East India Company ceased to regard the East Indies as its principal field of operations, and concentrated more and more on the Indian trade, which had been simultaneously developed but was less lucrative.2

If the English East India Company faced obstacles in establishing a foothold in the Spice Islands, they found the task no easier in the Celestial Empire. The Company wanted to open a factory at Canton to sell woolens and buy silk. It was only after 64 years of trying that the Company managed to open their Canton factory in 1699. The stage was set for what would be a lucrative Anglo-Chinese commercial traffic. However, it was not Chinese silk but tea that took Britain by storm. After successful initial sales in the 1650s, the Company in 1677 ordered its merchants in the Far East to procure 'teas of the best kind'. By 1700, tea had become popular with prince, Puritan and pauper alike. Between 1699 and 1751, British tonnage at Canton increased from 250 to 4,000, imports grew from £32,086 to £161,092. The quantity of tea sold at the Company sales in London leapt simultaneously from 91,183 lbs. to

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2,710,819 lbs. A. Aspinall argues that by the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the China trade was without doubt the East India Company's most valuable branch of trade. Whereas the Indian investment sold for an annual average of £2 million between 1787 and 1790, China goods realised an average of £2.67 million. Taken together, the India and China trade had risen from an annual average of £3.3 million in the 1770s to £4.5 million in the 1780s, and to £5.1 million in 1793, 'and the increase was wholly due to the increase of the China trade.'

Northcote Parkinson summarises this profitable enterprise thus:

With what was paid for the woolens and the rest, the Company bought tea. Any other imports from China shrank to nothing in comparison with the tea, on which the whole of the Company's trading activities centred. Only with China could there be any real exchange of commodities. In India the Company governed and took tribute when it could. Its trade was with China, and it was a trade in tea.

In his monumental and iconoclastic work, The Founding of the Second British Empire, Vincent Harlow perceives this flourishing China trade to be the basis of Britain's 'Swing to the East' and thus the genesis of Britain's Second Empire, the momentum of which began just after the Seven Years War. Desiring to consolidate the China trade, the British were again turning their eyes to the Malay world, or at least that part of it not within the sphere

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5 Parkinson, Trade, p. 89.
of the Dutch Moluccas, hoping to solve the problem of the shortage of Spanish silver by finding new commodities for exchange at Canton. A new British Empire in the Eastern Seas was envisaged that would transform the position of Great Britain in the Orient. It would not be based on territorial occupation and political responsibility, but on commercial alliances with local sultans riveted by the establishment of trading settlements at key points. In particular, 'a new emporium would be established half-way along the ocean route between India and the Chinese Empire. The circle of profitable exchange, linking London with Canton, would be complete.\(^6\)

K. C. Tregonning, writing specifically on British endeavours in the Malay Peninsula between 1786 and 1826, reiterates Harlow's thesis: 'The trade in tea then, was the basic impulse that led to the expansion of British power in the Far East, and as a corollary, in Southeast Asia as well.\(^7\) This lure of the East that was to be the basis of the Second Empire was evident twenty years prior to Britain's defeat by the thirteen colonies in 1783 and five decades before the Vienna Settlement in 1815. Thus, following the Peace of Paris in 1763, considerable attention was expended on a number of schemes which were directed to building up the China trade.\(^8\) It was within this context, explains Tregonning, that colonies like Penang were established: 'The movement of the British eastwards from India to the Malay Peninsula, the

\(^6\) Harlow, Second British Empire, vol. 1, pp. 62-8. See also Williams, Expansion of Europe, pp. 137-8

\(^7\) Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 5.

\(^8\) Williams, Expansion of Europe, p. 137. See also Harlow, Second British Empire, vol. 1, pp. 1-11.
impulse that led to the foundation of Penang in 1786 ... represented above all the British desire to strengthen trade with China.¹⁹

The 'Swing to the East' hypothesis, however, suffers from four weaknesses. First, the gravitation towards China was an aim rather than an achievement in the wider scheme of imperial affairs. The centre of interest and enterprise in the latter half of the eighteenth century remained in the western hemisphere. Although imports from the East Indies grew rapidly, their value remained below that of imports from the West Indies, while the North American trade by 1800 had made a steady recovery from the dislocation produced by war, and had reasserted its predominance over Eastern commerce. British exports to North America between 1772 and 1798 climbed from £2.6 million to £5.7 million while those to Asia crawled from £0.8 million to £1.6 million.¹⁰

Second, it is doubtful that before 1813 anyone with a knowledge of the East really expected the British to easily and extensively penetrate markets there. The more natural attitude was one of pragmatic caution, where it was acknowledged that British power was needed first to bring about orderly and amicable conditions before any substantial exchange of goods could be embarked on.¹¹ The endeavours of Alexander Dalrymple and Francis Light,

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¹⁹ Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. vii.
¹¹ Hyam, "British Imperial Expansion," p. 120.
as we will see, attest to this attitude of caution, though the two men expressed it in different ways.

Third, Harlow sketches a period in which government thinking was optimistic and expansionist, eager for economic opportunity rather than concerned about strategic fears or bothered by defence and security. As Ronald Hyam points out: 'In particular, one suspects a tendency [in Harlow] to fit all events into a scheme of economic expansion. Sometimes, however, a strategic interpretation would have been more appropriate', an assertion David Fieldhouse agrees with. Furthermore, Harlow's assumption that the swing to the east was powered by an underswell of free-trade expansion has been recently criticised by Christopher A. Bayly. Bayly contends that the British were opportunistic, and only obtained Penang and Singapore because the Malay world had been embroiled in, and therefore weakened by, a regional war caused by the rising aggression of the Bugis.

Fourth and last, the 'Swing to the East' theory does not adequately explain the British founding of Penang in 1786. If the China trade had become the main attraction for the East India Company by the 1750s, why was Penang not acquired in 1772, when Francis Light first brought it to the attention of Fort William? Why was it shrugged off so quickly, only to be

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12 Ibid., p. 121.


snatched up again in 1786? Furthermore, there was no guarantee that Penang would be a profitable contribution to the China trade, since it was embroiled in perpetual dispute between Siam and Burma and the island itself was further from China than the Philippine or Borneo islands, a more convenient location for a British factory.

The China trade itself for all its returns, was not without its difficulties. The tensions that existed between the Chinese and the British were cultural in origin. The Company came face to face with a China that lacked any concept of equal and independent states and that considered foreigners as barbarians deserving only to be taught respect for the Middle Kingdom. Earl Pritchard describes this East-West confrontation picturesquely: 'Against this super-civilized, self-esteeming civilization, ruled by bigoted and self-satisfied mandarins, came a young, virile, and self-confident people who expected to be treated as equals.'15 They were not. The Company's factors were restricted to the port and not allowed to enter Canton itself. They had no direct access to the markets in the interior, and were completely at the mercy of the Hong merchants, who strictly maintained their monopoly and concealed from the Emperor the true extent of the foreign commerce.16 China was also self-sufficient and the British, wanting to buy tea, could find little to sell that the Chinese did not already possess or were not quite prepared to do without. The demand for British woolen goods was paltry and the draining of silver bullion, in the contemporary British economic prejudice, was perceived as a


sign of national weakness. Spanish silver from the Philippines was used as an alternative until war broke out with Spain in 1762.17

How then, under such conditions, did Britain earn all her profits in the China trade? Part of the answer lies in the role of the 'country' and private traders, who plied solely between India and China under the auspices and watchful eye of the East India Company, the latter by this time having taken on the functions of administration and government and was willing to share its profits with the former. These private traders, both British and Indian, exported raw cotton from Bombay to China; and Indian wares, especially Coromandel Coast piece goods and Bengal opium, to the Malay world, where they exchanged them for dollars or other commodities in demand at Canton and Macau and, eventually, smuggled opium into China.18 The country traders, in other words, succeeded in China where the Company faced immense difficulties. Their country vessels heading east were somewhat hampered by the lack of any re-fitting station under British control between India and China. Malacca and Batavia, the two most conveniently situated ports, were in Dutch hands and imposed exorbitant charges on foreign ships. But this was more of an inconvenience than an obstacle to trade, and as long as the Dutch remained neutral in the wars between France and Britain, the China trade was not seriously handicapped.19

17 Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 5.


The clue to the acquisition of Penang in 1786 lies in British India, particularly during the Seven Years War. We need to consider the question of British naval strategy in the Indian Ocean; the weaknesses exposed between 1757 and 1763 and exploited by the French in the fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780-4. David Fieldhouse argues that 'by 1763 there could be no return to the casual attitude hitherto adopted by the British towards their American possessions. Victory over the French had eliminated old dangers, but it had also created many new problems.'20 The same can be said of the British position in India where, despite winning the war, they had learnt several lessons, one of which was the dire need for a naval base somewhere on the eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean.

This need had been hinted at in 1687. Whereas before, Anglo-French rivalry had centred on the west coast of India where Bombay provided England's sole important naval base, the appearance in 1687 in the Indian Ocean of a powerful French fleet bound for Siam and the subsequent French seizure of Mergui along the Siamese coast ushered in a new phase in English naval strategy. Gravitation eastwards to the Bay of Bengal presented problems for Britain because of the vulnerability of her factories, especially at Calcutta and Madras. The Company had no dockyards available there and repairs had to be undertaken either in open roadsteads or at Bombay. The Presidency of Bombay in fact had the Company's only viable port and harbour. But it was now on the wrong side of India. The one natural

harbour on the east side of India was at Trincomalee in Ceylon. Its coastal waters were safe from the winds and simple to navigate, and it commanded both the Malabar and the Coromandel Coasts. As a strategic base, Trincomalee was eminently suitable. Unfortunately for the East India Company, it was in Dutch hands for most of the eighteenth century, although British ships had made use of it since 1746.21

Britain's vulnerability on the east coast of India in the days of sail was compounded by the seasonal monsoons that raged with great vehemence on vessel and coast alike. In the Indian Ocean, the south-west monsoon blew from May to October and the north-east monsoon from October to May. During the south-west monsoon, the Coromandel Coast was safe for ships but with the onset of the north-east monsoon, it was not. The Bay of Bengal became a sea of turbulence. Vessels had to leave the Madras roads not later than 11 October and from then till 11 December, insurances along the coast ceased.22 The implications for naval warfare were considerable. Battles were usually fought in the Bay of Bengal during the south-west monsoon, hostilities breaking off in October and November. After this break, the side which had a squadron in the Bay the earliest—and the Coromandel Coast was safe from January onwards—scored an immense advantage in attacking the other's settlements and sea-borne commerce. British experience showed that a fleet could not leave the Coromandel Coast to refit at Bombay and return before April. In this way, three valuable months were lost, when an enemy

21 Parkinson, Trade, pp. 29-51; Graham, Great Britain in the Indian Ocean, pp. 16-7, 304-11.

22 Aspinall, Cornwallis in Bengal, p. 190.
fleet which had repaired at a more convenient base could dominate the Bay of Bengal.23

The Seven Years War that began in 1756 revealed the weakness of the British position along the Coromandel Coast. Following the defeat of the French at Chandernagore and Plassey by Robert Clive in 1757, the navies of Britain and France clashed on the high seas of India in the summer of 1758. The French commodore Comte d'Ache, secured an initial victory over his British rival, Admiral Pocock, by taking Fort St. David, south of Pondicherry and letting loose General Lally who marched against Madras. Winning no substantial victory and in need of repair, Pocock's squadron was forced to retreat in October and avoid the north-east monsoon. He first stopped at Trincomalee for water. However, since Trincomalee had no facilities for the major overhaul of his ships, many of which had been at sea for two years, he went on to Bombay. D'Ache in the meantime went to Mauritius, 2,000 miles away, where he stayed for a year. During Pocock's absence from the Coromandel Coast, Lally was able to lay siege to Madras for sixty-six days.

Exactly what followed is vague, at least if one reads the accounts by Ballard and Mahan. Ballard writes that 'Madras was besieged by Lally, but managed to hold out till Pocock's return [which] caused the French to retire', and Mahan asserts that both squadrons were absent during the siege, but 'the English returned first' and relieved Madras.24 It was not Pocock who returned first to confront Lally, however, but eight Company ships under

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Captain Kempenfelt who arrived at Madras from Britain on 16 February 1759, roughly two-and-a-half months (66 days) after Lally laid siege to Madras on 14 December 1758. Pocock could not have reappeared in the Bay of Bengal until April if he had been at Bombay and, by then, Lally’s forces had already beaten their retreat.25

Of the Seven Years War, Mahan observes: 'The one nation that gained in this war, was that which used the sea in peace to earn its wealth, and ruled it in war by the extent of its navy, by the number of its subjects who lived on the sea, and by its numerous bases of operations scattered over the globe.'26 In light of the result of Pocock’s absence from the Coromandel Coast, Mahan’s analysis of Britain’s sea power seems too generous. By the time the Peace of Paris was signed in 1763, the naval engagements during the war had demonstrated beyond any doubt that the side that had a base in the Bay of Bengal would have logistic and strategic advantages over the side that did not. Dutch neutrality had also been crucial to both the British and the French in India because it ensured that Trincomalee would not be used offensively against either of them.

It is not surprising that the East India Company stepped up its search for a new naval and commercial base in the eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean following the Peace. This resulted in two missions, in 1762 to Kandy in


Ceylon, and the following year to Achin in northern Sumatra. Both achieved nothing and served only as portents of things to come. Between 1763 and 1780 the search that sent the British back to the Malay world was characterised by vacillations and hesitancy. This was because the British had to juggle three inter-related considerations and could not decide which was the most important. There was the trepidation that the British felt for fear of antagonising the French and the Dutch, the continued temptations of the tea and spice trades, and the unwillingness of the East India Company to involve itself in the local affairs of the Malay Peninsula as the price of obtaining a settlement there.

Like John Seeley in 1882, Paul Kennedy perceives the Seven Years War as but one stage in a protracted Anglo-French duel that lasted throughout the eighteenth century. Apart from actual fighting, the duel also involved calculations about the Continental balance of power and the need of both rivals for European allies.27 One European ally that both sought was the Netherlands, where internal conflict between the royalist Stadtholder and the republican Patriots had rendered the state weak and vulnerable. The Stadtholder were traditionally pro-British, realising that Britain had a vested interest in maintaining Dutch independence, while the Patriots actively solicited French support. It was, of course, in the interest of Britain to avoid provoking pro-French reaction and weakening the Anglophile party. This delicate state of affairs, where Britain needed a strong and independent Holland in Europe against France, coloured Britain's post-1763 diplomacy.

27 Paul Kennedy, British Naval Mastery, p. 114.
Thus, the expansion of British trade with China through the Dutch dominated seas in the Malay world had to take into account these Continental requirements.29

H. M. Scott emphasises the centrality of the Anglo-French hostility to British politicians in the eighteenth century. They were not pursuing a 'blue-water' policy or 'colonial' strategy in the wars with France, but trying to find allies against the French, who remained Britain's natural and necessary enemy.28 In a curious way, the success of British diplomacy ultimately depended on the existence of a strong and aggressive French state which was, or could be portrayed as, a threat to the other Continental powers. This was lacking for three decades after the Seven Years War which correspondingly weakened Britain's influence. One result of this was the independent nature which Dutch foreign policy gradually took, which in turn strained Anglo-Dutch relations. This became evident in the issue over Dutch trade with the American colonies in the early 1770s when the Americans increasingly looked to Holland and the Dutch West Indies for munitions. The British attempts to suppress what they perceived to be an illegal trade inevitably revived unresolved disputes over neutral rights and re-awakended Dutch resentment of Britain's arrogant use of her navy.30 In light of this, Harlow's


optimistic portrayal of the eastward swing, where the glitter of the China trade inevitably brought the British into contact with the Dutch in the East Indies, must be questioned. From the outset, the British search for a base in the Malay world was hampered by an outlook of caution, even trepidation. As long as the Dutch republic lay vulnerable to French influence, the Dutch in the Eastern Seas must not be antagonised. Britain's last war with the Dutch had been in the distant 1670s (Third Anglo-Dutch War) and she was not willing to jeopardise her use of Trincomalee for the time being. This official mind-set of caution was later to hamper the activities of men like Francis Light and Stamford Raffles, whose outlook was far more aggressive, and who perceived the elimination of the Dutch in the Malay world as the solution to the problems of finding a suitable base.

None the less, the British remained ebullient about a settlement in the Eastern Seas, where they could 'have a share in the Spice Trade without interfering with those islands the Dutch have settlements at ....' Alexander Dalrymple, then Deputy-Secretary at Fort St. George in Madras, was instrumental in establishing the first base. The possibility of such a base was raised by Commodore Wilson's discovery in 1757-8 of what came to be known as the eastern or 'outer' passage to China. Wilson had sailed eastwards from Batavia through the Moluccas towards the coast of New Guinea, catching the north-east wind to his advantage in the Pacific Ocean

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32 Kempenfelt to Pocock, April 1762, quoted in Fry, Dalrymple, p. 16.
east of the Philippines, passing between Luzon and Formosa, and eventually reaching Canton in a shorter time than he would have taken by the usual route through the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{33}

Wilson’s success fired the imagination of Dalrymple, who himself had considerable knowledge of the Eastern Seas. His attention was drawn in particular to the group of islands in the Sulu Sea which, he learnt, were in no way subject either to the Spaniards or to the Dutch. Here in no-man’s land lay the opportunity for a Company settlement that would participate in the spice trade. Bugis traders from the Celebes and Chinese junks were in the habit of visiting Sulu, and it would need only a small change of course to bring East Indiamen bound for Canton to these islands. Thus Dalrymple hoped that he could circumvent the Hong officials at Canton, and remain active during the winter months when the north-east monsoon hampered sailing in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{34} Governor Pigot at Fort St. George, convinced of the bright prospect, despatched Dalrymple in April 1759 to secure this new post. What transpired between 1761 and 1764—British involvement in the quagmire of local Sulu politics—vividly illustrates the extent to which Dalrymple was willing to go, come what may, to see his dream of a British trade settlement in the Sulu Sea come true.

Dalrymple arrived at Jolo, the seat of the sultan of Sulu, in January 1761, and on the 28th concluded a treaty of friendship and commerce with Sultan Bantilan. This was followed in July 1762 by another treaty which granted the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Fry, Dalrymple, pp. 16-8; Hall, South East Asia, p. 493.
\item Fry, Dalrymple, pp. 19-21.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Company 'the part of Borneo to the northward to Abai River called Bira Birahan with what more land the English may want hereafter for plantations of pepper or other use.' Dalrymple chose the island of Balambangan thirteen miles from the most northerly point of Borneo for a settlement, which was duly ceded to the Company on 12 September 1762.

In the meantime, Spain had entered the Seven Years War against Britain, whereupon the British embarked on a two-pronged attack against the Spaniards, at Havana and at Manila. The latter was captured in October 1762 and occupied by British forces under Dawsonne Drake until April 1764. While in Manila, the British learnt that Bantilan, whom Dalrymple had dealt with, was a usurper. The legitimate sultan, Alimuddin, had fled to Manila in 1749. Though well treated by the Spaniards, Alimuddin was keen on regaining his throne and beseeched the British to help. In return for British assistance, Alimuddin ratified on 23 February 1763 the treaty made between Bantilan and Dalrymple. When Alimuddin was finally back on his throne in 1764 following the death of Bantilan, Dalrymple could finally begin laying the foundations for a British settlement at Balambangan.

