



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLI No. 62

December 1990



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Nicholas Tarling. (1990). St John's Biography of Sir James Brooke. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLI (62): 255-270

ST JOHN'S BIOGRAPHY OF SIR JAMES BROOKE

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INTRODUCTION

A biography will vary not only with its subject. It will, of course, vary also with the author and with the author's approach. That approach in turn will vary with the readership and with the publisher or patron, with the public and the purpose.

In our own day, the demand for biography is apparently insatiable. The subjects are varied: princes and princesses, generals and governors, artists and writers. Sometimes the authors are professional biographers, sometimes professional historians; sometimes they are friends or relatives, sometimes amateurs. Sometimes they are, in some way, 'authorised,' sometimes 'official': as a result the authors perhaps gaining wider access to material, yet possibly also being discouraged from being too free with their use of it. The public indeed is apparently looking for warts and all, and sometimes gets warts above all else. Though narrative history is no longer much to its taste, it does not particularly want in substitution the 'life and times' kind of biography of an earlier era. It is encouraged to look for revelations, for the Hyde even more than the Jekyll, for the underside, the private rather than the public. Its expectations risk imposing demands on a biographer that can be satisfied only by anachronism or speculation.

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In Victorian times, the subjects of biography were diverse. The authors might less often than not be professional writers, still less often professional historians: they were more likely to be friends or relatives, ex-employees or fellow-workers, sometimes amateurs whose work might be polished up by litterateurs or journalists. The subject was likely to be placed more fully in the context of the times: his or her public life was certainly the focus of interest. The book might have a purpose that made for economy with the truth. But there would be self-censorship on other grounds. Controversy might be avoided and probing into private life would be discouraged. Normally biographies were in a sense official or authorised. The feelings of families and friends would be respected. But the subjects themselves were generally constrained by duty and propriety in ways that later generations would see as repressive and later writers might misunderstand.

My own biography of Sir James Brooke, *The Burthen the Risk and the Glory* (1982), concentrated on his public life. That was not only because the massive documentation available was so concentrated: it was also because

Brooke's life was essentially a public one. The documents tell us little about his private life except in so far as it was affected by his public life. In those days people not only wrote more inhibitedly (though also more copiously) than now; they behaved more inhibitedly. The Raja liked to be surrounded by young men; he never married; he fell out with his elder nephew when he married; he recognised a bastard son, but did not make him heir; he had a strange relationship with Baroness Burdett-Coults. This does not entitle us with any validity to decide in our modern way that he was a homosexual. Much of his behaviour is indeed better explained by ups-and-downs of his public life: his ambition to change British policy in Southeast Asia, his bitter disappointment at his failure to do so, the burden and risk of the raj that weighed heavily upon him. These surely explained much of his pride, wilfulness, impatience.

The best of the nineteenth century biographies is that by Spenser St John, *The Life of Sir James Brooke Rajah of Sarawak from his personal papers and correspondence*, published by Blackwood in 1879, eleven years after the Raja's death. St John was associated with him for much of the crucial period of his public life. He had met the Raja, then at a pinnacle of public success, in London in 1847, and the following year, when the Raja became in addition the Government's Governor of Labuan and Commissioner and Consul-General to the Sultan and Independent Chiefs of Borneo, St John became his private secretary. When, following the commission of enquiry into Brooke's conduct, the Government dropped the Commissionership, St John became Consul-General at Brunei, gaining a reputation among the Bruneis that was long remembered. Back in Britain in 1862, he played some role in the negotiations with the British Government that precipitated the final breach between the Raja and his elder nephew and would-be successor Brooke, and the succession of Charles Brooke. His own views of Sarawak probably differed both from the uncle's and the nephews': he favoured Chinese immigration and economic development which, despite their other differences, they all distrusted.

In 1862 St John was moved to Haiti, and it was there that he was to write much of his biography. As a result he had to correspond about the work, and the letters tell us something about his approach, as well as about his sources and his subject. They also tell us something more generally about biography in the Victorian period, and, by comparison and contrast, about biography in our own period and in general. St John had, like other biographers, to borrow papers; he had, even more than others, to seek opinions. Possibly the conditions imposed as a result fell upon him even more sharply than if he had been in Britain, instead of being for most of the time, overseas. The Raja had been his chief: the biography was 'authorised'. But, prepared already for self-censorship, he was prepared to accept some cuts and amendments from others, though not all.

On leave in London in 1871, St John had begun to collect papers and correspondence to aid in the biographical task which he had promised the Raja he would undertake.¹ One possible source was the Rev. Edmund Evelyn, Brooke Brooke's brother-in-law, but he had taken the nephew's part in the quarrel. He held the papers of Brooke Brooke, who had himself died soon after the Raja.² 'My object in writing the Raja's Life is to present him as I believe he