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TWO ACCOUNTS OF THE CHINESE REBELLION

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INTRODUCTION

One of the main sources of information about the 1857 Chinese Rebellion in Sarawak is the account by Harriette McDougall, wife of Bishop Francis McDougall, who played an active part in defeating it. They had arrived in Kuching in 1848 to pioneer a mission on behalf of the Borneo Mission Society (later to be taken over by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel- SPG) and by the time of the Rebellion were well established in the Mission House on the hill overlooking the river-side bazaar. A number of their students at the Mission School were the children of some 3,000 Chinese refugees who had fled from the fighting between the Dutch authorities and the autonomous *kongsis* of the Montrado area in 1850. Apart from supervising the Chinese school children, Harriette also adopted a young girl called Niefong as a companion for her own younger daughter, Mab (Mary). Aiming to proselytise amongst the Chinese as well as the Dayaks, McDougall employed his principal teacher, Daniel Owen, to learn the Hakka dialect and to translate part of the Anglican church service. Owen also sent home a detailed account of the rebellion which was published first in the Cambridge Chronicle of 13 June 1857 and then as a pamphlet. An Account of the Borneo Rebellion. . . , long since forgotten.

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When the gold-miners at Bau decided to rebel against the authority of the Rajah, as expressed in the form of taxation, trade and legal jurisdiction, they perceived the Bishop as someone who would be acceptable as part of a new government, together with the Datu Bandar and the merchants Ludwig Helms and James Ruppell, which they would control. His unpaid work as a doctor had also earned him a good deal of credit. Consequently the Mission House was not a target for attack and the Bishop was sought out to take part in discussions at the court house where the *kongsi* headmen made known their intentions. As it happened, the rebels were soon cleared from the town when the Rajah returned with the Borneo Company's steamer and their subsequent pursuit by Dayaks and Malays turned into a terrible slaughter in which hundreds of Chinese were killed.

In the meantime, Harriette had fled by boat with her two young children and two other European women from the Mission, eventually finding sanctuary at Lingga fort. It was there, after taking a few days to recover from the exertions of an eventful week, that Harriette began to set down her recollections of what had happened. Completing her narrative on 8 March, she managed to post it off to London where it was passed on to the SPG and published in the church newspaper, the *Guardian*. Many years later, when Harriette and the Bishop were retired on the Isle of Wight, she re-wrote the narrative as part of her book, *Sketches of Our Life in Sarawak*. This was published in 1882 by another Anglican body, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and continues

to be one of the best accounts of European life in nineteenth century Borneo. The original manuscript is now in Rhodes House Library, Oxford, where the records of the SPG were transferred from their London headquarters some years ago.

What makes the original narrative worth re-printing is its freshness, written as it was within a week or so of the events described. Although the 1882 version is more polished and contains a number of additional anecdotes recalled in tranquillity twenty-five years later, it lacks the raw authenticity of the original account which is presented here in unedited form. As well as recording events for an English audience, Mrs McDougall was also inspired by the desire to refute some of the claims made by the Rajah and his close supporters about the Bishop's role. In a postscript to the narrative written many years later, she explained that she had underlined certain passages

to show that the Bishop was the last Englishman left in Sarawak when all the others had fled or had been sent off by him. He worked hard to keep the place and to stimulate the panic-stricken Malays and only left when his own life was in danger, Mr. St. John and some of the Bishop's detractors having very positively and forcibly stated that he did no more than anyone else and was not at any time in equal danger with the Rajah and the others.

Despite all the efforts by his secretary and biographer, Spenser St. John, and others to sweeten the unpalatable truth, it is clear that the rebellion demoralised the Rajah and revealed him as weak and indecisive. Once a leadership vacuum had been created by his precipitate departure from Kuching, it was inevitable that strong personalities like the Bishop and the Borneo Company manager, Helms, should step into the breach. And it was inevitable, too, that the Rajah's own self-disgust should be transformed into an antipathy towards them. As well as destroying the Bau gold-mining industry and consequently much of Sarawak's fledgling economy, the rebellion brought about a division within the European community which was never healed.

Owen's narrative does not conflict in any essential point with Mrs. McDougall's but it provides some additional details, reflecting the more active part he played in events. He was present, for example, at the courthouse when the *kongsi* called in the Bishop and his basic knowledge of Chinese probably enabled him to understand a little more of what was going on.

It would be unreasonable to expect Mrs. McDougall and Owen to have been capable of expressing anything other than the sentiments of a shocked European community who were essentially loyal to the Rajah and regarded his enemies as theirs as well. Although recent historians have pointed to the economic rivalry between Bau and Kuching as the basic cause of strife, Europeans at the time were bound to see it in terms of the *kongsi*'s challenge to the Rajah's lawful authority and its conspiratorial duplicity. Nevertheless, Mrs. McDougall revealed how assiduously the *kongsi* courted the Bishop before and during the rebellion and was clearly distressed by the bloodthirsty punishment its followers received. For his part, Owen entered more into the vindictive spirit demonstrated by the other Europeans.