Although the British were granted 'a free-trade without paying any custom or duty' and a monopoly of commerce 'in the Sooloo dominions', which greatly pleased them, the settlement was an unmitigated failure. It lasted merely from December 1773 to February 1775, the gross mismanagement of it by its leader, John Herbert, being a lamentable prelude

to its spectacular and absolute destruction by Sulu pirates. The Balambangan affair illustrates the determination of the British, and Dalrymple in particular, simultaneously to circumvent the Dutch monopoly on the spice trade and to anchor themselves in the China trade. The failure of the settlement did not diminish the lure of Oriental commerce in British eyes.

British ventures in the Sulu Sea were accompanied by French advances in Cochin-China, whose potential for trade the French at Pondicherry wanted to exploit. In 1775, a former merchant at Canton, de Rothe, argued that the China trade could best be promoted from bases in Cochin-China; that Cochin-China would provide the French with ample naval stores and wood for building country ships; and that the French from Cochin-China 'in time of war ... might intercept all English ships at the entrance to, or at the outlet from Canton.' The French proceeded to solicit a commercial relationship with the Nguyen family in Cochin-China. The British reaction to this was to despatch Charles Chapman there in 1778 to do the same. Both missions failed because the price to be paid for maintaining settlements in the war-raged region was deemed too high.

37 *Malaysia*, vol. 2, pp. 371-88 contains a reprint of the major treaties between the Company and the Sulu Sultans; see also Fry, *Dalrymple*, pp. 36-93, and Harlow, *Second British Empire*, vol. 1, pp. 70-97.


British interests in the Malay Peninsula, in the meantime, was being resurrected. In addition to Bencoolen at the southern end of Sumatra, acquired by the Company in 1685, country traders were busy by the 1760s at Achin. In particular, the Madras company of Jourdan, Sullivan and DeSouza had set up a factory there in 1766 under the leadership of Gowan Harrap. In 1770, he was joined from Madras by Francis Light, who was also active at Junk Ceylon and Kedah, and sent back to Madras detailed information about the region. But whereas Light urged the acquisition of Penang island in order to develop its trading potential before the Dutch did so, the Madras Council did not deem the Dutch threat severe enough to warrant involvement in local Kedah politics in order to establish a settlement there.

Sometime in early 1771, Light made his way to Kedah from Achin, where he had heard that the sultan of Kedah, Muhammad Jewa, was seeking British assistance against his enemies, the people of Selangor. Light relayed this request to his employers at Madras, adding that in return, the sultan promised to hand over the seaport and fort of Kedah and allow the British to open a factory. Light's tone was urgent: 'I must beg leave to acquaint you, gentlemen, that if you do not take advantage of this offer it will be given to the Dutch, and I refer to your consideration whether this port may not exclude the English entirely from trading in the Streights [sic].'

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Light followed his letter with another explaining that the sultan had added the island of Penang to the offer. Light also argued that the prospect of trade in Kedah was bright: 'Every kind of piece goods from the [Coromandel] Coast, Bengal and Surat is vendible here, but the article of greatest advantage is opium ....'\(^{42}\) As for Penang itself, 'there is plenty of wood, water and provisions; there they may be supplied with tin, pepper, betel-nut, rattans, birds-nests; and the Macau ships will be glad to stop there, and all other vessels passing through the Streights [sic] may be easily supplied as at Malacca [by the Dutch].' And Light remained adamant that the Dutch were to be pre-empted, for

should the Dutch have [Penang] they would possess the entire command of the whole streights [sic], for on the coast of Kedah is a river capable of receiving their largest ships at the half flood defended from all weathers by Poolo Pinang, and within site of Poolo Pinang is a fine clear channel of 7 and 14 fathoms, through which a ship may work at any time.\(^{43}\)

The island of Penang, fifteen miles long by nine miles wide, contains a spacious harbour formed by a channel (nearly two and a half miles wide) that separates the island's north-east extremity from the mainland of Kedah. In terms of India's defence, it seemed well placed to secure the Coromandel Coast between October and January, because it could provide shelter to British war ships fleeing the north-east monsoon. Penang itself was sheltered from


\(^{43}\) Light to DeSouza, November 1771, quoted in Clodd, *Light*, p. 10.
both the north-east and south-west monsoons. In terms of travelling time, a voyage from Madras to either Penang or Bombay took about a month, but ships could get back to Madras from Penang during the winter months by first sailing north along the Siamese coast towards Burma, then catching the north-east winds that blew across the Bay of Bengal to the Coromandel Coast. Thus, voyages from the Malay world to Madras were not hindered by the north-east monsoons in the way that those from Bombay to Madras were.

Light stressed that Penang was worth taking even if it meant complying with the sultan's latest demand that the British assist him not just in defence, but in recovering his property from the Selangorians. Better the British than any other European power: 'Had I authority to act, neither Danes, Dutch, French or anyone else should drive me out.' Light even turned to Warren Hastings, who had recently assumed the Governorship of Bengal, writing to him a letter reiterating his views on the Kedah trade. With Jourdan, Sullivan and DeSouza remaining uninterested, it was the Madras Council of the East India Company that responded, hoping to profit from the work of country traders such as Light. Madras sent Edward Monckton to Kedah and Charles Desvoeux to Achin in February 1772 to explore the possibilities of trade. Monckton's instructions were to seek a contract, under which the

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44 Ibid., Evidently, Light was aware of the sultan's offensive designs against Selangor and conveyed it to his employers who in turn relayed this to the Madras Council (Clodd, Light, p. 13). It was not that he 'avoid[ed] an explicit statement of the Sultan's offensive designs because he knew that the Company would draw back from this dangerous complication', which is Bassett's assessment (Bassett, "British Commercial and Strategic Interest," p. 126).

sultan would buy opium and piece goods and would provide tin, pepper, benzoin, gold dust and other commodities suitable for sale in China.

Monckton's task at Kedah in the summer of 1772 was virtually impossible, however, because he was only given the authority to sanction a defensive military agreement and not an offensive one as the sultan desired. The Madras Council refused to modify its offer even though it realised that the sultan was likely to withdraw his concession. Monckton returned empty handed to Madras in January 1773. Similarly, Desvoeux's mission to Achin accomplished nought primarily because the sultan of Achin had little of substance to offer Madras in return for military protection. The Madras Council for their part, however, refused to admit any responsibility for the failure of the Kedah mission and instead, proceeded to vilify Light as one who 'misled them by specious misrepresentations'.

D. K. Bassett concludes that Light 'certainly exaggerated the commercial potentialities of Kedah in order to bring about an extension of the Pax Britannica to that region', which is a fair assessment. Kedah's wealth, which was not significant, came primarily from the sale of elephants to the Coromandel Coast. None the less, it had enough potential to attract the attention of Light, who was not willing merely to avoid the Dutch in the Malay world, as Dalrymple was. On the contrary, he thought that it was imperative to confront them and, in the case of Penang, pre-empt them. It


48 Bassett, "British Commercial and Strategic Interest," p. 130.
took another war before Light's advice was taken up.\textsuperscript{49} For the moment, Madras was adhering to the traditional policy of trying to further commercial opportunities with as little political commitment as possible.

Francis Light now retired to the island of Junk Ceylon, 200 miles north of Penang on the Siamese coast, where he remained active. In 1777, he wrote to the Bengal Government, informing it that the king of Siam was eager to cultivate the friendship of the East India Company by offering Mergui to the British once he had successfully driven the Burmese out of it. The attack never materialised and Light's hopes for a British settlement in the area were once again dashed.\textsuperscript{50} Two years later, Light forwarded yet another proposal to Fort William, now the seat of government in British India, this time to bring Junk Ceylon under British control: 'this island lies so near to Madras and Bengal it cannot be subject to the dangers and difficulties a port on the other side of the Streights [sic] of Malacca is liable to ....'\textsuperscript{51} An additional incentive for annexing Junk Ceylon was the Dutch decision in 1778 to divert all Chinese junks and shipments of tin and pepper from the Straits of Malacca to Batavia, an action interpreted by Light as 'indirectly prohibiting the English from any of the eastern trade.' The remedy was to develop Junk Ceylon under a British

\textsuperscript{49} The Dutch at Malacca were in fact at this time about to embark on an aggressive commercial programme to attract more ships to its port. See the Memorandum by T. Schippers, governor of Malacca in 1773, in B. Harrison, "Malacca in the Eighteenth Century," IMBRAS 27 pt. 1 (1954), pp. 24-34. See also R. Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," IMSBRAS 28 pt. 1 (1965), pp. 135-58, for an indictment of the Madras Council's action.

\textsuperscript{50} Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," pp. 140-1, and Clodd, Light, pp. 29-30.

\textsuperscript{51} Light to Fort William, 1779, quoted in Clodd, Light, p. 31.
administration. Hastings was appreciative of this plan but did nothing about it in the face of another impending war with the French.

The American Revolutionary War as fought between Britain and France in India showed that Britain had not applied the elementary lesson learnt from the Seven Years War, that her navy was all too vulnerable in the Bay of Bengal. On account of the Dutch joining the fracas on France's side, the British fleet under Edward Hughes seized Trincomalee early in 1782, only to abandon it soon after to retreat at Madras. On 31 August, Trincomalee fell to the French under Admiral Baili de Suffren. Hughes returned to confront Suffren but no decisive victory was won by either side. Suffren then took his fleet to Achin Roads to refit while Hughes retreated to Bombay. Before Hughes could return in the following year Suffren had driven British commerce out of the Bay of Bengal and nearly succeeded in blockading Calcutta. The British navy was obviously handicapped in the war, as James Scott, Francis Light's friend, explained it some years later:

During the American War great inconvenience was experienced from the necessity which our Fleet was under of going to Bombay as it left the Bay [of Bengal] and our possessions and communications without defence from October to April. This, as it affected the supply of the Carnatic

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53 For the diplomatic background, see Graham, Tides of Empire, pp. 35-8, and Paul Kennedy, British Naval Mastery, pp. 107-16.

54 Hall, South East Asia, pp. 496-7, and Mahan, Influence of Sea Power Upon History, pp. 428-62.
with provisions, involved consequences of such serious import as induced Government to make enquiries after a Port of retreat for the Fleet, in the Bay.\textsuperscript{55}

The crucial fact in the war was the Dutch alliance with the French against Britain. For one thing the Dutch brazenly roamed the Straits of Malacca and consolidated their spice trade while the British were busy fighting in India. This greatly displeased Light. He explained to the Governor-General, Lord Cornwallis: 'If the Wars between the French and English, well nigh, ruined the Coast of Coromandel, the Dutch who had the sole power in the East, and without Rivals, were not idle.'\textsuperscript{56} But more critically, the whole strategic balance in the east turned against Britain when the Dutch joined the League of Armed Neutrality. Where prior to 1780, Dutch neutrality in Anglo-French wars and her possession of the Cape, Trincomalee and Batavia, were imperative to the security of British India, the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-4) meant that Britain could no longer trade in the Malay world on Dutch sufferance, nor leave uncontrolled the Cape and the Straits of Malacca, so critical in the maritime defence of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Finally, the British saw that the security of the Bay of Bengal and that of the South China Sea were indivisible.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} James Scott, "A Historical Sketch of the Circumstances which led to the Settlement of Penang and of the Trade to the Eastwards previous to, and since that Period. 1794," John Bastin, ed., JMBRAS 32 pt. 1 (1959), p.6, with an appendix, "The Failure of Penang as a Naval Base and Shipbuilding Centre" by M. S. Brown.


\textsuperscript{57} Wong, "Strategic Significance of Singapore," p. 25.
In the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1784, Britain acknowledged Dutch pre-eminence at the Cape and Trincomalee and the Dutch monopoly of the spice trade. In return, Britain secured Negapatam and the free navigation in the Malay seas. But her desire to distance Holland from France was hampered by the Franco-Dutch alliance of November 1785. In addition to its obvious implications for European diplomacy, it also had potential repercussions east of the Cape where the French now stood to gain from the use of Dutch bases.\footnote{Tarling, \textit{Anglo-Dutch Rivalry}, chap. 1.} The impact of these diplomatic setbacks was hardly lost on British India and a plethora of activity was launched to maintain a viable British presence in Malaya. In 1784, Hastings despatched a mission under J. Y. Kinlock to Achin and another under Thomas Forrest to Rhio. St. Matthew's Island and Junk Ceylon were also briefly considered for possible settlements. Kinlock failed to obtain an agreement with the sultan of Achin, and Forrest's mission was forestalled by a Dutch military takeover of Rhio in late 1784, much to the consternation of the British. Achin, in any case, would not have solved Britain's strategic problems because it was by no means well sheltered from the north-east monsoon.

The Dutch conquest of Rhio also put an end to Forrest's alternative project, a naval establishment on St. Matthew's Island. St. Matthew's itself offered little, if any, prospect of commerce, being unfrequented by traders.\footnote{Harlow, \textit{Second British Empire}, vol. 2, pp. 339-49, and Bassett, "British Commercial and Strategic Interest," pp. 134-9.} As for Junk Ceylon, which plan for settlement had been shelved because of
the Anglo-Dutch War, its friendly ruler died in December 1785, making it a less probable prospect as a colony.

Only the sultan of Kedah remained eager to solicit British friendship and protection, which he needed against his two feared enemies, the Siamese and the Burmese Kingdom of Ava. The sultan’s request was delivered to acting Governor-General Macpherson in February 1786 by Francis Light himself.60 Light, who had suffered the humiliation of capture and imprisonment by Suffren in 1783,61 was once again to the fore, sounding the clarion call against the Dutch threat:

The Dutch now possess all the Straits of Malacca from Point Romania (near Singapore) to the River Krian (the northern boundary of Perak) ... on the Malay side, and they have forts, factories and pretended claims from Bintang or Rhio to Diamond Point on the Sumatran Coast so that there is no part left for you to choose but the small Kingdoms of Junk Ceylon, Acheen and Quedah.62

The problems Britain faced in defending the Coromandel, Light told Macpherson, were also compounded by a resurgence of French intrigue in Ava and Cochin-China:

[Should] the French be able to negotiate an alliance with the court of Ava, and attain so much influence as to direct the counsels and armys of that haughty imperious Nation, ...

60 See Aspinall, Cornwallis in Bengal, Appendix 2, “The Beginning of Penang 1786-93” for background.

61 Clodd, Light, p. 33.

62 Light to Macpherson, 5 February 1786, quoted in Mills, "British Malaya," p. 27.
they will become a more formidable Enemy .... Add to the Acquirement of Cochin-China a rich Country, the people brave intelligent and faithful, capable of being made excellent soldiers and sailors, with such allies the enterprising spirit of the French is certainly more to be feared than when connected with their old friends on the Coast of Coromandel.63

The Bengal government met on 2 March 1786 to consider the various proposals and missions and decided that Penang was the only viable choice left for a British settlement. It did offer a reasonable prospect of trade, and had a suitable harbour that was sheltered from both the north-east and south-west monsoons. Penang was thus an appropriate, if temporary, means to check both French and Dutch designs on Britain's eastern empire. 'The harbour of Pinang [sic] would be particularly convenient to the Company's ships which proceed from Madras, Bombay and the Ganges to China and it will afford a station from which His Majesty's Squadron may at any season proceed to the support of the Company's Settlements upon either Coasts and as the Dutch have taken possession of Rhio and in fact all the Malacca Ports Pinang [sic] will afford a Mart for the Proos [or 'prahu', a Malay boat] of the Eastern Seas and the sale of our opium.'64

Bengal thus accepted the sultan of Kedah's offer to 'plant the Hon'ble Company's English Flag upon Pooloo Pinang a place for Trade and to repair


64 Bengal government proceedings, 2 March 1786, quoted in Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," p. 149.
Your ships of war and for refreshments ...

Francis Light was named superintendent of the island, an appropriate tribute to his endeavours. And in May 1786, an expeditionary force of one hundred native Marines, thirty Lascars, fifteen artillerymen and five British officers set sail for Penang under his command.

The expeditionary force reached Penang island on 14 July after stopping at Kedah to finalise the agreement with the sultan. On 11 August, according to Light's diary, 'Captains Wall and Lewin came ashore with several passengers, saluted them with nine guns, thought this the most favourable opportunity for taking formal possession of the island, at noon assembled all the gentlemen under the flag, who unitedly hoisted the flag, taking possession of the island in the name of His Britannic Majesty, and for the use of the Honourable East India Company, the Artillery and ships firing a Royal salute, the marines three volleys.'

Light named the settlement Prince of Wales Island and the cantonment, Georgetown, in honour of the heir apparent, the future King George IV.

The search for a naval base on the eastern reaches of the Bay of Bengal had begun effectively in the 1760s, following the Seven Years War but earnestly only in the 1780s, during and after the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. It had taken so long because the British, in returning to the Malay world after a century of abstinence, could not decide how to treat the Dutch empire there.


66 Quoted in Clodd, Light, p. 51.
Dalrymple suggested avoiding it, but Light favoured confronting it and for the seventeen years after the Peace of Paris, the British Indian government heeded the former. Not until the Dutch gave up their neutrality and joined France, Spain and the American colonies in the war against Britain in 1780 did British India realise once again the dire need for a naval base. The Dutch volte-face was the prime reason for the acquisition of Penang in 1786. Yet, the Penang settlement was not inevitable. Indeed there were several other possible sites for a naval base--Junk Ceylon, St. Matthew's Island and Rhio--in the 1780s, but these projects failed and Fort William had little choice but to occupy Penang before any other power did so. Penang was taken in a moment of apparent crisis and it was an uncertain solution to a twenty-year problem. The British were not absolutely clear that it would become the successful naval base that they hoped to have. And as we shall see, Penang's beginnings were further shrouded in diplomatic controversy, even putting in doubt, by 1790, the British settlement there.
CHAPTER 2: A PRECARIOUS SETTLEMENT, 1787-1796

The infant settlement of Penang was treated with disdain in the first few years of its existence. Acquired in a moment of crisis that had now temporarily abated, it was shoved into the back of politicians' minds, both in India and in Britain, ignored as though it did not exist, or at the most, existing only to be pawned off. This disdain, however, quickly turned into quiet delight when war broke out with France in 1793. Penang almost instantly rose in prominence as a base from which naval operations could be launched. Against the odds, it was now proving to be a worthwhile settlement, so worthwhile, in fact, that the French would begin to eye it covetously.

The account of Penang between 1787 and 1796, however, represents more than just that of a colony struggling against the odds. It shows that an acquisition made under duress could quickly become a liability. Penang was taken because British India wanted a naval base and hoped that it would be able to support itself and contribute to the China trade. The colony in its first decade proved to be a most useful watering hole for merchant vessels, but without a full complement of naval and military fortifications, it lay vulnerable to the French.

Soon after landing at Penang in 1786, Francis Light began building a fort. By October, he could describe to Calcutta the double rows of nubongs erected, the ditch dug, and the bastions solid enough to hold the ships' six-pounders. In January 1788, Light doubled the wooden stockade of Fort Cornwallis (diplomatically named after the new Governor-General at Fort William),

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then trebled it, finally managing to hoist up a few guns. But by 1790, the humid tropical climate had caused the wooden structure to decay and in 1793, with the advent of war, it was sheepishly reported that 'our fort is nothing more than an old and rotten stockade, with decayed platforms that cannot hold guns.'

Within the fort, Light had a small European artillery detachment of seventeen men, thirty infantry men (Lascars), and a marine force of 100 sepoys under the command of Lieutenant James Gray R.N.. Anchored offshore was a derelict 400-ton Company ship, the best that Calcutta could spare, designed as a patrol vessel, but now utilised as a store ship on account of its unseaworthiness. This was the extent of Penang's defences, barely adequate to beat off a local Malay attack, and certainly indefensible against even one raiding French frigate or privateer.

