

THE SULTAN AND THE MISSIONARY

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R. BONNEY remarks in his excellent *Kedah* that the "fuller story" of how Sultan Ahmad Tajū'd-din Halim Shah sought to regain his country after the Siamese conquest of 1821 remains to be told.¹ Sultan Ahmad's struggle lasted twenty years and held the attention, not only of the Malays and Siamese, but also of the British community in the region. The political and diplomatic aspects of the struggle are relatively well documented,² but, as is always the case in Malay history, less is known of the personality of the ruler. During Sultan Ahmad's exile, however, in Penang he became acquainted with an English missionary, Thomas Beighton, and the missionary's letters, located in the files of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, frequently mention the Sultan. The letters are in some ways disappointing. They are often badly written and say tantalisingly little. Understandably, Beighton's main concern was to further the cause of Christianity rather than to comment on developments and personalities.³ Also, like many of the L.M.S. missionaries, Beighton was poorly educated: his superiors in London felt compelled to advise him to keep his reports "clear and faithful", rather than "broad and large".⁴

¹ *Kedah 1771-1821*, (Kuala Lumpur, 1971), p. 167.

² See, for instance, L.A. Mills, "British Malaya 1824-1867", *JMBRAS*, XXXIII, 3 (1960), ch. VIII; N. Tarling, 'British Policy in the Malaya Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824-1871', *JMBRAS*, XXX, 3 (1957), ch. 1; C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (London, 1972), Ch. VIII; and W. Vella, *Siam Under Rama III, 1824-1851* (New York, 1957), Ch. 5.

Three readily available published sources for the period are the 'Asiatic Intelligence' sections of the *Asiatic Journal* (1823-1845); *The Burney Papers* (London, 1971), vols. I-V; and J. Low, 'An Account of the Origins and progress of the British Colonies in the Straits of Malacca', *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, IV, 1850, 106-118, 360-379.

³ Beighton actually apologized for mentioning political matters, explaining that they were offered merely to 'give you some idea how far missionary objects may be promoted or otherwise'; Beighton 11 Oct. 1826, Penang 2/4/A. Beighton's letters are contained in the section of the files described as 'Ultra Ganges Mission: Incoming Letters - Penang'. In referring to these letters I shall give the name of the writer, the date written, box number, file number and jacket number.

⁴ 17 April 1834, China/Ultra Ganges, Outgoing Letters, Box 2/3. John Rodyk, a supporter of the Society's work in Penang, noted Beighton's lack of a 'modern education'; Rodyk, 10 July 1843, Penang 4/6/A. The L.M.S. candidates papers note that Beighton was born in 1791 and came from Derby; 23 December 1816, Box 2, p. 57. Beighton arrived in Malaya in 1818; after a short stay in Malacca he remained in Penang until his death in 1844. Although not one of the more distinguished of the L.M.S. missionaries, his later letters contain considerable information on the Muslim community of Penang. Beighton discusses briefly the Mission's work in Penang in 'Penang', *Chinese Repository*, III, 1834-5, pp. 211-230.

Despite their obvious limitations, however, Beighton's letters provide a non-official, European perspective on the Sultan; they throw light on the Sultan's activities and moods during the period.

Beighton, who settled in Penang as a missionary to the Malays in 1819, first met the Sultan in 1821, on the eve of the Siamese attack. Beighton and his fellow missionary, John Ince,⁵ visited the Sultan's court at Pulau Tiga,⁶ on the Sungei (river) Merbok. Ahmad received them "very kindly" and was "very free and open in his manner. He and his principle counsellor (an old man nearly 80)⁷ sat cross legged on an elevated part of the room which was covered with the most elegant carpets, whilst some Ministers and Generals sat a short distance below". The missionaries' account continues:

'The King asked us several questions on different subjects. He asked the nature of the wind, which we endeavoured to explain on the principle of heat and cold The heat rarefying the atmosphere and the more dense air making into the comparative vacuum which this rarefaction would cause. We found however that they could not understand our idea respecting the nature of the wind so we proceeded to the effect and concluded our description with what our Lord said to Nicodemus, John 3 ch 8 ver.⁸ They appeared to understand what we said respecting the effects of the wind better than our definition of its nature. We were interrogated respecting our native country, size of our ships, number of Guns etc. etc. We spoke of England in high terms and especially of our late King. The Rajah asked why he was so much beloved, which led us to speak of his virtues, and the desire he manifested that the ignorant should be instructed. The Rajah asked us the age of our late King and of our present sovereign. We complimented the King on his having selected such a beautiful and pleasant spot for the new Town. He said he was merely building a few compounds, and thought it scarcely deserved the name of Town. During the conversation one of the King's servants handed round some chocolates of which we partook. The Rajah gave us permission to visit Quedah and ordered one of his servants to guard us wherever we might wish to go, and promised us a Boat and men to carry us to Pinang'.

⁵Ince died in 1825. For a note on him see A.H. Hill, 'The Hikayat Abdullah', JMBRAS, XXVIII, 3 (1955), p. 111.

⁶Beighton and Ince, 19 April 1821, 1/3/A. The two missionaries believed Pulau Tiga would be 'a fine country when cleared of its wood and jungle. The river is very wide and had three small Islands in the middle, where they are making the new town and from which the name arises of Pulo, or Island, and Tiga, three'. The Sultan's palace was 'made of Artap' and was 'floating on the River'. Regarding Pulau Tiga, see Bonney, *op. cit.*, pp. 119, 162.

