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SIR JAMES BROOKE: A NEW BIOGRAPHY SOME COMMENTS

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SIR JAMES BROOKE: a new biography

Some comments

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The biographer of Brooke, like any other biographer, will seek both primary and secondary sources. In the case of Brooke their coverage is spasmodic. Primary sources for his early life have not come to hand. By contrast a great deal of material, official and unofficial, printed and unprinted, concerns the 1840s and the early 1850s. Till recently much less has been accessible so far as the last decade or so of the Raja's life is concerned, and the chief primary source has been the collection of the Raja's correspondence with Angela Burdett Coutts published, somewhat imperfectly, by Owen Rutter. For the new biography the official records, especially those of the Foreign and Colonial Offices, have been thoroughly searched, and their contents related to the private papers. In addition, the archive of Admiral Basil Brooke, now deposited at Rhodes House Library, has, with his kind permission and that of the late Mrs Margaret Noble, been turned to account. Some of the material was used in an earlier biography, that by the Raja's follower Spenser St John, though much of it was set aside. The archive covers the whole of the Raja's Sarawak career, but the more novel material belongs to the 1850s and 1860s. The author of the new biography faces the task of trying to give an account of the whole of the Raja's life, avoiding the temptation simply to repeat what earlier biographers have written about his early life or alternatively to concentrate on the latter part of his life, in respect of which so much more unused material is available.

Besides the problem of sources, there is a problem of approach. To some extent the problems are the same. Earlier biographers played up the 'heroic' phase of the 1840s and early 1850s and played down the later years. The fact that the Raja recognised a natural son was revealed only in Emily Hahn's biography in 1953; the bitter quarrel that ended with displacement of Brooke as heir of the raj was covered only briefly by Gertrude Jacob in 1876 and St John in 1879; the irascibility of the Raja's last decade is hardly apparent. By contrast there is the risk that a new biographer will play up the later years, turning to account material on them not so far used. In an attempt to attain a balance I have concluded that over-emphasis on the 'heroic' phase not only gives a false impression of the Raja's character, but even of his objectives.

*These are the resulting reflections on a new biography of James Brooke entitled *The Burthen, Risk and the Glory* to be published by Oxford University Press in 1981 — Ed.