Early Penang also had to cope with the disorderly conduct of the sepoys. In 1794, James Scott, the prominent Penang merchant, wrote to Thomas Graham, a member of the Bengal board of revenue, touching on the problem. These soldiers, besotted with power, were described to be engaging freely in pilfering the local populace, which by 1790 had grown to about 10,000 of many Asiatic and European races, and altogether making a general nuisance of themselves. Scott complained that the sepoys' 'insolence and petty plunder, and sufferance or complaint has been the basis of the Connection of the Sepoys and Inhabitants.' Clearly, the defence of the new settlement was founded on sinking sand.

1 Quoted in Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 127, and also p. 45.
2 Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 128.
The hopes that Light had for a port at Penang were likewise threatened. Captain A. Kyd of the Engineers' Corps had been instructed by Calcutta in 1787 to proceed to Penang to survey the harbour. Specifically, he was told to examine the small island of Pulau Jeraja, clinging to the landward side of Penang, of which Light had written: 'between Pooloo Jaraja and Penang is a harbour fit for men of war to careen, being 7 and 8 fathoms close to Penang and the same close to Jaraja.'\(^4\) However, Kyd's enthusiastic proposition of a port at Penang for the use of the Navy and the protection of the Bay of Bengal was rejected by Calcutta in favour of the Andaman Islands.\(^5\)

This scorning of Penang by Fort William was not unexpected and was certainly in line with the thinking held in India and Britain which tended to regard Trincomalee, Rhio and the Andamans as far more important than Penang. In the first place, the acquisition of Penang in Cornwallis's opinion, had excited the jealousy of the Dutch. He did not think—as Light did—that they would venture a direct attack on Penang but he did acknowledge the probability of them instigating the Malays on the Malay Peninsula to harass the settlement.\(^6\) In the meantime, Light watched with apprehension from his

\(^4\) Quoted in Tregonning, *British in Malaya*, p. 128. Pulau Jeraja was enthusiastically described by Sir George Leith, Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, in 1805: 'The North end of Pulo Jerajah, is about five miles from the Point; is three miles long, and extends nearly to the South end of the Island. It is hilly, covered with fine Timber, and abounding with small streams of excellent water. There are a number of spots on which the different Buildings acquired for a Marine Arsenal, could easily be erected.' (Quoted by John Bastin in remarks on James Scott's "A Historical Sketch," p. 26).

\(^5\) Tregonning, *British in Malaya*, p. 128.

\(^6\) Bengal Public Consultation - Straits Settlements, 13 December 1786, quoted in Aspinall, *Cornwallis in Bengal*, p. 198.
vantage point, the revived efforts of the Dutch to secure an exclusive monopoly of the Malay trade. He reported to Cornwallis:

The present Plan adopted by the Government of Batavia to become the only purchasers of all the productions of the East, and the restricting [of] all other Europeans from trading to any other Ports than Batavia and Malacca ... the distress occasioned by this extraordinary attempt will not be felt by the Dutch and Malay alone, it will pervade all the Trading Ports of India.7

Despite the Dutch threat in the East, the collapse of the Patriots in 1787 had led to new discussions between Britain and the United Provinces over an alliance. Penang, though, was hardly considered. The British objectives were to secure the Dutch concessions of Rhio and Trincomalee in exchange for recognising the Dutch monopoly in the Spice Islands.8 From a naval point of view, British India needed to neutralise any threat from Dutch Trincomalee. Henry Dundas at the Board of Control was hardly convinced that Penang offered sufficient security to India, and, instead, pursued the traditional line of strategic thinking, clamouring for the use of Trincomalee by the navy. He told Cornwallis:

The great anxiety of Holland is the security of their spice trade, and the restoration of Negapatam, neither of which are objects to us; but on the other hand we felt the want of Trincomalee in the course of the last war so materially to


8 See Wong, "Strategic Significance of Singapore, pp. 26-7, and Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, chap. 2.
affect our interests in India, it must be our principal, and indeed our only object in an alliance with the Dutch respecting India, to secure ourselves against the danger of our ever being deprived of the use of the harbour of Trincomalee, in the event of future war.  

In the Straits of Malacca, Britain’s priority was Rhio, not Penang. British diplomats tended to downplay the latter’s potential. Lord Auckland, ambassador to Holland in 1790, for example, regarded Penang as supplementing Rhio in the control of the Straits and the spice trade. Dundas went further and suggested wresting Rhio from the Dutch in exchange for Penang. He told Cornwallis:

The more I think on the subject ... the more satisfied I am that a station for the purpose of commerce is necessary in the Eastern seas; and all things considered there seems no reason to doubt that Rhio from its ideal situation ought to be that place, and reasons which render Rhio the most eligible go to prove that the Prince of Wales Island is not so .... I think both Prince of Wales Island and Negapatam ought to be given up rather than Rhio ....

Rhio lay in the centre of the Malay world and attracted a large share of the local trade. Furthermore, being at the converging point of the Straits of

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10 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, p. 40.

Malacca and the South China Sea, it was in a better position than Penang from which to observe and control the route to and from India.

As for Governor-General Cornwallis, he had maintained since 1786 an attitude of disdain towards the new settlement, regarding its acquisition as taking place at a most inauspicious time. He recorded: 'I will not go so far as to say that in the present embarrassed state of the Company's finances, I would have recommended the undertaking .... My objections, as the Board will perceive, go rather to the time in which this measure has been resolved upon, than to the measure itself.' Lord Cornwallis and his brother, Commodore (later Admiral) Sir William Cornwallis, both favoured a port in the Andaman Islands. When the commodore arrived at Madras on 3 September 1789 to take up office as Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies squadron, he was greeted by a letter from his brother dated the previous June, which stated among other things that he was planning to take possession of the Andamans. 'If it should be found to answer, I should remove the establishment from Prince of Wales's Island thither. I have kept this discovery as secret as I could, and of course you will do the same.' The Andamans, which had three excellent harbours, one of which was promptly renamed Port Cornwallis, consequently came under British control in August 1789.

In February 1790, Commodore Cornwallis visited Penang and went on to the Andamans. His firm conclusion was that from the point of view of

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12 Meeting of the Council, 13 December 1786, quoted in Clodd, Light, p. 58.

proximity to Bengal, the advantage lay with the Andamans, since they provided a convenient base for his fleet which needed to assist the land forces against Tipu Sultan of Mysore,\textsuperscript{14} although he considered Penang to be 'a better place for refreshments than Madras',\textsuperscript{15} where his men could recover from the ravages of scurvy.\textsuperscript{16} Port Cornwallis, lying on the east coast of the South Andaman Island, had an excellent harbour. It was sheltered from the full force of the north-east monsoon by a group of islands off shore and the Siamese mainland nearby.

In the midst of his occupation with the Third Mysore War, the Governor-General had also decided in favour of the Andamans. He told Dundas,

\begin{quote}
I have been too much occupied this last twelve months to spare time to think of the Andaman Islands, but I shall probably meet my brother in May at Madras, when we will enter earnestly into that business. There can be no doubt of the propriety of our establishing ourselves in one of the harbours on that island, but my brother has seen one that he thinks far preferable to Port Cornwallis ....\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

This opinion however, was not translated into action, and it was uncertain whether the settlement at Penang could be sustained. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Clodd, Light, p. 73.
\item \textsuperscript{15} W. Cornwallis to Cornwellis, November 1790, in Cornwallis-West, Admiral Cornwallis, pp. 190-1.
\item \textsuperscript{16} W. Cornwallis to Light, 24 November 1790, in Cornwallis-West, Admiral Cornwallis, p. 241.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Cornwellis to Dundas, 4 March 1792, Cornwellis, vol. 2, p. 155.
\end{itemize}
stalemate was harshly criticised by James Scott: 'Whatever the cause, the measures indicate either a doubt of their reports or a change of opinion respecting the general measure, so that they remained balancing from 1787 to December 1792 between [the] Andamans and Penang and thence nothing was done for either.'

None the less, despite governmental inaction, British diplomats were unequivocally in favour of the Andamans, Rhio and Trincomalee and uninterested in Penang, to the extent that Lord Cornwallis regarded it as expendable, and Dundas as exchangeable. To make matters worse, Penang, by 1790, had to tackle another problem closer to home, for the state of Kedah had taken up arms against it. Penang had been snatched up with little consideration of the consequences. Between 1786 and 1790, British and Indian authorities could not decide what to do with it. The war in India against Mysore, diplomatic manoeuvres in Europe and dissenting opinion over naval requirements all added up to a state of inaction that did not augur well for Penang.

Ever since the acquisition of Penang, the relationship between Light and Sultan Abdullah of Kedah had steadily deteriorated on account of the former's inability to fulfill the 1786 treaty obligations. The East India Company remained obstinately opposed to providing military assistance to protect the sultan from his enemies. This slight vexed Abdullah as the resuscitated Siamese Kingdom was threatening to invade and subjugate Kedah. The Company also refused to pay the agreed annual fee of Spanish


19 Aspinall, Cornwallis in Bengal, pp. 198-9.
$30,000 to the sultan and, instead, directed Light to negotiate an agreement not exceeding $10,000 per annum for ten years. This the sultan refused, and likewise turned down the subsequent offer of $4,000 per annum for as long as the Company possessed the island.\textsuperscript{20} Realising he might soon lose Penang for good if the British continued to possess the island without paying the annual fee, the sultan turned anxiously to look for allies. He found them in other Malay sultans who were planning to evict the unpopular Dutch from the Straits of Malacca. Sultan Abdullah quickly threw in his lot with the group since they viewed the British as equal enemies with the Dutch, and the group proceeded to invoke the support of the sultans of Siak and Indragiri in Sumatra, the Lingga Archipelago in Rembau and the greatly feared Lanun pirates from the Sulu Islands. This movement has been colourfully described as 'a grand Malayan alliance to oust the Dutch from the Straits of Malacca ... and the British were to be driven from Penang ....'\textsuperscript{21} At the least, the alliance was a formidable enemy.

Light knew of this ominous development and thus had good reason to be anxious. On 29 November 1790, hearing of the arrival of Lanun pirates at Pulau Kra, a small island eight miles south of Penang, Light sent his entire naval force--three small cruisers and two long boats--to meet them. What Captain Lorraine, the squadron commander, found was a most formidable force of eighteen long prahus drawn up in line, with thirty smaller prahus in the rear, and over one thousand fully armed men. Lorraine however, could

\textsuperscript{20} Tregonning, \textit{British in Malaya}, pp. 78-9.

\textsuperscript{21} Clodd, \textit{Light}, p. 74.
do nothing because the cruisers could reach no closer than 600 yards from the prahus, which were anchored over shallows.22

On 11 December, with the Malay force poised at the mouth of the River Prai on the Kedah mainland directly opposite Georgetown, Light penned a frantic note to Admiral Cornwallis in the Andamans requesting his assistance:

We have been obliged to rebuild the Fort, the old Materials being entirely rotten .... We have Cruizers armed with 2 and 3 Pounders, and without their Complement of Men, which are to represent Men of War ... we cannot easily protect ourselves ... and our Force is not sufficient at once to guard both the Sea and the Land, the Chooliars' Vessels who came from the Coast of Coromandel are quite defenseless, and if our Cruizers cannot prevent the Prows from coming in, they cannot preserve the Vessels.23

Admiral Cornwallis, thus convinced of the dire threat to the island, arrived in H.M.S. Crown in early January 1791. His arrival secured a slackening in the tension, and Sultan Abdullah chose to negotiate with the British. On 12 March, with the discussions still ongoing, Admiral Cornwallis wrote that 'everything remains exactly in the same state' and with the arrival of the sepoys which were requested by Light, 'I apprehend that they will be now able to defend themselves if an attack should be made.'24 With that,

22 Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 80.

23 Light to W. Cornwallis, 11 December 1790, in Cornwallis-West, Admiral Cornwallis, p. 243; also Clodd, Light, p. 74.

24 W. Cornwallis to Admiralty, 12 March 1791, in Cornwallis-West, Admiral Cornwallis, p. 245.
Cornwallis sailed out of Penang on 15 March, much to the dismay of Light. Sultan Abdullah promptly regrouped with 8,000 men at River Prai.

By 22 March, all but one of the merchant ships, usually dotting the Georgetown harbour, had fled. With the cantonment deserted and all business halted, Light continued his desperate efforts to appease the irate sultan, promising to pay him $5,000. When it finally became clear that Sultan Abdullah was bent on nothing short of destruction, having issued the declaration of war on 9 April, Light decided to act first. At 4:00 a.m. on 12 April, Captain Glass embarked with the three companies of sepoys from Fort Cornwallis, and destroyed the two Malay forts on the Kedah mainland. Then came the naval attack at first light of day. Four gunboats, together with three cruisers attacked the fleet of 200 Lanun prows, forcing them to flee. When the Lanuns reappeared two days later, Captain Glass's gunboats dispersed them for good.25

Francis Light's calculated risk had paid off, and at the loss of only four men. Some 10,000 Malays and Lanuns, with 250 armed prahu, had been beaten off. With the diplomatic issues finally settled by a nine-point treaty which, among other things, fixed the cession money at $6,000 per annum, the occupation of Penang was confirmed. None the less, the incident illustrates that instead of providing security and shelter for war ships, Penang needed their assistance.

Penang had survived this early challenge to its existence. Events in Europe were soon to allow it to prove its worth to British India. With the Revolution in France gaining intensity, storm clouds now hovered darkly over Europe in the early 1790s. When war actually broke out in 1793, the British had not concluded their negotiations with the Dutch and their discussions were rudely interrupted.

In 1792, on the eve of hostilities, Sir William Cornwallis was an admiral without ships. All he had were a small frigate, the Minerva, a captured French vessel, the Bien Aime, and a small ex-privateer, the Concorde. When the admiral sailed home in 1793, India was virtually without naval protection.\textsuperscript{26} France, apart from her Indian stations, possessed the island of Bourbon, some settlements in Madagascar and the Seychelles in the western Indian Ocean, all subordinate to the Isle of France, otherwise known as Mauritius, which was the seat of government and a fortified naval base. Despite having these possessions, the French strategical dilemma lay in the fact that their military mastery in Europe could not necessarily induce the British Isles to surrender. Later, Napoleon advocated a concentration on building up the French fleet to destroy Britain. In the meantime, the French goal could be achieved only by waging a successful maritime and commercial strategy against Britain and her empire.

The French naval strategy in the Eastern Seas was primarily one of guerre de course, in which privateers sought to attack, capture or destroy British commercial traffic, that is booty-laden East Indiamen, rather than

\textsuperscript{26} Tregonning, \textit{British in Malaya}, p. 127.
British colonies. Such a strategy was a logical one for a Continental power to choose in the century-long war against Britain. In this way, the French might be able to stifle the Indian trade with China at minimal loss to themselves. The British navy retaliated by enforcing a strict convoy system, providing battle-ship protection to merchant fleets. Thus, Company ships had to collect at ports such as Penang to await their escort before proceeding to their destination.27

In January 1794, with the war in full swing, the new Governor-General, Sir John Shore, felt confident enough to meet the French naval challenge. He told Dundas: 'Notwithstanding the various surmizes respecting the French cruisers in the Indian Seas, I am firmly of opinion, that they consist of privateers only, and that there is not any frigates among them; our squadron is certainly equal to two frigates.'28 Yet two months later, Shore's optimism had faded: 'The Force of the French at the Islands is alarming, and their privateers have committed great depradations on our trade: it is rather surprising that they have not done more mischief.'29 This change in mood can be partly accounted for by Shore's action to deal with a worrisome rumour in January that the French had captured Fort Marlborough at Bencoolen, a British settlement on the western side of Sumatra near the Straits of Sunda.30

27 Patrick Crowhurst, The Defence of British Trade 1689-1815 (Kent: William-Dawson & Sons Ltd., 1977), pp. 228-34.
28 Shore to Dundas, 10 January 1794, Shore, p. 33.
29 Shore to Dundas, 10 March 1794, Shore, p. 50.
30 Shore to Dundas, 10 January 1794, Shore, p. 32.
Following the departure of Admiral Cornwallis in September 1793 and before the arrival of Commodore Peter Rainier to take his place in the following September, the naval defence of India rested with five armed Indiamen under the command of the senior Company Captain, Charles Mitchell. Mitchell's priority was the China trade but his first task was to check the truth of the Bencoolen rumour. To this end, he sailed to Penang to confer with Francis Light. The French squadron arrived at Bencoolen and demanded the surrender of Fort Marlborough only on 9 February 1794. They withdrew, however, after the British commander there persuaded them of Mitchell's imminent arrival.

In April, Mitchell's squadron escorted a convoy to Canton, which refreshed and regrouped itself at Penang. On the homeward route, the convoy encountered French privateers in the South China Sea, and captured two of them before proceeding to Batavia and then back to India. In this movement, Penang played a useful role, supplying a harbour for the Indiamen to anchor and collect information, fresh provisions and armaments. In July, nine East Indiamen with cotton for Canton hurried into Penang harbour, protected by a sole Bombay frigate, Commodore Pickett, and chased by the French privateer Revenge, which had greedily eyed the prized loot. Light sent out a fully armed galley to confront the privateer, which had by then fled from the scene. The East Indiamen thereafter reached Canton undisturbed.

31 Shore to Dundas, 10 January 1794, Shore, p. 33.
33 Tregonning, British in Malaya, pp. 129-30.
Upon Rainier's arrival in India in September 1794, his objective eastwards remained the protection of country ships and East Indiamen bound for China. Shore requested that naval forces be stationed off the French islands, off Achin, in the Bay of Bengal and in the Straits of Malacca. The last was essential because 'the China Ships generally enter the Eastern Entrance of the Straits of Malacca early in December on their return to Bengal.' The presence of British war ships would clear the Straits of Malacca of any French or Dutch cruisers which may be found there.34

Shortly after Rainier's assumption of command, the settlement at the Andamans was abandoned owing to the islands' unhealthy climate, but not before Rainier had despatched Kyd, now a major, to reassess Penang as a potential naval base. Specifically, Kyd was told to report on the Georgetown fortifications, and to re-examine the harbour and report whether it might be used by the navy ships.35 In the following year (1795), Kyd reported to Bengal that Georgetown now had a small stone fort of 500 square feet, to replace the old wooden one, but it was surrounded on all sides with buildings, and was so close to the waters' edge that ships could anchor about 125 yards off and overlook it. The fort, Kyd concluded, 'is as undefendable as it was at the beginning of the war .... It is hard to imagine a spot worse chosen, it can defend neither town nor harbour.'36

34 Shore to Rainier, 15 October 1794, in Parkinson, War, pp. 73-4.
35 Bengal to Penang, 10 July 1794, quoted in Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 129.
36 Kyd to Bengal, 2 August 1975, quoted in Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 130.
Kyd's assignment in 1794 coincided with the despatch of James Scott's pamphlet to Thomas Graham and a similar one to Henry Dundas, both of which argued that Penang could support a naval base with corresponding docking facilities and defences. To Graham, Scott reiterated the common view that Penang was of 'easy access and recess, undisturbed by Gales, has safe anchorage, plenty of Water, Wood and provisions; that it is rapidly acquiring a tonnage and produce to employ it; that careening Wharfs or Docks may be made at [Pulau Jerajah], which affords at small expense the most perfect safety.' Scott then proceeded to dispel the one misconception about Penang that seemed to prevent the government from building a naval base there: that the middle flat in the northern entrance towards Georgetown was too shallow. Scott was adamant that this northern passageway was 4.5 fathoms (26 feet) deep, and the tides were such that there were only 72 hours each year in which a large ship such as H.M.S. Gibraltar, needing 27 feet, could not enter. To Dundas, Scott argued that fortifications could also be built at Batu Lanchon, a spot about seven miles south of Georgetown where all ships sailing up the channel could be observed and where guns could form a cross fire with any batteries on Pulau Jeraja. However, neither Kyd's nor Scott's reports had any impact on either Bengal or London. British politicians, by 1795, had more pressing concerns.