⁷This was perhaps the Laksamana, who had long taken an important part in Kedah affairs; see Bonney's index under 'Laksamana'; *op. cit.*

⁸The Wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is borne of the Spirit'.

Beighton and Ince proceeded on a brief and rather timid tour, distributing Christian texts; on returning to Penang, they thanked "God of all our mercies for his special care of us".⁹

Some months later Beighton heard that a copy of the New Testament, which he had left in Kedah, had been shown to the ruler: the Sultan "so far sanctioned it as to say that part was received by the Muslims but not the whole".¹⁰ Beighton ought to have known, as a missionary to Muslims, that the Sultan's remark did not imply "sanction"; Ahmad was merely making a correct judgement on the Koran's handling of Christian doctrine.¹¹

By November 1821 Sultan Ahmad's fortunes had changed radically. On the 12th of that month a Siamese naval force despatched because of the Sultan's refusal to send to Bangkok the customary tribute, the *Bunga Emas dan Perak*, arrived in Kedah.¹² A letter from Beighton reports that the "Siamese entered Quedah by deception, stating they were hungry and wished for a little rice". The Siamese forces in Kedah, Beighton heard, numbered 5,000; they had destroyed the Sultan's new capital, Pulau Tiga, and were "determined to have (the Kedah Ruler) either alive or dead". Ahmad had fled to Penang, and it was feared that the Siamese would attack the island. At night "double guards" had been placed "in all directions", and some Europeans took their valuables to Fort Cornwallis for safety. Life in Penang was disrupted in other ways; "a great number of Malays" had fled there for safety and the Siamese depredations led to a rice shortage. Beighton comforted one refugee by giving him a New Testament, and counselling him "not to be afraid, but to read the Book of God, which proclaims peace on earth and good will towards men".¹³

On fleeing to Penang the Sultan and "another native Rajah" took up residence near Beighton's house. Living close to one another, the ruler and the missionary appear to have met and talked on several occasions.¹⁴ At what date their meetings

⁹Beighton and Ince, 19 April 1821, Penang 1/3/A. Protestant missionaries had a reputation for seldom travelling in 'native states'. J.T. Thomson, who worked in the straits settlements in Beighton's time, wrote that in seventeen years he had 'met a Protestant missionary out of the towns but once, and he was under the protection of the resident official'; see Thomson's editorial comments in J.T. Thomson (ed. and trans.) *Translations from the Hakayit Abdulla* London, 1874, p. 280.

¹⁰Beighton, 10 July 1821, Penang 1/3/B.

¹¹The missionaries had opportunity to study Islam. Sale's *Koran*, for instance, which was first published in 1734 and contained a helpful 'Preliminary Discourse' by the translator, was possessed by the Mission library at Malacca; see the *Second Annual Report of the Anglo-Chinese College* (Malacca, 1824) p. 22.

¹²Bonney, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

¹³Beighton, 28 November 1821, Penang 1/3/D. It was rumoured that Sultan Ahmad 'escaped the hot pursuit of the Siamese by scattering rupees from his elephant in his route, which helped to delay the soldiers'; Low, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁴In 1830 Beighton noted that the Sultan 'often called me to his house' Beighton, 5 January 1830, Penang, 3/2/A.

in Penang first occurred is not clear; Beighton reported their discussions to the L.M.S. Directors only in 1825, when the Sultan expressed an interest in the propagation of Christianity. The Kedah ruler had sent Beighton, on 9 June, a "bottle of Sherbert, a sort of lemonade prepared by himself with spices in it". The Missionary and his wife then visited Ahmad, who said that if "reinstated on the throne of Queda he would be very glad if (Beighton) would go and settle there."¹⁵ Within a few weeks Beighton was surprised again by Sultan Ahmad's interest in the mission. On 30 June he reported that "the other day (the ruler) honoured me by permitting his son, the Heir Apparent to the throne of Quedah, the Queen, and 2 Princesses to pay us a visit attended by a large retinue". It was necessary to have the windows and doors closed "lest any bystanders" should see "the ladies": for "a common man to look on a Queen or Princess in Queda is instant death". To Beighton's delight, the whole party attended a service in the Chapel. "The Poor Natives", observed the missionary, "never saw such a service before and some of the hearers did not behave with becoming decorum. . ."¹⁶

Understandably, Beighton was enthusiastic about Sultan Ahmad's interest in the mission. No other person on the island, he believed, had been allowed to see the royal family, "not even the Governor". The prospect of going to Kedah with the Sultan was immediately appealing; "it would much rejoice my heart", Beighton declared, "to be the honoured instrument of introducing the Gospel of Jesus into the Kingdom of Quedah . . ." Perhaps fired by his missionary ambitions, Beighton took a high opinion of Ahmad, and advised him to learn the English language. The Sultan replied that that task was "too difficult for him".¹⁷

As a Muslim Ruler, Ahmad's interest in Christianity is at first glance surprising. It is unlikely, however, that he considered apostasy. Malay Sultans frequently displayed an considerable interest in religious matters, and were sufficiently open minded to discuss spiritual questions with Christian divines. In 1828, another L.M.S. missionary, W.H. Medhurst, was asked by the Sultan of Trengganu to explain more fully, "what our books said about the judgement day and the world to come". The Chinese, explained the ruler, "were utterly ignorant of such things".¹⁸

¹⁵Beighton, 10 June 1825, Penang 3/2/C.

