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A NOTE ON THE APPEARANCE OF RAJAH JAMES BROOKE AT THE AGE OF 44

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ABSTRACT

In 1847-8, James Brooke spent four months in England, arriving on 2 October and departing on 1 February (Runciman, 1960). During this period he found himself a famous man, and was generally feted throughout the country. He attended meetings, gave lectures and, among other honours, was received at court by Queen Victoria who created him K.C.B.

It was also at this time that his portrait was painted by Francis Grant, A.R.A. This portrait, the original of which hangs in the National Gallery, London, has been reproduced many times and is, surely, to any historian of Sarawak the most familiar likeness of James Brooke (see, e.g., Longhurst, 1956: frontispiece; Payne, 1960: pi. 1; Cooper, 1968: pi. 18; Rawlins, 1969: p. 25). It is a frankly romanticised composition, showing the Rajah dressed in casual but unmistakably nautical fashion, athletically posed against a conventionalised tropical riverine landscape. The features are strongly modelled, the hair dark, the figure lithe and reasonably slim. If this picture is a guide, in his general appearance at 44 years of age the Rajah was still youthful, or at least could justifiably claim to be 'well-preserved'.

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by

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According to Payne (1960:69), those who knew him found the portrait an excellent likeness. On the other hand, I have recently come across a contemporary note quite strongly expressing the contrary opinion. Details are given below.

J. H. Williamson's note

My source is a handwritten inscription on the flyleaf of a copy of Captain R. Mundy's (1848) 'Narrative of events in Borneo and Celebes from the journals of James Brooke, Esq', which I bought at auction in 1980. Successive inscriptions on the introductory pages of this book make it clear that it was first purchased by one J.H. Williamson, who received it from J. Waller of London on 1 May 1848.

The frontispiece to vol. 1 of Mundy's work is a portrait of James Brooke, head and shoulders only, in the form of a black and white engraving by W. Holl, copied from the original by Francis Grant. This picture is sufficiently faithful to the original. Again, it shows a rather sharp-featured, youthful face, free of lines or other marks of age beyond the faint suggestion of an incipient double chin.