In late 1794, the French overran the United Provinces. The pro-French Patriots were quickly installed in government and, by 1795, the Batavian Republic was established, allied with France and antagonistic to the British in the East. The French takeover of Holland, with all its consequent implications, had for some time been feared by the British. Prime Minister William Pitt had warned Marquess Cornwallis, in 1787: 'If things unfortunately should come to extremities, we shall be engaged in a contest in which France will probably for a time have the support of the province of Holland .... In this situation, the first struggle will actually be for the foreign dependencies of the Republic.'

There were dissenting views to this emphasis on acquiring the colonies of Holland. Lord Auckland, for example, who had been the ambassador to Holland in 1790 focussed his attention on the Continent. He opposed a naval expedition to the French West Indies when war with France broke out in 1793, telling the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville: 'our first and great object ought to be to destroy the Convention; .... If we are materially diverted from that object by the pursuit of conquests, whether on the continent of Europe or in the East or West Indies, we risk the fate of the whole war and of the existence of mankind.'

In a desperate attempt to avoid an absolute capitulation, the ousted Prince of Orange issued the Kew letters in early 1795 instructing all the Dutch settlements overseas, including the Cape of Good Hope, Cochin, Chinsura, Surat, Pulicat, 

41 Auckland to Grenville, 7 November 1793, Auckland, vol. 3, p. 137.
Trincomalee and Malacca, to put themselves under British protection for the
duration of the war. In this connection, the British occupation of Malacca in
August 1795 concerns us here, especially as Penang played no small role in it.

On 21 July 1795, two squadrons left Madras to seize Trincomalee and
Malacca. The latter expedition was led by Major Archibald Brown with Major
James Mackerras as second-in-command. They had with them four battalions
of European soldiers, including the 15th battalion under Captain Ludowick
Grant, which had been appropriated at the eleventh hour by the Commander-
in-Chief, Sir Robert Abercromby, to the chagrin of Shore who deemed their
departure from India ill-timed. Their orders were to 'rendezvous at Prince
of Wales Island' before proceeding to Malacca. At Penang, the squadron was
fitted with powder, as the store-ship for the expedition had been captured by a
French privateer. Penang also provided stores and fresh food and thus
proved to be a useful launching pad for expeditions to the east.

Malacca, the most ancient and historic of the towns of the Malay
Peninsula, lies at the head of a broad shallow bay, by the mouth of a small
river, 240 miles south of Penang. Originally the home of a few Malay
fishermen, it rose to international fame and stature during the heyday of the
Malacca Sultanate (1402-1511), when it became the centre of Southeast Asian
trade and the heart of Islam in the area. After the Portuguese captured it in
1511, a stone fort was built on the south bank of the river mouth, while the

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42 See Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, pp. 52-3 for a discussion on the Kew letters.
43 Abercromby to Cornwallis, 25 August 1795, Cornwallis, vol. 2, pp. 302-3, and Shore to
Dundas, 5 November 1795, Shore, p. 81.
Malay town sheltered the north side. This the Dutch inherited when they came into possession in 1641. However, Malacca was not the centre of their empire, but on the periphery, the Dutch priority being Batavia and the Spice Islands to the east. This, coupled with Dutch restrictive and regulatory trading policies—which had so irked Francis Light and would irritate Stamford Raffles—contributed to Malacca's decline in wealth and status in the eighteenth century. When Major Brown anchored in the bay on 16 August 1795 and looked towards the little town and the stone fort with its nine solid bastions, Malacca was held by a mere 270 men, of whom over 200 were unenthusiastic Javanese, Amboinese or other Malayans, who were weakly armed and unwilling to fight.45

Britain's quarrel was not with the Dutch but with the French, who stood to gain strategically and territorially from the Dutch colonies. Yet this in no way assured a smooth and peaceful hand-over of power by the Dutch colonial governors to the British. Much in fact depended on the political inclinations of the local governor, whether he was of the Stadtholder or the Patriot faction. And the British could never be too sure of what to expect, hence the large expeditionary force. Although the Dutch Governor at Malacca, Abraham Couperus, was a Stadtholder man, his Dutch subjects were not eager for a British takeover.46 In this case, Anglo-Dutch commercial rivalry outweighed any ideological uniformity between the two states.

45 Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 131.

46 This subject is amply discussed in Graham Irwin, "Governor Couperus and the Surrender of Malacca 1795," IMBRAS 29 pt. 3 (1956), pp. 86-113.
On the night of 17 August, Major Mackerras embarked with his troops for the area south of the fort, but encountered jungle 'so thick as to render it impossible to land. The boats therefore drew off and stood to the Northward an officer walking in the serf, abreast of the boats, to inform us when we came opposite to the open ground, when the troops immediately landed. The troops then advanced to the fort and captured it with hardly a shot fired. Britain had acquired her second settlement in the Straits of Malacca.

The acquisition of Malacca in 1795 did not represent a British empire moving from strength to strength, snatching the commerce and colonies of the Dutch for her own gain, as the mercantilist mythmakers would have us believe. Rather, it was the result of Britain's diplomatic and military failure in Europe to prop up Holland against France. It was a defensive move. Britain did not want to capture Malacca. She had to. It was done under the exigencies of war, to prevent France from acquiring a foothold in the Straits of Malacca which would, in turn, threaten Penang.

Commodore Rainier in the meantime, not knowing of the outcome of the Malacca expedition but confident of its success, was casting his eyes on the other Dutch possessions in the Spice Islands. An assault on Batavia was too difficult on account of its strong defences, but Amboyna in the Moluccas might be captured. The Dutch population there was small and divided by the confusion of home politics. The Governor of Madras, Lord Hobart, was cautiously encouraging. He told Rainier:

47 Mackerras to Couperus, 1 April 1805, in Irwin, "Governor Couperus," p. 112.
We shall take the liberty of submitting to your consideration the advantage that would result from an early possession of Amboyna, which we understand to be one of the most valuable; but as we are extremely deficient in point of information with respect to the strength or value of the Dutch Spice Islands; and as so much must depend on the Intelligence you may receive either at Prince of Wales's Island or at Malacca, we should not wish to dwell on any particular object.\footnote{Hobart, Saunders and Fallofield to Rainier, 29 September 1795, in Parkinson, War, pp. 91-2.}

With the successful taking of Trincomalee by Rainier himself on 31 August and the Cape by Vice-Admiral Keith Elphinstone on 15 September, Rainier felt sufficiently confident of an expedition to the far reaches of the Eastern Seas to challenge the Dutch empire there. On 15 October 1795, he set sail for Malacca with the \textit{Suffolk}, \textit{Centurion} and \textit{Swift}, expecting to find there the \textit{Resistance} and \textit{Orpheus}. For trade protection in the Bay of Bengal, he left only the \textit{Heroine} and \textit{Hobart} and two Company cruisers. Rainier expected little resistance from the Dutch, who had only two men-of-war. However, Rainier's sailing to the East Indies displeased Shore. 'He ought to have remained on the Coast [of Coromandel] until the acquisition of all Ceylon and Cochin', the Governor-General told Dundas.\footnote{Shore to Dundas, 5 November 1795, \textit{Shore}, p. 83.} The French, in fact, exploited the admiral's absence and from early 1796 entered the Bay of Bengal and clashed with British ships. The presence of Rainier might have deterred such incidents.\footnote{Shore to Dundas, 7 February 1796, \textit{Shore}, p. 94.}
Once again, Penang was to prove its worth as a staging point. Rainier arrived at Georgetown on 14 November 1795 with his men-of-war. There he made careful inquiries into the Dutch Indies and decided to approach Amboyna via the 'Straits of Sincapour'. After stopping at Malacca, Rainier headed towards eastern Java and the Molucca Sea and by February 1796 anchored off Amboyna, with his squadron intact and ready to avenge the massacre of 1623. On 16 February, Rainier landed and seized the town before moving on to take Banda on 9 March. While planning to attack Ternate however, Rainier was called on to suppress a native revolt in Amboyna.

Because the whole expedition was conceived not merely to loot, but to establish British power in the East Indies in place of the waning Dutch empire, Rainier found himself involved more deeply in local affairs than he had expected. In July, naval assistance had to be sent from India to help Rainier quell the Amboyna uprising. The end result of the admiral's eastern expedition was to leave the Coromandel Coast in a defenceless state. As Shore told Dundas:

Notwithstanding your attention to furnish us with a strong naval force, we are actually at this moment in a most defenceless state, and six French frigates parade the Bay [of Bengal] in triumph. The fundamental error was the expedition against the Spice Islands, which I never approved. Our opposition arrived too late to stop it; I have never ceased to lament this expedition, as we have risked by it much more than we can ever gain.51

51 Shore to Dundas, 9 September 1796, Shore, p. 109.
All in all, Rainier was detained in the East Indies for the whole of 1796, not leaving Amboyna until 1 December. He returned to Madras on 13 February 1797, via Penang, having been absent for fourteen months. Rainier's willingness to stay in the far reaches of the Malay world for so long and at the expense of the security of the Coromandel Coast betrayed his eagerness to confront the Dutch empire and also to acquire riches and fame for himself. The Dutch islands to the east were a threat to India because of the shelter they accorded to French ships. However, to men such as Rainier and his successor, Edward Pellew, the East Indies also presented opportunities to augment their personal fortunes.

Before 1796 was to run its course, one more noteworthy event took place. Besides raiding the Coromandel Coast, the French also seized the opportunity to dent Britain's China trade by raiding Penang. Francis Light had been aware since 1793 of the possibility of such an attack on the colony but maintained an attitude of obstinate confidence, if peppered with bravado: 'The French talk much of paying us a visit, I am not in much apprehension of their coming here, the adventure appears to me to be attended with too much risk to men who are seeking after plunder only; they will apprehend the meeting of an armed squadron here as well as in the Straits of Sunda.' A French raid on so prominent a base as Penang would be no surprise, especially since it remained Britain's only foothold in the Malay Peninsula apart from Malacca.

52 Quoted in Clodd, Light, p. 125.
After Light's death in 1794, his successor as Superintendent of Penang, Major MacDonald, found the island threatened with total destruction by a squadron of six large French frigates, led by Rear Admiral Guillaume de Sercey, fitted out at Mauritius for the express purpose of plundering and destroying the settlement. Sercey sailed on 14 July 1796 towards the Coromandel Coast, where the schooner Alerte, together with her papers and the expedition's plans, was captured by the British frigate, Carysfort. The French squadron then fled from India towards Achin. On 8 September, Sercey sighted two British war-ships, the Arrogant (74) and Victorious (74). Captain Richard Lucas of the Arrogant had been sent out from Penang to meet Sercey after receiving despatches from Sir John Shore on 25 August regarding the French squadron. Sercey, bent on commercial destruction, did not want his frigates crippled. He thus turned tail but Lucas gave chase. As Lucas explained later:

The critical situation I now found myself in and the advantage they might take, it being doubtful my falling in with them again ... and believe me, Sir, Rear-Admiral Rainier's critical situation to the Eastward was not forgot; nor the protection of the different Settlements in this Country, all these circumstances determined me to risque an action ....

The settlement immediately threatened was Penang, a fact not lost on Lucas. The two squadrons opened fire on 9 September and a most unsatisfactory battle ensued. The Victorious, under Captain William Clarke,

53 Clodd, Light, p. 125.
54 Lucas to Elphinstone, 17 October 1796, in Parkinson, War, p. 103.
performed dismally. Not only had her gun-powder become too moist to fire, but she constantly strayed out of line and drifted far too close to Sercey and at one point, at the commencement of hostilities, even managed to fire several shots at her consort, the Arrogant. Eventually, after four hours, Sercey broke off the action, having received severe casualties. Accompanied by the Arrogant, the Victorious limped backed to Penang, sore and embarrassed, but triumphant.\textsuperscript{55} Penang had prevailed without calling the Penang garrison into action. Had Sercey reached Penang and raided it, untold damage would have been done.

In 1894, the British colony of Penang commemorated the centennial of the death of its founder, Francis Light, who died on 21 October 1794, probably of the fever that claimed the lives of so many other European pioneers in Malaya. To 'gratefully recall' his hard work, A. M. Skinner penned a "Memoir of Captain Francis Light" which was published by the Journal of the Straits Branch Royal Asiatic Society in 1895. Skinner's comments on Light were frank and perceptive, if a touch sentimental. Francis Light's responsibilities as founder and Superintendent were certainly onerous: 'The task of governing this mixed multitude fell entirely on the shoulders of Captain Francis Light himself, for he received but little encouragement from the Indian Government, who long regarded the establishment of Penang with doubts and even with jealousy.'\textsuperscript{56} In fact, so neglected was the infant

\textsuperscript{55} Parkinson, War, pp. 101-5; Clodd, Light, pp. 127-31.

\textsuperscript{56} A. M. Skinner, "Memoir of Captain Francis Light," ISBRAS 28 (1895), p. 5.
settlement in the years between its acquisition in 1786 and the advent of world war in 1793 that 'the life of Penang hung on a thread.'\textsuperscript{57} This was no exaggeration. Both Bengal and London remained adamantly unconvinced of Penang's worth and preferred Rhio, the Andamans and Trincomalee. Not only did the settlement prevail in the midst of this diplomatic scoffing, but it even survived its harshest test in 1791 against the Kedah Sultanate on the Malay mainland.

Following a brief reprieve to catch its breath, Penang rose in international stature during the first few years of the war with Revolutionary France. Being Britain's only foothold in Malaya, it became a vital rendezvous and staging point for the navy in the quest to protect the China trade and poke at the French and their reluctant ally, the Dutch, in the East Indies. However, by this very same token, it was made a prime target by the French at Mauritius in 1796. By a happy turn of events, the battle for Penang was fought in the waters off Achin. The island itself, vulnerable and delicate, was never bombarded or besieged. Penang's weak land fortifications, far from providing security, required naval protection. The general weakness of Penang also made it imperative that Malacca should not fall into French hands. The safety of Penang as a vital base for the collecting of merchant ships and their convoys, the freedom of the Straits of Malacca and the route to India necessitated the British seizure of Malacca in 1795.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 6.
Towards the end of the War of the First Coalition and throughout the Second Coalition, it became imperative for strategic reasons that British India should capture Spanish Manila and persuade the recalcitrant Batavians to enter the British fold. Such actions would deprive the French of bases in the Eastern Seas. Yet the attacks never took place because Napoleon's Egyptian adventure threatened British India. What could happen eastwards of the Bay of Bengal was conditioned by what happened westwards, in the Middle East. This pull from the west is significant because it illustrates that the expansion of India through and beyond the Straits of Malacca was subordinated to the defence of the Raj. The plans for the Penang naval base, which also eventually fizzled out, must be viewed similarly in the context of the tug of war between the propositions that it serve Indian interests and that it act as a base from which to thwart the Dutch in the East Indies.

Britain's European strategy against France between 1793 and 1797 involved persuading other states to fight on her behalf to defeat France. The persuasion was done by the offer of financial subsidies such as those to Prussia in 1794 and Austria in 1795. However, Britain did not send any substantial army to the Continent to demonstrate her commitment to the defeat of France and to justify her directing the soldiers of Prussia and Austria on the field. Thus, the First Coalition against France was weak and made up of loosely strung treaties that Britain made separately with the other European states. The fissures became most evident by the end of 1797 when
Austria terminated hostilities with France under the terms of the Treaty of Campo Formio.1

Britain's Continental strategy was complemented by her 'blue-water' or, colonial policy, where the Royal Navy was used to snatch the overseas colonies of France and her allies.2 The conquest of overseas territory was small compensation for the loss of Britain's allies in Europe. None the less, it could divorce France from her overseas possessions and annul any potential threat from them. It would also give Britain some leverage with which to bargain for peace with France. Sometimes, the failure to maintain an alliance with a European state caused Britain to take this next step of acquiring her colonies. This was the case with the Dutch in 1795. Now it was Spain's turn.

On 19 August 1796, Spain left the British side for the French and in October, declared war against Britain. In November, the Court of Directors issued a despatch to Sir John Shore, directing him to attack the Spanish Philippines. This move was a logical one. The ports of Manila and Cavite in Manila bay were a potential menace. Manila was capable of harbouring thirty gun-boats, and as many as four line of battle ships (74) and five frigates could shelter at Cavite. Both squadrons were capable of damaging Britain's China trade. At the time of this expedition, the Spanish fleet in Manila bay consisted of three war ships (74) and four frigates.3

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3 Parkinson, War, pp. 39-43, 119.
Colonel Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, who commanded the 33rd Regiment, part of the military force sent to capture Manila, had little doubt of success. The city was so weakly defended that it would fall easily. Furthermore, it could be conquered without inconvenience, danger or much additional expense.4 (Recent reports however, had described a stronger Manila than Wellesley expected. Not only had the troops there been reinforced and their discipline improved, but the fort was now in a very respectable state and the Governor was 'an active clever man'.5) The only real constraint on the expedition, according to Wellesley, was the timing. The same south-west monsoon that would drive the ships towards Manila would also hamper operations in the bay itself. Wellesley thus advised that the troops should remain at Tanjoran, on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, until 1 October, thereafter sailing with the wind to Manila bay, arriving there precisely when the south-west monsoon broke up.6

Despite some difficulty in acquiring the necessary supplies for the expedition, Shore shared Arthur Wellesley's bravado at least in spirit: 'I have no doubt of our ability to carry [the expedition] into execution.'7


5 Captain Walter Caulfield Lennon, "Journal of a Voyage through the Straits of Malacca on an Expedition to the Molucca Islands under the Command of Admiral Rainier, 1796," ISBRAS 8 (1881), p. 74.


7 Shore to Dundas, 20 May 1797, Shore, p. 126.
British expected, barring any drastic military or diplomatic ill-wind elsewhere, to take Manila easily.

Wellesley was so confident that he proposed an attack on Batavia—'they could not stand against the attack'—on the way to Manila. He did not perceive the mission merely as a hit-and-run raid on enemy stations in the Malay world and beyond. On the contrary, Wellesley expected a head-on collision with the Dutch empire in the East Indies, from which the British would emerge unscathed. The expedition should 'attack Batavia and the Dutch settlements upon the Island of Java', either destroying or taking possession of them, and if the latter, Wellesley had a plan for the protection of a new British establishment there.

Clearly, to the British gazing eastwards from Calcutta, the Dutch empire, and in this case, the Spanish empire as well, seemed to be real threats because of their friendship with France, and therefore needed to be defeated. In holding this sentiment, Wellesley was in good company. Francis Light had seen the danger posed by the Dutch in the Straits of Malacca and wanted to challenge rather than to avoid it. Likewise, Admiral Rainier the previous year had sought in his Moluccas expedition to mount the dishevelled ramparts of the Dutch empire. Despite the British endeavours in Europe to maintain and, after 1795 to shelter the royalist party of Holland, men in the East continued to worry about the Dutch in the Spice Islands. Wellesley at least recognised the dilemma Britain faced in wanting to destroy the eastern

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empire of a waning world power who, for all its previous friendliness to the British, had swopped allegiance under duress: 'the destruction of Batavia would ruin the Dutch; but it may be a question whether it would be right completely to annihilate them.' In the end, Fort William decided not to take up Wellesley’s suggestion to capture Batavia.