¹⁶Beighton, 30 June 1825, Penang 3/2/C.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸W.H. Medhurst, 'Journal of a Voyage up the East Coast of the Malaya Peninsula', *Quarterly Chronicle of Transactions of the London Missionary Society*, July 1830, p. 155. See also the attitude to christianity of Sultan Idris of Perak (1887-1916), reported by W.H. Treacher in H. Clifford "Life in the Malay Peninsula"; as it was and is, *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, vol XXX, 1898-99, p. 395, and the account of a ruler of Brunei consulting both Christian and Muslim divines; the letter of Father Antonio Pereira, 1608, in R. Nicholl, *European Sources for the History of the Sultanate of Brunei in the Sixteenth Century*, Bandar Seri Begawan, 1975, pp. 89-90. For references in Malay writings to interest in spiritual matters on the part of Malay rulers see, for instance, R.O. Winstedt (ed.) 'The Malay Annals; or Sejarah Melayu', *JMBRAS*, XVI, 3 (1938), p. 121; A.H. Hill (ed.) 'The Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai', *JMBRAS*, XXXIII, 2 (1960), p. 66.

If Sultan Ahmad had a genuine interest in Christian teachings, however, he might also have had political reasons for establishing friendship with Beighton.

Although the Sultan had hoped for British support in his attempts to regain Kedah, by 1825 he would have had serious doubts regarding the loyalty of his allies. The treaty with the East India Company of 1791 had promised that "Queda and Penang should be as one country", and the Kedah rulers believed that statement implied mutual help and assistance in time of attack".¹⁹ The British, however, took a different view; and their wish to assist an ally was countered by a desire to maintain friendly relations with Siam. In the immediate aftermath of the conquest of Kedah, the Penang Government, although giving no military assistance, did refuse to surrender the ruler to his enemies, and negotiated on his behalf in Bangkok.²⁰ But by 1825, the negotiations had failed and the Siamese demands for Ahmad's surrender had not subsided. According to some reports, the powerful governor of Ligor, who was the principle instrument of Siamese control in the region was even threatening to attack Penang to capture Ahmad.²¹ By this time there were also reasons for the Penang government to cultivate the friendship of Ligor. The Anglo-Burmese war had commenced in 1824, and the East India Company was keen to obtain his assistance in an attack on Burma.²²

Knowing of these developments the Sultan might well have doubted whether the British authorities, who had failed to protect his state, would now continue to protect his person. It would be sensible for Ahmad to curry favour with the British community and his wooing of Beighton was perhaps an aspect of that policy. In the early nineteenth century the missionaries were often in close contact with the Government; the records portray Raffles and Farquhar, for instance, as particularly sympathetic to the L.M.S.²³ In Penang, Beighton appears to have been in relatively close contact, for instance, with the official John Anderson, an energetic opponent of Siamese expansion.²⁴ Whether or not the Sultan knew of Beighton's connections with the government, as a Malay ruler accustomed to influential religious advisers,

¹⁹ Bonney, *op. cit.*, p. 101. Before the Siamese invasion Beighton certainly believed that relations between the Sultan and the governor of Penang were 'very friendly'; Beighton, 25 April 1821, Penang 1/3/A.

²⁰ D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South East Asia*, London, p. 154.

²¹ Asiatic Intelligence, *Asiatic Journal*, 20 (1825), pp. 720-1.

²² Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 514. Sultan Ahmad had also angered the British in 1824 by seeking an alliance with the Burmese; see *Burney Papers*, II, 2, p. 12.

²³ See, for instance, Milton, 18 December 1819, Singapore 1/1/A; Huttmann, 18 November 1820, Malacca 1/4/D; Morrison, 19 February 1823, Malacca 2/3/A.

²⁴ They discussed their mutual difficulties with the Established Church; Beighton 1 January 1829, Penang 3/1/A. For Anderson's attitude to the Siamese presence in Kedah, see Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

he might well have expected useful results from cultivating one of the spiritual leaders of the small European community.²⁵

In the outcome, the East India Company continued to protect the Kedah ruler, but promised, in the Treaty signed between Siam and the Company in 1826, to prevent Ahmad from attacking Kedah.²⁶ The Anglo-Burma war influenced these terms. The British envoy to Siam, Captain Henry Burney, told Beighton that although the Government "wished (the Sultan) to be reinstated on the throne of Quedah", had this been insisted on "a war might have been the consequence which would not be very desirable so soon after the Burmese concern".²⁷

Following the Treaty, though he continued to refer to the Sultan, Beighton's enthusiasm waned. In April 1827 he wrote that he was pleased to learn that "the King of Quedah speaks to Malays (if I can believe them) concerning me as his friend", but added: "I fear the poor fellow will not be placed on his throne".²⁸

