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TWO MISSIONARIES IN BRUNEI IN 1837: GEORGE TRADESCANT LAY AND THE REVD J.T. DICKINSON

Bob Reece

In the mid-1830's the British and Foreign Bible Society was anxious to spread the Christian message to those parts of the Indian Archipelago and the Philippines where missionary activity (based in Batavia and Manila) had not reached. One of these areas was north-western Borneo, notably Brunei, and the nearby Celebes. At the same time, American traders based in New England and in Canton were keen to establish safe and dependable sources of pepper. Problems in Sumatra, highlighted by the piratical seizure of the American brig *Friendship* of Salem off Kuala Batu in Aceh, Sumatra, in February 1831 and the U.S.S. *Potomac*'s devastating attack on the settlement there a year later¹, turned attention once again to Brunei. The sultanate had been a significant supplier of pepper in the late 18th century but since then had greatly declined in importance, together with the community of Hokkien Chinese responsible for its cultivation.

Two Missionaries in Brunei in 1837:

George Tradescant Lay and
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by

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In late 1836 the Canton-based American merchant house of Olyphant and Co. decided to despatch their ship, the *Himmaleh* (Captain A.V. Fraser), on a voyage of reconnaissance to Brunei via Singapore. The instructions given to Fraser indicated that the Company was interested in setting up a trading agreement with the Sultan of Brunei 'and other native princes' in the area, to which end a memorandum of proposals was attached.² A certain quantity of trade goods and Spanish dollars were to be obtained in Singapore with the assistance of American Consul Joseph Balestier to facilitate the purchase of pepper and other commodities, but the Company was insistent that no opium or firearms be traded. The firm's founder, David W.C. Olyphant, was

a Quaker of high moral principles and his was one of only two foreign firms in China who refused to trade in opium.³

Emphasising that Brunei was the principal focus of the voyage, the Company was anxious that Fraser and his companions should create a good impression and thus facilitate the establishment of a trading base there:

We regard the city of Borneo (Bruni) ... as your destination, and to it, its access and capabilities, we call your best attention. By maintaining a pure and lofty character in your intercourse with its native authorities, we hope you will succeed in gaining a footing at this important settlement.⁴

At Macao the *Himmaleh* picked up George Tradescant Lay, who had recently been appointed Far Eastern representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the Revd Edwin Stevens, a missionary of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. George Lay was a member of an old English Quaker family which was distinguished for its interest in natural history. One of his ancestors had put together the collection which eventually formed the nucleus of the British Museum. He himself was a trained naturalist and geologist who had been employed in that position on Captain F.W. Beechey's expedition to the North Pacific and Bering's Strait between 1825 and 1828 on board H.M.S. *Blossom*.⁵ He also had a sound practical knowledge of medicine, which was to stand him in good stead in Brunei and elsewhere on his travels. By the time of his embarkation on the *Himmaleh* on 3 December 1836, he was fluent in Chinese and seems to have subsequently picked up a working knowledge of Malay in Malacca and Singapore where he spent some months before visiting Brunei.

On their arrival in Singapore on 10 December, the Revd Stevens and Captain Fraser were both taken seriously ill with fever and the American missionary died some weeks later. His place on the voyage was taken by the Revd James T. Dickinson, also of the American Board and evidently proficient in the Malay language. Captain Fraser, who had fortunately recovered,