Manila, as we have seen, was considered an easy prey and was expected to be taken with little difficulty. Admiral Rainier would command twenty-three ships carrying 2,059 troops. This was an expeditionary force that was equipped, willing and able to take Manila. Yet it never proceeded beyond Penang and was recalled on 28 August 1797 for reasons that had less to do with the Spaniards in the Philippines than with conditions back in India.

The immediate reason for its recall was the news from Constantinople of preliminary negotiations at Leoben in July, which led to the Treaty of Campo Formio in October 1797. Piers Mackesy has suggested that the year following the Treaty of Campo Formio was a significant one in the war against France because of the change in Britain's strategy. With the collapse of the First Coalition, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville proposed adopting a more aggressive policy towards France. His strategy involved forging and leading a new coalition with Prussia, Austria and Russia in order to militarily drive France back inside her pre-war frontiers. A stable peace for Europe required a stable regime in Paris, preferably royalist. Thus, Grenville's war aim, taken up by Pitt, was the ultimate overthrow of the French Revolutionary


The negotiations for the Second Coalition dominated British foreign policy from October 1797 to March 1799.

Grenville's Continental strategy of overthrow did not negate the activities of the Earl of Mornington and Henry Dundas to ensure the security of India. In February 1798, as Mornington was heading out to India as the new Governor-General, he admitted that should London obtain a settlement with Paris, the French, if they returned to their former colonies, could well enhance their position in India 'to a degree of formidable strength never before possessed by them'. To prevent that, Britain had to retain both the Cape and Ceylon, taken from the Dutch,\footnote{Mornington to Dundas, 28 February 1798, *Wellesley*, vol. 1, pp. 31-4.} which in turn would withhold from the French the means 'of undermining our Indian Empire and destroying our Indian commerce.'\footnote{Pitt's speech on "Belgium: The Price of Peace," 30 December 1796, in R. Coupland, ed., *The War Speeches of William Pitt, the Younger* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), p. 180.}

Apart from the Cape and Ceylon, Mornington, who arrived at Calcutta in May, was determined to expand British power in India but not beyond. The interests of India were far more important to him than those of the Malay world. In the event of peace, he later argued in 1799, Britain should obtain from Portugal a cession of Goa on the Malabar Coast in exchange for either Malacca or the Spice Islands, 'or for some equivalent pecuniary compensation',\footnote{Mornington to Dundas, 26 October 1799, *Dundas*, p. 198.} which would deprive the French of a potential foothold in India and correspondingly augment British power there.
In June 1798, it was reported in India that Tipu Sultan of Mysore, Britain's arch-enemy on the subcontinent, had sent an embassy to the French at Mauritius five months earlier. This caused some alarm to the British in India because any connection between the two would have serious consequences, 'and may ultimately involve us in the calamity of war.'

However, Mornington's worries quickly abated. The small number of French troops on Mauritius and their inexperience made Tipu's design the 'subject of general ridicule'. None the less, because Tipu had violated his treaties with the Company which was equivalent to a declaration of war, Mornington deemed it 'not only my right but my duty' to strike a blow against Tipu's Indian possessions in order to frustrate his preparations for war. According to Edward Ingram, Mornington viewed the report of the negotiations at Mauritius for an alliance between France and Mysore not as a threat to British India, but as an opportunity to attack Tipu and claim to help the British in the European war. What Mornington needed was an excuse to seize Tipu's territory in Mysore and proceed on a vigorous policy of expansion: 'It appears to me that the landing of any French force in Tipu's country is a sufficient ground of war.'

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15 Mornington to General Harris, 9 June 1798, *Wellesley*, vol. 1, p. 54.

16 Mornington to Dundas, 6 July 1798, *Dundas*, pp. 53-5.


18 Mornington to Dundas, 6 July 1798, *Dundas*, p. 62.
The Governor-General's plans were complicated by news received from London of a French fleet being fitted out at Toulon, whose destination was probably India, either by way of the Red Sea, or by Basra. The defence of India was of great importance: 'we can only exhort our several Governments to be constantly upon their guard, and watchful against surprise.' As President of the Board of Control and Secretary for War, this was Dundas's concern. Any successful attack on Britain's possessions in India, and the overthrow of the British interest there, 'would be a death wound to every prospect which any civil servant of the Company can entertain.'

Mornington thought it was improbable that the French could reach India from Egypt, especially if there were British ships patrolling off the Straits of Babel-Mandab. The more logical course for French ships, according to Mornington, was round the Cape. In either case, it was equally incumbent on Mornington to maintain Bombay and the Malabar Coast in a respectable posture of defence.

The cancellation of the Manila expedition must be seen in light of these two divergent views of India: whether to defend against a foreign invasion of India from Egypt, which was Dundas's view, or to annul any foreign intrigue with Tipu Sultan, which was Mornington's. Rainier, who had been recalled in August 1797 was now directed by Mornington to the Malabar Coast. This complemented Horatio Nelson's search for Napoleon in the Mediterranean

20 Dundas to Mornington, 16 June 1798, Dundas, p. 50.
21 Mornington to Dundas, 11 October 1798, Dundas, p. 98.
22 Mornington to Dundas, 11 October 1798, Dundas, p. 96.
Sea. According to Dundas and Mornington, the possibility of a French invasion of Egypt had ramifications in Europe because it revealed that if the British could be forced into a defensive stance in India, they would be unable to play their traditional tactic in Europe of maintaining the balance of power by fighting as the subordinate of whichever ally that would fight as the principal. Fighting as a subordinate power in Europe was what Dundas and Mornington desired. The Governor-General's plan to prevent the French from turning the Indian balance of power against the British was to transform British India into the paramount power in India, and India into a second British empire. This would begin with the defeat of Tipu. For Dundas, any adverse shifts in the European balance of power would be avoided by driving Napoleon out of Egypt.23

The navy had to make a choice between sailing to Manila or to the Malabar Coast. It was not a difficult choice to make, as it would have been fruitless to capture Manila if the navy had no British India to return to. The dictates of the west were a troublesome hindrance to the omnipresence Mahan felt the navy should enjoy. The dictates of the west were also heeded at a price. By relinquishing the Manila mission, Rainier left the Spaniards free to plunder Britain's China trade. This they promptly did for the next two years with Admiral Sercey's aid, and this had to be tolerated for the moment.

Because Nelson destroyed only the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile on 2 August 1798 leaving intact the French army, which had been on Egyptian soil

23 Ingram, Commitment to Empire, pp. 62-4.
for a month, Napoleon's supremacy over the British on land remained unchallenged. As the British had no means of attacking the French forces at Alexandria, Admiral Rainier was reduced to carrying out scouting patrols along both Indian coasts and the Cape, and squadrons were sent out to secure the islands within the Straits of Babel-Mandab for Britain.24 The death of Tipu Sultan upon the capture of his state in May 1799, and the departure of Napoleon from Egypt later the same year gave the British Indian government a momentary respite. It was during this time, while planning another mission to capture Manila that Admiral Rainier received orders from London on 5 May 1800 to complete the overthrow of the Dutch East Indies by capturing Batavia.25 The possibility of enemy frigates from Batavia entering the Bay of Bengal during the north-east monsoon to surprise the Coast of Coromandel in the early months of each year had remained, causing Indian authorities some concern.

This new endeavour came about in the aftermath of Britain's military disaster in Holland in late 1799. The inability of the British army to invade France cast doubts on Grenville's strategy of overthrow and gave new hope to Dundas's colonial approach.26 In the next nine months, however, the command to attack Batavia was to be cancelled three times, much to the consternation of Rainier. Each cancellation was due to further ominous

25 Parkinson, War, p. 163.
events relating to the French threat to India. Again, the strategic ambitions of the British were to be staunched by limited resources.

Soon after Rainier received his orders in late May 1800, it was decided that the Batavian expedition would only employ gentle coercion. No force was to be used, since the government of Batavia was to be *persuaded* to put itself under British protection, in the manner Surinam had.\(^ {27} \)

Direct negotiations were to be opened up with the government, while 'in order to give weight to the negotiation', Admiral Rainier would blockade the port of Batavia.\(^ {28} \)

The same dilemma attendant in 1797 remained in 1800--how to prompt intransigent Batavia to capitulate without destroying it. Furthermore, a naval blockade had its limitations. For example, it would be hampered by a change in the monsoon, and dependent on a steady stream of supplies. In any case, the expedition was cancelled in July by Mornington, now Marquess Wellesley, in view of the possibility of Rainier's ships being required to co-operate with a naval force in the Red Sea to frustrate any French designs in Egypt.\(^ {29} \)

The expedition to Batavia was cancelled for the second time in October 1800 after news arrived from Europe that Austria had once again made peace with France, which would conceivably allow Napoleon to attempt a relief of his army in Egypt, to be followed by an attack on India. Rainier's ships were required in India, rather than at Batavia: 'the pursuit of any foreign conquest,


however easy or advantageous,' Wellesley explained, 'must always yield to the necessity of self-defence.' Batavia could be appropriated at another time, but the absence of the fleet would be 'fatal to our existence in India'.

Unknown as yet to Wellesley, the British cabinet had decided on 3 October to plan a military invasion of Egypt to drive the French out. This move represented the abandonment of Grenville's Continental strategy in favour of Dundas's colonial one.

The safeguarding of India was of paramount importance and to this end, not only were belligerent missions called off, but extra troops and frigates were requisitioned from the Cape. Cancelling the capture of Batavia in order to prevent too wide a dispersal of their ships and troops, the British now found themselves anticipating those dire straits they wanted to avoid, making the arrival of British reinforcements imperative. What if France obtained the Philippine Islands from Spain? Or what about the 'indefatigable activity and enterprise' of French, American, Danish and Irish adventurers and mercenaries in the Eastern Seas?

The British had to take action to anticipate attacks on several fronts simultaneously. To pin down the French in Egypt, a naval force was to be deployed to the Red Sea to co-operate with the Mediterranean fleet and a blow
was to be struck against Mauritius. The latter was quickly called off due to sloppy security. A French woman living at Madras had informed her friends at Mauritius of the expedition, and it was assumed that the French on the island would probably prepare accordingly. It was therefore decided in January 1801 that the expedition against Batavia would be resumed, after which a garrison would be left behind and the remainder of the troops would proceed directly to attack Mauritius. One objective was to establish themselves at Batavia. Arthur Wellesley was thereby informed of the measures to be adopted 'with regard to that colony in the event of its becoming subject to British power.' The other probable object was that the attack on Batavia would serve as a diversionary measure to lull the French at Mauritius into complacency before the British sailed there.

Whatever the objective, the Batavian mission was yet again not to be. By February 1801, the British were finalising their plans for a concerted offensive to drive the French out of Egypt. A military force under Sir Ralph Abercromby was to advance up the Mediterranean to co-operate with the Turkish army assembled on the frontier of Syria, with a view of attacking Egypt. A complementing fleet was to congregate in the Red Sea to dispossess the French of the ports they occupied on that coast and to create a distraction

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35 A. Wellesley to Wellesley, 22 January 1801, *WD*, vol. 1, pp. 53*-4*.
37 Wellesley to A. Wellesley, 5 February 1801, *WD*, vol. 1, pp. 57*-8*.
in favour of the combined British and Turkish armies acting on the Mediterranean side.

Unable to penetrate the centre of French power on the Continent by using the army, the use of the Royal Navy allowed the British to hold a ring around the French empire which, under the proper circumstances, would be tightened, forcing the periphery of French power to recede.\textsuperscript{39} Thus the expeditionary force that had been preparing for Batavia was consequently redirected to the Red Sea.\textsuperscript{40} Cancelled for the third time running for the sake of India's survival, the attack on Batavia was not to be seriously considered again until ten years later.

The British invasion of Egypt constituted one facet of the tightening of the ring around the French empire, the other being the Peninsula War. The whole operation had a defensive element as well since it was necessary for Britain to make sure that the French invasion of Egypt did not constitute a springboard into the wider world. By pushing Napoleon's empire back into Europe, India would be spared the possibility of being invaded.

The events of 1800-1801 with regards to the British view of Batavia illustrate that although Batavia was not life-threatening to India, it was an irritating pin-prick at her side because it was friendly to France. As such, it had to be eliminated, or at any rate, taken over by the British. Its capture was proposed three times, in May and October 1800 and January 1801, and each time it was subsequently cancelled. Ultimately, British strategic ambitions in


\textsuperscript{40} Wellesley to Baird, 10 February 1801, \textit{Wellesley}, vol. 2, pp. 440-2.
the Eastern Seas were restricted by, and subordinate to the higher calling of
defending India from the French: 'the expulsion of the French from Egypt, is
indispensably necessary to the future security of the British empire in India.'\footnote{Wellesley to Baird, 10 February 1801, \textit{Wellesley}, vol. 2, pp. 442.}
It would also give the British a stronger bargaining position for peace. The
pull from the west could not be resisted if British India was to prevail. What
the French did while in Egypt was a striking demonstration of what could be
done by an army against a navy especially if London was committed to a
Continental rather than a colonial war. Every step Napoleon's infantry took
in Egypt was met by a flurry of activity by the British in India to reorganise
and redeploy their resources, and this in turn saved the remaining enemy
settlements. Mauritius and Java were spared by Napoleon landing at, and
snarling from, Egypt and by the neglect of Egypt by London until late 1800. By
putting what was virtually a stranglehold on the Indian fleet between 1797
and 1801, Napoleon revealed that British sea-power could be flexed and
flaunted for all it was worth, but was otherwise helpless against a formidable
land power.

On 21 March 1801, Abercromby's army decisively beat the French in the Battle
of Alexandria. Cairo fell in June and on 2 September, the French army
surrendered. In October, Britain sued for peace. The elimination of the
French threat to India from Egypt improved Britain's negotiating position,
but only slightly, in light of French gains elsewhere in Europe. By the Treaty
of Amiens signed in March 1802, Britain was forced to concede much territory
that had been laboriously wrested during the war. She gave Pondicherry, Chandernagore, and several other Indian villages back to France, and the Netherlands received Malacca, Amboyna, Banda, Ternate and most agonisingly for Britain, the Cape. None the less, the outcome was sufficiently pleasing for Lord Hobart to congratulate Wellesley for helping to expel the French from Egypt and especially for effectively strengthening British power in India by the annexation of Ceylon to the crown.42

Wellesley decided not to withdraw from the Moluccas without establishing another settlement in the Sulu Sea. He thus ordered Robert Farquhar, the Resident at the Moluccas, to install the administration on Balambangan, which was duly accomplished by late 1803, with no apparent opposition from the inhabitants. The scheme however, horrified Dundas, now Lord Melville and First Lord of the Admiralty since May 1804, who thought it needless. China ships were now rarely attacked, the convoy system providing adequate protection against Spanish and Dutch privateers, and Mauritius was too far away to strike effectively. At a time when Britain was seeking to subdue the Maratha Confederacy in India, and when France had regained former colonies there, the founding of a remote outpost was deemed unnecessary. The Balambangan base was ordered withdrawn.43

Melville's abhorrence of the Balambangan scheme and his concern for British India was a harbinger of the soon coming quarrel with Admiral Edward Pellew, Rainier's successor, over the role of Penang as a naval base.

43 Tregonning, British in Malaya, pp. 134-5.
Should Penang contribute to the defence of India?—as Lord Melville proposed; or should it serve more as an outpost from which the Dutch East Indies empire could be checked?—as Pellew fancied. The protagonists differed in their views because Melville did not perceive the Dutch empire to the east as a threat to British India while Pellew did, and saw the prizes to be had there. The question of whether India would continue to dictate developments in the Straits of Malacca remained in the air.

The plans in 1805 for the Penang naval base have slipped swiftly into oblivion, forgotten both by contemporaries as well as by naval and imperial historians. This is perhaps understandable, since the naval base was never built. Where the Penang base has been assessed, historians have tended to discuss the reasons why the plans were finally abandoned. Otherwise, it is mentioned as a footnote to the schism between Admirals Pellew and Troubridge over the boundaries of the newly divided Indian naval command, of which Penang was to be one of the several bases. However, the quarrel over boundaries and Penang’s role went beyond personality conflicts, and encompassed the question of what threat, if any, the Dutch East Indies posed to India.

Admiral Edward Pellew arrived in India in early 1805 to replace Rainier. Immediately, he proceeded to strengthen the naval forces, increasing the existing battle fleet by six, to twenty-eight. The growth of the India squadron


was imperative because of the need to compensate for the loss of the squadron that between 1796 and 1801 was based on the Cape when the Cape was returned to the Dutch at Amiens, and because Wellesley desired to abolish the aging Bombay Marines that consisted of men-of-war belonging to the Company.\textsuperscript{46} To be sure, Pellew was concerned with the threat from Mauritius.\textsuperscript{47} However, he also realised the need to provide convoys for the China trade, and to guard against the predatory views of enemy cruisers. To that end, the navy was to patrol the Straits of Malacca and Pellew himself would visit 'that side of India' with plans 'for the further effectual defence of the Company's trade and settlements.'\textsuperscript{48} Because of Spain's hostility, the navy also had to keep vigil along the coast of Cochin-China against any seizure of the China trade by Manila-based ships.\textsuperscript{49} Pellew also had to keep an eye on Java because of the constant retreating of French ships to Batavia.\textsuperscript{50} In other words, Pellew's concerns differed little from that of Rainier before him, for they both had to maintain sentry against the French to the west and southwest, and the Spaniards and Dutch to the east.

In August, Sir Thomas Troubridge, sent out by Lord Melville with orders to take over half the fleet, arrived in India. These arrangements had been made before Melville's resignation as First Lord in May 1805. The India

\textsuperscript{46} Parkinson, War, pp. 260-2.


\textsuperscript{48} Pellew to Admiralty, 1 June 1805, in Parkinson, War, p. 263.

\textsuperscript{49} Pellew to Wellesley, 25 May 1805, Wellesley, vol. 4, p. 553.

\textsuperscript{50} Parkinson, War, p. 264.
command was to be divided, and both commanders were to be virtually independent of each other. The dividing line which separated the two commands was to be a line due south from Point de Galle on Ceylon. Troubridge, junior to Pellew, was consigned by Melville to the eastern half, including the Coast of Coromandel, the Bay of Bengal and embracing Penang and the entrance to the Straits of Malacca.\textsuperscript{51} Such a division made sense if Penang was to serve the original purpose for which it was established in 1786, namely to contribute to the naval defence of India, which was Melville's purpose.\textsuperscript{52} To accompany this project, Penang's status was elevated to Presidency, the fourth after Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, and Philip Dundas, Lord Melville's nephew, was appointed Governor.

However, the division of the command along the Point de Galle line infuriated Pellew. Such a measure went explicitly against maritime common sense. It would bring both Madras and Calcutta into the eastern station, thereby depriving the western squadron at Bombay of its normal summer movement to the Coromandel Coast during the south-west monsoon, and similarly the eastern fleet of its shelter at Bombay during the winter months. Furthermore, the use of Madras was critical to the western squadron because it held the principal depot of naval stores and the only naval hospital for the ships in India.

Pellew therefore decided to redraw the boundaries. Troubridge could keep the eastern fleet but the dividing line between the two commands

\textsuperscript{51} Parkinson, \textit{War}, pp. 278-9.

\textsuperscript{52} Wurtzburg, \textit{Raffles}, p. 28.
would be 82.5 degrees east, which would bring Madras and Trincomalee into the western station, allow for normal naval manoeuvres and place under the charge of the senior admiral the protection of both the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts and of convoys passing between India and Europe.