The next year the Sultan sought Beighton's assistance in gaining news of important developments in Europe: "when the news arrived concerning the war with Turkey the King sent several messengers to me for particulars, even before I was acquainted with them myself". The Sultan was seeking news of the battle of Navarino, which occurred in October 1827, and involved the defeat of an Islamic (Turkish and Egyptian) fleet by a combined French, Russian and British force. The reaction of the Sultan's messengers to these events did not bode well for Beighton's plans to Christianise Kedah: the messengers "appeared as though some general calamity had befallen them", Beighton related, "& when I had given them the information they returned to their Royal Master saying as they went "Baniak Susah" "Baniak Susah", "Great Trouble - great trouble".²⁹

From 1827-29 the Penang government tried without success to induce Sultan Ahmad to move to Malacca, where it would be easier to keep him out of Kedah

²⁵ It will be seen that Sultan Ahmad sought assistance from the business community in Penang; he also consulted a European lawyer; Memorandum by Henry Burney, 9 January 1830, *Burney Papers*, III, 1, p. 81. Beighton would not, in fact, have occupied an elevated social position. The modest social status of Beighton's fellow missionary, John Ince, is indicated in the Penang Almanack of 1819. In the list of births for that year the wives of Lieutenants Phipps and Burney, for instance, are described as 'Ladies'; Ince's wife is referred to merely as Mrs. Ince; V.W.W.S. Purcell, *Early Penang* (Pinang, 1928), pp. 119-120.

²⁶ Tarling, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²⁷ Beighton, 11 October 1826, Penang, 2/4/A. Beighton added: 'Capt. B. feels confident the Supreme Govt. will approve of all he has done as Lord Amherst hoped he would avoid every thing that might lead to war'.

²⁸ Beighton, 30 April 1827, Penang 2/5/C. On 11 October 1826 (Penang 2/4/A) Beighton reported that Sultan Ahmad had told him he 'wants much to go back to Quedah and appears unwilling to be sent to any other place'.

²⁹ Beighton 9 June 1828, Penang 2/6/A. The Battle of Navarino was seen by some missionaries as an indication that Christianity would soon make important gains against Islam elsewhere; see, for instance, 'Mohammedanism, its present attitude in Eastern and Western Asia', *Chinese Repository*, 3, (1834-5), p. 162.

affairs. To encourage him to move the British authorities suspended his pension, promising an increased sum if he complied with the government's wishes.³⁰ The Raja, however, was determined not to leave the Kedah region. Indeed, in October 1829 he defied both his British hosts and Siamese enemies by travelling to Province Wellesley.³¹ It was evidently a time of hardship for the Sultan. Stripped of his pension, he was described by a Penang newspaper as living 'in a starving condition, in a wretched boat, lying in a creek on a river on the (Kedah) shore'.³² Ahmad appears to have sold his house, and Beighton reported that he was 'pawning & selling his gold ornaments etc. far below their value'.³³

In January 1830 Beighton reported that a large number of Siamese were assembling in Kedah with the aim of capturing the Sultan. Ahmad faced his plight with a sense of fatalism. The 'Poor Man', related Beighton, 'he says he will not, and cannot, run anywhere — his heart appears to be gone, all energy fails — he says, the Siamese may take his head if they want it'.³⁴ Beighton encouraged Ahmad to go to Malacca, but the ruler 'viewed it in so degrading a light that he would not go'. Beighton had begun to despair of his friend. He told the L.M.S. Directors that he had written on Ahmad's behalf 'to a Gentle Man connected with the Government and told him all I know', but added: 'For a long time past I have not been near (the Sultan) and refused to go when he called me, as I could do him no good, and might have been involved in trouble'.³⁵

Ahmad's fortunes revived in 1831. Over the previous four years, according to James Low, the Superintendent of Province Wellesley, 'scarcely a month (had) passed without reports of (Malay) expeditions against the Siamese in Kedah'.³⁶ In June 1831, however, Beighton reported:

'the Malays have retaken Quedah and the Siamese having in consequence declared war — an army lately sent by the Siamese to Quedah has been cut off by the Malays. The King of Quedah who has been under protection for some years, is sent by Govt. to Malacca to be out of the way — I know not how the affair will end, but I fear much Blood will be shed — the Malays motto, is *Death or Victory*'.

³⁰Tarling, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–8.

³¹*Burney Papers*, III, 1, p. 146.

³²Asiatic Intelligence, *Asiatic Journal*, New Series, 2, 1830, p. 79.

³³Beighton, 5 January 1830, Penang 3/2/A.

³⁴Beighton, 5 January 1830, Penang 3/2/A. See also James Low's letter of 30 December 1829 in *Burney Papers*, III, 1, p. 161. If Beighton saw Ahmad at this time the meeting must have taken place in Province Wellesley, to which Beighton frequently travelled.

³⁵Beighton, 5 January 1830, Penang 3/2/A.

³⁶See his letter of 22 July 1831, *Burney Papers*, III, 1, p. 223. For a note on Low, see the introduction by James Jackson to J. Low, *The British Settlement of Penang* (Kuala Lumpur, 1972).

