

2

The Royal Empire Society—

Essay Competition.

B.T.T.
Commander

Class. B.

Subject: "Who is your favorite hero or heroine among the pioneers of the British Empire Commonwealth." Give reasons for your choice.

[Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles]

Christopher Kennedy

Born

[REDACTED]

Age 14 yrs.

Haitaki Boys High School,
Dunedin,

New Zealand.

1

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles.

On July the fifth, 1871, aboard the brig "Anne of London," a mighty pioneer of empire came into being; on February the fifteenth of this present year that hero's "own child" as he had so often described it fell to the treacherous Japanese. That is my reason for devoting this essay to Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, for he was that pioneer, and his "own child" was the proud Singapore, the temporary loss of which is apt to bring to our minds thoughts of the days when Britain's possessions in the Far East did not include that all-important gateway. The story of its development is hardly a romantic one, but it tells of the life-struggle of one who ranks among the greatest empire-builders, it tells of his untiring devotion for his country, and it tells of the great sacrifices he made for her.

Apart from the fact that he was born in comparative poverty little is known of Raffles' early life, and still less of his family. His father, Captain Benjamin Raffles, was master of the brig on which he was born, and rather peculiarly, as all Raffles' life's work was done in the East, at the time of his birth it was plying off Port Morant, Jamaica, in the West Indies. From then on, until at the age of twelve when we see him entering Dr. Anderson's "Respectable Academy" at Hammersmith, nothing is known of Raffles' career.

After two years of schooling, (throughout his life Raffles never ceased to deplore

the necessity which withdrew him so early from school) the poorliness of his parents necessitated his removal to some station where he would be able to contribute some share to the family finances, therefore he became an "extra clerk" in India House. There his overpowering personality and passion for work showed him out from the start, gleaming like a beacon over the dark sea of his contemporaries. He mastered French in "stolen moments" so well that in Sumatra, 20 years later, he was able to translate instantly a passage of Moore's poetry into French verse for some guests of that nationality, whom he was entertaining.

So impressed were his superiors after ten years of his service in India House that in 1805, when an assistant secretary was required for the government of a strip of territory known as Province Wellesly, on the mainland of Malaya, he was elected for the position.



That in itself was a remarkable promotion for

a clerk of twenty-four, but still more remarkable was the rise in his salary, in one leap it had graduated from £100 a year to £1,500 a year. For Raffles, of course, the whole world was transformed. He now had sufficient capital to allow his parents to spend their declining years in comfort, and sufficient, ^{also} to enable him to take with him his beloved wife, Olivia Fancourt, to share his trials and his triumphs.

We next see Raffles, rising above the murk and turmoil of history, in Province Wellesly, where his knowledge of the Malayan tongue, which he had perfected on the long voyage out, and the sympathy and understanding (which were to remain throughout his life as essential elements of his character) were fast ~~help~~ helping him to endear himself to the natives of that area. Raffles in this was in earnest — he desired for the natives real protection, not exploitation in disguise, and his highest dreams were of widespread British administration throughout the East Indies.

In Province Wellesly ~~here~~ he worked and wrote and studied, working his body so hard that in 1808 a severe attack of fever took him and to preserve his life he was forced to hasten to Malacca, where the climate was ~~was~~ more suited for Europeans. Here his thoughts began to range far and wide, from Java to Japan, and it is logical to state that it was his influence which inspired Lord Minto, the governor general at Calcutta to take Java from the Dutch in 1810, for by then the word of Raffles was taken as no small authority on matters dealing with the South Pacific.

Note. It must be remembered that at this time Europe was

settling in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, that Holland had been annexed by France, and that Napoleon had been preparing to use Java as a base against the British in the Indies.

Lord Minto personally led the expedition with Raffles as his right-hand man. In July the twenty-ninth, 1811, the fleet of 110 British ships with 57 transports carrying 11,000 troops came within sight of Java. The British landed and took Batavia, seat of the corrupt Dutch government, then marched inland to Cornelis, where the Dutch were fortified, laid siege to the town and captured it, practically wiping out the Dutch forces. Then began the much harder task of reorganizing the administrative system of the island, and this Lord Minto entrusted to the capable hands of Raffles, departing once more for his desk at Calcutta with this injunction, "While we are in Java, let us do all the good we can."

Raffles did marvellous work in Java, moving efficiently and humanely in his new situation as Lieutenant Governor of Java and its dependencies. Firstly, he conciled with the Dutch, and then with the natives, and established British control throughout the island. He cleverly abolished slavery on the Dutch plantations by drying up the source of supply, and engineered a full social revolution from the administrative capital by ~~which~~ which he gave the Javanese full and equal rights with the Europeans.