Not only would such an arrangement continue to provide an adequate defence of India from the west, but it could also assign Penang to a commanding role in the eastern station, since Trincomalee, which was retained at the Peace, could serve Pellew. The eastern fleet, thus relieved of the Indian defence, could employ itself in the South China Sea beyond the Bay of Bengal. The Straits of Malacca, the country trade between India and China, together with the observation of the enemy's possessions in that quarter 'would engage all the attention of a distinct command.'

Arthur Wellesley, stopping at Penang in August 1797 on the way to capture Manila and Cavite had been favourably disposed towards the island being retained as a base for military operations to the eastward. Apart from providing repairs for the ships and refreshment for the troops, Wellesley observed that Penang had stillness of water, which was crucial to shifting cargoes, stores and men from ship to ship. This last condition was not provided by Madras or Calcutta, which waters were rough and violent even at the height of summer.

The difference between Pellew and Melville was a difference in perception of where the real threat to India lay. If it came from France, whether in Egypt, at the Cape or at Mauritius, then Melville's proposition

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53 Pellew to Admiralty, 30 September 1805, in Parkinson, War, pp. 280-3.
would do just fine and Penang would serve Indian purposes as a harbour for war ships patrolling the Coromandel Coast. However, Pellew, like Rainier, Arthur Wellesley and Light before him, saw a dual threat. The Dutch in the East Indies were, at worst, of equal danger to British India because they raided China-bound merchants, furnished and sheltered the French and could control the Straits of Malacca, of which Penang was the key to the Bay of Bengal. Under Pellew's plan, the defence of British colonies in the East Indies would be the major responsibility of the eastern fleet whereas if Melville's proposals were implemented, the fleet would be hard pressed both to protect the Coromandel Coast and to patrol the Malay seas. In all this diplomatic sparring, it became evident that the swing to the east would continue to strain against the pull from the west, and Penang was caught dead centre.

Pellew soon received his opportunity to make the British presence felt in the Malay world. We should not, however, under-estimate the personal ambitions of men in influencing what they did. Pellew's reputation had been made as the commander of detached cruiser squadrons, when he had picked up a fortune in prizes. The great prize awaiting the British in the Eastern Seas was Batavia, capital of the Dutch East Indies, and its capture was worth promotion, recognition and a peerage. In November 1806, he led a successful raid on the Batavia harbour to destroy a Franco-Dutch naval squadron sheltering there.

Between June and December 1807, a series of expeditions were undertaken to further destroy or capture enemy vessels that were at

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Samarg, Point Panka, Griessie, and Madura along the Java coast, in order to prevent the Dutch ships of war from acting under the control of France in hostility to the British.\textsuperscript{56}

By ordering and participating in these missions to the East Indies, Pellew had displayed a reckless attitude towards the western defence of India. In September 1807, Britain's political agent at Bushire on the Persian Gulf had warned Calcutta that the French had entered into a treaty of alliance with the shah of Persia, which allowed French forces and ships to collect at the port of Bandar Abbas in the Straits of Hormuz. Pellew refused to believe that Napoleon would turn Bandar Abbas into a forward base in the Middle East from where an attack on India might be launched. Thus, after making arrangements for two frigates to patrol the Persian Gulf and Captain John Ferrier, in H. M. S. Albion (74), to take command at Bombay and keep watch on the French, Pellew himself sailed from Madras for the East Indies.\textsuperscript{57}

Fortunately for Pellew, the French invasion never materialised and his reputation remained intact. During a session in the House of Commons in 1808, Mr. Money, an East India Director, commended Pellew's service: 'Such was the vigilance with which Sir Edward had chased the enemy from our extensive shores, and so powerful the protection which he gave to our commerce in those seas ... which otherwise would have fallen into the hands of the enemy.'\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Osler, Exmouth, p. 246.

\textsuperscript{57} Ingram, In Defence of British India, pp. 117-29.

\textsuperscript{58} Quoted in Osler, Exmouth, p. 251.
As for Penang, it was accorded its first and only squadron in 1805; not that it mattered in the final calculation, because the plans for a naval base there were abandoned by 1807. The demise of the Penang naval base between 1805 and 1807 has been well explained. There was a first flush of optimism to build a large frigate and a third-class battle ship (74). However, Penang timber was found unsuitable for shipbuilding, and teak had thus to be laboriously imported from Burma, Sumatra and Kedah. Another problem was the dearth of skilled artisans so necessary for the establishment of a base and for the repair and construction of ships. Master builder Joseph Seaton, arriving in 1806, found that convict labour was inadequate for the specialised task of shipbuilding. As for technicians, smiths, shipwrights or caulkers, hardly any were to be found on the island. An even bigger obstacle to the progress of Penang was the quarrel between the Admiralty and the Company over who should pay the expenses. With the departure of Lord Melville from the Admiralty in May 1805, the Admiralty refused to defray the cost of the project until such time as it was 'convinced of the practicability and probable advantages of making docks, ships, etc. for a naval establishment.'

Only in two respects were the hopes of the Court of Directors achieved. The old edifice of Fort Cornwallis was reinforced, extended and re-armed by 1809. More significantly, two ships were built and launched, not at Jeraja,


60 Governor, Penang to Court of Directors, 21 February 1806, Penang, p. 26.

61 Governor, Penang to Court of Directors, 17 January 1807, Penang, pp. 28-9.

62 Quoted in Tregonning, British in Malaya, p. 139.
where the proposed naval base was to have been built, but at the marine yard near Georgetown. In 1809 the frigate Pinang was launched and in 1811, the Inglis (74) was christened. However, by mid-1807, the failure of the Penang naval base was admitted by the Court of Directors and the project temporarily halted. This order was reluctantly complied with by Penang.\textsuperscript{63} The death knell to the project had been delivered in late 1806 when the divided command of the India fleet was abolished and Pellew was reinstated as the sole Commander-in-Chief. Troubridge was posted to South Africa and thereafter, with the quitting of its permanent squadron, Penang faded slowly away from the limelight, with the prospect of ever financing a naval base increasingly dim.

Bad planning, lack of direction and enthusiasm, and the inability to utilise the natural resources of the land all contributed to the downfall of the Penang naval base even before it was built. Sixteen years after Francis Light failed to subdue the Malayan hinterland by diplomatic bargaining, his successors guaranteed the demise of the colony by putting aside the plans for the naval base, thereby rejecting the very objective for which the island was acquired in 1786. However, viewed within the context of Britain's limited naval mastery of the Eastern Seas between 1797 and 1807, it comes as no surprise. Paul Kennedy, writing of this period, unabashedly contends that as always, the course of the colonial struggles between Britain and her European rivals was ultimately decided by sea power.\textsuperscript{64} It is true that the Royal Navy snatched

\textsuperscript{63} Governor, Penang to Court of Directors, 29 January 1808, Penang, pp. 33-4.

\textsuperscript{64} Paul Kennedy, \textit{British Naval Mastery}, p. 152.
Trinidad, Minorca, Surinam, Goree, Curacao and Malta, flattened French Madagasca and smashed the enemy fleets at Aboukir Bay, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar, but these were accomplished at no small expense and the happy demolition of other navies had no necessary impact on land warfare. To meet and thwart Napoleon in Egypt, the navy had to relinquish several expeditions to the East, expeditions which successes were confidently predicted even before setting sail. Such aborted missions are naturally unpopular with, or ignored by, naval historians. But the reasons why they were abandoned are none the less important. The Royal Navy, not being omnipotent, had to make choices. British sea power had its limitations because the navy's resources were finite while its commitments seemed otherwise. Therefore, the capture of Manila, Batavia and Mauritius between 1797 and 1801 had to be sacrificed in order to constrict the French in Egypt by having the navy patrol the Persian Gulf and the Malabar Coast. The defence of India had to take precedence over the expansion of India and the desired swing to the east was constrained by the necessary pull from the west. The only exceptions to the rule were Pellew's 1806-7 naval expeditions to the Malay world.

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CHAPTER 4: SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES AND THE ACQUISITION OF SINGAPORE, 1808-1819

The acquisition of Singapore in 1819 can partly be accounted for by the desire to protect and expand trade with China. However, Raffles's taking of Singapore needs to be placed in the larger context of the expansion of British power in Java and Sumatra between 1811 and 1814 and the grim prospect of its instant erasure by the return of the Dutch in 1818. The reconstitution of the Dutch empire posed the immediate conundrum: how far northwards from Batavia were the Dutch going to expand and how much should the British be willing to concede? Stamford Raffles wanted, at the very least, to keep open the critical junction at the Rhio Archipelago, where the Straits of Malacca meet the South China Sea. This in effect meant that Britain would have had to acquire a new post in that strategically important vicinity.

In 1810, it became necessary finally to embark on the mission to capture Java because Lord Minto, the Governor-General, was very conscious of the French threat in the Indian Ocean, which had been lately reinvigorated. In 1808, General Herman Daendels, a Dutch Francophile, had been sent to Java where he had raised new regiments of native troops, built munitions factories and fortresses and continued to harbour Dutch and French vessels. The French

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General Decaen at Mauritius had also been very busy primarily in organising raids by French privateers on British trade and commerce in the Indian Ocean. The naval blockade of Bourbon and Mauritius carried out by Pellew in 1808 which had attempted to end those hostile activities, failed. Even with the recapture of the Cape in 1806, the British still had no base near enough to Mauritius to maintain an effective blockade.

By 1810, when Napoleon annexed Holland to France, he had acquired a strong position in the Indian Ocean and the Malay world: 'France looked to Java, as the point from whence her operations might be most successfully directed, not only against our political ascendency in the East, but likewise against our commercial interests, both abroad and at home.'

In March 1810, Minto decided to occupy the French islands of Bourbon and Mauritius. These expeditions corresponded with similar naval and military attacks by the British in the far eastern reaches of the East Indies to recapture the islands lost by the Treaty of Amiens. Thus, in quick succession, Amboyna was taken in February 1810, and Banda and Ternate in August. When Thomas Stamford Raffles, Chief Secretary at Penang, arrived at Calcutta in June 1810 with proposals to annex Java, he found Minto in a very appreciative mood. In fact, writing to Lady Minto sometime in 1810, Minto hinted that he had 'one object more ... which will purge the Eastern side of the globe of every hostile or rival European establishment.'

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3 Raffles, p. 7.

4 See Parkinson, War, pp. 364-97, Minto, pp. 239-48.

5 Bakshi, British Diplomacy, pp. 75-7.

6 Minto, p. 249.
Raffles drew the Governor-General's attention to Daendels's accomplishments in Java, pointing out that he was able 'once more to establish the Dutch authority on a footing which if not timely checked bids fair to be more permanent than ever.' The persuasive clerk noted that since the French lost 'all hopes of establishing a solid footing on the Continent of Hindostan', they had turned their efforts to Java and the Malay states. Minto was easily convinced and Raffles was appointed 'Agent to the Governor-General with the Malay States' for the purpose of collecting information for a military expedition.

As news of Holland's capitulation filtered into Calcutta in early 1811, the sense of urgency intensified, making it imperative to extinguish Java, 'a power which is now formally as well as substantially directed by French Counsels.' Furthermore, the British capture of Amboyna, Banda, and Ternate and the expedition against Bourbon and Mauritius the year before would have alerted Daendels to the grave possibility of an attack on Java.

When news came in late January 1811 that Mauritius had been captured in December 1810, Minto was left with a free hand to pursue the 'execution of our further views to the eastward' by the capture of Batavia. However, he felt it necessary to exceed the instructions of the Court of Directors merely to reduce Dutch power in Java, destroy their fortifications and then evacuate. Minto concluded that this would be more destructive than constructive, as it would allow the European colony to 'fall a sacrifice to the vindictive sway of

7 Raffles's memorandum in Wurtzburg, Raffles, pp. 101-2.
8 Fort William to Fort St. George, 17 January 1811, in Wurtzburg, Raffles, p. 119.
the Malay chiefs.' Thus, following victory, the British were to maintain the structure of the existing Dutch administration under the control of a presiding British authority. By his own admission then, Minto clearly disobeyed the Directors' orders, which sought only to expel the enemy, not to replace them. 'I think we ought to make [Java] an English colony as soon as we can, by the introduction of English colonists, English capital, and, therefore an English interest.' While the Court of Directors of the East India Company desired to limit expenditure and burdens, Minto saw the establishment of formal control as necessary, so necessary in fact, that Raffles's new appointment included the task of inquiring into political alliances with Malay chiefs in the Eastern Seas, especially in the vicinity of Java. Raffles, as we will see, carried out his orders with zest.

Raffles's report, submitted to Minto in June 1811 on the eve of the Java mission, is a testament to his immense understanding of the Malay world as well as evidence of his somewhat lofty ambition to extend British influence into the region:

The annexation of Java and the Eastern Isles to our Indian Empire, opens to the English nation views of so enlarged a nature as to seem equally to demand and justify a bolder policy, both of a commercial and political kind, than we could lately have contemplated.


10 Minto to R. Dundas, 6 October 1811, Minto, p. 314. See also Minto to Secret Committee, 3 September 1811, Minto, pp. 307-13.

This vision was not inexplicable since it had already been hinted at by a whole generation of men in the employ of the Company's administration, who had sought strategic security as well as commercial wealth for India. Where Raffles differed starkly from them was in the territorial extent of the British empire in the Eastern Seas, for Raffles imagined it to stretch from the Bay of Bengal to Australia. This vast empire would include, according to Raffles, the states of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo, the Sunda Islands, Celebes, Sulu and the Philippines, Moluccas, Gilolo and New Guinea in addition to Java.\textsuperscript{12} This of course, was highly idealistic and unrealistic, rather than visionary. To hold such a empire would have gone beyond the resources and ingenuity of the British and would also rely heavily on the amity of the Malay rulers, something that could not be guaranteed. As it turned out, Raffles could only extend the tentacles of the British government to a fraction of the territory envisaged.

Governed by India, specifically Calcutta, the envisioned empire would then serve Indian purposes. Firstly, it would prevent the enemy, that is, the Dutch, from regaining their former advantages and power from the possession of Java and the Moluccas. Secondly, the evils of piracy and slavery would be eradicated, thereby ensuring that the Eastern Islands would not be 'overrun by a multitude of unprincipled adventurers, chiefly Chinese, Arabian and American.' Finally, the commercial intercourse between 'countries rich in manufacturing industry', India, and 'countries rich in raw produce', the East Indies, would be mutually beneficial. In addition to spices,

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 146-7.
sugar and coffee exported to India, the Malay world could export tin to China. Britain, according to Raffles, was poised at the threshold of the 'most splendid prospect, which any administration has beheld since our first acquisition of India; the pacification of India completed, the tranquility and prosperity of our Eastern possessions secured, the total expulsion of the European enemy from the Eastern Seas ....'\(^\text{13}\)

In June 1811, the British invasion fleet of 80 ships and 11,000 troops led by Lord Minto in person, sailed out of Malacca, arriving at Batavia in early August.\(^\text{14}\) The defence of Batavia had been entrusted to General Janssens, Daendels's successor, whose task was made difficult by the fact that the Dutch populace was divided between detestation of French control and hatred of their British rivals. On 9 August, Batavia surrendered without a shot, and the British troops thereafter pursued the retreating Franco-Dutch forces inland. The resistance formally ended with the battle of Samarang on 10 September. With the military aspect of the campaign over, Raffles, now Lieutenant-Governor of Java, settled down to the congenial business of safeguarding British interests by the extension of her political influence.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Ibid., pp. 147-55.

\(^{14}\) See Minto's very interesting first hand account of the journey, 3 August 1811, Minto, pp. 273-84.

\(^{15}\) Wurtzburg claims for Raffles the major credit for the campaign: 'The success of the Java campaign ... was ... the work of Raffles and no one else.' Raffles, p. 116. Lord Minto naturally would have differed with good reason: 'Java, therefore, so far as credit is concerned, is as much my own as the French islands; for the plan was formed, and the resolution taken, and the preparations made, and the service would have been performed precisely as it has, on my own judgement and at my own risk.' 3 October 1811, Minto, p. 299.
Before discussing this expansion of empire in the Malay world, we need to turn our attention once again to the pivotal Straits of Malacca. The burgeoning importance of the Straits was well illustrated by the controversial and somewhat absurd effort to level Malacca in 1807. Malacca, retained by the British when the Dutch failed to return to it before war broke out again in 1803, had enjoyed a temporary revival under the Resident, William Farquhar. Robert Farquhar, Lieutenant-Governor of Penang between 1804 and 1805, however, saw the rising prosperity of Malacca as a threat. He had written to Calcutta and London recommending a complete annihilation of all the fortifications and public works of Malacca, and the forced emigration of its inhabitants to Penang. This, Farquhar argued, would change Malacca from a competitor to a colleague, and might even deter the Dutch from re-possessing it. London decided to act on his advice in April 1805. But the stiffening of commercial competition did not justify the drastic measure of destroying Malacca. The whole scheme smacked of personal jealousy on the part of Robert Farquhar and fear of spiralling expenses on the part of London, both of which, Raffles remonstrated, were needless.

When Raffles, who had been in Penang since 1805, arrived at Malacca in August 1808 to recuperate from an illness, the town fort had already been levelled. The town itself was soon to suffer the same fate. Raffles was horrified, and proceeded in October to pen a lengthy but eloquent document to Minto and the Court of Directors, expressing his disaffection. The trade at Malacca complemented that of Penang, Raffles argued. The former's business

16 Tregonning, British in Malaya, pp. 143-4.
was primarily with the Bugis and Javanese, with Rhio, Lingga and other nearby ports in the East Indies whereas the latter received the bulk of the Indian and China trade. Even if the duties of Malacca were raised to encourage Penang's trade, it was unlikely that the small ships that converged at Malacca would sail north to Georgetown: 'Penang cannot expect much more of [population and trade] than it already possesses.' If Malacca was destroyed, the local traders would merely turn to Rhio, not Penang. Furthermore, Penang, though commanding the Bay of Bengal and the northern entrance of the Straits, 'has by no means the same advantage and command within the Straits that Malacca possesses.' All ships traversing the narrow channel would be observed from the latter. 'We have now the command. Why give it up, unless we are forced? and I trust we are not reduced to that extremity.' If Malacca became a permanent British settlement, her rivalry with Penang would cease and they would assist each other.17

Malacca had surpassed Penang in importance both commercially and strategically. Britain's interest and involvement in the Straits of Malacca as a passage from India had increased. (With the acquisition of Batavia in 1811 and the enlarging of the British sphere of influence, the Straits would become the most crucial waterway to and from the East.) Both Minto and the Court of Directors were made to think twice before relinquishing their responsibilities and jeopardising British interests in the Straits of Malacca. Raffles's letter to the Court of Directors in October 1808 had 'in so comprehensive a manner laid open to our view the present circumstances of the settlement of Malacca,

17 Raffles to Minto, 31 October 1808, in Boulger, *Life of Raffles*, pp. 64-75.
and the dangers which may arise by the total abandonment of it.\textsuperscript{18} Malacca was therefore saved from destruction by Raffles's timely advice.