Beighton had been on the Kedah Coast in May 'distributing the Holy Scriptures and Tracts etc. and Preaching to the People'. He found that 'many of the Malay's there had left to 'join the army against the Siamese'.³⁷

The Malay victory was short-lived. The Penang Government honoured the British promises of 1826, and assisted the Siamese.³⁸ The head of the Malay "General", Beighton learnt, was "taken in triumph to Siam". With the return of the Siamese, led by the Raja of Ligor, Malays again fled from Kedah, and Beighton commented that if the refugees were "a fair specimen of that country Quedah must be in a very degraded state".³⁹

Ahmad, as the missionary explained, had been "sent by Government" to Malacca. But, although now receiving a full pension of 10,000 dollars the Sultan was determined to return to Penang. Eventually, in 1835, he was given permission to travel to Deli, in East Sumatra, and used the opportunity to head north towards Kedah. In April 1836, Beighton reported that the old ruler was "now not very far from Penang" and that "several native chiefs" had "espoused his cause with the view of dispossessing the Siamese of Quedah". A "flotilla manned by natives, mostly Malay under the direction of a native Prince" was reported to be trying to pass through Penang harbour on the way to Kedah. Beighton understood that the flotilla's purpose was to: "drive the Siamese out of Quedah and replace the ex-King on the throne . . . many pirates, it is confidently concluded are connected with the movement." The Penang Governor, Murchison, on the principle of neutrality, had taken measures to prevent the flotilla from travelling through the harbour. In the event of Penang being attacked, Beighton believed "the natives could not be depended upon"; the Chinese, however, were "very numerous" and it was "not likely that they will render any aid whatever to the adherents to the ex-King but oppose them with all their might". Beighton considered the "Kling people" would act in the same manner as the Chinese.⁴⁰

By June 1836, a Malay attack on Penang was no longer feared. Ahmad remained "at a place about one day's sail from Penang" (at Bruas, just north of Dindings) and Beighton saw "no prospect of his re-instation" in Kedah.⁴¹ But the Government was determined to put an end to the turbulence. Two warships were sent to Bruas to take the Sultan to Malacca. After a short battle in which more than sixty Malays and two of the British force were killed, the Sultan surrendered. Travelling in his brig, Ahmad was towed by a naval sloop to Penang on 25 April. He stayed there ten days, and was then towed on to Malacca. In Penang, Ahmad remained in his brig, anchored in the harbour. A guard of artillery was placed on

³⁷ Beighton, 27 June 1831, Penang 3/3/A.

³⁸ Tarling, *op. cit.*, p. 39; Vella, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³⁹ Beighton, 31 January 1832, Penang 3/4/A.

⁴⁰ Beighton, 27 April 1836, Penang 4/1/A.

⁴¹ Beighton, 7 June 1836, Penang 4/1/A.

board and the Sultan was refused contact with the hundreds of Malays waiting on the shore. In these conditions Ahmad's sense of humiliation must have reached new heights. He began to seek help from many quarters.⁴² One of the first to whom he turned for assistance was his old missionary acquaintance.⁴³ Beighton reviewed the events of the time in a letter written some months later.⁴⁴

"As I understood Government had prohibited persons from visiting the ex-Rajah and several of his friends being anxious I should visit him and hearing also that the old King had been inquiring for me, I at once applied to Mr. Bonham Governor (who was then here on a visit)⁴⁵ for permission to go on board and see him stating to the Governor that I had nothing to do with politics. Full office permission was immediately given with a request that I would try and persuade the King to proceed quietly to Malacca and prevent Government sending him by force. I accordingly went on Board with a boat nearly full of Malays who wished to take shelter under my wing & see their King. I was recd. with great kindness by the King. He recollected my late fd. Inc. and self visiting him in his own dominions. Had expected me the day before and he told me some particulars of his grievances and showed me letters from the Bengal Govt. and expressed his indignation at the treatment he received. I endeavoured in a gentle manner to suggest whether he had not better go quietly to Malacca now and write or send a substitute to confer with the Bengal Governor. He expressed his determination not to go to Malacca except by force. The wounded female was shown to me. The poor creature was in great misery & I immediately advised her being sent on shore for medical aid. I wrote to Mr. Bonham about her and the result of my visit to the King. I presented his Majesty with a copy of the Bible and a few Tracts and we talked about their contents. He received them in the presence of his people with much apparent pleasure and hoped I wd settle at Quedah in the event of his restoration to his throne. I expressed the pleasure it would afford me to visit him again in his own dominions. I informed him of what my object was in coming to India. That I had nothing to do with worldly politics etc. etc. I was in talk with him for more than an hour. He ordered sweet cakes for my refreshment and I was

⁴²For a naval officer's account of these events see C.A. Gibson Hill, 'The Affair at Bruas'. *JMBRAS*, 24, 3 (1951), pp. 164-6. Beighton's letter of 4 September 1837 (4/2/B) includes a long quotation regarding the Sultan's enforced stay in Penang from 'the Penang Newspaper April 1837'. The newspaper is the Prince of Wales Island Gazette, 2 April 1837. A further excerpt from this issue is contained in Asiatic Intelligence, *Asiatic Journal*, New Serie, 24, 1837, p. 168.

⁴³It is not clear what day Beighton saw Sultan Ahmad. In his letter, quoted below, Beighton notes that he received a letter from the Sultan (also quoted below) after Beighton's visit. The letter is dated 26 Muharam 1253 (3 May 1837). Beighton's reply to that letter is also dated 3 May.

⁴⁴Beighton, 4 September 1837, Penang 4/2/B.