Meantime the European war was drawing to a close, and the British were debating as to whether Java should be returned to the now-free Dutch, and as we read today the

letters which Raffles wrote home imploring the government to retain its hold on the Malayan archipelago, it becomes a wonder to us as to why the officials did not act accordingly, but the full independence of the Low Countries had always been a fixed idea with Britain, and in 1816 she returned Java, together with practically all her East Indian acquisitions, including Malacca, to the Dutch.

Raffles was heartbroken.

Not only had he been slandered, censured and dismissed for attempting to save Java, but ~~in~~ during his last few months in that colony fortune seemed to have turned against him. His wife and children and many of his dearest friends had died, and he was, as it were, alone in a world of terrible adversity. However, the anticipation of being home again with his mother and other remaining members of his family, and then its realization, proved a restorative to his broken mind and body. On his arrival in London too, he found himself not as before, an insignificant and unknown youth, but as an ex-governor, and one to whom even the highest of social and political circles were open.

The rapid recovery which Raffles made after the terrific shock of having all that for which he had labored in Java swept away before his eyes illustrates to the full his wonderful. As a fellow clerk in India House had described him, before he had stepped into fame, he was "Insatiable in ambition, though meek as a maiden. He was known always to be patient and sympathetic, daring but rarely injudicious, and his ventures in the East were

6
eternally characterized by his desire for complete equality between black and white races.

In England his desirable nature and force of character soon won him new friends, among whom ranked such famous men as Wilberforce, Joseph Banks, and William Marsden. He wrote two volumes on the history of Java and in recognition of this was knighted by the Prince Regent. However the call of the East had Raffles in its grip, and in 1817 he sailed again for the E. Indies, this time as Lieutenant Governor of Bencoolen, in Sumatra, taking with him his beloved second wife, Sophia Hull.

Bencoolen was a ^{and forgotten} neglected settlement, rotten with gambling and corruption, but it was a base from which he was able to resume his old work. He did his best to clean it up, but his thoughts went far beyond it. Was it possible to make Sumatra a greater Java? He made a treaty with the Sultan of Menang-Kalau but the company disallowed it. He tried in vain to help the Sultan of Palembang against the rapacious Dutch, who were seizing everything upon which the British might establish a trading station. As Raffles said himself - "I fear the Dutch have hardly left us an inch of ground to stand on."

Above all Raffles pondered on the sea routes of the East. More than forty per cent of the shipping of the Eastern seas passed by the southern end of Sumatra, through the Straights of Sunda. Raffles took steps towards a British base at Samanka Bay in the Straights but was foiled by the Dutch.

Then he turned to the Northern route, which ran past Achin and through the Malacca Straights. There lay Britain's last chance of establishing a key base in the Indies. "In a little vessel, overrun by centipedes and scorpions, which lost a mast on the passage and was run upon a sandbank at the mouth of the Hooghly by a drunken pilot," Raffles went to Calcutta in 1818 to put his ideas before Lord Hastings, who had succeeded Lord Minto in Calcutta.

Having gained his full support, and the half-hearted consent of the home authorities, he returned to the Indies and on January 29, 1819, he raised the British flag within the mouldering ramparts of the ^{great city} of Singapore, on Singapore Island, which commanded the main East Indian trade route. When the news of this sweeping stroke reached them, the Dutch were furious. They demanded a quick and immediate withdrawal by Raffles and small party from the island, but Raffles, backed up by Hastings, remained, and after a short while the storm abated.

Meanwhile, Singapore was winning its own victory. It possessed a perfect natural harbor, and as it commanded the shortest route from China to the occident, by 1826 35,000 tons of shipping were using the port. In 1835 the population was 30,000 and the tonnage 200,000. This increase was astounding, and of course such quick and concrete results could hardly fail to impress the once dubious authorities in London. However the future of Singapore had already been assured when Raffles left the island for ever on June 4th. 1823.

He returned to Bencoolen

to complete his term of office there and on February 2nd., 1824, he sailed for home with his family on the ship Fame. That evening the Fame caught fire. In a few minutes it was in flames. But the sea was calm, the passengers and crew were able to row back to Bencoolen, some 50 miles away. All Raffles' books, papers, maps, curiosities and treasures, the collections of many years, were lost.

On April 10th he sailed again. He reached England a small, shrunken, wizened old man, although he was only 43, ^{and} ~~he~~ settled near Mill Hill, with Wilberforce, appropriately enough, as his next door neighbour, and in 1825 was occupied with plans for his main home interest, the London Zoological Gardens.

On his forty-fifth birthday, July 5th, 1826, he was found lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs in his home, dead of apoplexy. He had spent himself without stint in the service of his country, and his fine true memorial, when restored to the English people, will stand forever reminding the world of a valiant hero and ~~an~~ ^{true} English gentleman.

Books used: "Raffles" by R. Coupland, and various articles from magazines and newspapers which I have read during the last few years.