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THE BRUNEI SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC OF 1904**A.V.M. Horton****INTRODUCTION**

In this article I will examine the Brunei smallpox epidemic of 1904, the last natural disaster to have befallen the Sultanate. The disease decimated the population of the capital: 'even Sultan Hashim', in the space of a fortnight in June-July, was obliged to mourn the loss of a son, three grandchildren and eight younger children.

Today smallpox has been entirely eradicated from the world, but for 800 years before the 19th Century it was a terrible scourge, causing the deaths on average of one million people each year. The decisive breakthrough came in 1796 when Sir Edward Jenner (1749 — 1823) — "an English physician to whom mankind must ever remain indebted" — demonstrated that by inoculating a person with animal cowpox virus immunity to subsequent smallpox resulted. This technique — "vaccination" (from vacca, Latin for cow) — has since spread throughout the world and, by using an appropriate vaccine, has been applied to defeat, not just smallpox, but other killer diseases as well.

THE BRUNEI SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC OF 1904

by

A.V.M. Horton

1. Introduction.

In this article I will examine the Brunei smallpox epidemic of 1904, the last natural disaster to have befallen the Sultanate. The disease decimated the population of the capital: 'even Sultan Hashim*', in the space of a fortnight in June-July, was obliged to mourn the loss of a son, three grandchildren and eight younger children.

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2. Brunei Town

The picturesque Brunei Town, scene of the 1904 tragedy, lay “in the centre of an amphitheatre of hills” twelve miles from the mouth of the eponymous river and was built “entirely over the water wherever mud banks (made) it possible to erect a dwelling”. In late 1904, i.e. after the epidemic, Acting Consul McArthur** estimated “at a rough computation” that there were 1,000 houses and at least 12,000 inhabitants in Kampong Ayer.¹ The 1911 census revealed that the actual population was only 9,767 (out of the Sultanate's total of 21,718).² Although some building had taken place on land by this date, it seems unlikely that, between 1904 and 1911, more than two thousand people had removed from the River Village to settle on *terra firma*.³ Mr. McArthur's estimate, therefore, may have been an exaggeration.

* 25th Sultan, reigned 1885–1906.

** M.S.H. (Stewart) McArthur (1872–1934). 1895–1922: Malayan Civil Service. Acting British Consul (1904–1906) and British Resident (1906–1908) in Brunei. Final post: 1919–1922 Acting British Adviser, Kedah. Died 20 February, 1934.