⁴⁵Samuel George Bonham was Governor of the Straits Settlements, 1836-43; Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

compelled to try and eat some thing though I had no appetite having previously taken Rice at home. He honoured me when parting by rising from his seat. Some of the people afterwards remarked that were the King again on his throne and I wd go inside there all the people would believe the Gospel and if any were unruly the King would chastise them and make them believe. I told them that was not the way I wished the people to believe the Gospel etc. Poor creatures they seem to have strange ideas on the subject. If the Ruler orders them they will be of any Religion — good or bad — were the King restored it might by a very favourable opening for Missy labour. I wd consider myself quite safe under his Government Probably his young Son the heir apparent⁴⁶ will lay claim to the throne in case of his father's death and prove equally favourable in the event of missies going there. Many of the King's friends applied to me for counsel as to what they should do. I recommended quietude and patience — by no means create a disturbance. If they felt disposed to present a respectable petition to the Penang Government I could see no harm in it but do it peacefully not with clamour etc. Petitions were sent. The English merchants had a meeting and petitioned the Bengal Government and the King in Counsel and I suppose the Petitions are gone. I attended no meeting & had nothing to do with any Petition further than I have stated. The general feeling appears to be that the Ex-King is an injured and degraded man, and much has been printed in the Papers. Perhaps the matter will now be taken up at home. The King is now at Malacca — I recd. his letter after my visit. In conversation with him he appeared anxious to know my sentiments & whether I thought he was treated justly and according to the principles of my Religion. The treaty with him was that the enemies of Quedah would be considered the enemies of Penang etc. etc. He considered the Treaty as having been wantonly broken and no attention paid to it. I believe he spake truly".

With his letter to the Directors Beighton enclosed the Sultan's letter, with its 'Royal Signet . . . such as is used in all the King's letters of importance'. The following is Beighton's translation of the letter:

'This sincere and friendly letter and mark of increasing regard is from me Sultan Ahmid Tajudin Halim Shah, which may the great Lord of the whole universe cause to reach the hand of my graceful Friend Tuan Padrie Beighton (there follows some extravagant compliments). By this letter I make known to my friend that I informed the Hon'ble. Mr. Bonham of my wish to come on shore and arrange for proceeding to Bengal. I now solicit the assistance of my friend to discourse with Mr. Bonham on the subject for continuing on Board this small vessel is exceedingly unpleasant. Penang itself was formerly my Father's property. He hired it to the Company and I am anxious to land. If I am to be sent to Malacca or Singapore, like

⁴⁶Beighton is perhaps referring to the Sultan's younger son, Tengku Daik, who succeeded his father in 1845; Tarling, *op. cit.*, p. 42; *Burney Papers*, V, 1, p. 202.

a convict better hang me at once or blow up my vessel with my children and Grand Children. My anchor is east near the fort, and not far from the Man of War. Moreover when Mr. Murchison⁴⁷ was Governor he informed me that no person living under the Company's Government would be oppressed, for it was contrary to English Law. I am astonished therefore that I should be treated with such severity. The Siamese persecuted me and took my country. Suddenly a Man of War came and attacked me though I committed no fault. The captain told me Mr. Bonham wished to see me at Penang, I came and now he wishes to send me to Malacca like a convict though I am quite innocent. Better for me to die at once than live in disgrace without end. I therefore request the assistance of my friend, that I may go to Bengal and confer myself with the Governor General. To what he says I will listen. Bulan Puasa 26 day Hijerat 1252'.⁴⁸

Beighton's transcription of the date is incorrect. The original letter (on the back of which Beighton wrote his translation) is dated 26 Muharam 1253 (3 May 1873). Beighton immediately replied to Ahmad's letter. He told the Sultan that he had informed Governor Bonham of Ahmad's wishes, but had not received an answer. Beighton also suggested that Sultan Ahmad write a similar letter to Bonham 'as the one addressed to me'. The missionary concluded: 'Night and Day . . . my