The debate over the increasing or declining attraction of the China trade (and the corresponding role of Raffles and Singapore) is a popular one.\textsuperscript{19} However, the point to note here is that the difficulties faced by the British over this trade in Raffles's day were essentially the same as those in the early eighteenth century, with differences in degree rather than in kind. There was always the endemic fear that the two waterways, the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Sunda, might be closed to the Company's ships, which in turn prompted the on-off discussion over the need to forge a chain of stations linking India to China, guaranteeing the safe pursuit of trade. The intransigence of the Hong merchants still frustrated the British, Canton was still the only port open to foreigners, and the East India Company continued to rely on country merchants to sell their wares. Thus, while commerce was of course important as an interest, and certainly a factor in the swing to the east, it should not be exaggerated. The conquest of Java that preceded the acquisition of Singapore had great and immediate political and strategic implications. That the security of India depended upon the expansion of India was a common argument. However, this time the rationale was extended to the Malay world by both Minto and Raffles. In this way, Minto differed from his predecessors, Wellesley, Shore, and Cornwallis, who were

\textsuperscript{18} Court of directors, 1 November 1809, in Boulger, \textit{Life of Raffles}, pp. 75-6.

\textsuperscript{19} See for example, Carreon-Bunag, \textit{The Founding of Singapore}, for the former, and Marks, \textit{Contest for Singapore}, pp. 8-14, for the latter.
occupied with defeating enemies within India—the French, Tipu Sultan, and the Marathas—and tended to neglect the Dutch presence in the East Indies.

The conquest and administration of Java and the attempts to establish amicable relationships with nearby islands and states between 1811 and 1814 have been examined at great length by Raffles's biographers. Only the salient points will be mentioned here to illustrate the extent of Raffles's ambition, the qualified acquiescence of Minto and the disaffection of the Directors in London.

In November 1811, Raffles sent a commission to Palembang to occupy the Dutch factory there and establish friendly relations with the sultan. Before their arrival however, the sultan had turned hostile and massacred the Dutch settlers, thereby prompting Raffles to despatch a military force to quell the trouble and depose the sultan. The new ruler not only made peace with, but also ceded to the British the islands of Banca and Biliton in perpetuity. Of Banca, Raffles reported that its harbour of Klabbat was 'the most secure in India, capable of every defence.' Minto's reaction to this was unreserved approval.

20 Wurtzburg, Raffles, chaps. 9-16; Boulger, Life of Raffles, chaps. 5-6; John Bastin, "Raffles and British Policy in the Indian Archipelago 1811-1816," IMBRAS 27 pt. 1 (1954), pp. 84-118.

21 On the basis of this infamous massacre of Palembang, Syed Hussein Alatas has written a vitriolic biographical account, Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer? (Singapore: Angus & Robertson, 1971), charging Raffles with full complicity in the act. The book was also a reply to Charles E. Wurtzburg's article, "Raffles and the Massacre of Palembang," IMBRAS 22 pt. 1 (1949), pp. 38-52, which attempts to exonerate Raffles.

22 Quoted in Boulger, Life of Raffles, p. 141.

23 Minto to Raffles, 15 December 1812, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, p. 145.
The new Lieutenant-Governor also looked to stamping British authority to the east of Batavia. On 25 October 1811, Colonel Alexander Adams and John Crawford left Batavia to take up Residency at Surakarta (Solo) and Jokjakarta respectively. Their orders were to remove the Dutch Residents and seize local farms so as to regulate the sale of opium and other raw materials. When the Malay rulers of both districts refused to yield, Raffles decided to persuade them in person. Upon his arrival at Surakarta on 21 December, the Susuhunan (Emperor) surrendered the proceeds of birds'-nests and teak forests in return for money payment and military protection. Jokjakarta was subdued with more difficulty, because of an incipient plot to drive out all Europeans that had to be put down, again by necessary force in June 1812. On 25 June, Raffles was able to report that 'the European power is for the first time paramount in Java. We are now able to dictate the terms of the future connection with the British government and the native administration.'

Raffles's attention was also drawn to the vast island of Borneo, where Dutch claims were very weak. British traders at Pontianak and Banjermassin claimed that Borneo had untold wealth—gold and diamond mines, and pearl fisheries. However, it also had its troublesome pirates. In June 1813, after the sultan of Sambas refused to surrender the town and his 'piratical adherents', British troops landed and stormed the stronghold. In July, Raffles despatched Captain B. C. Garnham to conciliate the sultan of Sambas and make him dependent on the British authorities. He was also to abolish piracy and bring

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about the confinement of foreign trade to Banjermassin, Pontianak and Brunei. In August 1813, Garnham issued Raffles's orders to Banjermassin, which in December 1812 had already ceded to the British all privileges previously possessed by the Dutch. In September, Pontianak agreed to the wishes of Raffles's government. So did Brunei. Sambas finally conceded to British demands on 23 October 1813.25

In return for their compliance, the four districts were promised military protection, for what it was worth. On 21 September 1813, even before the return of the Garnham mission, Raffles informed the Secret Committee that he had taken these tentative steps to establish British supremacy and influence in the Eastern Seas for the security of commerce there, 'without any view whatever to an increase of territorial possessions or infringements on the just rights of the dependent native states.' Minto, in this case, objected strongly to Raffles's policy of restricting trade to specific ports in Borneo and in a letter dated 10 July 1813, had in fact advised Raffles to suspend the arrangements until such time as the home authorities could decide on the matter. Raffles, not surprisingly, did not display the same deferential spirit he demanded of the Borneo sultans.

On the contrary, Raffles pressed ahead, anxious to achieve his ends. In early 1814, John Hunt was sent to Sulu and Mindanao, to warn the sultans against encouraging piracy, and to arrange to reside at Sulu as a British agent who would open commercial intercourse with neighbouring islands. The Sulu sultan however, adamantly refused to admit a British Resident, and

Hunt was forced to return to Batavia empty handed. Raffles was more successful at Bali, which was much nearer Java than Sulu was, and which had never been conquered by the Dutch. Here, he wanted to subdue political grumblings against the British in Java and to reduce the slave trade. When Major-General Nightingale's military force of 3,000 men arrived at Bali on May 1814, the way was paved for the appointment of a Resident on the island, who would work at promoting harmonious relations between Java and Bali. When signs of unrest appeared in nearby Celebes in July 1814, Raffles sent Nightingale to deal with the troublesome Raja of Boni at Macassar. Peace was soon restored.26

The above is obviously a shortened and simplified account of British empire-building in the Eastern Seas. However, it is sufficient for the present purpose, which is to show that following the capture of Batavia in 1811, the British administration in Java, with Raffles at the helm, was not inactive. Whether involved in regulating local trade, promoting commercial traffic to and from China, securing political stability or eradicating the evils of piracy, Raffles had accomplished much. Thus, when London showed scant regard for his efforts prior to and during the Vienna Settlement to the Napoleonic War, Raffles had good reason to feel disappointed.

Raffles was well aware of London's disaffection and he tried hard to change their minds. In his famous Minute of 11 February 1814, he proposed a series of actions to be taken when Java was restored to the Dutch following the war, an event he dreaded but expected. According to Raffles, it was

26 Ibid., pp. 98-113.
imperative to distinguish those 'states in connection with the British government' from former dependencies of the Dutch. 'This is necessary to avert the possibility of these acquisitions of British policy and arms being confounded and lost in any arrangements that may eventually take place.' In other words, the independent native states where the Dutch had no prior claims, and which had been brought within the sphere of British power, ought to be entirely divested of any relation with Java. After all, Raffles continued, it had been his own policy of separating the possessions that were exclusively British (that is, the Borneo states and Bali) which he controlled as Political Agent for the Governor-General in the Malay States, from those that fell into his hands as the immediate consequence of the 1811 conquest which he held as Lieutenant-Governor of Java (that is, Jokjakarta and Surakarta).\(^{27}\)

Raffles was resigned to Java reverting to Dutch control but was determined to hold on to Borneo. In particular, he had great hopes for Banjermassin where, with the permission of the sultan, a settlement was growing. This, Raffles hoped, would rival the Dutch when they returned to Batavia.\(^{28}\) As for those states now under the British but were formerly vassals of the Dutch--Palembang, the Celebes and Moluccas--their future was uncertain.

London's reply in January 1815 to Raffles's Minute was predictably hostile. The Lieutenant-Governor's proposals were 'impolitic, and injudicious', calculated to needlessly involve Britain in local affairs. As for the settlement at Banjermassin, it was to be annulled and withdrawn.\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\) Ibid., pp. 104-6; Wurtzburg, Raffles, pp. 319-21.


\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 108.
Furthermore, Java had not proved to be financially self-supporting. This great strain on Bengal’s finances, and the risk of war entailed by Raffles’s forward-policy, contributed to Calcutta’s disapproval of Raffles’s plans. Lord Moira (later Marquis of Hastings), who replaced Minto as Governor-General in 1813, was less keen on Raffles than Minto had been: ‘Java is a still worse drain than the others .... Just now, in the height of our exigencies, we receive an intimation from the Lieutenant-Governor [that is, Raffles] that he cannot pay his provincial crops unless we allow him 50,000 Spanish dollars monthly in addition to the prodigious sums which we already contribute to his establishment.’

In May 1813, Viscount Castlereagh, Britain’s Foreign Secretary, had assured the envoy of William VI of Orange that Britain would restore the colonial possessions taken from Holland, whenever Holland appeared strong and friendly enough to justify it. Late that year, in the Cabinet’s Memorandum for the other allies in the war against Napoleon, the British Government stated that it would follow overseas a policy of restitution, thus indicating a sincere disposition to strengthen Holland against France. All acquisitions made after 1803 would be returned to Holland, with the exception of the Cape and three West Indian territories—Berbice, Demerera, and Essequibo. The British would keep Ceylon. Even though it was taken in 1795, Malacca would be given up.

30 Hastings’ private journal, 1 February 1814, quoted in Wurtzburg, Raffles, p. 322.
31 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, pp. 71-2.
Castlereagh did not deem an enlarged British empire desirable or necessary, especially if it was acquired at the expense of Holland. He had told the Prime Minister, the Earl of Liverpool, 'I still feel great doubt about the acquisition in sovereignty of so many Dutch colonies. I am sure our reputation on the Continent, as a feature of strength, power, and confidence, is of more real moment to us than an acquisition thus made.'

The relinquishing of Britain's newly acquired empire in the Malay world as embodied in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 13 August 1814, made sense as far as European politics went. It was clearly in line with Britain's traditional policy towards the Dutch Netherlands. Even with France defeated, London needed to ensure that Holland was not too weak. She must be independent and strong enough not only to resist future invasion by France, but even to deter the French from acting aggressively. As a British diplomat told the Sovereign Prince in 1813, 'We wish you to enrich yourselves by trade, for it is to our advantage that you should again become rich.' Britain's empire in the East Indies would be surrendered to help to bring this about.

The 1814 Anglo-Dutch Treaty was not contradicted by the Congress of Vienna. Castlereagh's Circular Dispatch had declared that the Prince Regent desired no extension of the British Empire 'beyond what Providence has already blessed it with.' His only wish had been to preserve the peace.

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32 Castlereagh to Liverpool, 19 April 1814, *Castlereagh*, vol. 9, pp. 474-5.


The diplomatic discussions in Europe between 1813 and 1815 had led, as far as the Malay world was concerned, to the nearly absolute erasure of the British empire there at the expense of Raffles's hard work. Raffles was sorely disappointed. In a desperate last stand, he had remonstrated vociferously. If it could be certain that the Netherlands would forever remain in ties of amity and defensive alliance with Britain; if it were sure that Britain would obtain the just reward of her sacrifices and generosity, by being admitted to an equal share of commerce in the Eastern Seas; then the reverting of Java and its dependencies to Holland would be no matter. But there was no such guarantee: 'Let Great Britain then, consolidate her Eastern Empire by retaining the command of the Eastern Archipelago ... let the British flag continue to wave in the colonies, where it has now for the first time been pre-eminent.'

In spite of these efforts on the part of Raffles, the restoration of Java to the Dutch was inevitable. In fact, London had already decided in May 1815, to recall Raffles from Java and appoint him to Bencoolen, Britain's sole remaining colony, apart from Penang, on the south-western side of Sumatra. On 5 March 1816, a Dutch officer, Captain Nahuys, arrived at Batavia with tidings that the new Dutch Governor-General would arrive to resume the administration of Java. On 11 May, Raffles received notice of his recall.

In the process of finalising this transition, the Court of Directors did not look to the fringes of the Dutch empire, as Wellesley had done a decade earlier when, failing to retain the Moluccas, he had revived the claim to

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35 Raffles's memorandum on the retention of Java, January 1816, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, pp. 207-10.
Balambangan. By 1814, this was no longer felt to be necessary. The spice monopoly had ended, and since the Company had assumed the monopoly of the manufacture of Indian opium in 1797, thereby ensuring a rise in its price, the Company's trade at Canton had in fact become more profitable. Thus, there was much less need than in Dundas's day for an entrepot in the Archipelago for the collection of local products to amplify the investment in China.36 Besides, as Harry Marks points out, the Netherlands at the close of the war was economically apathetic, which did not auger well for any vibrant Dutch commercial policy as yet in the Malay world.37 The British, it seemed, had no major interest in the Malay Archipelago to counterbalance the ever increasing reluctance to extend their political commitments there. The Dutch empire would be allowed to reconstruct itself, because it would be of little economic threat, and more importantly, because Britain saw fit once again to buffer the Dutch in Europe.

The Dutch returned very quickly to the East Indies. In December 1816, they took over Palembang and its dependency Banca, as conceded in the 1814 Treaty. That Banca, with its valuable harbour was abandoned, grieved Raffles, who wrote retrospectively in 1824: 'Banca having been ceded expressly to the British Government, it was not possible to foresee that it would as expressly be again ceded by us to the Dutch.'38 The surrender of Palembang itself posed a grave threat to Bencoolen because the two states

36 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, p. 74.

37 Marks, Contest for Singapore, pp. 3-8.

38 Raffles, p. 18.
were so close together. 'Thus the proceedings of the Dutch in that quarter [that is, Palembang] could not be viewed with indifference.'

The Dutch tried to take Biliton, but the British Resident at Palembang, M.H. Court, refused to hand it over because Biliton had not been specifically mentioned in the 1814 Treaty. Eventually, however, the Dutch did seize the island in June 1818, prompting an outcry from Bencoolen.

Raffles's successor at Batavia, John Fendall, whose task it was to oversee the transfer of administration to the Dutch, arranged to withdraw the British post at Banjermassin. The Dutch subsequently made a new treaty with the sultan in early 1817, gaining substantial cessions in sovereignty and a commercial monopoly. They also took over the Moluccas in early 1817, which the British had conquered separately from Java and had administered directly from Bengal.

When these manoeuvres were taking place in 1817, Raffles was in England, preparing to leave for Bencoolen after receiving his knighthood. If he had not received news of the Dutch moves in the Malay world, he certainly knew what to expect. As he later wrote:

At the period I was about to embark for Sumatra in 1817, very strong apprehensions were entertained by those interested in the trade of the Eastern Archipelago, that the Dutch would succeed in re-establishing the supremacy which they once

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39 Raffles, pp. 42-3.
40 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, p. 82.
41 Raffles, p. 45.
42 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, p. 82.
possessed in that quarter of the globe; and as their jealousy of us was well known, they would naturally take every means of debarring us from participating in a trade from which we had derived such considerable benefit.43

When Raffles arrived at Bencoolen to begin his Lieutenant-Governorship in March 1818, he was able to survey the scene at first hand. His assessment was grim: 'The Dutch possess the only passes through which ships must sail into this Archipelago--the Straits of Sunda and of Malacca; and the British have not now an inch of ground to stand upon between the Cape of Good Hope and China; nor a single friendly port at which they can water or obtain refreshment.'44 Raffles exaggerated. It was of course not true that Britain had 'not now an inch of ground ... nor a single friendly port' between the Cape and Canton because they still possessed Penang and Bencoolen. However, it was a great disadvantage, as Raffles took pains to show, that the Dutch effectively controlled the two strategic straits.

Even before leaving England, Raffles had advocated not just an explicit warning to the Dutch to respect British treaties with the Malay chiefs, but also the immediate possession of a third port in the Archipelago as an entrepot for British merchandise. Raffles's two choices for this third port were Banca, which he hoped the British could purchase back from the Dutch, and Rhio on the island of Bintang, where the last Dutch factory had been destroyed in 1795. To seal his argument, Raffles pointed to the threat of European rivals:

43 Raffles, p. 40.
44 Raffles to the Secret Committee, 14 April 1818, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, p. 267.
Is not Russia extending her influence on all sides? Has not France, in renouncing the Mauritius and all right of erecting forts on the continent of India, acquired a fresh motive for making establishments in the Eastern seas? What could be a more convenient stepping stone to Siam and Cochin-China, with which she has been always so desirous of establishing an intercourse? The Americans have already a considerable trade with the Eastern islands, and are favourably looked upon. Would any of these nations be desirable neighbours?45

It should be noticed that Raffles did not consider the possibility of Singapore as the third port.

What he did do, as Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen, was to resist the Dutch. In early 1818, the Dutch attempted to take over the Lampong district in south Sumatra that had belonged to the sultan of Bantam, a vassal of the Dutch, but where they had no actual settlement. Raffles protested the legitimacy of this move and in May, the Union Jack was defiantly raised at Lampong. Raffles was determined not to give the Dutch more than the British had taken from them.46

Raffles also refused to surrender Padang, a minor outpost on the west coast of Sumatra, which was taken by the British in 1795 under the Kew Letters, and had not been reoccupied by the Dutch after Amiens: 'I declined to


46 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, pp. 84-5.
lower the British flag, until further orders from my superiors for that purpose."47

Finally, the Dutch claimed Borneo. By September 1818, treaties were signed with Sambas and Pontianak, involving surrenders of sovereignty to the Dutch, and the establishment of salt monopolies. 'It appears that the Dutch, fully appreciating the vast and productive field which Borneo presents, have established themselves throughout that island.'48

By all accounts, Stamford Raffles was putting up a fierce challenge to the Dutch return to the Malay world in 1818. He had long argued against such an immediate and absolute reconstitution of the Dutch empire if and when Napoleon was defeated. However, his protests went unheeded because it was expedient for London to concede British gains in the Malay world made between 1803 and 1814, to Holland. The Dutch East Indies empire, that had been looked upon with dread by Light, Rainier, Pellew, and Arthur Wellesley, now appeared to blossom again, re-grafted as it were, by Britain. Certainly, Raffles's hard work was being erased and he naturally made the most aggressive resistance, especially since he perceived the Dutch to be exceeding the terms of the 1814 Anglo-Dutch Treaty. In addition to Raffles, the colony of Penang was also becoming concerned.

The Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, Bannerman, informed Fort William in June 1818 that in light of the imminent return of the Dutch to Malacca, he had decided to take measures to obviate any disadvantages to the

47 Raffles, p. 45.
48 Raffles, p. 17.
British trade which such an event might occasion. Therefore, he despatched Walter Cracroft to Perak and Selangor and William Farquhar, the Resident at Malacca, to various other Malay states to formalise commercial arrangements. Bannerman also urged Calcutta to send the long-proposed mission to Siam to promote trade and augment the British position in the Malay Peninsula.

Cracroft successfully concluded commercial treaties with the Raja of Perak on 10 July 1818 and with the Raja of Selangor on 22 August, both of whom granted the British most-favoured-nations status and freedom to trade in their ports. This was relayed to Calcutta, along with news that Farquhar had also obtained similar treaties from the Rajas of Rhio, Lingga, and Siak. However, Bannerman was concerned that the Dutch would adopt an aggressive policy at Malacca as they were doing at Pontianak, that would be detrimental to Britain's China trade. Farquhar's solution to rectify this was to occupy the Carimon Islands opposite Malacca.