⁴⁷ Kenneth Murchison was Governor of the Straits Settlements, 1833–35; Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ The letter is contained in Penang 4/2/A. It follows closely a letter written by the Sultan to the "principle merchants of the settlement" and also dated 26 Muharam. This second letter was translated in the Prince of Wales Island Gazette; see Asiatic Intelligence, *Asiatic Journal*, New Series, 24 91837), p. 254. The following is a romanized version of the Sultan's letter to Beighton. In romanizing the Jawi original I was assisted by Abdul Halim Haji Mohd, Seh: "Surat tulus ikhlas serta kasih sayang mufakat yang tiada berkesudahan daripada beta Sultan Ahmad Tajudin Halim Shah barang disembahkan tuhan seru sekalian alam kehadapan majlis sahabat beta tuan master padri ali Beighton yang adil lagi arif bijaksana kemasyhur kepujian lagi pandai mengambil hati handai tulannya karib dan baidu yakin zuriat ahwal adalah beta menyatakan pada sahabat beta khabarkan pada berhormat gunor bonham hendak naik kedarat berachtiar kapal hendak pergi ke banggala maka inilah beta pinta dengan penolong sahabat beta boleh akhtiar akan dengan tuan berhormat gunor bonham boleh beta naik kedarat kerana duduk didalam kechi ini sangat kesakitan demikian lagi akan Pulau Pinang ini pun tanah air beta paduka marhum beri sewa akan kompani Inggeris sebab itulah maka beta mau datang singgah di Pulau Pinang di dalam pada itupun jika tiada boleh beta naik ke Pulau Pinang daripada dibawa beta pergi ke Melaka atau Singapura seperti orang yang jadi tawanan terlebih baiklah beta digantung atau diaras dengan meriam pada kechi beta ini kerana baik sudah tempat perlabuhan kechi ini kerana beta dengan segala anak cucu beta sekalian ada duduk didalam kechi itu demikian lagi ada surat daripada master tuan gunor murchison dahulu beri akan beta tersebut didalamnya kata jika seorang duduk didalam daerah tanah kompani Inggeris tiada boleh hendak dikerasi bawa pada tempat yang asing kerana tiada sebut didalam law Inggeris boleh berbuat yang demikian itu dan lagi beta pun sangat hairan akan perintah ini orang Siam berbuat aniaya ambil negeri beta tiba-tiba datang kechi perang kompani pukul beta demikian lagi kata kapitan kechi perang ini pada beta tuan berhormat gunor bonham hendak berjumpa dengan beta di Pulau Pinang lalu beta datang ke Pulau Pinang maka sekarang ini berhormat gunor bonham hendak bawa ke Melaka pula dibuatnya seperti orang tawanan dengan tiada sesuatu kesalahan beta pada fikiran beta lebih baik beta mati sekali-sekali daripada hidup beroleh malu berpanjangan tiada berkesudahan maka inilah beta pinta juga dengan penolong akhtiaran sahabat beta supaya boleh segera beta pergi ke banggala berjumpa dengan lord apa-apa hukum lord boleh beta dengar sendiri ahwal inilah beta nyatakan surat hari Selasa enam likur bulan muharam shamat 1253".

prayer to God and the Lord Jesus Christ is that my friend may be restored to the throne of his kingdom in peace and tranquility'.⁴⁹

Beighton may have played an important part in the developments occurring after Ahmad was seized in Bruas. Although it is not clear when Beighton's meeting with the Sultan took place, it must have been toward the beginning of Ahmad's enforced stay in Penang: the Sultan's letter, which Beighton explained was received after the visit, was written on 3 May. On that day and on May 6 Ahmad wrote letters requesting assistance to a number of Penang merchants.⁵⁰ The merchants were sympathetic and petitioned the Penang government to alter its policy. In seeking help of this type Ahmad may have been influenced by Beighton's advice to send a 'respectable petition' rather than 'create a disturbance'. I can find no confirmation in the India Office files in London that the Penang authorities hoped to use Beighton as a mediator. But Governor Bonham was certainly worried by the 'obstinacy and perversness' of the 'poor old King', and wished to 'reconcile him to the restraint that must now of necessity be imposed on him.'⁵¹ It would not be surprising if Beighton were asked to 'try and persuade the King to proceed quietly to Malacca'.

The year 1837 must have seemed the nadir of Ahmad's fortunes. In 1838 Beighton heard more promising news of his royal acquaintance. On 30 August he reported that 'the Malays have just recovered their country Quedah from the Siamese . . . Many lives lost I hear on both sides. The commander of the Malay forces was resolved to conquer or die'. Beighton did not know if the Sultan would 'return to his throne', and doubted if the Malays would be able to keep Kedah. He commented that they 'would long ere this have succeeded had not the English assisted the Siamese'.⁵²

Beighton's pessimism was warranted. With British help, the Siamese were again in control early in 1839.⁵³ Before the attack '1000 some say 2000 females were sent over to Penang for safety; only males remained to defend the Quedah Fort'.⁵⁴ Again, following their defeat, many Malays fled from Kedah to the British territories: Captain Low, administering Province Wellesley, told Beighton that region had 'become very populous'.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Contained in Penang 4/2/A.

⁵⁰ For translation of two of these letters see Asiatic Intelligence, *Asiatic Journal*, New Series, 24, (1837), pp. 254-5. For James Low's criticism of the mercantile community's attitude see *Burney papers*, V, 1, p. 165.

⁵¹ Bonham to Secondary Government India, 5 June 1837, *Burney Papers*, III, 2, p. 398.

⁵² Beighton, 30 August 1838, Penang 4/3/A.

⁵³ Tarling, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

⁵⁴ Beighton 5 July 1839, Penang 4/4/A.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Kedah's humiliation, however, was drawing to an end. Following the death in 1839 of the Raja of Ligor, who had so much influenced Siamese policy in Kedah,⁵⁶ the Bangkok government displayed a willingness to compromise. After lengthy negotiation, involving the British as well as the Malays and Siamese, the Sultan was given permission to return home.⁵⁷ Beighton met Ahmad in June, 1842 on the eve of his homecoming. The ruler, he explained, was 'being restored to a portion of his dominions'. Beighton had called on his old acquaintance and 'in the English phrase (was) most graciously received'. The missionary's account of the occasion is disappointing. Their conversation, he explained, 'was too long for me to repeat and would not probably be interesting for the Board (of the L.M.S.) to hear'. Beighton hoped that 'his Highness (would) not interfere in the subject of Religion. That is neither order them to read the Gospel nor yet prohibit them'. The missionary promised that if Ahmad pursued such a policy 'I will publish his fame as widely as I can . . .'.⁵⁸