By September 1818, the Dutch had returned to Malacca and proceeded immediately to protest against Farquhar's treaties with Rhio. C. J. Wolterbeek was sent from Malacca to Rhio and its environs, and he persuaded the native princes to renew the treaties of 1784 which had bound them to the Netherlands East India Company, but which had been abandoned by the

49 Secretary, Prince of Wales Island, to Fort William, 26 June 1818, Penang, pp. 76-7.

50 For the treaty with Perak see Penang, p. 79. The Selangor treaty was identical.

51 This is inaccurate. Farquhar had in fact only concluded the treaty with Rajah Muda of Rhio, acting on behalf of his nephew, His Majesty Sri Sultan Abdul Rahman Shaw, King of Johore, Pahang and Dependencies, including Siak. (Marks, Contest for Singapore, p. 22.)

52 Secretary, Prince of Wales Island, to Fort William, 19 September 1818, Penang, pp. 80-2.
Dutch at Malacca when Governor Couperus surrendered to the British in 1795. Johore, including Rhio, once again became a vassal state of Holland. Rhio and Lingga were to be opened to all ships, other ports only to native and Dutch vessels, and Dutch troops were to be stationed at Rhio. Raffles only learned about the Dutch occupation of Rhio, which effectively annulled Farquhar's treaties, when he arrived at Penang from Calcutta in late December 1818.

Raffles had arrived at Fort William in October 1818 to impress upon Hastings the urgency of the situation in the Malay world in light of the encroachment by the Dutch on British possessions there: 'I am now struggling hard to interest the Supreme Government in the Eastern islands.' Hastings's attitude towards Raffles had been coloured by the controversy surrounding the charges made by General Gillespie, Raffles's subordinate in Java, over alleged financial mismanagement by the then Lieutenant-Governor. However, in November 1818, Hastings was quick to see the threat the Dutch posed in the Eastern Seas, and specifically to the Straits of Malacca. On 14 November, Raffles told a friend: 'I have now to inform you that it is determined to keep command of the Straits of Malacca, by forming establishments at Acheen and Rhio .... Acheen I conceive to be completely within our power, but the Dutch may be beforehand with us at Rhio.'

53 Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, p. 92, and Marks, Contest for Singapore, pp. 23-8.
54 Raffles to Marsden, 16 October 1818, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, p. 296.
55 Raffles to Marsden, 14 November 1818, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, p. 297.
Instructions were sent from Calcutta to Farquhar to accompany Raffles to Rhio.56

The object of Raffles's mission was straightforward. In order to prevent the extension of Dutch supremacy over the whole Malay world, Hastings deemed it 'to be an object of essential importance to our political and commercial interest, to secure the free passage of the Straits of Malacca, the only channel left to us since the restitution of Java and the other Dutch possessions.' The only effective means of accomplishing this was the 'establishment of a Station beyond Malacca, such as may command the southern entrance of those Straits.' Clearly the station in mind was Rhio, because it appeared to 'possess the greatest advantages for this purpose.' However, if the Dutch beat the British to Rhio, Raffles was ordered to avoid all collision and instead proceed to Johore and continue the search there.57

Equally evident was Raffles's growing conviction that the Dutch had 'hardly left us an inch of ground to stand upon.' Writing to Marsden five days after leaving Calcutta on 7 December 1818, Raffles expressed that his 'attention is principally turned to Johore, and you must not be surprised if my next letter to you is dated from the site of the ancient city of Singapura.'58 This was Raffles's first ever reference to Singapore, implying that up to then he had scarcely considered it a possibility as a station. By the time he reached Penang

56 Secretary, Fort William, to Major Farquhar, 28 November 1818, Penang, pp.85-6.

57 Hastings to Raffles, 28 November 1818, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, pp. 298-302.

58 Raffles to Marsden, 12 December 1818, in Boulger, Life of Raffles, p. 303.
on 31 December, notice of the Dutch capture of Rhio had already been sent to Calcutta.59

Raffles had no choice but to depart, not for Rhio, but for Singapore, which is separated from Johore on the Malay Peninsula by a mere kilometre-wide channel. Raffles’s squadron anchored off the island on 28 January 1819. The next morning, Raffles, Farquhar and a solitary sepoy landed and met Temenggong Abdul Rahman, the local Malay chief and on 6 February, a treaty was concluded with Sultan Hussein of Johore, permitting the British East India Company to maintain factories on the island in return for an annual payment. Following this brief ceremony, salutes were fired by the sepoys and artillery, and the Union Jack was hoisted, not to be lowered for the next century and a half.60

It has been lately suggested that in considering the foundation of a British settlement in Singapore, the role of Raffles has been over-estimated in comparison with those of Hastings and William Farquhar.61 It is true that Hastings sanctioned the search by Raffles for a new station. It is equally true that Farquhar worked hard to secure commercial treaties with Malay chiefs and to alert the Bengal government to the crisis that he claimed could be alleviated by an annexation of the Carimons. However, these were recent developments. Hastings’s decision was made only in November 1818, and

59 Secretary, Prince of Wales Island, to Fort William, 30 December 1818, Penang, pp. 87-8.

60 See Raffles, pp. 48-56 for his personal reflections on the acquisition of Singapore.

Farquhar's endeavours were only taken from June 1818 onwards, when the return of the Dutch to Malacca became imminent. In any case, what of the actions taken by Bannerman and Cracroft that likewise contributed to Raffles's search? The causes for the acquisition of Singapore are traceable not just to 1818 or 1817, but at least to 1810, when Raffles relayed his plan to conquer Java to an eager Lord Minto. Because as Lieutenant-Governor of Java, Raffles took the leading role in expanding and consolidating British interests in the Malay world, he also had the most to lose from London's decision to return to the Dutch their former colonies in the area, and thus made the highest bid to secure an alternative station at the pivotal junction where the Straits of Malacca meet the South China Sea. However, to describe Raffles as visionary because he acquired Singapore for the British would be to allow a conclusion from the consequences of, rather than from the events preceding, the acquisition. After all, can his decision to sail for Singapore in December 1818 as a last resort after being deprived of Rhio be considered visionary? Singapore, like Penang three decades earlier, was acquired in a moment of crisis, when there was little else for the British to take. Certainly Raffles was idealistic and somewhat unrealistic, as his 1810 dream of a far-flung empire from Bengal to New Guinea testifies. His idealism though, was complemented by determination—determination to secure the route from India, to promote international trade for profit and national interest, and above all, to disobey and exceed the orders of higher authorities whenever he deemed necessary to pursue his dream. And it was this arrogant disregard for official opinion, this streak of stubbornness and independence, that makes Raffles worth remembering. That, and perhaps the spiralling success of
colonial and independent Singapore since 1819 have exalted him to the popular status that he enjoys today, fully deserving of both his place in the history books and the two life-sized statues of himself that stand imposingly in front of the Victoria Concert Hall and beside the Singapore River in modern-day Singapore.
CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS TO BRITISH SEA POWER
AND THE EXPANSION OF INDIA

Stamford Raffles wrote to his friend, Colonel Addenbrooke from Singapore in 1819: 'Our object is not territory but trade, a great commercial emporium, and a fulcrum whence we may extend our influence politically, as circumstances may hereafter require. By taking immediate possession we put a negative to the Dutch claim of exclusion, and at the same time revive the drooping confidence of our allies and friends; one Free Port in these seas must eventually destroy the spell of Dutch monopoly; and what Malta is in the West, that may Singapore become in the East.'

Equidistant from the two most important commercial cities in western and eastern Asia--Calcutta and Canton--Singapore quickly became the centre of British military power eastward of India. Secured against all European threats by the Royal Navy, it could be the ultimate instrument for extending British trade and influence in distant waters. East of the Cape there was not a single foreign port from which an enemy squadron could challenge Britain's paramountcy in the Indian Ocean. As a potential naval base, Singapore had an excellent sheltered harbour. It commanded the entrance to the Straits of Malacca as effectively as Gibraltar controlled the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea; and it was in a position to exert a far greater influence on

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the trade and navigation of the South China Sea and the eastern Indian Ocean than Malta ever exercised on the eastern Mediterranean.²

However, all that was to be in the future. For now, it is worth remembering that the choice of Singapore in 1819 was more the outcome of circumstances than of design.³ And circumstances in 1819 for the British were hardly propitious. Raffles's instructions to Singapore's first Resident, William Farquhar, was that he should avoid provoking the Dutch in the region because of their proximity to Singapore and their jealousy of it.⁴

The occupation of Singapore embarrassed British politicians who were still trying to sort out political and commercial differences with the Dutch. George Canning, President of the Board of Control, went so far as to disavow Raffles's behaviour.⁵ Only by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 were these disputes resolved. The Dutch finally agreed not to exclude British trade in the Malay Archipelago and also consented to British dominance in the Straits of Malacca. The Dutch ceded to Britain their factories in India and Malacca, withdrew from the Malay Peninsula, and gave up all claims to Singapore. In return, the British abandoned their possessions and future territorial ambitions in Sumatra (including Bencoolen and Achin⁶), the right to

³ Wong, "Strategic Significance of Singapore," p. 29.
⁴ Raffles to Farquhar, 6 February 1819, Penang, pp. 90-1.
⁶ Raffles had left Singapore for Achin on 8 March 1819, arriving there on 14 March. A treaty was signed on 22 April with Sultan Jauhar al-Alam Shah. In exchange for monetary payments and firearms, Britain had obtained political and commercial privileges.-- Wurtzburg, Raffles, pp. 508-18.
conclude treaties with Sumatran chiefs, and finally, all claims to the Carimons, Bintang, Batam and Lingga, and any of the other islands south of Singapore. Both sides agreed that none of their local officials could form any new settlement on any of the islands in the Eastern Seas without authority from their respective governments in Europe. Both also agreed not to transfer the ceded territories to any other power, and, should either party decide to abandon any of their territories, the right to them passed onto the other party.7

If we are to be cautious about assuming too quickly that the 'swing to the east' from India to China was prompted by the profit motive, we should also be careful about applying Paul Kennedy's analysis of British naval mastery between 1793 and 1815 to the Bay of Bengal and the Eastern Seas.8

According to Kennedy, the Royal Navy's primary role in the war with France was to defend Britain and her rich trade. The elimination of the enemy's colonies and commerce was in itself insufficient to defeat France. Britain's wealth, which was substantial and thus worthy of protection, had to be maintained in order to win the war. This wealth was derived from Britain's growing industrialization and foreign trade, supplemented by a sophisticated financial system which offered insurance to the merchant shipper, capital for industry and loans to the State. This economic strength in turn supported a large navy and a considerable army. The navy, by

7 For fuller accounts of this 'paper-war', see Tarling, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry, chaps. 4-5, and Marks, Contest for Singapore.

8 Paul Kennedy, British Naval Mastery, chap. 5.
defeating other navies (at Aboukir Bay, Trafalgar and Copenhagen) retained Britain's command of the sea, diminished the likelihood of invasion and further magnified her wealth. This critical cycle of navy protecting wealth and wealth sustaining navy, Kennedy asserts, was crucial to Britain's performance and eventual victory over France.

Such an analysis, however, has its shortcomings. In the first place, Kennedy glosses over the role of the navy in the Indian Ocean and spends even less time on the Malay seas. This is a grave oversight, not just because India was the bulwark of Britain's Asian empire, but more pertinently, because the potential instability of India could have had dire effects on Britain's Continental war effort. Napoleon was well aware of this and the fact that he did not succeed in creating this instability must not shade the threat he posed just by landing in Egypt. India was central to the British empire, especially so during the War of the Second Coalition when, as Edward Ingram suggests, events in and around India prophesied the upcoming Great Game in Asia.9 The defence of India, neglected by Kennedy, was of grave importance to Britain's war effort, and even partly governed her strategy and war aims.

The second oversight Kennedy makes is to view the acquisition of Singapore as part of the endeavour to promote the Eastern trade. 'Thus,' he suggests, 'in 1819 Singapore, controlling the main entrance into the South China Sea from the west, was taken over.'10 This, of course, is true.

9 Ingram, Commitment to Empire.
10 Paul Kennedy, British Naval Mastery, p. 182.
However, to separate this occasion from British India's interests during the French wars simply because it took place after the Vienna Settlement, is to ignore the threat of the Dutch East Indies empire both before and following 1815. This thesis has attempted to show that between 1786 and 1819, the Straits of Malacca, which led to Singapore, mattered more than the South China Sea, which led from it.

The basis of Britain's naval mastery, as seen by Kennedy however, is worth noting. Her command of the seas was attained because of the exceedingly high standard of British seamanship, the willingness of naval commanders to take risks (which did not compromise their professionalism and efficiency) and the superiority of British gunnery. British sea power, Kennedy argues, was not due to any overwhelming numerical superiority. This is evident when the balance of naval power as a whole is examined. In 1793, the Royal Navy totalled 115 ships of the line to France's 76, but the defection of Spain and the Netherlands, with their respective if nominal fleet strengths of 76 and 49 quite altered the picture; and the prospect of one or several of the northern states entering the war over the touchy issue of neutral shipping rights was ever present. By 1803, Britain's naval power became even more circumscribed by the widespread nature of the navy's tasks. It had to hold the Mediterranean, guard the Spanish fleet bases in the Atlantic, watch the Dutch, and patrol the Baltic. This inevitably dispersed her forces and diminished her overall capabilities.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Ibid., pp. 147-51.
The common explanation of British pre-eminence in the decades preceding 1815 in naval terms, therefore, has to be questioned. One historian has in fact gone so far as to assert that British command of the sea was 'command in a vacuum'--a bluff--because it was not that British war ships were everywhere, but that there were no other war ships in significant concentration anywhere. This certainly comes close to the truth when assessing Britain's naval situation in the Bay of Bengal preceding and during the French wars. In the early 1780s, Britain had no viable naval base that was strategically and suitably located, and in the early 1790s, when world war broke out, she had no navy there. This dire circumstance was ameliorated as the years wore on and by the 1800s, the British had acquired a formidable Eastern fleet. However, up to 1795 when Malacca was seized, British sea power in the Indian Ocean and the Eastern Seas was virtually non-existent.

Yet, British influence and interests expanded eastwards from India into the Straits of Malacca. Gerald Graham's comments on the acquisition of the Cape, Mauritius and Trincomalee would well apply to Penang, Singapore, and to an extent, Malacca:

> [Economic considerations] never positively influenced the choice of a naval base. Such a choice was much more likely to be affected by geography and the state of international politics than by the prospect of economic gain. Certainly ... the supreme economic interest lay not with the base, whatever kind of colonial establishment it might warrant. It

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12 Parry, *Trade and Dominion*, pp. 443-5.
lay simply in the extent to which that base helped to safeguard the vital sea route to India.\textsuperscript{13}

That Britain did acquire Penang, Singapore and Malacca must not colour the fact that she did so in moments of weakness and crisis rather than strength. That the power of the Royal Navy was successfully applied in these circumstances only meant that it was a most useful last resort. In any case, the \textit{actual} taking of Singapore and Penang was more a task for the diplomat than the admiral, and Malacca, in the end, was captured by British soldiers, not sailors. Finally, the fact that the navy was exercised at all in the Malay world represented an overall failure in British diplomacy. If the mark of a truly great power is the ability to resolve crises by means other than force, then Britain fell short of it.

The expansion of British India into the Straits of Malacca was carried out in spite of limitations in sea power, and sometimes because of it. Because the navy could not rely on the use of Trincomalee's harbour after 1780 and because there was no adequate British naval base on either the Malabar or Coromandel Coasts, the British had to search eastwards. This search led to the acquisition of Penang in 1786 as a potential naval base.

Events both in Europe and in India thus determined Indian interests in the Straits and the role the navy would play. The exit of the Dutch from the British camp during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780-4 deprived the British of the use of Trincomalee and prompted the founding of Penang. The

\textsuperscript{13} Graham, \textit{Tides of Empire}, p. 69.
defeat of Holland by France in 1794 meant that there was little choice but to despatch ships and men to capture Malacca and safeguard the passage to India from Java. The undertaking of such missions by the navy was always at the expense of its role in guarding the Coromandel Coast. The vulnerability of the Coromandel Coast was further illustrated when Rainier sailed off to the East Indies to capture Dutch bases there.

Not only did the relationship between Britain and Holland have an impact in the Eastern Seas, but the attitudes and priorities of politicians at Calcutta and London also affected the future of Penang. Interest in the colony waned in the first five years after 1786, thereby threatening its very existence. As late as 1805, British politicians in London could not decide what purpose the proposed Penang naval base would serve. This diplomatic impasse contributed to its gradual decline in the first decade of the new century. In this case, sea power was diminished by the indecision of British politicians.

The contribution of the navy to the war effort also depended on the strength and self-sufficiency of naval bases. In other words, such bases had to be assets rather than liabilities. Squadrons should sail there for shelter, not to defend them. Unfortunately, many of Britain's naval bases required more assistance than they gave. To Malta, Gibraltar, and Trincomalee, must be added Penang, which was unable to subdue the land around it. In 1791, Penang came close to being destroyed by the Malay alliance and required the assistance of Admiral Cornwallis. Furthermore, the colony's fortifications were poorly sited and exposed to any naval bombardment. That the French were unable to capture Penang in 1796 was only due to their squadron being apprehended by British ships before they could reach the island.
Economically, Penang was unable to sustain a naval base. The high cost of importing timber because Penang timber was not suitable for shipbuilding made the naval base too costly.

Between 1797 and 1801, British India became most willing to exert her influence upon the Malay world and beyond in order to annul the threat from Dutch Java and Spanish Philippines. The Royal Navy was thus called upon to accomplish this task. One expedition to the Philippines and three to Java were proposed and planned but all were relinquished because India's western defence against Napoleon in Egypt was more important than her eastern expansion. The Royal Navy, unable to achieve both had to choose between the two. Potential and probable victories in the Eastern Seas had to be given up because the pull of the west was too strong to be resisted. The security of India was the paramount priority and the navy's action was correspondingly constrained by it.

However, between 1810 and 1814, it became imperative that India expanded her influence and authority into the Malay world to maintain this very security. With the destruction of the French navy at Trafalgar and the successful elimination of the French islands, only Java was left to threaten India. Following its capture in 1811, Stamford Raffles, the Lieutenant-Governor, embarked upon a policy of consolidating British interests in the Malay world. This made his pill difficult to swallow when London decided to return to the Dutch their former colonies in the East Indies in 1814.

To prevent the absolute reconstitution of the former Dutch empire and the virtual capitulation of the British there, Raffles took it upon himself, urged on and aided by others, to acquire another base for Britain at the
southern tip of the Straits of Malacca. This resulted in the founding of Singapore in 1819, which did eventually staunch what was up till then the unchallenged return of the Dutch to the East.

The acquisition of Singapore was made in circumstances similar to that of Penang three decades earlier. Both islands were snatched in moments of grave crisis, when there was not much else left to take and when European rivals seemed to threaten British interests. The founding of Penang, in fact, was made complete by the founding of Singapore. The former had marked the beginning of Britain's formal interest in the Straits of Malacca and the latter entrenched it. This swing to the east from the Bay of Bengal to the Straits of Malacca was a slow and reluctant one. It was accomplished under the pressures of war and because the defence of India required it. As a passage from India, it was crucial that the Straits of Malacca was dominated by the British.

The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 made the Straits the dividing line between the British and the Dutch empires. Thus, Singapore was kept for strategic and commercial reasons, borne out of the lessons learned from several wars with France. George Canning, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs who finalised the 1824 Treaty, and whose initial disavowal of Raffles was now forgotten, aptly summed up the reasons for retaining Singapore when he told the House of Commons in June 1824 that, by securing the strategic command of the Straits of Malacca, Singapore was 'the unum necessarium for making the British Empire in India complete.'14

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Penang (Prince of Wales) Island
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