Beighton's letters do not suggest that the Sultan's return to Kedah heralded an upsurge of Christian proselytism in the state. Even if Sultan Ahmad promised to condone or support Beighton's work (and the missionary's letters do not state that he did so) neither man would have relished new challenges by 1842. Both Ahmad and Beighton were old and probably tired.⁵⁹ They both must also have been preoccupied with other matters. Beighton was struggling to prevent the L.M.S. closing down the Penang mission; the Sultan would have found serious difficulties awaiting him in Kedah.⁶⁰ After decades of war his state was depopulated, with its rice plains lying waste; moreover Kedah's borders and its precise relationship with Siam had not been settled.⁶¹

Whether or not Beighton was planning the propagation of the Gospel in Kedah there was little time. Within three years of the Sultan's restoration both men were dead. Beighton died on 14 April 1844;⁶² Ahmad died the next year.⁶³

⁵⁶Vella, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁵⁷See, for instance, Tarling, *op. cit.*, p. 41; Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 163; Vella, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-5.

⁵⁸Beighton, 3 June 1842, Penang 4/5/B.

⁵⁹In 1842 Beighton was only fifty-one years old, but even in 1829 he remarked that he was ageing rapidly: 'If 1 year in India is equal to 5 in England, I am an old man, it being almost 11 years since I left England. . .'; 16 January 1829, Penang 3/C/A. Sultan Ahmad was about sixty-two in 1842; but John Crawford commented that he had the 'appearance of 60' some twenty years earlier; quoted in K.G. Tregonning, *The British in Malaya*, (Tuscon, 1965), p. 94.

⁶⁰See, for instance, Beighton, 3 June 1842, Penang 4/5/B. When Beighton died his widow wrote that his health had 'greatly suffered' after he learnt of the possibility that the Penang mission might be closed; Mrs. Beighton, 19 April 1844, Penang 4/6/B.

⁶¹Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁶²A. Stronach, 6 January 1844, Penang 4/6/C.

⁶³Tarling, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

The Kedah ruler probably benefited more from the friendship of the two men. Despite his assurances to the L.M.S. Directors that he had abstained from meddling in politics, Beighton added his slight influence to the lobby urging the government to reverse its policy towards Kedah. There is no evidence, on the other hand, that Christianity made any headway in Kedah. Yet Beighton must not be seen as merely foolish in hoping that his relationship with the Sultan might further Christian influence among the Malays.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems unlikely that the early nineteenth century Malays could have been enticed away from Islam. But the optimism of such missionaries as Beighton may have been encouraged by reports that, after the conquest of Kedah, some Malays had been 'converted to their original faith, Buddhism'.⁶⁴ And, if Christianity were to be propagated in Malay states it was sensible to work, as Beighton did, through the ruler. In concluding that Malays would adopt any religion 'if the Ruler orders them' he was echoing the Malay accounts of their earlier conversion to Islam. The Malay Annals, for instance, describe the Malacca raja, Sultan Mohammed Shah, as the first in the state to be converted, and they relate that he 'commanded' all the people of Malacca 'whether of high or low degree' to become Muslims.⁶⁵

However sensible Beighton's strategy for proselytism in Kedah may have been, he was never certain of the ruler's real religious sympathies. In Beighton's last reference to Sultan Ahmad, in September 1842, he reported the Sultan as declaring after reading a missionary tract, that it 'reveals the secret of Mohommedanism'. Beighton wondered: 'does he mean the mystery of inquiry is revealed or the concealed Pearl of great Price. I cannot say what he means.'⁶⁶

The simplest interpretation of Ahmad's behaviour toward Beighton is that he deceived the missionary in order to obtain his assistance in the recovery of Kedah. As we have seen, however, it would not be surprising if Ahmad, like other Malay rulers, displayed genuine inquisitiveness regarding Christianity: as the religious leaders of their communities Malay rulers appear to have considered it a duty to keep abreast of the latest spiritual ideas available. But Ahmad's encouragement of Beighton might also have been a product of the Sultan's politeness. The British official, John Crawford, noted that Ahmad's manners 'like those of all Malays of rank . . . were soft, pleasing and unassuming'.⁶⁷ Ahmad might well have tried to please and compliment Beighton and the eager missionary interpreted his politeness as encouragement to the Christian cause.

⁶⁴T.J. Newbold, *British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, (London, 1839), vol. 2, p. 20.

⁶⁵R.O. Winstedt (ed.), 'The Malay Annals, or, Sejarah Melayu'. *JMBRAS*, 16, 3. (1938), p. 84.

⁶⁶Beighton, 10 September 1842, Penang 4/5/C.

⁶⁷Quoted in Tregonning, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

The tale of the missionary and the Sultan is an historical side-show which influenced none of the major events of the time. But information regarding Malay historical personalities is rare, and Beighton's letters provide glimpses of the interests, anxieties and courage of one of the most influential figures of early nineteenth-century Malaya. Had Beighton been more sensitive or articulate we might have learnt more of the royal 'inner man', yet there is something intimate in the picture of these two old men, a Malay ruler and a poorly-educated Protestant missionary, comparing Islam and Christianity and, perhaps, contemplating together the nature of the world to come.